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Soft Toys as Instructional Technology in Higher Education: The Case of Llewelyn the Lynx

Lee Raye¹

Cardiff University, Cardiff, Wales, UK, CF10 3EU

Abstract

Scholarship on instructive technologies in higher education has emphasized the use of high-tech facilitative technologies for long-term use, and low-tech props to illustrate single topics. This paper, on the contrary, discusses the use of a long-term, low-tech instructional technology: Llewelyn the Lynx was a soft animal used to assist with discussions in first year seminars. In-class questionnaires and anonymous online reviews on RateYourLecturer show Llewelyn was popular, facilitated equal contribution to discussion, and made seminars less intimidating and more enjoyable. Llewelyn may have functioned as a tactual or kinaesthetic stimulus, and an assistive technology for students with learning difficulties. His use does not seem to have infantilized most of the students although there was some disagreement here.

Keywords: Instructional technology; soft toy; talking stick; teaching prop; RateYourLecturer.

For the past two years I have been bringing a soft toy into my university seminar classes. The soft toy's name is Llewelyn the stuffed lynx and he now has an impressive teaching resume. Llewelyn has now met 160 students of medieval and renaissance history and literature and had 170 close-contact hours with these students across eleven seminar groups and five modules.

I did not gather personal information about the students in these classes, but I was able to retrieve data on general student demographics in 2015-16 from an equality and diversity report (Department of Strategic Planning and Governance, 2017) and through a Freedom of Information Request (FOI17-081). In 2015-16, the average undergraduate in the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences was female (62%), white (only 10% of domestic students were black or minority ethnic), under 21 (56%), heterosexual (83%), atheist (47% - 26% Christian), and able-bodied (9% of all university undergraduates were disabled). These figures seem approximately correct for the courses I taught, with the exception that because I taught only first-year courses, a greater number of learners were aged below 21. The figures here are approximately typical for an elite university in the

¹ Corresponding author's email: rayel@cardiff.ac.uk

UK, but less diverse than the typical UK university (21% black or ethnic minority, 11% disabled).

In this report, I want to discuss the experience of bringing a stuffed animal into the higher education classroom, and discuss some of Llewelyn's successes and failures.

Review of Relevant Literature

Originally Llewelyn was intended to function as a technology to facilitate discussion without the need to pick on learners directly, and as a confidence building 'talking stick'. This is based on the work of Valerio (2001) who suggests passing round a 'talking stick' where only the person holding the technology can talk, whilst everyone else must listen. Talking sticks are used especially to help construct safe spaces for controversial discussions. The first year curriculum in Medieval and Renaissance History and Literature at the university I teach at includes many controversial topics: there are discussions of the medieval and early modern roots of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, and the need to introduce provocative feminist, post-colonial and eco-critical readings of texts. It can be hard for students to discuss such topics without feeling safe, and harder still if there are no rules to prevent a few students from dominating the discussion. However discussions are also unavoidable, they are one of the only effective ways to challenge learners' attitudes to the world (Kozma, Belle, & Williams, 1978, p. 235). It was hoped that Llewelyn could function as an informal talking stick in this context.

Llewelyn was additionally intended to function as an assistive technology for me: I have an abysmal memory for names, and therefore wanted a way to target individual students for questions without having to name them. Other students with the same problem could use Llewelyn in the same way. The intention of the talking stick was that learners threw Llewelyn around the room, and were therefore always ready to speak and listen to each other. In practice, Llewelyn is usually passed around our seminar circle clockwise, or thrown from group to group, meaning that Llewelyn also functions as a facilitative technology for the class, to ensure equal contribution from each learner.

I was first introduced to the use of soft toys as a classroom technology in a *Welsh for Adults* language class (see Acknowledgements). The practice is common in Welsh as a Second Language teaching (Talfryn, 2014). Generally, the use is as prescribed by 'desuggestopedia'; in language teaching, tutors have learners pass objects between themselves (more usually balls) and speak when they hold the object. The idea is that the excitement and fast-paced nature of the passing can bypass learner fears and barriers to learning and teach language at a much faster rate (Larsen-Freeman, 2010, pp. 73, 77).

Although this is not the way I use Llewelyn (as described above) this innovative usage inspired me because case studies of the use of instructional technology in higher education usually focus discussion on 'high-tech' solutions. For example, Evans (2014) looks at the use of Twitter for learners, Sorensen (2009) reflects on the use of virtual worlds and Wagner (2014) considered the use of Pinterest. In the cases where low-tech technol-

ogies are discussed, they tend to be described as ‘props’, directly relevant to single topics (for example, Pollard & Duvall, 2006; Vossler, 2011). This is not the case here; Llewelyn the lynx is not generally relevant to the subject matter, but instead acts as a low-tech facilitative technology.

Before proceeding further, we should perhaps note that in pedagogical parlance, high-tech refers to expensive, sophisticated devices, usually with a specific function to help learners (e.g. a dvd player) while low-tech refers to simple, cheap ‘bare bones’ props (Astrachan, 1998), which are usually generic and may not be ‘technological’ at all in ordinary parlance but nevertheless assist with learning (e.g. a whiteboard) (Wirkus, Comer, Swenson, & Weingarten, 2009).

