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Innovative Involvement not Embarrassing Intervention: Using Technology to Connect with Students without Treading on Virtual Toes

Abstract: Emily Allbon recounts her experiences in integrating social networking tools into her work with law students and, in particular, how she has integrated them with her prize-winning portal – Lawbore. She also documents her use of personal response systems in her teaching sessions.
Keywords: social networking; law libraries; law students; legal research

Introduction

When I saw the call for papers for the 2009 Conference I was keen to talk about the idea of connecting with our users and how far we should get involved with their social networks. Thinking of a title was deathly and I think some people were disappointed when I changed it from "Get out of my Face(book): using technology to connect with students without emulating embarrassing dad at the disco." There had been some quite prominent newspaper reports on how students were not interested in seeing their universities on Facebook or MySpace. (*Students tell universities: Get out of MySpace*![1]). More recent headlines on this have included: *Facebook wouldn't be the same if my mother wasn't stalking me!*'[2] and *Facebook is for old fogies*![3]

For most academic librarians the challenge offered today, more than ever, is that of getting our students to recognise that we have something to offer them; that our expertise can make their lives easier. We need to make clear that their research will become less of a hurdle if they take on board the recommendations we give them, use our online tutorials and attend the training we run.

When I first started at City in 2000, I was only a few years older than my undergraduates and about the same age as the average GDL student. This made it easy for me to fool myself into thinking I knew what they wanted, as well as what they needed. Things are very different now in the post-30 world, and I have to work much harder to connect. I worry that the highlight for my students during my teaching programme last year was when I unwittingly stepped in the wastepaper basket and careered across the floor!

The Web 2.0 answer?

Much of the conference this year (and indeed in 2008) focused on the technologies available, and how we harness them to better connect with our users. Many BIALL members have been experimenting with blogs, wikis, Twitter, Facebook and instant messaging. There are lots of good examples of this within the academic legal information field. The Bodleian Law Library has totally embraced the Web 2.0 revolution with their excellent Bod Blog[4], Facebook and Twitter presence, as well as social bookmarking via Delicious. Blogs are also used very effectively at Birkbeck by Wendy Lynwood[5] and LSE by Maria Bell.[6]

Some of you will be feeling a bit overwhelmed by it all, wondering if it really is worth jumping into the Web 2.0 frenzy and indeed whether you have the skills or time to dedicate to it. The question is, if students don't want their lecturers in their space, are they likely to want librarians? Are we risking credibility by trying too hard to be cool?

The truth is I am floundering a little too. I am wondering what the best direction for our provision is, and what I can cut back on to mean that I have the time to dedicate to this. All hardened bloggers will scoff at those who say they do not blog because they do not have the time, but it is a concern of many. Thinking of communicating in new ways requires some imagination, and I think many are

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wary of looking as if they are trying too hard to be revolutionary. Where are we expected to squeeze in all the essential duties such as collection development, book ordering, teaching, and enquiry work? Especially when tailored with the growing numbers of students, courses, *and* ever increasing budget pressures on our time. Is it realistic to imagine we can take on another commitment?

What happens at City University London?

All of the communication with students at the City Law School comes via Lawbore, the portal I set up in 2003. In comparison with some of the resources we've heard about, the site feels a bit of an old dinosaur. I last presented a paper at the 2005 Conference on Lawbore and certainly the site has changed a great deal since then.

Lawbore's creation and subsequent development has all revolved around my perception of my students. As my office is based on the law library floor, students bring many of their questions and concerns to me, and these aren't limited to library issues. The law school office is a five minute walk away and often those burning questions do not seem to be able to make it across St John Street. This means that I have a very good insight into issues and gaps across the law school and combined with what I can glean from my teaching, allows me to try and find solutions to a variety of issues using Lawbore.

What are the big problems?

Students getting buried under vast quantities of information

We all know the issues students have with even locating resources detailed on a reading list, never mind doing research of their own. Simply tracking down journal articles online can sometimes be challenging, when they could be present in any number of databases. The Graduate Diploma in Law at City is extremely intellectually rigorous and the sheer quantity of reading they need to do each week, as well as all the extra-curricular commitments they need to do to remain competitive (pro bono, mooting, writing prize essays), means that some find it difficult to keep their heads above water. I wanted to ease this by signposting some curriculum material and demonstrating that finding resources is not as daunting as it may seem at first.

