

Technology reviews by first year Law students

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As part of their first year Legal Method course, students attend four library seminars which have linked assessments forming part of their overall grade. For their final assessment, I offered them a choice of the assessment. They could either complete an assessment based on legal information sources on the internet or write a technology review, the best of which I would submit to Compass.

This alternative assessment asked them to base their review on “any freely available app, tool, piece of software which you feel has a benefit for anyone studying or teaching LAW”. I also asked them to take account of the following points:

1. What is it? Give the manufacturer or developer’s name and the website where you can find it.
2. How is it used? Explain what it does, and how well it fulfils its purpose, and any limitations.
3. Why is it useful and who might use it?
4. How easy is it to use? Indicate how user friendly you think it is.
5. What is the “killer” feature? Explain what makes this stand out against the competition?
6. What mark would you give it out of 10?

My reason for taking this approach was threefold: firstly, to provide an alternative assessment; secondly, to allow students to undertake an activity which could help their writing skills in something that was also a typical example of a workplace activity in their chosen subject area; and thirdly, I wanted to find out more about apps and software used by law students.

Assessment has the potential to motivate students, and one approach is the use of real-world scenarios. Burton (2011) summarised approaches which identify an assessment as authentic. These include “fidelity of the task to the real world”, the idea that the task is “a polished product valuable in its own right” and that this type of assignment “requires students to make judgements, choices”; these seemed to be key aspects in the assessment I created. For example, students taught by Abel Nyampfene (2011) at the University of Exeter worked on a risk assessment for the IT network at the University as an authentic assignment for electronics engineering and computing students. Nyampfene noted that in contrast with more traditional teaching methods, students had to come up with their own ideas. His end of course evaluation confirmed that most students were motivated by this approach. In another example, Strachan and colleagues (2010) devised an assessment to develop their computing students’ technical writing skills and to make research and the dissemination of their research a more central part of their course. The task achieved authenticity by the creation of a conference attended by employers at which the students presented their research. The students prepared posters on a range of computing topics, ensuring that they

used terminology understandable by a non-technical audience, and at the conference gave a verbal tour of their poster to the audience.

The task of reviewing pieces of writing is already used in literature courses; reviews of writing or of products and software could also be included in many subject areas. The growing interest in student research and publication is demonstrated by the increase in undergraduate journals across the higher education sector including the University of Greenwich, which produces *Platform: the Journal of Student Research and Scholarship in Secondary Education*, the Law School's *Sui Generis*, and *The Beagle* in the Business School.

I was very pleased when a small number of students chose the alternative review assessment task, and I have selected two reviews for this article. I did not receive reviews of any freely available public apps but of two subscription services widely used by law students in the university. An interesting point to note is that whilst the university pays a substantial fee for this service, students perceive it as a 'free' service. In future I will provide further advice and guidance on the difference between paid for and non-paid for services.

The reviews

LexisNexis review conducted by Petar Arnaudov, first year Law

One of the most beneficial applications for law students is Lexis Nexis. It provides computer-assisted legal research and is a legal database providing a wide range of court opinions, legislation, documents and additional law related materials. The app not only established the electronic accessibility of legal documents, but in fact probably provides the largest legal electronic database.

The application allows the user to search for legal documents among a large number of court decisions, statutes, commentary on cases, precedents, journals and other law related information, such as news and other additional materials. It provides a wide range of search options giving more and easier access to the required information.

Lexis is a favourite source of information in the legal worlds, mainly because of the instant access and easy accessibility. The company offers paid subscription to its services. These services can be helpful to students, academics and legal professionals.

In addition, the website provides a user-friendly layout, where the customer can use different search methods such as case name, issue related cases, case citation, source and legal term. It also allows the client to choose between cases, legislation, comments and additional materials.

What makes Lexis a desired partner in education, research, and work and allows it to offer features not provided by the other legal search tools, is that it is a huge legal database guaranteeing a helpful search outcome.

What I consider to be a "Killer Feature" is the Practice Area Tab offering a selection of up to five Practice Areas for professionals and students, who specialise in a specific area of law.

This allows the users to see recent updates, articles and cases within the practice area and if I were to rate the application, then I would easily give it a 10/10 because of the great service and the simplicity of the website.

Westlaw review-conducted by Nistha Sharma, first year Law.

What is it?

Westlaw has been useful in providing reliable legal information sufficiently. The Westlaw search engine has been established since 1970 and is expanding its provision of legal information.

How is it used?

It can be accessed through a user account or it is available on the student portal. Accessed through a student account, Westlaw is available through the Greenwich library website and portal, located under database, journals and e-books.

How easy is it to use?

One of the greatest advantages of Westlaw is that it is user friendly and, although the software is different to familiar search engines, it is easy to use. This reliable source of information is also one of the most advanced legal databases. Law students will find that expertise in searching gained from using the database will be a valuable asset in their future career in law firms and other places of work.

Why is it useful?

Westlaw is a search engine which stores more than 40,000 databases of case law, journals, statutes, law reviews and many more legal resources. Having access to such a large source through the internet makes case finding simple and easy. This search engine is particularly useful for law students who wish to search case information quickly through a reliable and accurate source.

The Killer Factor & score

The differentiating factor of Westlaw in comparison to other databases is that Westlaw has an easy to use search engine that allows one to rapidly locate useful information. The continuous updating of legal information makes Westlaw a reliable source. Overall I would highly recommend this online legal resource and rate it 10/10.

Conclusion

As the Law Subject Librarian, I teach on part of the Legal Method course, which is only a small part of the whole programme. I therefore have limited access to surveying students' reaction to this type of assessment. Despite this, the results have been very interesting and I would like to develop a clearer brief and include this option again. One of the major learning points for students is to understand the digital environment in which they are entering as professionals. As Generation y-fi, they have grown up thinking that almost everything is free to them. In this era of high student fees it is worthwhile pointing out that these two subscription services are costly and this is partly what they pay their fees for.

References

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Author Biography

Sarah Crofts is based in the Greenwich campus library and is Senior Academic Services Librarian for Law and Criminology. She is interested in the general area of students' digital literacy and is co-author (with Irene Barranco, Maggie Leharne and Rachael Hartiss) of the *iPROGRESS* online information skills course. Sarah is also an Associate Teaching Fellow and participates in teaching legal research on the Law School courses.