As noted above, most previous case studies of low-tech tools in higher education have focused on the use of props rather than assistive technologies. These previous case studies are nevertheless significant in that they emphasise that there is a surprisingly high level of enthusiasm for low-tech instructional technology among students. Astrachan (1998) notes that some element of showmanship can make classes more enjoyable. Vossler (2011) points out that humorous examples and props can be especially memorable. Perhaps the greatest use of teaching props has been by Pollard & Duvall (2006) who have built up a ‘bag of tricks’ to provide concrete props to help understand abstract issues. They found the use of props can make students excited about the class. It was hoped that Llewelyn would similarly add some fun and energy to the class, despite being a facilitative technology rather than a prop.

Considering this enthusiasm for low-tech props, it is significant that I have not found any direct parallels to Llewelyn the Lynx. Discussions of specifically soft toys in educational settings have been generally confined to early year settings. Such studies are of limited relevance, although tips about, for example, how to keep soft toys hygienic (Koza & Smith, 2009, p. 32) were valuable and easy to neglect with older learners.

Teaching props are also hypothesised to assist learners with tactual and kinaesthetic learning styles. Learners with these styles learn best when able to physically touch learning objects and move physically through a learning environment. The tactual and kinaesthetic learning styles are generally not well catered for at higher education level (Boyle, 2000). One of the initial hopes I had for Llewelyn was that holding him and passing him round would help low-visual and low-auditory learners take in information. The physical game aspect of holding, throwing, and passing Llewelyn before speaking was hypothesised to reinforce important points for kinaesthetic and tactual learners, who clearly benefit significantly if learning has a physical aspect (Whitley & Littleton, 2000).

There is also some evidence that low-tech technologies like Llewelyn may provide useful attention-holding fidgets for learners with ADD (attention deficit disorder) and ASD (autistic spectrum disorder) (Hartanto, Krafft, Iosif, & Schweitzer, 2016; Wirkus et al., 2009). The slower, more-structured and relaxed discussion which Llewelyn aimed to make class debates more approachable to some learners, although I was also concerned it could make discussion less exciting to others (Kozma et al., 1978, pp. 235, 237).

Finally, one of the biggest concerns about bringing a soft toy into a higher education classroom has to be whether students consider it infantilising. Silver's (1996) study of the roles given to objects by students entering higher education is especially relevant here. Silver carried out ethnographic research on students in a Midwestern American university in 1996. Silver found that although soft toys and dolls were the valued possession of several female students, they were generally embarrassing reminders of childhood, and kept to a minimum for identity reasons.

This study would seem to suggest that including a soft toy in a higher education class would be infantilising. However, the research was undertaken before many of the students I taught were even born, and in a different country. It is conceivable that a generational gap might exist on this subject.

The debate has also been taken up by medical practitioners. Nurses of patients suffering from Alzheimer's and dementia have found that the use of soft toys and dolls can be beneficial for residential patients, but there is concern that the practice may be infantilising there too (Milton & MacPhail, 1985). The current consensus is that the practice is positive, but some are still sceptical (Higgins, 2009).

Whilst the comparison of first year university students with dementia patients seems extreme, it is worth remembering how stressful the first year of university can be for many students, especially the younger learners. All of my seminars were with first year students, and if holding a stuffed animal can be a tactile comfort, without being embarrassing, this is a factor to consider. The success of the 'soft classroom' experiment, where chairs and desk traditional classroom was redecorated and added colourful throws, curtains and carpets, suggests that students do appreciate attempts to make classroom settings less intimidating (Sommer & Olsen, 1980; Wong, Sommer, & Cook, 1992). For whole group discussions to be successful, students need to feel safe and valued (Kozma et al., 1978, p. 238).

Altogether, whilst the literature to date is cautiously optimistic about the use of teaching props, there are some uncertainties especially about whether the use of a soft toy is too infantilising. For this reason, I wanted to obtain some learner feedback on the use of Llewelyn in the classroom.

Measures

As well as my own experience using Llewelyn across the eleven seminar groups, I have been observed six times by colleagues (see Acknowledgements). In Llewelyn's second year I also sought out learner perspectives on Llewelyn through a quantitative in-class Likert questionnaire (Figure 9) undertaken by 51 students 2015-16. Finally, at the beginning of the second year I set up a profile for Llewelyn the Lynx on RateYourLecturer.co.uk with the co-operation of website staff there in order to receive on-going anony-

mous and in-depth reviews² (see Figure 8). Over the year since then, Llewelyn has been given 18 qualitative reviews on this platform, from both cohorts of students, which have allowed me to check that I am representing learner voices despite the quantitative nature of the initial Likert questionnaire. I will be quoting from these reviews in the discussion.

It's worth pointing out here, that each time I distributed the questionnaire in class, and the first time I gave out the link to the RateYourLecturer profile by email, I gave the following brief:

There has been some discussion about Llewelyn. Some lecturers seem to like him but others worry that he might make you feel like you're at nursery rather than university. I've been asked to write a report about it, and hoped you could help...

This introduction signposts the idea that Llewelyn might be infantilising, which may partially account for the high number of students discussing this idea on the online profile and in the questionnaire.

