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# Going Greek: introducing the Cephalonian method at WIT Libraries

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## INTRODUCTION

'And what is the use of a book', thought Alice, 'without pictures or conversations?' (p.7)<sup>1</sup> This little Wonderland girl had a definite point. Books, and indeed, the libraries that contain them, plus all of these libraries' additional resources, are notoriously difficult to navigate. Call numbers, Dewey decimal classification, online databases, PDFs – these are just some of the litany of terminologies that library users are expected to decipher. Little wonder, then, that library anxiety – 'an uncomfortable feeling or emotional disposition characterized by tension, fear, feelings of uncertainty and helplessness, negative and self-defeating thoughts, and mental disorganization that appear only when students are in or contemplating a visit to the library'<sup>2</sup> – is a common complaint among undergraduate students.

## LEARNING SUPPORT PROGRAMME

We at WIT libraries are actively seeking to address this condition by promoting the library in a positive light as an approachable, accessible, informative and, above all, welcoming centre of excellence. The learning support programme plays a key role in this process. Based on the philosophy that if you give a man (or indeed, a woman) a fish, you feed him for a day but if you teach him how to fish, you feed him for life, the programme's ultimate aim is the development of 'fishermen' – independent lifelong learners who are capable of recognising when information is needed and who have the ability to locate, access, evaluate and use effectively the needed information.<sup>3</sup>

The programme consists of a series of training sessions, including introductory library skills classes for undergraduates, advanced courses for second to final years and research support sessions for postgraduates and staff. In a bid to equip participants with a transferable set of information literacy skills, so as to improve the quality of their research output and ensure lifelong learning, the programme takes a student-centred approach. It includes a large measure of interactivity and is organised according to a progression of levels and abilities.

## PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY

As the programme co-ordinator, my personal goal for my classes is for students' initial impressions of the library to be positive ones, the assumption being that if they start out viewing the library, and indeed its librarians, as welcoming and informative, they are more likely to return to us with their information queries and to become confident, competent lifelong users.

In line with Shuell's view that 'what the student does is more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does' (p.429),<sup>4</sup> my overall vision for learning support is for students to take centre stage within the classroom, while the librarian acts as a facilitator, or 'guide on the side', who directs them towards independent learning through active learning techniques.

The question as to how to achieve my goal on a day-to-day basis, and my vision in the longer term, represents a constant challenge for me. Let me put my position in context by outlining my impression of an ideal class, as against the real library classes that I regularly encounter.

## THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

In an ideal class, the audience's attention is immediately engaged. The teacher succeeds in putting the students at their ease and awakening their interest in the topic within a matter of minutes. By generating this kind of enthusiasm at the outset, the lesson continues on a positive note. The class becomes actively involved in the learning process through dialogue with the teacher. This makes for an optimal learning environment, where students are encouraged to make what they learn part of themselves by talking and writing about it, relating it to past experiences and applying it to their daily lives.<sup>5</sup>

This is in contrast to my regular classes, where every group is an unknown quantity and where one of the major difficulties that I face is gauging the students' levels of library knowledge. I tend to rely on the individual groups to supply me with this information in the first few minutes of class. Those who offer spontaneous feedback provide me with an invaluable starting point for the session, not only in terms of its coverage but also in terms of initiating a dialogue with the group. Student attention has been gained and the ice is broken, as it were.

Unfortunately, some groups refuse to interact. My queries are met with 'blank faces, glazed over eyes and stifled yawns' (p.4)<sup>6</sup> or, worse still, by 'a wall of silence' (p.38)<sup>7</sup>. The students are perhaps suspicious of my unfamiliar face and maybe even a bit anxious about being exposed as inept library users. My own anxiety and anticipation may at this stage be obvious too. These types of sessions are difficult. I get off on the wrong foot and despite attempts to gain the students' attention at various stages throughout the class, the ice never really breaks.

So where can I find a solution to my predicament? Let me begin with some tried and trusted friends – a selection of the literature on the topic.

#### **WHAT THE PAPERS SAY**

According to my reading, a potential solution lies within the classroom itself and specifically relates to the students' first impressions of the training sessions. The opening sequence of the class is thus vital, with Oswald and Turnage, for example, claiming that effective training depends on the tone being set in the first five minutes of class: 'So much is happening between the students and the librarian in the first five minutes of class. Librarians who can create enthusiasm for the subject can hook the students' attention, thus creating a positive learning environment' (p.350).<sup>8</sup>

The importance of injecting enthusiasm or 'gaining attention' at the very beginning of class is also emphasised by Gagne,<sup>9</sup> who recommends using a stimulus to arouse learners' interest and to set the momentum for the session. Morgan and Davies' paper, which discusses best practice for library induction, provides a dynamic example of one such stimulus in the shape of the Cephalonian method. This technique was invented by the authors and is based on 'a fusion of colour, music and audience participation which is designed to appeal to the senses. The main feature of the

method is that students drive the session forward by asking us a series of questions from cards distributed as they arrive. (p.5)<sup>10</sup>

