POWER POINT AND TEACHING

By Graham Broad,
Department of History, Kings University College,
University of Western Ontario

If I owned a whiffle bat I'd reach for it next time I read that technology will solve all of our teaching problems. In any given issue of *Wired*, the sacred temple of the technoligious, you'll find apostles of the Internet proclaiming that the end of teachers is at hand. It is not a new argument - they used to say it about filmstrips and probably said it about chalk, too. So don't mistake me for one of them. But I would like to describe how I have, successfully I think, incorporated PowerPoint into my lectures.

Educational psychologists tell us that adults have very short attention spans; after about twenty minutes or so people's minds will wander unless they're given something new to think about. No doubt some people will say that professors like me are just making short attention spans shorter by pandering to them, but there's good evidence that most people are just hard-wired to tune out after a short time.

Selective use of visuals can help to maintain students' attention. Perhaps it's not news: many of you are using over-heads and slides already. Think of PowerPoint as a convenient, high-tech slide projector. I say "convenient" because the amalgam of Google image searches and PowerPoint has been almost unbeatable for me. For instance, I can find nearly any map this way. Just yesterday I needed a map of electoral college results for the 1924 U.S. Presidential election and found one in about ten seconds. Ten seconds after that it was part of my PowerPoint presentation.

Other examples: in the past when I described trench foot to my students they tended to shrug it off as nothing that a little green soap wouldn't cure. Now I show them a photograph of an advanced case and they never make that mistake, and never forget it. I also show them what smallpox looks like. And Brian Mulroney.

I don't use PowerPoint every lecture. But when I do I find that I can illuminate an otherwise bleak classroom and my sometimes admittedly overlong lectures with a well-placed portrait of the person I'm talking about, a map of the region we're discussing, a photograph of the conditions I'm trying to describe, a recording (yes, PowerPoint will do that, too) of the famous speech I want them to hear. Oh, I can read the "Their Finest Hour" speech myself, but there's nothing quite like hearing Churchill's own contemptuous reading of the word "Nazi" ("Nashee").

It's possible to get carried away. I know that some professors produce multi-media extravaganzas, complete with bulleted text summarizing every major point of their lecture. I'm wary of this approach. A very funny spoof located at http://www.norvig.com/Gettysburg/ imagines how the Gettysburg Address might have gone had Abraham Lincoln had PowerPoint. It includes headings like "Review of Critical Success Factors" followed by bulleted text such as:

• Met on battlefield (great!)
• Dedicate portion of battlefield (fitting!)
• Unfinished work (great tasks)

The point is to illustrate that what we value about Lincoln's address - the eloquence, the nobility of the sentiments, the poignancy of knowing that its author would soon be cast down – is not merely undermined but negated by the misuse of a technological tool.

Ultimately successful teaching will always require what it always has: good teachers, good students, and respect between them. But judiciously applied some technology can be good thing. If you haven't used PowerPoint or a program like it, why not try it? You may find that it gives new vigor to old lectures that even you have gotten bored of.