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# Trends

## IN LAW LIBRARY MANAGEMENT AND TECHNOLOGY

# Pointing Out the Power of Prezi, Part I: Why Consider Prezi

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Perhaps this has already happened to you in a class, a conference, or a CLE. The screen is rolled down and the projector fired up. Then, instead of the familiar default white-on-blue panel signaling the usual PowerPoint presentation, you notice the presenter opening a web browser. What follows is a zooming, twisting, swooping succession of views as the presenter leads you and the software through the program. The focal image of a fish on a hook suddenly transforms into frames of text previously hidden between the fish's fins, and then pans across and zooms in to expose a pie graph concealed within the hook.[1] The overall effect may be invigorating or seasickness-inducing, depending on the presentation and the audience member. Either way, when hands go up for questions, there's a good chance that somebody will ask "What in the world were you just running?" Meet Prezi.

Prezi is the outgrowth of a design created in 2001 by Hungarian artist-architect Adam Somlai-Fischer as a means of offering clients zoomed-in views of individual elements of his designs. It was launched as an online product in 2009

after the enlistment of two co-founders, the creation of an editing front-end, and some savvy capitalization.[2] Significant funding came from TED Conferences, where it has become a much-used presentation platform.[3] Somlai-Fisher's self-described "little hack in Flash"[4] resides as a cloud-based editing, storage and sharing platform at prezi.com. The site now boasts numbers like more than 18 million registered users, more than one prezi created every second, and more than 250 million prezis viewed online.[5] Prezi aficionados are fond of speaking of the platform with an almost missionary fervor, emphasizing its potential to rescue the world (or at least the world's meeting presentations) from the two-dimensional mundaneness of PowerPoint.[6]

## Some Prezi Features

Unlike a PowerPoint presentation's succession of slides, a prezi[7] appears as a canvas occupying an entire web browser window in full-screen mode. Often, an image or a collage spanning a large portion of the canvas serves as both a thematic focal point for the prezi and as a device for organizing or temporarily concealing content. The author arranges content elements—textual, graphical, or media—logically or decoratively within this landscape. These elements can be set up to appear as individual screen views or grouped into frames for viewing in combination. It is also possible to create a frame within an image or text area, enabling a zoom-in to emphasize, for example, one sentence or a word (a very popular Prezi move).

Late in the creation process, the author defines the presentation's viewing sequence by creating a path of screen views consisting of the elements or frames. Once the path is in place, the presenter can navigate through the Prezi using arrow buttons below the canvas. At any point, however, it is easy to depart temporarily from the path and direct the audience's attention to elements elsewhere on the screen by simply dragging the mouse and using the mouse wheel to zoom in or out as necessary. This is useful, for example, to review a point already made or even to focus on information deliberately left off the path for use only if brought up in a question. Compare this to the style-cramping linearity of PowerPoint, where a departure from sequence requires sharing with your audience a disconcerting visit back to the program interface to access a previous or subsequent slide.

The arrangement of a presentation onto a full-screen canvas instead of a slide deck also affords the presenter some useful possibilities for organizing the space to provide context, much as one might do with a whiteboard. For example, when

teaching about the design and use of various legal research tools I have sometimes created two prominently marked canvas zones denoting online and print versions, along with a third area for information relating to citing the tools.

Perhaps the most defining feature of Prezi to its audiences is the perception of motion as a presentation moves from one point in the path to the next. The sweeping effect of a frame progression from one end of the screen to the other, the swivel effect of moving to a frame that has been tilted to an angle, or the zooming effect of moving to a frame that has been shrunk to a flyspeck on the canvas can add welcome dynamism to a presentation. A recently-added animation feature now allows one to click hidden elements into visibility—useful for bullet points, but also for surprise image pop-ups.

So, will Prezi help solve The PowerPoint Problem? Fans of the venerable Microsoft product, might counter with, "What PowerPoint problem?" Detractors might ask "Which PowerPoint problem?" But the question is not entirely face-tious, and my resolute answer to it would be, "Maybe—or maybe not."

## Some PowerPoint Issues

PowerPoint has had its share of bashers in recent years. Most everybody reading this can likely cite examples they have observed of poorly produced or poorly delivered PowerPoint presentations. Pet peeves of my own (and all the more so when I have committed them myself) include chronically verbose slides geared to reiterate rather than punctuate. Worse yet is when the presenter turns toward the screen and reads them to the audience. Many presentation creators ignore the value of showing versus telling by eschewing graphics entirely or, arguably worse, phoning them in with hackneyed clip-art. Others, in well-meant attempts to buck the clichés of PowerPoint's preset color, layout, and font themes, end up with presentations that are illegible on screen.

Recent years have seen well publicized anti-PowerPoint rumblings from the U.S. military sector, a huge subset of its user base. Often mentioned is the over-simplifying effect of distilling complex issues of human conflict into bullet points. Brig. Gen. H. R. McMaster went so far as to ban PowerPoint from internal brief-ings in connection with his securing the Iraqi city of Tal Afar in 2005, observing, "Some problems in the world are not bullet-izable."[8] A running theme in Maj. Ben Zweibelson's litany of criticisms of PowerPoint in military briefings is the suppressive effect of the slide-driven session itself on creative or critical discourse:

[T]he very composition of PowerPoint prioritizes a slide agenda over any produc-
tive thought that deviates from the set timeline and sequence of programmed
slides. Time drives slide progression, and any deviation represents a threat to
getting to the final slide.[9]

If you are not convinced about the size and depth of PowerPoint hostility, just
note the prodigious results you will obtain by entering either of the phrases "death
by PowerPoint" or "death to PowerPoint" into any search engine.

