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Citation: Allbon, E. (2005). IT'S ALIVE! The birth of Lawbore and the Indispensability of the Law Librarian. Legal Information Management, 5(4), pp. 211-215. doi: 10.1017/s1472669605000903

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Legal Information Management, 5 (2005), pp. 211–215
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IT'S ALIVE! The Birth of LawBore and the Indispensability of the Law Librarian

Paper given by Emily Allbon at the 36th BIALL Annual Study Conference in Harrogate, June 2005.

Introduction

As soon as I saw the theme of the Harrogate conference, *'Gateways, Gatekeepers and Gatecrashers'*, I wanted to contribute, although the thought of doing a session unnerved me. I was keen to talk about my gateway, LawBore, and how it had changed since I first wrote an article on it in *Legal Information Management* back in 2003, but I also wanted to convey how creating LawBore had changed things for me within my workplace.

Emily Allbon

Background to LawBore

My inspiration for the site came from my observations of the law students at City University, both from the context of my teaching sessions and also from the questions I was being asked. It became apparent that students were heavily using the subscription databases (which was great – meaning that we are getting our money's worth) but did not have much familiarity with those legal websites which are free to all. This concerned me primarily because the aspirations of our students at City are vastly different. We run a CPE course where any would-be solicitors are generally in possession of training contracts from large law firms before beginning the course, and an LLB course where students are as likely to end up in a high street firm or a charity, as they are at a global firm. This disparity means that some of our students may end up working somewhere where a subscription to an expensive legal database is out of the question. I wanted to ensure that my students were not totally reliant on these services, and that they had access to other options.

Another issue was that undergraduates were often failing to stray from the security of their favourite textbook when researching for coursework. I wanted to find a way of making secondary sources such as journal articles, government papers and Law Commission reports more accessible.

Thirdly I hankered after somewhere students could feel that they had a space of their own, where they could find information on lots of related areas. Perhaps I wondered, something which I could extend, creating a resource where there wasn't one to answer a student's question. More on this later though…

I won't dwell too long on the practical issues involved in setting up the site, as this was covered in my previous article, but I joined forces with a first year law student, Andy Bromley, who I had become friends with, who just happened to have worked in internet design before deciding he wanted to be a lawyer. Andy's work was paid from funding I bid for from the library. He did all the technical programming required to set up the site, building the database which a potentially large site would need to gain its content from. We worked on the design together, researching countless websites and evaluating what worked and what didn't. We focused particularly on those websites which were aimed at young people - club and music sites. If we wanted to attract (and retain) our students, then the site would have to look cool. Work since 2003 has continued thanks to Howard Richardson, who took over from Andy (who has since decided not to be a lawyer) and he continues to provide the technical expertise for any new features on LawBore.

