

An Inconvenient Tool: Rethinking the Role of Slideware in the Writing Classroom

Laurie E. Gries and Collin Gifford Brooke

Every so often, a technology will saturate the market to the extent that the name of the product becomes a stand-in for the technology itself, like Kleenex or Xerox. While it belongs to the broader genre of slideware,¹ Microsoft PowerPoint is perhaps the best example of software that has achieved that level of ubiquity. Despite Apple's Keynote, the Presentation Editor within Google Docs, Zoho Show, and others, the visual display of sequential slides (most typically during an oral presentation) has become synonymous with PowerPoint. Although it has achieved this level of popularity, PowerPoint is also considered by many to be synonymous with mind-numbing boredom, painful expository bullet points, and the overexposure of the Microsoft clip art library. That is, PowerPoint may be used widely, but it is just as widely disparaged, and often used only begrudgingly. For all of the success PowerPoint has achieved as a piece of software, it has inspired an equal amount of dismay in dimly lit classrooms, boardrooms, and conferences across the world.

To imagine, then, that a PowerPoint presentation might win an Academy Award sounds absurd, like someone receiving a Pulitzer Prize for a five-paragraph theme. And yet, in 2007, *An Inconvenient Truth*, the documentary based upon Al Gore's slideshow about global warming, received two Academy Awards (for best documentary and best original song). By the time the film was released, Gore himself estimated that he had delivered his presentation more than a thousand times; combined with the worldwide success of the documentary, this suggests that millions of people have seen this single slideshow, and presumably acted upon the message it was designed to support. Nancy Duarte explains in *slide:ology* that Gore "has done more than any other individual to legitimize multimedia presentations as one of the most compelling communication vehicles on the planet" (86). While the rehabilitation of slideware may seem a negligible benefit when compared to the political and environmental impact of *Inconvenient Truth*, we would argue that the success of Gore's documentary is merely the most visible example of a larger movement towards a re-legitimation of PowerPoint and slideware more broadly. This movement has emerged, in part, by redefining the terms according to which we think about multimedia presentations. As we discuss below, PowerPoint has been articulated as an inferior information technology, incapable of the kind of information density possible with

other media. Industry professionals like Duarte and Garr Reynolds, however, refuse to engage this critique of PowerPoint on those terms, seeing it instead as a rich environment for the practice of multimedia rhetoric, as opposed to information delivery.

In rhetoric and composition, we are more likely to hold to the former position, seeing slideware as a necessary evil at best. Although we in the academy hold different goals and motives, our opinions of presentation software have generally run parallel to those of the business world. It is time that we reconsider our received opinions regarding slideware, and listen closely to the new voices (and visions) of presentation and design experts. After all, some of the leading thinkers in technology-related fields, such as Lawrence Lessig and Steve Jobs, are among slideware's most dynamic presenters. Others such as Daniel Pink are encouraging us to make more room for creativity in our thinking, suggesting that critiques of PowerPoint may not provide us with the whole story when it comes to considering slideware. We argue below that when used in dynamic, inventive ways, slideware can become an integral and productive part of our pedagogical and technological repertoires. We believe it is time to set aside our mistrust and disdain for software like PowerPoint and consider carefully how it might aid us in the teaching of writing. Using the presentation format Pecha Kucha as a model, we offer productive reasons and ways to reconfigure the role of slideware in the composing process. Slideware design and delivery can play a creative and inventive role in our students' making of writing.

The Rise and Fall (and Rise?) of PowerPoint

Because we have generally accepted the terms of the PowerPoint “debate” as it has played out in public discourse—going so far sometimes as to teach Edward Tufte's and others' critiques of the software—it is worth reviewing that debate, and understanding the values implied there, before we explore slideware's specific application in the classroom. Understanding how professionals like Reynolds and Duarte are positioning slideware can provide us with useful guidance as we consider it for adoption.

In part, the return to slideware is a response to the public backlash against PowerPoint that followed its meteoric rise to popularity. In a 2001 *New Yorker* article titled “Absolute PowerPoint,” for example, Ian Parker claimed that PowerPoint “is software you impose on other people” (76). Parker details PowerPoint's success, its presence at the confluence of factors like the changing structure of industry in the 1960s and 1970s, the emergence of affordable personal computers in the 1980s, and the fear that most people have of public speaking. “Because PowerPoint can be an impressive antidote to fear,” Parker explains, “there seems to be no great impulse to fight th[e] influence” of PowerPoint itself, or of the templates supplied with the

program (78). There is an unevenness to Parker's treatment of PowerPoint in the article, however—an uncertainty about whether or not the ubiquity of PowerPoint is worth taking seriously. On the one hand, he explains that PowerPoint

has a private, interior influence. It edits ideas. It is, almost surreptitiously, a business manual as well as a business suit, with an opinion—an oddly pedantic, prescriptive opinion—about the way we should think. It helps you make a case, but it also makes its own case: about how to organize information, how much information to organize, how to look at the world. (76)

Implied in Parker's more serious descriptions is the question of whether any software should play as large a role as PowerPoint seems to in the shaping of our ideas. And yet this question alternates throughout with amused accounts of the "joke" of the Auto-Content Wizard, product development being driven by marketing departments, a housewife driving her children to tears with slideshows about "domestic harmony," and the infamous PowerPoint translation-parody of the Gettysburg Address. Despite both anecdotal and empirical evidence of PowerPoint's effect on information and subsequent audience judgments, one has the impression from Parker that to take PowerPoint too seriously would result in becoming the anonymous user who admits "I caught myself planning out (in my head) the slides I would need to explain to my wife why we couldn't afford a vacation this year" (78).

