

# Animating experience: Bringing student learning to life through animation and service user and carer experience

Gareth Morris<sup>1</sup>, Sylvia Prankard<sup>2</sup> and Liz Lefroy<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:** The imperative for participation in social work education has led to consideration of the ways in which service users' and carers' voices can best be heard by students. At Glyndŵr University, this debate has resulted in the development of a service user and carer-led module which will introduce students to a variety of creative approaches as a way of telling narratives of experience. In preparation for the module, a pilot project was run to assess the particular benefits of using animation for this purpose. This reflective case study describes the experiences of a social work student who worked with a carer to make a short animated film. It articulates the ways in which theoretical teaching was brought to life by working intensively. It demonstrates that creative approaches can offer a constructive means of addressing the need to cater for diverse learning styles. In addition, it adds weight to the argument that service users' and carers' experiential knowledge should be taken as seriously as other forms of knowledge.

**Keywords:** animation; service user and carer participation; social work

1. Student Social Worker, Glyndŵr University, Wrexham
2. Member of Outside In, Glyndŵr University, Wrexham
3. Senior Lecturer in Social Care, Glyndŵr University, Wrexham

**Address for correspondence:** Liz Lefroy, Senior Lecturer in Social Care, Glyndŵr University, Wrexham, l.lefroy@glyndwr.ac.uk

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## Introduction

The use of creative arts within education is part of a long-standing debate (Simmons and Hicks, 2006) in which it is argued that broader and more creative modes of expression have the ability to engage learners whose learning style does not fit neatly within the narrow confines of traditional 'linguistic, logical-mathematical intelligences' conventionally adopted in educational settings (Jeffrey, 2005, p.2). Other arguments highlight the importance of creative methods in developing key transferrable skills such as reflexivity, team work, communication, resilience and problem solving (Lucas and Greany, 2000), all of which are essential for effective practice.

As with other visual arts, animation has the ability to take abstract knowledge and portray it as an image or series of images. The word animation derives from the Latin *animare* meaning 'to breathe life into', and it is this process of working with inanimate images in a way which appears to bring them to life which has fascination and potential. Images and models which may seem too bland or crudely executed to bear close scrutiny in themselves take on a new sophistication when given the illusion of movement.

Animation workshops have been found to be a 'powerful tool' (Hani, 2006, p. 9) in working with a variety of people, including men and women from diverse ethnic backgrounds, people with learning disabilities, physical disabilities, behavioural problems, issues resulting from bereavement, mental illness, and other challenges. In addition,

previous research identified that animation workshops could stimulate positive responses ... encouraging physical and mental social interaction, and improving physical and mental skills overall. (Hani, 2006, p.9)

Animation has been found to have greater creative potential as a medium for autobiography than, for example, digital storytelling which is highly dependent on a formula of still photographs and first person narration.

In terms of audience, animation is an art form used to communicate with a diverse range of people. The stories told can be light and entertaining or serious and powerful, enabling the creator to challenge the beliefs and perceptions of the viewer whilst at the same time conveying a message. In essence, animation allows the film-maker to contextualise knowledge through a visual experience.

## The Project

Service user and carer participation is a strong feature of the BA (Hons) Social Work programme at Glyndŵr University, a development initially driven by the Care Council for Wales' strategy for the new social work degree. Quinney and Fowler (2012, p.1) note that 'service user involvement is a very important part of social work education given that ... undergraduate degree programmes in the United Kingdom cannot gain approval from a social care regulatory body to train social workers unless they demonstrate evidence of a commitment to it.' The publication *Standards for Including Service Users and Carers in the Degree in Social Work* (CCW, 2005) outlines parameters for involvement, including the requirement for there to be an explicit and jointly agreed basis which can be understood by all involved and referred to in case of difficulty or lack of clarity. At Glyndŵr University, this has taken the form of a 'Working Agreement' developed by the service user and carer focus group Outside In and agreed by university staff. It outlines what service users and carers can expect in terms of support, financial reimbursement, training, confidentiality and feedback. This applies to all aspects of participation: classroom teaching and workshops, interviewing prospective students and staff members, assessment of students' work, and management of the degree.

