Developing Links Using Online Learning

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Forming a case study, this article will explore the nature of the relationship between the Library and the Law School, and how collaboration between the two led to the successful implementation of an online course for law students.

Context

Subject librarianship
Since 1996, I have worked as the subject librarian for Law. A major component of my role in supporting staff and students is to train students in the use of legal materials. I participate in the legal research training of students on the undergraduate degree, Postgraduate Diploma in Law and MA courses. The Legal Practice Course (LPC) has an established Practical Legal Research (PLR) module, now mirrored on the Bar Vocational Course (BVC); it is with PLR that I have most input.

Prior to September 2000, my teaching load increased substantially from one year to the next, as I became more established within the Law School and the availability of e-resources accelerated. Consequently, I began to explore different teaching methods to allow my input to continue and to relieve the pressures on my time.

Relations with the School of Law
While the University Library manages my post, the Law School finances it. This makes it unique within the current staffing structure of the University Library, but encourages a close working relationship with the academic staff.

The willingness on the part of the Law School to involve the Library in their courses, and on my own part to take on that role, means that a good relationship between myself and key staff has evolved. Therefore, my proposal to move towards a different mode of delivery was accepted and
even welcomed; liaison during the creation and delivery of the course was able to remain informal and, arguably, more productive.

**PLR and progression to an online course**
PLR is a compulsory course undertaken by all LPC and BVC students to assess their skills and competency in legal research. My own role within PLR - particularly as part of the LPC - has increased significantly. I am now regarded as a member of the PLR team by both Law School staff and students.

I work closely with the rest of the PLR team to create a comprehensive learning experience for students. I have designed a series of *Legal Research Worksheets* in relation to paper-copy legal resources. Initially seen as an optional extra for the conscientious, they have been integrated into the course manual by the PLR team, making them compulsory and demanding feedback. These worksheets have proved to be a valuable training tool, but in recent years the PLR assessment process has developed to include electronic research. Therefore, it has become necessary to extend training provision to include electronic resources.

Initially, students were offered workshops in small groups to practise using a variety of electronic resources. Despite the practical emphasis, the workshops were restrictive - students attended a single workshop at a prescribed time and place; devising and supervising numerous workshops was time consuming for me at an already busy time of the year.

The electronic element of PLR was a perfect candidate for progression to an online course, and the LPC and BVC students were chosen as the target user group because:
- their courses are largely skills-based
- the PLR course was already well established
- students already have legal knowledge
- as postgraduate students they are relatively mature
- the part-time cohort of the LPC responds well to initiatives which enable them to work off-campus
- the original workshops were time consuming and restrictive.

**PoLeR: Practical Online Legal Electronic Research**
*What is it?*
PoLeR aims to equip students with the skills to perform legal research using electronic resources prior to formal assessment. Students access and complete the course online, then access and submit their formal assessment online.

PoLeR is based around four databases hosted by the same provider, Butterworths. The reason behind this choice was:
- the stability of provision
- the ability to search for different types of legal material
- the desire to promote a then relatively new service to students
There are three main areas to the course:
- tutorials - these contain the information needed to complete the quiz
- PoLeR Quiz - students have five attempts to complete it within a given timescale, and attain a certain score to progress to the next stage
- PLR Assessment - this is the formal assessment set by academic staff.

How is it integrated into PLR?
Academic staff view PoLeR as an integral part of the PLR course. PoLeR has been devised to cover skills in which students must demonstrate competence, and it is used as a compulsory part of the assessment process. Students must achieve a quiz score of at least 50% to be granted access to the full PLR assessment, and they must access and submit this assessment online via PoLeR. In addition, references are made to the skills acquired using PoLeR and to their application to other subjects studied within the LPC.

Communication throughout the stages:
Proposal
I proposed an online solution early in 2000. Initially, informal discussions were held with Media Services and a WebCT-active colleague from the Law School to see whether this was a viable option and to draw on their experience. I then met with the PLR course leader to suggest that we utilise WebCT. We agreed:
- which databases PoLeR would be founded upon
- the timescale for PoLeR being operational
- that PoLeR would be compulsory
- that a time limit would be imposed
- that completion of the quiz was a requirement of the course
- the quiz would complement the skills necessary to complete the assessment.