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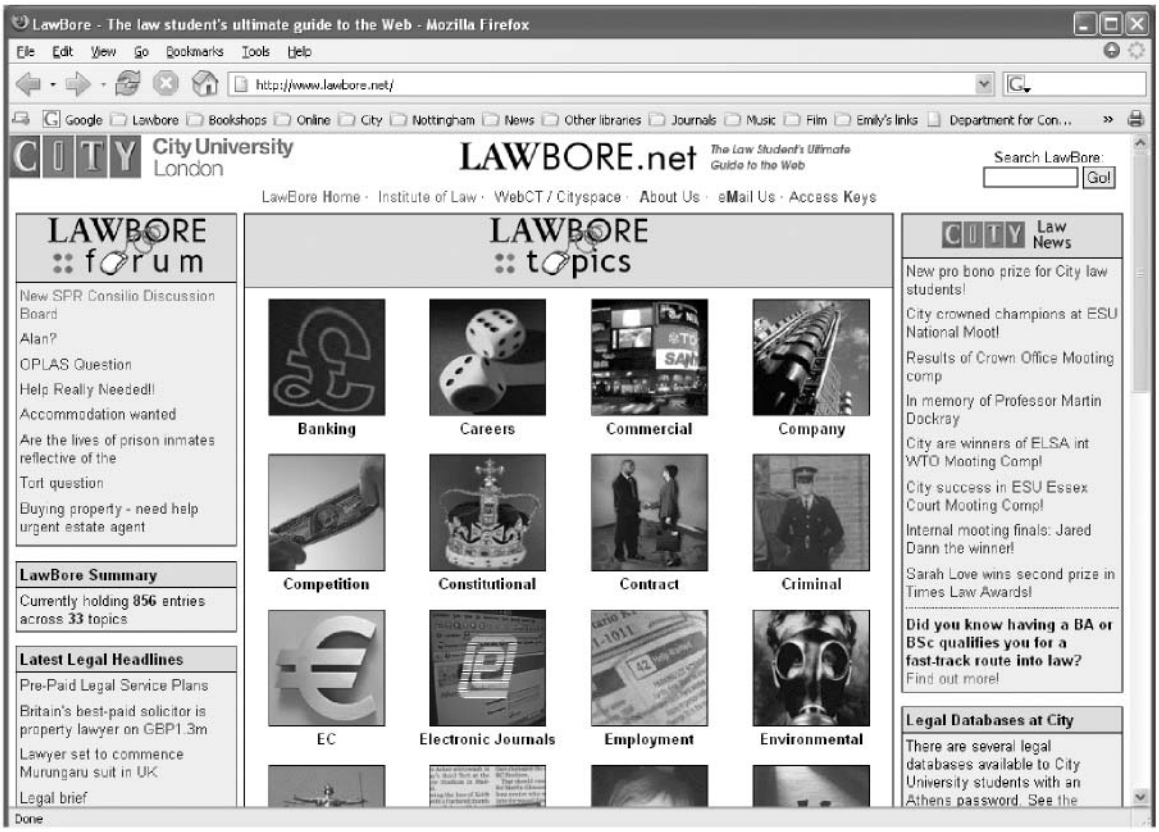

Figure 1. LawBore front page.

The challenges

The key challenge for the LawBore project has probably been time – I still have all my regular tasks to carry out. As sole law librarian there is no-one to pass work on to. The other difficulty has been getting others as fired up about the project as I am. At the beginning it was tough to convey the vision that you have to others without having anything concrete to show them. For the website to succeed it needs input and help from all parts of the law school – teaching staff, students, administrators and alumni. Not surprisingly, everyone has a lot of commitments and they don't always welcome new ones!

Another test has been trying to get the balance right, between making it easier for students to find useful resources, but without spoon-feeding them with everything they need. The idea behind LawBore is that it will provide users with selected resources, including deep-linked articles, enough to demonstrate how easy it is to find valuable items, but not by any means giving them a definitive list. The idea is to inspire, not to stunt the learning curve.

A major frustration for me has been that I cannot do everything – it's irritating that I can't put my new ideas into practice straightaway, but have to get Howard onto it. One day I may get round to doing a programming course…

Structure of LawBore

Each of the subject icons on LawBore is split into three categories:

- Web links
- Articles
- Hot docs

There are five links under each heading and these are known as the Top Picks – essentially the top five in terms of quality and relevance to City students (there are *More Links* for those keen students). The concept of having Top Picks relates to the fact that often students have only a limited amount of time to research – they may only have 25 minutes until a tutorial and so research needs to be done quickly. Not that all students leave research until the last minute of course! Web links are pretty self-explanatory and articles may either be freely available via journals like the *Web Journal of Current Legal Issues*, or deep-linked from a subscription database like Lexis or Westlaw. This means the student clicks on the link, gets an Athens sign-on screen and is then taken straight to that specific article without having to search for it.

Hot docs are basically a selection of official documents; government reports, Law Commission Reports or Consultation Papers, research studies, and sometimes a key piece of legislation or a case.

Each resource is given a brief write-up and a figure listing the number of people who have previously

