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CYBERTORT

(Towards an Integrated Electronic Learning Environment for Distance Learning in Law)

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Abstract

This paper describes the pedagogy underpinning two conceptually related designs for web-based learning. At the heart of both versions is the desire to promote deep learning, encourage an ongoing dialogue with the materials and make the learning experience meaningful. Practical outcomes are explained with some illustrations taken from the current web pages. Those from the WebCT environment are described developmentally to demonstrate how designers can move from the simple to the quite sophisticated. Both platforms could serve the needs of distance learners and to this end they are compared with the guidelines on the quality assurance of distance learning produced by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

Keywords: Cybertort, IOLISplus, WebCT, Developing Web Pages, QAA Guidelines for Quality assurance of Distance Learning

Introduction

For the past two and a half years I have been involved in the designing of web pages. These were first for law students and then for colleagues who are continuing their professional development by seeking a Diploma in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. Details of the developments for law students are described in some detail elsewhere (Grantham, 1999, 2000). However, whether at undergraduate or postgraduate level, the pedagogical issues supporting the rationale for web page design are much the same.

Appropriately, perhaps, my role as leader of the module Curriculum Development and Design for the postgraduate Diploma has enabled an ongoing and critical dialogue of web-based learning with colleagues from a wide range of disciplines. According to Carr and Kemmis (1986) this critical dimension is an important step in the process of evaluating professional practice. This may be particularly true at a time when electronic delivery of learning and teaching is fast becoming a

subject of national focus and when emerging products are of variable quality. Constructive criticism from colleagues has led to redesign and, sometimes, to the consigning of some ideas to infinite cyberspace.

My background in curriculum development has also been a real asset. It provides a useful set of concepts and questions with which design issues can be addressed. These 'tools for thinking' about curriculum, many of them also applicable to non-electronic learning environments, had already led me to replace lectures with 'workshops' and supply interactive instead of passive notes. When it became clear that the Internet was the coming thing, and that electronic learning environments held much promise, then the interactive notes were to be a valuable starting point for web page design. But, just as the spider needs time to spin a web then so too does the curriculum innovator. Time came via a half-time secondment to the Coventry University Teaching and Learning Task Force that began in the autumn term of 1997. What has so far emerged from the development work is two conceptually similar electronic platforms for web-based learning. One is linked to the Law Courseware Consortium's IOLIS (I called it 'IOLISplus') and the other a 'stand alone' approach that can be designed at different levels of sophistication. At Coventry University, both sit within the overall online learning platform of WebCT.

This paper briefly describes the pedagogy underpinning the current version of IOLISplus, goes on to do the same for the 'stand alone' design, and then describes four levels of development that led to the latter environment. Although the original intention was to produce web-based learning for on-campus courses it soon became clear that both platforms could serve the needs of distance learners. The paper concludes with a brief commentary on how the two designs match up to the criteria for quality assurance of distance learning produced by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (1999).

IOLISplus

IOLISplus was my first venture into web-based learning and was presented at the first Learning in Law Initiative (LILI) conference in January 1999. Subsequent evaluation led to some changes in the format and these were outlined at the second LILI conference in January 2000. For those not familiar with IOLISplus let me briefly outline its history and pedagogical purpose.

IOLISplus was born in the Autumn of 1997 as an idea for an electronic learning environment to support the much more familiar IOLIS. My University had already decided to invest heavily in the hardware for communications and information technology (C&IT). IOLISplus was just one of a number of Coventry University Task Force projects that were intended to harness the new technology.

IOLISplus web pages, created in Microsoft Front Page, supplement IOLIS by providing:

- a) self-paced learning not bounded by rigid timetables
- b) powerful navigation around the learning environment
- c) links to articles and other web-based materials
- d) infinite possibilities for 'customisation' by tutors

Despite the lure of the techno whistles and bells it is important that sound pedagogy leads the technology and not the reverse. It is all too easy to be persuaded by the instantaneous 'fix' that the technology can sometimes promise. Web design has to begin with important questions about learning and teaching and proceed to web pages that will be a valuable learning experience for the student. Such an experience may not result unless the underpinning pedagogy is questioned and the

ensuing page design is tested against the pedagogical conclusions. Underpinning pedagogy for IOLISplus is firmly rooted within the broad spectrum of 'student-centred' learning. Some features provide an opportunity for the students to follow their own particular learning styles. Other features encourage the student to think about the learning process itself and aim to promote a collaborative approach between learner and learner and learner and tutor (Boud, Cohen and Sampson, 1999).

