

Biography

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From Black and White to Colour; Educating and Engaging the Screen Addicts of 2011

Abstract: This article, by Emily Allbon, is based on a presentation given at the BIALL Conference in 2011. She explores the depth of student engagement with online resources and how to handle the information-complacent law student. She discusses the development Learnmore, Lawbore's legal skills wiki, and concludes with thoughts over future development of this resource.

Keywords: wikis; e-learning; law students; legal research; legal education

Introduction

In 2003 I created a website for City University law students called Lawbore¹, which has been the focus of a few previous articles in this very journal. Lawbore started out life as a subject gateway – a portal to resources, and stood out for its image-led navigation and descriptions written to connect with students. Other models either had very extensive source descriptions, which would make undergraduates switch off, or merely a few words. Over the years this has developed into a much bigger beast, with other parts of the site including the



Emily Allbon

Hub, a community area with news, events, updates and e-access, *Future Lawyer*², the careers blog and *Learnmore*³.

Background

Learnmore, Lawbore's legal skills wiki, was first let loose on the students in 2007. I felt that there was a dearth of visually exciting materials out there to help students get their heads around some of the 'perceived-as-dull' legal skills like research and legal writing, and also the scary prospect of mooting.

I used a programme called Articulate to create what I termed 'talking slideshows': basically more polished

PowerPoint – slides, voiceover and inbuilt navigation so students could jump ahead to a specific section they wanted to listen to. These were very well received, with ‘*Understanding legal citations and abbreviations*’ and ‘*Get to grips with law reports*’ being two of the most accessed resources on Lawbore. I concentrated on making the PowerPoints as interesting as possible and developed a style which was very image-focused, using bold images from Flickr (using the Creative Commons licence) to get my points across in a fun and sometimes quirky way. I knew the students liked this approach from my Legal Method teaching. Learnmore version 1 also had a series of short video clips, filmed with 2 students to illustrate the possible perils of mooting. These were gloriously over-the-top, with clips demonstrating the two extremes of different situations. These included entrance to the moot, delivery and dealing with judicial interventions. The two students wrote the script and we roped in an academic to play the part of a suitably gruff judge. This addition to the site made a massive impact; the students loved learning about mooting by seeing and they enjoyed the tongue-in-cheek approach.

As a librarian, I’m in a fortunate situation as my office is in the law library (which is one floor of the main university library); I encourage students to just drop by, and they do. The Law School building is across the road and no teaching goes on there (it’s where the admin office and academic staff reside), so students often come and see me about a whole range of things, because I’m geographically closer. This works out well, despite being a little chaotic at times, because I get involved in all manner of issues within the School and can often come up with ways of easing situations for students (which don’t strictly speaking fall within my remit) via Lawbore.

My teaching (and the assessments I do) on Legal Method also means I spend a substantial proportion of my time with undergraduates whilst getting a useful insight into how they learn and what they find challenging.

Fast forward to 2010 and after a successful year teaching the Legal Method module with a new academic, Sanmeet Kaur Dua, I began tentatively thinking about whether she would be interested in collaborating on some resources. With Legal Method it felt like we were on a similar wavelength with regard to our teaching style and she had shown enthusiasm about the existing Learnmore resources. Luckily she agreed, and Learnmore version 2 began to develop.

Why is Learnmore needed?

Those issues my students have are, I’m sure, very similar to issues of others. Your average 18-year-old undergraduate may not have had too much to do with a library. If they need to know something they’re going to Google it or ask their friends, and they’re not familiar with most of the sources. Many of them don’t even understand how to use an index in a book, never mind have the patience for ensuring a piece of legislation is up to date.

Postgraduate students doing the GDL law conversion course or an accelerated LLB often come equipped with some research skills from previous studies, but this ability can fall anywhere across a wide spectrum. The GDL at City is rigorously academic and with 17.5 hours of teaching over a four-day week, the remainder of time is spent in the library, mooting or sorting out applications for pupillage or training contracts. There is little time for anything else, and this includes time to refine research skills.

We know from various studies (Google Generation, 2008⁴) that students have less technological nous than we have often assumed; we also know of course that a study of law requires a keen eye for detail and research expertise to find sources to back up your argument. As the fees go up and opportunities go down, we also know how these skills tie in to the ultimate profession, but students don’t always appreciate this. It’s not unusual to find students nearing the end of a diploma don’t know the simple hierarchy of law reports or how to do structured searching within a database.

