

Making Content Available to Law Students Through a Virtual Learning Environment: Fountains of Knowledge or a Drop in the Ocean?

Abstract: Virtual learning environments (VLEs) are successfully used by many institutions to provide content which supports and enhances taught courses. In this article, Lizz Edwards-Waller explores the role of the library in uploading articles, case notes and book excerpts to a VLE for law students, and discusses the need for librarians to collaborate with course leaders and administrators. The article also considers the decision-making process involved in determining which resources to make available and highlights some key copyright issues to be aware of.

Keywords: virtual learning environments; VLE; e-resources; academic law libraries

INTRODUCTION

Virtual learning environments (VLEs), also known as Course Management Systems (CMSs) or Learning Management Systems (LMSs), have been adopted by most higher education institutions over the past twenty years. Used to deliver e-learning courses or to support and enhance traditional classroom teaching, they are a familiar element of many undergraduate and taught graduate courses. There are several types of VLE with ‘off-the-shelf’ or open access models such as Blackboard and Moodle, that can be customised by each institution, amongst the most popular.

Within an institution, most VLEs are organised around taught courses: providing resources, activities and communications for students appropriate to a specific course of instruction¹. VLEs can provide a wide range of tools for course leaders to utilise: discussion boards, video uploads, coursework submission portals, announcements and polls, to name but a few. However, this article will focus on the delivery of articles, case notes and book excerpts for students within a law course VLE. I will consider the role of the library in making content available and the decision making process involved: who decides what to upload?, how much can be made available?, what are the alternatives?

I’ll consider some of the challenges which, although not limited to law, are likely to have an impact on the content provided for law students in particular: for example, linking to content from Westlaw and LexisNexis and ensuring that material is taken from the most up-to-date edition of print works. I am familiar with the

Moodle VLE model but most of the issues discussed within this article can be applied to other VLEs. The copyright licences discussed are specific to higher education institutions within the UK and are likely to vary between institution types and between countries.

A ROLE FOR LIBRARIANS?

The management and use of a course-centred VLE brings together numerous stakeholders within an institution, including – but not limited to:

- **Students** using the VLE as content consumers and in some instances (e.g. where discussion boards or collaborative forums are enabled) as content creators;
- **Course leaders and teaching staff** using the VLE to deliver aspects of the course or provide content which supports the learning outcomes (e.g. lecture notes, PowerPoint slides, reading lists and reading material);
- **ICT staff** who may be involved in the initial licensing and set-up of the VLE, including the organisation of course sub-sites as well as ongoing support (e.g. providing access tokens for users)
- **Academic administrators** who may provide ongoing support for the VLE and deliver course-related content to students via the VLE (e.g. exam timetables, course handbooks).

As early as 2001, George Machovec asked, when considering course management software, ‘where is the

library?². His question has been echoed several times over the past fifteen years³, testament to the fact that many VLEs are managed by course leaders directly or via ICT departments, circumnavigating library staff. Furthermore, the design of software for early VLE models did not always enable the full range of library resources, such as databases, resource aggregators, and e-books, to be integrated or even included within the VLE.

So where does this leave library staff today when it comes to making content available? We can start by considering why librarians can, and should, be involved.

- **Access to collections**

Daly notes “It is no secret that undergraduates expect to access nearly all library resources outside the library walls”⁴. One of the great benefits of web-based VLEs is to provide content to students which is accessible at any time, from anywhere. Where e-journals, e-books and e-looseleaves exist, these can normally be linked via a VLE to provide a seamless experience. Where electronic versions of material do not exist, content can, within copyright licence limitations, be uploaded. As MacColl observes: “there is a burgeoning area of overlap between the ‘learning resources’ which academics wish to install in their VLEs and the digitised learning resources which libraries are making available”⁵. To avoid the duplication of effort and to promote a shared understanding of which resources are needed, it makes sense for the library to be not only represented but actively involved in making content available.

- **Access to the tools to make materials available (e.g. scanners, PDF editing software)**

Whilst VLEs provide an effective sphere in which to organise and present content, they do not generate content themselves. The tasks of scanning material, editing and checking files, uploading and describing material must fall to someone. Different institutions will have different expectations about who performs these functions. However, this is a service many libraries are equipped to offer for academic teaching staff and may facilitate easier reporting for licensing purposes.

