Delivering Legal Information Skills via a VLE

Abstract: Angela Donaldson describes the process of developing an online environment in which to deliver legal information skills to undergraduate LLB students.

Keywords: academic law libraries; virtual learning environments; legal research

Introduction

No legal information professional would disagree with the assertion that effective legal research skills are vital to a successful legal career, but I am sure many, particularly those working in the academic sector, would agree that getting undergraduate students to appreciate the importance of these skills can be a struggle, one that I am all too familiar with here at Nottingham Trent University (NTU). This article describes the process of developing an online environment in which to deliver these key skills to an ever increasing student body.

Previously, legal information skills had been taught via workshops in our training room, with three tutorial groups timetabled to attend at once. The sessions would consist of a presentation and demonstration, followed by hands-on use of the databases to locate cases and legislation. Because these sessions were additions to the students' timetables and not embedded in any law modules, this resulted in very poor attendance. The situation changed in the academic year 2008/09, when three separate factors combined to alter the provision of legal information skills teaching at NTU.

The introduction of a new Virtual Learning Environment

Our old VLE, a home-grown affair, primarily managed and developed by academic staff with library staff permitted only minimal access, was replaced with a commercial VLE product, Desire2Learn. The new VLE (known locally as NOW) was to be managed by the Educational Development Unit within the library. Liaison librarians were encouraged to get involved with it from the outset and were given as much training, if not more, than the academic staff. I could immediately see the potential for a legal information skills area for law students and began working in my "sandbox" area on a pilot version.

A review of assessments within the LLB programme

One of the principal lecturers within the Law School was tasked with reviewing all elements of assessment within the undergraduate programme. This highlighted an online legal skills assessment in the Legal Environment module, which was there as the result of "custom and practice" reasons which I will now explain. In the late 1990s, the LLB programme included a first year module called Lawyering Skills, encompassing all the various skills elements, from mooting to legal research. Within this module, I delivered some lectures and tutorials on legal research skills and the students were given a comprehensive workbook to complete. The format worked well, and the workbook element meant that students were required to come into the library, in order to complete the exercises. But academic course design is a constantly evolving process and programmes rarely go too many years without being restructured, which is what happened to our LLB programme.

A revamp of the course led to the disappearance of the Lawyering Skills module, with the skills elements being allocated to other modules. Legal research skills were picked up within the Legal Method module, which meant I lost my timetabled lecture and tutorial slots and had to make do with the voluntary sessions, outlined earlier, instead. Although this was not my preferred delivery method, I worked with the module leader to convert the workbook into an online assessment which was made available through her module. Fast forward another few years and there was yet another programme restructuring. This time the Legal Method module was replaced by one called Legal Environment, which had a different focus, but the same module leader. We continued to work together to provide the legal skills assessment, even though the module content was no longer so directly related to legal research.

It was at this point that the principal lecturer began his review of assessments and queried why the online

legal research skills assessment was sitting within an unrelated module. His view was that legal research skills are too important to be "hidden away" within one particular first year module. On the contrary, they apply across all modules and to all years and should be given due prominence.

New "Law With" programmes mean an even greater than normal increase in student numbers

From 320 first year LLBs in 2007/08, to 460 in 2008/09 thanks to the popularity of our new Law with Business, Law with Psychology and Law with Spanish programmes and the continuing popularity of the Law with Criminology degree. I am no great mathematician, but even I could work out that 460 first years divided by 27 pcs in our training room, would most likely equal a nervous breakdown for me (quite apart from the timetabling logistics that would be required to ensure the simultaneous availability of the students, the training room and me!). Clearly, seeing all the students face-to-face for training was not going to be an option and given that projections for the year 2009/10 were even higher, the sooner an alternative delivery method was devised, the better. (Those projections were subsequently realised, with just under 600 first years enrolling in 2009/2010).

These three factors collided, with the result that the principal lecturer approved my concept of a Law Learning Room and agreed to sponsor the proposal through the various School Committees and Boards to ensure that it was formally accepted by the Law School.

