Gaining an insight into the user experience by becoming a user.

by Greg Bennett

Abstract

In this article, based on his presentation at the BIALL Annual Conference in July 2022, the author, a law librarian, discusses the insights he gained by becoming a student of Law, and so, a user of a law library.

Keywords: law libraries; law librarians; library management; universities; teaching methods

Biography

Greg Bennett retrained to become a librarian after a brief career in pensions in the City of London. His trainee year was at the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, where he discovered a love for specifically law librarianship. He came back to work at IALS after his MA, and then worked at the law firm Slaughter and May before returning to the academic sector at the University of Essex. From 2018 to 2021 he worked for Goldsmiths, University of London, and during that time he completed an LLM by distance learning. He now works at BPP in London, where, in addition to being a law librarian, he will start an LPC in September.

Introduction

Like many law librarians, I have developed a broad knowledge of law as a subject, but that broad knowledge is also relatively shallow. This broad but shallow knowledge is probably fairly common for librarians in general. However, having learnt to enjoy law as a subject, I decided to try and gain a deeper knowledge – at least in some areas of law – and so I chose to study an LLM CPE in Law by distance learning at the University of Wolverhampton. In addition to gaining a deeper understanding of the law, studying law gave me some excellent insights into being on the receiving end of a law library service, ie being a user, rather than a provider of such a service. So, what did I learn that I didn't know before?

Reference management software

For a start, I gained some important practical skills. One of those skills was how to fully use reference management software. Like many academic librarians, I had previously taught students how to use software like EndNote, Zotero and Mendeley to manage their references. However, I hadn't really used any of these tools for my own writing. So, I only really knew enough about these tools so that I could teach students the basics, but beyond that my knowledge was limited. Having to write many essays using OSCOLA meant that I had to learn how to use reference management tools more fully (or I could have produced my bibliographies by myself without software, but this didn't seem like a sensible option – I knew that reference management software made the essay-writer's life easier, I just wasn't

especially experienced at using it for myself).

It seemed clear to me quite quickly that Zotero was the tool that was most compatible with OSCOLA. And, in fact, even though there is a version of Zotero – called Juris-M – that is supposed to work particularly well with legal references, I found that the main version of Zotero worked better than Juris-M with OSCOLA – Juris-M has more of an international focus than I needed, ie it is very good if you are producing references from many jurisdictions. But, for me, who just needed UK and EU references, the main version of Zotero worked well.

I now feel very expert in Zotero for OSCOLA. This has become a great help in my teaching. I know exactly where Zotero works best with OSCOLA, and where it needs tweaking to get decent references. I also feel fully confident to teach students to use Zotero without the need for extensive preparation – before I studied law myself, I felt reasonably unconfident with Zotero, and so had to put in a lot of preparation to teach a class. There is certainly a very nice sense of assurance when you know very well a subject that you have to teach to others. I have certainly gained this by being a user of Zotero myself.

Learning to defer to another's expertise

Another thing I learnt by being a student is that it is perfectly fine for a librarian to defer to someone else when asked certain questions. I used to sometimes feel slightly embarrassed when a student would ask me how to answer particular essay questions. I had an awkwardness in simply referring them to their tutor. I felt that perhaps I should be able to give them an answer myself. And maybe I could have. However, it became very clear to me, while studying, that lecturers often have very specific ways that they want their students to answer essay questions (I learnt this to my cost when answering a question in a way that wasn't the precise way that my tutor prescribed it should be answered). And, although I as a law librarian might have very good suggestions as to how to answer essay questions, they might not match with exactly what the tutor wants. Ultimately, it is the tutor, not the librarian, who marks the assignments. So, I now feel not only is it fine to refer students onto their tutor, but in fact I would be doing them a disservice if I didn't refer them onto their tutor when they ask me about things that the tutor will mark.

The library collection

What about the collection itself? Did I discover any deficiencies in the University of Wolverhampton library's law collection, and what worked very well with that collection? One major deficiency came in my EU Law module, which I was taught in 2020. My tutor kept referring us to the 5th edition of Unlocking EU Law by Storey & Pimor, which was published in 2018. However, the library only had access to the 4th edition, which was published in 2014, and since this pre-dated Brexit, it was a terrible oversight for an EU course.

Somewhere along the line, the new edition had not been made known to the right people

so that it could be bought. This really brought home to me the importance of thorough liaison between library and faculty. And this principle is not just relevant in university libraries – very often librarians can find out more easily than the users of libraries, eg academics and lawyers, when new editions of books become available. There are occasions, even in an academic setting, when out-of-date law books are a real problem. And this is more the case in commercial law libraries, when actual legal advice might rely, to some degree, on library-held books.