- **Awareness of copyright**

Where material is scanned and uploaded to a VLE within the UK it is often done so under a licence from the Copyright Licensing Agency (CLA)⁶. Library staff are no strangers to copyright, having often been involved in providing physical copies of library materials. Each institution will have a CLA Licence Co-ordinator who is often based in, or working in collaboration with, the library and who is responsible for collating and reporting details of what has been made available via the VLE to comply with the terms of the licence.

- **Awareness of the other options available, if and when material can't be uploaded**

Not everything can, or should, be included on a VLE. In instances where material cannot be uploaded under the terms of the CLA licence, or where the time or cost involved is too prohibitive, librarians are well placed to suggest alternatives. This can include, but is not limited to, purchasing additional copies of printed texts, purchasing or subscribing to an electronic copy, moving texts to short loan or reserve collections and suggesting alternative titles.

- **Professional training as information organisers**

Librarians are experienced in organising information to reflect the priorities of the end consumer and improving the discoverability of resources (e.g. within an OPAC or LibGuide). Many librarians have also become actively involved in user experience design and testing⁷ and the VLE represents another forum in which these skills and experiences can be deployed.

One of the most enduring benefits to librarians of getting involved in uploading content is to form partnerships with course leaders⁸. This normally equates to obtaining administration rights for the VLE which in turn gives access to other content uploaded by course leaders (e.g. reading lists) and announcements to students. Most importantly, it gives librarians access to, and an opportunity to shape, the virtual spaces where students and course leaders work. Parallel access to the physical lecture room or seminar class is rarely available, so make the most of it!

WHAT TO UPLOAD?

Uploading material to the VLE, for the purposes of sharing with a specific cohort of students, is covered within most UK institutions by a CLA licence or undertaken with the specific permission of the rights holder. This is not an opportunity to reproduce half the library within the VLE; rather, it is a careful decision-making exercise to ensure that we can fulfil the requirements of both course leaders and students, alongside our obligations as licence holders, and within time and budget constraints.

The initial decision to make content available will normally come from course leaders and teaching staff. They know at the outset of the course which resources are likely to be in high demand and where students may struggle to access materials. Whether the content is made available by the course leader, by library staff or in partnership, it's useful to consider a series of questions before submitting material to the VLE. This ensures the terms of the CLA licence are complied with and a consistent process becomes routine.

Is this material useful to students enrolled on a specific taught course?

The CLA licence covers the sharing of content with registered students and members of staff at an institution. Being password-protected and course-specific, the VLE provides an ideal vehicle for supplying this content to a cohort of students. However, it is not appropriate for supplying material to an individual (e.g. research students working on extended projects) that will not be of use to the wider group.

Can this type of material be uploaded within the CLA licence terms?

Some categories of material are not covered by the CLA licence. These include maps and music scores – unlikely to trouble most law librarians! However, whilst the UK and a further 38 territories are included under the licence framework, materials from select countries (that do not allow scanning from their works) are excluded, as are unpublished proof copies. Newspapers are also excluded, other than for holders of a NLA media licence.

Is the material already available to students electronically?

In some instances, the CLA licence does not include copying from digital publications owned or subscribed to by an institution. In these situations, material available elsewhere online should be linked to from the VLE. For some resources this can be a link to the library OPAC or direct to the case or article. Attention should be given as to whether access restrictions are likely to impact a student's experience of linking from the VLE (for example, an electronic resource which can only be accessed within the institution's IP range may not be appropriate for the VLE which students are likely to access remotely).

Is the material owned by the institution?

Only print material owned by the licence-holding institution can be scanned and uploaded. Personal copies, or those loaned from other institutions, are not acceptable. For teaching staff who are likely to have an office full of books or software full of citations from a variety of sources this can prove to be a challenge!

How much do you want to upload?

Within the CLA licence one article or one chapter from a work or 10% of the total (whichever is greater) can be uploaded. The use of the VLE has to be carefully considered where students are likely to need extended use of a textbook, as it does not provide an effective substitute for an e-book or multiple print copies. Furthermore, the terms of the licence state that reproduction under the

licence is not intended to be a substitute for the purchase of original material⁹.

Has material from a previous edition, or another section, of the work already been made available?

