

Lawbore; a legal gateway for City University

The background and work involved in implementing the Lawbore project to provide a website for staff and students in the Law department at City University, which is about to be launched, is described fully in this article by Emily Allbon and Andy Bromley

Introduction

Lawbore is a subject-orientated gateway to legal resources developed at City University, which has been created as a community site for the law department. Lawbore's features include regular polls, articles written by City staff and students, legal news and useful legal quotes. It aims to attract students with its time based structure, snappy resource descriptions, direct links into articles within databases, interactive qualities, relevance to module content and easy navigation. At the time of writing (February 2003) the site is still not complete, but it is planned that it will be ready and have a month or so of testing before *Legal Information Management* readers see this article.

Compiling useful resources onto university webpages has been an issue occupying law librarians for some time now. All across the country librarians are putting together lists of links and training guides on the Internet, which is time-consuming, particularly the resource location work, and it is questionable as to whether we are all worthlessly duplicating work. This is a problem which Sarah Carter's current project LawPaths, which is described elsewhere in this issue, is tackling. When this project is complete it promises to offer fantastic support by allowing the sharing of guides, workbooks and other teaching materials, which can be customised for use within individual institutions.

This article will follow my progress as I attempt to create a resource which will encourage and stimulate my students to use the Internet for research and which will be interesting enough to attract a wider academic audience. The challenge was to go beyond just repackaging something already being done at universities nation-wide.

When word went round City University Library at the beginning of 2001 that there were funds available for selected bidding projects, I decided to put together a project proposal. My predecessor had left me with a links page which was well hidden and little used and so I decided to try to convert this into a total legal resource offering links directly related to the legal modules run at City. It was clear that although students used legal databases like Lexis and Westlaw heavily, on the whole they did not use the Internet for research. The main reason for this was the time-consuming nature of Internet searching.

This concerned me, and I was keen to create a resource which reflected the fact that lawyers are expected to do increasing amounts of research on the web. I created a booklet for students which broadly split useful sites into the subjects studied. This was very well received and all copies soon

disappeared. I began quizzing students as to why they did not use existing gateways, and it seemed that there was a need for something in between Sarah Carter's trailblazing Lawlinks and the extensive SOSIG site. The students did not want too much choice – this seemed to put them off - and they wanted resources that were tailored to their courses. I thought that it would be interesting to have a site which was a 'one-stop shop' providing not only web pages, but also journal articles and related official publications. Getting LLB students to consult any material other than textbooks is hard enough, so my main aim was to balance making resource location easier without spoon feeding them. I was keenly aware of the need to teach them how to research independently, with the hope that having available resources wetted their appetites to go and find more.

Getting started

I had a rough idea of what I wanted to achieve, and my bid had been authorised for 70 hours of a professional's time (this later increased to double the original allocation). I realised that my web authoring ability wasn't going to be sufficient for such an ambitious project, particularly as it wasn't practical to build a site using separate pages when it would have to be updated so regularly. I made attempts at finding a web designer, but the agencies were charging more than we could realistically afford. Enter Andy Bromley, an Internet Technology Consultant, who just happened to run his own web design company, Codehead UK (his previous clients include Butterworths Lexis Nexis, DWP, Pfizer, Blake Laphorn, BT and Unilever), AND he was an LLB student at City!

Andy agreed to the task and we began swapping ideas in November 2001, his first being that he could build the site using a database, making it easier to update without touching any html code. It has been incredibly useful having him not only for his programming expertise but also for his insight into what it's like to be a law student at City. He really took on the project as a favour to me and despite getting a snippet of what he'd normally charge; his enthusiasm and stream of ideas for the project never wavered. Andy will be writing on the technical details of the site later in this article.

Image considerations

My first problem was that I wanted the site to be independent of the City website, despite it being hosted by their server. I was keen that it should have a brand of its own, whilst retaining an element of the City visual identity. So it will be hosted both on the City site (<http://www.city.ac.uk/lawbore>) and an external site (<http://www.lawbore.net>). It is hoped this will make the site easier to find. Priorities were to make it clean, fresh looking and uncluttered, whilst having bold images throughout. After a design review of other successful sites, it was decided that each subject area would have an image attached to it, as this seemed to create a sense of smoother navigation for users. Location of these images was a very time-consuming part of the project; sources coming from clipart, the university archives and other websites. Requesting permission for the use of images was highly problematic, as often no one replied to my emails, or seemed to know who was responsible for giving this permission.