If there is some ambivalence to Parker's account of PowerPoint, there is none in Edward Tufte's scathing critique of the software, his 2003, self-published essay, "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint: Pitching Out Corrupts Within." The cover visual for his essay is instructive: Tufte adds several thought and speech balloons to a picture of Stalin Square in Budapest, with comments like, "There's no bullet list like Stalin's bullet list!" and "For re-education campaigns, nothing is better than the Auto-Content Wizard!" The humor of these additions is strained at best; underlying it is a strong sense of disapproval, if not outright contempt, for PowerPoint, and the core of Tufte's argument is deadly serious. In what is perhaps the conceptual centerpiece of the essay, Tufte places on two facing pages a single slide from the NASA slideshow that preceded the 2003 explosion of the space shuttle Columbia. The slide is surrounded by several paragraphs of Tufte's detailed commentary critiquing the "festival of bureaucratic hyper-rationalism" (10) represented there. Each slide in the presentation, according to Tufte, contains "4 to 6 levels of hierarchy," provides no continuity from slide to slide, and ultimately serves to complicate and obscure what are already difficult technical issues. Eventually, Tufte cites the Columbia Accident Investigation Board's report in support of his own conclusions "that the distinctive cogni-

tive style of PowerPoint reinforced the hierarchical filtering and biases of the NASA bureaucracy during the crucial period when the Columbia was damaged but still functioning” (12). It would perhaps be a stretch to blame the Columbia disaster on PowerPoint, but, as Tufte makes clear, not much of one. “The language, attitude, and presentation tool of the pitch culture had penetrated throughout the NASA organization, even into the most serious technical analysis, the survival of the shuttle” (12). Whether or not we want to go so far as to blame the presentation tool, Tufte is clear that PowerPoint had a marked effect on the communications of the organization and fatal consequences for the crew of the Columbia. Tufte’s claims circulated well beyond the traditional audience for such analysis; his condemnation of PowerPoint was not only covered by *Wired* but by Sunday’s *New York Times Magazine* under the headline “PowerPoint Makes You Dumb.” Tufte’s essay has also appeared in countless classrooms, an archetypal critique of the problems of uncritically adopting and using software.

As a result of his critique’s ubiquity, if there is one person who has done more to shape the academy’s attitude towards slideware, it is probably Tufte. But it is worth considering in more detail the perspective compositionists have endorsed. In one sense, Tufte is an obvious ally for writing teachers; as he explains, “Serious problems require a serious tool: written reports” (14). Although an abbreviated form of Tufte’s essay appeared in *Wired* with the headline “PowerPoint is Evil,” his broader argument is not that PowerPoint is essentially wrong, but rather that print writing is more important than we sometimes imagine. In the case of Columbia, information was circulating, as well as decisions made that were based upon that information, in a form inappropriate to the detail and sophistication needed. The second major argument that Tufte offers in his essay has to do with information density and PowerPoint users’ tendency to compromise density in favor of readable font sizes, copious negative space, and meaningless clip art. Given the criterion of information density, Tufte finds PowerPoint wanting on almost every level. The “simple tables” permitted by slides are compared with John Graunt’s 1662 “Table of Causalities,” which, as Tufte explains, would have required 155 slides to present what Graunt accomplishes in a single page. Standard injunctions about the number of bullet points per slide and words per line reduce potentially complex topics to the diction of first-grade reading primers. In short, Tufte explains, “The PP slide format has the worst signal/noise ratio of any known method of communication on paper or computer screen” (26). As a discipline devoted, in many ways, to the “signal,” it is unsurprising that we would find these arguments persuasive.

There have been a few challenges to Tufte’s conclusions, however, worth considering; one such appeared from Donald Norman, whose work on design qualifies him easily as a peer of Tufte’s. In a 2004 interview with Cliff Atkinson, Norman lays out the ideas that would later turn into an essay, “In

Defense of PowerPoint,” published at his own website. In that essay, Norman describes Tufte’s conclusions as “nonsense;” he argues that the NASA slides, however poorly executed, reflected similarly mistaken findings on the part of the engineers. “The fault is with the findings, not with the slides . . . they highlighted the information they thought important and minimized the parts they thought not important. That is the absolutely proper way to present a set of recommendations” (“In Defense”). Norman’s broader point is that information density is a standard more appropriate to the reader than the listener, and that “the speech giver should really develop three different documents:” personal notes, slides, and handouts, each designed to meet different goals as part of a presentation. From a disciplinary perspective, Norman qualifies Tufte’s argument in an important way: information density is not a context-independent value. This doesn’t necessarily invalidate Tufte’s critique, nor does it absolve poor presentations of any responsibility. But it should prompt us to think about those contexts where PowerPoint might actually be appropriate and, used well, a platform that can enrich the role of design and delivery in our writing pedagogies. As design takes a more central place in composition pedagogy, the PowerPoint renaissance that has occurred in the business and design world in recent years challenges us to consider the role of slideware more seriously.

