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He's ready for his closeup

Peter the Anteater's guide to the library

The scene opens with a laptop kiosk. In the foreground, a furry head comes into focus with the text: "With an essay to write, a laptop would come in handy!"

Meet Peter, the anteater puppet who discovers a laptop kiosk in the library and learns to check one out and return it. In the past year, the libraries at the University of California-Irvine have created several videos with Peter to raise awareness of library services and resources.



Doggo the Husky, the predecessor to Peter the Anteater puppet.

Origin story: The dawn of Doggo

We cannot begin to discuss the creation, use, and impact of Peter the Anteater without tracing back to its predecessor, Doggo the Husky at the University of Washington's (UW) Odegaard Library. The brainchild of one of the authors while she was still a graduate student in UW's MLIS program, Doggo is a testament to low-budget, high-impact outreach. Made of a men's crew sock, with extra gray-colored cushioning at

the toes and soles, a pair of googly eyes, black puffballs, faux fur, and pink felt, Doggo is a simultaneously humble, quirky, and charming guide to various library services.

Doggo was largely a one-woman production, with the storyboarding, filming, and puppeteering done by a few MLIS graduate students using only a phone and iMovie. Because Doggo himself looked so informal, the videos could also take on a campy, amateur feel rather than

worrying about high production standards. Still, the videos adhered to best practices by staying under a minute in length. Doggo

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did not speak— rather, the video was interspersed with narrative text stills, similar to techniques used in silent films.¹ This made the videos more accessible to hearing-impaired viewers, while also saving a step of having to record a voice for Doggo.

It is important to note that the inspiration for Doggo came out of student responses to instruction assessment forms that asked them to quickly comment on what they liked learning about while also identifying what they wished to learn. A trend that emerged was that students still did not know how to navigate the library's most basic services, like finding a book and checking it out, scheduling consultations with librarians, and making appointments with the Writing Center. Since the one-shot classes where students were completing the assessment forms already bordered on information overload, alternative methods of communication were needed.

This is where libraries frequently turn to making online videos or other tutorials. Many articles document best practices for creating library tutorials that primarily use screen capture or animation and narration components.² These tutorial videos are largely instructional in nature, guiding users through a process such as using a database or a service, or describing a concept such as the information cycle or the peer review process. However, these tutorial videos suffer from a fundamental barrier: regardless of how short, clear, accessible,

or professional they may be, they are not effective if students do not watch them, and students will not watch them unless they feel appropriately engaged.

P is for puppet: Mascots in library videos

Doggo was unique in that he was entirely unexpected of a library video, was instantly memorable, and added humor and approachability to discussing library services. Studies on consumer behavior suggest that using brand mascots with anthropomorphic elements can increase engagement,

memorability, likeability, and loyalty.³ Anthropomorphism is also common in children's literature and media:⁴ picture books frequently feature heroes that are animals or vehicles with human characteristics, and children frequently



Peter the Anteater investigates high tech tools at the Multimedia Resource Center.

learn from nonhuman teachers, such as The Muppets on *Sesame Street* or Smokey Bear.

Despite the advantages that anthropomorphic mascots may offer, academic libraries have not widely used them for instructional or outreach purposes. One example we found was from Portsmouth Library in the United Kingdom, where students can follow the adventures of Pablo, a stuffed penguin mascot who explores library spaces and resources on Twitter.⁵ The authors of the case study at Portsmouth describe Pablo as successful, evidenced by the fact that “in its first year, the @uopenguin Twitter feed has attracted more than 540 followers, and one student suggested

on Twitter that the light relief of the feed helped them to complete their degree.”⁶

Doggo was similarly popular at UW. Videos featuring him were among the most-watched and well-liked videos on Odegaard Library’s Instagram account. Videos with Doggo featured common library services such as the Writing Center, the Research Help Desk, the checkout desk, as well as consultations with the undergraduate experience librarian and a writing tutor. However, the uncommon use of an endearing sock-puppet mascot as a guide to these services led to high student engagement. Doggo’s videos rivalled the filming of a dance party in the library for student views.

A star is born: Peter, the library anteater

We had an excellent opportunity to build on the success of Doggo at the University of California-Irvine (UCI), as the library did not

yet have an established video tutorial or outreach program. Because UCI already has a unique and identifiable anteater mascot, and because multiple versions of the UCI anteater already existed, we thought it would be easy to build a set of library videos using an anteater puppet. We purchased an inexpensive puppet, and then created or purchased some small accessories and props to increase the anthropomorphic feel of our mascot. Thus, Peter the library’s anteater was born.⁷

We decided to hire students to be involved with the video project early in the process for several reasons. First, UCI had a Film and Media Studies major, and so it was likely that we would be able to find

students who had good filming and editing skills. Not only was it very cost-effective to hire students for video production, but also having the student perspective on video content was extremely valuable, since students are the primary audience for our library videos. The personal insights and academic experiences of our video production students informed their work with the library videos, which fostered a sense of relatability in the videos and also helped give life and personality to Peter. Finally, we believed that involving students in the creative process was empowering, as it gave them a distinct voice in a larger library



Peter the Anteater visits the Center for Excellence in Writing and Communication.

initiative. In the end, one student was hired to work on the videos with Peter, working for approximately four-to-six hours per week.

