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Repository Citation

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Creating Online Tutorials: Five Lessons Learned

Technology for Teaching ... is a periodic feature of Perspectives, designed to introduce and describe the ways in which teachers of legal research and writing are using technology to enhance their teaching. Through Volume 9, this column was edited by Christopher Simoni, Associate Dean for Library and Information Services and Professor of Law, Northwestern University School of Law. Readers are invited to submit their own "technological solutions" to Mary A. Hotchkiss, Perspectives Editor, University of Washington School of Law, William H. Gates Hall, Box 353020, Seattle, WA 98195-3020, phone: (206) 616-9333; e-mail: hotchma@u.washington.edu.

By Lauren M. Collins

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In the fall of 2005, two librarians, a legal research and writing program director, and an instructional technologist at Wayne State University received a grant to create online tutorials introducing novices to the basics of legal research. Tutorials were planned on subjects that the library and the legal research and writing program had traditionally covered jointly via library workshops, coordinated with classroom instruction for first-year law students. Since the mission of the law library is to support campus-wide activity and to assist members of the general public with legal research needs, the content of the tutorials was designed to serve multiple audiences. With a year to finish the tutorials in time for the next incoming class, the group began work toward the completion of seven tutorials on a shoestring budget of \$4,000.

Since the completion of the tutorials, librarians have asked us directly or made general calls for information looking for ideas about tools, costs, and the process of beginning similar projects. Our response to this question has not been to chronicle our journey but, rather, to share a few lessons we learned from the process. There are two reasons for this: (1) we believe there are many ways to accomplish what we did, and (2) we experienced

some bumps in the road we would just as soon see others avoid. There were five main lessons we took away from the process.

Lesson One: More Constituencies Than You Might Imagine Will Be Interested in Your Project—Find and Tap Them

The librarians at the Arthur Neef Law Library at Wayne State University (WSU) provide hands-on legal research workshops to introduce students to basic legal resources over a two-month period at the start of first-year classes. The topics covered follow the schedule of the WSU Legal Research and Writing Program. At the time the tutorial project was conceived, only two law librarians conducted workshops, sharing more than 80 20- to 30-minute instruction sessions between us. We made time for these sessions in addition to our other duties as librarians. Clearly, the idea of supplementary tutorials was a no-brainer for us. In addition, we felt sure we would find support with the legal research and writing instructors who wrestled with enforcement of participation in library workshops and regularly fielded questions from students complaining about the added time commitment workshops required.

To our surprise, others were also interested in the work we planned. First, faculty in other disciplines who had not been willing to give up class time but still required students to use basic legal resources to complete work on policy issues in their areas of study would gladly support our project. In addition, funding was available from the WSU Library System for the creation of model uses of technology that could cross disciplines. Finally, our library administration and other campus librarians whose disciplines crossed campuses were interested in learning new methods to provide instruction online. Support from other disciplines overcame the common perception that those in professional schools often come up against—that we expect

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and/or receive preferential treatment. Our project would not only serve as a model for use in other disciplines, but professors teaching hundreds of students across campus were committed to recommending or requiring their students to use our tutorials. By demonstrating such a large audience for the tutorials that crossed the entire campus, we showed the grant committee that its funding would have a significant impact that exceeded the walls of the law school.

Lesson Two: People Who Are Disinterested at First Will Join the Cause if They Understand the Plan

One of our most useful ideas came from a librarian who initially had no interest in the project. Because his position did not include participation in library workshop instruction and our work began with content creation, he did not join our initial meetings. However, as we began to work on the video component of the tutorials, which showed the location of the resources in the library and our use of the materials being introduced, his interest was piqued. This was just about the time we realized there was not a Steven Spielberg among us as our video recording sessions became long and laborious and much of our resulting footage was useless. Having heard our complaints from the sidelines, the nonparticipating librarian suggested using a succession of still photographs in lieu of video, saving us the considerable time and effort of becoming efficient videographers.

When asked why he had not stepped in sooner, it became clear that our group had failed to share our plan and our awareness of its limitations clearly. Because we did not understand the technology available, some of our ideas were uninformed and unsuccessful. Since our goals were not clear, people with useful skills and expertise were not yet interested enough in our project to provide their full support. Once we were able to better communicate our goals, we were able to attract the interest of those with the proper mix of skills to successfully complete the project.

Lesson Three: Bring Everyone to the Table at the Start of the Project

Because this project was a marriage of dissimilar components, no single participant had the experience or expertise to answer every question it raised. By including librarians, instructors, and an instructional technologist in our initial working group, we thought we had covered all of the necessary bases. Though our group represented a good start, it did not include all of the necessary players. Having an instructional technologist in the group covered design but not necessarily product functionality. When the finished product was not compatible with Mozilla Firefox, it was the library system's webmaster who had to fix the accessibility problems. Had he been involved in the project from its inception, our technologist's choice of software might have differed and late efforts to make the tutorials Web-ready may not have delayed the launch of the project.