Matters of Slideware Design

As evident in a growing number of articles and textbooks in our field, design has a growing influence in composition pedagogy; Richard Marback refers to it in a recent issue of *College Composition and Communication* as a “centripetal interest” for our discipline (398). In a 2001 *Philosophy and Rhetoric* article, Richard Buchanan suggests we can think of design as “the human power of conceiving, planning, and making products that serve human beings in the accomplishment of any individual or collective purpose” (qtd. in “Design” 191). To think of design, then, as “styling of appearance of products,” Buchanan argues, is a serious misconception of what the work of designing entails (194). Like rhetoric, design is an art of forethought, whose work occurs deeply in the act of invention, arrangement, and production. Design, like rhetoric, is a productive act of making.

Anne Wysocki and Dennis Lynch’s handbook, *Compose, Design, Advocate*, is perhaps the most explicit in articulating the important function of design can play in the writing classroom. While acknowledging that the discipline of composition has always been closely linked with rhetoric, Wysocki and Lynch point out that because of changes in communication technologies, particularly the digital, thinking about design has become especially pertinent. As Wysocki and Lynch point out, the fields of composition and rhetoric and design share similar concerns—“both are concerned with audiences and

with how audiences respond to what we make” (5). Yet, design also differs from composition and rhetoric in that design is more concerned with: a) the material and creative process of composing; b) testing the audience’s experiences with the products; and c) the future functions of the product once it enters into circulation. Such concerns, Wysocki and Lynch note, have the potential to enhance our students’ composing processes as they learn to anticipate and consider the responses their artifacts might invoke in the daily lives of their audience.

Students also, and perhaps most importantly, learn to consider which different media are most appropriate to use in achieving their rhetorical goals. Because PowerPoint has gotten a “bad rap” in recent years from figures such as Tufte, the innovative and rhetorical potential of slideware is often overlooked. Contemporary designers, however, make a strong case as to why slideware presentations should take a more important role in the writing classroom. The design of slideware cannot only enhance our students’ abilities to think creatively about problems that matter, but also to communicate clearly in designs that matter. In addition, slideware design makes use of whole- mind aptitudes, which many argue are needed to communicate successfully and persuasively in today’s global arena.

Nancy Duarte’s book *slide:ology: The Art and Science of Generating Great Presentations* is one text that makes a strong case for thinking about slideware as an innovative writing technology that can boost our students’ creative thinking. Duarte—the designer behind *An Inconvenient Truth*—situates PowerPoint at the tail end of a long history of visual storytelling that begins nearly 2,000 years ago with the oldest cave painting found to date in Lascaux, France. Duarte rejects Tufte’s argument that PowerPoint reduces the analytical quality of presentations and weakens verbal and spatial reasoning. Instead, she suggests that PowerPoint can be a productive visual aid for generating innovative ideas and communicating creatively, clearly, and effectively for a given audience. As evidence, in *slide:ology* Duarte illustrates how PowerPoint design is revitalizing the role of multimedia presentations in the business world. Case studies are woven throughout her text to illustrate how creative PowerPoint presentations are not only saving business people from committing “career suislide,” but also enhancing the production and reception of presentations performed by today’s most innovative thinkers. At intellectual gatherings such as the highly prestigious TED and PopTech conferences, the innovative role of slideware is certainly pervasive, giving rise, in many people’s opinion, to some of the most compelling media presentations ever produced.

In *slide:ology* Duarte offers composition teachers and students a useful framework for thinking about the development process of slideware as a “presentation ecosystem” constituted by an interdependence of innovative ideas, effective (rhetorical, in essence) delivery, and visual design (11). Too

often, visual design in composition classrooms is simply thought of as an act and sign of “academic decorum” (George 25). Students, in other words, use visual design to demonstrate their attention to document design. In slideware, this act translates to mere concern with representation. *slide:ology* demonstrates how visual design is actually a highly conceptual and creative communicative act that can help students solve problems by generating new ideas. For instance, by sketching ideas and creating diagrams to communicate abstract ideas in their slide presentations, students can find relationships between information that leads to new insights and generates deeper understanding between audience and presenter. In *slide:ology* the creative process of designing slides is positioned, in other words, as not simply the representation of ideas but rather the generation of ideas. In this sense, slideware becomes an important means of invention, dispelling notions of slideware simply as a means of delivery.

Garr Reynolds’s book *Presentation Zen*, in conjunction with its active accompanying website, also offers composition teachers and students a fresh outlook on the productive possibilities afforded by slideware design. Garr Reynolds is a leading consultant in presentation design and delivery for Fortune 500 companies around the globe. He conceived the idea for this book after growing frustrated by the ubiquity of poorly designed and difficult-to-understand presentations riddled with bullet points, crammed text, and egregious clip art. Reynolds calls such poorly and thoughtlessly designed slide presentations “slideuments,” which he claims are created more from a desire to save time rather than generate effective presentations. Reynolds argues that PowerPoint as a tool is not to blame, however. If used to create simple, balanced, and beautiful designs in conjunction with a well-crafted story and delivery style, PowerPoint presentations can be highly effective in achieving one’s communicative goal(s). Unlike the conventional demonizations of PowerPoint by Parker, Tufte, and others, Reynolds argues and illustrates that PowerPoint is a tool capable of creating intelligent, emotional, and effective communication.