We wanted to ensure that students would engage with the room, and decided to include a self-assessment exercise, which would be compulsory for first years, and optional for other years. Given the University's strict regulations governing the number of assessments students should be subject to, it was agreed that there would be no minimum pass mark and no limits to the number of attempts a student could make. In order to highlight the importance that the Law School placed on the skills being delivered via this room, the following convention was added to the Law School's assessment's policy:

> "Failure to complete the Self Assessment exercise will be viewed as a failure to engage with the Programme as a whole, and will count against you at Exam Boards".

So if a student was a borderline pass/fail and it was found that they had failed to complete the self assessment exercise, then they would be marked down, rather than up (Figure 1).

The content is divided into 2 main sections, Essential Online Training & Compulsory Self Assessment and Additional Online Training. Each of those sections is further divided as illustrated in the following screenshots (Figures 2 & 3).

The text within the various sections, is nothing revolutionary and (local references apart) not much different from the text that you would find in any legal research skills textbook. Library circulation figures, however, show that our legal research books are borrowed very little, so
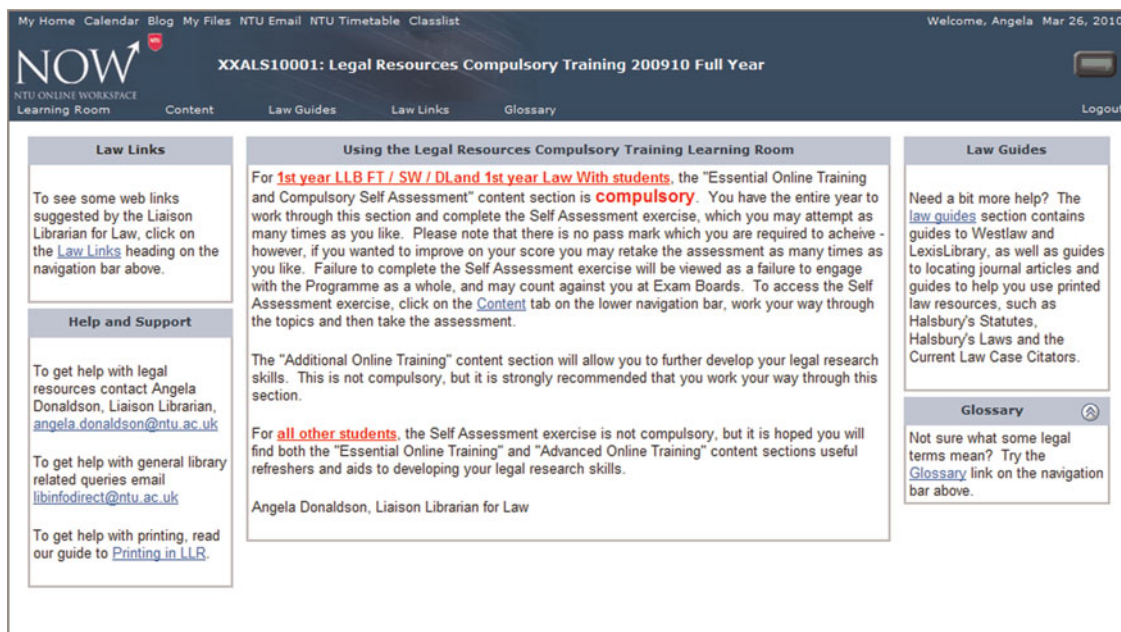