The naming of the site was surprisingly difficult, as all the best ones seemed to have been already taken! For weeks on end I had acronyms running wild round my head but to no avail. I held a competition at the library, but eventually came up with Lawbore myself. The name has a dual meaning – I've heard people talk of an 'opera bore': someone who talks non-stop about opera, but is all knowing and also combining the concept of 'boring' into law, indicating the depth of knowledge offered by the site. Hopefully the name is also fun and catchy, and doesn't convey the impression that law is boring.

Location of resources

This was done principally on the basis of reading lists for each subject. I searched the Internet and subscription legal databases using case names, subject areas and concepts. This was very monotonous, but worth doing because I found real gems that I hadn't been aware of before. Obviously I had accumulated the general sites when putting my paper guide together the previous year, but I knew there must be many more out there. I also scanned the existing gateways for any sites I may have missed. Some subject areas are more comprehensively covered than others, but this will hopefully change over time. I chose resources that I believed would be useful for any student studying law for the first time. I assessed them using the usual points such as currency and authority, but some sites I discovered and couldn't even work out who the creator was, but nonetheless I included them simply because they were incredibly useful. In my short description of each site I highlight if there are any issues to be wary of, for example a site which hasn't been updated for several years but nevertheless still remains useful. Difficulties arose as some subjects are better covered than others: for example equity seemed scarce on the internet. Conversely subjects like human rights law saturate the web and it was vital to keep reminding myself that Lawbore is a selective site, which places emphasis on quality of links rather than quantity.

Structure

The Lawbore site is split into three 'Top 5' areas (as well as a brief subject introduction), designed to aid students' research in the fastest possible way. Clicking onto a subject icon will take the user to a page containing:

- A subject introduction: e.g. What is criminal law? The lecturers at City who teach these areas write these subject summaries.
- Top 5 links: the most useful 'all-round' sites – if the student only has ten minutes to find something, this should provide an answer.
- Top 5 articles: the most useful articles on the subject. Articles could be freely available on the web or from Lexis or Westlaw. Selecting an article from a subscription database will mean a password prompt comes up on the screen (obviously only City users can access this). After entering a password the user will be taken directly to that specific article, so no searching within the database will be needed. Andy will discuss the structure behind this linking later, but I will say that both Lexis and Westlaw have been great at unleashing their technology for link creation to

me. Westlaw already had a system in place which was used by their commercial users, but Lexis created a link builder especially for my needs.

- Top 5 Hot Docs: these are either introductory guides or official publications such as Law Commission Reports, Home Office Reports, research studies or Government publications. If a particular case is synonymous with a certain subject area that will also be included where possible e.g. carbolic smoke ball with contract law.

In addition to these 'Top 5' sections there will be a pointer to 'More links', which will take the user to additional links, this is to accommodate the more dedicated researcher.

Lawbore as a community site

It was envisaged that the site would involve its users at all levels and I believe that part of its attraction will be that it is somewhere where both students and lecturers at City can post their messages. At present, any messages to students are sent either by email or put on a notice board; this is problematic because so many students don't use their City accounts and often don't inform us of their web based email accounts. It was thought that if there was a central place where students could regularly check, then this would have more success. Pages are split into four student entrance points: LLB, PG LLB, LLM and CPE.

The site will also have a few light hearted features such as user polls on varying issues: legal, political, ethical or City related ones. The political news from the BBC, and legal news will also be streamed onto the site by Moreover Technologies, ensuring students can be kept up to date without straying from Lawbore. A 'Quote Hotline' will display a different legal quote from major subject authorities, as well as a few classic Denning quotes, each time the page is refreshed. It is also hoped to publish comments and a regular column from both students and staff on pertinent legal or City issues.

Lawbore's technical side

When Emily approached me about the possibility of assisting her on what was to become the Lawbore.net project I was very enthusiastic. As a 2nd year law student at City University and also an experienced internet technology consultant, I had always been frustrated at the low quality of user experience that many legal gateway websites offer. The shortcomings of these sites are even more acute when it comes to the type of information that law students require: typically a much narrower and more specific subset of information tailored to the undergraduate syllabus. I have always considered that a gateway is an opportunity for experts such as librarians (who after all know most of the material better than any lawyer could) to be rigorous with the quality of material on offer and specifically to focus the content for the intended audience. With this in mind I already felt that I could contribute constructively to the structure of a gateway for law students.

Technical Architecture

In terms of a design remit there were three principal goals:

1. The content of the website should be dynamically generated from a database.
2. Someone with little technical knowledge should be able to administer the site and update and modify content.
3. The user experience should be immediate, accessible and relevant.