Reynolds’s book offers students an “approach” to slideware rather than a method, one that relies heavily on Zen principles² relating to aesthetics, mindfulness, and connectedness. As Reynolds explains, a method of presentation design and delivery might offer a set of design rules to be adhered to by everyone in the same way. In contrast, the philosophical approach of *presentationzen* emphasizes a flexible path to designing and delivering presentations that encourage audience awareness, creativity, and discovery (25). Reynolds’s main argument can be essentially wrapped up in one line: *Design Matters to Clear Communication*. Reiterating Duarte’s argument that design is not about decoration or ornamentation, Reynolds emphasizes that design is, to a great extent, about making communication as easy and clear as possible for one’s viewers (163). Thus, design matters because audience

matters—a lesson we cannot impress enough upon our students in the composition classroom. To achieve simple, clear, and effective communication, Reynolds suggests being constantly mindful of the principles of restraint, simplicity, and naturalness: “Restraint in preparation. Simplicity in design. Naturalness in delivery” (7). Such mindfulness, he argues, has the potential to generate innovative and effective communication, especially if it becomes a permanent way of thinking about design and delivery.

The design values embodied in both Reynolds’s and Duarte’s ideas on presentation and delivery are aligned with contemporary notions about the role of creative thinking and design in effective persuasion. While writing instructors might not typically look to contemporary arguments made about communication offered in best selling business books, such arguments challenge us in productive ways to rethink the relation between slideware design and persuasion. Reynolds’s approach, for instance, draws deeply on Daniel Pink’s right-brain aptitudes as discussed in *A Whole New Mind*. In composition and rhetoric classrooms, analytical thinking is often the privileged form of knowing that we teach in relation to rhetoric and argument. Pink would argue that such logical, linear, and analytical, or left-brain thinking, skills are no longer sufficient to prepare students to communicate effectively in the “Conceptual Age” in which we presently find ourselves. According to Pink, students need to develop “high concept” aptitudes, which include detecting patterns and opportunities, generating creative and emotional beauty, crafting appealing narratives, and synthesizing unrelated ideas to generate new ones (2). Pink especially emphasizes that it is not enough to make logical arguments in order to persuade. We need to be able to create compelling narratives, which Pink argues is at the heart of effective persuasion. In addition, while analysis is obviously still necessary, the ability to empathize and synthesize, see the big picture, and identify interconnectivity is increasingly becoming important to successful global communication. From a design perspective, these abilities, which are fostered through slideware design, are needed to communicate effectively and create effective presentations in today’s professional world.

Arguments about the importance of design to persuasion are also evident in Chip Heath and Dan Heath’s principles for communicating ideas that stick. In their book, *Made to Stick*, Heath and Heath argue that “sticky” ideas have six common principles: simplicity, unexpectedness, concreteness, credibility, emotions, and stories. Too often, Heath and Heath argue, presenters suffer from what they call the “Curse of Knowledge”—the condition whereby the deliverer overestimates an audience’s background knowledge about the topic at hand. Presenters who suffer this condition often create abstract claims that are perfectly clear to the presenter, but barely, if at all, comprehensible to the audience. Scholars who attend highly theoretical conference presentations in our own field will recognize this curse. Too often conference presenta-

tions couched in dense theories and discourse fail to make an impact on an audience, not because their ideas are not smart and important, but simply because the language is too abstract for an audience to absorb in a 20-minute session falling in the midst of a long day of conference-going. Their ideas simply are too abstract to stick. Heath and Heath offer a counterargument to Tufte's claim that PowerPoint has too poor of a signal/noise ratio to be effective or appropriate by arguing for the value of a low signal/noise ratio in slideware presentations. While Tufte would argue slideware lacks the ability to convey complex ideas needed in specific rhetorical situations, Heath and Heath—alongside Reynolds and Duarte—argue that simplifying a message actually amplifies the clarity and effect of a complex message. Heath and Heath suggest avoiding too many statistics or, in our field, too many dense quotes, which often stem from over-attempts to establish one's credibility. In addition, Heath and Heath advocate for surprising the audience and speaking of concrete images to increase the stickiness of a message. Making some kind of emotional connections with our audiences and incorporating an element of story in our presentations are also effective ways to create persuasive messages that audience members will remember.

While such principles for effective communication and persuasion, offered by experts in the design and business worlds, may not seem profound or even new to scholars of rhetoric and composition, these applied principles encourage us to rethink the value of slideware design in our classrooms. Unlike Parker, Tufte, and others who see little value in PowerPoint's ability to generate and deliver innovative ideas, design professionals such as Duarte and Reynolds argue and illustrate that we ought to take slideware more seriously as a creative and intelligent tool. First, integrating slideware into our pedagogy has the potential to enhance certain aptitudes and design perspectives that can make students more effective communicators. Second, if taught as a process, slideware can help bridge verbal, visual, and oral communication skills, which still so often get divorced in much writing pedagogy. Also, in addition to improving our students' chances to make their ideas stick, slideware presentation, as we aim to illustrate in the next section, can especially help students realize and make use of design's inventive affordances. For these reasons, we argue it is time that writing teachers take slideware more seriously in our writing classrooms.

