

Resources Loved, Resources Shunned: LPC and BVC Students at the Inns of Court School of Law and their Library Use

Abstract: This article by Sarah Batts discusses findings from a dissertation research project investigating LPC and BVC students' use of resources in supporting their legal research. Although there are many similarities between the two cohorts in the tasks they find difficult, or their use of a virtual learning environment, there are also key differences in the sources of help they would turn to first to look for answers to problems. This understanding of the different emphasis that students place on different resources provokes a number of questions which, if addressed, could help promote a positive library experience for students.

Keywords: law students; legal research skills; training

Introduction

In 2005 a module for City University's virtual learning environment (WebCT, branded locally as CitySpace) was produced by Emily Allbon at City University and Verena Price at ICSL. The module provided instruction on key print legal resources and at ICSL was undertaken as part of the students' induction to their course.

This article describes some of the key findings from a larger research project undertaken for a Master's dissertation. The research used three tools: a questionnaire, five follow-up interviews and usage logs from WebCT.

Much has been discussed about the use of WebCT and similar resources, so it seems appropriate to focus in this article on the additional insights into the attitudes of current students which are of interest for both those in current academic settings and for those working with trainees. Hence results will focus on questionnaire and interview answers.

Defining and understanding students' attitudes towards the 'usefulness' of the module was the key focus of the research. Other questions were posed to discern



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whether any specific differences existed between the needs of the students on the BVC and the LPC course, with the intention that these outcomes might help inform the level of support needed from front-line staff.

Where formal comparisons are made, and thus significant results are commented upon, chi-square tests were used. Statistics are included only for the significant results. Chi-square is a non-parametric test, used when data is not normally distributed. The test does not permit inference of any causal relationships between the findings from the questionnaire, but does show potential associations between groups, based on whether the observed frequencies of an occurrence differ from the expected frequency.

Participants

Demographics

At the start of the academic year 2005/06 there were 511 registered full time BVC students, and 172 on the

Table 1 – Gender breakdown

	Male (n)	Female (n)
BVC	28	26
LPC	19	25
Total	47	51

LPC. The sample used in the questionnaire study represented 11% of those following the LPC and 25% of those on the BVC. Only full time students took part in the study.

The gender split in the sample was almost 50:50.

Most students fell into the youngest age category, 21–31 years of age.

Students’ confidence with IT and research skills

There was no difference, as measured by the questionnaire, in the levels of confidence in their IT skills between the two groups of students. Students were also confident in their legal research skills both at the start of the course and at the point in May 2006 when the research was conducted. Participants were asked for their level of agreement with the following statement:

“Before the course started, I was good enough at using legal resources to find what I needed for the course.”

48% of BVC students said they either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, compared with 60% of the LPC students.

Asked for their agreement on a second statement, “Today I am confident in identifying what I need to answer a legal question,” 95% of LPC students agreed or strongly agreed compared to 83% of those on the BVC.

There were no significant differences between the groups in these results. They do show that on the whole students place high confidence in their skills, which could have an impact on their willingness to look for help during the latter stages of their course.

Table 2 – Age profile of sample

Age range	number
21–31	84
31–40	10
41–50	2
51+	0

Use of the library

Use of the library itself was explored through the interview stage. Of those interviewed, all were regular users although the frequency of their visits was different. One LPC student used the library every day; others two or three times a week or less. What was interesting was that for all students the emphasis was on the use of the IT facilities or photocopiers and far less on the actual printed resources or even the library as a place to study. Typical of his generation, perhaps, one student commented that.

‘I don’t think I ever touched a book, just used electronic sources and watched DVDs.’

Sources of help

‘Ideal’ source of help and WebCT

As part of the investigation into the usefulness of the WebCT tutorial, students were asked what their ideal method of finding support for their assignments would be. Four options were given and the table below gives the responses for each one for each course followed. No significant differences were found between groups.

In further analysis, course of study was ignored as a variable and students from both courses were assigned to one of two groups. Those who answered the above question with a preference for small group or individual tuition were the ‘face to face’ group; those who would look for a book or online source of help were labelled ‘individual.’

Students’ attitudes towards WebCT were examined in light of these groups to try to understand more about the motivations for using or not using the online tools. The level of agreement with six statements, drawing directly on the stated purpose of the module, was compared between the ‘individual’ and ‘face to face’ groups.