To produce a dynamic web site it is probably essential to run the site from a database, and most professional websites we visit on the net will be running with a database behind them. The alternative to a dynamic database driven website is to use static html pages which each have to be edited manually every time the content changes. The static solution can work in some circumstances e.g. where there are (a) a limited number of html pages to update or (b) the content doesn't change very often. For Lawbore however we projected that there would be a large number of pages and that Emily would be checking frequently to ensure that the content was up to date and still relevant. Also we wanted to incorporate a number of features for which a database is essential e.g. surveys/ threaded discussions/ random content generation / fat site and user customisation (sometimes known as skinning).

Hardware & Software

The plan right from the start was to take advantage 100% of open source software and thus keep our software costs to a minimum. In this respect I chose to use PHP as a scripting language, MySql as the database backend and Apache running on Solaris as the webserver. The University already had all these packages so the grand total of these resource costs was zero! It's interesting to consider that an equivalent system using software from the leading software producers could easily run into tens of thousands of pounds.

Requirements analysis

Before any code was written, Emily and I spent a number of hours discussing the project in detail, both the technical and design aspects. This proved to be very beneficial, as right from the start we both had a very clear and united vision of what we wanted the end result to be.

Development

This was never going to be a project where we could both sit down for a couple of months and work exclusively on the web site so we really took advantage of technology and the telephone. The majority of work was probably done on the train and in coffee shops around London and Emily and I held regular tele-meetings, each with the phone in one hand and the computer mouse in the other. The careful planning was especially fruitful at this stage, as it was easy for me to break down the work into chunks of functionality and then as I finished them, add this functionality to the site. This meant that right from the start we could both work simultaneously on different areas of the site.

Graphics

We had a good idea of the look and feel we wanted for the site but were undecided about the exact colour scheme. To help us choose we actually made ten different colour schemes of the images that we had in mind and I

created a virtual switch that would allow us to change and compare them very easily until we could finally decide on which one we liked best.

Problems

I would like to say that the construction of Lawbore has been a smooth and easy process and that I didn't have any sleepless nights. However, most of our problems can be put down to either a lack of time, or everything taking longer than was initially predicted. Andy used up all his 'paid for' hours back in the summer (2002), and has been doing the odd bit here and there for free ever since. Obviously for him trying to juggle a job, a law degree and Lawbore has been difficult. Luckily for us, there was no pressure at all; it was something I initiated and so both the Library and Law Department were happy to wait. However, despite this laid-back approach, the slow progress we experienced at times was frustrating, particularly when it was something I had no control over (usually involving programming) which made me reliant on Andy's goodwill.

Other complications involved getting co-operation from staff members and departments. Most colleagues within the field of academic librarianship will identify with the problems involved in getting hold of reading lists or asking certain people to do that bit extra. On the whole the Law Department staff were supportive and were pleased such an innovation was taking place. Other departments who needed to be involved were Computing Services and the University Web Service. Computing Services advised us on certain project plans and answered very specific questions about the facilities available to us, while the Web Service could advise us on making sure our site matched up to City's visual identity expectations.

The future of Lawbore

It is somewhat difficult to think of the future before the site has even launched, perhaps a bit like tempting fate, as we don't know what the response to Lawbore will be. I am looking forward to receiving feedback and usage statistics and then we might be able to think about where to go next.

Our main priorities for the future will include increasing user involvement in the site by offering each resource up for criticism (or admiration), in a similar way to the Amazon site. Users will be able to post comments on each resource, so if they believe a site doesn't give them as much help as it should do, they can inform us and other users of this. Also if a site is really good and yet I haven't placed it in the Top 5 section, then a comment could motivate me to move it up the ratings. It is hoped that this kind of interactivity would encourage more use of the site. The comments posted will be diverted to me to regulate any suspect language. This wasn't possible without extensive further work by Andy and so was delayed until the site was up and running properly.

Other improvements will include increased student and lecturer input and the implementation of some basic metadata. These are all features we initially hoped to include at launch but ran out of time (and money!). I would like to see each resource given a basic set of metadata elements in order to make the search facility as easy to use as the browsing mechanism. Userguides

are available on Lawbore for each of our key databases, downloadable in pdf., to act as a stopgap before I work out a better way!

Conclusion

I hope that with Lawbore we have created something innovative and dynamic, certainly only time will tell whether we have managed to pitch the site at the correct level. Its ultimate aim is simply to get students using the Internet for research (especially journal articles) on a deeper level and to create a sense of community where the whole department can share information and materials.

I would welcome any comments on any element of the site from *Legal Information Management* readers, as Lawbore is really a fledgling website and my first attempt at creating an information service. Any comments to Emily at e.allbon@city.ac.uk