Creation
Following the initial proposal and discussions, communication continued throughout the creation of PoLeR. Law School support was vital for the success of PoLeR, and so a degree of ownership was necessary. Once I had developed some content, another informal meeting was held to ensure that the course was going in the right direction, this time also including the LPC course leader.

The Law School gave me a free hand to design the course and produce the content, their only stipulation being that it prepared students for the assessment, which itself had to satisfy certain criteria and allow students to demonstrate particular skills. My initiation to course development was a two-day web authoring course and I made use of the support and guidance of the Learning & Teaching Unit; without their constant advice, the development of PoLeR would have been a far lengthier process.

The PLR team were asked to test PoLeR for themselves once it was complete. They were encouraged to comment on the structure, layout,
wording and content of PoLeR, in particular the functionality and level of difficulty of the quiz. Feedback was generally positive but inevitably resulted in some alterations being made.

During 2000-1, and to a lesser extent during 2001-2, this dialogue continued in order to monitor progress, troubleshoot any problems as they arose, revise deadlines and manage PoLeR.

**Integration of assessment**
At an early stage, it was agreed that the formal coursework undertaken by LPC students to assess their competency in electronic legal research would be incorporated into the online course. The PLR course leader and I liaised regularly to ensure that the assessment was developed by academic staff, and uploaded into PoLeR by me, so as to be available for students at the appropriate time.

Discussions were also held to decide under what circumstances students would be able to access the assessment. Conditional settings were imposed within PoLeR, so that access to the assessment was dependent upon students having completed the quiz to a satisfactory level and within a particular timescale.

The PLR team also agreed that students should submit their assessment online, and be able to view their results online in order to complete the electronic cycle.

At each stage, I was able to feed management information back to the PLR team for them to monitor progress. This resulted in a high completion rate - students failing to meet deadlines could be followed up and their difficulties resolved.

**A United Front**
The PLR course leader introduces me to students at the beginning of the PLR course as part of the team. This ensures that students see the Library - and me - as an integral part of PLR rather than as something separate.

This united front is reinforced throughout the course. A lecture is delivered jointly by the PLR course leader and myself specifically to introduce students to PoLeR; the course is taken seriously, and not seen as an optional extra supplied by the Library.

As my role includes the management of PoLeR as well as its creation, students are expected to communicate with me if they have problems with PoLeR, or have failed to gain automatic access to some part of it. They only contact PLR staff if their problem lies with the formal assessment.

**End of year reviews**
At the end of 2000-1, the success of PoLeR was assessed and students were asked to complete evaluation forms. Again, this was done jointly between the Law School and the Library. I created the questionnaire and
collated the information, but academic staff distributed and collected the questionnaires during class time to encourage a high return. The feedback covered:

- the structure of the material
- the relationship between the tutorials and the quiz
- how often and for how long PoLeR was used
- features of the course that were and were not used.

The data gathered confirmed that it would be worthwhile running PoLeR in the future and informed the updating process. In the main, modifications affected the quiz aspect of the course. Rather than three mini quizzes, one quiz was developed covering four areas, and certain question types were omitted, having caused many students difficulties.

The PLR course leader changed for the year 2001-2. Informal meetings were held with the new course leader for the updating of PoLeR. This was based on feedback gained from staff and students, and our experiences of having run an online course for a year.

At the end of 2001-2, feedback was gathered by the Law School as part of their evaluation of the LPC as a whole; course committees and staff/student liaison committees also provided a forum for raising issues throughout the year. In addition, students were asked to participate in an evaluation exercise as part of an information skills project, The Big Blue, a JISC funded project managed by the University Library. Students were asked to comment on:

- how useful PoLeR was towards the completion of their assessment
- whether their skills had improved as a result of PoLeR
- whether the skills acquired were applicable to other parts of the LPC

Responses were positive. Only one student who completed the questionnaire said PoLeR had not assisted their completion of the assessment, and only one said there had not been an improvement in their skills. Students also found it useful for other areas of the LPC, and in building their confidence in using electronic resources generally.

**Success**

PoLeR's success is illustrated by the desire of the Law School to continue implementation into the second year, and now the third. Feedback gathered from students has shown it to be a valuable learning experience, and one that is not limited to the PLR course, but which is useful to the LPC as a whole.

