AMAZING RACES SPANNING FROM OUTDOOR INSTRUCTION ALL THE WAY TO VIRTUAL REALITY

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INTRODUCTION

My approach to instruction is simple, “If students are not paying attention, the instructor is not teaching.” That is why I created a rather unique library scavenger hunt. One book title is, “The Rebellion of the Beasts: or, the Ass is Dead! Long Live the Ass!” That definitely grabs students’ attention. Consequently, I named my scavenger hunt, the Amazing “Library Titles” Race. Students are “amazed” to find so many books with profanity in the title in Stanford University Libraries’ collection. Luckily, for me, the library does not censor.

AMAZING RACE

The Amazing Race adds an interactive component to the lecture portion of my library workshops. There are lots of other advantages. Students pick a partner to go into the “scary” stacks and retrieve books. The library layout is confusing, so the buddy system helps. Administering the Amazing Race is simple. Keywords of book titles are scrambled. To save time, I do not use more than three keywords. Everyone gets a Stanford Library pen to keep. Teams of two receive individual race sheets that are color coded to ensure that at least one book is located in the East Wing and their partner’s is in the West Wing. The first step requires everyone to unscramble their titles. They yell out the title to confirm they are correct before searching the catalog. If shy, I encourage them to just spell out the titles, because I respect that not all college students use profanity. Next, they retrieve books from both wings and return to class. If the catalog indicates the book is available, but it is not on the shelf, students take pictures of the shelf where the book should be.

The team back with their books the fastest, wins. Prizes range from stickers, to temporary library tattoos, to campus bookstore $5 gift cards. These classes teach rhetorical skills, so the last step requires them to convince their classmates that their book has the “Most Amazing Title.” Timing the race makes it feel like a game, but more importantly, keeps my class on schedule. Only one team has had to return at the 10-minute time limit, to avoid disqualification. I escorted that unsuccessful team to the correct section, and they said quote, “Oh we were in PN five hundred, not PN fifty.” That “aha moment” is the entire point of my activity.

My favorite Albert Einstein saying is, “I never teach my pupils, I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn.”

OUTDOOR INSTRUCTION

My students are increasingly using mobile devices instead of laptops to do searches in class. This saves time during the Amazing Race because they have the catalog record and Call Numbers in the palm of their hands. Fortunately, the library’s website, databases and catalog are all compatible with mobile devices, so it is easy to teach outdoors.
I created an abridged version of the Amazing Race for when I teach outdoors, or for refresher classes that do not need to go physically retrieve books. I added a lot more titles to my abridged version to include books located in our branch libraries. The most popular addition was the book titled, “F*ck : a History of the World in 65 Unfortunate Incidents.”

Needless to say, student evaluations confirmed that they loved this activity and were definitely amused. One student complimented me on my “Fantastic book choices!” In addition to the students and professors, I also personally benefited from the Amazing Race. There is something surprisingly therapeutic, about searching the library’s catalog for titles containing expletives, especially when co-workers happen by and are thoroughly confused by your results displayed on the monitor. Not everything in my instruction is as startling. I do utilize traditional tools, but I still add a little something extra. For instance, I created instructional videos, but decided to hire a professional production company instead of replicating the prevalent Do-It-Yourself (DIY) library videos.

NERD SQUIRREL VIDEOS

My professional videos augmented my instruction by allowing me to use a flipped classroom approach. These videos replaced my point and click catalog and database demonstrations. I gained valuable classroom time, previously used to demonstrate rote actions, with more meaningful search syntax strategies and critical evaluation lessons. As a result, I expanded my lecture to include complex aspects of peer-review including the reasons why professors require them to use refereed material; the cost of journals; as well as the insidious way predatory publishers hijack legitimate scholarly publication titles. My recent class even veered into discussions about underrepresented groups’ concerns about gatekeeper aspects of what I call the “informational industrial complex.” These types of higher-level concepts were previously omitted in order to allow me to demonstrate where to click on a library webpage.