It is also worth noting that the sample of learners who gave reviews on RateYourLecturer were self-selecting. Most learners ignored the website, presumably meaning that only those who had the strongest feelings on the subject, or the most spare-time, left reviews. The end-of-year questionnaire was handed out to all learners and filled in during the class, so was only self-selecting in that learners who missed the final classes did not get the opportunity to give feedback.

The questions themselves are presented in the Appendices (see Figure 10).

Results

The responses to the Likert survey were generally positive. 51 learners (all present in the second year classes) took part in the classroom survey. I have presented the raw results in the Appendices, but Figure 1 gives a graphical depiction:

To unpack these results briefly: 100% of learners agreed that Llewelyn worked as a talking stick. His use in the class was not distracting (82%) or stressful (90%) but it made seminars more exciting (88%) without slowing them down (75%). Most learners did not dislike touching Llewelyn (82%) and liked having him in the seminars (86%).

Some learners were optimistic but many were not convinced that Llewelyn helped aid confidence (65%), helped them to think (51%, Figure 3) and avoided infantilising them

² RateYourLecturer has received very bad press from academics in the UK since it was launched in 2013 (see especially (Cooke, 2013)). However, I believe it can be a very useful tool for pedagogical development, particularly in cases like this where the 'lecturer' being rated does not have an ego to bruise (Llewelyn sadly has an average 'hotness' score of only 3/5 flames), and the novelty of rating a stuffed toy may help prevent the reviewing task from becoming a chore. Llewelyn's page is: <http://rateyourlecturer.co.uk/cardiff/cardiff-university/llewelyn-the-lynx/>

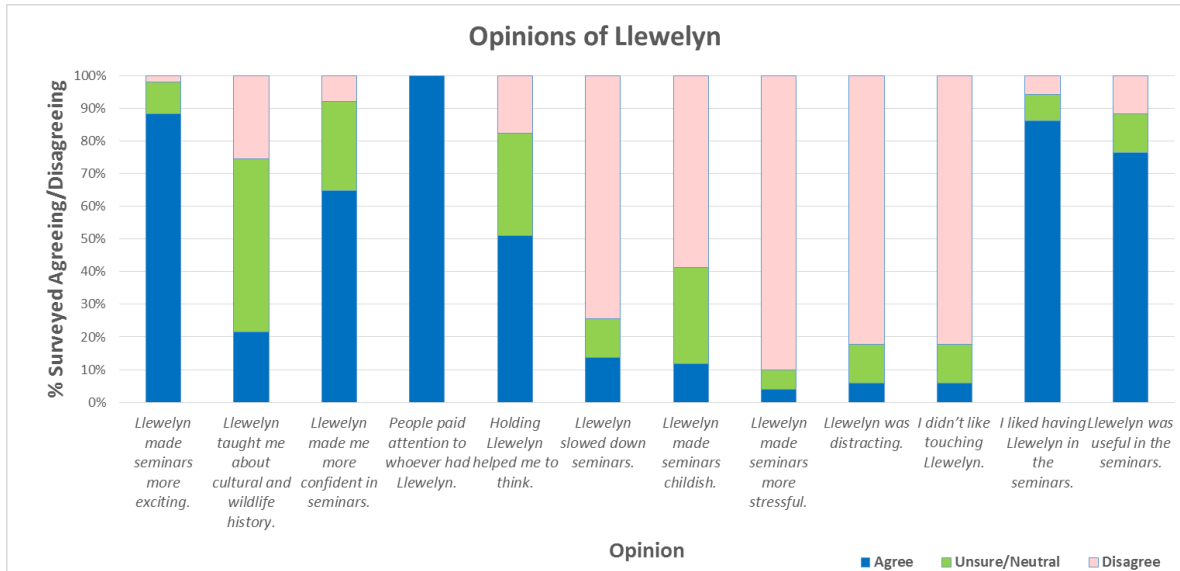


Fig. 1. A stacked column chart showing the % of learners who agree, are unsure/neutral and disagree with each statement.

(59%). The figure for Llewelyn's perceived usefulness (76%) was lower than the figure for his popularity (86%).

Learners tended to disagree or were uncertain that Llewelyn taught them about cultural or wildlife history (53%) as seen in Figure 2.

Seventeen learners voluntarily gave Llewelyn in-depth review on the anonymous RateYourLecturer webpage (see note 1), and he has a score of 8.0/10 there. Learners' feedback here was also overwhelmingly positive. Only six learners produced serious Cons (puts you on the spot, seems a bit forced, may be childish). Fourteen learners gave useful feedback in the Pros section (helps everyone speak so no-one dominates and everyone forms independent opinions, makes seminars lively yet relaxed).

Discussion

Was Llewelyn a prop in himself?

