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What does PowerPoint mean to you?

A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract
The purpose of this research is to understand in depth the perceptions and lived experiences of the postgraduate students whose lecturers are using PowerPoint in the classroom. The sample of this research is the postgraduate students of the University of Malaya in the Faculty of Education. The sampling is purposive and they have passed at least one semester in the Faculty of Education. This study searched to describe what it was like for a UM postgraduate student in the Faculty of Education to learn through PowerPoint. Data collection was based on focus group and individual interviews. The results have shown that the research participants have opposite feelings toward PowerPoint. Some of the students consider PowerPoint interesting at the beginning of the lecture but boring and tiring a few minutes later. Others feel happy when lecturers refer to PowerPoint in delivering the lecture’s content. However, participants hold PowerPoint does not support face-to-face interaction in the classroom. The analysis of the interviews shows that some factors like PowerPoint construction and management, subject knowledge and the teaching skills are potentially effective in using PowerPoint in the classroom.

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Keywords: PowerPoint; Postgraduate Student; University; Experience

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1. **Introduction**

During the last several decades, the application of technology in education has overcome the traditional methods of teaching. One of the most common tools of technology in classrooms is the presentational software Microsoft’s PowerPoint (Bates & Poole 2003). Since it was developed in 1990, PowerPoint has been debated as an effective presenter in education. According to Brown and Harlin (2007), PowerPoint became widely available and used for a variety of purposes in today’s university and public school classrooms. To Anderson (2004) electronic slides are becoming an important presentation tool in the classroom. They allow advanced preparation of material, improving organization of the presentation and giving a means of showing information-rich content such as complex tables, formulas, programs, and diagrams. Roblyer and Doering (2013), consider three advantages for PowerPoint; organizing thinking about a topic, enhancement the impact of spoken information and providing collaboration on presentations.

However, the positive effectiveness of PowerPoint in classroom teaching and learning has been the main topic of many articles, the ways instructors use it in their classrooms is still limited in research. Some argue that it has negative effects according to the poor use of it. Voss (2004) stated that students feel ignored in lecture halls when the instructor is focusing on the presentation and not paying attention to the class. She also viewed that the instructor may not be able to leave the podium because he doesn’t have a remote mouse to advance to the next slide. Young (2006) explained in a survey that a good PowerPoint presentation can enliven a lecture by offering imagery to support key points, and having a prepared set of slides can keep professors from straying off on tangents. Many students also praise PowerPoint slides for being easy to read, noting that professors' chalkboard scrawls can be illegible. Nevertheless, students say some professors simply dump their notes into PowerPoint presentations and then read them, which can make the delivery even flatter than it would be if the professor did not use slides. Tufte (2003) disapproved PowerPoint for poorly designed presentations, stating that the program’s templates limited the options that presenters have in communicating with their audiences.

2. **PowerPoint in Higher Education**

In higher education, lectures are rapidly giving way to PowerPoint presentations. Usually the slide ware is combined with a computer, an LCD projector, and a screen in the classroom setting. So many colleges and universities have rooms equipped with technology necessary for any instructor to display information via PowerPoint presentations (Bartsch & Cobern 2003). Graig and Amernic (2006) have shown that students like to be taught using PowerPoint. Also Bartsch and Cobern (2003) have found that students believed that they learned more from PowerPoint lectures. Despite of the effectiveness of PowerPoint presentations to both teachers and students, they are one of the most easily misused teaching aids (Priya, 2012).

Focusing on teaching, Creed (1997) argued about PowerPoint in several points: first, “You may get less feedback from the class because your eyes and theirs are on the screen rather than looking at each other;” second, students don’t have a chance to synthesize what they’ve heard; and third, the emphasis is on the quality of your presentation rather than your students’ learning.

