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Background:

For the past five academic years, I have been using PowerPoint presentations in class (text and visual images) in an effort to enhance student learning. (At my previous institution, a laptop university, faculty were strongly encouraged to use PowerPoint presentations in the classroom.) One of things that I have always found problematic about such presentations is that students are more likely than not write down everything on the slide first. Moreover, too many students do not take notes during a lecture because they have written down the information from the slide. I have had some concerns and frustrations with PowerPoint-enhanced lectures for years, and this program has been the impetus for me to explore how effective PowerPoint presentations really are. Despite my reservations about the effectiveness of PowerPoint presentations, students overwhelmingly indicate that they favor such presentations as a learning tool on the course evaluation that I developed and use.

Project:

For the foreseeable future, I will be teaching two sections of History 190 (US to 1877) most semesters. My CETL project involves re-working the current course and conducting a study of PowerPoint's effectiveness. The project will be conducted fall semester, 2006; it was not feasible to carry out the study this semester. One section of HIST 190 will be taught as it is currently taught—lectures enhanced with PowerPoint presentations (text and visual images) and in-class discussions. In the other section of HIST 190, PowerPoint presentations will contain just visual images—no text slides. Instead, outlines of the lectures will be available to students on D2L beforehand. Students will have an opportunity to print out the outlines, or save the outlines to their computers and insert class lecture notes into the outlines. Students may choose to use the outlines merely as a guide for following the lectures. The lectures will cover the same material, but students will process that material differently. My sense is that students in the class without the text slides will better master the material because they are more actively engaged with the lecture, and thus will do better on examinations.

Process:

Over the summer, I will create outlines for my HIST 190 lectures. For one section, those outlines will be placed on D2L. The text slides for this class will be hidden so that during lectures students will have the visual images (photographs, maps, charts, etc.) available—the same visuals that will be viewed and studied by the second section. The other section will see the PowerPoint presentations in their entirety. Both classes meet on Mondays and Wednesdays in two-hour blocks.

Potential Problems:

This is not a scientific study, but, rather, an informal study for my edification. While the two sections involved are of the same course and they meet on the same days for the same amount of time, one section will be nearly twice as large as the other. I have decided to try the new approach in the large section because it is more likely to be populated with first-semester freshmen. It is also more difficult for me to keep students in the large section focused and this might help students become more engaged with the material. It is also possible that one section will have a number of upper-level students while another will have a number of incoming freshmen. One section could also have students with significantly higher GPAs than the other. A disproportionate number of majors in one section or another can also affect grades students earn. I may also develop a much better rapport with one section. Because of how I lecture—constantly throwing out questions and trying to generate discussion—some classes become very energized because of student participation. Other classes do not experience the same energy and rapport because students do not embrace the style and choose not to actively participate. These types of issues will not be addressed.