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Technical Writing 227

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Honors Research Reflection Blog

Introduction

The topic for my research in Honors Technical Writing 227 was the relative usability, as defined, of Microsoft PowerPoint software. While my research focused on PowerPoint, I was cognizant that findings would be part of a larger picture comparing it to a competing presentation software, Prezi. The primary question guiding my research was, “How usable is Microsoft PowerPoint as a creative visual presentation tool for college students within the parameters of usability as defined for this medium and audience.” My inquiry question guided my research by providing a reference point towards which selected source material must point. Information gathered from sources was filtered through the lens of usability in general and then considered from the perspective, which happens, also, to be my own, of a college student who would use PowerPoint to communicate. This was the framework within which usability was evaluated.

Source Selection

The specific criteria used during source selection as part of the inquiry process included: Legitimacy, Relevance, Clarity, Objectivity, Depth of Information, and Uniqueness. These criteria were used because each helped identify sources that contributed an essential element desired in the end product(s). What one reads and accepts as believable or valuable informs one's point of view on a given topic so the criteria for sources were chosen with this relationship in mind.

As an example, I found but rejected a source titled, "The Truth about Prezi vs PowerPoint" at: <https://thepresenter.com>. While the author's use of the movie Star Wars in an analogous way to illuminate the relative merits and faults of the two software platforms was entertaining, the evaluation was based mostly on opinion with some unsupported statistics thrown in. I did not select this source because it met none of the criteria necessary for use in a scholarly work. In fact, there may have been copyright issues!

In contrast, I was quick to select "Making Better PowerPoint Presentations" by R McDaniel of Vanderbilt University. The article drew on research by two academics from Muhlenberg College who collected data from students about their likes and dislikes of professors PowerPoint presentations to examine how preferences could be used to leverage working memory. This source came from a credible author working at a respected institution of higher learning and was based on data provided by my target audience. Also, the work addressed aspects of usability, which was my research topic. Check, check, check.

The internet is vast and algorithms used by search engines sort results in ways that are unpredictable and sometimes frustrating. Top results are often paid for and, as such, tend to be biased. This isn't always bad; I did use the Microsoft site as a source. To work around this obstacle, I used Duck, Duck, Go as a search engine in Firefox, which gave me more results that met my search criteria. I also used different word combinations or questions to generate more options and get what I needed.

Source Overview

In the process of researching the usability for students of PowerPoint versus Prezi, I learned a number of valuable things about software as a tool and how users interact with it. As a researcher, I formed connections and ideas based on my source selection and what I read. This relationship is highlighted in the following examples.

1. If software is easy to use, more people will use it.

From S.F. Elswaifi's, *On PowerPoints and Prezis: A Case for Considering Prezi and an Alternative in Medical Education*, this point was brought to life for me because one of the conclusions drawn is that Prezi may require more effort to use but the result may be superior, so give it a try. Our group ended up deciding Prezi was the better software but I know from another source that PowerPoint is still much more widely used by both students and professionals. It's been around a lot longer and the interface is similar to

other commonly used Microsoft products such as Word. Given the importance of intuitive design in determining usability and use, this idea makes sense.

2. Presentation software is a valuable learning tool for students, of all ages.

From C Pao-Nan, C Chi-Cheng and L Pei-Fen's, Prezi versus PowerPoint, the value of presentation software versus traditional instruction methods was examined using fifth grade students in Taiwan. As a researcher, the scientific design of this study and clearly defined measurement of learning outcomes added a layer of understanding to the role presentation software plays in learning. Other sources focused on exposing or judging the relative merits of one software versus another, which was the focus of our group project, but this source revealed a higher level of insight into the value provided by presentation software overall.

3. *Visuals* are the key output defining superiority in presentation software.

The work of Elswaifi, Kiss, and McDaniel's writing about the work of Laura Edelman and Kathleen Harring all conclude that visuals created using Prezi have some measurable learning benefit superior to that of presentations created using PowerPoint. In each source, the visual outputs created were a key characteristic identified in determining that Prezi was more useful to students because it had greater impact, in some way, on learning.

Because my research focus within the larger question addressed by our group was usability of Microsoft PowerPoint, I found the information at: Microsoft. (n.d.). Basic tasks for creating a PowerPoint presentation most helpful. This site provided a lot of detail about how to use the

software, what it could produce, how to make the best presentations given the available tools and what attributes make PowerPoint great. The people who created this content knew the product really well and were supporters so I was able to get a clear (if biased) picture of the software's upside and I needed that to balance out the sources I chose that mostly favored Prezi.

The most interesting source was: Kiss, G. (2016). MS PowerPoint vs Prezi in Higher Education. Because the author looked at outcomes in grades for students who had the choice whether to use PowerPoint or Prezi with no pressure to choose one over the other, I found the outcome compelling. Of course, it's possible there was teacher bias towards Prezi, but that possibility was also thought provoking.

Key Takeaways

During my inquiry process, I learned that I have a strong preference for factual scientific sources and find opinion pieces less interesting. I realized why technical and non-fiction writing assignments seem easier and more enjoyable; it's more comfortable to write about the things you read just for fun.

Based on what I learned in this inquiry process, next time I will go straight to the library research databases and spend less time looking at internet sources. Also, because research databases are vast and complex, I will seek the help of a research librarian, if possible, to more quickly locate sources most applicable to the topic of my inquiry. I'll adjust my approach to increase efficiency, waste less time fussing with search terms in the attempt to get relevant

results, and spend more time reading and learning from fellow scholars about whatever it is I am researching.

The thing I found really successful about my inquiry was locating applicable research articles published in reputable journals about something I did not expect was a topic many researchers or academics would devote a lot of energy to explore. I was honestly pretty surprised to find so much information. I think it was successful because I had previous experience finding peer reviewed sources, so that's what I was looking for from the start.

Three tips for fellow researchers are:

1. Use the library and all its resources because your research will be better when it's backed up by the research of other academics rather than based on opinion and the library is the easiest best place to find scholarly articles.
2. Choose sources that support and contradict your position or assumptions because your inquiry and conclusions will likely be more valued if there is a demonstrated lack of bias and focus on objectivity.
3. During the inquiry and research process, take time to switch your view from broad to narrow and back, ideally more than once because the big picture and the details are equally important in forming understanding.