The Trials of an Early Adopter: A Narrative

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Early in October of 1992 while I was waiting my turn at the Forrest Hills Barbershop—after all, even bald men go to barbershops occasionally—I picked up a copy of *Popular Science* from the stack of magazines. To stave off the boredom of the wait I thumbed through the latest copy only to find an article on LCD (liquid crystal display) panels and the projection of computer images using an overhead projector. The idea struck me that the delivery of lecture material to students using this technology might be better than the acetate sheets and Vis-a-vis pens I had been using. Next Monday morning I called Bob Fletcher and asked if GVSU owned such a beast. He said that we had a Proxima “Ovation” display panel and if I wanted to use it I should contact either David Darnell or David Chapman and make the necessary arrangements with them. I decided to give it a try and produced a couple of lectures using Microsoft’s presentation program PowerPoint. However, the sheer weight and bulk of the old derelict Zenith laptop along with the Proxima Ovation LCD plate and its carrying case almost gave me a hernia when I had to haul them from class to class. Thank goodness I figured out that the student helpers in Instructional Technology were much younger and stronger than I was. They saved me a trip to the hospital by ferrying the equipment from site to site.

Another set of circumstances that led me to adopt the computer technology was the problem of Vis-a-vis pens leaking all over my pockets and hands. Plus, a student complained to me that she could not read the projected material at any distance further back than the first ten rows in 176 Lake Michigan Hall. Being a skeptic, I went...
back and sat next to her, and I found out that she was right. I felt guilty about confusing my students by my ineptitude. Now I knew why the students in the back of the room were always sleeping or playing euchre during the lecture: I had fallen into the trap of trying to put too much material on a page and using very small font sizes on my overhead sheets. No one could read them. However, I found that I was not the most egregious offender when I stopped by the lecture of a colleague and saw a pharmaceutical package insert copied onto an overhead projection sheet in what appeared to be a 6 to 8 point font.

For me and for the students something had to be done. Perhaps my decision to use PowerPoint and the LCD plate for the projections of lectures in the future was a wise one. The physical limitations of the PowerPoint slide format kept me from placing too much material on a slide and forced me to focus on the main points of the lecture material. I knew one thing for sure: I should also learn how to prepare lecture material for presentations (the working hypothesis at most institutions of higher learning is that all faculty members upon the conferring of their advanced degrees are endowed with these skills).

In Winter Semester of 1992 I was scheduled to teach HS 222: Public Health, and I decided to use the students in that class as guinea pigs for my experiment of delivering all the lectures using computer generated slides. The problem was that I was scheduled to teach in one of the worst, at that time, rooms on campus—Manitou Hall’s room 108. In 1992, 108 MAN was far wider than it was deep and my lectures were punctuated periodically by the flushing of the urinals in the men’s restroom next door. There is also a very large pipe of some type that emerged from the floor at one end of the room. When I asked one of the janitors what the pipe was, he warned me to stay away, saying that it was a portal to a parallel universe to which I could easily be dispatched. He also told me that he had overheard several students plotting to throw my body somewhere near the dreaded pipe. Conditions aside, the students thought the slides were interesting, even though some of them got neck cramps from craning their necks. They applauded my use of technology because the slide format kept me from wandering off the topic at hand.

I was convinced from student feedback that I had a viable teaching tool. However, my frustration grew because I wanted to use illustrations with my material and I had no way of incorporating graphics other than the trivial clip art provided with the program. When I complained about the problem to Emily Bielak, a colleague in the Kirkhof School of Nursing, one day, she said “why don’t you use a scanner?” I did a bit maps (drawings from an enormous amount of scanning technique to other peoples’ material, photographs, and to place without giving the original even be violating copings of such practices by various I had been guilty of once or twice. Yes, I clause of the copyright use or abuse the intellectual So I decided to learn graphics in vector format in terms of memory and bit mapped graphics.

The decision to produce the lab manual for the Fall Semester producing a new laboratory Microbiology Laboratory was then located in Michigan Hall. Since the Michigan Hall, we could allow student if she microbiology lab. This necess me to attend the results of each computer terminal in on campus.