Reliance on one or two textbooks and not much else

Undergraduates are most likely to have this problem, with many finding it challenging to read around a subject, preferring in many cases to stick to a couple of key textbooks, rather than using a wide range of materials. They needed to have their horizons broadened, again by presenting information to them in a welcoming and easy-to-understand fashion. Journal articles and other commentary needed to be given a higher profile.

Too many of them…only one of me

Student numbers are increasing every year, as do the hours I need to spend away from my office in meetings. I wanted to make sure there was support online as an alternative to me.

Isolation – need for a community

When Lawbore first started there were a few communication issues within the law school. Inboxes often got full so that students missed out on emails. There were insufficient ways of getting important information out to students.

How does Lawbore address these issues?

Topic Guides

This is how Lawbore first started out, as a subject directory to show students just how many resources are available. Each of the courses at City is represented here. An ingenious sliding menu means we can squeeze many subjects into a small space. Each topic guide offers an introduction (What's it about?) and links to key websites, commentary (journal articles, speeches), and hot docs (key cases, government reports, Law Commission publications). There is a filter which allows non-City users to view the material minus the subscription resources. Recent developments include getting permission to host a chapter from useful student texts. McBride's *Letters to a Law Student* and Robson & Wolfe's *Path to Pupillage* are highlights.

Forum

This is a chatroom which currently has a stay of execution. Usage has tailed off in the last few terms. The frustrating thing is that students are still viewing posts but not getting involved. There are other avenues for students to talk to each other now and I think the likelihood is that it will be withdrawn next year.

City Hub

This addresses the community issue, offering course notice boards with all the messages from the law school, the university and myself. Law School News is the place to go for messages about competitions, events and more. Access to the e-Library is here too: all City's law databases and e-journals. There is a box for featured content from the Topic Guides to flag up resources I really want them to use. I also have a Twitter account which feeds

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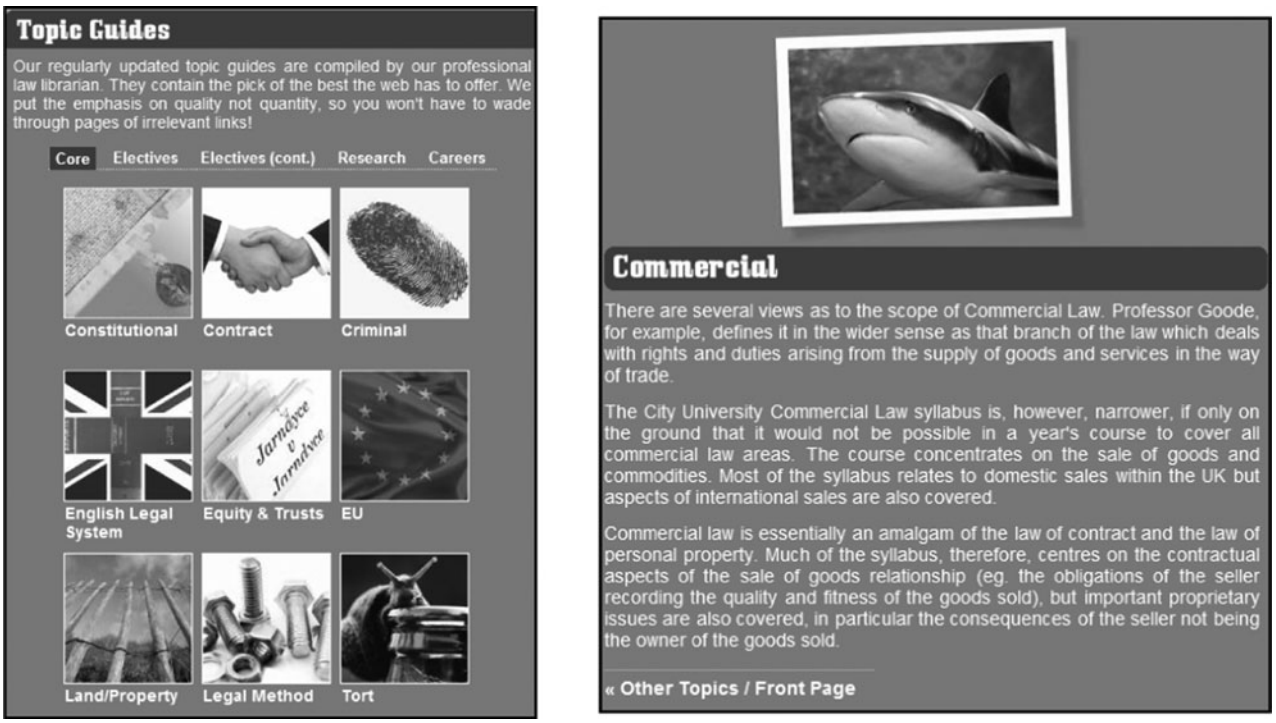

