

St. Lawrence University
Center for Teaching and Learning
Technology for Teaching Grant Proposal

(Full-time faculty members are eligible to submit proposals for teaching grants.)

Technology for Teaching grants are designed to infuse technology-enhanced pedagogy into the university curriculum. Intended to serve both experts and newcomers to technology, the grants help faculty members explore, develop, and support technology-related strategies and curricula. Examples include, but are not limited to: workshop attendance, course-specific software or hardware, using trained student assistants to enhance technology-orientated teaching, or travel to a technology and teaching conference. Any questions about proposals can be directed to the CTL. (x5981)

Smaller grant proposals (\$500 or less) will be reviewed on an ongoing basis. Proposals for larger grants (\$501 to \$1500) must be submitted by **April 15** for the Fall, and by **October 15** for the Spring. All proposals will be reviewed by a committee of faculty and IT staff. Larger grants are limited to one every other year, and requests for travel will be approved only if the applicant's regular pedagogy travel fund has been exhausted.

Grant Criteria:

1. The project represents an innovative use of technology to enhance teaching, or changing technological need related to past innovations.
2. The project represents a new pedagogical direction for the instructor or the course. We particularly encourage projects that involve students in collaborative research and instructional roles.
3. The project exhibits a demonstrable connection to institutional or departmental curricular goals.
4. The project's outcome represents a new application of technology to the course(s) involved.
5. A final report summarizing the project must be submitted by the following April 1 for Fall support and September 1 for Spring support.

Name: Rob Loftis **Department:** Philosophy **Phone:** 5663

Project Title: Is PowerPoint Stalinist? A Case Study in Design, Technology, and Values

Dates of Project: July 20-22

Please send this cover sheet and the following information by email as a Word attachment to ctl@stlawu.edu:

- **Project description and specific goals with respect to enhancing teaching**
- **Itemized list of resources and expenditures needed for project**
- **Student support responsibilities (if applicable)**
- **Brief description of how you might share the pedagogical impact of this project through a CTL sponsored Shop Talk or IT program**

Total amount requested: \$1,500

Faculty Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

OFFICE USE ONLY:

CTL Director: _____ **Date:** _____

Total amount approved: _____

Final report received: _____

Grant Proposal **“Is PowerPoint Stalinist?”**

Project Description and Goals With Respect to Teaching

The core of this grant proposal is an ongoing research project of mine with the provocative title, “Is PowerPoint Stalinist?” The project is an investigation into the values embedded in Microsoft’s presentation software and their effect on learning and the classroom dynamic. The title is inspired by an essay and graphic by information designer Edward Tufte called “The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint” (2003), in which he compares the attenuated information content of a PowerPoint presentation to the words Soviet-era propaganda. The project has already yielded a talk given over the summer to the American Association of Philosophy Teachers. The next step in the project is to give a presentation on the more theoretical aspects of the issue to the biennial conference of the Society for Philosophy and Technology, meeting this year in Delft, The Netherlands. The theme of the conference is “Designing and Technology”, and I anticipate that the research project will not only profit from the feedback I receive on my presentation, but from exposure to the other presentations and researchers at the conference. The final outcome of this research project will be first of all a journal article, either in a teaching journal that covers philosophy of technology. In addition, I hope to produce a set of tools and recommendations for teachers who use presentation software in the classroom. Possible tools might include templates and wizards, especially ones relevant to my field, philosophy. Creating entirely new pieces of software is not only beyond my ability, but completely unnecessary given the range of software already available and the often untapped flexibility in that software. Possible recommendations include evaluations of the usefulness of software for teaching, which could be written as reviews for teaching magazines or posted online. I would also like to produce guidelines for presentation design which are more specifically tailored to the teaching environment than many of the existing sets of guidelines, which often simply repeat bad advice from the world of corporate presentations, such as the so-called rule of sevens.