In these respects, particular distinctive features of IOLISplus are:

a) essential 'prior learning' needed by the student to get the best out of the topic or area being studied (Figure 1)

[Click here for Picture](#)

(Figure 1)

b) 'learning objectives' or 'outcomes' for each topic, though these also now appear in the latest version of IOLIS (spring 2000)

c) 'frequently occurring misunderstandings' (FOM's), based loosely on the 'frequently asked questions' ('FAQ's) but which focus on mistakes and misapprehensions commonly found in the area of study concerned (Figure 2)

[Click here for Picture](#)

(Figure 2)

d) questions designed to promote deeper learning of some matters already introduced in IOLIS or based on articles to which the web page is linked, particularly a critique of the present law, where appropriate

e) more contextual material allowing even more scope for questions that attempt to plumb the depths of understanding of the issues

f) a rating system for all IOLISplus questions that allows the student to make choices about which questions to tackle and in what order; thus enabling different styles of learning

g) ongoing online dialogue with and between students via an electronic legal forum

h) graphics, including some animated graphics to add interest to the pages

Students can navigate from the IOLISplus Home Page (Figure 3) from which all other pages can be accessed. Even though students can take advantage of introductory workshops for new users there is also a 'How to use it' instructions page. Particular issues or even individual words can be found via a powerful search facility.

[Click here for Picture](#)

(Figure 3)

Students navigate between both IOLIS and IOLISplus, the IOLIS data and exercises providing a foundation of learning upon which the IOLISplus questions and additional materials can then build.

Legal articles are particularly valuable since they can be directly linked to the appropriate web page in IOLISplus. Students have up-to-date comment on matters of direct concern and tutors have another source of progressively more searching questions. Hypertext in electronic journals also provides a facility that allows the tutor to target particular issues or comment. Often, it is questions on these more challenging matters that will be the focus for a continuing dialogue in the legal forum.

My own field of tort law holds much of interest and is quite amenable to contextual and critical study. Psychiatric injury was the first area of the field that was chosen for early experimental web pages in Cybertort. Since then pages introducing tort (Figure 4) and pages on the tort of nuisance have been added. The end of the 1999/2000 academic year should see pages on economic loss and duty of care. Add to this the 'stand alone' pages on medical negligence and remoteness of damage and there will be in excess of 30% of the tort module in electronic form.

Analysis of the first evaluation of the pilot studies of IOLISplus was carried out in the spring of 1999 and further evaluation is planned. Results so far are encouraging. Most students like the electronic learning environment, with the proviso that what they really prefer is a mixed learning milieu, i.e. incorporating both the electronic and face-to-face modes of learning (Grantham, 2000).

From the tutor's point of view, one of the most interesting developments has been the use of the electronic discussion forum. Originally, the forum was created within Front Page but this has now been superseded by the forum within WebCT. This is far more flexible and strings discussions together in a more user-friendly fashion. By far the most useful attribute of WebCT, however, is the ability to create fora for particular questions or for different groups. Thus, each seminar group, or learning group (sub-sets of seminar groups) can have its own discussion area. Each group can be confident that only members of that group and the seminar leader can see postings. This helps both hesitant students and sympathetic tutors to move the discussions along. Students have more time to consider their written responses and do not have to speak off-the-cuff as is sometimes required in face-to-face seminars. It may be that this latter skill is essential for the putative lawyer but such skills can be sharpened in other ways. In any case, the overwhelming majority of law students will no longer enter the legal profession and surely there is a strong case for putting more emphasis on honing writing skills, rather than oral abilities. Add to this the probability that many careers are more, rather than less, likely to demand the competent use of electronic communication and the electronic discussion forum increasingly becomes an indispensable learning tool.

New ways of assessing students could also emerge from electronic discussions. Group and individual postings to discussion fora could form a very valuable means of both formative and summative assessments. Students can learn much from the tutor's reaction to their postings, understanding more about how to focus their enquiries or how to use authorities to support their arguments. Tutors can trace how a student's understanding and reasoning ability develops over time. They can give credit, not just for meeting set criteria, but also for where a student is now compared with the point from where they started. Although I have not yet adopted such assessment for law students I have used it in the postgraduate course for colleagues. Much reflective learning took place on all sides and there was a written record of the continuous development of understanding and of ideas.

'Stand Alone' web pages

Most law tutors will be able to identify areas of law in their own field where they have a particular interest. These may be prompted by research, personal experience or simply because there is something about the area that fascinates them. Consequently, they will want their students to learn about this area of law in a way that incorporates at least some of those aspects that have so motivated the tutor. IOLIS, for all its virtues, does not afford the opportunity for extensive customisation by law tutors. There is an annotation facility but this is limited and does not permit of direct hyperlinks to material outside IOLIS. It is possible also that there are whole rafts of law in a learning and

teaching programme that are not directly covered in IOLIS, or are scattered throughout the IOLIS package. Such is the case for me in tort law in respect of, for example, remoteness of damage and medical negligence. For these areas I have created web pages that are separate from IOLIS and IOLISplus and can stand on their own as independent learning resources.