The Google grip round our students’ throats hasn’t lessened, and our paid-for resources still often come second best. My experience is that this is less the case in Law; they know the value of the databases often because they are so focused on their career and appreciate their expertise in databases has a role to play in this. That said, the lack of critical and analytical skills which Nicholas and Rowlands detailed in 2008, still rings very true. A brief piece from online collaborative magazine *Good* in August 2011 details a two-year study, the *Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries*, which concludes that “students are so used to conducting simple searches on Google that they have a hard time doing more sophisticated research either online or in the library”⁵.

There was much debate in 2010 on the publication of Nicholas Carr’s international bestseller: *The Shallows: what the Internet is doing to our brains*, after he opened discussion with the proposition that our reading on the web is faster but far less thorough. He describes the internet as: “...an interruption system. It seizes our attention only to scramble it...We want to be interrupted, because each email, tweet, instant message, RSS headline – brings us a valuable piece of information”⁶. We don’t like feeling out of touch. But our brain has to reorient itself each time which adds to, what he terms, the cognitive load, this makes sense – I know if I’m working on something, if an email or tweet comes in I’ll have to investigate it, and then it takes that bit of time to get your brain back on task. Skipping constantly between hypertext links, reading text from multiple documents penned by different authors does make me lazy about how deeply I read – I am aware of losing focus easily.

Students don’t see that they need any special skills to find information online, an article written back in 2004 quotes a student who didn’t see the point in attending an information skills session: ‘we’re on the web all the time. We can find the information we need’ (Spence, 2004⁷).

Emily Allbon

I'm not sure the students' perception of their web skills has changed enormously, although this does change depending on how much exposure they get to their library and librarian.

Legal skills are the tools of the trade. If students are well equipped with these 'tools' then they are better placed to learn substantive law, and ultimately, to enter the profession. Most law schools however, struggle with finding an appropriate slot for a subject such as English Legal System, Foundation programme, Legal Method, Legal Skills, or whatever it may be called in individual institutions. Most within law schools accept that it is necessary to teach these skills at the outset, but struggle with trying to decide where to squeeze out enough time to teach them. If legal skills are the building blocks and these need to be taught at the beginning of the law course, we also need to accept the fact that students are generally like 'rabbits in the headlights' at the start of the course. They do not fully appreciate the importance of the skills that they are being taught until much later when they in fact need to apply them, and struggle to recall what they were taught when they were being bombarded with information.

It is often the case that we end up relying on students picking up the skills by doing – pretty much a sink or swim approach, so the challenge is to engage from the start and get students to appreciate the value of deeper learning for their study and their professional life.

Current challenges that we have found in trying to improve student engagement in learning legal skills include:

- That gaping hole of transition: it is a big leap to make from A-level to degree. They have a very steep learning curve.
- The traditional lecture/tutorial way of teaching is a tough one for students to get a handle on, particularly when so many of these rely on a largely transmissive teaching style. Their experience of education pre-university will differ enormously in both the way they are taught and how much they need to stand on their own two feet.
- Getting students to take legal skills seriously is a tough one, as many can see it as simply ticking a box, not something which remains with them throughout their profession. Some can feel it is holding them up from the real matters of learning proper law. It's certainly a challenge to make it stimulating as a subject.

So back to Lawbore...

As I've mentioned Lawbore already had an existing skills wiki with some good content, but the very structured 'look' didn't do it justice. It was quite plain looking; wordy and very organised categories put students off. There simply wasn't enough visual engagement. Students only used a small proportion of the content.

Sanmeet and I made a shortlist of what was important for the new resource. This included the following:

- It had to consist of a wide variety of stand-alone resources in order to offer 'something for everyone'
- It was important to give the students some ownership of the resource – get them involved. We wanted a supportive outlet that gave them somewhere to go for help in those 3 am panic moments.
- There had to be lots of real-life examples for students to learn from and lots of multimedia.

Visual is king!

We know that students are used to being online for a large part of their day; Facebook and YouTube rule. They learn by watching and then doing. The visual is king in their lives so any redesign had to incorporate lots of different types of media and had to look fun and engaging. The rest of Lawbore has always been a little quirky and the redeveloped Learnmore had to continue in a similar vein.

A big part of what Learnmore allows us to do is let the students loose on the resource and decide individually what support they need. They can obviously access it 24/7 and we've placed a big emphasis on how the resource looks, as well as what it does.