Content from any edition of a published work, owned by the institution, can be made available via the VLE. This can be particularly useful in ensuring students have access to a previous edition of a work which would not be available through e-book providers or kept on the library open shelves. However, a licence does not permit more than one chapter or article (or up to 10% of the total content) to be uploaded across different editions of the same publication. Most notably, it is not possible to swap material midway through an academic year. Therefore, there is a substantial benefit to pre-planning what content will be made available at the outset of the course. In many VLE models content can be uploaded and 'hidden' to be released to students at the point of need.

The management of a VLE is subject to the demands of multiple stakeholders and there is often a friction between the short-term needs of students (e.g. needing a chapter uploaded today, for next week's assignment) and the longer term priorities of course leaders (e.g. who may be aware of more relevant content from the same publication, to be made available next term). There is a strong argument for librarians and course leaders to work together to best address these diverse needs. As a minimum, it's important not to scupper each other's use of the VLE by uploading content which infringes the licence, or prevents more useful material being made available at a later date.

The series of questions listed above, although not exhaustive, are likely to 'weed out' many of the resources which are not suitable for upload to the VLE, and suggest alternative sources where needed. To work effectively, the model assumes good communication between stakeholders and supports the argument that more information should be given to course leaders and teaching staff to enable them to identify library resources which can be included on a VLE¹⁰.

AN EXAMPLE READING LIST: WEEDING, CONSULTING, UPLOADING

Within institutions, requests for uploaded content are often driven by course reading lists. An example reading list is included below to illustrate the range of materials which could be requested and the decision-making processes involved. It should be noted this is included for illustrative purposes only and does not reflect a specific course of study.