Discussing the WebCT videos giving instruction on key paper sources, the six statements were:

- It was useful to refer to the same examples to remind myself of the steps to take in research
- The videos were a sufficient replacement for a class in research skills run by library staff
- The videos were a good tool for learning how to use paper sources
- The videos were clear and easy to follow
- The videos were a good tool for revising how to use paper sources
- More in-depth instruction would have been helpful

There was no difference in the level of agreement with the first five statements between the two groups: all students were generally positive. This suggested that, on

Table 3 – Students’ ideal method of gaining help

	BVC (%)	LPC (%)
Face to face teaching in a small group	36	32
Individual tuition	36	32
Online resources I can look at in my own time	12	29
Help from a book or other printed guide	16	7

the whole, students’ preferences for finding support did not influence their use or perceived usefulness of these online tutorials.

The results for the final statement predictably served to highlight the preferences; there was a significant association between the agreement with the statement that ‘more in depth instruction would have been helpful’ and the ‘face to face’ or ‘individual’ groupings. This association could be expected given the students’ stated preferences. It suggest that even in situations where students expressed a preference for face to face tuition, WebCT or similar packages are still seen as useful tools. Differentiation in selling the benefits of online sources may be necessary, rather than treating students as a homogenous group.

Resources loved and resources shunned

By far and away the most revealing part of the study was that which looked at the resources students would and would not look to for support with their legal research.

Technical and intellectual challenges in research

The original pilot stage of the questionnaire asked students to describe the most difficult aspects of researching a problem. Six areas were most frequently given, and

these were used in the main study. At analysis, two categories were established – ‘intellectual challenge’ and ‘technical aspects,’ each with three items. The table below shows the percentages of the students choosing each one.

There were no differences found between the groups on the particular aspects of legal research –so although all students found the same aspects of research difficult, their methods of finding help and solving problems were different.

Ratings of potential sources

A further question asked respondents to rank their preferences for a number of potential sources of help if they were finding it difficult using legal resources.

The two figures illustrate extremes of examples, namely, which resource students would turn to first against those that they would never consult. They highlight interesting differences in the behaviours that the two groups of students would display. Recognising and understanding these differences could help formulate procedures or questions to allow for a more helpful or tailored enquiry desk service. Pointing students deliberately towards resources they are comfortable with may be easier, but less beneficial in the long run, than emphasising a range of available sources and how to decide which is the most appropriate.

These results suggest the Google-isation of research is an established phenomenon. Results discussed above showed that the hardest aspect of legal research for

Table 4 – Intellectual challenge vs technical process

	BVC (%)	LPC (%)
Intellectual challenge:		
Pinpointing issues to define search terms	43	58
Deciding where to start	9	8
Ensuring comprehensiveness	23	24
Technical process:		
Updating your sources	11	5
Finding resources in the library	9	5
Knowing which practitioner text to use	6	0