In addition, though we had the support of library system administration¹, their support did not necessarily mean our project was a priority. We were a small fish in a big pond. At the time we realized the tutorials could not function on various Internet platforms, the library system was migrating the law library Web page to a new, system-wide format, several digital projects were in process, and our comparatively small project was not at the top of anyone's to-do list but our own. Though our webmaster's dedication eventually got our tutorials up and running,² our initial launch was only available on computers in the law library's computer lab, which meant they were only accessible to law students. Though this was our primary audience, much of the appeal of our funding application was the number of students the tutorials promised to reach across campus. Nearly six months passed

¹ The law library at WSU is governed under the general university library system. Many departments, like Library Computing and Media Services, are centralized and directly governed by library administration. Thus, the law library does not provide its own Web services.

² The webmaster re-recorded the tutorials using independent software that published into multiple formats that were not limited to play on Microsoft platforms.

before Web access was available and the tutorials became accessible campus-wide.

Lesson Four: Do the Easy Part First

One thing that we did right in planning this project was starting the actual work with what we knew as librarians. Developing the content seemed a natural starting place as it allowed us to begin within our comfort zones and ease into the more technical work.

One side effect of starting with the content was the comfort and commitment it developed among the team of librarians. By the time the content development began, a new law librarian had been added to our staff. The three librarians began regular meetings to determine our focus and develop scenarios for the tutorials to follow. Though we would later divide the seven topics among us and one of the students we hired, for continuity's sake, we determined the direction and focus of each tutorial together.

We all agree those were the best meetings of our careers. Because we were aware of each others' commitments, meetings were planned for the convenience of all and started on time and ended on time. Each meeting was both productive *and* enjoyable. Our tutorial-planning group shares memories of creating stories about TV characters in high-speed car chases and fictionalized athletes engaged in drug smuggling. When the work got technical and difficult, students did not show up for shifts, and deadlines were in jeopardy of being missed, we all stayed on board not simply because of our commitments as professionals to a worthwhile project but also because of the relationships that emerged as we developed the content of the tutorials.

Lesson Five: Be Prepared for Change

Some changes are welcome—discovering the ease of working with still photographs over video, finding people with useful skills who are more interested in your project than you expected, figuring out how to get the best out of a student with potential—but some added obstacles to an already challenging project. The week after we

completed the photos of the *Federal Practice Digest*® to be used in the tutorial entitled “Finding Federal Case Law,” a new, full set of volumes arrived. An urgent message from the law library director alerted us to this wrinkle. New photos and page references were immediately required. There was newly reported case law related to our topic. Our experience with the video, however, had taught us a lot about responding well to change. With a new run-through of the research, a rush processing job, and a Saturday morning photo session, “Finding Federal Case Law” became a reality with minimal stress and panic.

Conclusion

By the end of our project, we had completed seven tutorials:

- Finding Federal Case Law
- Finding Michigan Law
- Finding Online Resources
- Finding Federal Statutes
- Updating Legal Information
- Using Secondary Resources
- Free Online Legal Resources

Each guide to using a print resource provides moving photos of the library showing the location of the resources and our progress as we complete research using each resource to demonstrate its structure. At the same time, the user views slides with teaching points and listens to voice-over explanations of the process. Tutorials introducing online resources show the actual use of the resource and also include voice-over instructions. The tutorials reach users through two senses and address several learning styles. The user can advance or rewind the tutorials and learn the research lessons taught at his or her own pace. In completing the tutorials we used Camtasia, Microsoft Producer, Microsoft PowerPoint, a digital camera, an audio recorder, 200 hours of paid student time, and countless hours of time from library and instruction professionals.

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Student surveys have shown that our first year of providing the tutorials was moderately successful. Our student response and survey data is limited as a result of the delay in making the tutorials available via the Web. Though access limitations affected the number of survey results, the responses we did receive were enthusiastic, and anecdotal student reviews have been overwhelmingly positive. Despite the obstacles, the project has been, unquestionably, worthwhile. Had we been aware of some of the challenges that could occur at the planning stage, we might have saved considerable time and avoided some of the frustration. Hopefully our story will encourage you to consider similar projects of your own and help you eliminate some of the potential kinks as you complete them.

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Another Perspective

“[L]egal research is a skill, and like other skills components of law school curricula, including trial advocacy, negotiations, and brief writing, it requires considerable resources to be taught well. Skills training requires on-going development of detailed problems, a high faculty-student ratio, and substantial clerical and administrative support, as well as funding for new staff or the time and attention of existing faculty—all of which translates into a very resource-intensive curriculum. By that measure, perhaps it is not alarming when we hear the often-repeated tales of the graduate from a top tier law school who objected to his own motion in court; the associate who rang up several hundred dollars in Westlaw charges to read a single newspaper article; or associates who think the Federal Reporter 2d only contains cases from the Second Circuit. In traditional legal pedagogy, law firms have largely been left to resolve these problems, not the academic community.

—Matthew C. Cordon, *Beyond Mere Competency: Advanced Legal Research in a Practice-Oriented Curriculum*, 55 *Baylor L. Rev.* 1, 11–12 (2003).