

Exploiting Connections – the Modern Law Library within a Virtual Learning Environment

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Introduction

I should say at the outset that I am not an expert. My knowledge is greater now than when I first started to prepare for this session but my direct experience is still limited. The College of Law has been using Blackboard for a year. The Knowledge Manager and Administrator for the College VLE is part of the Information Services team, which assures us a certain degree of involvement. This is therefore more in the way of an overview of the existing and the possible and hopefully will encourage those attending to contribute their experiences and enable future sharing.

The title of this talk was designed to encompass both the linking up of resources and the co-operation of information staff. Are we achieving added value for our physical resources and how do we make the most use of existing expertise? Exploiting our colleagues, in the sense of recycling their efforts, is extremely important in this context. Development of online tutorials and making collections of resource links is very labour-intensive. One of the mantras of content management systems is “Write once, use often.” And I have done this in the preparation of this session, exploiting (with permission I should add!) the work of, among others, Caroline Williams and her colleagues at Manchester Metropolitan University Library. Should we be doing more to collaborate? Certainly we should, if the low level of response to Sue Pettit’s survey conducted via Lis-Law last year is anything to go by. Lord Woolf, in his March 2004 speech delivered at the Squire Law Library in Cambridge said that libraries must evolve to meet the needs of their readers. Information professionals are adept at this and one of the reasons is our ability to forge connections. Now is the time to exploit these connections!



Marianne Barber

What is a VLE?

But what exactly is a VLE? The JISC definition is “an electronic system that can provide online inter-actions of various kinds that can take place between learners and tutors, including online learning.” I think it is important to be aware of how your particular institution defines it. Is it seen as a “Valuable Learning Environment” or rather something that is “Almost but not quite as good as the real thing”? Although arguably online, or e-learning, is a possible outcome from any resources placed on a VLE, I decided at the outset that this was a separate topic. However, there are parallels, again, between the essential elements of successful e-learning and an effective VLE:

- **Dynamism:** information constantly refreshed. Materials need to be interesting and useful, easy to digest and of good quality to keep people coming back – what website designers sometimes call “stickiness”. Some examples might be press releases, parliamentary debates, petitions to the EU on a topical issue.
- **Different options:** it is recognised that there are many different special needs and that people learn differently – in other words, more is demanded these days than just the “sheep-dip” approach.
- **Change management:** for successful change management, planning for and creating short term wins is crucial.
- **Aims:** what outcomes are you trying to achieve, what are you actually “selling” and does it fit in with the needs of your core business? LPC students, for example, need to be able to select the best information source for a particular legal research question and to conduct their own research.

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- **Winning hearts and minds of users:** lack of commitment from staff can, at best, confuse a user as to whether they should be spending time on the computer at all. You could also, of course, be unavoidably tied to the fortunes of other departments. The LIS departments of some academic institutions have made a policy decision to carry on developing the library web-page as a separate gateway until they see more evidence of VLE success.

VLE or WebOPAC?

What advantage then is there in channelling library resources through the VLE instead of the WebOPAC? The VLE page becomes personal to the user – the quickest route with the least possible sifting becomes the way of choice. If we want to exploit those expensive databases and, at the same time, follow the dictum of Raganathan to “save the time of the reader”, one way to achieve this is by pushing resources towards the students inside their course pages on the VLE. I’ve included a hypothetical mock-up here by way of illustration. Some of the elements you may already be familiar with. Some are only just coming on to the horizon.

- Good evening, Marianne. Your next workshop will be on money laundering. Here is the relevant legislation url (linkbuilder). Here are some journal articles and the relevant cases. The library has a video on this. Would you like a synopsis? Click here to reserve a copy. I see you find quizzes useful. Would you like to test your knowledge now? Yes/No.

Some VLEs are programmed to build up a profile of an individual student – where they are in the learning process and which learning methods suit them. I have included a link to a video training programme in the example as the College of Law produce the LNTV videos. However, you might consider links to radio programmes such as Radio4’s “Unreliable Evidence”. Link-building software is developing to meet demand. Cataloguing of such items as “learning objects” through the use of metadata is becoming possible. Both Westlaw and LNUK have link-building products and are very happy to liaise with individuals to discuss their use. HMSO now have permanent urls for each piece of legislation, BAILII has recognisable urls for cases and TSO is working towards the use of DOIs (digital object identifiers) for Consultation Papers and other documents in its library.

“Spectrum of involvement”

In order to share experience it may help to identify your own position relative to VLEs – what I’ve called the “spectrum of involvement”. Are you co-habiting, just good friends or not yet introduced? When you have established this, how far do you wish to go along the route of integration? Achieving the state of co-habiting depends very much

on the cultural position both of your academic department (ie the law faculty) and of your library service – and maybe also the relationship between the two. Whereabouts do you wish the library service to sit? Do you wish to become invisible or is it important to remain a recognisable distinct organisation?