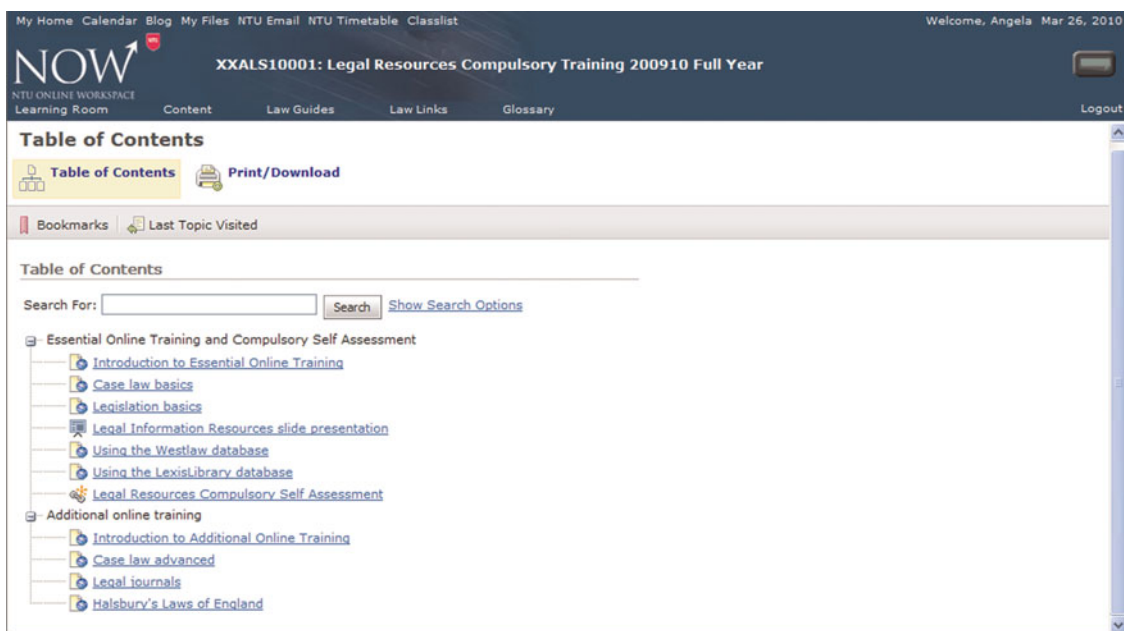*Figure 1: Advice to students that completion of the Self Assessment is compulsory*

Figure 2: Table of contents: Essential Online Training and Compulsory Self-Assessment plus Additional Online Training

it would seem that students are not accessing the information in that format. What is revolutionary about this approach is that we are making the information available in the place that the students most regularly visit. NOW has quickly become most students' default home page, with the majority of them accessing it at least once a day, so by putting this content under their noses, it significantly increases the chances of them engaging with it. In addition to the textual content, the room contains tutorials for legal databases, handy guides to using both printed and electronic sources, a legal terms glossary and a law links section, which defaults to my Delicious law bookmarks (Figure 4).

