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PowerPoint Invades the Classroom

By LISA GUERNSEY

Kelvin Mazara, a seventh grader at the Edison School in Union City, N.J., could not have appeared more engrossed in the morning's assignment. He and his classmates had been asked to assemble a report about a play they had just read, "A Raisin in the Sun" by Lorraine Hansberry, and Kelvin's teacher was reviewing the topics to address: Who are the major characters? What are the conflicts? What are the broad themes?

But Kelvin had other questions on his mind. Like his classmates, Kelvin was preparing his book report on PowerPoint, Microsoft's popular presentation software, but he had jumped ahead in picking a background color for his slides: a rich royal blue, featuring a shimmering gold key.

Next came the layout. He typed "conflicts" and it appeared, perfectly centered and in a matching gold color, at the top of one slide. After playing with font size (12 point? 14?), he turned to a classmate. "How many conflicts can we have?" he asked, as he tested the look of two or three bullet points.

His teacher, John Bennetti, had started to walk through the rows of desks, his eyebrows raised. "Enhance it when you are done," Mr. Bennetti said emphatically. "When you are done."

PowerPoint — the must-have presentation software of the corporate world — has infiltrated the schoolhouse. In the coming weeks, students from 12th grade to, yes, kindergarten will finish science projects and polish end-of-the-year presentations on computerized slide shows filled with colorful animation, bold topic headings and neat rows of points, each introduced with a bullet mark. Software designed for business people has found an audience among the spiral notebook set.

"When you get to high school, you will need a lot of PowerPoint," said Nestor Mendoza, another student in Mr. Bennetti's class, "and in the real world, too. This gives us time to practice."

But just as PowerPoint has its detractors in the corporate world, some educators are disturbed by the program's march into the classroom. They are concerned that too many students will become fixated on fonts and formats without actually thinking about what they are typing next to all those bullets.

Sandee Tessier, a kindergarten teacher at San Altos Elementary School in Lemon Grove, Calif., has been using PowerPoint with her 5- and 6-year-old students for nearly four years, integrating it into her regular reading and math lessons.

"People come in and they have tears in their eyes because they can't believe what these little kids are doing," Ms. Tessier said. "It's part of their day, like picking up a pencil."

Sometimes, she said, she will take digital photographs of her pupils acting out scenes from a book, put the photos on slides and ask the pupils to describe their actions in words. In the process, the children create their own books.

"I train them how to get into PowerPoint, how to get into their files, over many months," Ms. Tessier said. "And then they type captions under each slide. Their spelling isn't that great, but that's O.K."

Ms. Tessier also encourages her pupils to write accounts of their lives and present them in front of the class.

"It is sensational for oral language development," she said. "They'll say, 'Hi, my name is Julie, and I like to eat pizza.' And there is their picture on the screen behind them, like on a TV monitor. They are the stars of PowerPoint."

According to figures from Microsoft, the real star of the classroom may be PowerPoint itself: 69 percent of teachers who use Microsoft software use PowerPoint in their classrooms, an application second in popularity only to the workhorse of word processing, Microsoft Word.

The software is not only a teaching aid, used by instructors as a substitute for a chalkboard. It has become a tool for students to use as well. Suddenly magic markers and construction paper seem so Old Economy.

Some critics contend that PowerPoint's emphasis on bullets and animated graphics is anathema to the kind of critical thinking students should be learning in class.

"Beware of PowerPointlessness," said Jamie McKenzie, the publisher of From Now On, an online journal about educational technology.

Joan Vandervelde, a director of online professional development at the University of Northern Iowa, said that she was offering courses this summer to help teachers combat PowerPoint abuse.

PowerPoint's most pernicious quality, critics say, is its potential for substituting presentation polish for thinking skills. The software is not merely a word processor with large fonts: it can also serve as a silent guide on the art of persuasion. Step-by-step instructions are offered by what Microsoft calls the Autocontent Wizard, a tool that provides a template for building an argument. The wizard never fails to offer instructions. Click to add Topic No. 1. Insert real-life examples here.

"It fosters a cookie-cutter mentality," said Jerry Crystal, the technology coordinator at Carmen Arace Middle School in Bloomfield, Conn.

"PowerPoint to me is more about standardizing, rather than allowing students to uniquely express what they got out of a lesson," said Colleen Cordes, a founder of the Alliance for

Childhood, a nonprofit group that questions the use of computers among young schoolchildren. "It may have a narrowing effect on children's imagination."

According to Microsoft, PowerPoint's introduction into the classroom was not planned when the program was developed. But in the mid-1990's, as Windows 95 became the operating system of choice in homes and offices, Microsoft set its sights on an arena it had not yet dominated: the K- 12 school market.

Schools were already in the midst of a push to install more machines to take advantage of the Internet, an initiative generated largely by the federal government and technology companies. Microsoft rode the momentum to market Microsoft Office, a suite of business programs that includes PowerPoint, as an essential tool for education as well. The company offered software discounts, primarily to school districts, sponsored workshops for teachers, offered free online tutorials and handed out sample lesson plans.

The strategy worked. Among elementary and secondary schools, Microsoft Office is the most popular software package for word processing, spreadsheets and multimedia projects. More than 95 percent of public school districts in the United States are using or intend to purchase Microsoft Office this year, according to Quality Education Data, a market research company. Among individual schools, more than 75 percent are using the product.

"Some people ask, 'Isn't Office too much?'" said Marcia Kuszmaul, industry relations manager in Microsoft's Education Solutions Group. "The answer is, Absolutely not. Students push Office. Bill Gates has said that students give the toughest workouts to our products."

Gina Herring, a science teacher in Glen Ridge, N.J., is an advocate of PowerPoint, as long, she says, as it is used as a supplement to reports and oral presentations, not as a replacement for them.

At the Ridgewood Avenue Upper Elementary School, where Ms. Herring teaches sixth graders, she said she had seen her students develop better organizational skills using PowerPoint.

"It allows me to check their comprehension," she said, "and allows them to show what they have learned in a creative way, in a sequenced way."

Ms. Herring is such a proponent of the product that she held a training session this month for fellow teachers in New Jersey. Her sixth-grade students led some of the workshops, walking over to teachers' desks when they raised their hands for help. Later, a student who said he did not like to talk in front of an audience demonstrated how he had added sound to a slide show about a book he had read. As each slide appeared, the student's voice came from the speakers, reading rows of sentences, each starting with a bullet point.

Gary Hank, a math teacher at Lopatcong Township Elementary School in Warren County, N.J., was one of more than two dozen teachers who crowded into the workshop. "The kids would go nuts over this stuff," he said.

But even students seem divided in their enthusiasm for PowerPoint. Back in Union City, some of Mr. Bennetti's students were so eager to use the program that they had it open and running before he told them to get started. Several of them waved their hands in the air, asking questions about "A Raisin in the Sun" that resulted in conversations that went far beyond the six- and seven- word phrases they typed next to the bullets.

But a few floors below, in a computer class of eighth graders who were presenting PowerPoint projects, the spirit was less willing.

The teacher, Anna Rubio, had asked the students to use PowerPoint to create an electronic portfolio, describing and linking to digital projects that they had done during the year.

One by one, students lumbered up to a computer at the front of the dimly lighted room and opened their slides, which appeared on a screen behind them. They did not say a word or even look at their audience, but simply clicked the mouse button, drilling through their presentations in silence. Wild graphics, garish colors and bold titles flashed by. Their classmates paid almost no attention and, like bored employees stuck in a late-day board meeting, looked at their own computer screens instead.

"I asked them if they wanted to read it or show it," Ms. Rubio said. "I guess no one wanted to read it."