Manchester Metropolitan University – “co-habiting”

I’ve taken MMU as an example of what I’ve called “co-habiting” – I’m sure there are many others. MMU are now developing their second generation of online tutorials. Those specific to law are PoLer (Practical Online Legal Electronic Research), BLIS (Basic Legal Information Skills), Step into Law. The LIS staff have also produced generic tutorials which can be adapted to suit any course – InfoSkills. A major element of their success would seem to be that they have allocated sufficient resources in terms of training and staff time. They now share their considerable expertise and experience with the rest of the subject team and are happy to do this with the wider academic community as well. Focus groups were consulted to help with design and a particular partnership, in the case of law, was forged with the academics. Practical Legal Research assignments are now only released onto the VLE of a particular LPC student when a minimum of 50% score has been achieved on the PoLer exercise. Since PoLer was introduced the pass rate for PLR has gone from 75% to 98%.

College of Law – “just good friends”

In the “just good friends” category I would put institutions like my own where the LIS input so far has been limited to a link to the “Information Resources” web-page from the VLE, although library staff also provide user support and supply the knowledge management/administration. Quite a few institutions use reading lists on the VLE to link to library resources via the WebOPAC. At the College of Law the unusual step was taken of loading the complete course materials onto Blackboard at the outset, as well as the more usual CAL exercises and discussion groups. The library staff, up to now, have not been directly responsible for designing learning objects, such as CAL exercises for PLR, although we are gradually becoming involved with this. We are beginning to investigate the possibilities of linking to electronic resources. We are also setting up discussion groups as virtual meeting rooms for library staff in different branches. As I mentioned before, Blackboard at the College is only just coming to the end of its pilot year, but already it has been accepted as the norm. (A part-time student overheard one evening saying to the rest of the group “Well, it wasn’t on Blackboard” – implication: it doesn’t exist.)

“Not yet been introduced”

If your institution has a VLE but you have “not yet been introduced”, there is a lot you can do to prepare (always providing you have decided that you will want to be involved.) The LawPaths project will soon be a valuable starting point for anyone new to devising guides and tutorials. Thinking in terms of change management, produce some quick gains examples. We all know how short a time it takes for a busy academic to “file and pass on”. At a recent JISC workshop on promoting electronic resources a recurring theme was the need for case-studies – live examples to demonstrate an idea in action to a course designer or lecturer. Publishers can be good allies in this – it is very much in their interest to have their products promoted to the end user. Using link-building software may also solve some of the copyright headaches (NB. You need to check whether your VLE will permit opening a link in a new window otherwise you will appear to be opening somebody else’s material inside yours). Deep-linking, however, raises its own permission issues. Turning to the human connections, form partnerships; get close to library staff in other departments which are already involved. Lawyers themselves are traditionally resistant to technology, as illustrated by the following quote from the 2nd BILETA report into IT and Legal Education: “. . . quite rightly, law schools tend to observe changes in technology from a distance rather than risk scarce resources on the so-called ‘bleeding-edge’ of technology”. This was written way back in 1996 and there have been some considerable changes since! Find the enthusiast in the law faculty – there is always one. It was noted recently that skill boundaries for academic law librarians are becoming fuzzy. If you are involved with electronic resources you already know a lot of the jargon and can act as interpreter between the technical staff and the academics. If you are aware that your institution is about to acquire a VLE, make your skills known to the project manager. Often our profession is so well hidden that managers simply don’t realise what we have to offer. Collect together examples of other people’s online tutorials and CAL exercises for legal research skills. Check on the compatibility of your library system with the proposed VLE. As with any change, prepare your LIS staff, or if you are a lone subject librarian, band together with the enthusiasts. Tap into official sources of support – the JISC website is probably already familiar to you but also, for example, Durham University hosts an annual conference for Blackboard users.

Copyright issues

Getting more involved with a VLE raises some side issues, such as copyright. In the enthusiasm for making all things no more than a mouse-click away it is possible to overlook the implications of using digital materials. In fact, where academics are becoming publishers we may find ourselves increasingly playing the role of copyright policemen –

unable to look away if we see an IP crime being committed! One plus point must be the ability to link to permission statements and conditions. Another issue worth considering is whether we are taking away the users’ opportunity to research and select sources for themselves? My initial reaction when I first heard to what extent some institutions were integrating their information resources with VLEs was, I admit, one of concern – “Isn’t this an extreme form of spoon-feeding?” But, thinking about the book-selection skills a librarian exercises in collection-building I turned to Ranganathan again. If you are hunting for pizza bases in a supermarket don’t you prefer it when they take you to the shelf and make sure you find them – and a selection of the other ingredients you need to produce a finished pizza? Google isn’t going to go away, no matter how much information professionals publicly scoff at it but privately admit to using it all the time. By gathering together relevant sources and direct links to individual documents within the VLE where other learning materials are held we could begin to beat the mechanical search engine at its own game. By selecting sources for inclusion in the VLE, course designers and information staff are putting them forward as reliable and up-to-date.

