"Don't Students Learn *Anything* About Research on the LPC?" Developing a Multimedia Research Tutorial at The College of Law.

Paper presented by Tony Simmonds at the 37th BIALL Annual Study Conference in Brighton, June 2006, describing the design process for, and key features of, the i-Tutorial software introduced at the College.

Introduction

My title arises from comments by law firm colleagues overheard at past BIALL Conferences, asking why so many of their new trainees arrive poorly equipped for practical legal research. I hope to demonstrate how the College of Law is breaking new ground with learning technology to better meet this challenge.

The College of Law

The College of Law is the largest provider of vocational legal education and training in Europe. Its client-base of around 6,000 spans pre- and post-qualification students across six Centres nationwide. The largest cohort studies for the Legal Practice Course (LPC). This intensive programme prepares students for careers as solicitors in England and Wales. In addition to the one-year full-time route, a variety of part-time modes of study are available. Early in 2006, the College was successful in its bid to secure degree-awarding powers.

E-Learning at the College of Law

Among its strategic objectives, the College commits itself "to provide leadership in the teaching and learning of academic and vocational legal education in an

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environment which encourages innovation and student participation" and there is a strong tradition of investment in e-learning.

As early as 2000, the College ran pilot projects to deliver learning support materials on CD-Rom for selected LPC elective courses. In the 2003/04 academic year, it launched a virtual learning environment based on Blackboard software. As well as disseminating course materials, this supports a variety of interactive learning tools such as test and feedback exercises and group email assignments.

Finally, in 2004/05, the College produced two interactive tutorials or "i-Tutorials" in the area of insolvency law. These were enthusiastically received by students and by the professional bodies who monitor the standards of the College's programmes. A decision followed that traditional lectures across the LPC should gradually transform into i-Tutorials.

Accordingly a further 24 i-Tutorials were designed during Spring 2005, including one covering the skill of Practical Legal Research (PLR). Students on all modes of the LPC viewed these during Autumn 2005.

The Learning and Teaching Model

I-Tutorials anchor the College's Learning and Teaching Model, a blended learning approach which shapes each stage of the LPC. Over about an hour, each i-Tutorial
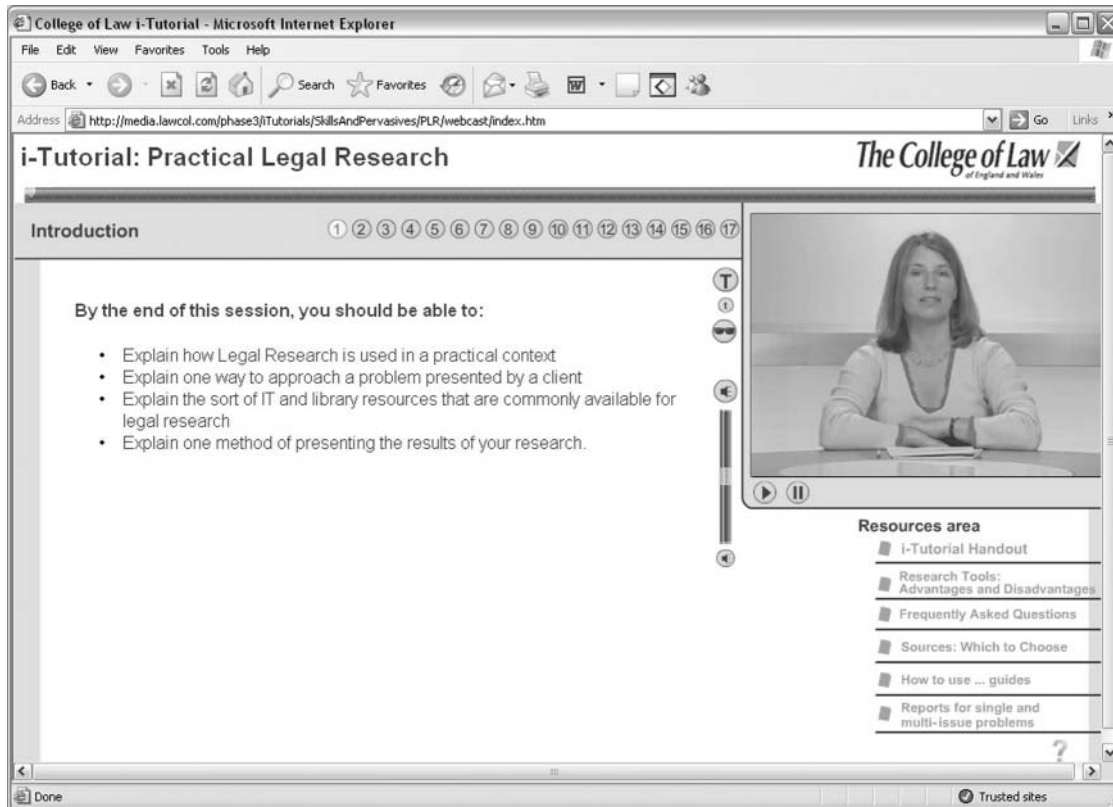
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Figure 1. I-Tutorial Introduction

introduces a discrete subject-area. It gives context and examples of how the law operates in practice. Typically this involves working through realistic scenarios, transactions and documents.