Despite the fact that the librarian controls the lesson's overall structure and content, the Cephalonian method directly involves the audience to the extent that the class has 'the illusion of being 'student-driven' (p.5).<sup>11</sup> It therefore encourages genuine student interaction and dramatically alters the dynamics of traditional 'show and tell' library training. In this way, it cultivates a classroom climate which is conducive to an interactive 'learning by doing' approach, somewhat akin to Lancaster's description of performance-entertainments and also relevant to my own personal vision for learning support: 'These kinds of events demand active participation by spectators which blur the boundary between the performers' space and the spectators' space, as they create the performance event together' (p.77).<sup>12</sup>

In terms of energising my own library classes, I thought the Cephalonian method might be exactly the type of catalyst that I need. As an example of a highly effective icebreaker for gaining students' attention and motivating them to become positively involved and engaged in their learning, the method is certainly worth a try!

#### **CEPHALONIA COMES TO TOWN**

On the basis that 'first impressions count', I have decided to apply a version of the Cephalonian method to my library classes. The new classroom technique is based on prompting students to ask questions from pre-prepared flash cards at the start of class in a bid to establish an immediate rapport with the group. The rationale behind this technique is multifaceted. It not only underlines the value of classroom interaction and the importance of questioning and dialogue but also instills in students a sense of responsibility for the class as well as the confidence to ask spontaneous questions of their own.

The approach makes for an inclusive, participatory environment where the librarian acts as a facilitator, taking questions from the floor. Students are encouraged to interact with the librarian and to become actively involved in their own learning. Lessons thus become a two-way, reciprocal event. Given that it provides a fun way of introducing the library and of prompting students to ask for follow-up help, I predict that this approach will help to 'break the ice' by capturing students' attention at the very beginning of class.

I am also hopeful that it will help to dispel library anxiety by promoting a long-term positive attitude towards the library.

#### **A GOOD START IS HALF THE WORK**

I decided to start small by concentrating on one particular aspect of the learning support programme. Following Moore, Walsh and Risquez's viewpoint that 'technology is best utilized as a way of facilitating student engagement, empowering their own autonomous approaches to learning, and enhancing interaction among teachers and students' (p.96),<sup>13</sup> I focused on the introductory powerpoint presentation that we use to open first-year training sessions.

The adaptation of this opening sequence so as to accord with the principles of the Cephalonian method proved time-consuming. It involved reworking the powerpoint presentation into a series of question cards and complementary answer slides to be delivered as an icebreaker during the first fifteen minutes of class.

The following steps were necessary:

- 1 Preparing a series of questions as based on the pre-existing powerpoint slides for first year classes
- 2 Organising the questions into themed and numbered colour-coded categories with a distinctive visual identity, for example,
  - red – general information (opening hours etc.)
  - green – services (information desk etc.)
  - silver – facilities (printer-copier etc.)
- 3 Converting these questions onto matching colour cards, using simple language and humorous graphics to appeal to the students
- 4 Preparing corresponding colour-coded answer slides for each of the questions
- 5 Developing a handout to accompany the session.

I also spent some time accumulating small prizes for the students who read the questions aloud for the class. The promotional freebies (pens, pencils etc.) that the library receives from some of the database vendors are ideal, although some of the literature also recommends distributing chocolate.<sup>14</sup>

#### **'PICTURES AND CONVERSATIONS'**

I am currently piloting my version of the Cephalonian method with students. This involves ran-

domly distributing the question cards as the groups arrive, explaining the system to the class and working through the themes in a logical order during the first fifteen minutes of the lesson. Following the category divisions, questions from the red cards are called for first, then the green cards and finally the silver. In each case, the corresponding powerpoint answer slide is selected as a back-up to my verbal answer.

Rather, then, than basing the entire introduction on a set of passive powerpoint slides, the pace of which is dictated and controlled by the librarian, the new technique focuses on the interactive question cards, with the powerpoint technology playing a secondary role.

In a bid to involve the students from the outset, I aim to be enthusiastic, to move around the room and to inject as much humour as possible into the question-and-answer section.

The reaction to date has been very positive. Students appear to be energised and enthused by the question cards. They quite obviously enjoy having some ownership over the lesson and, whether as a direct consequence of this technique or not, they are certainly more alert and involved than the students in many of my pre-Cephalonian classes.

From my own point of view as teacher or trainer, my initial experience of the Cephalonian method is that, aside from requiring significant preparation time, it also requires particular skills on the part of the co-ordinator. Adapting to the role of an approachable, informative 'guide on the side', as distinct from an authoritarian 'sage on the stage' is paramount. The method also involves an element of risk in terms of maintaining a balancing act between empowering students on the one hand while dealing with the consequences of this loss of control on the other.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Despite these caveats, I intend to continue piloting my variation of the Cephalonian method during class. I am hopeful that it will ultimately help me to achieve what Oswald and Turnage describe as 'the results we desire – students who are confident that they will succeed in meeting their immediate information need and who have a positive feeling toward librarians and libraries' (p.350),<sup>15</sup> and also students who, like Alice in Wonderland, are not afraid to ask questions!

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