What about the collection more generally? Did I discover things by being a student that I hadn't been aware of before studying? Yes, I did. Firstly, I knew already that I was someone who very much appreciated eBooks. I like their accessibility: I don't need to wait for someone to return a book before I can use it; and I like their functionality: searching for keywords can make my reading far more targeted than when reading paper books. However, I became aware that when I am studying from a book, I want to make notes all over it. So, I found myself often printing out sections of books, precisely so that I could write on them.

One set of eBooks that I bought when I was the law librarian at Goldsmiths (ie before I started my LLM) was CUP's Cambridge Core set. I thought it was a great set of books. However, CUP do not allow any printing of any of these books, which is quite unlike other eBook providers (where very often at least 10% can be printed out). Only when I was a student did I realise how frustrating this prohibition to print was. It very much made me think twice about buying the Cambridge Core set again. EBooks are nice, but it certainly helps to be able to print from them.

I decided to buy for myself a hard copy of the textbook for each module I studied. When studying a module such as EU Law, or Criminal Law, or Tort, there will normally be one textbook that you are expected to use on a weekly basis. I decided that it would help me to buy it in print, so that I could write all over it. Not all students have the finances to be able to buy themselves so many books. So, it struck me that eBook access to the core textbooks for modules is essential for the sake of being available to students every single week of the module (ie without needing borrowed hard copies to be physically returned). But being able to print out reasonable proportions of those eBooks is also very important. And not all eBook providers allow for that. So, availability and printability should affect which textbooks are used – and this would then again involve careful liaison with module tutors.

In addition to the textbooks for each module, I discovered that Law Express exam revision books were very useful. Before studying for myself, I had a slightly snooty attitude towards such books, thinking that they weren't really appropriate for a scholarly library collection. I have now very much changed my opinion. I found them to be very useful, and I know that students enjoy having access to them in the collection. This was an important lesson for me. A collection can be made up of a variety of different types of books – each having their own benefits.

One type of book I really didn't need while studying for an academic qualification was practitioner textbooks, such as Chitty on Contracts, ie books written by lawyers, aimed at explaining to other lawyers how to do the law. Instead, I really needed academic textbooks, ie books written by academics, aimed at explaining to students why the law is as it is, eg including the history and theory, rather than the how to do the law that practitioners' textbooks contain. I also very much benefitted from monographs, ie books not covering a whole area of law like a textbook, but instead perhaps covering some particular issues within the law, and covering them in depth. Some of these books were great for my dissertation, since monographs often cover similarly niche topics to journal articles, but in more depth, and so, finding an appropriate monograph, can be like discovering gold.

Knowing what types of books are needed for a library can be incredibly cost-saving. I think there is very little need for buying whole suites of practitioner textbooks in universities that only teach academic law courses. Similarly, a law firm has no need of academic textbooks, and very little need of monographs.

On the subject of buying for a collection, I found that the journals available through Lexis Library, Westlaw and Hein Online were completely sufficient for me for the whole two years of study, ie I don't think there is much need for additional subscriptions. On only one occasion did I request an interlibrary loan for an article, but the librarian got back to me to say the article was actually available in Lexis Library. She was right. I was suitably embarrassed! However, that did remind me of something I already knew: neither Westlaw nor Lexis Library are especially discoverable via discovery layers. If I failed to find an article, then presumably many students do likewise. Discoverability of both databases is certainly something that we need to continue to press Thomson Reuters and Lexis Nexis for. Hopefully Lexis+ will be an improvement on Lexis Library.

Teaching methods

Beyond collection development, I gained some practical insights into teaching by being on the receiving end of instruction myself. I chose to study by distance learning before Covid made online learning standard. I wanted to be able to fit my learning around a full-time job and various other personal commitments, so I thought that online learning would suit me best. And I very much enjoyed being able to learn at times that were convenient for me. Most of the teaching I received was delivered asynchronously through recordings attached to PowerPoint slides. I was able to watch several in a row, or none for a few weeks, depending on my own time commitments. This was incredibly convenient for me.

There might be a suggestion that this type of non-interactive learning is not ideal. However, I personally don't enjoy interactivity terribly much when I'm being taught (I appreciate this is just a personal opinion, and might go against standard teaching practices). I tend to groan inwardly when I'm told to break into small groups and discuss something. I personally very much enjoy learning directly from someone who is an expert in their field, rather than discussing issues with my peers who know as little as I do. So, for me, personally, traditional

lecture-based teaching, delivered at a time that was convenient for me, suited me very much.