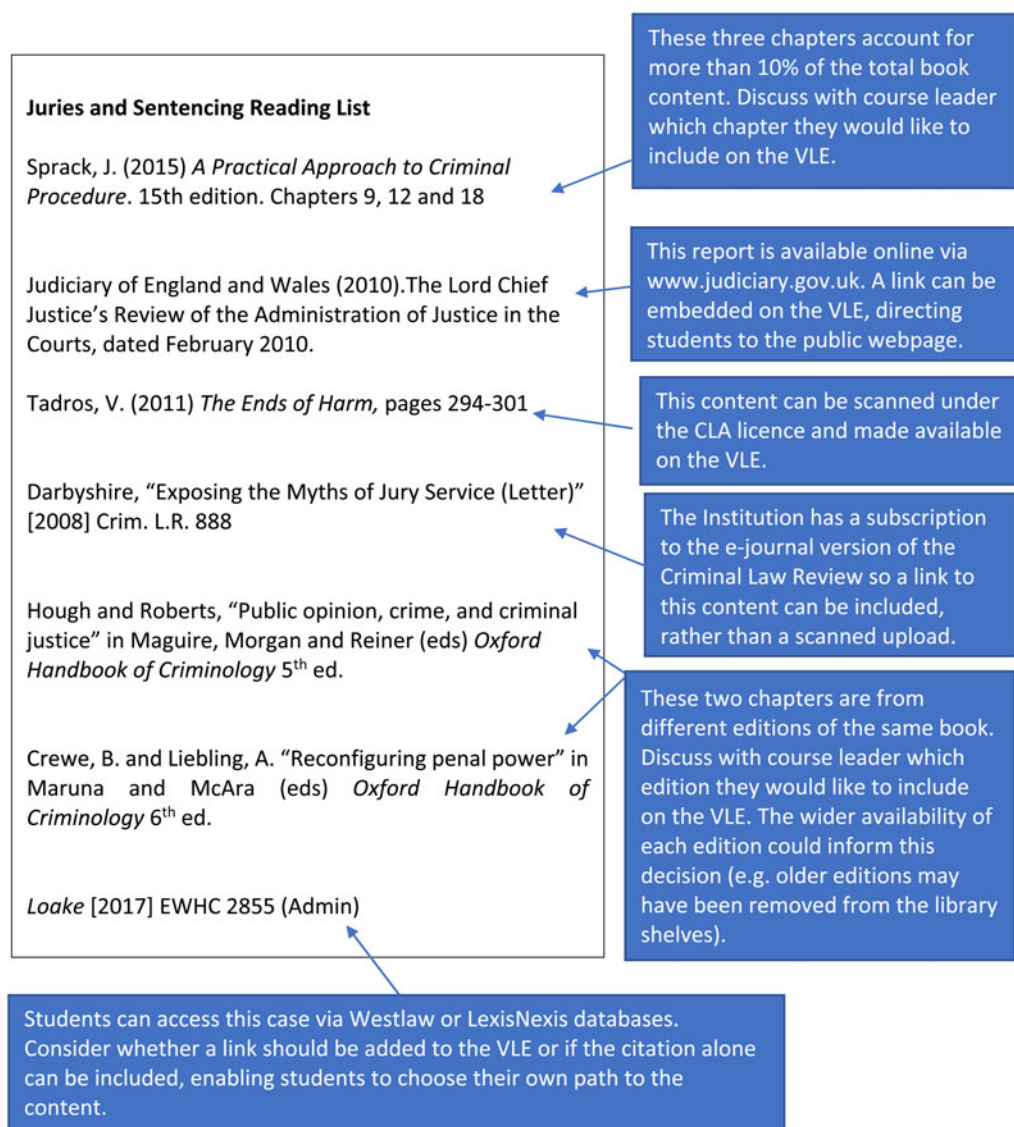


Figure 1. An example reading list.

HERE'S THE MATERIAL, NOW WHERE ARE THE STUDENTS?

Adding content to a VLE is only the start of the process; material is of very little use if it can't subsequently be discovered and effectively used by students.

In terms of layout, librarians and course leaders alike are often constrained by the design of the VLE. Some may employ a dedicated section for articles, case notes and book excerpts; others may intersperse content with related teaching materials (e.g. course handouts, audio recordings of lectures).

However, there are certain measures that can be employed to ensure resources are discoverable:

- **Resource Description:** many VLEs enable descriptive text to be added alongside the content file. These can be used to ensure students can cite the material correctly. However, they also provide a

useful tool for keyword searching within a VLE, which is especially important for instances where searching within an uploaded document is not available.

- **Organising material by subject matter, date of related teaching or author surname:** Gibeault's study⁷ highlighted that many students have different organisational preferences to their instructors. For example, students favoured a time-based approach to organising material. Whichever method is employed, standardisation within the VLE is frequently reported as being helpful to students who access multiple subsections for different papers or elements of their course.
- **Accompanying announcements:** many VLEs support an automated "recently added" feature to keep track of updated content. Alternatively, embedded discussion boards could be used to alert students when new content becomes available.

- **Links to the OPAC** can highlight related library resources or direct students to a print copy. This can be especially important for students using the VLE alongside the physical library.

CONCLUSION

The use of a VLE to provide articles, book excerpts and cases for law students either as part of a distance learning programme, or to supplement a traditional taught course, can be an integral piece of a wider programme of academic teaching and support. The involvement of the library in sourcing materials, uploading content and advising on alternatives requires both a willingness, and an availability, of library staff and expertise, alongside buy-in from course leaders and teaching staff.

Kampa suggests that “the integration of the library into an LMS is not an arduous task”¹¹. However, it does require a time and staffing commitment, especially when scaled up to offer a consistent level of service across all subsections of a law course VLE. The pay-off from a library perspective is an opportunity to integrate into students working environments, bringing library resources to a wider audience, and to collaborate with teaching staff.

There are, of course, drawbacks to focusing on providing content via the VLE, especially when this comes at the expense of developing more visible services. Gorham and Jagar argue that law libraries need to take note of the success public libraries have had in looking to work more widely with the community¹². It is worth considering whether law librarians should seek to engage with students across the institution campus and beyond, rather than adopting a narrow focus on law students and staff. By its very nature, the VLE is only accessible to a specific cohort of law students and therefore the work

undertaken to source and upload content is largely unseen by the wider community.

Finally, it is worth considering the limitations of the VLE in terms of its reach and appeal. Several studies highlight a resistance amongst students to move from traditional printed textbooks to e-book equivalents¹³. Whilst the VLE may be the ideal tool to bridge the gap between the physical library and the virtual world, it does beg the question: is all this uploaded content simply being printed out? If so, would additional print copies better address the needs of students in some situations? The VLE is an important tool for the library to utilise, but it is not a perfect fit for all materials or all students.

NEXT STEPS

Is this just the beginning? Many libraries have considered what can successfully be integrated into VLEs alongside course materials. For example, links to the library website or OPAC, research guides, RSS feeds for newly acquired materials and LibGuides. These elements can be offered as a standard across subsections of a VLE within an institution, or tailored to specific subjects, reflecting the specific research needs of each student cohort. Ultimately, some libraries create their own library modules within the VLE, sitting alongside – but separate from – course content.¹⁴

Looking ahead, it's important to recognise the VLE as a dynamic tool. No useful course content page will stay the same for long; it needs to reflect the new material available, the updated formats on offer, the ever-changing requirements of the law course, and the demands of the students themselves. This is perhaps the biggest challenge of all for librarians when making content available; whether we are offering a fountain of knowledge or merely a drop in the ocean.

