

CHAPTER 13

Teaching Library and Legal Research Skills to First-Year Law Students: The Role of Library Tours and Exercises

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INTRODUCTION

In his classic work *The Bramble Bush*, the great American legal scholar [Karl Llewellyn \(1960, p. 101\)](#) describes the first year of legal studies as a time when students have to learn to “think like a lawyer.” This requires them to master skills “to think precisely, to analyse coldly, to work within a body of materials that is given... It is not easy thus to turn human beings into lawyers.” Anyone who has studied law will share the sentiment underlying Llewellyn’s statement. Studying law requires skills that students do not usually possess on entering legal education. This can be a challenge, particularly in countries such as Britain where, unlike in the United States, legal education is predominantly undergraduate, i.e., students can study law immediately on completion of their secondary education ([Jackson, 1989, p. 669](#)). For this reason, British universities place special emphasis on introductory legal courses. At Aberdeen, one of them is *Legal System*, which is taught in the first semester.

In this chapter, we discuss the role of library tours, library exercises, and quizzes in legal education and focus on the collaboration between the School of Law and the Taylor Library. The library tour is part of the library induction for new students. The library exercise and the quiz are integrated into the *Legal System* course, which aims to introduce the fundamental characteristics of the Scottish legal system and includes various sources of law such as statutes, precedents, and institutional writings.

We present the different components of the orientation period and describe the steps of familiarization with library resources. With data collected from a library survey and interviews with staff, we analyze how students benefited from the above activities.

Background

The Taylor Library is one of three branches at the University of Aberdeen Library and houses the law collection over two floors. The library serves around 1200 students and 46 academic staff, and it is run by a small team of six librarians. The School of Law resides in the same building, occupying the floors above the library. It offers undergraduate, masters, and doctoral programs for students.

As the Taylor Library is a subject library, its role is to provide the resources (both paper and electronic), which are indispensable to legal research and teaching, and to offer assistance with their use. The Taylor Library and the School of Law have been relying on each other since the establishment of the Law Library in 1964. Over time, their partnership improved to satisfy the needs of the continuously growing user community. Formal meetings between the library manager and the representatives of the school now take place regularly. As a result, library staff are involved in a range of teaching activities with the aim of equipping future legal professionals with advanced legal research skills.

THE “ABERDEEN TRADITION”

Library Tours

Why Does the School Organize Tours?

Compulsory tours of the library run during Freshers' Week, and they form the basis of the new students' library training. Their purpose is to introduce students to library staff, begin their orientation, and allow a first peek at the Library's modus operandi. This marks the start of the effort from both departments to help the students build the skills required to use the Library confidently and independently. These skills evolve over time and are part of a wider learning experience. As Noon (1994, p. 11) suggests: “information skills are a skill for life.”

The School of Law organizes the library tours and splits the first-year law students into groups of approximately 20. Information about groups and times is disseminated to students by email and displayed on notice boards at the School. The same information is forwarded to the library

manager who places relevant notices at the library entrance. As this task calls for the participation of all library staff, the team splits the tours between them. The tours take place on the same day, and sessions last for about 30 minutes each.

Delivery: Students and Library Staff Meet for the First Time

On arriving at the library, students report to staff and sign the attendance sheet at the Issue Desk, where our circulation and enquiry services are run from. Circulation and all other services remain active during this busy time.

The librarian presenting the tour introduces themselves and thanks everybody for attending; the group is then taken around the library. The session covers information about opening times and geographical points of note, such as locations of entry, exit, and available facilities. During the tour, staff indicate the points of contact within the library, i.e., Issue Desk, Help Desk, and European Documentation Centre, and inform students about the nearby IT department. Borrowing procedures, as well as the photocopying, scanning, and printing services, are explained. Students are reminded to carry their ID cards with them at all times.

Library catalogs, study spaces (with different food, drink, and noise policies) and the project and computer rooms are pointed out, and staff give an overview of the different collections: Heavy Demand, General Collection, Reference, UK statutory materials and official publications, law reports, and law periodicals. The Library uses QR codes to link paper collections to online resources, and the provision of this service is made known to students.

Staff explain that the School uses the OSCOLA referencing system (Oxford University Standard for Citation of Legal Authorities) in which the names of law reports and journals are abbreviated. Common legal abbreviations lists can be found throughout the library to aid students' identification of resources.

We always try and accommodate different learning needs and paces; tours can be tailored to the requirements of students who may benefit from a more personal communication style or have limited mobility or hearing. For example, we have posted an online library tour on YouTube ([University of Aberdeen, 2015](#)). Students are always encouraged to come back to us if they have any questions.

Particular emphasis is placed on the collection of statutory materials and law reports because they provide immediate access to legislation and court

reports in physical form. In addition, these are the resources that students will be using during the exercise. We also highlight these two collections because they do not follow the Dewey classification system—unlike the rest of the collections, they are arranged chronologically (Public Acts) and alphabetically by title (Law Report series), which can sometimes cause confusion.

Library Exercise

The Character of the Exercise

At Aberdeen, teaching legal research skills to first-year students is an integral part of the degree program, and the mandatory library exercise on the first teaching week serves this purpose. It is deliberately designed as a paper exercise. Some scholars question the relevance of this approach considering how much prominence electronic resources enjoy in the 21st century (Mawson, 2010, pp. 94–97). Others (Clinch, 2006, p. 276) reassure us that the printed word is not dead, and “paper collections of academic law libraries will still be in demand in the future.” Despite this continuing debate in the literature, the legal profession clearly expects that legal research training for students must cover paper and electronic resources equally (Law Society of Scotland, 2010, p. 24, 41; Bar Standards Boards, 2016–2017, p. 27).