Now that I have explained why I created the videos, I can share some logistics. My videos are short, professionally created videos, featuring a library mascot affectionately called the “Nerd Squirrel.” These videos are designed to spark interest, make the learning process enjoyable and memorable, and be available at the students’ point-of-need.

One of the first steps in video productions is storyboarding. A storyboard is a detailed, visually graphic illustrative outline. The storyboard specifies every action, in each scene including the dialogue/script, images displayed on the screen and any URLs to be captured.

Before creating the storyboard, I decided on the black squirrel as our library mascot. These black squirrels are prevalent on campus, but I had never seen one before coming to Stanford. A squirrel had the added benefit of being a video spokesperson that avoids representation issues relating to sensitivities around heteronormative (gender) and racial identities. Nevertheless, people who insist it is male, point out that the Nerd Squirrel is quote, “Porky-Pigging it” meaning only wearing a sweater, you know, up top. But I digress.

We hired a student narrator to make the videos more relatable to undergraduates and to save money. Our videos required a graphic designer to create the mascot. Hiring a graphic designer was the most expensive component. Luckily, that was just a one-time cost of $8,000. Our 2-minute video cost approximately $2,900; our longest video is 6-minutes and cost $8,600. The latter was more expensive because we added lots of animations to keep our viewer’s attention throughout the longer run time. We posted all videos on our Stanford Library’s YouTube channel. We spent $600 updating them. When we update them, the number of YouTube’s views resets to zero, but our videos have been viewed tens of thousands of times.

My professors assign the Nerd Squirrel videos as homework prior to my workshop. The students must email me a book and article, as demonstrated in the videos. Many times, they do it incorrectly, alerting me to the fact that they did not actually watch the video. I then reply to each, informing them if they did it correctly or incorrectly. This allows me to begin a fun, individualized discussion with each of my students prior to our class meetings.

Student feedback shows a positive association with the videos, including:

“I had planned to just skip ahead in the video but couldn’t because I got sucked in right from the beginning!”

“We love the Nerd Squirrel!”

Another thing our students love is putting stickers on their laptops. So naturally we made stickers using images from our videos of the Nerd Squirrel in different costumes. The stickers are incredibly popular. This is a great way to promote the videos, specifically and the libraries, generally. Our instructors asked if they could pre-order stickers, because we ran out, the year before. We usually order 1,000 of the 3” x 3” die cut stickers that cost $600.
Figure 1: Nerd Squirrel in Different Costumes from the Videos
As a result of my Nerd Squirrel videos, I am able to teach outdoors, which my students love most of all. Since I am explaining informational infrastructure concepts instead of demonstrating clicking motions, I can teach in our library’s courtyard, near a water fountain, in the sunlight and fresh air. My pedagogical philosophy is that these types of settings are more mentally stimulating and conducive to learning than windowless classrooms with mustard colored walls. As mentioned earlier, using an abridged version of the Amazing Race also allows me to teach refresher classes outdoors. Being untethered allows me the freedom to teach anywhere, physically. Nevertheless, I still aspire to teach everywhere, virtually.

**VIRTUAL REALITY**

I do not only want to remove physical limitations from my classes, I want to remove mental limitations on instruction possibilities! A long time ago, I created a very popular information literacy program in Second Life, when that was still an emerging technology. Currently, I propose using Virtual Reality (VR) technology for library workshops. Virtual Reality is a computer-generated technology that uses headgear to create a simulated world that enables users to interact with visual and auditory elements rendered or projected through headgear. As a tool to teach information literacy, VR is still an underutilized, interactive, active learning alternative to lectures.

The main objective of my VR project is to illustrate to students that “common-sense” used in everyday real-life is the same “critical evaluation skillset” needed in the academic world. My project shows students that they inherently possess the cognitive tools to differentiate between untrustworthy information sources and more authoritative resources in order to transfer their deductive reasoning skills to academic pursuits.