Footnotes

¹ For an interesting comparison of course-centred and content-centred VLE design, see Wessa, P., De Rycker, A., Holliday, I.E. (2011) Content-based VLE designs improve learning efficiency in constructivist statistics education. *PLoS ONE* 6 (10).

² Machovec, G.S. (2001) Course management software: where is the library? *Information Intelligence, Online Libraries and Microcomputers* 19 (10).

³ For example, Cohen, D. (2002) Course-management software: where's the library? *Educause Review* 37 (3); Buehler, M.A. (2004) Where is the library in course management software? *Journal of Library Administration* 41 (1/2).

⁴ Daly, E. (2010) Embedding library resources into learning management systems: a way to reach Duke undergrads at their points of need. *College & Research Libraries News* 71 (4) pp. 208.

⁵ MacColl, J. (2001) Virtuous learning environments: the VLE and the library. *Program: Electronic Library and Information Systems* 35 (3) pp. 231.

⁶ A summary of Copyright Licensing Agency licences for educational institutions can be found at: <https://www.cla.co.uk/higher-education-licence>.

⁷ For an interesting case study of VLE usability testing see Gibeault, M. (2018) Organization of materials and accessing the library in Blackboard: a learner-centred usability study. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 44 (2).

⁸ Examples of successful partnerships include: Barr, D. (2010) Reaching students where they go: embedding library resources in course content. *Science & Technology Libraries* 29(4); Jackson, P. (2007) Integrating information literacy into Blackboard: building campus partnerships for successful student learning. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 33 (4).

⁹ Copyright Licensing Agency (2016) The CLA Higher Education Copyright Licence: good practice guide in the creation of course packs, available at: https://www.cla.co.uk/sites/default/files/CLA-HE-Good-Practice-Guide_2016-2019.pdf.

¹⁰ For discussion on a range of strategies to create new campus partnerships see Jackson, P. (2007) Integrating information literacy into Blackboard: building campus partnerships for successful student learning. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 33 (4) pp. 458.

¹¹ Kampa, R.K. (2017) Bridging the gap: integrating the library into Moodle learning management system a study. *Library Hi Tech News* 34 (4) pp. 17.

¹² Gorham, U. and Jaegar, P.T. (2017) The Law School Library or the Library at the Law School: how lessons from other types of libraries can inform the evolution of the academic law library in the digital age. *Law Library Journal* 109 (1).

¹³ For example, McNeish, J., Foster, M., Francescucci, A. and West, B. (2012) The surprising foil to online education: why students won't give up paper textbooks. *Journal for Advancement of Marketing Education*. 20 (3).

¹⁴ For an interesting insight into the VLE module created at New York University see Collard, S. and Tempelman-Kluit, N. (2006) The other way in: goal-based library content through CMS. *Internet Reference Services Quarterly* 11(4).

Biography

Lizz Edwards-Waller is a Library Assistant at the Squire Law Library, University of Cambridge. She is responsible for uploading library resources to the Moodle VLE and oversees the dedicated short-loan collections for students enrolled on the LL.M and Master of Corporate Law (MCL) courses. She has previously worked at Cambridge University Library.

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Usage and User Experience in an Academic Law Library

Abstract: This article, written by Josephine Bailey and Kate Faulkner, discusses the collection of library usage data at the Squire Law Library, an academic law library embedded in the Faculty of Law at the University of Cambridge. Two initiatives were employed to survey usage: firstly, regular headcounts of library users and secondly, occasional spot-checks of university cards. This article details the data that was collected and how it fits into a wider ethnographic approach to understanding how students and researchers use libraries. The article also discusses how the pilots have developed into long-term procedures, and how this has led to improvements to the delivery of the service.

Keywords: usage statistics; surveys; academic law libraries

INTRODUCTION

The Squire Law Library is the dedicated library that supports the Faculty of Law at the University of Cambridge. It shares a building with the Faculty of Law; the building

includes lecture theatres, administrative offices and a café on the lower three floors. The library is situated on the top three floors of the building, known as the David Williams Building. The library is very much embedded within the Law Faculty and many offices of the law