Each i-Tutorial is associated with and forms part of the preparation for a Workshop (along with textbook reading; group email assignments; online test and feedback exercises and other work on specific tasks). Workshops are intimate (around 15 students facilitated by a tutor) and last 2.5 hours. This permits sustained, real-time handling of practical tasks and transactions. There are regular opportunities for everyone to present findings to an audience. Finally, students carry out consolidation tasks in their own time after each Workshop.

Why i-Tutorials?

The lecture is an entrenched model across higher education for transferring knowledge but from the perspective of the student it has drawbacks. It is a one-off, learners are tied to a fixed time and place; delivery can be uneven; communication is generally one-way, and learning is usually passive.

By contrast, the College's i-Tutorial software opens fresh possibilities to involve students in learning that is active and flexible. The individual is free to study at his own pace, at a time and in a location of his choice. Such flexibility accords with the aspirations of the Law Society's Training Framework Review, and is a particular

boon to part-time students. In addition the medium is rich, mixing different kinds of materials and modes of learning. A range of online activities engages the student and permits him to monitor his growing understanding. There is consistency of delivery across locations. Content can be re-used over and again for consolidation and revision.

Furthermore, employers are increasingly recognising the merits of e-learning in the workplace. The College is alert to such trends as it constantly strives to smooth the transition of students into working life. I-Tutorials will prepare them for the environment of their continuing professional development in legal practice.

Contribution of Library and Information Services (LIS)

A senior LIS manager designed the PLR i-Tutorial. This invitation to work on core curriculum design was a breakthrough. It capped several years of raising a profile within the organisation by building activity in support of legal research teaching. This involved writing in-house guides and contributing to published manuals; liaising with course designers to review course materials; and developing a portfolio of voluntary research classes for students.

Besides our familiarity with the sources and our contacts with publishers, knowing where students struggle was, perhaps, the strongest argument for the

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involvement of LIS. We support students every day in conducting research tasks, and inevitably there is a pattern to enquiries. (Moreover, we derive similar insight concerning trainees from our contacts in firm libraries). So the College's PLR i-Tutorial focuses on some of the stubborn gaps in students' understanding:-

• *Halsbury's Laws* doesn't reproduce Acts.

• There's a hierarchy of law reports, with the *Law Reports* at the top.

• If an old Act makes no provision for its commencement, cite the date of Royal Assent.

• How to choose paper versus electronic sources.

• The perils of relying on Google.

• Above all, avail yourself of the invaluable and always obliging asset that is the law librarian!

Key issues in the design process

I-Tutorials are a compulsory element of the College's LPC programme. Therefore, the chance to design the PLR i-Tutorial allowed LIS to embed their teaching into the curriculum, reaching every student. However, the flip side is a limit to control over content. LIS had to work to an imposed set of parameters, aims and objectives that mirrored those of the erstwhile lecture. For example, it was necessary to illustrate how to write a research report according to the template that the College commends to students for their PLR assessments.

One fixed constraint was that content should be independent of institution. This preserved the option of licensing for use by other organisations, but inevitably it prevented coverage of areas that might benefit College students, such as local library facilities or database password procedures.

Another parameter was length: a maximum of one hour. Consequently hard choices had to be made to squeeze content in. For instance, the i-Tutorial does not set out to illustrate step-by-step how to navigate particular databases, and there is only light coverage of the European dimension.

In addition, designers were asked to future-proof content for a lifespan of three years. This is hazardous in relation to legal research, where online resources in particular often change appearance. For example, the HMSO web presence transmuted into the Office of Public Service Information (OPSI) website in the middle of the production period. It was possible to swap screen shots, but not to alter the mention of "the website of Her Majesty's Stationery Office" in the already-recorded script. Fortunately the OPSI website preserved the HMSO logo, so we retained some credibility!

PLR stands for *Practical* Legal Research. Therefore much of the learning agenda of the i-Tutorial is delivered in the context of short practice-based scenarios. This has the benefit of realism for students, but setting the scene

takes valuable time. For an information professional who is not legally qualified, this approach also requires the assistance of lawyers to ensure that scenarios are topical and factually correct.

The inclusion of database screen shots and digital photographs of book pages and covers raised the issue of copyright. All permissions were granted quite straight-forwardly, although certain publishers did ask for detail of the context in which their products would appear.