The structure of the content was the subject of some discussion. In the pilot version, I had created a separate section for each heading within the case law and legislation topics, which meant that the table of contents was long, but the individual contents pages were short. I envisaged that the students would consult the room to answer a particular query, e.g. "I don't understand the
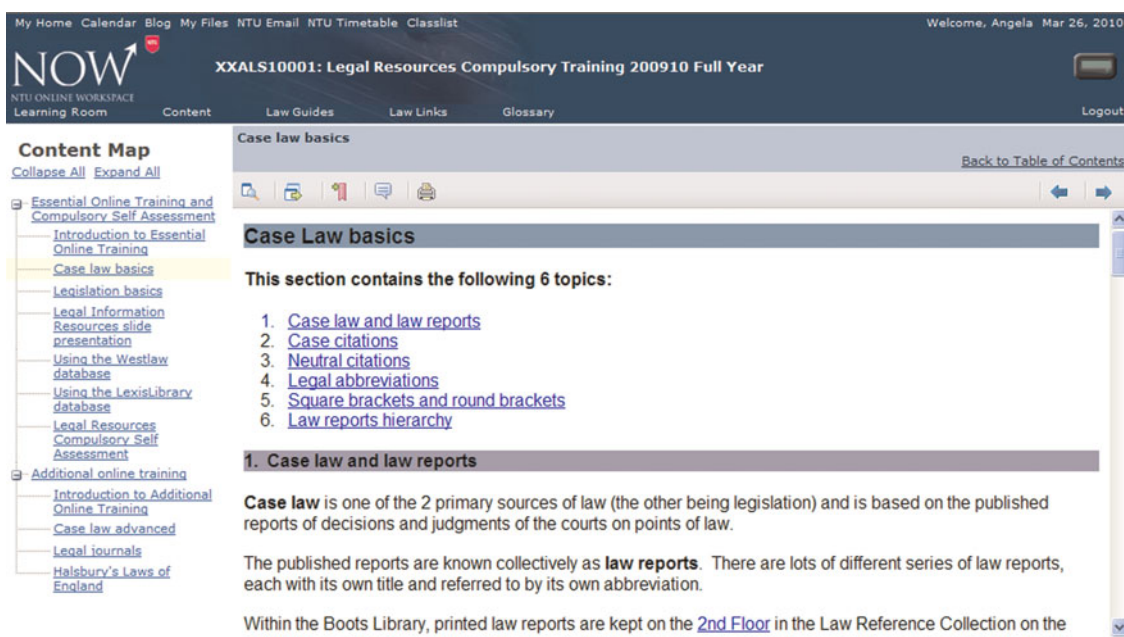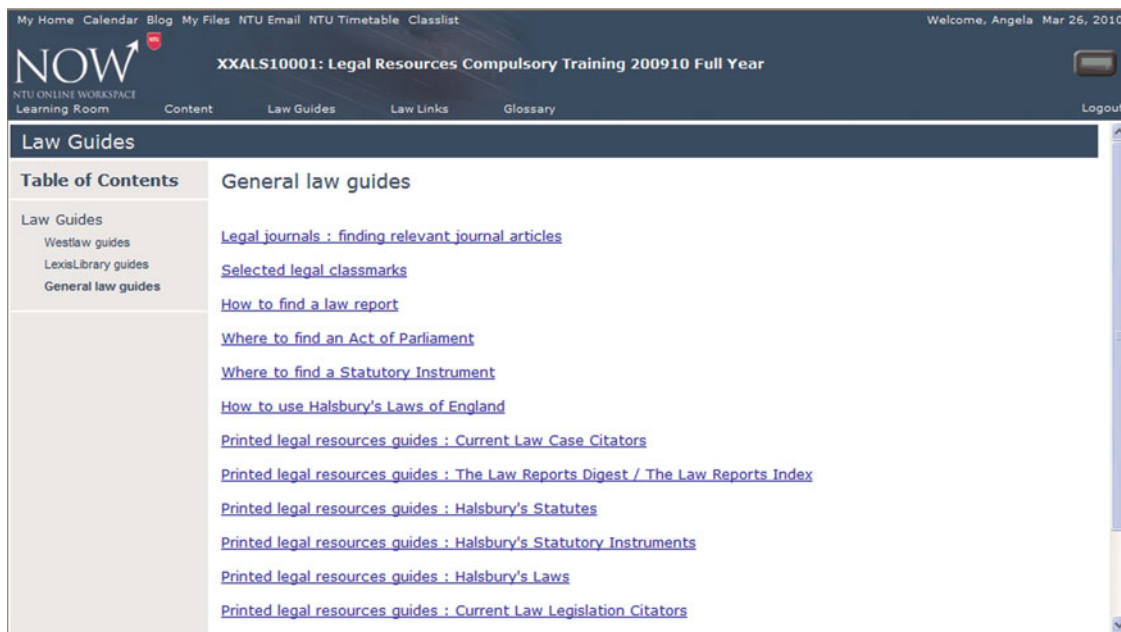
Figure 3: Case Law Training

Figure 4: General Law Guides

difference between historical and updated legislation, so I'll click on that heading" or "I need to know about the law reports hierarchy, so I'll open that section". The principal lecturer saw the room as a tool that he wanted the first year students to work their way through, before completing the assessment and worried that such a lengthy table of contents could put some students off before they started. He also argued for including the word "compulsory" in the learning room title, to emphasise the importance of the content and the fact that

students are expected to engage. As you can see from the images, his negotiation skills were superior to mine (he is legally trained!), and his views were carried, although I remain not entirely convinced that the current headings are the most appropriate.