Building on the success of these varied forms of involvement, a service user and carer led module has been developed for the level 6 (year 3) curriculum. The content of the module focuses on the use of creative approaches to working with service users and carers to tell narratives of experience. The project aimed to evaluate the potential use of animation as one of these approaches. The project was a voluntary week long collaborative animation workshop with members of the University-based service user and carer group, Outside In, and level 4 (first year) BA Social Work students. It was held in a purpose-built centre for the creative industries. This was the second such workshop; it was requested by students, a pilot project having been carried out a year earlier with funding from the HEA Wales (Kelsey, 2012). The main aim of the workshop was to create animated autobiographical shorts directed by people who use health and social care services. The title for the films, chosen by Outside In members prior to workshop commencing, was *Letting in the Light*. Some members of the group recognised the tendency for the focus to fall on social work 'only when it fails' (Doel & Best, 2008, p. x) and wanted to work actively against this. The title, therefore, encapsulated the aim of

exploring the positive impact that effective health and social work practice could have on service user or carers' situations.

The project ran for ten two hour sessions over five days. It was supported by two members of university staff: a lecturer in social care and a lecturer in animation. In addition, a graduate of the University's Masters in Animation course provided technical support. All other participants, 11 students and 6 members of Outside In, were volunteers – travel expenses were offered to both students and Outside In members, and lunch provided each day. The cost of the project – the technician's fees, refreshments, art and other materials - was approximately £800. This was funded from the Care Council for Wales' annual grant supporting service user and carer participation in the BA (Hons) Social Work.

This case study focuses on the experiences of two of this paper's authors: first year social work student, Gareth Morris, and member of Outside In, Sylvia Prankard. Sylvia is carer for her husband who is also a member of Outside In. He was working on a separate film during the project. Care has been taken to focus on Gareth and Sylvia's experiences – other students and Outside In members will have experienced the project differently.

### **The student's view: Gareth Morris**

During our Induction Week for the BA (Hons) Social Work, we were shown the films made during the first animation project (*Completing the Circle*) and heard from the Outside In members and the students who had made them. The students talked about how much they had gained from the experience, so when the opportunity arose at the end of the first year for us to take part in a similar project, I volunteered straightaway.

On the Monday morning, I was quite nervous - I saw myself quickly becoming less knowledgeable than others involved in the workshop. In particular some Outside In members had been involved in the previous project and so had experience in using the equipment, developing storyboards and other skills new to me. I could feel a shift in the balance of power from being trained as a professional with the 'gaze' that objectifies the service user/carer as someone in need of expert help and services to suddenly becoming the unknowing student (Foucault, 1973). This was a very humbling experience and it reinforced, in a tangential way, the notion

that the service user/carers are the experts of their own lives (Smale & Tuson, 1995).

The lecturer split us into small groups comprising two students and one Outside In member. The group I was in consisted of Sylvia, another student, and me. We began by discussing and exchanging ideas around the theme of the film, *Letting in the Light*, and what each of us thought it meant. It was at this stage that I became a bit more comfortable, the group was small and we listened carefully to each other's ideas.

As Sylvia began to share her story and think about which aspects to include in the film, I was aware that it was her story, her life and she wanted to share it with me: someone she had never met before. It was an intense and profound experience. I started making connections between this experience and the knowledge I had been taught in the classroom during my first year. Unconsciously, I adopted a *narrative approach* which Lee (2001) describes as a being a process of enabling service users to tell the story of events in their lives. This is often seen as a therapeutic experience which is not only concerned with the facts of the story but also with gaining an understanding of the service user's self-identity.

Using the knowledge and teaching that I had received in the classroom in this situation brought it to life and almost instantly made it clearer. We had learnt, for example, about the 'Exchange Model' (Smale and Tuson, 1995). I had read about this and had referred to it on several occasions whilst completing essays, but this was the first time that I really *saw* and understood it. The 'Exchange Model' reflects social work's key value of anti-oppressive practice by placing service users in a position of control, and demands that social workers to respect their expertise through experience. By using this model to further explore Sylvia's experience I was able to gain more information and further enhance my understanding of the situations she had faced.

As Sylvia talked about her experiences as a carer, we began to work together to use the knowledge, understanding and emotional weight of these to create a narrative. As Doel and Best (2008, p.5) state: 'the story is the events and the narrative is the telling of the events'. There was much lively debate and I had to be careful to remain aware that Sylvia is the expert and to rely on her to guide the process, not to impose my own take on the events of her story for the sake of a good ending or in order to promote my own interests and agenda. However, I experienced this as an equal exchange – we discussed ideas and agreed on the structure of the narrative. Although as a social work student I was aware of the need

to ensure that professional boundaries were maintained, there was no 'us and them' feeling. We started to bond, develop a trusting relationship and engage in each other's thoughts and feelings. This relationship was built on an understanding of each other's roles within the group and I feel that the trust we developed ensured boundaries were kept on an understanding of our roles within the group - the trust we developed ensured boundaries were clear. These boundaries enabled us to work as a group with shared power, and we were able to rely on each other to complete the film successfully.