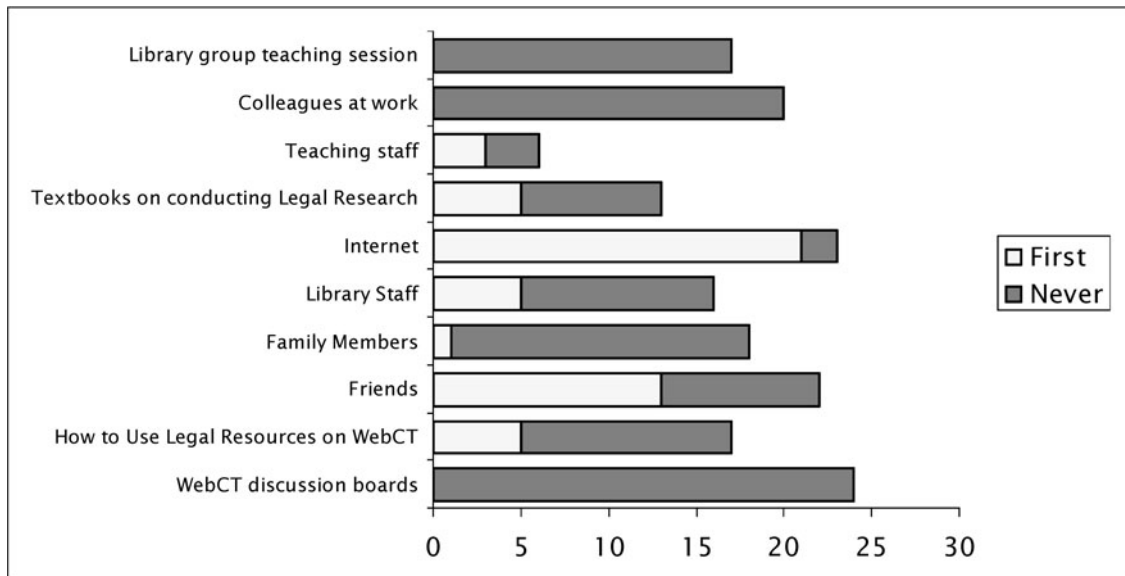


Figure 1: LPC responses

many was ‘pinpointing issues to define search terms.’ Note that this problem itself was suggested by the pilot group of students and not the researcher. It is suggestive that this is a difficulty very much in internet or online searches, reflecting that for many students this is the first and more important port of call. Those accustomed to using print versions of *Halsbury’s Laws*, for example, would have the challenge of finding the first port of call in the index, but from there would find suggested terms or alternative references. Not so the user online.

LPC students are more likely to turn to the internet or friends for help, and less likely to turn to a library group teaching session. BVC students, however, will readily ask library staff or friends for help, and are less likely to use the internet.

BVC students look in more places for help – each category had at least one person who gave it priority,

whereas LPC students had three sources of help that were never cited as a first place to turn to (library teaching session, colleagues at work, WebCT discussion boards).

Few students would use WebCT facilities, including discussion boards, if they were seeking help. Students on both courses are more likely to turn to the internet (BVC n = 14, LPC n = 21) or friends (BVC n = 18, LPC n = 13) for support with a problem. It is interesting that although 18 BVC students said that they would turn to library staff first, only 5 LPC students agreed.

Personal preferences

The list items from this were collapsed into two groupings – sources that indicate students prefer to find

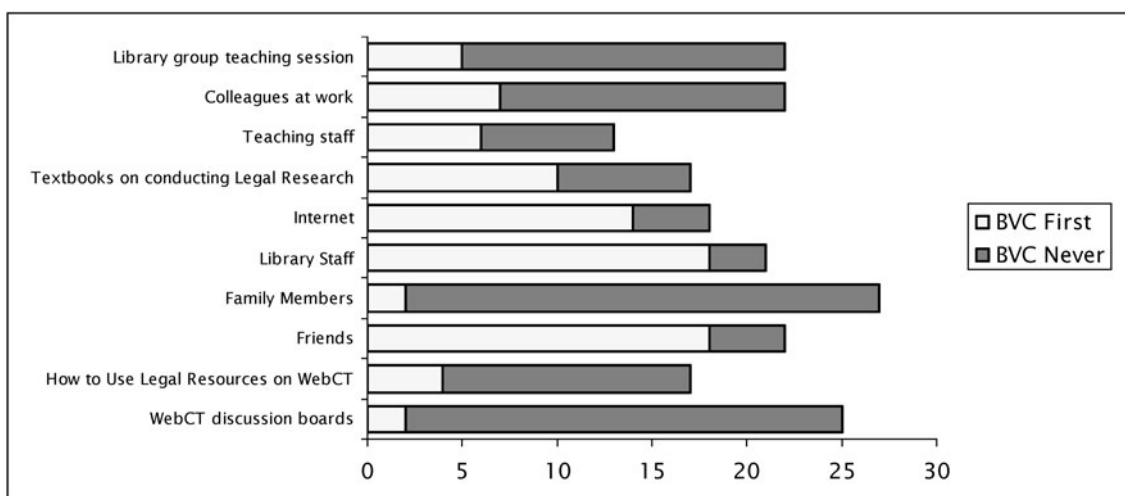


Figure 2: BVC responses

Table 5 – Two groupings from Question 18

Finding answer oneself	Asking others
WebCT discussion boards	Friends
How to Use Legal Resources on WebCT	Family members
Internet	Library staff
Textbooks on conducting legal research	Teaching staff
	Colleagues at work

Table 6 – Division of sources of help

People	Colleagues at work Friends Family Members
Print	Textbook on conducting Legal Research
Online	Internet WebCT discussion boards How to use Legal Resources
Staff	Teaching staff Library Staff Library teaching session

the answer themselves and sources that indicate students prefer to ask someone who may know the answer; as shown below.