Originally, Llewelyn was intended to have a minor significance as a prop in himself. His name was chosen to be one which would help English and international students become familiar with a Welsh name and learn to pronounce Welsh letter <ll> a voiceless alveolar lateral fricative (ɬ). The name 'Llewelyn' was also intended to be a reference to my medieval research: there may have been an Old Welsh word for the lynx (*llewyn*) which was

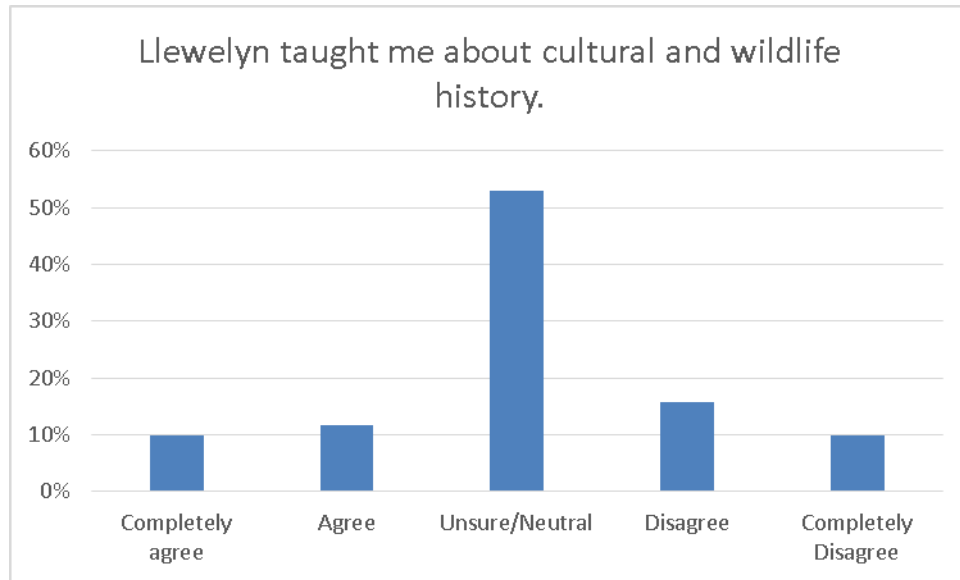


Fig. 2. A bar chart showing whether learners agreed or disagreed that Llewelyn taught them about cultural or wildlife history

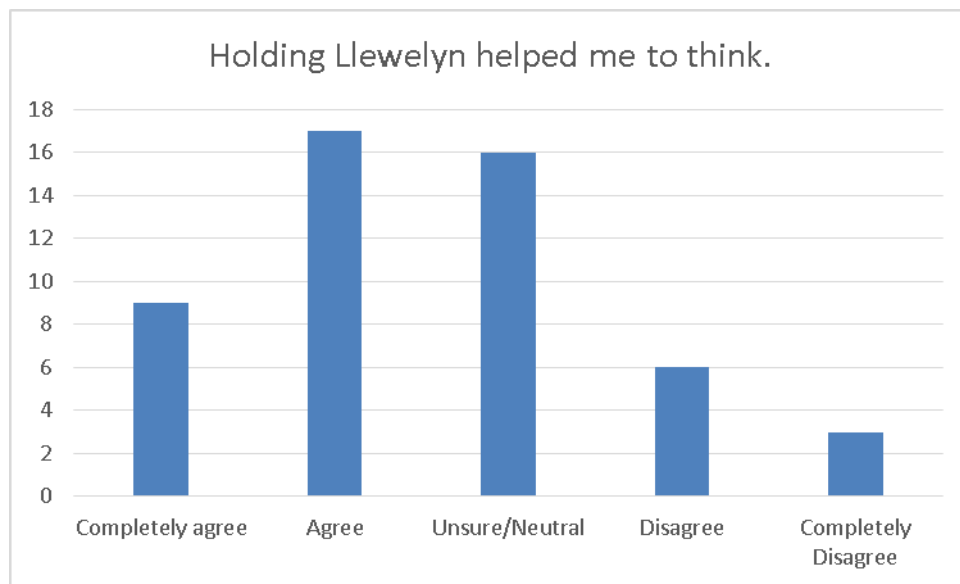


Fig. 3. A bar chart showing whether learners agreed or disagreed that Holding Llewelyn helped them to think.

lost when the lynx became extinct in Wales, and was later mistaken for the name Llewelyn³.

³ Unpublished article: Raye, L. & Foster Evans, D. (2016) Llewon, llewyn: a term for the lynx in Old Welsh.

To question whether Llewelyn was a prop in this way I asked learners whether Llewelyn taught them anything about cultural or wildlife history. The result was ambiguous. Unsurprisingly, my research topic of the extinct British lynx did not come up in any of the modules I taught. Using a more relevant soft toy might have been preferable on this note, although Vossler (2011) suggests that keeping humorous physical props in the classroom for too long often serves to distract the group and embarrass the teacher. It's clear that Llewelyn's main function is as a facilitative technology rather than a prop.

Did Llewelyn assist tactual and kinaesthetic learners?

There were occasional hints that Llewelyn did assist tactual and kinaesthetic learners. Whilst some learners were embarrassed to throw Llewelyn, others seemed to enjoy this aspect. Some learners left Llewelyn on the desk, but some stroked or cuddled him as they spoke. One learner had an unconscious habit of twirling him by one ear or his label whilst they spoke. These actions may have helped reinforce learning, but they may equally have been expressions of nervousness. Three learners filling in the end of year questionnaire added a note that although they agreed that Llewelyn slowed down the seminars, this was "in a good way".

The qualitative feedback given on RateYourLecturer did not address this issue. Three learners did comment on the tactile element:

Pros

He's fluffy!

