Electronic Courseware in Legal Education

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One of the consequences of the development of electronic resources, including CD-ROMs and the Internet, is the increased ability to make educational resources available in forms other than print. As this article shows, some law schools and organizations have already taken the lead in this field. Susan Barker is presently developing an Intranet for the Faculty. Among other things, the Intranet provides a venue for offering electronic-based course materials to students of the faculty. This article provides a brief introduction to the concept of electronic courseware and discusses some of the advantages to this approach to educational resources.

Electronic courseware appeared on the horizon of legal education just a few years ago. Courseware is computer-assisted instructional material that be defined as either interactive exercises, lessons and other such products developed by commercial publishers or educational consortia, or class notes, tutorials, interactive quizzes and on-line assignments made available by law faculty members through the World Wide Web.

These educational tools are now being used increasingly by both faculty and students especially in the United States and United Kingdom.

Pioneers in Electronic Legal Courseware Publishing

There are several publishers of electronic courseware in the market today; the following projects represent some of the most significant computer-based learning initiatives:

Law Course Consortium:

Currently 54 law schools in England, Wales and Northern Ireland subscribe to Iolis, law courseware developed by the Law Course Consortium at the University of Warwick. Authored by forty professors from more than thirty different law schools, Iolis covers key law courses such as Contract, Criminal Law, European Law, Property Law and Tort Law. It is published on a windows-based CD-ROM and is made available to the students on their local area networks. Updated versions are available for downloading to the subscribing law schools from the Law Course Consortium’s website (http://www.law.warwick.ac.uk/html/lcc_home_page.html).
The Iolis package contains a large collection of workbooks, a resource book and a scrapbook. The workbook contains interactive exercises, graphics and text. The resource book has full-text versions of many primary and secondary materials such as periodical literature, government publications and newspaper articles. The courseware allows lecturers to annotate the material, highlighting specific points of interest and provides students with a scrapbook and bookmark facility. Hypertext links help to integrate these components and provide quick access to information relevant to the exercises.

Centre For Computer-Assisted Legal Instruction (CALI)

CALI, a non-profit consortium of 160 mostly U.S. law schools, is another important publisher of computerized legal exercises and tutorials. It offers about 100 lessons in different formats (windows, DOS and Macintosh). Students of subscribing schools can access these lessons and tutorials through their school’s computer network or can make a copy of the individual lesson to run on their home computer.

The CALI products offer flexibility regarding the format of exercises so that they are consistent with the author’s educational objective. For example, some exercises are based on simulated trials to test the students’ understanding of an area of law while others may require students to interpret cases and statutes. Still others may be structured as a series of questions that reinforce the concepts learned in the classroom.

Lexis-Nexis Millennium Initiative:

This is a joint venture between Lexis-Nexis and U.S. law schools to integrate technology and the teaching of law. Written by faculty members from various law schools including Cornell, Chicago-Kent and Harvard, there are about sixty casebooks that are currently available. These electronic casebooks are based on Folio VIEWS software and contain the full text of many primary source materials. The software allows students and professors to create new materials and connect them to the work of others. Students can also buy the materials for a course on disk and use them on their own personal computers. The course materials are fully searchable and the users can edit text, create links, place bookmarks and integrate extracts from various documents into their own customized notes.
Canadian Initiatives

Similar projects have also been undertaken by some Canadian law schools although on a much smaller scale. For example, the University of Alberta Law School offers electronic casebooks and materials for courses such as Credit Transactions, Criminal Law and Procedure and Evidence through its website (http://www.ualberta.ca/law/courses/). Due to copyright limitations, these casebooks are only accessible to University of Alberta Law School students.

Despite the small market, there may be a niche for electronic materials focusing on various areas of Canadian common and civil law that could be widely accessible to law students across Canada. Collaboration among Canadian law professors to publish high quality legal courseware could address this need.

Course Materials on the WWW:

Several electronic casebooks and course-related materials are now available on the homepages of law professors. Bernard Hibbitts, a 1986 LL.M. graduate of our faculty is now a law professor and Associate Dean for Communications and Information Technology at the University of Pittsburgh. Hibbitts' homepage (http://www.law.pitt.edu/hibbitts/jurist.htm) contains links to several homepages of law professors who have posted course materials on the Web. A variety of information such as course descriptions, readings, on-line assignments, past exams and links to full-text resources and websites is available through many of these homepages.

Advantages of Electronic Courseware and Course Materials:

On-line courseware is becoming increasingly popular for a number of reasons:

**Ease of Updating:** Instructors can review and revise the course materials as often as they want. They can add new cases and statutory amendments that may be too recent to have been included in the original casebook.

**Cost Savings:** Courseware can result in cost savings because updated versions can be produced and distributed at a minimal cost in comparison with the print equivalents. In addition, lecturers who offer course materials through homepages can easily incorporate related materials freely available on other websites. As a result, a significant body of courseware can be developed at no extra cost.

**Exposure to Technology and Electronic Research:** Electronic courseware exposes students to new ways of organizing materials, an important skill for both student and lawyer. Students learn ways to connect electronic texts, research notes, and outlines into a manageable source of information. Since students can cross-reference material in one source to several other sources without swapping books or flipping through documents, they have more time to focus on synthesizing and analyzing the content.

**Better Communication Between Faculty and Students:** Through web-based discussion groups, faculty members can get quick feedback about classroom learning. Also, students who are more comfortable with written medium, are encouraged to participate in discussions.
Some professors have even made the on-line discussion a course requirement. At Queen’s University Law School, Professor William Flanagan who teaches the Advanced Family Law course, has assigned a certain percentage of the student’s overall grade to participation in the on-line discussion group (http://qsilver.queensu.ca/~flanagnb/family/chat.htm).

**Easy Accessibility:** Networked and disk-based courseware enable students to access the course materials at any time from their personal computers at home and through law school computer labs.

**Variety in Course Materials:** Diverse links to websites containing materials related to a course can help students to have a better grasp of the breadth of a particular topic and can facilitate deeper understanding. On-line quizzes such as the one set up by Professor Rebecca Ward of Drake University School of Law for her Business Associations course (http://members.aol.com/randward/busass/baqpast1.htm) help students to test their level of familiarity with and understanding of legal issues.

**Conclusion:**
In 1992, the University of Dayton Law School and Mead Data Central formed a Joint Committee to study the role of technology in legal education (http://www.law.cornell.edu/mdc_udsl/toc.html). In a letter to the Joint Committee, James Milles, Head of Computer Services at St. Louis University commented:

“As students are exposed to new information technologies in their pre-law school education they will expect access to advanced technology in the law school of the future as well. Schools that lag behind risk losing the best students. Also, other things being equal, legal employers will begin to gravitate toward the technologically proficient student.”

The success of and growing interest in commercial, shareware and homepage publishing of courseware indicates that it will continue to play an important role in legal education. Courseware is not only an invaluable educational tool but it also represents a productive application of technology and is becoming necessary to maintain a competitive edge in the delivery of legal education.

Therefore, law faculties that take the initiative to develop courseware now will be better prepared for the future.

**Suggested Readings:**


“Interim Report of the University of Dayton School of Law Mead Data Central Joint Committee to Study Computer Technology in Legal Education” (1993). (http://www.law.cornell.edu/mdc_udsl/toc.html)