Bates and Poole (2003) outlined that it is important for any instructor to ask himself before advancing a PowerPoint-based lecture to the students, for whose benefit is the PowerPoint software being used. Is it primarily to help you as the teacher to ensure that you cover the main points and follow the careful preparation you have invested in the lecture or is it to help the students to ensure that they have a record of the main points of the lecture? (p. 110). They also stated that the teacher should care about the amount of the information in the
slides and because of large amount of information students become tired of the presentation. Young (2006) has shown that without training professors, good technology will mean bad teaching. The study also stated that students said that some professors simply dump their notes in the presentations and read them, which can make the delivery even flatter than it would be if the professor did not use slides. Cernamo (2011) said that the instructor doesn’t have to worry about the design of his presentation; he can leave this to the students. Instead, the instructor has to worry about the content. In this research, we will consider PowerPoint as an educational tool, which would be studied according to its addressees.

3. Aim and research questions

Most research about the integration of PowerPoint into teaching have focused on satisfaction and/or reaction of the users, whose purposes are mainly to evaluate the result of PowerPoint integration, but in this research the purpose is to understand in depth the perceptions and lived experiences of the postgraduate students whose lecturers are using the PowerPoint in class. The results of this research will be useful for the lecturers to consider learning experiences of their users as a baseline for further improvement. For achieving this aim, the researchers attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What are postgraduate students’ experiences in learning through PowerPoint?
2. What contexts or situations have influenced postgraduate students’ experiences in learning through PowerPoint?

The sample of this research is the postgraduate students of the University of Malaya (UM) in the Faculty of Education. The sampling is purposive and they have passed at least one semester in the Faculty of Education.

4. Research Methodology

The research purpose requires focusing attention on the qualitative aspects of the experience itself. So phenomenology was chosen as an appropriate methodology to answer the research questions. This study searched for a thick and holistic analysis to describe what it was like for a UM postgraduate student in the Faculty of Education to learn through PowerPoint. In this research, phenomenology is an appropriate methodology to answer the research questions. It involves both a descriptive and interpretative analysis of an experience. We have conducted focus group interviews and semi-structured individual interviews.

This phenomenological study was designed to investigate students’ perspectives of classroom interaction when PowerPoint is used for delivering information about the lecture’s topic to them, their feelings when attending a PowerPoint-based lecture and their views on the use of PowerPoint presentations by their lecturers in the classroom. The study also tries to understand if the students perceived as part of their learning in classroom to learn efficiently from PowerPoint about the topic at hand. For data collection, we have used individual and focus group interviews. Thirteen postgraduate students participated voluntarily in this study. The individual and focus group interviews were audio recorded for transcription purposes.

5. Procedure

Data analysis involves making sense of the text and provides an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data. In this study data was collected through open-ended questions asked to the participants then an analysis evolved from the replies provided by the participants. Multiple level of analysis was done by the researchers from specific to general levels. First, the interviews were transcribed into a text form. Transcriptions were read repeatedly to get some concepts. By concept meant a single thought or idea. Initially concepts like “Boring”,
“tiring”, “irrelevancy”, “wordy”, “gaining information”, “No face to face interaction” etc. emerged. Then the concepts were grouped into categories and the text was analysed by correlating the categorized data to the research questions.

6. Findings

As part of this study, an attempt was made to discover the main concepts that would come from the analysis of the data collected from the interviews. The study of these concepts was intended to provide a better understanding of the students’ experiences in attending PowerPoint-based lectures.

6.1. Experiences of attending PowerPoint based lectures.

Participants considered PowerPoint as a supporting tool for the lecturer but decrease the interaction between them and him/her. Most of them agreed that PowerPoint is so boring in the classroom setting. It can be drawn from participants’ responses that they only benefited from PowerPoint in having the information that can be reached at any time needed. Some of the main themes of their experiences are as follow:

6.1.1. PowerPoint as a supporting tool for outlining the lecture:

The focus group participants mentioned that PowerPoint is beneficial in the classroom when it is used to deliver the lecture. They suggested that better way to read the topic is through the PowerPoint slides.

“I feel very happy when we have PowerPoint slides because I know. Ok. That is what we are going to learn. So my mind will not be diverted because we are focusing on the words on the PowerPoint so… PowerPoint gives me a clear idea of what the lecture is about.”