We tried to keep the production of the videos as low-tech

and low-cost as possible. We used software that the library already had licenses to—in our case, it was older versions of Camtasia and Adobe Premiere—and made use of cameras and tripods that the library regularly loaned to students. While library staff provided ideas and direction for video topics and priorities, the production of the video was largely handled by our one student. For each of the 20-to-90 second videos, she handled the general scripting, storyboarding, filming, and editing. Library staff members helped by puppeteering Peter or by serving in cameo roles as themselves at service points.

Like Doggo, Peter does not talk. All of the videos use subtitles rather than voice

narration. Each video is branded with a simple UCI Libraries end slide.

Over the course of a few quarters, we were able to produce a number of videos featuring processes such as checking out books and laptops, printing, refilling print cards, and reserving group study rooms. We also produced videos on library services, such as research consultations, writing center services, special collections, or our multimedia resources center. Another category of videos centered around exploring library spaces or resources, including our collaboration zone, board games, stress relief zones, and exercise bike desks. Finally, we produced videos that showcased Peter attending library events.

All of our videos were initially uploaded to Vimeo. We chose Vimeo as a platform for our Peter videos, as well as for our screen-capture instructional videos, because Vimeo allows for versioning, whereas YouTube does not. This was particularly important when little processes, like print services, changed. We could upload a new, refreshed version of the video without altering the URL. We also preferred the ad-free space that Vimeo provides, and the overall quality of the videos. However, because the library does have a YouTube channel, it is possible that some of the Peter videos will also be uploaded to that platform.

To be continued . . .

Our next major step is to distribute our videos widely. Due to some staff turnover in our library's communication unit, we were unfortunately unable to launch any substantial marketing campaign of library services using the Peter videos in our first year. Still, the Peter videos have received a surprising number of plays with limited marketing to date. Just by providing links to these videos on a library webpage for "Online Tutorials," the videos on how to print and how to reserve a group study room have seen nearly 200 plays each within one quarter. When we embedded a link to the video about an

upcoming pet therapy event in a "Personal Librarian" message to first-year students, more than 260 students watched the video in two days. We have also used the videos successfully in face-to-face instructional settings. For example, we received positive feedback from students when we played the video of how to use special collections during an instruction session to humanities students.

In our upcoming year, our main focus will be on distribution and assessment of the impact of these videos. The responses and play rate of our initial limited marketing suggest that Peter is a popular and likeable library guide. We plan to work closely with our social media team to launch a library services awareness campaign via social media featuring Peter as video or possibly in photo format. We also plan to loop several of the videos and play them in the background for passive library services awareness during Welcome Week and orientation programming at the beginning of fall quarter next year.

One other challenge we will need to address is sustainability. We were fortunate to have hired a very talented student to initiate this video project. However, we will need to consider how often our videos will need to be refreshed or updated in the future. This is not a challenge unique to using a mascot, however any outreach or instruction video has a time horizon where a resource will need to be updated or retired.

End credits

Peter the Anteater videos are a lighthearted, high-impact, low-cost way of providing outreach to students, while spreading the word about different library services. As evidenced with Peter, the production of the videos was not difficult, especially with the vital input on humor and tone from our student worker. The videos and Peter allow libraries to have their own unique, campy yet charming mascot that students can identify with. Despite this campiness or even

the lack of professional sheen, Peter's videos have been well received by students. In the end, the benefits and exposure that a mascot outreach video has outweighs the minimal risks and the costs of creating such videos.

Notes

1. See https://www.instagram.com/p/BT9WFVgFSSg/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

2. M. Bowles-Terry, M. Hensley, and L. Hinchliffe, "Best Practices For Online Video Tutorials In Academic Libraries: A Study of Student Preferences and Understanding," *Communications in Information Literacy* 4(1), 17–28, <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2010.4.1.86>; T. Weeks and J. Putnam Davis, "Evaluating Best Practices for Video Tutorials: A Case Study," *Journal of Library & Information Services In Distance Learning*, 11(1–2), 183–2), p.183–195; J. Cayla, "Brand mascots as organisational

totems," *Journal of Marketing Management* 29(1–2), 86–104, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2012.759991>.

3. J. Chandler and N. Schwarz, "Use does not wear ragged the fabric of friendship: Thinking of objects as alive makes people less willing to replace them," *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 20(2), 138–145, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2009.12.008>.

4. J. Blanchard, "Anthropomorphism in Beginning Readers," *The Reading Teacher*, 35(5), 586–591, retrieved from jstor.org/stable/20198047.

5. D. Bennett and P. Thompson, "Use of Anthropomorphic Brand Mascots for Student Motivation and Engagement: A Promotional Case Study With Pablo the Penguin at the University of Portsmouth Library," *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, 22(2–3), 225–237, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13614533.2016.1162179>.

6. *Ibid.*, 234.

7. See <https://vimeo.com/272682279>. 

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