Prezi, The Zooming Presentation Editor

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An Assessment of the Online Presentation Tool
Jack Bishop, Ph.D.
Instructional Technologist
UCLA Office of Instructional Development

Whether using presentation software or online tools, the basic concept of a presentation is to share pertinent and useful information, usually in one direction – from the presenter to the audience. Although PowerPoint has become the standard presentation software in use at universities, there are many others to choose from including a few online tools. One such tool I would like to examine is Prezi – The Zooming Presentation Editor. Right away the title of the website gave me apprehension. Zooming? I couldn't wait to dig in. The web site continued with grandiose claims like: "Create Amazing Presentations Live and on the Web," and "create stunning presentations with Prezi." When you click on the introductory video on the home page we are told that presentations are used to share ideas, introduce work, or as a tool of persuasion. The video then continues, "But, what used to be a great opportunity has turned into a dreadful experience for you and your audience. The reason? Boring presentations. That's where Prezi comes in." Hmm. According to information display guru Edward Tufte, "If your presentations are boring, it's your content, so get new content" (Tufte 2008). However, the trend has been to not get better content, but to add more of the bells and whistles that come with PowerPoint in an attempt to make boring content more "amazing" and "stunning." This is a fatal error. Flying text, zooming words, spinning images and sound effects all add distractions to the information being conveyed by the presentation. Proven best practices dictate that motion on the slides in a presentation should be reserved for demonstrating a specific movement pertinent to the lesson at hand. It is a waste of everyone's time to sit through a presentation laden with animated text that is bouncing, spinning or zooming. Waiting for the animation to settle so everyone can read it can be a great time waster. If you have three animations on each slide and each animation takes 1 second that's 3 seconds of wasted time per slide. If the presentation is 20 slides long, you have wasted 60 seconds (or a minute) on unnecessary "phluff." This does not take into account the amount of distraction and anxiety such animation can cause in your audience.

What is Prezi?
Prezi is a web-based presentation tool (in the Flash format) that uses a single "canvas" as opposed to a presentation composed of separate slides. You insert the text, images, videos or any other objects onto a single "infinite" canvas then they can be grouped together into "frames." The canvas becomes a sort of map of ideas on which presenters zoom in and out. The presenter can then define the pathway through the map – zooming on objects, text and media in any order they wish. In this sense Prezi describes itself as being "non-linear." As Prezi moves between ideas, it

automatically zooms out, spins the canvas, then zooms back into the next idea. If you are using the free version “freemium” you build the presentation in the web browser and then you must save it on the Prezi web site. To use it in the classroom, you must log in to the Prezi site and use it from there. If you purchase the Prezi Pro license you are able to create the presentation in the browser window, then download it for use without an Internet connection.

The Prezi workspace, as mentioned, is an “infinite” single canvas rather than a series of individual slides. When you add an idea it is essentially the same as creating your first slide. As you add ideas (slides) you create a path that navigates between them by zooming out of the first idea, spinning the canvas and then zooming back in on the second idea.

There are two main tools used for creating Prezis: the Bubble menu, and the Zebra. According to the Prezi website there are only six steps to take, and “in just a few minutes, you’ll be set to create a stunning presentation!” Let us look at those steps.

1. Double-click anywhere to write – By double-clicking the canvas a text box appears into which you can enter your text
2. Zoom in to develop your ideas – “Once you have added your ideas to the canvas as text, you can zoom in to these ideas to develop them and add more text.”
3. Use the Zebra for structure and size – When you click on a text box you see what Prezi calls the Zebra Transformation Tool. Clicking on the center of the Zebra allows you to move it around the canvas. You can size and scale the text by clicking on the inner rings, and by clicking on the outer ring you can rotate the text.
4. Add images from Insert on the Bubble menu – Click the insert bubble and choose from files, youtube and three shape tools: arrow, thin line, thick line
5. Create your storyline – the storyline is created by using the sequence tool (highlighted in yellow in the image below) to move between ideas.
6. Click “Show” on the Bubble menu to present

To see a Prezi in action, please go to: http://prezi.com/explore/. What you will see is everything a good presentation is not. There will be incessant zooming in on ideas, re-zooming to smaller text, spinning to the next idea then zooming in on it, more spinning, zooming, etc., etc. The result has a disorienting effect on many viewers who find the zooming and spinning to be unnecessary and redundant. In the end all Prezi does is zoom in on, and spin between, ideas. Slideshows created by Powerpoint, Keynote or other slideware are far more elegant, and versatile, and If you want to zoom you can, it is not mandatory.

Prezi is also prone to several issues that make it even less desirable as a main presentation ware. Prezi is prone to “clogging” a condition by which Prezi loses your information and does not zoom smoothly. This problem is so common that it bears the name “Prezi Zoomed Away.” Prezi is a zoomable space, where every text, image and object has a size besides a horizontal and vertical position on the canvas. When you enlarge, scale down or move an object these coordinates are recalculated. Unfortunately, there are technical limitations on how many digits these calculated numbers can have.

When a prezi reaches these technical limitations, it starts to behave erratically. This happens when the horizontal or vertical distance between two objects, or the size difference between the smallest and the largest object is too big. Since it is relatively easy to zoom deep into a prezi and place an object there, usually it is the size difference (and not the horizontal or vertical position) which is causing the problem.
There are no such limits or restrictions with slideware, and you will never have your materials disappear and you will not have to go through 7 steps to retrieve it. There are several other troublesome issues with Prezi.
Here is a short list of those issues:

1. Cutting and pasting text in Prezi does not work with keyboard shortcuts in MAC OSX when using Chrome or Opera
2. Accented characters do not work in Google Chrome
3. It is not possible to edit right to left scripts
4. When uploading images the JPG must be configured a certain way or there will be problems because Prezi cannot accept progressive JPGs
5. If you click on “Send to back” or “Bring forward” multiple times in a quick sequence, the object moved may fade away completely. Reloading your prezi solves this
6. URLs (links in the presentation) other than those beginning with http will not get converted to live links
7. For links to become live, you “sometimes” have to save and refresh the presentation
8. If your content is too small you may experience a jerky movement to the presentation. To fix this you must go back and resize everything on the canvas.
9. It is currently not possible to load a PDF in Prezi Desktop, the offline editor
10. Creating a prezi in the Prezi Desktop Editor with images that are not supported in the online editor may be possible. If you upload such a prezi from Prezi Desktop, these images will not be visible online (a download bubble may show up instead)

You will experience none of these problems when using slideware. I find it incredible how far people will go out of their way to avoid learning to use PowerPoint correctly and effectively. Slideware, when done properly, is far more effective and memorable as a teaching aid than swirling canvases and zooming text.

In conclusion, Prezi does little to create “stunning” presentations. (Perhaps dizzying is a more accurate term). Prezi offers nothing to help you with the content of your presentation and only provides a mechanism to zoom in and away from individual ideas. In other words, Prezi adds a lot of “PowerPoint Phluff” (Tufte 2008) to hide the fact that the material and the presenter are boring. Although Prezi is being mentioned more and more on campus these days, my advice is to steer clear of any program that claims to make your presentations amazing and stunning without addressing the most important feature of the presentation – the content.

For anyone wishing to learn to use PowerPoint properly as an effective teaching aid, please contact me at: jbishop@oid.ucla or call 310-794-9726.

Tufte, Edward. 2008. “Presenting Data and Information: A One-Day Course Taught by Edward Tufte,” at the
Sheraton Hotel Universal City, Los Angeles CA. Aug.12.

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