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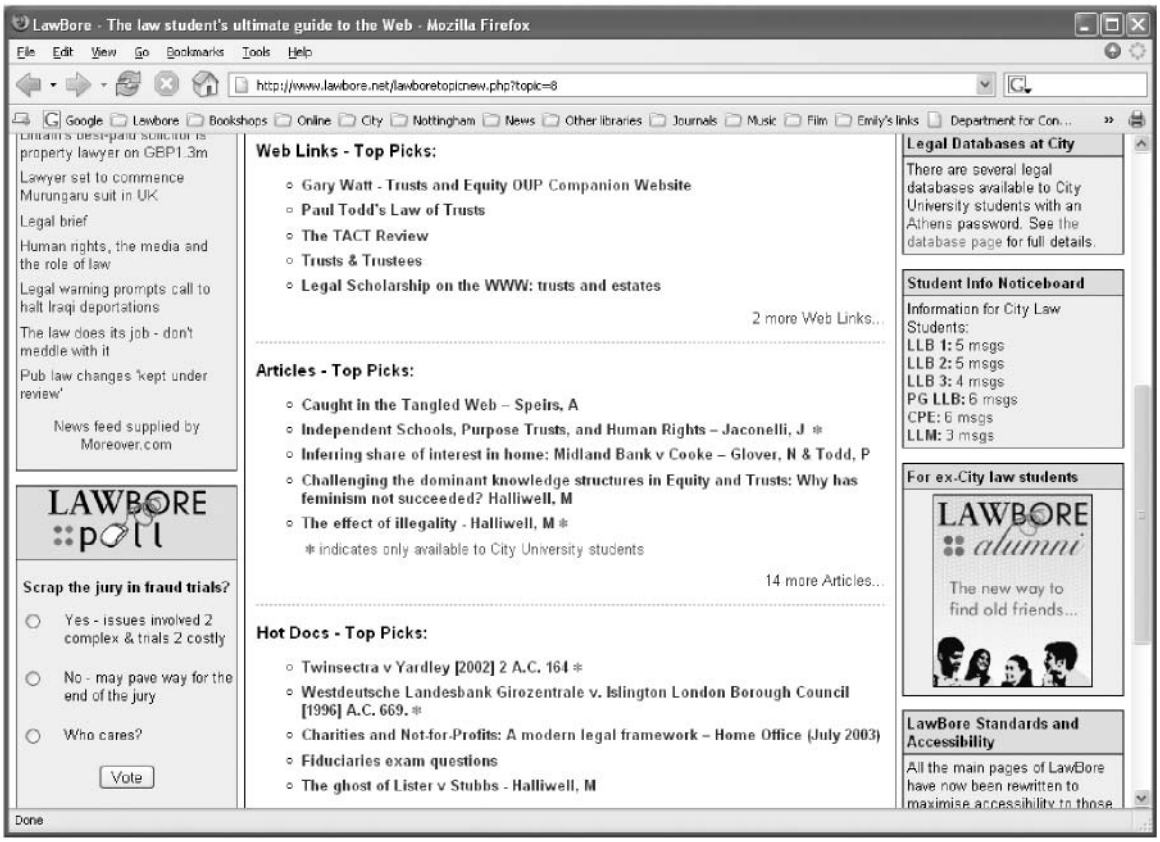

Figure 2. Structure of subject within LawBore (Equity).

accessed the link. Each subject area has its own pictorial icon and this stays with the user however deep into LawBore he goes, so he always knows which subject area he is in.

Key features of LawBore at a glance

- **Uses reading list material** – where possible, LawBore uses City reading lists as a basis for some of the resources recommended. These are selected readings though, and certainly only a "taster" of the reading list is available on LawBore.
- **Time-driven browsing** – Top Picks enable quick searching for the most relevant information. For those users with more time on their hands there are *More Links*.
- **Incorporation of articles/cases from subscription databases** – Selected materials (particularly in the Articles section) are deep-linked from Lexis, Westlaw or HeinOnline.
- **Ranking** – Being able to see how many people have accessed each individual link means that resources can be re-classified according to their popularity. For example, if a resource currently held in the *More Links* section is gaining popularity then it may be moved to the Top Picks section instead.
- **Subject orientated** – allowing students to browse resources via the modules they study. It is of course possible to search as well.

The community elements

I always had a desire to turn LawBore into more than just a gateway to resources. As sole law librarian, I have always found my job rewarding and interesting because I get asked for help on such a diverse scale. The law library is on one floor of the main library at City, and my office is located on the law library floor. This means for those law students who have made the library their second home, I am first port of call for anything that pops into their heads. Consequently I am often trying to find out answers to questions which probably aren't anything to do with me. This prompts me to try and think of answers. One example of this is that as part of the Legal Method/Legal Writing course (of which I teach the library element) all first year LLB students must participate in a moot. This is a terrifying prospect for many and I wondered if we might be able to create a resource to make this a less daunting process. After approaching the lecturer responsible for mooting with the idea of creating some video clips covering the do's and don't of mooting, she came up with some names and that summer two of our star mooters worked out a script together and we filmed them. As a first attempt it worked well – Mike Purdue, the senior

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lecturer who agreed to be the judge, was suitably gruff and the two students got into their roles (the hapless mooter, the mooter who thinks he's in an American film, the swot…) brilliantly. I'm pleased with the way it turned out, especially as Mooting.Net recommends us.