We started to make storyboards using the main themes which in this case were about the skills of listening and understanding being key to successful practice. It was decided that we would use superheroes as a theme which would highlight in a humorous way the role that key practitioners had played in Sylvia's story by listening to her. Once the storyboards had been devised, I started to draw examples of potential characters. I found that drawing enabled me to portray subtle messages through the use of colour and facial expressions which could carry more meaning than could have been achieved using words alone. Working together, we developed a cast of characters each with their own distinct differences that had some meaning to all of us. It is possible that these differences may be missed by an outside viewer. As a group we were quickly developing a culture represented for example by some visual in jokes which may not, in the end, be picked up by the audience, but which increased the enjoyment and creativity of the experience of filmmaking.

Once the characters were created, it was time to make the sets and film them in action. Whilst some groups used 3D models, we worked in 2D using hand-drawn, cut-out characters and a stop-motion technique using an animation program called I-Stopmotion. The process involves setting up scenes and then taking multiple stills of them to create two second frames, manipulating the cut outs in small increments between shots to create the illusion of movement. This process acted as a leveller. Sylvia already had experience of using the technical equipment (cameras, microphones, and the like), but this had been a year ago, and so none of us was initially confident. We had to learn together and work together to complete our goal.

I am sure each of the groups making a film will have learnt their own lessons, but for me it was like being given the instructions to a complicated jigsaw. Knowledge gained in lectures and books suddenly started to come together. I had understood the theories, concepts and technical elements

of the knowledge, but this one single intensive week spent working on a defined and creative project in conjunction with Sylvia made that knowledge tangible and real. The animation artwork had its own symbolic language and was able to 'bridge the gap between the inner and outer reality' (Jennings & Minde, 1993, p.54) enabling me to contextualise previous classroom learning.

### **Evaluation of the learning experience**

As a social work student I firmly believe that this form of unconventional learning enabled me to re-enact the values and knowledge learnt in the classroom through a tangible experience. I was able to take the many written words that I have had to learn and give them a meaning that enabled me to relate them to the social world in which I aim to practise. I enjoy the classroom environment but my particular learning style is that of an *accommodator*. This means I rely on concrete experience and active experimentation for most of my learning (Kolb, 1984; Evans et al, 2008), a preference which is not often fully catered for in conventional classroom learning or even on practice placements. The methods used during the animation workshop and the opportunity to learn from Sylvia's experiences did not replace the need for theory, but it did allow me to reinforce it in a way that was suited to my style of learning.

The workshop allowed me to enact key social work values such as respect, individualization and partnership (Biestek, 1979; Timms, 1983; Thompson, 2009), whilst at the same time offering me the opportunity to develop practice skills such as active listening, communication and questioning styles. I consider that experiences such as this can enhance education programmes for health and social care professionals. Whilst animation has particular strengths as a creative activity, in particular because its techniques are unfamiliar to many people, other artistic activities could offer similar opportunities to engage with service users and carers in an unconventional learning environment.

## **The carer's view: Sylvia Prankard**

We had decided to focus on a positive theme for the films. I'd made a film before with students during the previous project and wanted to make something with a different emphasis.

While I was talking about my experiences as a carer, both students asked lots of questions and made copious notes. Everything was done in a friendly and relaxed way – the students were professional in their work and obviously understood confidentiality issues. Lots of discussion took place over various ways we could get the message across; I felt central to the process the whole time, and all aspects of making the film – script writing, design, drawing, animation, voiceovers, editing, selecting music, and so on – were done together. Despite moments of frantic activity when we were trying to finish on time, the whole process went smoothly.

Animation is a good way of getting our experiences across to a variety of people as it is an accessible way of working together and the end result can be enjoyed by almost everyone. We added subtitles, for example, so that people with hearing impairments would be able to follow the script. The members of Outside In who took part included people with learning and physical disabilities, people who use mental health, sensory impairment and other services. We were all able to join in making the films, and all able to enjoy the films once they had been made. The discussions we had were more relaxed and full than ones we've had with students in shorter sessions in the classroom. Animation is a way of getting a point across without such emotional intensity – there's room for humour, for checking you're saying exactly what you want to say, for cutting out the bits that you'd rather not share after all.