Students see that via PowerPoint presentations they can have clear ideas about the topic and the objectives of the lecture. Moreover, it helps them in understanding what the lecturer is talking about. Susskind (2005) in his study shows that students have positive attitudes about the course and greater self-efficacy with PowerPoint. According Priya (2012) PowerPoint is very easy to be learned and used. PowerPoint encourages and supports teaching by facilitating the material presentation. It is a support to the oral regular lectures as it provides outlines for the discussions. It also gives structure to the lecture by dividing it into several steps. The study of Hill, Arford, Lubitow and Smollin (2012), shows the majority of undergraduates consider slides the most useful when they outline lectures and they believe PowerPoint is the best way to organize and simplify course material.

6.1.2. PowerPoint brings boredom to class and distracts learners

Most of the research participants have negative feelings toward PowerPoint. They consider PowerPoint interesting at the beginning but boring and tiring after a few minutes. One student tells:

“For me PowerPoint seems to be interesting at the beginning of the class but later on it becomes a bit boring because I become tired to get the words and I tend to lose focus and switch off”

Some others think the cause behind the feelings of boredom and the impact of distraction is that some PowerPoint presentations are uploaded with excessive information:

“PowerPoint is too wordy and somehow it distracts my attention, it even makes my eyes tired and I lose focus”

According Hill et al. (2012 students desire presentations which are “not too much text on each slide” (P. 249).

6.1.3. PowerPoint doesn’t support Classroom interaction:
Participants hold “It doesn’t support face to face interaction in the classroom”. Many participants expressed they had limited interaction either with each other or with the lecturer, and they hesitated to ask questions as hardly can find an answer, and interacted only if the lecturer asks a question so they refer to the slides in front to provide answers. They described preferred lecturers as those who present detailed explanations about the topic guidelines in the slides rather than those lecturers who read only. The read only-lecturers leave negative effect on them and may distract them from the main core of the lesson. Instead, participants viewed that it will be interactive if lecturers include some hypermedia to their presentations.

“PowerPoint doesn’t allow for any collaborative learning and basically lecturers use PowerPoint just for presentation but not for any other purposes. Their Presentations are all in a linear basis just bullets and after bullets. If they can merge it with some video files or YouTube videos that are relevant to the lesson it may not be so boring.”

Adams (2006), holds, PowerPoint disrupt dialogue between lecturer and students and favours “pre-determined monologue and teacher-centred pedagogy over unpredictable dialogue and other pedagogical forms” (P. 403). According Hill et al. (2012) research in some subjects like sociology, which requires discussion, critical thinking and debate, PowerPoint inhibit the development of these characteristics. Some researchers criticize PowerPoint which, change teaching from conversation into presentation (Adams, 2006).

Also, if we accept the idea of Marambe, Vermunt, and Boshuizen (2012) that Asian culture (including Malaysian culture) discourages the expression of thought, we could tell, PowerPoint stabilize this characteristic of the culture.

6.2. Influential contexts on postgraduate students’ experiences in learning through PowerPoint.

6.2.1. PowerPoint construction and management

Participants feel that they are lacking concentration when the lecturer only read from the slides, as they do not have to follow or to listen to him/her because they can read what is on the screen.

“…because I know later I would read the same slide again, so why do I have to listen”.

The majority of the participants commented that the lecturers use the PowerPoint in a boring way, which consequently leads to having a boring and distracting lecture. Some said that the information provided in the slides is sometimes not relevant to the topic of the lecture.

“Some lecturers put in the PowerPoint something that is irrelevant to what we suppose to know so the lecture becomes very boring”

Bartsch and Cobern (2003) study approve this view that PowerPoint can be beneficial, but material that is not pertinent to the presentation can be harmful to students’ learning.

While others viewed that the lecturer is only using it as a support tool or a guideline to a boring lecture. For better using PowerPoint one of the students recommends as follows:

“So the PowerPoint is important but not for the entire lesson. Lecturer can use it in part of the lesson but certain parts of the lesson should be group discussions or just simply talking with teacher, answering his questions. It should be used as part of the lecture but not the entire lecture”

Another participant holds that:
“Three-hour lecture is a very long time when the lecturer use PowerPoint and he must check from time to time if his students understand or not the topic of the lecture. For example in my case, my English is not so good so it will be better if he checks our understanding of the lecture”

Young (2009 cited in Roblyer & Doering, 2013) cites a British study that reported students’ perceived use of PowerPoint-based lectures among the most boring they experience.