My project replaces the mundane, jargon-filled lectures with dynamic Virtual Reality modules consisting of recognizable, real-life simulated scenarios. Using VR, I can create problems for students to solve that are relatable. These familiar scenarios make learning objectives more easily comprehensible and will improve student learning and retention. Additionally, VR is a safe space for students to make incorrect choices without time-limit pressures, or worrying that they are being judged by peers and professors. A laudable advantage of VR is that it allows for the transmission of knowledge without students feeling they are being preached at.

**USER EXPERIENCE**

My project creates modules consisting of two action-oriented prompts located in a dynamic, futuristic world. One prompt is a choice between typical situations, in their daily life. The second prompt is a choice between library sources that requires them to use the exact same common-sense reasoning. Users are instructed to “choose wisely” in both realities. Users must successfully complete each module in order to advance to the next level. There will be a holographic robot, a “Librarian-Bot,” to serve as a docent to guide users through the pair of scenarios.

For example:
Users must identify the most trustworthy choice when presented with two options, both involving strangers.

**Option 1:** While in a nightclub, a suspicious looking stranger offers you a drink that could be spiked.

**Option 2:** While in a hospital bed, the Emergency Room (E.R.) Nurse, who you never met before, gives you water and pills.

The two above scenarios illustrate that the same common-sense thought process is used to evaluate situations and determine who is a trusted source and ascribe a motive to each. This is the same skillset needed to become information literate. The suspicious stranger in the nightclub represents the same type of problems as an unknown information provider online. Whereas, the E.R. Nurse’s credibility represents the same type of trusted expertise, as do scholarly materials, in academia.

After the nightclub, students advance to different levels by flying through wormhole effects. On the next level, students have to make another wise choice and separate out real news reports from false accounts or fake news. Users move truthful items onto a 3-D, free-floating, shining star marked “TRUE.” Otherwise, they slide the untruthful material into a sunken, burning garbage bin, marked “FAKE NEWS.” The complexity results from the ambiguous choices proffered because in real-life there are times when something is neither all true, nor all false.

Galileo stated it brilliantly: "You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him to find it within himself."

**LOGISTICS**

Coming up with scenarios was challenging but I quickly learned that constructing backgrounds inside of virtual worlds is expensive. Several professional VR developers estimated my project would cost anywhere between $50,000 to half a million dollars. Vendors offered cost saving measures such as reducing the number of different settings. Incorporating Hybrid Reality or
Mixed Reality components was another way to add variety, prevent motion sickness, and save money. Hybrid Reality is a combination of animation and live action features, that merge to produce an environment in which users can interact with (real) physical as well as (virtual) digital objects.

The first step in VR production is to create a Game Design Document (GDD). This is equivalent to creating a storyboard before producing a video. Below are some logistical requirements for my project.

**Design Phase**
- Program is comprised of detective-like gameplay that encourages users to not take everything at face value.
- Provide quick summations, by the Librarian-Bot at the end of each situation, for reflection.
- Define all features, functionality, gameplay and interactivity of the application to build all levels.
- Create scope and sequences that reinforce the desired learning experience.
- Write all content, including dialogue and descriptions of animations and/or live action scenes.
- Focus on reducing actions that may cause motion sickness, while using headgear.

**“The Infinity Library”**
The setting will use distinctive details of the real Stanford University Libraries combined with magical realism.

The Librarian-Bot welcomes users to the Infinity Library, explaining “The impossible is possible,” because this library does not operate, at all, like its real-world counterpart.

**Art Style**
- Futuristic and high fidelity using bold colors for buttons to attract attention.

**Staff Resources**
- 1 artist, 1 designer and 1 producer - 60 hours each person.

**Performance Specification**
- Executable Windows (exe) application, compatible with the HTC Vive headset & controllers.

**Control & Setup**
- 4x4 meters room-scale VR setup with the HTC Vive controllers.

**Full Scope ($79,000)**
- First Playable & Game Design Document including Project Management & Art.

**Medium Scope ($54,000)**
- Simplified less realistic art.
- Instead of animated robots, feature square machines with blinking lights.