The presentation for the Delft conference, and the future journal article, take as their starting point the critique of PowerPoint that has been advanced by Edward Tufte (2003) and in the popular press (Thompson 2003, Parker 2001, see also Byrne 2003a, 2003b). The upshot of this critique is that the design of PowerPoint assumes that the audience is too stupid to handle complicated ideas and is only amused by a visual sideshow of flashing lights and dancing graphics. The thesis at the root of my academic work on this topic will be that this critique is correct, and can be elaborated and made more rigorous. The elaborated version of the critique will describe PowerPoint as having an embedded ideology, that is, a theory of human nature and how humans should interact. From this starting point, I will develop two lines of thought, one theoretical, and one practical. On the theoretical level, I will use PowerPoint as a case study supporting what I believe is the emerging consensus view about the relationship between values and technology. Historically, discussions of values and technology have either depicted technology as an autonomous force with a uniform and distinct value set that is driving all of modern society (Elul, early Winner, Marcuse, Heidegger) or stood firm in the claim that all technologies are completely value neutral (Pitt, Florman). The emerging consensus (Feenberg, current Winner, Mitcham) finds a middle ground, that different technologies carry different values with them, and that those values can influence but not completely determine social structures. This consensus is nicely summarized by Talking Head David Byrne’s description of PowerPoint as “limiting, inflexible, and biased” (2003a). Another part of the consensus view is that the relationship between society and technology is in some way reciprocal. This idea is pithily summarized in Winston Churchill’s remark on architecture: “We shape our buildings, and thereafter they shape us.” (quoted in Mitcham 1994). The problem with this

consensus is that statements of it are too often bound up in particular theories with only a narrow appeal (e.g. Feenberg's approach based in Marxist critical theory) My goal in the examination of PowerPoint is to show that when applied in practical contexts the emerging consensus becomes a claim that is commonsensical enough that anyone can agree to it but substantial enough to be worth asserting.

At the practical level, my central goal is to address the basic question: should teachers use PowerPoint in the classroom? In answering this question, I will look at various alternatives, including alternative ways of presenting visual information (blackboard, handouts, overheads, 35mm slides) and alternative software that can be used for presentations (Corel Presentations, OpenOffice, Adobe Acrobat). During these investigations I will look specifically at the assumptions the software makes about human interaction and how that impacts the classroom. For this reason, I will focus on templates, wizards, and design advice, because these are the parts of the software that carry the most ideological freight. As a part of this, I will probably have to investigate add-ins and third party graphics programs. Although the major pieces of software (from Microsoft, Corel, and Adobe) are already available to me for no additional charge, I may have to purchase the third party software, and my budget reflects that.

Many of these questions were addressed in an excellent but preliminary way by Tom Greene in his Shop Talk last year and associated Teaching Technology Grant. Dr. Greene's presentation discussed the basic critique of PowerPoint from Tufte and presented some demonstration software that might function differently in the classroom. My goal is to go beyond what Dr. Greene discussed by (1) deepening Tufte's critique by tying it to theoretical work done in the philosophy of technology (2) expanding the existing critique by considering a wide range of software and applications and (3) developing practical outcomes that are simple and easy to immediately apply, such as templates, add-ins, and product reviews

Itemized List of Resources and Expenditures

Conference Costs:

Airfare: \$1,000
Registration: €80 (≈\$100)
Hotel: €234 (≈\$190)
Food: \$105

Research Costs:

Software for testing: \$200

Planned Shop Talk & Other Outcomes

The most immediate outcome of this project that will be shared directly with the SLU community will be a shop talk that continues the discussion started by Tom Greene last year. Another outcome will be the development of presentation templates. Often simple alterations to the default settings of a piece of software can dramatically effect the embedded ideology, that is the assumptions it makes about people and the way they should interact. For instance, most of the templates that come with PowerPoint have extremely wide margins on all four sides filled with decorative graphics. Increasing the information content of one's slides is often simply a matter of narrowing the margins and killing the distracting graphics. The template I use right now has a series of master slides with margins of various widths to reflect different kinds of content. This may not seem like a particularly deep change, but it actually has a real moral effect on classroom functioning.

I also want to get a better sense of what the alternatives to PowerPoint are. Microsoft says PowerPoint has 400 million users (Thompson 2003), but most of these users were drawn in the way Microsoft draws in most of its customers: name recognition, availability, and portability. Hopefully we teachers can move past these factors.

References

Byrne, David. 2003. *Envisioning Emotional Epistemological Information*. Gottingen: Steidel.

———. 2003. Learning to Love PowerPoint. *Wired*, September.

Mitcham, Carl. 1994. *Thinking Through Technology: The Path between Engineering and Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Parker, Ian. 2001. Absolute PowerPoint: Can a software package edit our thoughts? *New Yorker*, May 28, 76.

Thompson, Clive. 2003. PowerPoint Makes You Dumb. *New York Times Magazine*, December 14.

Tufte, Edward. 2003. *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint*. Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press.