Figure 1: Topic Guides

into the Hub and, although a little hesitant at first, I think it is a good feature. I was concerned that students would think '*Why does she think we care what she's been up to?*' Several things made me push forward with it – the About Us section on Lawbore gives some personal information and students often comment on this positively. Also I heard our Dean of Students, Dr Malcolm Cross speak at a Learning and Teaching event about some research[7] he had undertaken on student feedback. It was clear throughout the study that students liked to think they knew something about their lecturers and having some small insight into their lives. Time will tell how it is received, but I think a balance between using it as a place for promoting new content on the site and the odd snippet of personal information will work.

Learnmore

Learnmore is a how-to wiki: a place for law students to learn essential skills which are not linked directly to

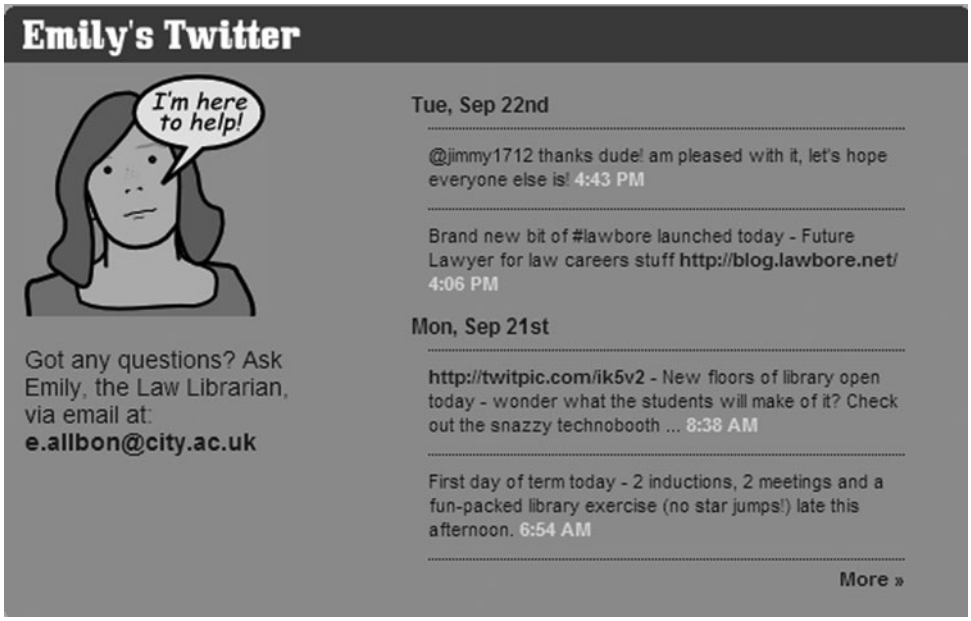

Figure 2: Emily's Twitter

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Figure 3: Learnmore Wiki

Figure 4: Future Lawyer

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core subjects. These include mooting, study skills, using legal resources, writing coursework, doing exams and speed reading. Emphasis on Learnmore is on resources which are fun and varied. A bit quirky even. There are video tutorials, talking slide shows and guides. I have worked closely with law students on much of the material, making sure it is pitched at the right level. The talking slide shows are built using Articulate which essentially adds Flash to your PowerPoint slides, making it a very professional stand-alone product. The students really love the fact that they can learn by looking and listening for a change, as law is obviously such a book-heavy subject.

