

Metaphors for Presentations

THE metaphor of PowerPoint is *the software corporation itself*. To describe a software house is to describe the PP cognitive style: a big bureaucracy engaged in *computer programming* (deep hierarchical structures, relentlessly sequential, nested, one-short-line-at-a-time) and in *marketing* (advocacy not analysis, more style than substance, misdirection, slogan thinking, fast pace, branding, exaggerated claims, marketplace ethics). That the PP cognitive style mimics a software house exemplifies *Conway's Law*:

Any organization which designs a system . . . will inevitably produce a design whose structure is a copy of the organization's communication structure.⁵

Why should the structure, activities, and values of a large commercial bureaucracy be a useful metaphor for our presentations? Are there worse metaphors? Voice-mail menu systems? Billboards? Television? Stalin?

The pushy PP style imposes itself on the audience and tends to set up a dominance relationship between speaker and audience. Too often the speaker is making *power points with hierarchical bullets to passive followers*. Aggressive, stereotyped, over-managed presentations—the Great Leader up on the pedestal—are characteristic of hegemonic systems:

The Roman state bolstered its authority and legitimacy with the trappings of ceremony. . . . Power is a far more complex and mysterious quality than any apparently simple manifestation of it would appear. It is as much a matter of impression, of theatre, of persuading those over whom authority is wielded to collude in their subjugation. Insofar as power is a matter of presentation, its cultural currency in antiquity (and still today) was the creation, manipulation, and display of images. In the propagation of the imperial office, at any rate, art was power.⁶

A BETTER metaphor for presentations is *good teaching*. Practical teaching techniques are very useful for presentations in general. Teachers seek to explain something with credibility, which is what many presentations are trying to do. The core ideas of teaching—*explanation, reasoning, finding things out, questioning, content, evidence, credible authority not patronizing authoritarianism*—are contrary to the cognitive style of PowerPoint. And the ethical values of teachers differ from those engaged in marketing.⁷

Especially disturbing is the introduction of PowerPoint into schools. Instead of writing a report using sentences, children learn how to decorate client pitches and infomercials, which is better than encouraging children to smoke. Student PP exercises (as seen in teacher's guides, and in student work posted on the internet) typically show 5 to 20 words and a piece of clip art on each slide in a presentation consisting of 3 to 6 slides—a total of perhaps 80 words (20 seconds of silent reading) for a week of work. Rather than being trained as mini-bureaucrats in the pitch culture, students would be better off if schools closed down on PP days and everyone went to The Exploratorium. Or wrote an illustrated essay explaining something.

⁵ Melvin E. Conway, "How Do Committees Invent?" *Datamation*, April 1968, 28–31. The law's "inevitably" overreaches. Frederick P. Brooks, Jr., in *The Mythical Man-Month: Essays on Software Engineering* (1975), famously describes the interplay between system design and bureaucracy.

⁶ Jás Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph: The Art of the Roman Empire AD 100–450* (1998), 53.

⁷ On teaching and presentations: Joseph Lowman, *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching* (1995); Wilbert J. McKeachie and Barbara K. Hofer, *McKeachie's Teaching Tips* (2001); Frederick Mosteller, "Classroom and Platform Performance," *The American Statistician*, 34 (February 1980), 11–17 (also posted on internet).