**Minimal Scope ($44,000)**
- Smallest scope focusing on the core intent.
- Replace robots with conductor voice and subtitles.
- Simplified scenery and effects.

**CONCLUSION**

Even though my proposed VR project is not economically feasible, I firmly contend that VR is the future of information literacy instruction and that the future is now! Virtual Reality is an experiential learning approach whereby students use personal experiences (as opposed to books) to conceptualize and apply the knowledge being conveyed. This approach gives ownership to students and offers them the opportunity to manage their own learning. After completing the exercises in my project, students would recognize that they already employ common-sense critical evaluation skills, on a daily basis, often without even thinking about it. My project would illustrate how easy it is to transfer those evaluation skills to academia.

All of my aforementioned activities have one overarching goal; to equip students with the tools to empower them to make the unknown, “known!”

The following proverb summarizes my teaching philosophy perfectly:

“I hear, I forget.
I see, I remember.
I do, I understand.”
APPENDIX

AMAZING RACE CLASS INSTRUCTION SHEET

Amazing "Library Titles" Race
Felicia A. Smith

Race Overview:
Teams of two students will race to retrieve books in Green Library.

All participants get a library pen because they need something to write with and it is a gift for all.
The first step requires teams to unscramble their titles, using their Sanford Libraries pen.
The next step is to search the catalog (preferably on their cell phone); retrieve books from both the East Wing and West Wing; and return to the classroom within the 10-minute time limit.
The fastest team wins, a campus bookstore $5 gift card.
The last step is to have a Show & Tell of their books and vote on the "Most Amazing Title."
The team with the most amazing title wins a special prize (a library temporary tattoo, or a sticker).

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Required:
Instruction Handout/Race Sheet for each team member.
Prizes: Library pens & temporary tattoos & stickers. ($5 bookstore Gift Cards for winners).

Organizers Instructions:
- Added East and West location codes to Footers of each Race Sheet using just an “E” or “W” in the Footer. This replaced Color Coded Sheets so less obvious.
- Do not repeat titles because 1st class will have pulled books so not on shelves for next class session, this only applies to Back-To-Back classes.
- Day of the race confirm books are available (not checked out) in the catalog.
- Project Sample Race Sheet on screen, before they are given their sheets. This allows them to review the instructions before starting but avoids the temptation for them to start unscrambling their titles.
- Let students pick teammate before distribute Race Sheets.
- 1st team member gets West Wing sheet (should be coded “W” in Footer).
- 2nd team member gets East Wing sheet (should be coded “E” in Footer).
- Require the class to vote for “Most Amazing Title” (this team wins special prize).
- Synchronize start time with all teams before turning over Race Sheets to begin.
- Librarian or professor must approve unscrambled titles before racers go retrieve books. Just check the code in the Footer and the Location written on each Race Sheet by students to make sure they are going to the correct wings.
- Remind them to bring the book to class.
  - If missing, take a picture of the shelf where it is supposed to be.
- If not checking out the book, racers return it to librarian/professor, at end of class.
APPENDIX

AMAZING RACE CLASS ACTIVITY SHEET

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Amazing “Library Titles” Race

*TRIGGER WARNING* This activity uses Profanity

*NOTE* You can search library website & catalog on Cellphones/Mobile Devices
All teams will start on my mark, at the same time.

Step 1) Unscramble the following title keywords.
Write the title on the blank lines below:

*HINT* Search as [TITLE] in the Drop Down Menu

Scrambled Title Keywords:

L W A S A S

Unscrambled Title is:

Step 2) Search in SearchWorks for the title keywords.
*Note* You can search the catalog (SearchWorks) on Cellphones/Mobile Devices

Step 3) Write the Location, East Wing or West Wing or Branch.

Step 4) Write the Call Number below.

Yell out the Amazing Title when complete!

First one Wins!