But this provides little evidence on which to base conclusions. Learner response to this issue in the in-class questionnaire was also tepid:

Most learners were positive about this aspect, but the result was ambiguous, and less positive than most of the other results. On the other hand, this does not necessarily suggest that Llewelyn was not useful in this way. This element would only have been noticeable to the minority of high-tactual and high-kinaesthetic learners anyway, and, in retrospect, the idea was not well conveyed in the questionnaire. Further study on the issue of whether soft toys are helpful or tactual or kinaesthetic learners at higher education level would be beneficial.

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Was Llewelyn Infantilising or Comforting?

The results of the questionnaires specifically about infantilising were ambiguous. Worries about infantilising were picked up by several learners in their reviews (although note the bias in the methodology section above). One anonymous learner explained:

Cons

It does seem a little childish and some people may not want to use such methods once moving up into university.

Although another argued:

Pros

... He is great as an ice breaker, and makes the seminars feel less formal. Plus, who doesn't love cuddly toys.

On the in-class survey 59% of learners disagreed or completely disagreed that Llewelyn made the seminars seem childish (Figure 4), 29% were unsure and 12% agreed or completely agreed. This was one of the more ambiguous results but the lack of explicit agreement does suggest the idea of a generational shift since Silver's research (1996). Further research is needed to confirm this theory.

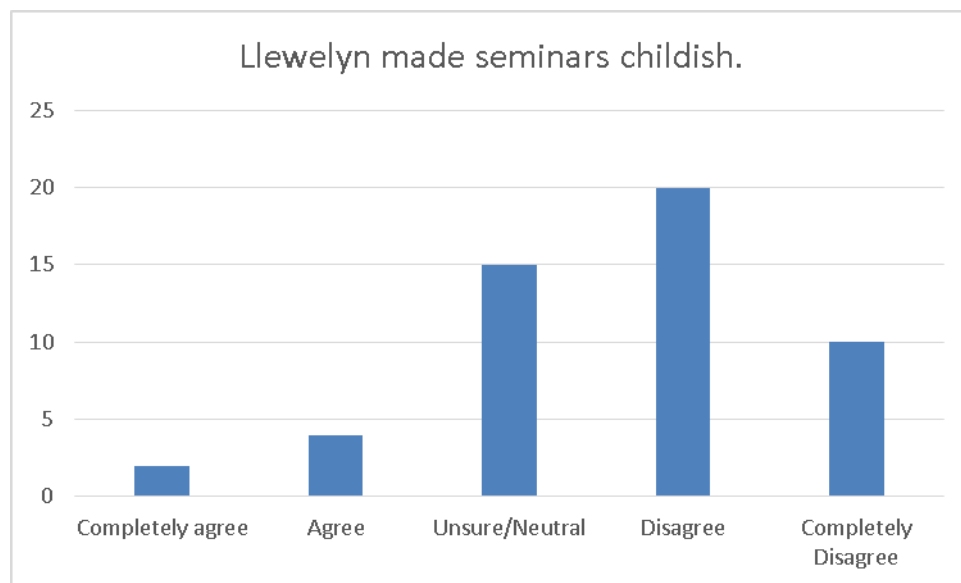


Fig. 4. A bar chart showing whether learners agreed or disagreed that Llewelyn made the seminars childish.

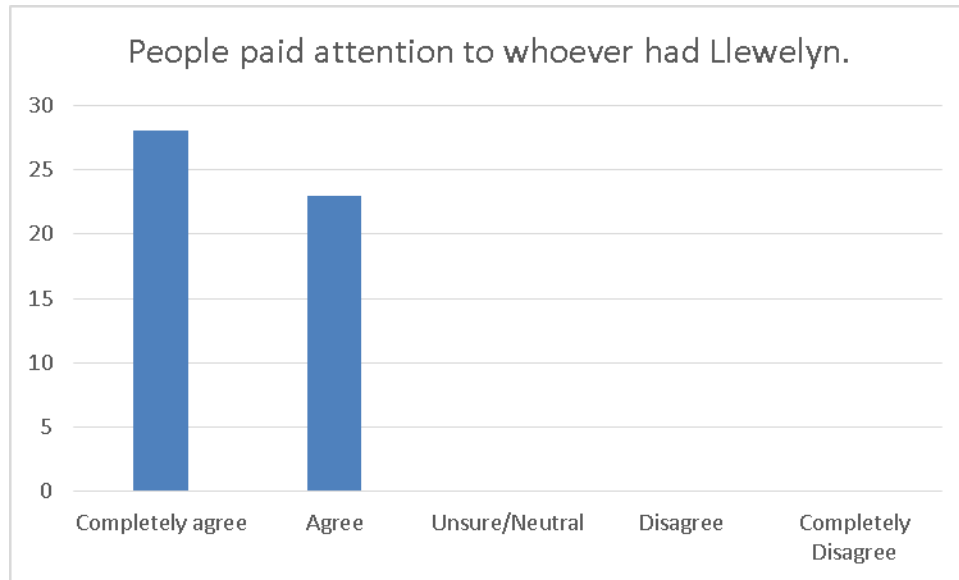


Fig. 5. A bar chart showing whether learners agreed or disagreed that People paid attention to whoever had Llewelyn.

Was Llewelyn a talking-stick?

