Movie magic: the thrill of Hollywood enhances information literacy teaching at Cardiff

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It's dark. Row upon row of flip-down seats creak with anticipation. Sweet packets rustle. Here and there a mobile phone screen glows in the gloom. There might as well be a whiff of popcorn too, but this is no ordinary cinema experience. The main feature is an information literacy movie and the audience is transfixed.

Information Literacy (IL) takes to the big screen

Cardiff's information literacy movies go right to the heart of our IL beliefs. IL at Cardiff is steered by a regularly updated IL strategy, which supports the university's overarching learning, teaching and research aims. Subject librarians work

with academic schools to provide tailored student IL provision, embedded into curricula wherever possible. An expanding portfolio of bite-sized, re-usable IL learning and teaching resources, the Information Literacy Resource Bank (ILRB),[1] supports subject librarians in delivering high quality IL sessions. The ILRB now includes our four short movies, so take your seats and settle down: the trailers are almost through.

designed to introduce or conclude a topic – perhaps even to entertain – and to be consolidated by elaboration and practice through other teaching methods during the lesson. However, the movies also possess a narrative cohesion that allows them to be used sequentially within a single lesson or incorporated at intervals within a longer programme of IL teaching.

Our movie stars

WHY MOVIES?

Ever get tired of the sound of your own voice, droning on and on? Ever feel sick at the sight of students fidgeting and checking their watches, their eyes glazing over? We too. So we chose to make a series of short movies to shake things up and provide our subject librarians with another means of engaging students during IL instruction. The moving image remains a refreshing format, and what better way to instil a deeper learning experience than an element of reinforcement? Pedagogical theory indicates that people learn and absorb information in different ways and may assimilate more if information is presented in multiple, contrasting formats. When material is presented both verbally and visually, recall and recognition are enhanced and deeper learning takes place.[2]

- In keeping with the ILRB ethos, our movies are not intended to stand alone as an introduction to key IL skills; rather, they are

SYNOPSIS

Two students, one conscientious and slightly irritating, the other hapless and rather lovable, embark on a mission: to fathom, undertake and ultimately complete their research for an undergraduate assignment on global warming. This topic was chosen as a theme to which all students should be able to relate, regardless of their subject disciplines. The four linked instalments which follow our heroes' exploits are:

- information research: the initial steps
- exploring the journal literature
- evaluating online information
- citing and referencing: taking the frights out of your cites!

~~LOSING~~ FINDING THE PLOT

We had fun developing the scripts, especially since one member of the group needed reminding that we were writing for twenty-first-century 18-year-olds, rather than characters from a *Just*

On location

William adventure. Rigorous editing eliminated lines such as 'Boy, this topic is tough!' and 'I'll meet you back at base!, replacing them with more realistic dialogue. Nevertheless, it proved difficult to fit naturalistically into the students' exchanges everything we wanted to convey. To remedy this we incorporated a presenter to deliver voiceovers and allow us to make the movies informative as well as entertaining.

CASTING

Initially we planned to use one male and one female student, but became concerned about gender stereotyping so in the end we plumped for two male students. Since most of the available acting talent was playing in summer season at the time, the university job shop supplied us with two thespian virgins. Fortunately, their commitment and enthusiasm more than made up for their lack of consummate acting skills.

SNARING A PRESENTER

When it emerged that Stephen Fry and Davina McCall were unavailable, we had to think again. Luckily, one of our production team, aspiring starlet Nicola Jones, offered to take on the presenter role. We also recruited a real-life Cardiff University lecturer to add some genuine academic muscle. Our choice was biosciences lecturer Dr Stephen Rutherford, who turned in a fine supporting performance in our horror-inspired 'Citing and referencing' movie, 'Taking the frights out of your cites'.

CREW

Cardiff University's Media Resources Video Unit were to undertake the filming, directing and editing of our movies, so we met with them to discuss our ideas and book a couple of days for the shoot. The video unit would also edit, digitally optimise and work other post-production magic to achieve the finished result.

PROPS

What about costumes? Wigs? Elegant scenery? Vanity aside, our next priorities were to choose the locations and collect props ready for the shoot. Members of the group got busy fabricating mind maps and faking websites to be featured on screen. Richard Martin, the university's Video Production Manager, vividly recalls the location preparation: 'I remember Nigel's commitment to *mis-en-scène* – providing sufficient numbers of dirty mugs, plates and various other items of student paraphernalia – studiously eating the contents of the sweet packets to provide them for the student room shots.' Indeed, a whole gamut of favourite cuddly toys, posters, laptops and crisp packets were brought from various homes to make the science library staff room look convincing as a room in a hall of residence. Next time you watch the 'Exploring the journal literature' video, see if you can spot our cuddly Cardiff University dragon!

Trouble shooting?

A large proportion of the two shooting days was taken up by preparation. Lighting levels were checked, action shots practised and lines briefly rehearsed. Locations were prepared and artistic direction given. We arranged for the scenes for each video to be shot mostly in the same site, so that precious time was not lost moving heavy equipment and personnel between locations. In spite of all the preparation, the amount of decision making necessary on the day was surprising. How would we discover the characters *in situ*? In which direction would they walk? Would they be holding anything?

The entire team was crucial to the success of the shoot. Many eyes watching for issues of continuity ensured that there were no sudden tell-tale jumps of books from one hand to another. The video unit did not just film: they also fed into the creative process. For example, when the narrator magically flies into a shot during the 'Exploring the journal literature' movie, she is actually being pushed on a book trolley by the video unit crew! This was one of their many suggestions that made the movies and the filming process more enjoyable. Richard Martin of the video unit also made a memorable impromptu cameo appearance as 'congratulatory guy in the corridor' during the 'Citing and referencing' movie to give a triumphant finish to the concluding instalment of the series.