As is often the case with multimedia projects, thinking and writing time was ample (more than two months) but the production schedule was very tight (around five days for all filming, editing and pulling together on-screen activities, images and text). No matter how strong the planning discipline, this is bound to call for some flexibility in working hours!

Features of the software

The Glasgow Graduate School of Law at the University of Strathclyde conceived the initial design of the i-Tutorial model. This has been developed considerably in-house (see Figure 1 for a screen shot). It comprises three elements:-

• A sequence of video clips to provide narrative coherence and some of the interpersonal feel of a lecture.

• A range of supporting material, featuring during and between clips: text; flowcharts; digital images; screen shots; activities.

• A separate collection of embedded materials to support and extend learning; this includes a template for note-taking, guides to key research resources, FAQs about legal research and sample research reports.

Content

The tutorial begins by welcoming students and outlining expected learning outcomes. There follows a short segment delivered by the Training Partner at a large City law firm about the importance of good research skills, especially in the early years of practice. (This is aimed at those students who labour under a stubborn illusion that somebody else will carry out "routine" tasks such as research on their behalf once they start employment!).

Students next encounter a model for problem-solving to be used as a template for approaching real research tasks in legal practice. Three scenarios are then introduced. These encompass issues of copyright, easements and pre-nuptial agreements. In each instance, students are asked to formulate suitable search terms to launch their research.

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The variety of research resources in different sorts and sizes of legal practices are then discussed. The need for confidence in handling both paper and electronic sources is emphasised, as is the authority of primary sources.

Halsbury's Laws is the first source to be explored in detail in relation to the law on pre-nuptial agreements. Electronic and printed versions both feature, including digital photographs of relevant pages from the index, main volume, Cumulative Supplement and Noter-up. The ability to bring particular entries on particular pages of a printed encyclopedia to every student's attention is a great strength of the multimedia approach to teaching legal research.

Subsequent sections cover sources for researching legislation and case law, again in the context of resolving the problems raised by the three office scenarios. The drawbacks of using Google for legislative searches are highlighted. *Current Law* is described in some detail, both in its printed form and via the content of *Westlaw* (it is surely easier to understand the latter if one first grasps the various functions of entries in the former). Mindfulness of the impact of European law is encouraged, and the case law of the European Court of Justice is differentiated from that of the European Court of Human Rights. Finally, students are guided through the elements of a sound research report.

Student feedback

The College has gone to great lengths to survey students about their general reaction to the programme of i-Tutorials. The response has been very positive. Students feel that the tutorials achieve their intended learning outcomes effectively. They highly appreciate the flexibility of being able to study where and when they choose. They report that the multimedia approach is modern and innovative.

Some students queried whether the introduction of i-Tutorials was a cost saving measure. The answer is emphatically no! The process of design, production and distribution is a substantial and ongoing investment for the College. Furthermore, staff time that would have gone into delivering the corresponding lectures has been redeployed into extended Workshop teaching.

Students reported that they would prefer to see multimedia as one element of a blended mix of learning that also includes face-to-face interaction with teaching staff. That is the College's intention, and in future years students will receive clearer guidance on how the components of the Learning Model integrate with one another.

Some students regretted the loss of personal contact in the traditional lecture. In reality, however, lectures tend to involve one-way communication, and so interaction tends to be patchy and infrequent. Furthermore, this aspect must be weighed against the benefit of consistent delivery of material to every student; not every lecturer is inspirational in every performance.

Finally, a minority of students requested that more attention be paid to how i-Tutorials are introduced during induction, with more information about their role, benefits and capabilities. The College will address this issue in staff training during Summer 2006.

The future

The College is very pleased with how i-Tutorials have bedded down into the culture of teaching on the LPC. The range will expand dramatically during 2006/07, so that virtually every LPC Workshop will be preceded by an i-Tutorial. In addition, a small number are in production for the introductory Legal Method course on the Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL), the conversion course for students with a degree in a non-legal subject.

Technical research and development is ongoing to enhance the software that supports i-Tutorials. For example, various changes to the interface and user controls will be introduced in 2006/07, including more sophisticated rewind and fast forward capability. To benefit those students who prefer to view i-Tutorials using their personal PC at home, a software tool that automatically checks the suitability of a machine's specifications is in development.

Finally, information professionals at the College will go on seeking new arenas to deploy their expertise, so that future trainees leave us with the right skills and knowledge to research with confidence (with a little help of course from their librarians!)

Biography

Following a Graduate Traineeship at York University and an MA at Loughborough, Tony began his career at the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies. This ensured a thorough grounding in the theory and practice of law librarianship. He joined the College of Law in 1998, where he is currently a Deputy Director within the Knowledge Services department. He is responsible for library policy and standards and professional development across six College Centres. In addition, he has a special interest in training and supporting students in the tools and techniques of legal research. Outside work, he enjoys theatre and walking in the Scottish hills.