In this context, Llewelyn was absolutely useful as a talking stick, as the in-class questionnaire showed (Figure 5).

This 100% agreement rate was the best result; Llewelyn’s main function was also recognised as such by all six observers as well as the learners. In the reviews on RateYourLecturer, nine of the seventeen learners there suggested that Llewelyn helps facilitate discussion. Here are two examples:

Pros:

Llewelyn gets me talking.

Pros:

Llewelyn was good for getting everybody to contribute to the discussion, instead of having just a few voices dominating. He also helped keep things lighthearted.

On the reverse side, the use of a talking stick might lead to learners being forced to speak when they are not ready to. We had a pass mechanism, but learners may not have always been comfortable using this. Four learners on RateYourLecturer explained that Llewelyn sometimes made them feel “on the spot”. I was initially concerned about this aspect, but the end of year questionnaire revealed 90% of learners either disagreed, or completely disagreed that “Llewelyn made the seminars more stressful” (Figure 6). Five learners also

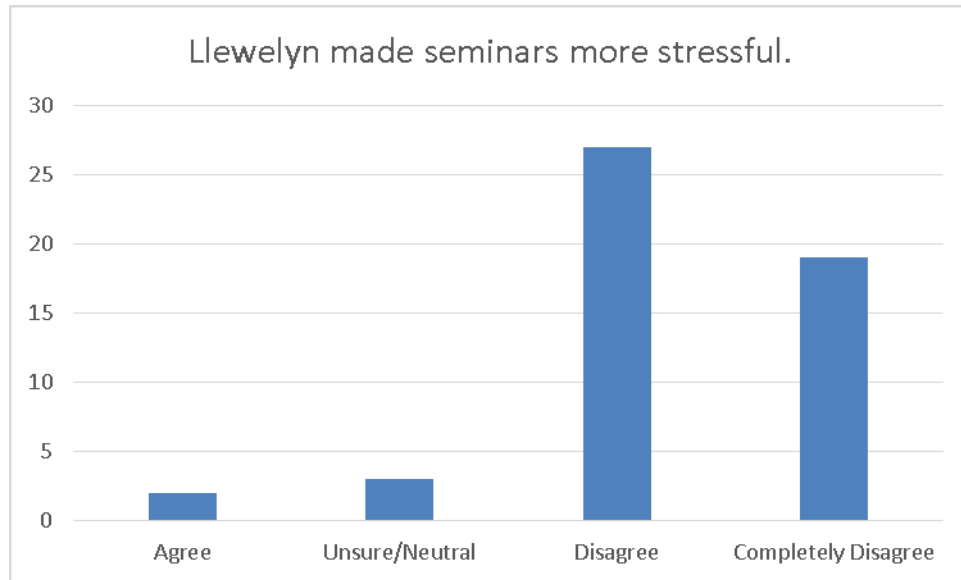


Fig. 6. A bar chart showing whether learners agreed or disagreed that Llewelyn made the seminars more stressful.

commented positively on RateYourLecturer that Llewelyn made seminars relaxed, friendly, light-hearted or less formal.

Was Llewelyn well-liked?

Finally, it is worth noting that Llewelyn by the end of each year was becoming a kind of ironic celebrity in his own right. In the end of year questionnaire, Llewelyn managed an 86% approval rating. I also noticed laughter and smiles at the beginning of the spring seminar when I announced that Llewelyn was now the third most popular lecturer in each subject at the university on RateYourLecturer. Evans (2014) notes that instructional technology may be especially appreciated by the new generation of students who are at university to get a job rather than out of love for the subject. Perhaps for these students, Llewelyn may have provided light relief during a dull topic (see Figure 7). One classroom observer, Melanie Bigold, praised Llewelyn's ability to bring energy to the room and keep learners alert, an idea supported by at least one RateYourLecturer review:

Pros:

Makes the room more lively.

As well as the end of year questionnaire:

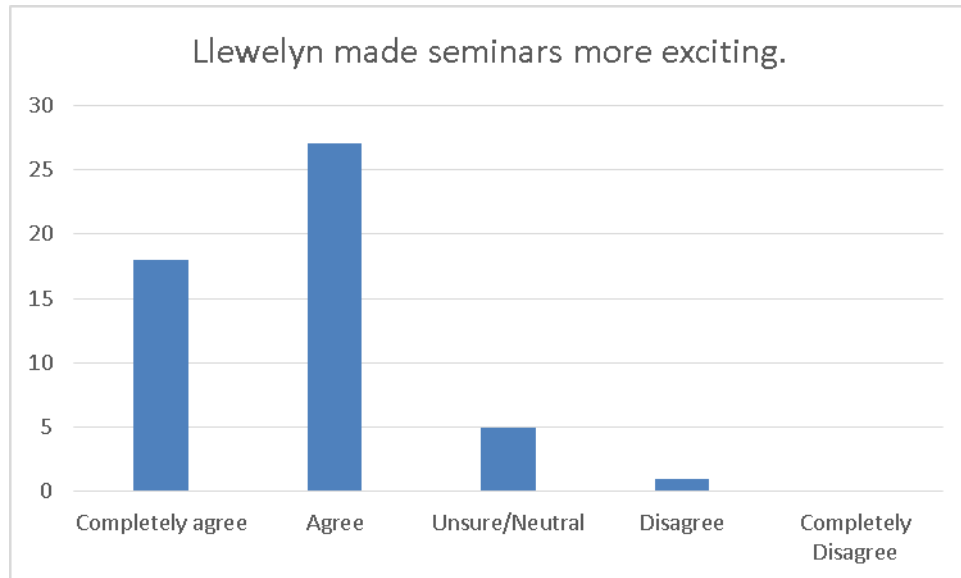


Fig. 7. A bar chart showing whether learners agreed or disagreed that Llewelyn made the seminars more exciting.