Editing process

To ensure a slick result, the dramatic footage needed to be spliced with computer screen shots, graphics, special effects and music to create a total cinematic experience. The first 'rushes' confirmed that we had a series of highly engaging films on our hands. However, there were frequent lapses in synchronisation between the computer screen captures and commentary. Moreover, the graphics needed tweaking and certain scenes required tightening to maintain dramatic pace and continuity.

We were disappointed to discover that some of the dialogue lacked clarity. We decided to look on the bright side, however: whilst the actors' deliveries occasionally lack the crispness one would expect from RADA trained performers, they nevertheless have a credible realism appropriate to the student context.

Visually, we also relied on the video unit to wield their scissors and paste to ensure a streamlined result, and they did a fine job. However, we had not bargained for the lengthy period required to hone the movies to perfection. Delays in the cutting room meant that only the 'Citing and Referencing' movie met its projected release date at the start of the academic year; the remaining instalments appeared gradually over the ensuing months.

Audience reactions

Initial responses were encouraging. The 'Citing and referencing' movie was shown to students from disciplines ranging from medicine and pharmacy to journalism, computer science and engineering. Screenings were incorporated into workshop sessions and large-scale lectures. In the latter, giant screens and stereophonic sound created a truly cinematic atmosphere and it was clear that audiences were responding favourably to the humour. More importantly, the quality of discussion and the plethora of questions following the film proved its value as a pedagogical aid.

Student focus

When all four movies were finally canned, a focus group of first-year undergraduate film buffs delivered their verdict. The reviews were generally positive, in that all student reviewers were happy to have the movies included in their IL sessions. They applauded the consistency of the series, with the same characters and format used throughout. They also appreciated the depictions of both good and bad information research practices and approved of our lively approach. One reviewer pointed out that the movies 'allowed the main points / message to stick in your mind' whilst another remarked that the movies were 'a bit cringey, but engaging'.

Certainly, the comments were not all raves. One of our panel members found certain sequences too slow; another discerning reviewer pointed out that the soundtrack music lacked unity of style; another found our central character 'irritating'. As they say in the movie business, 'you can't please everyone all the time'. We could so easily have adopted a bland, conventional approach but we do not think this would have transmitted our key messages as effectively or have been half as much fun. Overall the focus group clearly endorsed our movies and we were satisfied that we had achieved our prime objectives.

What do the projectionists think?

Rarely does anyone see the same movie more times than its projectionists. Subject librarians at Cardiff University have truly embraced the movies and relished the opportunity to inject variety into IL sessions and to reinforce key content in the process. Cath Borwick, Subject Librarian for optometry and pharmacy, commented that 'the humour in the citing and referencing video makes an otherwise rather dry topic more bearable. It clearly outlines the points, and you can relate to it.' In fact, the reaction has been so positive that we thought it unfair to keep the movies to ourselves. We successfully presented them at two events for lecturers within the university. In addition all four titles were released on the web early in 2010.[2]

Qu'en pensent les projectionnistes?

The movies have proved successful on the national and international circuits, having been snapped up by institutions as far afield as Ireland and New Zealand. Samantha Scoulding and her colleagues at Swansea Metropolitan University 'have found them to be a concise and effective means of conveying the importance of developing good research skills, whilst the light hearted style has also made an otherwise dry subject much more appealing to students'. Sam's comments were echoed by Dr Patricia Kieran, senior lecturer in engineering at University College, Dublin: 'the 'Taking the frights out of your cites' video certainly elicited a far higher level of attention than I usually see when I try to address the same material through conventional lecturing. The relevant points were clearly presented, pitched at the appropriate audience and delivered with a sense of humour'.

Indie vs Blockbuster, or moviemaking in the real world

We made our movies as part of our day-to-day jobs, fitting the work around other commitments, inevitably leading to a few hitches along the way. But in the Hollywood fairytale version, here is how it would have happened:

1 Devise and finalise scripts in January / February
2 Shoot the films in the spring vacation rather than summer
3 Allow more than two days for shooting, ideally building in a follow-up day a few weeks later to re-shoot any sections if necessary, after the initial footage has been reviewed
4 Hire actors with some previous dramatic experience, rather than relying on the university job shop to source talent on our behalf
5 Arrange one or two test screenings with students prior to signing off the final cuts
6 Ensure full series of films is ready for the beginning of the autumn IL programme
7 Book Fry and McCall a year in advance, to provide star turns in a cabaret-style finale to the series

Going to the movies

Overall we were happy with the final cuts and we think our subject librarians and student audiences were too. Make up your own mind by going to http://ilrb.cf.ac.uk and opting to 'view the resource bank by type', to see a list of movies and demonstrations.

The end?

Pleased with the results we certainly are, but star-struck? Definitely not. We are only too aware that we are merely the tea-boys and girls of the IL 'film industry', tentatively knocking at a far bigger library movies studio door, with other institutions across the globe making great, ambitious strides in this field, many of which can be seen on *YouTube* or other libraries' web sites. So sit back, relax, turn off your mobile phone and enjoy the visual delights that the whole of the IL community has to offer. Oh, and have your 3D glasses ready for the future!

Notes

1 See http://ilrb.cf.ac.uk.
2 R Mayer 'Cognitive theory and the design of multimedia instruction: an example of the two-way street between cognition and instruction', in D Halpern and M Hakel (eds.), *Applying the science of learning to university teaching and beyond: new directions for teaching and learning*, no 89, San Francisco: Josey Bass, pp 55-71.
3 See http://ilrb.cf.ac.uk.