Careers is another area which LawBore tries to tackle. Again I gather up questions which I am asked and try to find alumni who might be able to write an article on that subject. These articles are found within the *Exclusive Content* section of LawBore.

Some undergraduates have slightly unrealistic ideas about what you actually do as a solicitor or barrister – imagining the glamour of life in court – so the Day in the Life column is a response to this. The Careers-Focused pieces try to provide information on questions which trouble students such as Why should you do a mini pupillage? What problems may I come across as a mature student? What's it like doing an LLM? What do I do if I don't get a training contract? One area I'd like to expand in the future is that of alternative career paths, to show the students that it isn't the end of the world if they don't get a training contract or pupillage.

The *Forum* is LawBore's chatroom and this is the feature I'm the least happy with. I've seen it work well, particularly in the revision period when students had all kinds of questions popping into their heads, and they could ask their peers for help, but it still has a long way to go before it reaches its potential. To achieve this it needs the lecturers to use it as a tool themselves. I am hopeful that the new academic year may see this working better, but I'm not sure if my vision for pre-seminar discussion questions to be posted up by lecturers will ever be achieved.

Other community elements include the *NoticeBoard* – messages which are generally emailed to students are sent to me by the law school administrators. This means there are always several places to check for items like room changes, coursework deadlines, book sales etc, as often students forget to check email or their university mailboxes are full. In addition to this is a *Pro Bono* section – detailing student experiences, and an *Alumni* section for our past students to keep in touch.

Problems?

My problems with LawBore have mainly been trying to get staff and students involved – LawBore will only remain fresh if it has new material appearing periodically. I need lecturers to be on board as they may have ideas that I have not considered, but with full teaching schedules, research and administrative tasks, some are understandably less enthused than others when it comes to giving more of their time.

The Forum raises some difficult issues. There will always be someone who posts inappropriately – all I can do is keep a close eye and draw on the advice of law school staff when problems arise.