PoLeR has also been commended by the Law Society who validate the LPC, illustrating the innovative steps the Law School has taken in its approach to electronic legal research skills.

Citing the success of PoLeR, I developed a second course for the Law School, this time for the PGDL course. BLIS (Basic Legal Information Skills) runs along similar lines to PoLeR, and was embraced by the Law
School as the way forward. Similarly informal meetings were held with key staff during the proposal and creation of BLIS, and lecture time was given to introduce it to students. Now at the end of 2001-2, usage statistics show that it has been a worthwhile exercise. BLIS is also compulsory and underpins a formal assessment, but the assessment itself was not completed via BLIS. It would be advantageous to explore the feasibility of taking the assessment online to improve further the success of BLIS – this will be investigated pre-September 2002.

My work with WebCT also led to the creation in 2002 of LibWeb as a further avenue of communication between the Library and academic staff. LibWeb promotes the use of Library resources within online courses, and is automatically made available to all WebCT developers.

**Advantages of collaboration**

**Benefits for academic staff**
WebCT makes it easy to gather management information about a particular online course. Monitoring students logging onto the course, checking they have completed the quiz and their score, and whether they have uploaded their formal assessment, informs the management of PoLeR. Academic staff are able to target particular students and query their failure to comply with the requirements of the course.

Academic staff claim that there has been an improvement in students' skills since the inception of PoLeR. The quality of student assessments for this part of PLR has also improved so that more students now complete the assessment successfully on their first attempt.

As already mentioned, PoLeR has increased the status of the Law School with the Law Society, the validating body of the LPC. PoLeR was seen as innovative, with few, if any, other examples of this kind of development in the law subject area. The Law School is recognised for taking the electronic legal research skills element of the course seriously and delivering it in a groundbreaking way.

**Benefits for students**
The restrictions of workshops applied to students as well as myself. Students had to attend a particular workshop at a given time and place. Once the workshop had come to an end, they left the class with some practical exercises which, depending on individual skill levels, may or may not have been completed. An online course means that students are now able to work at their own pace, when and where it is convenient for them. This is particularly attractive for part-time students who have other demands on their time. They are still able to gain assistance from me, by email, telephone or in person if necessary, and they have a message board facility within PoLeR to seek help from peers. The content of PoLeR
remains available to students throughout the course, and they are able to refer to it whenever appropriate.

PoLeR is not simply a case of reading through some notes and doing a quiz. Students must access their formal assessment via PoLeR, and once they have done the research and formulated their answer, submit their assessment online by uploading the file into PoLeR. To complete the process, they are able to find out whether they passed the assessment by checking the appropriate section of PoLeR. The online course therefore offers a total electronic experience, from learning the skills to applying them, and finding out how well they have done.

Completion of PoLeR provides students with transferable skills. As well as electronic legal research, it embraces other basic IT skills, such as file management, along with general skills, for example time management. The evaluation from 2001-2 has shown that students themselves think the skills developed using PoLeR have been used in other parts of the LPC, and it is argued that these skills are also transferable beyond the LPC into the workplace. Students may not always have access to the particular databases PoLeR is based around, but the ability to research an online database, in principle, is the same.

The compulsory nature of PoLeR forces even the less confident student to participate in an online environment. The submission of their formal assessment via PoLeR means there is no alternative for those who previously would have avoided electronic resources. These students may not appreciate it as a benefit, but working to improve their electronic research and other IT skills now will be advantageous in the future.

Benefits for the Library
From my own point of view, running an online course year on year is far less time consuming than running significant numbers of workshops. Admittedly, in the first year, creation time plus the troubleshooting that you would expect with a new project meant the load was comparable to more traditional delivery methods. However, it was more manageable because I was able to create the course during a quieter time of year. In subsequent years, it has taken up less time, only involving a revision of the quiz and checking tutorial content for necessary changes and updating.

PoLeR is also far less repetitive. In previous years, I ran 13-14 workshops during a two-week period to provide an opportunity for all LPC students to attend and familiarise themselves with three or four databases. This was repeated for the BVC and, prior to the creation of BLIS, for the PGDL students as well.

PoLeR has done a fantastic job in promoting the Library and the role we can play in information skills training. The Library and the Law School have been put on an equal footing in respect of this training, so that the Library is able to complement and support the work of the academic staff in providing students with the skills they need.
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