Future Lawyer

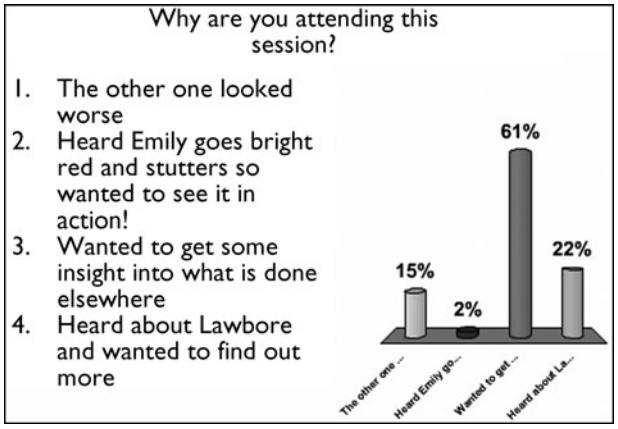
New for the 2009/10 academic year is Future Lawyer, a blog focusing on careers information. What spurred me on to create it was a bit of lethargy in some students for attending careers events, and not getting going quickly enough on looking for related experience. I felt we needed a personal approach – students always assimilate more easily the views of those they know have been through the same experience, than if they hear it from a lecturer or careers adviser. I hoped that getting some alumni involved sharing interesting and varied roles would be a good strategy. At the time of writing the site had only just launched so this is speculative, but it will include video interviews with alumni and pieces written specifically for the site. I'll also have a team of student journalists working with me, attending law events and reporting back.

Teaching aids

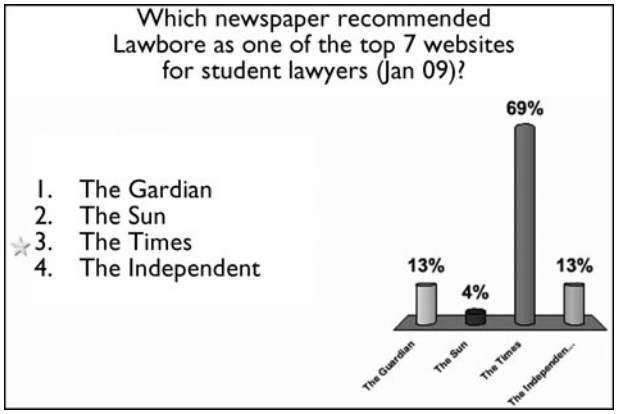
I wanted to give my paper in a different way this year and so I utilised the classroom clickers I use in my legal skills teaching. I teach on the legal method course and needed something to get the students more involved. Telling a large lecture room full of excitable 18 year olds about the joys of legal citation and trying to explain why it is important to update is an uphill struggle. Obviously the spectrum of students will mean that most are keen to learn, but others will soon lapse into whispering to their neighbours or texting. When teaching to very large groups you need something extra. The personal response system (PRS) aka "who wants to be a millionaire" clickers are small handsets with buttons numbered 1-9, and are a great way to keep them focused. The students are genuinely interested to see how everyone else responds and they get pretty competitive. It is a good way of checking knowledge before and after to make sure you are not just talking to yourself. Asking the same question at the beginning and end of a session can be a very effective method.

You can make up PRS slides on the hoof, so if something comes to you in the session you can just insert it. This flexibility means that to a certain extent the session can become student-led. It encourages participation; those shy uncertain students are much more likely to participate when answers are anonymous. What kinds of questions can you ask?

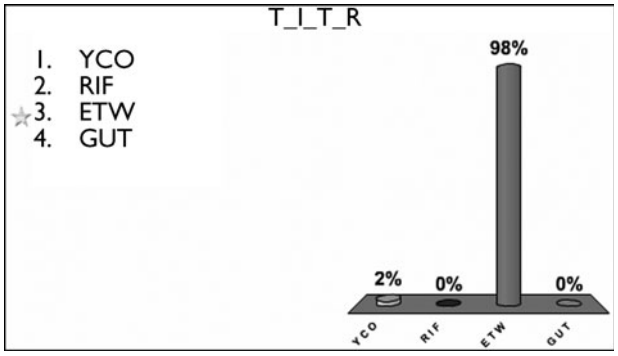
- Ice-breaker – use at the beginning of a session to get people used to handsets and hopefully get a laugh.



- Quick-fire questions to test prior knowledge



- Silly anagrams to put them at ease



- You can get them to vote for a top 2 in order, PRS will then compile results, complete with weightings depending on if it were first or second choice.