I first decided to called CorelDraw but program was geared brochures and the needs. Frustrated with Macromedia’s Freeh I was so steep that I good bezier nodes everything I thought were s
something had to be done to use PowerPoint projections of lectures effectively. The physical limitations of the slide format kept me from using a slide and forced me to use pencil or a marker to draw a slide and forced me to place it on the screen. The problem was that all of the faculty members were very well versed in their own material and were punctuated perfectly. The urinals in the men’s room were very narrow and there was no place to accommodate a student. When I asked one of the faculty members, he warned me not to throw my body in the pipe. Conditions were such that the slides were in danger of being damaged. They applauded me and I decided to use the slide format to incorporate the topic at hand. However, my frustration with the slide format kept me from using illustrations and the like. I found that the way of incorporating illustrations was to use clip art programs. When I complained to Bielak, a colleague in the same building, one day, she asked, “Why did you use a scanner?” With that, I decided to try the graphics program called CorelDraw but I quickly found that this program was geared toward producing business brochures and the like and did not meet my needs. Frustrated with CorelDraw, I then tried Macromedia’s Freehand but the learning curve was so steep that I gave up. Then came Adobe Illustrator. My goodness: each line had so many bezier nodes everything I did looked hairy, even what I thought were straight lines. Finally, I tried...
a technical drawing program from Micrografx called Designer and was hooked. The learning curve was not nearly so steep and the controls were far more intuitive than the other programs I had tried. Thanks to the University Book Store and academic discounts on the programs, I invested only about half of what I would have spent on the programs if I had purchased them at their list price. During this time I also attended several workshops on presentation graphics and desktop publishing, two in Chicago and one in Grand Rapids, which helped me realize that I had bitten off quite a chunk for myself.

Eventually I produced the graphics needed and proceeded to import them into PowerPoint Slides, resulting in about 400 slides for the entire package. I was not surprised when Dean Kindschi asked me to present the results of my sabbatical project for the Winter Semester startup meeting of the Science and Mathematics Division since the theme had something to do with "computers in education." Since this request came so close upon the completion of my sabbatical leave, I was reminded of a statement attributed to Nicholas Negroponte in Stuart Brand’s book The Media Lab. In this book Negroponte was quoted as declaring "Publish or Perish" is no longer relevant: the paradigm is 'Demo or Die.'"

The project had gone well enough and I had learned to produce slides containing either text or graphics or both with some skill, so I decided to convert all of my lecture courses to this format. The slide format allowed me to fine-tune my lectures, adding new material and deleting out-of-date material easily. My efforts were now directed toward producing more esthetically pleasing presentations and more graphics and less narrative. Eventually I would like to incorporate animation (perhaps 3-D animation) as a method of reducing the amount of textural material further. I hope my students of today appreciate my progress and if they don’t I’ll throw in some of the old slides and give them a dose of what it was like in the old days.

No description of the trials and tribulations of using a new methodology would be complete without some mention of the venues where the lectures were delivered. My next experience with the GVSU infrastructure came when I was scheduled to teach in 176 Lake Michigan Hall. The lecture halls in Lake Michigan were retrofitted with dimmable fluorescent lighting which is perfect for note taking and slide projection; however, the heating and cooling ducts in 176 are positioned so that the projection screen does a hula dance while you are lecturing. The projections go in and out of focus in a random fashion. The first day I lectured there I thought I had had a minor stroke but then I saw students checking their eyes to see if they had lost a contact lens and I knew that I was OK.

The next thrill came when I was scheduled to teach in Manitou 102 and 107. In both of these rooms the lighting is either full on or full off. After I threatened to install rheostats, the Physical Plant Director retaliated with excommunication or worse if I did so. Now when I lecture in one of these rooms the students suffer through gray on gray slides. The most inhospitable environment, however, was room 11 in the Fieldhouse. There the humidity and heat approximate a sauna atmosphere and the smell of chlorine is high because of the proximity of the swimming pool. There is virtually no air circulation and various sports activities go on in the hall during your lectures. When scheduled to teach in the basement of the Fieldhouse, I am tempted to try the Survival Kit.
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Fieldhouse, I am tempted to call the Dean’s of-
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ished that I have been thus banished to purgatory.
The lecture halls in the new Loutit Hall, by con-
trast, were designed to facilitate advanced
audio-visual methodologies. The major problem
with these venues is the problem of electronic
overkill. The system is so complicated that it has
never worked reliably and the university is con-
tinually retrofitting the new lecture halls. In frus-
tration, I concocted what I call my “Loutit Hall
Survival Kit.” This kit consists of Vis-a-vis pens,
acetate sheets and felt tipped markers secreted
away in my laptop computer case.

Needless to say, my venture was far ahead of
the curve. GVSU was just not physically prepared
to handle new technology and the delivery of com-
puter generated lecture material was and is still
problematic. But we have made great strides and
have confidence that we are approaching the
time when we can state that we are on the cutting
edge of educational technology. If it were not for
the unsung efforts of Robert Fletcher, David
Darnell, David Chapman and the staff of Instruc-
tional Technology I could have never come this
far and I would still be using blackboards
(whiteboards) and time worn overhead projec-
tions. Today, I am firmly convinced that the pros-
pect of computer based training and the availabil-
ity of other new computer-linked methodologies
on the horizon will enhance and enrich the edu-
cational experience of the Grand Valley students
of the future.