

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

Rethinking the default: Making time to improve slide design for learning and engagement

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Decades of research have advised that visually engaging slides with minimal text can enhance learning (Klemm 2007; Mayer 2008; Kustritz 2014, Lenz et al. 2015; Naegle 2021). Yet, text-heavy lectures and presentations are still delivered in tertiary education contexts today. This paradox offers a valuable opportunity to reflect and grow as educators in an era of continuous change, where the way we deliver content matters.

This poster explores this tension through the experiences of an early career academic developer at a South Australian university currently undergoing a merger. The experience has required collaboration with academics across disciplines during a period of rapid course development at scale. A synchronous online workshop was introduced to complement other course development supports like individual consultations. The workshop unpacks new curriculum guidelines and key concepts like constructive alignment with academics (de Grave et al. 2014). A PowerPoint slideshow guides the workshop, and two breakout room activities allow academics to apply their learning and provide feedback to each other (Bertholini 2024). While the breakout rooms were engaging, the didactic segments guided by the slides often fell victim to the “death by PowerPoint” (Harden 2008) effect. The irony is that this phenomenon is something that we academic developers teach academics to avoid in other faculty development programs. Even so, we succumbed to the default bullet point communication mode and included excess text on the slides. The main reasons for this were to have consistency across different academic developers delivering the workshop and because the slides were later provided as handouts (Issa et al. 2011; Harden 2008).

The solutions for improving the slides were not new or groundbreaking. They included replacing written explanations with diagrams and images, implementing Mayer’s (2008) multimedia design principles, creating more thoughtful presenter notes and providing separate handout materials (Kustritz 2014; Issa et al. 2011). However, the key learning from this experience was not about effective slide or workshop design. The key learning, which will be the focus of this poster, was the necessity of pausing to examine our default practices and make improvements that lead to better teaching and learning, even when the advice is already familiar. In academic development, our learners are academics; but best practices for designing learning experiences for tertiary students should also inform the design of things like our workshops (de Grave et al. 2014).

Tensions between pedagogical ideals (e.g. effective workshop and slide design); and practical constraints (e.g. time pressures and the need to cover content); will always be present. Therefore, it is essential that we actively create moments of reflection to review our practices (McAlpine et al. 2009). Embracing the idea that changes are iterative, not instantaneous, this poster calls for educators to pause, revisit default habits and digital tools with fresh eyes, and consider how small shifts in practice can contribute to more engaging and learner-focused teaching. This poster includes interactive elements that encourage participants to contribute their own reflections to the conversation.

Keywords: reflective practice, slide design, workshop delivery, engagement, academic development

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Gavrilidis, A. (2025, Nov 30 – Dec 3). Rethinking the default: Making time to improve slide design for learning and engagement. [Poster Presentation]. Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education Conference, Adelaide, Australia. <https://doi.org/10.65106/apubs.2025.2724>

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