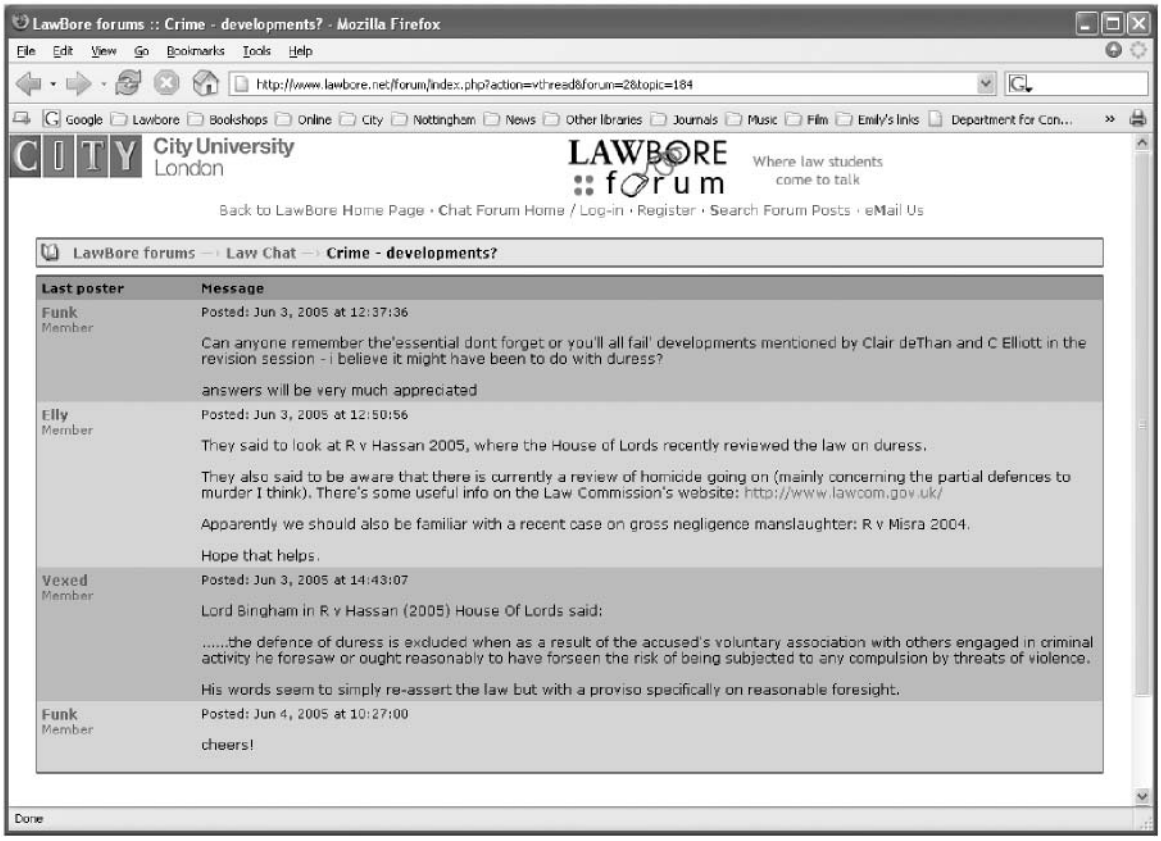

Figure 3. LawBore Forum.

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The indispensable law librarian?

Using my skills (organising information to meet user needs) in a new way has really made a difference to the perception of my role within my institution. LawBore is the one place within the university where staff, students and alumni are linked and in turn it puts the library at the centre – where it should be! The students' perception of the library has changed in that they see it as somewhere dynamic, where their needs are being considered and they are more proactive in coming to me with problems in the belief that I'll be able to sort them out.

What has been achieved through the site has meant that the law school also appreciates what the library can do in many new areas. I have been invited to participate in matters I was not previously involved in including communication, marketing and careers provision. The informal nature of LawBore means that many things are possible here which simply wouldn't be viable on the main www.city.ac.uk site.

For me it has meant that I can be much more proactive, picking up gaps in student knowledge via their questions, and then providing an answer extremely quickly which will reach lots of them at once, indeed often before many students even knew there was a gap.

Where next?

My main priorities include promoting the Forum more strongly to the new intake, and encouraging lecturers to play a more active role in its development. Also I hope to have a new area dedicated to hard copy resources – somewhere students can go for guidance on using items like Raistrick, *Halsbury's Statutes* and *Halsbury's Laws*. Finally I need to continue to concentrate on tracking down past students who are willing to share their experiences with our students.

Biography

Emily has been Law Librarian at City University since 2000, after completing her MSc at the same institution. Since then she has been busy creating the successful LawBore website and has just finished her CPE at Nottingham Law School which she undertook via distance learning, whilst continuing to work full-time.

Legal Information Management, 5 (2005), pp. 215–219
© BIALL Printed in the United Kingdom doi:10.1017/S1472669605000915

Small Jurisdictions...Big Ideas

Paper given by Nancy Matthews and Angela Otterwell at the 36th BIALL Annual Study Conference in Harrogate, June 2005.

Introduction

How do you get two solo information professionals in two separate small island jurisdictions to give one presentation, talking as one? Especially two who had never met together until the day before they were due to give the presentation at the 2005 BIALL conference in Harrogate The way this came about neatly sums up what it is like to be an information professional in a small jurisdiction. You spend a long time on the telephone and email, you take the initiative, collaborate, share ideas and bring out the best in each other. In short, you reach out beyond your little island, because not to do so means not to operate effectively.

The presentation we collaborated on tackled the freedoms and challenges of working in a small jurisdiction – the key aspects of what it means to be a law librarian/information professional in a law firm on a small island. First and foremost, small jurisdictions have to think big to survive; they have to be flexible in their government and legislation, stable in politics, and always consider their international reputation. This is at the forefront of the work of a law firm in a small jurisdiction, and is consequently vital in our work. It makes for a varied, challenging, and liberating career.

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