The process of introducing students to the Learning Room has differed. All new full time first years were timetabled to attend a lecture with me, which outlined the basics of case law and legislation and included demonstrations of the key legal databases, and how students
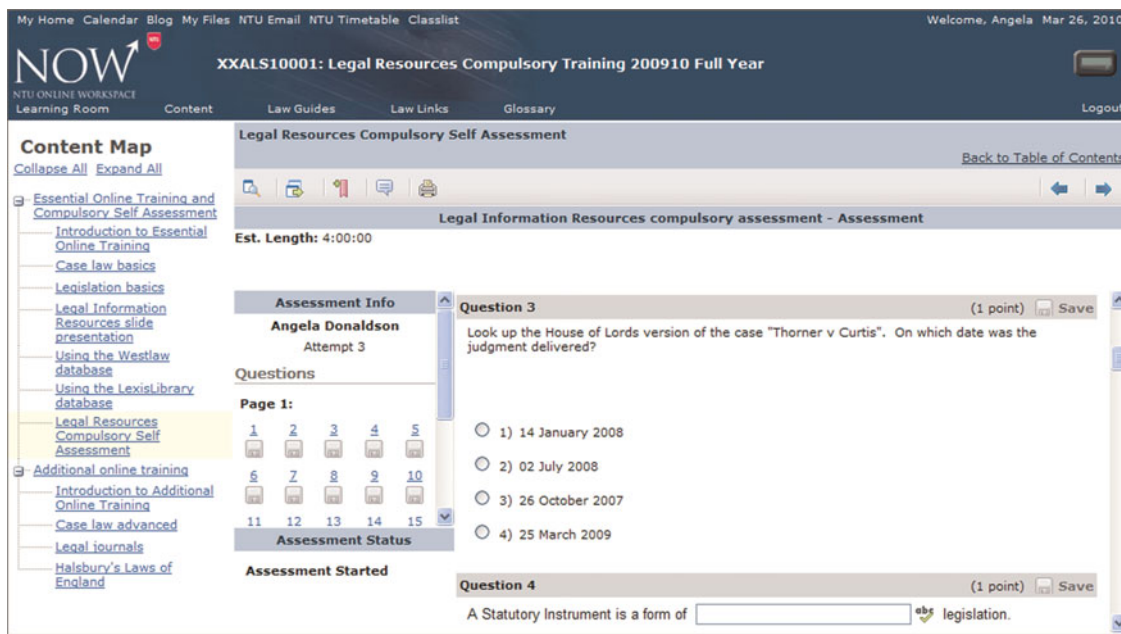

Figure 5: Legal Resouces Compulsory Self Assessment

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access them. The lecture also showed them the Learning Room and emphasised the self-assessment exercise. To complement the lecture, two workshops were offered in the library's training room for those first years who wanted more instruction and hands-on practice. Students were required to sign up in advance for these sessions, and the take up rate was extremely low. First year students on our Distance Learning LLB also attended a timetabled lecture/workshop in the library, which promoted the Learning Room and gave them an opportunity to explore it. Promotion to second and final year LLB students has been via email, through other law workshops offered as part of our "Events for Students" programme and by word of mouth, both as a result of academics recommending it in class and library staff demonstrating it at enquiry points. As a by-product, I have noticed a distinct reduction in the number of basic legal enquiries being passed on to me, as my Academic Liaison Team colleagues have been able to answer many more queries by referring to the Room's content.

The Learning Room has been live now for two terms, and as of the end of March 2010, 42% of the first years have completed the self-assessment exercise, with an average score of 85%. While 42% may be seen as low, compared with the percentages I used to get attending my workshops under the old scheme, it is a vast improvement. The Programme Leader and individual Module Leaders have also agreed to remind the first year cohort of the importance of completing the self-assessment before the end of the year, not least because it could help them with their exam preparations, so I expect to see a flurry of activity after Easter (Figure 5).

In the future, I want to further develop the content and would like to create more visual content, possibly through a webcam or digital camcorder. I am also gathering feedback from staff and students, which will inform any future improvements. There has been interest in the room from non-law courses, such as journalism, social work, construction and forensic science, whose students take some law modules, so there is the potential to roll out the room to other programmes in the next academic year.

Conclusion

So has the room helped undergraduates to appreciate the importance of legal research skills? I cannot say if they appreciate them more, as that depends on the individual student, but I think it has certainly helped a substantial proportion of our students develop better legal research skills. Hopefully, as they become more efficient researchers and move forward in their careers, an appreciation of those skills will naturally develop.

Biography

Angela Donaldson has been the Liaison Librarian for Law, supporting undergraduates at Nottingham Trent University, since 1998. In 2009 she also became responsible for NTU's postgraduate law programmes, including the GDL, LPC and BVC courses.