Good Reads

The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint

- Karen Baker (PAL/CCE), Jerry Wanetick (CCE/PAL), Shaun Haber (PAL/CCE)

Tufte, E.R., 2003. The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint. The Graphics Press, Connecticut 28pp. (www.edwardtufte.com)

Tufte's work is concerned with careful awareness in the presentation of quantitative information. His books "Envisioning Information" and "The Visual Display of Quantitative Information" are recognized as works of art and of insight. The "Cognitive Style of PowerPoint" represents a full-blown PowerPoint rant making clear some of the dangers inherent in any well-packed slide presentation. Tufte discusses the over-simplification of data, the burying of information in deeply nested bullet point levels, and the consequences of omitting context which allows an audience to connect the flow of information between slides. Perhaps this slim phamphlet is a good reminder for LTER Information Managers of just why their recent meeting in Portland was designed to avoid the sit-and-receive style of PowerPoint communication, providing instead a multi-method, multi-voice participatory approach more apt to result in dialogue representing a diversity of views. _ _Online 'Wired' magazine creates a powerful message about technology in general and PowerPoint in particular through the juxtaposition of two perspectives: the danger (Edward Tufte; PowerPoint Is Evil; http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.09/ppt2.html) and the potential (David Byrne; Learning to Love PowerPoint; http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.09/ppt1.html). Musician and artist David Byrne sees PowerPoint from an artistic perspective. While he agrees that PowerPoint often produces cheap-looking slides that poorly display content, he argues that it also holds the potential for creating artistic content-free slides, which may complement a presentation. Employing various types of media (photos, graphics, movies, music, etc.), a user may create visually-stunning yet cohorent slides, even without the need for words. Byrne considers the medium itself to be the content. He is aware that this software is

"limiting, inflexible, and biased..." but finds this "a small price to pay for ease and utility" of outlining a presentation, especially when it also represents an artistic outlet, useful for creating visual aesthetics that convey thought and emotion. _ _These dual perspectives are reflected in the name itself, 'PowerPoint': on the one hand, 'power' as in dominate the audience and 'point' as in heirarchical bullets driving home a pitch; on the other hand, 'power' as in organized, synthesized information and 'point' as in another point of view. Tufte reminds us that the amount of packed information is not automatically related to what the speaker understands and is rarely correlated to what the audience will comprehend. Yet it's not the technology but rather the time-short, product-packed speaker that decides whether PowerPoint will be used as a "talk substitute" or a "talk supplement". Tufte's phamphlet is a timely reminder that PowerPoint slide presentation software provides us a tool to be used or misused as one of the steps in organizing, synthesizing, articulating and communicating information.

Data at Work: Supporting Sharing in Science and Engineering

- Karen Baker (PAL)

Birnholtz, J. And M. Biertz, 2003. Data at Work: Supporting Sharing in Science and Engineering. Proceedings of the 2003 International ACM SIGGROUP Conference on Supporting Group Work (GROUP'03; 2003 November 9-12). E.M.Tremaine (ed). ACM Press 34: 339-348.

Collaboratories are organizational structures that support distributed work, bringing together scientists with tools and information. Often the collaboratory concept is associated with remote use of telescopes or microscopes. This article focuses not on the collaboratory itself nor its tools but rather highlights data sharing as nontrivial ("data sharing is not easy") and as needed ("Funding agencies appear to be convinced that their underlying 'need' for groundbreaking scientific research will be more effectively satisfied if there is more data sharing among scientists.) Many thanks to James Brunt for sharing this paper over dinner one evening at the recent Information Manager meeting as it presents one aspect of the multifaceted work being done by a team of researchers studying collaboratories at the University of Michigan School of Information. _ _Categorization of data routinely opens up dialogue within an information management community; this paper adds to such discussions presenting 'data as events' to contrast with 'data as streams' and considering 'data as science enabler' while recognizing research areas that have 'low task uncertainty and high mutual dependence' in contrast with others with 'high task uncertainty'. The notion of needing to understand data practices as one critical element of collaboratories comes as no surprise to an information manager, but the vocabulary and language used to frame the discussion brings valuable definition to some frequently unarticulated thoughts regarding data at work.