When it came time to write my dissertation, I was expected to write it on an area of law that we hadn't been taught on the course. I chose International Law. I got some good books to get me started, but I then did what I often do when I want to learn something - I'm a keen DIYer, and when I'm about to start a project, I tend to go to YouTube to see video guides that experts have produced. I did the same with International Law, and found a fantastic set of videos produced by Professor Pierre d'Argent at the Université Catholique de Louvain.[i] They were each around 8 minutes long, and there was a set of over a hundred of them. Again, I found this format to be incredibly useful. I binge-watched videos on occasions, watching perhaps 8-10 in quick succession. I could also watch and rewatch particularly relevant videos. The length of the videos was very accessible, and the presenter's simple style of delivery – he just spoke into a camera, with no gimmicks – was again, very accessible to me. I learnt a great deal from this collection of short videos.

So these learning experiences of mine made me think about my own teaching methods. I have now produced a growing number of video guides at BPP for Law,[ii] as well as other subjects. My videos are perhaps a cross between the Wolverhampton lecture recordings, and the International law MOOC when it comes to length – most of my videos are around 15-20 minutes long. Sadly, attention spans seem to be decreasing, so I may have to shorten my video guides, however, I did want to get across a reasonable amount of information in each video, so that they could each be standalone videos.

I can't help but think that asynchronous teaching, ie teaching in a non-live manner through things like these videos, is a great way for us, as librarians, to teach. I have, in the past, delivered classes in lecture halls to 300 students, and yet what I was doing for much of the time in those classes, was demonstrating things on websites like Westlaw to the class, such that they were simply watching a screen behind me. I think the kind of teaching we do, ie this demonstrating of searches etc, is much more suited to being watched on a person's own device. And video guides do this perfectly. In addition, asynchronous teaching can be accessed exactly when needed by the student (so long as the videos are made available in appropriate places).

I have often organised legal research skills classes to which no-one, or very few people, turned up. Students don't necessarily appreciate the benefit that their law librarians can bring them, and unless my classes are time-tabled as mandatory for the students - the holy grail for university law librarians of embedded teaching - the students don't tend to turn up. And yet, our expertise is very useful to them. Making video guides that they can access at the very point when they realise they need help seems a great solution to the problem of non-attendance at classes.

Historically, I (and perhaps most other teaching librarians) have put much more emphasis onto classroom teaching, and have thought that video guides were a nice addition to that

teaching. I feel very much that I now view this balance the other way round – my focus is now on the asynchronous recordings. So much so that I now record every class I deliver live, and then make those recordings available to the cohort of students after the event. Some of the students didn't attend the live class, and can then watch the recording, but many of those who did attend choose to watch parts of the recording again.

Even though at BPP I thankfully have a lot of embedded teaching, the viewing statistics I get for my recordings – both the 15 minute video guides and the recorded classes – far exceed the number of students who attend my actual classes, which encourages me to continue to produce asynchronous teaching.

By the way, I think it is possible to produce video guides very quickly. In my experience, academia is often crippled by perfectionism, but if we don't let best get the better of good, then I think producing high quality video guides need not be time-consuming.

Conclusions

I believe the modern world has led to library users (and much of society as a whole) wanting fast, but nevertheless correct information, at a time that suits them. We have in our hands technology that allows instant access to the whole of the Internet, at a time that suits us. I can't help but think that waiting to be able to borrow a physical book that someone else has out on loan seems to be a process more in keeping with the 20th Century than the 21st. Most libraries these days seem to be moving much more towards a digital first collection development policy, and this certainly helps in the goal of producing fast information. However, as I've discussed, there is still a need for physical resources, and so printability of eBooks is an important factor to aid study.

With respect to producing correct information, librarians often teach users to be able to assess the quality of third-party information. But we shouldn't just be engaged in pointing towards answers elsewhere; we can give expertise of our own. In most places where law librarians work, I would venture that they are the most expert people at carrying out legal research. And for things like that, we should point towards ourselves as sources of information. And after studying law for myself, I have added a new-found knowledge of Zotero to the corpus of things that I feel completely comfortable to give expert advice on. So, we can very much be sources of correct information ourselves. And yet, sometimes, eg with the tutors who mark assignments detailed above, it is absolutely appropriate to defer to someone else's expertise.

Finally, we all lead busy lives, and being able to access the information that we want at the most convenient time, is important for us all. So, I believe asynchronous teaching is fast becoming the most appropriate way to educate our users. Of course, there will remain a place for live teaching in physical classrooms. However, I believe the emphasis should change, at least for librarian-teachers, towards a higher proportion of asynchronous teaching.

[i] Université Catholique de Louvain, 'International Law MOOC - YouTube'
<https://www.youtube.com/c/InternationalLawMOOC> accessed 28 July 2022.
[ii] BPP Library, 'Law: Legal Research' <https://bpp.libguides.com/law/Essays> accessed 28 July 2022.