Right from the off we knew it had to be fun, and the earlier incarnation of the resource launched in 2007, showed that students loved the combination of hardcore textual information alongside the visual 'this is how you do it' type of content. They liked seeing visually how things should be done.

Design-wise we wanted something unique to catch their attention, and that had the flexibility to change over time. The idea of basing the site around a law student's brain just seemed to suit our very student-led site. We wanted each of the six areas to have its own character and commissioned a collection of images from a US illustrator, these were quite retro in style and added just the extra visual interest factor we needed. A feature added later included the appearance of random pictures (snail, beer, plugged in iron, goldfish, desert island...) to illustrate what the student is thinking. A lot of time was spent refining these images to get the right match – there were some concepts we lost along the way.

We asked them...

I carried out a survey on the first year law undergraduate students (120 respondents out of a possible 150) in December 2010 around their thoughts on multimedia sources and learning legal skills, as well as their views on Learnmore. The results were quite surprising; what really came through was the feeling of self-awareness about

LEARNMORE
EXPAND YOUR LEGAL MIND

law tutorials by **lawbore**

Want to refine your legal skills?
No clue how to moot?
Find writing legal essays daunting?
Want help from other students?

Then poke about in my head
for all the answers!

<http://learnmore.lawbore.net>

The City Law School
CITY UNIVERSITY LONDON

The advertisement features a cartoon illustration of a man's head in profile, wearing glasses. The top of his head is covered in several overlapping, torn-edge paper-like shapes, each containing a legal term: 'EXAMS', 'NEW-BIES', 'MOOTS', 'RESEARCH', 'WRITING', and 'CAREERS'. A thought bubble originates from his head, containing text about refining legal skills. The background is a solid grey color. Logos for 'LEARNMORE' and 'lawbore' are in the top left and right respectively. The URL and 'The City Law School' logo are at the bottom.

how they learn and retain information. Many students made the point that everyone learns in different ways, and there were copious comments around how tough they find reading such dense text in books and that they appreciated having the option for a break from this. In response to the question around why they felt multimedia helped with learning legal skills we had a variety of responses:

“Everyone learns by different methods – closes the learning gap”

“More fun to work [with these resources], so I concentrate more”

“Makes it stick more in my mind”

“Variety of resources is refreshing, not dull and boring like a book”

“Able to visually see things”

“Get the chance to watch it again”

With so many different possibilities for engaging students we were curious as to what the students thought about the different legal skills they needed to learn; which were most important and what they considered the value of learning from different types of resource.

When asked for the top two skills needed to be a great law student, they listed legal research and legal writing. Big surprise! Three quarters of students felt that using a variety of media to learn from made their learning

a more beneficial experience. Law, being a book-heavy subject, seems ripe for revolution (in terms of learning resources anyway!)

A closer look at Learnmore

Moots – Each of the six areas of Learnmore varies in the content available. For launch in late 2010 we focused on Mooting as that seemed the area that held most concern for students, as well as the one crying out for more visual sources. At City we run several internal moots as well as taking part in the national competitions, and we decided to film as much of one internal moot (The Crown Office Moot, sponsored by Crown Office Chambers) as we could, to give us a large pool of footage to re-purpose. The massive editing process took a huge amount of time, but we managed to use clips from it for an FAQ’s section, and to illustrate different points within two prezis: *‘Judges: Scary or Softies?’* and *‘Saying it right’*.

Other content within Mooting includes basic documents for students to learn from, like the skeleton argument examples, lots of talking slideshows on areas like bundles, modes of address, researching a moot problem and more video footage in *‘Take it from the students’*. These are clips resultant from a roundtable discussion we asked five of our students to have, on the basis that

students like to hear information from those who they know have been there, done that, particularly if at the same institution. We also moved away from the hypothetical footage I'd used in version 1, although some of the clips are still there for amusement's sake. It was great to be able to show different examples of judicial interventions and how students dealt with them.

Legal writing – At present this is one of the least developed areas; so far all text-based: with a little guidance on coursework writing, an example of answering a problem question and detailed information about the various law essay competitions there are out there. New for the 2011–12 cohort will be some resources around note-taking and *Talking Essays*: a bank of real essays representing a range of grades which will include both written and audio lecturer comments. We hope this will go some way to helping students understand feedback they are given, often an area that universities fall down on in the NSS.