Llewelyn's ongoing profile on RateYourLecturer was also very important because it moved him from a low-tech teaching prop to a seminar celebrity with a virtual presence. Learners could find him, not just in seminars but as part of the greater *experience* of the module. We should not over-emphasise this point however. The online reviews continued to reflect only his classroom performance:

Pros

He's fluffy!

Cons

Sometimes he falls off the table

On the other hand, the popularity of Llewelyn on RateYourLecturer alone suggested that Llewelyn was becoming a true class mascot. One learner, reviewing Llewelyn a year after the seminars finished expressed it succinctly:

Pros

... The touch of crazy that a soft toy brought to seminars made them far more engaging and memorable.

Conclusion

There is room for doubt about whether Llewelyn was useful as a prop-in-himself (e.g. teaching about lynxes or about Welsh history) or as a tactual stimulus. However, although previous scholars have suggested that soft toys may be infantilising for adults, Llewelyn appears to have been well liked and comforting. There was 100% agreement among learners and observers that Llewelyn functioned as a talking-stick discussion tool to get everyone talking equally. Most importantly, there was a consensus that he made seminars more enjoyable. This may reflect the demographic of student involved (predominantly 18-20 year-old white British learners, in female-dominated classrooms).

Generally, Llewelyn has been a successful addition to the classroom. His position as a low-tech facilitative technology makes him nearly unique in higher education, and goes against the normal practice of using low-tech technologies to illustrate single activities, and using high-tech technologies to facilitate learning in a digital environment. Llewelyn's success suggests there is room for a low-tech facilitative technology.

On a personal note, the success of Llewelyn has prompted me to continue using soft toys in the class room. I think for some classes a subject specific prop would have the benefit of helping to solidify the curriculum; for example, a Chaucer the Poet doll would help teach the complicated authorship and narratorship of the *Canterbury Tales*. However, I can see there is some benefit to having a single, non-subject-specific teaching prop to visit multiple classes. As explained, Llewelyn has built up a popular following online, and exists as a personality outside and between classrooms. Llewelyn will therefore not be retiring from duty for some time to come.

Acknowledgements

I first experienced some of the potential of the use of soft toys in a Welsh for Adults class in 2012, as taught by Sion ap Glyn, and he inspired my use of the soft toy as a teaching technology. I also gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Michael Willett and Jenny Needs in researching this topic. Llewelyn's use was praised and commented upon with surprise by six colleagues: Melanie Bigold (October 2014), Kay Westoby (March 2015), David Mason (November 2015), Nathan Munday (February 2016), Katherine Mansfield (March 2016) and Michael Willett (March 2016), I am thankful to all, especially the encouragement of Melanie and Michael. The RateYourLecturer team kindly facilitated a profile for Llewelyn the Lynx on their website, I am grateful for their assistance and understanding. Most importantly I am very grateful to my eleven seminar groups for indulging my unusual teaching practice and giving such useful feedback. If you are a student reading this, thanks for all the memories, and I hope I have been able to represent your views. Please feel free to email me with corrections if you feel misrepresented.