Slideware in the Classroom

Integrating slideware successfully and meaningfully into our classrooms depends on rethinking the role and location of delivery in the composing process and reconsidering the productivity of constraint writing, presentation design, and visual thinking. In rethinking the role of delivery, James Porter and others argue that we need to think about how delivery connects to

productive, inentional thinking rather than simply a means to disseminate information. For many of us, such reconfiguration of delivery works against all that we have been taught about the composing process. As Kathleen Yancey notes in her recently published NCTE report *Writing in the 21st Century*, in print-based models of composing, delivery has long been associated with publication or presentation—the final stage of the writing process. The writing process, of course, has been taught as recursive; we all know that invention, style, revision, and arrangement do not happen in chronological order. However, in terms of recursivity, at least in many of our classrooms, delivery by and large has been, and still is, conceived and taught as the final act of the composing process—or in more ecological terms, the final stage in the life cycle of a text. As the final stage, the role of delivery is simply to translate one's print-based arguments into oral, visual, or multi-media form and to present one's final arguments to a broader audience. As such, in writing instruction, John Trimbur argues, “delivery has been an afterthought at best, assigned mainly to technical and professional communication and associated largely with such matters of document design as page layout, typography, visual display of information, and Web design (“Composition” 190). Delivery, in other words, is a “technical issue about physical presentation” rather than a practice of invention (190). It is the final touch we put on our already completed written ideas, one that has little to do with the ideas themselves.

A visualization of presentation or delivery being the “last act” cannot be more palpable than in Ruth Culham and Vicki Spandel's 6 + 1 Trait framework. This model is billed as an assessment method, but it is currently being used all over the nation as a writing instruction method for secondary English education. According to this model, presentation is the “+1,” added onto and othered from the list of more core traits of idea development and organization. In addition, presentation is positioned outside the recursive process, which only encompasses pre-writing, drafting, responding, and revision. Such frameworks are reinforced in our college composition classrooms when we assign PowerPoints as the culminating assignment in our curricula—when we ask students to visually and orally express their ideas that they have already thought through, polished, and presented in formal writing assignments.

This truncation of delivery as a final, almost inessential, stage in the composing process positions it as exterior to invention. In Derridean terms, delivery conceived here is a supplement, both in that the role of delivery is created by its opposition to invention and that it is often seen as an unsuitable substitute for invention. As supplement, delivery cannot be trusted as a core trait (if we want to use that term), nor can it be “trusted” as a productive stage in the composing process with the potential to help students develop creative and analytical thought. Continuing to conceive of and to teach de-

livery according to traditional print-based models of composing necessarily limits the role that slideware might play in the composing process. Using the presentation format Pecha Kucha as a model, we aim to illustrate how slideware can provide writers with meaningful acts of rhetorical transformation, especially when we permit invention to be constituted by delivery, resituating it to a more productive place in our writing curricula.

Pecha Kucha is a contemporary form of presentation design and delivery³ revitalizing the role of PowerPoint in the design world. The method of Pecha Kucha entails telling a story in sync with 20 slides, shown for 20 seconds each. As Daniel Pink has described the format, “That’s it. Say what you need to say in six minutes and 40 seconds and then sit the hell down.” Pecha Kucha derives from the Japanese term for “the sound of conversation” or “chit-chat.” As originally conceived by Astrid Klein and Mark Dytham, this presentation format affords designers a brief, but potent, means to share their work in public spaces with other designers. In other words, Pecha Kucha began as a designer’s adult version of “show and tell.” Since its inception in Tokyo in 2003, Pecha Kucha nights have become a global phenomenon in which professionals from the design, architecture, photography, and other creative fields meet, network, and present their current work in public venues.

In the writing classroom, the Pecha Kucha format has transformative affordances that emerge when slideware is used to construct arguments rather than present *already* composed, written arguments. To a great extent, these features emerge when we ask students to work with format and design constraints. In *The Laws of Simplicity*, John Maeda explains, “In the design world, there is the belief that with more constraints, better solutions are revealed” (qtd. in Reynolds 39). Extending this point, Reynolds also argues, “[C]onstraints and limitations are a powerful ally, not an enemy” (39). Working within constraints with the trust that restrictions can be liberators, Reynolds claims, creates clear and powerful messages (39). In the composition classroom, constrained writing has been under-appreciated. As Jan Baetens explains, we can think of constrained writing as “the use of any type of formal technique or program whose application is able to produce a sense of its making text by itself, if need be without any previous “idea” from the writer” (“Freewriting” 2). A constraint-ruled text is opposed to a text in which an author attempts to articulate an idea that was realized before he or she sits down to write (2). Typically, in the composition classroom, we associate constrained writing with a current-traditionalist approach and thus neglect to explore how constraints can be an important part of the inventive process. Yet, as Baetens make clear, constraints can act as a meaningful imaginative tool if an integrated relationship is created between constraints and the entire production process.