Exams – This is probably the starkest area, currently this contains a few tip-based pieces from past students. We're looking to add more over the coming year, highlighting where students tend to fall down under exam stress, as well as a resource around techniques for compiling notes for revision.

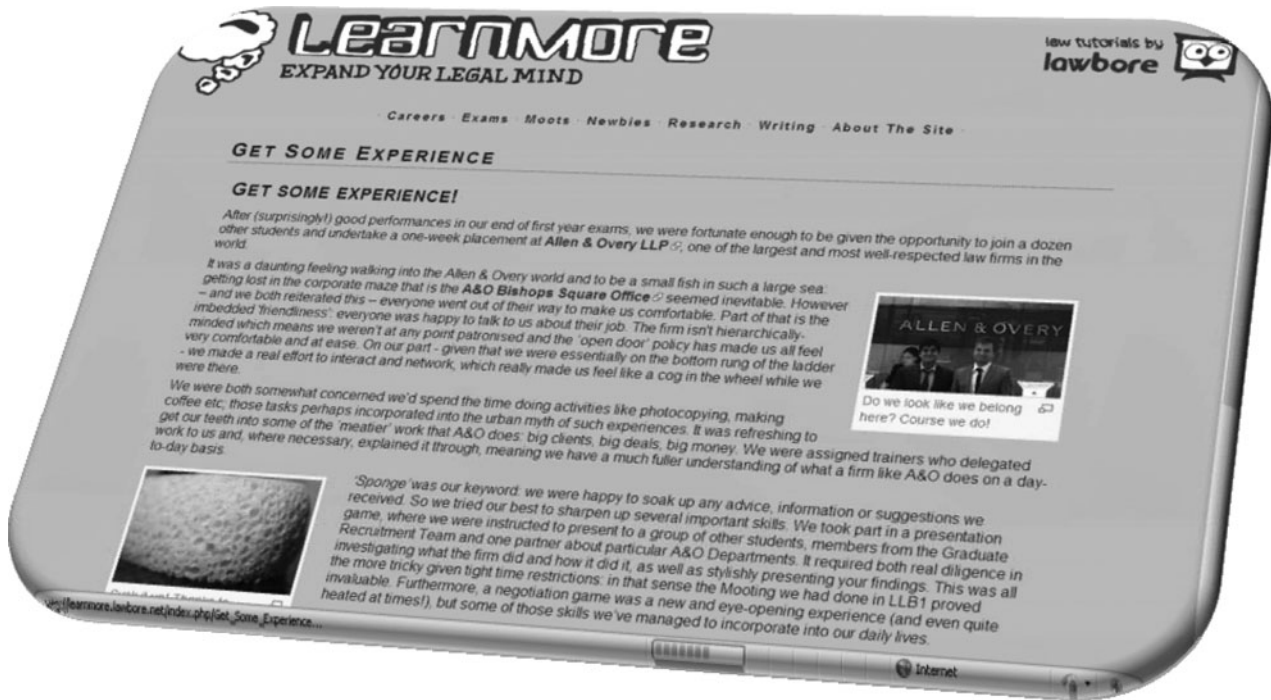
Careers – This is very much focused around articles introducing key milestones of the law student journey – highlighting skills and experiences via current student or alumni authors. Pieces include: *Get some experience!* *Pupillage: What should I expect?* *Testing your commercial awareness* and *The LPC: How hard can it be?* There is some crossover with the blog.

Newbies – Obviously focused on resources that will support students in their first few months of law: short pieces around how to get the best out of lectures and tutorials were the first items to go up. What's been great about Learnmore is that its development really grows with the students: I write new content sometimes as a direct result of questions I've been asked or random chats with students. The piece on *Remembering cases* came about because a student asked me for advice on how to get all those case names to lodge in her brain. I gave some brief advice at the time, did a bit of traditional research but couldn't find much to help her so used the twitter community to gather more ideas, and then put together the piece for Learnmore. Pieces on debating, *Debate or die*, and *Studying law abroad: worth a thought?* followed after random conversations with students.

For the new academic year we will be incorporating some video content, with students talking about their experiences as a new student – sharing the challenges they've faced and offering advice for the new first years coming through. One of my students got a fantastic ongoing pro bono position at Reprieve after reading a tweet I sent and so I asked her to write a piece on how Twitter can be a useful tool as a law student (*Twitter for lawyers*).