A further Chi-square test showed that there is a significant difference between the BVC and LPC students and the major source of help ($\chi^2 = 7.11$, $p \leq 0.01$, 1 d.f.) This suggests that BVC students could be more likely to ask for help rather than attempt to find the answer independently.

Resources were assigned to one of four categories – people, print, online, or staff, as shown in the table. In this rearranged format the null hypotheses were that there would be no difference between the LPC and BVC students in the category they would consult first, or that they would never consult. There was no difference in the category that students would never consult, but there is an association between the category that would be consulted first and the course ($\chi^2 = 8.092$, $p \leq 0.05$, 3 d.f.).

So, even though they are using the same resources and have access to the same facilities, BVC and LPC students are doing different things in the library.

During interviews, students were asked what factors influence their choice of resources for tackling questions, and to think how they might approach this when in a trainee role. Representative answers are given below:

‘Definitely prefer online for the amount of material, I always start with Halsbury’s online but

within a little time go to the print copy, easy to see surrounding paragraphs in the books.’

‘What’s worked in the past can give a good success rate because you trust the resource and know your way around it, I’m more confident with electronic than paper.’

‘I might be tempted to go to Google first or even look at my old notes or stuff depending on the problem.’

Displaying a great confidence in his future workplace’s staff: ‘I’d have a chat with a librarian.’

A telling comment was made regarding the library’s research methods seminar:

E: ‘This was invaluable, I relied on everything that I learned on that session throughout the rest of the year. Other people said it wasn’t useful but they weren’t paying attention.’

Further questions

What this short article has aimed to do is highlight the fact that the LPC and BVC students cannot always be viewed as a homogenous group from behind the library counter. There are further avenues of research that could be explored – fundamentally, that the teaching itself has not been examined and the pointers that tutors are giving their students have not been taken into account.

However, there are also other differences that have not been explored – are there cultural differences between student bodies? Is the BVC cohort composed of more international students, who might expect to ask for help as a first resort rather than UK students who might not value the librarians’ potential as a source of information? Are the sorts of enquiries that the two student groups have different – and thus can they be solved differently?

Exploring further what students do when they use the internet as a source of first resort might unpack more sophisticated strategies than just general Google searches, as have been assumed here.

These unknown explanations notwithstanding, it would seem that the current findings provoke some questions about promotion of services available and how students can effectively find help.

Are students aware that the staff behind the desk are able to do more than issue books, mend photocopiers or replenish printer paper? If they are given an introductory talk on the library as part of their hectic induction process, is this reinforced as their first term

progresses? Do other staff members point students towards the library as a place to find guidance or just as a place that holds books? Is there an expectation that all LPC qualifiers will go on to a trainee post in a well-resourced commercial firm with full database access, and if so, are those who do not missing out on vital skills? And finally, what might enquiry skills training for staff look like if it took these course-related factors into account?

Biography

Sara Batts completed the MSc Information Science at City University in September 2006. From September 2003 – March 2006 she worked part time as an Information Assistant at the Inns of Court School of Law, and has been a full time advisor with Addleshaw Goddard since August 2006.

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Legal Information Management, 7 (2007), pp. 289–293

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doi:10.1017/S1472669607002162

NELLCO International Fellowship – What a Thrill!

Abstract: Melinda Renner, from the University of New Brunswick, writes about her experiences as a New England Law Library Consortium International Fellow who was seconded to the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies in London. She describes the visits she made and her impressions of how academic librarianship in Britain and Canada appear to share many of the same issues and problems.

Keywords: academic law libraries; law librarians

Introduction

Have you ever been hit on the head by a meteorite? Probably not, but that's exactly what it felt like, back in February, when I opened an e-mail from Tracy Thompson, Executive Director of the New England Law Library Consortium (NELLCO). Tracy was writing to inform me that I'd been selected as the inaugural NELLCO International Fellow. I was completely surprised, very pleased, and very grateful for the opportunities this award afforded me, as I shall describe below!

New England Law Library Consortium

NELLCO is a co-operative network that exists to enhance research and educational opportunities amongst law libraries through programs of co-operative collection development and resource sharing for mutual benefit. Founded in 1983 by fifteen New England law libraries, NELLCO is a non-profit corporation currently composed of academic (ABA accredited), private non-profit, and government law libraries. By 2006, NELLCO had grown