Various ways of creating web pages exist, and I have used Front Page, Word Web Editor and tools within WebCT. These start from a simple uploading of workshop notes, which are then overlaid with hypertext and a glossary, and evolve to become quite a sophisticated learning environment, employing some of the IOLISplus features. Each stage has its own pedagogical rationale and it is this that has driven the technological developments.

A short summary of each stage of the web design follows. I have used a horticultural metaphor since it seemed to me that, as professional learning and teaching practitioners, we are in the business of causing things to grow - in this case, hopefully, our students.

The 'Seedbed' (first stage in web development)

Pedagogical objectives

To encourage the student out of 'passive' mode into interacting with the material to improve understanding. The document is minimally interactive so that the students can do something with the notes, even if it is only to find their way more quickly around them. However, later stages will enhance interactivity by adding other features. Two features are added to the basic notes:

- a) Hypertext to the sections in the notes has been added. This allows students to navigate quickly around the document.
- b) A glossary has been constructed. This should help most students but particularly those for whom English is an additional language (Figure 4).

[Click here for Picture](#)

(Figure 4)

'Shoots' (second stage in web development)

Pedagogical objectives

To get students to be even more interactive by setting tasks within the text of the notes. The variety of questions is designed to provoke different kinds of learning. In addition to the hypertext and glossary, exercises [or tasks] have been added. Here, the students have to 'do something with the notes' so that more interactivity is encouraged. Responses could be prepared for a seminar or postings could be made to the Discussion Forum. However, the latter option might be difficult for the tutor to manage if all students were to make individual postings.

Tasks are of six types:

- a) **Awareness** of the significance of change in law and/or appreciation of social context and change.

The pedagogical purpose here is to introduce into the learning those matters that influence the law and to give some context to legal change. It assumes that 'black letter' law does not provide a

sufficiently meaningful learning experience and tends to promote 'pond skating' (surface learning

b) **Puzzle**. Most questions of the puzzle type require an understanding of a lack of 'fit' with previous learning. Such apparent contradictions afford excellent opportunities to increase student tolerance of ambiguity.

Underpinning pedagogy for this kind of question is to give the student an opportunity to examine dissonance in the law. The lack of 'fit' with the student's prior learning is to reveal that things do not always rhyme as anticipated.

c) **Revision** of previous understanding - with or without clues.

Linking with prior learning enables the student to 'integrate' their understanding and to think more holistically. A pedagogical assumption here is that holistic learning is more valuable to the student than 'atomised' learning where bits of understanding are often not related to each other. Atomistic learning is one of the dangers of a modular system.

d) **Links** question, attempting to draw upon understanding from another module.

Pedagogically, the aim is to afford the opportunity to the student to make connections between apparently discrete modules, i.e. to foster 'holism' and more of an overview of law generally. The ability to make such connections is another transferable skill.

e) **Problem-solving**. Here the student is faced with applying first principles to a fact situation.

Clearly, skills in problem-solving are not peculiar to law. However, such skills are essential if the student is to embark on a legal career. This is yet another example of a transferable skill.

f) **Reconciliation** exercise where the student has to apply careful reasoning to apparently irreconcilable decisions. This is a difficult task and will require the student to research.

This is yet another exercise that invites the student to explain dissonance. Pedagogically speaking, this kind of learning plays the important role of introducing the student to the possibly disconcerting idea that experts can sometimes get it wrong! Here, in possibly applying the law incorrectly, the judges may have arrived at a 'fair' conclusion. The task is a difficult one but there is much potential for deep learning.

'Flower buds' (third stage of web development)

Pedagogical objectives

The new feature of this development is the provision of feedback to students (Figure 5). Not all tasks have instant feedback since some of them require more dialogue between students in the Discussion Forum.

[Click here for Picture](#)

(Figure 5)

Advantages of instant feedback are:

a) the students can quickly check their understanding; and

- b) it can boost student confidence ready for the next learning task; and
- c) it instantly reveals any learning that will need to be adapted or remedied.

Disadvantages of instant feedback are:

- a) the student can beat the system and look at the feedback without putting in much, or any, learning effort; and
- b) the student could be led into thinking that the response reveals *all* that needs to be known, or that there is to know, about the subject-matter.

Both of these disadvantages can be countered by including in the feedback some questions to prompt even further enquiry. (There is, of course, no guarantee that the student will follow through with the enquiry!)