Paper v electronic sources

There is also the continuing balance between paper and electronic formats to consider. The project executive for our VLE admitted that “in the real world, access to electronic copies will not always be so easy . . . the materials used by lawyers will remain a mix of the two.” It is already difficult enough to engage law students in learning how the books work. Paradoxically, we could find ourselves using an electronic medium to teach paper research skills – in some cases we are already doing this. Lastly, having worked out what we think a VLE is and what we want to do with it, we need to check that both teachers and students are achieving their expected outcomes in terms of information gathering. The issue of quality sources has already been mentioned. As an illustration of how easy it is to include information just because we have it, the ISO for evaluating library sources is 2789. Information overload is itself a sign that we are not doing our job effectively. More straightforward ways of finding out how successful we’ve been are focus groups, talking to front line library staff and students. Meaningful user-statistics are also very useful if you can get them.

Conclusions

My overall observation is that there is great potential for further promotion of good quality information resources, especially legal resources, via a VLE. To apply Gorman’s revision of Ranganathan’s laws “Respect all forms by which knowledge is communicated” and “Use technology intelligently to enhance service”. The extent to which this is entered into depends upon the intentions of the parent

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institution as a whole and whether or not it is better to “provide” rather than “guide” in the matter of information provision. If we provide too much how will our students gain the necessary skills, as stipulated by the Law Society, to be able to do their own legal research? How will they learn to judge between a reliable, complete source of information and a poor second-hand report? If we simply guide,

we risk them either not reaching the sources we have, or giving up under a bewildering array and falling back on Google. Either way, for information professionals there is no doubt of the need to share resources and experience in relation to working with VLEs. “Telling stories”, including the things that haven’t worked, will benefit all of us, wherever we find ourselves in the spectrum of involvement.

Appendix: Points which emerged from the discussions that followed

- Considerable overlap between the issues which content systems managers have already faced and those emerging for VLEs.
- VLE take-up is very patchy across the UK.
- Some use them just as a depository for teaching materials (and will just keep adding to them since they have large capacity for storage)
- If you use a VLE you should have a defined idea of what it is you are offering.
- Good design and realistic targets are vital.
- Don’t underestimate the importance of testing.
- Adoption of a VLE increases the amount of support needed but it is also advisable to set realistic limits on user expectations from the outset.
- Australian and Canadian academic libraries now have experience (and data) on providing the virtual reference librarian – typically involving early and late shifts to minimise unavailability.
- There could be some resistance to the idea of LIS staff being involved with the VLE both from academics worried about the possible limitations of copyright and from the institution as a whole.
- To become involved (and the earlier the better) LIS staff need to be pro-active and take hold of chances as they occur (even if this means their resources will be stretched thinly for a while?)
- There is a need for better training/understanding of the pedagogy involved in the use of Discussion Boards (chat-rooms).
- On practical matters, the increased use of wireless lap-tops can be surprisingly disruptive in a traditional academic library and undisputed is the observation that photocopying decreases as printing goes up and up!
- The negative aspects of VLEs are probably only just beginning to emerge as those in the forefront start to evaluate their progress so far.
- The use of a VLE can actually create a barrier to access and cross-departmental sharing of resources unless library and teaching staff are enrolled in each and every small group of students on the system.
- Courses and assessment in information literacy skills must be embedded in the curriculum to counter-balance the effect of packaging and pre-selection of materials for the VLE.

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Marianne Barber’s first professional post was as Inter-library Loans Librarian at Portsmouth Poly. During an eleven year interval whilst bringing up her children she trained as an adult literacy tutor and a counsellor, acquired a great deal of committee experience and improved her negotiating and time-management skills! She came into law librarianship by chance and has been “hooked” ever since. She is on the Liverpool committee of the SCL (Society for Computers and Law), the BIALL WebEditorial Board as well as the steering group of the current BIALL project to set up a Register of UK Online Resources. She is a past chair of the Liverpool Law Librarians Group and a current co-owner of Lis-law. After nearly 10 years running the library at the Chester branch of the College of Law she was promoted to the post of Information Development Manager. Her job description includes activities which affect the College as a whole – such as copyright advice, management of electronic resources, Athens administration, SENDA compliance.