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Appendices

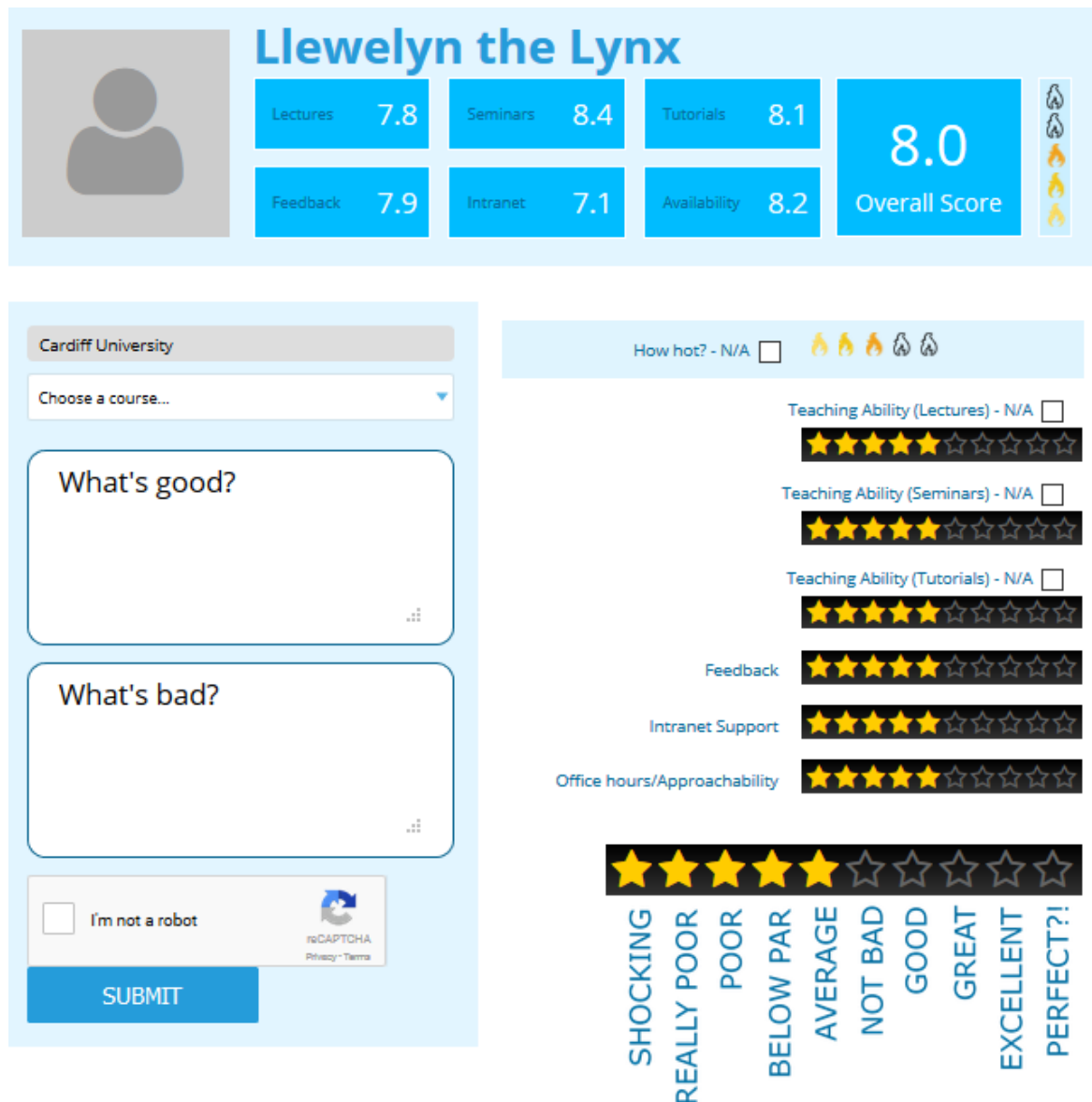



Fig. 8. The RateYourLecturer review system.

Put a cross on the following table to show to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements...

	Completely Agree	Agree	Unsure/Neutral	Disagree	Completely Disagree
 Llewelyn made seminars more exciting.					
Llewelyn taught me about cultural and wildlife history.					
Llewelyn made me more confident in seminars.					
People paid attention to whoever had Llewelyn.					
Holding Llewelyn helped me to think.					
Llewelyn slowed down seminars.					
Llewelyn made seminars childish.					
Llewelyn made seminars more stressful.					
Llewelyn was distracting.					
I didn't like touching Llewelyn.					
I liked having Llewelyn in the seminars.					
Llewelyn was useful in the seminars.					

Please visit Llewelyn's RateYourLecturer page to give detailed comments:
<http://rateyourlecturer.co.uk/cardiff/cardiff-university/llewelyn-the-lynx>

RATE YOUR LECTURER

Llewelyn the Lynx

Supporting	0.0	Seminars	10.0	Response	10.0
Feedback	10.0	Prepared	10.0	Availability	10.0

Overall Score

10.0

is this your lecturer? RATE YOUR LECTURER

Fig. 9. The in-class review questionnaire.

	Completely agree	Agree	Unsure/Neutral	Disagree	Completely Disagree
Llewelyn made seminars more exciting.	18	27	5	1	
Llewelyn taught me about cultural and wildlife history.	5	6	27	8	5
Llewelyn made me more confident in seminars.	9	24	14	3	1
People paid attention to whoever had Llewelyn.	28	23			
Holding Llewelyn helped me to think.	9	17	16	6	3
Llewelyn slowed down seminars.	2	5	6	26	12
Llewelyn made seminars childish.	2	4	15	20	10
Llewelyn made seminars more stressful.		2	3	27	19
Llewelyn was distracting.	1	2	6	25	17
I didn't like touching Llewelyn.		3	6	23	19
I liked having Llewelyn in the seminars.	17	27	4	3	
Llewelyn was useful in the seminars.	13	26	6	5	1
	Agree	Unsure/Neutral	Disagree		
Llewelyn made seminars more exciting.	88%	10%	2%		
Llewelyn taught me about cultural and wildlife history.	22%	53%	25%		
Llewelyn made me more confident in seminars.	65%	27%	8%		
People paid attention to whoever had Llewelyn.	100%	0%	0%		
Holding Llewelyn helped me to think.	51%	31%	18%		
Llewelyn slowed down seminars.	14%	12%	75%		
Llewelyn made seminars childish.	12%	29%	59%		
Llewelyn made seminars more stressful.	4%	6%	90%		
Llewelyn was distracting.	6%	12%	82%		
I didn't like touching Llewelyn.	6%	12%	82%		
I liked having Llewelyn in the seminars.	86%	8%	6%		
Llewelyn was useful in the seminars.	76%	12%	12%		

Fig.10. The collected results of the in-class questionnaire