Baetens distinguishes between dissociative and integrative processes of constrained writing. Dissociative approaches ask students to work with one constraint in the production of a text. When constructing a Pecha Kucha, for instance, a dissociative approach would impose one rule students must abide by, such as using two sentences per slide and in conjunction with one image. Working within the confines of a single contrived constraint, students are able to dissociate from the design process to a certain degree. An integrative approach, on the other hand, asks students to work with permanent constraints throughout the whole production of their Pecha Kuchas. Unlike a dissociative model, in an integrative process, constraints have the potential to mutually shape all parameters of the work (Baetens). An integrative approach to creating Pecha Kuchas is encouraged when we ask students to abide by presentation design principles forwarded by Reynolds to tell the story of their 10-12 page first-draft, researched arguments in 6 minute and 40 second Pecha Kuchas. Design constraints are conceived as aesthetic values, rather than rules, to be considered through every step of the production process. For example, students are asked to strive for simplicity, balance, subtlety, elegance, naturalness, and tranquility. These values are achieved by using empty space, relevant elements or information, clear and simple display of information, 2-D rather than 3-D representations, repetition of visual elements, contrast, alignment, etc. These design principles, offered by both Reynolds and Duarte, place constraints on slide design throughout the entire production of Pecha Kuchas. In terms of the oral part of their presentation, students are encouraged to avoid reading from a script, move from behind the podium, keep the lights on, and attempt to make some kind of emotional connection with the audience. While these constraints often intimidate students, we also have begun to observe many students taking risks and generating dynamic presentations. Thus, rather than act as creative obstacles, such integrated interaction with constraints stimulates visual play and innovative presentation design.

Constraints, although difficult to work with, help students create visual presentations that are rhetorically powerful. When positioned as rhetorical strategies, students' design choices help them achieve their communicative goals. Yet even more importantly, the integrated process of working with constraints is transformative, especially when we relocate delivery to the middle of our students composing process. In our critical research and writing courses⁴, for instance, students begin by crafting full drafts of a written argument. Students then research for, design, and craft their Pecha Kuchas with the goal of narrating the exigency for their study, their findings, and their current arguments about the topic at hand. Students present their ideas in a Pecha Kucha to the class during a Pecha Kucha Night event. After they present their Pecha Kuchas, and the class discusses them, we ask the students to go back to the page to reconstruct their arguments in light of that

discussion. Integrating the design and presentation of Pecha Kuchas *into* the composing process helps students revise their initial print-based arguments, not only in terms of organization but also in the development of ideas. The 20 x 20 slideware format obliges students to identify and emphasize only the most relevant ideas in their longer arguments. In rewriting their final print documents, students often omit material included in their original print arguments when they realize it was not significant enough to include in their Pecha Kuchas. At the same time, students often end up rearranging their final written essays to create a more coherent argument. Constructing Pecha Kuchas helps students understand how their written arguments could be more effectively arranged on the page. As a result of deploying slideware *during* the composing process, rather than as an afterthought, students craft powerful narratives that end up resulting in tighter and sharper arguments on the page.

When finding visuals to include in their Pecha Kuchas, students also often discover new information that extends, complicates, and contradicts their previous arguments. Some students even realize that the original focus of their previous arguments is no longer the main point they want to or need to be focusing on. Students develop new ideas, in other words, by working through the composing process of creating their Pecha Kuchas. In an interview with Nancy Duarte about her work with Al Gore, Duarte explains that Gore was “constantly learning from each presentation and refining his message and his visuals along the way” (“Duarte Design”). Similarly, Pecha Kucha stimulates rhetorical revision of students’ initial arguments. The rhetorical revision that slideware can provoke has important inventive implications. Our teaching experience similarly indicates that students often have a difficult time “re-seeing” their work and realizing that much of the revision process is actually an act of letting go and developing new directions for their work. They have a difficult idea time buying into the notion, in other words, that revision is constituted by invention just as invention is constituted by delivery. Asking students to switch modalities in the midst of their composing process to design a multimedia presentation of their argument engages them fully in this process, however. Resituating “presentation” in the composing process can help students work recursively between visual and print, as well as other interactive stages of the 21st century composing process. In effect, through the design and production of slideware, students realize inventive possibilities in their own work that the invisibility of typical print- based writing may not encourage.

It is important to note here that the transformative possibilities afforded by slideware exist only when we take time to teach slideware as a presentation design process, which entails crafting a message, designing a visual story, and thinking through delivery. In teaching slideware, the instructor must do more than simply show students how to operate the software. If our

pedagogical focus rests solely on the technical—the mastery of the software’s basic features—then much of the potential of slideware will be unavailable to us. Following Reynolds, Duarte, and others, slideware can provide us with an opportunity to teach presentation as a sensitive ecosystem, balanced by attention to content, design, and delivery. In our classes, we devote nearly six weeks or one unit to discuss and implement the innovative design and delivery principles offered in *Presentation Zen* and *slide:ology*. During this unit, the classroom is turned into a studio environment where students are creating storyboards, crafting narrative, using visual search engines, playing with Photoshop, designing visuals, creating handouts, and practicing delivery. Rather than being an afterthought, then, slideware is positioned as a rhetorical strategy and a productive means of invention, persuasion, and revision.