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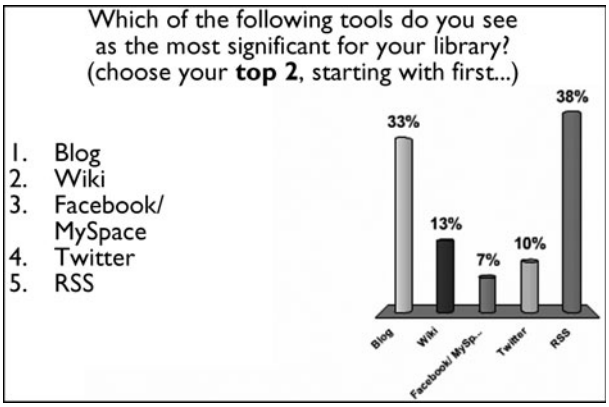
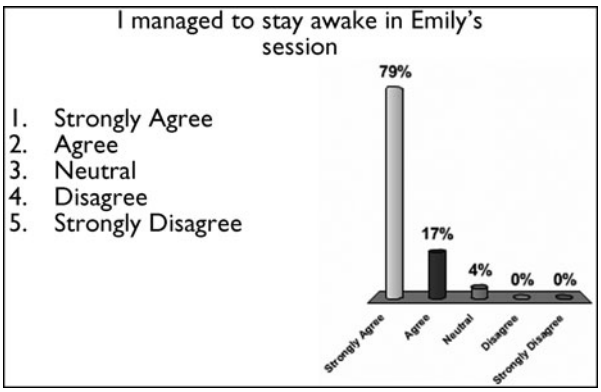


• Finally it is also a quick and easy way of gathering feedback.



What do the students think?

The use of PRS goes down really well. Eighty-seven per cent of students last year thought it made the session more fun. Students are far more involved in the session, and are listening more carefully in case a question is coming up. I'll certainly be using it again this year.

In terms of Lawbore, students are always very appreciative of the resource tailored specifically for them. Here are a few of the comments:

> *"Having just had a manic term on the CPE I just wanted to say thank you for all the work you put into Lawbore – it's phenomenal!"*
>
> *"Lawbore is AWESOME – it really is. Helping lots with revising…"*
>
> *"I love the fact that the site is completely different to anything else out there: vibrant, stylish, attractive and interesting. Lawbore is totally focused on students."*
>
> *"I found your tutorial on mooting invaluable and referred it to anyone who has questions on mooting. It is really really well done."*
>
> *"Learnmore = a tutor on duty 24hrs…Such a support when everything is so new"*

I hope this shows that I am getting the balance about right. Lawbore may be six years old but it changes each year to adapt to the changing student expectations and technologies available.

Fingers crossed that I'll continue to stay on the right side of the line between innovative involvement and embarrassing intervention…if not, someone tell me!

View Emily's presentation at the BIALL Conference 2009 on slideshare: http://www.slideshare.net/lawbore/

See the new Future Lawyer at http://blog.lawbore.net/

Footnotes

[1]Students tell universities: Get out of MySpace! http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2007/nov/05/link.students (5th Nov 2007) Guardian Education.

[2]Gordon, B Facebook wouldn't be the same if my mother wasn't stalking me (7 Aug 2009) Telegraph http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/bryonygordon/5990896/Facebook-wouldnt-be-same-if-my-mother-wasnt-stalking-me.html

[3]Grossman, L Why Facebook is for old fogies (Feb 12 2009) Time magazine http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1879169,00.html

[4]Law Bod Blog http://lawbod.wordpress.com/

[5]Strictly Legal – the Birkbeck Law Librarian's Blog http://birkbecklibrarylaw.blogspot.com/

[6]LSE Legal Information Resources Update http://lselawlibrary.blogspot.com/

[7]Cross, M & Nanjuwany, J Enabling and Disabling Learning: student perspectives on lecturer good-practice: a case study. See abstract here: http://www.city.ac.uk/research/resdev/resdev_dps/research%20events/teaching_scholars/cross_abstract.doc

Biography

Emily Allbon has been Law Librarian at City University London since 2000. She combines this role with that of Head of Information Literacy. She is creator of Lawbore www.lawbore.net which was recommended by *The Times* as one of the top seven websites for student lawyers in January 2009. She is also a member of BIALL Council.

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