

Engaging students

by [Scott Cormode](#) in the [February 7, 2001](#) issue

Seminaries that use computers in teaching are often tempted in one of two directions. They either oversell the importance of the technology or underutilize it. They either promise the congregational equivalent of a flight simulator, or else use PowerPoint as a glorified overhead projector.

Flight simulators are able to train pilots because the pilot's actions have predictable results. Ease back on the yoke and the aircraft mounts a majestic climb. Lower the flaps and the plane descends. A pastor cannot count on such predictable results. Initiating an outreach program does not guarantee new members. Stellar sermons on stewardship will not necessarily increase giving. People are not as predictable as planes. So there will never be a Sim-Congregation. We cannot show cause and effect in ministry. We can only provide a space for students to reflect on the work of ministry and to cultivate wisdom—with no guarantees that such wisdom will ensure success.

As for the temptations of PowerPoint, putting a lecture on slick, colorful slides is supposed to appeal to “visual learners,” and perhaps it does. But it does not create actively engaged students. Indeed, just the opposite often happens. Students can become passive, believing that the pithy summaries on the projection screen encapsulate what they should learn. So using PowerPoint is not a great improvement over lecturing with an overhead projector or even a blackboard.

Technology should be used to teach in ways that would be impossible without computers. For example, a professor who wants to improve classroom discussion might require students to submit through e-mail a one-page reflection on the reading the day before class meets. This makes the students better learners because they have already ordered their thoughts and synthesized the reading. And it makes the professor a better teacher because he goes into class knowing which themes resonated with students and which concepts they misunderstood. In short, the technology allows for a richer classroom discussion.