`Flowers' (the fourth stage of web development)

For this final stage of development there are six additions to the design of the web page. Each has its own pedagogical basis and this is explained before or after the description of the development.

a) **Prior Learning**

One of the most important things about learning is what the student already knows (Ausubel, 1978, Entwistle and Entwistle, 1992). As in IOLISplus, here are listed the essential things the student should know before proceeding with this study.

b) **Learning Objectives**

There are arguments for and against these. Coventry University decided that these must appear in all module descriptors and since 'benchmarking' in law is to be a reality, they are included here. Learning objectives have the advantage of providing the student with a checklist of what they should be able to know and do at the end of the study. Some of these objectives have been drafted in very broad terms. Such objectives can be met by a similarly broad set of learning activities.

c) **Frequently Occurring Misunderstandings ('FOM's)**

Similar to the innovation in IOLISplus, these alert the student to a range of misunderstandings that commonly arise in learning this area of the law. They have been gathered together from the tutor's experience of holding seminars and assessing student work.

It is a kind of 'map of the minefield' which students can examine if they wish.

They can enter the minefield without reference to the map - and some no doubt will!

d) **Learning Groups**

To avoid the tutor having to respond to each student in the Discussion Forum the students are divided into learning groups. These could be whole seminar groups or sub-groups. Students must learn how to email each other with ideas and then how to make group postings to the Discussion

Forum. Alternatively, a Discussion Forum could be set up for each group, or sub-group, postings being visible only to the members of the group and the tutor.

Tutors should allow free dialogue between the students and only intervene strategically, i.e. when the dialogue is 'off-task', or flagging and in need of new input, or is simply going in the wrong direction. It will be realised that such interventions require sound professional judgment. Inappropriate, or untimely, tutor postings can hamper or completely stop the dialogue.

e) **Links to the Internet**

These can be added to a web page relatively easily. Cases reported on the Internet can be similarly linked. Students' attention can be drawn to the link and additional tasks set relating directly to that link.

f) **Graphics**

These add interest to the pages and introduce something of an element of fun. Gathered from various free graphics web sites they can light up what might otherwise be a dull page. More than this they can act as a prompt to learning, especially for students who are motivated by visual stimuli.

QAA guidelines on Distance Learning

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education issued its guidelines in March 1999. They describe distance learning as:

'A way of providing higher education that involves the transfer to the student's location of the materials that form the main basis of study, rather than the student moving to the location of the resource provider'. (page 1)

The guidelines cover every aspect of quality assurance of distance learning and focus on six main areas, i.e:

system design,

programme design, approval and review

management of programme delivery

student development and support

student communication and representation

student assessment

It is worth examining the degree to which IOLISplus and the 'stand alone' web pages go in meeting those guidelines concerned with learning, teaching and evaluation.

** Identifying and testing the forms and lines of communication to be used between all the parties to be involved, in the context of constraints imposed by the timetable and, where relevant, time zones (page 8).*

Bulletin boards email and the 'chat' facility in WebCT more than meet these basic requirements and have been tested in a number of contexts. Time zones present a different issue and tutors would need to arrive at an accommodation with students about 'real time' communication. Asynchronous communication should present no difficulty.

** Determine the processes that should apply to piloting, or otherwise field testing, learning materials, and to evaluating any locally provided facilities or services on which successful study is assumed to depend (page 8).*

Both IOLISplus and 'stand alone' webs have already been evaluated as pilots by both peers and students. In the case of the postgraduate programme the peers are the students! More extensive evaluation is in progress.

** Devise processes appropriate to the system of distance learning, as designed, for feedback, review and evaluation of all components and specify how resulting information is to be incorporated into quality management and quality enhancement processes (page 8).*

Each WebCT site has an embedded evaluation questionnaire. This can be revealed to students at the end of a programme of study. Resulting data can be fed into the institution's quality assurance systems.

** Incorporate projections on the updating and enhancement of learning materials and ensure that the design and operation of the distance learning system can take account of this updating and enhancement (page 8).*

Once materials are uploaded to IOLISplus or into WebCT it is a relatively easy task to update them. New links can be added and these will become more numerous as more data, including electronic journals, becomes available online. As already described, web pages can be improved incrementally in the light of evaluation, new technology or developing technological expertise.