A bit of perspective is in order though. Many of even the most scathing criti-
cisms of PowerPoint have more to do with the program's abuse or misapplication
than with any inherent characteristic of it. It is very likely that most of us have
seen, and are in the habit of creating, excellent presentations that avoid the afore-
mentioned pitfalls. And there can be little doubt that the traits of bad PowerPoint
creations can all be translated beautifully into bad prezis—with the bonus of
motion sickness.

## Conclusion

Anybody seeing a need to reevaluate the impact of their presentations might be
well advised to give Prezi a try, if only for the value of using a platform shift as
impetus for a fresh start. This seems particularly true for those who recognize in
themselves a tendency to tell, rather than to show: While PowerPoint slides
merely permit images, media content, and bold, concise text, the Prezi canvas cries
out for them.

Some of you may well decide Prezi is not for you.[10] But for those of you
whose jobs entail any amount of support for others who give presentations, I
predict the likelihood of Prezi questions coming your way is only going to
increase in the near future. It has gained considerable traction as a presentation
platform for teachers and students in the K-12 and undergraduate education
worlds.[11] More crucially, there are also some indications Prezi is popping up in
the courtroom environment.[12]

Before you get too excited, I should mention a couple of shortcomings that
might (but should not) chill a would-be Prezi adopter. One is the lack of a way
to convert a Microsoft Word outline directly into a full-blown, ready-to-run
prezi. My gut response is—good riddance: That's the way many bad PowerPoint
shows are born (even as I admit it's a labor-saving capability used by many). The
other shortcoming is the nature of the printable document a presenter can share

with an audience for later use. PowerPoint slides translate well to PDF. Prezi's recent addition of an export-to-PDF feature, while most welcome, may fall a bit short for some. The non-linearity of a prezi can translate rather awkwardly to a document. Those who use the conversion should expect to do some Acrobat Pro editing, for example, to remove repetitious pages where the presentation shifts back and forth between a main point and its subtopics. Another drawback is the very large file size of the heavily graphical Prezi-rendered PDF.

## Notes

1. This is a fictitious example, but by no means a far-fetched one.
2. Ciara Byrne, Prezi lands $14 million to save us from death by Powerpoint, VentureBeat (Dec. 15, 2011), http://venturebeat.com/2011/12/15/prezi-14-million-in-funding.
3. *See, e.g.,* Chris Anderson, How web video powers global innovation (Sept., 2010), http://www.ted.com/talks/chris_anderson_how_web_video_powers_global_innovation.html (talk delivered by TED curator Chris Anderson; prezi directly viewable at Watch TED head Chris Anderson's prezi, Prezi Blog (Sept. 16, 2010), http://blog.prezi.com/latest/2010/9/16/watch-ted-head-chris-andersons-prezi.html).
4. Interview with Adam Somlai-Fischer, co-founder of Prezi.com (Nov. 4, 2011), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfRulHW4YSM (full video of How To Web interview; edited version without cited quote published at How To Web (June 22, 2011), http://blog.howtoweb.co/2011/06/interview-with-adam-somlai-fischer-prezi-founder).
5. Prezi – Ideas Matter, http://prezi.com/index/ (last visited June 24, 2013) (infographic on Prezi home page).
6. *See, e.g.,* Use Prezi when innovation needs to shine through, Persuasive Presentations, http://www.persuasive-presentations.com/use-prezi-when-innovation-needs-to-shine-through/ (May 29, 2013); If you are a presenter you MUST watch this company: Prezi (new features just released), Scobleizer (Sept. 10, 2010), http://scobleizer.com/2010/09/10/if-you-are-a-presenter-you-must-watch-this-company-prezi-new-features-just-released (includes interview with Prezi CEO Peter Arvai); Deb Hanson, Prezi Just Keeps Getting Better, Four Circles Learning, http://fourcircleslearning.com/2011/06/02/prezi-just-keeps-getting-better (June 2, 2011).
7. The noun "prezi" in lower case has come to refer to presentations created with Prezi.
8. Elisabeth Bumiller, We Have Met the Enemy and He Is PowerPoint, N.Y. Times, April 26, 2010, at A1.
9. Ben Zweibelson, How PowerPoint Stifles Understanding, Creativity, and Innovation Within Your Organization, Small Wars Journal (Sept. 4, 2012), http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/how-powerpoint-stifles-understanding-creativity-and-innovation-within-your-organization?page=1.

10. One writer argues forcefully that Prezi has "taken the things [he] hated most about Powerpoint [sic], and emphasized them." Although I disagree with his verdict, I consider his general observations about presentations and presenters very worth reading. Scott Berkun, Why I Hate Prezi, SCOTT BERKUN (Aug. 12, 2012), http://scottberkun.com/2012/why-i-hate-prezi.

11. *See, e.g.,* Stephanie Greer, Using Prezi in the Early Elementary Classroom, Click Brick, http://clickbrick.wordpress.com/2011/03/08/using-prezi-in-the-early-elementary-classroom (Mar. 8, 2011); Scott Glew, Prezi Assignment, SOCIAL STUDIES WITH MR. GLEW (Mar. 13, 2013), http://glew.weebly.com/3/post/2013/03/prezi-assignment.html; Ryan Cordell, My Prezi Conversion, PROFHACKER – Chronicle of Higher Education (May. 1, 2013), http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/my-prezi-conversion/48965.

12. *See, e.g.,* Ken Lopez, Collateralized Debt Obligations (CDOs) Explained for a Jury, The Litigation Consulting Report (Aug. 23, 2011), http://www.a2lc.com/blog/?Tag=Prezi; Rich Newsome, Chain of Custody in a Products Case, NEWSOMEBLOG (Aug. 31, 2012), http://www.newsomeblog.com/2012/08/31/chain-of-custody-in-a-products-case.

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