We also find that when we ask students to engage in presentation design, many engage in visual thinking, which often triggers creative potentials not accessed in print-based composition. Visual thinking is as highly unstable in meaning as rhetoric itself. Yet, for our purposes, as Dawan Stanford helps us understand, visual thinking, most broadly, can be thought of as “the use and exploration of images as tools for communication, understanding, creativity, problem solving, and explanation” (“What is”). Visual thinking⁵ entails such activities as making and using sketches, diagrams, and graphs to think through abstract concepts, generate ideas, make decisions, problem solve and/or illustrate relations between information. Other activities, among many, include creating tag clouds, concept mapping, and data visualization. Visual thinking, as conceived here, is different than visual rhetorics. As articulated in *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, visual rhetorics, in a broad sense, is most often thought of in two ways: as an artifact that individuals create for communicative purposes and as a perspective or lens employed to study how visual artifacts perform rhetorically (303). Visual rhetorics, we would argue, is just one realm of visual thinking. While visual rhetorics is receiving growing attention in composition studies, visual thinking, in its creative, explanatory, and problem-solving sense, has received little attention in composition and rhetoric.

Our work with slideware in the classroom suggests that many of our students, especially those majoring in the design arts, benefit from stimulating visual thinking to generate productive reasoning, creativity, and communicative fluency. Visual thinking can trigger non-linear, intuitive, and creative thought processes that often, in turn, unlock modes of thought not accessed via linear, logical thought processes (see Rudolf Arnheim’s classic text *Visual Thinking*). When students engage in presentation design and visual thinking during the construction of presentations, students are able to access this creative mode of thought that helps to generate new ways of thinking about their topics. This ability to switch between logical and creative modes of thought, in turn, enhances our students’ potential

to employ their whole mind to generate compelling arguments. As Eva Brumberger argues, visual thinking is important for helping students move fluidly between and within different modes of thought and communication (“Making,” 378). When we prepare students to think verbally, but not visually, Brumberger argues, we “risk producing writers who are visual technicians—writers skilled in visual tools and techniques but lacking what Hocks and Kendrick (2003) referred to such ability as ‘fully hybrid eloquence’” (378). Such eloquence entails thinking of visual and verbal modes of communication as complementary and being able to move fluently and creatively back and forth between the two to achieve one’s communicative and problem-solving goals. Students training to be professional and technical writers especially need to develop ambidexterity in terms of thought and communication style to succeed in the workplace (Brumberger 2007; Johnson-Sheehan, 2002; Olsen, 1991; Stroupe, 2000). As our field takes on the responsibility to prepare technical and professional writers, we argue that when taught as a presentation development process, PowerPoint offers student opportunities to hone this ability.

At least one other significant affordance also emerges. As the creators of Pecha Kucha explain, “Pecha Kucha is a *real* social network” in which presenters interact with each other’s ideas throughout the evening in a casual atmosphere (Dytham and Klein 18). In the composition classroom, because of the typical ways in which we position delivery, students too often think of presentations as formal, final reports of their work rather than opportunities to stimulate casual conversation about their ideas. Assimilating Pecha Kucha events in our classrooms, however, repositions delivery as occasions to share their ideas and learn from peer and instructor responses, especially if we omit the typical, stifled Q & A sessions in favor of opportunities for students to casually discuss each other’s work. In post-Pecha Kucha reflections, students claim that their peers’ presentations and the subsequent conversations actually provoke new ideas about their own arguments. In effect, students’ final written arguments become utterances in Bahktinian terms—responses to and determined by previous utterances. If repositioned in *media res* of the composing process, slideware design and delivery helps students begin to see that their writing can generate a response from an intended viewer. This response may or may not be the one they hoped to evoke; yet, no matter—by hearing the responses and seeing how their own work stimulates dialogue, they come to see how their final compositions act as *utterances* generated as part of and for the purpose of dialogue. A tighter social network of writers, rhetors, and designers is thus created in the classroom community. Students begin to take their own as well as their peers’ ideas more seriously.

Conclusion

Despite the universal disdain we hold in writing studies for the five-paragraph theme, no one would suggest that we do without paragraphs themselves in our writing, and yet, this is the curious position that most slideware occupies for us. PowerPoint, Keynote, and the rest are judged by the very worst examples of what they can accomplish, leading us to resist their use in our classrooms. This in turn often means that we spend little time exploring or negotiating the software, either on our own or with our students, and this results in the very types of presentation that we dread. Our failure to take slideware seriously as a writing platform keeps us trapped in a vicious circle, one marked by mediocre presentations and an unwillingness to engage seriously the very tools that might help us improve them. We argue for a pedagogical renaissance of slideware in the writing classroom; coupled with contemporary design theories, slideware has the potential to revitalize student writing at all stages of the composing process. Slideware repositions our students as makers and designers in addition to writers and rhetors.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes among the modalities of knowing, doing, and making, suggesting that each has its own values and criteria by which we measure them. One of the striking things about rhetoric and writing, as well as design, is that they cut across all three. While the earliest days of the process movement attested to our ability to know through writing, and the social turn of the past twenty years has emphasized symbolic action and writing as a form of doing, our recent disciplinary forays into multimedia and networked writing encourage us to recover the third term, *making*, as well. It is not ultimately a matter of choosing one over the others, but rather, critically integrating them in a way that allows all three to inform each other. We would not necessarily suggest that slideware presentations supplant more traditional academic essays, but we have found that, as an element of the process rather than an afterthought, slideware can encourage our students to attend more closely to the ways that they *make* as they write. This sense of design can productively complicate their work, make them more conscious of their choices, and help them to develop a better sense of their own rhetorical effectiveness.

Notes

1. Although for many years, PowerPoint has been synonymous with what we call “slideware,” a wide array of applications exists that permit the sequential display of slides. For this reason, in this essay, while we center much of the discussion around PowerPoint, we prefer the broader designation of “slideware.”