I could see that, through working in this way, Gareth gained a better understanding of service users' and carers' everyday lives and struggles – the not so good, like waiting times, lack of information and poor communication, and the good, like being listened to and receiving the help needed. The film emphasised the different approaches professionals take – not just social workers, but occupational therapists, specialist nurses and the mechanic who fixes wheelchairs. I really appreciated Gareth's interest and effort to understand all these aspects of my life. I think he surprised himself with his ability to create and draw characters and find different ways to get the point across.

Making the film was quite a therapeutic experience. I came to a different understanding of my story and felt surprised at how much I'd achieved on



my own. In the end, it was a celebration of my role as a carer as much as a celebration of good practice. I hadn't expected that.

## Discussion

Traditionally, theories and knowledge taught on social work programmes have come from the perspective of academics and practitioners, which inevitably has cast carers and service users within a passive role (Wilson and Beresford, 2000). It is significant that accounts of how social work is experienced form a very small part of the social work literature (Doel & Best, 2008). Additionally, a consequence of discrimination can be to silence or filter the service user and carer voice. Even when it is heard, Beresford and Croft (2004, p.3) note 'the tendency for professionals to appropriate service users' knowledge and reframe it as their own'. The expectation about what constitutes 'knowledge' in an academic or professional setting can be complex, with hierarchical notions predominating (Cottrell & Morris, 2012). Brady et al (2012), using the example of the exclusion of the views of young mothers from debates about teenage pregnancy, note the difficulty faced by challengers of the dominant discourse.

Since the introduction of the new social work degree, however, and the requirement stipulated in Wales by the Care Council for Wales for service user and carer participation, there has been a shift towards greater acknowledgement of the importance of experiential knowledge. Most often, this knowledge is taught in classrooms in similar, if sometimes less formal, ways to those used by lecturers. Members of Outside In, for example, regularly give talks to social work students using PowerPoint presentations, or participate in role play and group discussions and question and answer sessions. The knowledge Sylvia imparted to Gareth during the project was similar to the type of experiential knowledge an Outside In member may present in a talk – it was 'knowledge that has originated from direct experience' (Cotterell & Morris, 2012, p. 57). However, what was different was the amount of time spent discussing and clarifying what that knowledge was, checking for understanding, and asking further questions to ensure that the full story had been told. It was this process, conducted through the creative space of animation, which ensured the experiential knowledge interacted intimately with Gareth's theoretical knowledge (knowledge provided by others). The creative space

was neutral in the sense that neither Sylvia nor Gareth was an expert in animation, and it provided a purposeful aim for the storytelling: the need to produce a film. This process suited Gareth's preference for concrete learning opportunities and was the catalyst he needed to enable him to develop a clear understanding of how theory and practice relate. It is likely that this understanding will help him to become a more effective and reflective practitioner (Fook and Gardner, 2013).

It is worth noting that the project was a much more intense and sustained experience of relating between service users, carers and students than that experienced in the classroom and even on most practice placements. According to a research report by Holmes et al (2009), social workers typically spend 10-20% of their time with service users, whereas the social work students taking part in this project spent almost 100% of the time with service users and carers. The relevance of the usual labels - lecturer, student, service user/carer (Tew et al, 2012) - caused some uncertainty at times, with students in particular feeling unsettled about the redefinition of roles. Gareth has articulated how this experience was of great benefit to him, but other students had to confront the unease they felt in an uncertain situation in which they did not feel in control. The intensity was not only an opportunity but a challenge. There was little time between sessions for reflection and the pressure to complete the project on time was felt both as an incentive and as a stressor.

However, as Dirkx (2001, p.63) suggests, this intensity, and the emotions that arise from it, are 'integral to the process of adult learning'. Learning is as often an uncomfortable and stretching experience as a consolidation of knowledge and experience. Cottrell & Morris (2012) comment that those traditionally in a privileged position with regards to knowledge (for example health and social care professionals) will have to 'shift significantly to accept (new) knowledge in different forms' (p.58). It would seem, however, that introducing this 'new knowledge' to students at the outset of their professional education and training may make that shift if not easy, then less onerous. The service user and carer-led module will, it is hoped, extend and consolidate the experience of the animation workshops by introducing students to a variety of creative approaches and opportunities to work alongside a diversity of service users and carers.

Jeffrey and Craft (2001) state that it is hard to convince policy makers and funders that creative teaching approaches such as this are worthwhile. However, the costs of this project were relatively small and the benefits included not only the process of learning described, but the production

of a suite of seven short films which can themselves be used as aids to learning. Combining participation with creative approaches can be seen to have the potential both to ensure that service user and carers are encouraged to speak, and to increase the potential for what is said to be heard without being filtered through, or constrained by, notions of what constitutes knowledge.

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