** In designing distance learning programmes of study, and any component modules, a providing institution should ensure explicit and reasoned coherence between, on the one hand, the aims and intended learning outcomes, and, on the other, the strategies for teaching at a distance, the scope of the learning materials and the modes and criteria of assessment (page 10).*

Attempts to achieve 'curriculum coherence' should not be peculiar to distance learning programs. Such coherence, according to Stake, (1967) and Eraut, (1984), should be an aim of all courses or programmes of study. IOLISplus and WebCT pages stress learning objectives (or outcomes) at the start of each study topic. Learning materials and the tutor's questions can be examined for congruence with the learning objectives. In addition, the distance learning strategy is already made partly explicit through 'essential prior learning' and the choices made available for different student approaches to learning. Criteria for assessment have not yet been added to the web pages but this would need careful consideration in a distance learning context. Potential web-based assessment has already been mentioned and this ought to form a major part of a distance learning strategy.

** A providing institution is responsible for ensuring that the design of distance learning programmes of study provides a learning opportunity which gives to students a fair and reasonable chance of achieving the academic standards required for successful completion (page 10).*

Students who work through the web pages and linked materials with diligence and who, with suitable encouragement, make effective use of the discussion and email facility should be able to achieve the requisite standard. For reasons discussed earlier, there is every reason to suppose that the contributions to virtual seminars by distance learners could be just as considered as those made in the heat of face-to-face seminars. There is a growing amount of evidence that this is indeed the case

(Ehrmann, 1999).

** An institution might be expected to consider how learning materials might be made interactive and allow students to gain formative feedback (page 11).*

Both IOLISplus and WebCT materials score well against this guideline. Essentially both are interactive and formative feedback is available either through hypertext links, the discussion forum or email.

** In respect of students taught at a distance, a providing institution should give explicit attention to its responsibility for supporting and promoting autonomous learning and enabling learners to take personal control of their own development (page 15).*

One of the main driving forces behind the design of IOLISplus and WebCT pages is the need to empower students to follow their own learning patterns. It is the student who decides, for example, when they will seek feedback or make postings to a discussion forum. Searching questions in both formats aim to get the student to review their own understanding of an issue and to help them to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty. With Perry (1968) I am firmly of the view that one of the most important functions of the learning and teaching practitioner is to provide opportunities for student personal and intellectual development. This means designing learning experiences that encourage movement along a scale from polar views of knowledge, through to the understanding of all knowledge as contextual and relativistic. Such experiences and understanding should also encourage the development of personal commitment and to a student taking control of their own future. Students of Cybertort are faced with varying degrees of challenge depending, in part, on the point they are starting from. They will encounter increasing uncertainty and even 'messiness' in the law. These abound in various corners of the law, but tort law appears to have a larger than average proportion of such dark recesses. Such knowledge, according to Barnett (1994) is 'propositional' and is best achieved through a process of reflection. Cybertort is an electronic means by which light can be shed on these corners and from such light can come better understanding.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the pedagogy underpinning two developments in web-based online learning environments. One of these (IOLISplus) is linked to a CDROM-based package (IOLIS). The other is a form of incrementally designed web pages within a WebCT environment. Each stepped innovation in this process has its own pedagogical imperatives and allows a practitioner to enhance the design according to available time and technological confidence. Finally, it also looked at how the resulting Cybertort measures up to the learning and teaching guidelines for distance learning programmes produced by the QAA.

Throughout, the emphasis has been on learning and teaching strategies that best encourage interactivity and which empower the student to learn in their own way, at their own pace and in their own time. However, a central aim of the design has also been to strongly encourage the student to get closer to the subject and not to view it from a safe distance. Distance learners often study from the comfort of their own homes. However, in no way are they required to learn in a cosy and unchallenging way.

Carefully designed electronic learning environments can provide rich learning experiences for students both on and off campus. An array of materials, linked astutely to probing questions, can promote deep learning of a kind that mirrors the best face-to-face seminars. Students of Cybertort are not bound by time or place or by the strictures of a set learning and teaching programme. They are not prisoners of the hurried lecture where, although it might be stressed that students can ask questions, there is an understandable reluctance to disturb the speaker in full flow. A lecturer persuaded towards more electronic learning and teaching will have to become less of the performer

and become more of a mediator of student learning. As Laurillard (1993) puts it:

'Making student learning possible places much more responsibility with the teacher. It implies that the teacher must know something about student learning, and about what makes it possible. This is what I have characterised as mediating learning.' (p14)

Such a change of role has many implications for practitioner development and is far too complex an issue to explore here. One thing is certain. As use of the Internet becomes more widespread, students on and off campus, including many who traditional higher education has not yet reached, will expect more electronic resources. Learning and teaching practitioners must respond to these expectations and design electronic learning environments that enhance the education experience of all. Building a community of learners in the context of cyberspace is indeed a challenge for a new millennium. It is a challenge for which higher education institutions must prepare.

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