Research – Whilst it's encouraging the students do see legal research as one of the most pivotal skills they need to learn, there are still many difficulties in getting students to understand the nature of legal sources. There are also lots of issues around getting students to question the authority of items they find online. Basics around understanding legal abbreviations, law reports and





practitioner texts are tackled here alongside simple breakdowns of different legal sources. Talking slideshows dominate here as a way of bringing alive a somewhat dry subject. In future I hope to use testimonial-style video as well as 'how-to' screen casts to help students develop their skills in online databases.

Students helping students

In our survey, an overwhelming 71% of LLB students surveyed said they valued the mix of advice from lecturers and other students. It was good to have this confirmed, as Lawbore has long focused on involving students in the content, where possible. In the early days, one of the Topic Guides housed links to pieces written specifically for our current students by alumni. This idea matured into *Future Lawyer* eventually. The blog is a mixture of news items running alongside interviews with alumni (video and text based) and articles and event reviews written by current students.

An article in a US law journal touched on the benefits of peer learning within law and backed up what I've always suspected – that students will hold in far greater esteem what their peers say to anything I can spout. Herndon says "Law professors' personal stories about 'how I learned it' – somewhat meaningless and antiquated...Novice peers, are perfect mirrors to help each other reflect and regulate law student learning" (Herndon, 2010⁸).

Obviously social networks are all about us getting a window into the world of our friends, and this is a chance to see how others have used their interest in law

to further themselves. Quotes from my undergraduates within the survey also confirm this:

"Advice given by students is closer to your heart than that given by your professors"

"I felt inspired by reading about what others in our position have achieved"

Where next for Learnmore?

Put simply: more content, more student contributions and experimenting with new methods of helping students learn, particularly around film. No doubt this academic year will throw up lots more ideas. I would like to take Learnmore to a wider audience too; perhaps with versions on different platforms – a Learnmore app maybe? Essentially I'd like to improve on what we have and get more comments like these ones!

"It helps to have lots of different resources to learn from, not being reliant on always learning by reading!"
Different resources – online tutorials, slideshows and videos – present the information in a fun and stimulating way..."

"It gets intense going through textbooks as reading can become a chore – nice to have something to lighten it"

"Suits different people and how they study"

"A confidence booster for all new students!"

"Gives you the extra help and techniques you need to survive in this course"

Learnmore pieces mentioned in this article:

Understanding legal abbreviations and citations

Getting to grips with law reports

Mooting FAQ's

Judges: scary or softies?

Saying it right

Take it from the students

Get some experience!

Pupillage: what should I expect?

Testing your commercial awareness

The LPC: how hard can it be?

Remembering cases

Studying law abroad: worth a thought?

Debate or die

Twitter for Lawyers

Footnotes

¹Lawbore, <http://lawbore.net>

²Future Lawyer, <http://blog.lawbore.net>

³Learnmore, <http://learnmore.lawbore.net>

⁴David Nicholas and Ian Rowlands, 'Information behaviour of the researcher of the future' A ciber briefing paper (11 January 2008) <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/reppres/gg_final_keynote_11012008.pdf> accessed 01 September 2011

⁵Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries <http://www.erialproject.org/project-details/background/> noted in Liz Dwyer, 'Just Google it: how search engines stunt college students' research skills' (*Good Magazine*, August 30 2011) <<http://www.good.is/post/just-google-me-why-the-search-engine-might-be-stunting-college-students-research-skills/>> accessed 10 September 2011

⁶Nicholas Carr, 'The web shatters focus, rewires brains' (*Wired Magazine*, 24 May 2010) <http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/05/ff_nicholas_carr/> accessed 05 August 2011. This article appeared the month before publication of Carr's book.

⁷Larry Spence, 'The usual doesn't work: why we need problem-based learning' (2004) *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 4(4) 485–493

⁸Lynn C. Herndon, 'Help you, help me: why law students need peer teaching' (2010) *UMKC L. Rev.* 78, 809

Biography

Emily Allbon has been law librarian at City University since 2000. She is a Fellow of the HEA and is currently completing her second year of an MA in Academic Practice. Interest in Lawbore and Learnmore has meant she has given conference papers on the subject regularly, in 2011 speaking at the Learning in Law Annual Conference (Warwick), Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference (London) and at the BIALL Conference (Gateshead). She was very excited to receive several internal awards within City in 2011, including the Student Voice Award (voted for by students). She was also runner-up for the SLA Europe Information Professional Award 2011.