6.2.2. Subject knowledge, teaching skills and the PowerPoint usage

Most participants agreed that the lecturers mainly use PowerPoint for presentation purposes only to demonstrate that the lecturer is using technology in his or her classroom.

“PowerPoint is a one way tool, it is only used to present”.

One student who is a college teacher believes, lecturer use PowerPoint because in the evaluation form, one item is application of the technology in the class, so it requires lecturers to use PowerPoint as a symbol of technology. Hill et al research shows some lecturers, particularly “newer lecturer who do not have the security of tenure and are often adjunct or contingents lecturers”(2006 P. 253), use PowerPoint, because teaching evaluation form requires them.

Some researchers think many instructors are hiding behind the slides. Priya (2012) said that teachers could get away with not having an understanding of the subject by presenting pre-prepared presentations on topics, thereby avoiding oral lectures completely.

The study of Yilmazel-Sahin (2009) reported that instructors (a) use PowerPoint as a straight lecturing tool, (b) read directly from slides, (c) present the whole class in PowerPoint, (d) present information on the slide that is directly copied from the textbook. In addition, significantly more undergraduate students reported experiencing PowerPoint overload due to overfull presentations and the rapid pace of instruction.

Also the results research of Burke and James (2008) indicated that (a) students have a significantly less favourable overall view of PPT’s influence on cognitive learning and classroom interaction than faculty members; (b) unlike faculty members, students do not believe that posting notes on the Web will decrease their motivation to attend class; and (c) both faculty members and students perceive that PPT has a favorable impact on notetaking quality, content recall during exams, emphasis on key lecture points, and holding student attention during class. The authors offer implications for instructors and future research.

Two different things enrich using PowerPoint. First using all features of this software and not limiting to linear style and words. One student tells:

“I can understand more when the lecturer uses a simple picture to explain the topic. By using the animations or pictures, the lecturer ensures that I still want to listen to his lecture”

Klemm (2007 cited in Roblyer & Doering, 2013) offers several tips for using PowerPoint, better, including showing only a few slides at a time before having students apply the information, having some slides with just images or diagrams. Moving around the room while showing slides, taking the last slide off the screen when moving on to student work, and not giving out hard copies of slides.

One clear message from the participants was that the use of PowerPoint in the classroom overtime switched them off, they lacked attention and could not follow the lecturer but only focus on the words appeared in the
slides knowing that later they would read them or just copied them during the lecture. However, they could do some discussions with their peers if the points are cleared to them or at least laid in front of them.

The only thing that participants considered to gain from PowerPoint presentations is the information about the topic.

“I guess I gain from PowerPoint some sort of information”.

Participants also expected from PowerPoint attracting them or engaging them in the lecture but they said it was boring and distracting.

Finally it is necessary to mention that according to Hardin (2007), the impact of PowerPoint on students learning is more dependent on instructor variables than on whether PowerPoint was used. In other words, the PowerPoint is more influential if is used by a knowledgeable and skilful instructor.

When it comes to the use of PowerPoint in the classroom, the general feelings of students would like to have more attractive and interactive PowerPoint Presentations. Much can be learned from taking students’ views and opinions about their lecturers’ use of technology in the classroom. Through students’ perspectives on the classroom interaction when technology is integrated, a problem of focusing on the technology and ignore the students always manifest in their discussions.

This study provides particular guide that we need to attract the lecturer’s attention that technology is important but might not be the solution for most of the educational problems. The study shows that the views of students are of great importance specifically when the targets are directed towards enhancing the teaching and learning processes. Further study of this issue with a larger sample of students with diverse educational backgrounds and characteristics would give us more insights into the perception of gaining the desired learning outcomes by technology in the different educational settings.

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