2. Some scholars may certainly scowl at Reynolds' appropriation of Zen imagery and philosophical principles for slideware design and criticize his explanation of Zen for its reductive qualities. Yet, from an affirmative perspective, the "Presentation Zen approach" does offer a straightforward and, we would argue innovative, way to reconceptualize the value of PowerPoint.
3. Inspired by Pecha Kuchas, Ignite is a similar presentation genre in which presenters show 20 slides that automatically rotate after 15 seconds, creating a 5-minute presentation. Started in Seattle in 2006 by Brady Forrest and Bre Pettis, Ignite has two parts: an Ignite contest and Ignite talks. Community members can decide on what contest they want to hold and then recruit speakers to present.
4. The Pecha Kucha assignment as discussed in this article has been implemented in several sections of WRT 205 at Syracuse University. WRT 205 is a required critical research and writing course designed to be taken during students' sophomore year. The claims made about the value of resituating presentation and the value of constrained writing in the composing process are based on student reflections, teacher observations, and one-on-one conversations with students. No formal study of this assignment has been conducted. This article grows out of the authors' interest in pedagogical exploration of slideware and delivery in the writing classroom, rather than a report of research findings.
5. For an excellent discussion of visual thinking in relation to communication, see Brumberger.

Works Cited

- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. and Ed. Roger Crisp. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. Print.
- Arnheim, Rudolf. *Visual Thinking*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1972. Print.
- Atkinson, Cliff. "PowerPoint Usability: Q&A with Don Norman." *Socialmedia*. (2004): n. pag. Web. 10 Oct. 2009.
- Baetens, Jan. "Comic Strips and Constrained Writing." *Image [& Narrative*. Oct (2003): n. pag. Web. 15 Oct. 2009.
- . "Free Writing, Constrained Writing: The Ideology of Form." *Poetics Today*. 18.1 (1997): 1-14. Print.
- Brumberger, Eva R. "Making the Strange Familiar: A Pedagogical Exploration of Visual Thinking." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*. 21 (2007): 376-401. Print.
- Buchanan, Richard. "Design and the New Rhetoric: Productive Arts in the Philosophy of Culture." *Philosophy and Rhetoric*. 34.3 (2001): 183-206. Print.
- Duarte, Nancy. *slide:ology: The Art and Science of Creating Great Presentations*. Cambridge: O'Reilly Media, Inc., 2008. Print.
- Dytham, Mark, and Astrid Klein. *Pecha Kucha Night: 20 Images x 20 Seconds*. Tokyo: Klein Dytham, 2008. Print.
- Heath, Chip, and Dan Heath. *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*. New York: Random House, 2007. Print.

- George, Diana. "From Analysis to Design: Visual Communication in the Teaching of Writing." *College Composition and Communication*. 52.1 (September 2002): 11-39. Print.
- Johnson-Sheehan, R. "Being Visual, Visual Beings." In *Working with Words and Images: New Steps in an Old Dance*. Ed. Allen.. Westport, CT: Ablex, 2002. Print.
- Maeda, John. *The Laws of Simplicity (Simplicity: Design, Technology, Business, Life)*. Cambridge: MIT P 2006. Print.
- Marback, Richard. "Embracing Wicked Problems: The Turn to Design in Composition Studies." *College Composition and Communication* 61.2 (2009): 397-419. Print.
- Norman, Donald. "In Defense of PowerPoint." *jnd.org*. 2004. Web. 10 Oct. 2009.
- Olsen, G. R. "Eidetecker: The Professional Communicator in the New Visual Culture." *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*. 34 (1991): 13-19. Print.
- Pink, Daniel. *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2005. Print.
- Parker, Ian. "Absolute PowerPoint: Can a Software Package Edit our Thoughts?" *The New Yorker* 77.13 (2001): 76-87. Print.
- Porter, James E.. "Recovering Delivery for Digital Rhetoric and Human-Computer Interaction." 2 Feb 2010. Web.
- Reynolds, Garr. *Presentation Zen: Simple Ideas on Presentation Design and Delivery*. Berkeley: New Riders, 2008. Print.
- . "Duarte Design Helps Al Gore "go visual." *Presentation Zen Blog*. 01 June 2006. Web. 10 Oct. 2009.
- Stanford, Dawan. "What is Visual Thinking? (definition 1.0)" *Fluidhive Blog*. 8 June 2009. Web. 2 Feb. 2010.
- Stroupe, C. "Visualizing English: Recognizing the Hybrid Literacy of Visual and Verbal Authorship on the Web." *College English* 62 (2000): 607-32. Print.
- Trimbur, John. "Composition and the Circulation of Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 52.2. (2000): 188-219.
- Tufte, Edward. "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint: Pitching Out Corrupts Within." *The Work of Edward Tufte and Graphics Press*. 6 Sep 2005. Web. 10 October 2009.
- . "PowerPoint is Evil: Power Corrupts. PowerPoint Corrupts Absolutely." *Wired* 11.09 (September 2003): n. pag. Web. 10 Oct. 2009.
- Yancey, Kathleen. "Writing in the 21st Century: A Report from the National Council of Teachers of English." Urbana: *NCTE.org*. 2009. Web. 10 Oct. 2009.