Students in Action

As indicated above, the library exercise is tailored to meet the learning outcomes of the *Legal System* course. Students are expected to manage legal information and select key materials from various different sources. They have to apply knowledge in a legal context and use appropriate legal terminology.

Before Freshers’ Week, the Library receives the handout of the course, which contains the syllabus and the questions of the library exercise. As the exercise is integrated in the substance of the above academic course, the course coordinator sets the questions; the Library is not involved in this process. In preparation, we check the availability of resources and complete the exercise before students arrive. If any issues arise, we consult the course coordinator.

Thirty questions are carefully selected, so that they cannot be answered by using online resources. Workshops to introduce electronic legal databases take place at a later time. The students thus have to come to the library and locate primary legal sources, e.g., statutes and cases. The majority

of the questions are deliberately kept rather simple—the students have to find the short title of an act or a statutory instrument, or name the parties involved in a legal case. Other questions require a deeper understanding and deeper engagement with the sources. For example, figuring out whether an act is an Act of the United Kingdom or the Scottish Parliament is not always straightforward, even if the word Scotland appears in the title. The terminology can also be confusing. When one of the questions asks the student to justify their answer, they are usually uncertain how to interpret it. The following examples demonstrate the types of question that are asked:

- How many children did the petitioner and respondent have in *Pirrie v Sawacki* 1997 SCLR 59?
- Under the authority of which Act of Parliament was the statutory instrument that bears the numerical reference SI 1958/1344 made?
- State the Hansard reference for the parliamentary debates in the House of Commons and House of Lords on the Slaughter of Animals (Scotland) Act 1980 (c 13).

The exercise and quiz take place during the first and second teaching weeks, after the students have had their first *Legal System* lecture and library tours. Although the exercise is expected to be an individual piece of work, the students usually come to the library in groups and work together. The exercise also offers an opportunity for the students to establish friendships and to form study groups, which frequently endure through their years at university.

Another reason why tension is high among the students is that those who enter university today, born around the millennium, are more used to working with technology than any previous generation (Tenofsky, 2007, p. 284). When they come to the library to complete the exercise, their instinctive reaction is to get a computer and find the answers online. When this proves impossible, they start to panic. To reduce stress and help the students, librarians try and ensure that they are always available. They are present on the floors and at the Help Desk to explain the abbreviations, assist with citations, and direct students to the correct shelves, without giving out the answers. Experience from previous years has shown that the most difficult part of the exercise is understanding the case and legislation citations.

On completing the exercise, the students are expected to test their knowledge in an online quiz on MyAberdeen (the university's Virtual Learning Environment). The results do not count toward their final grade

for *Legal System*, but the successful completion of the exercise is a prerequisite for sitting the exam. Last year, 20 students needed to retake the exercise before their exams.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Library relies on several tools to evaluate the success of the activities described above. A library survey measured the student satisfaction of the academic year 2015–16. Feedback from the School and interviews with library staff have also provided valuable information.

Library Survey

Last year, the School enrolled 251 new law students on the *Legal System* course. They all participated in the library tour and the exercise. At the completion of the teaching session, the School asked the students to rate the course. There was only one student who noted that she/he disliked the library exercise. Of course, we cannot assume that the rest of the class liked it. To gather more evidence on student satisfaction, we drafted a survey comprising 14 questions. The survey was voluntary and anonymous. Seven percent of the students answered the questions.

The results show that 64% of the respondents regarded the tour as useful for the completion of the library exercise. Although 69% stated that the library exercise was difficult, 84% finished it within a day. More than half (53%) thought that the exercise contributed to them becoming regular library users. More specifically, 31% claimed to be in the library every day, 53% a few times a week, and 8% at least once a week. An overwhelming majority (98%) found the library staff helpful. An excerpt of the survey questions and a chart showing the responses can be seen in the appendix.

Feedback From School and Staff

As part of the research, we interviewed the Taylor Library staff. The shared view was that the library exercise is useful. Alongside the tour, it marks the beginning of the new students' library training. The Site Services Manager reiterated this sentiment and added:

“The exercise gets students into the library and introduces the resources available. The downside is that it causes disruption in the Silent Area. First-year students sometimes disturb others who need a quiet place to study.”

Our experience shows that students will come back to the library after this first contact. Throughout the year they have tutorials and seminars for which they are required to find and present legal materials, mainly cases. Some will ask for further help, whereas others will work independently. We are hopeful that the library exercise is a positive factor. When the course coordinator for *Legal System* commented on the result of last year's process, he said: "We get students to look things up for tutorials later in the course and they are able to do this, so they must have learned something."

Can Other Libraries Use Our Orientation Paradigm?

The method of library instruction described here may sound familiar to staff of law libraries. However, it can be useful to other specialized libraries working closely with a faculty where the library plays an active role in supplying students with the skills necessary for a degree program. As [Bellard \(2007, p. 502\)](#) suggests: "Information literacy is best taught when it is integrated into the substance of a course."

For example, it could be applied to a music faculty library housing a number of primary, secondary, and tertiary resources that uses various classification systems for these. In the proposed exercise, new students would go around the library and try to answer questions about early recordings, film footages, and music periodicals. The aim would be to familiarize them with their library and help them understand the resources available in music and the role of primary and secondary materials in their subject.

CONCLUSION: STUDENTS LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

On beginning university, some first-year students already feel confident navigating the collections; perhaps they used to know their way around their public or school library. Others pay close attention to what is said on the library tours. The fact remains that for new students, the small, specialized Taylor Library is unknown territory that has to be charted. Giving students a library exercise and asking them to find answers by themselves puts them in the driver's seat during this stage of the learning process. As [Mestre \(2012, p. 11\)](#) puts it: "Learners are now considered to be active participants in the learning process as opposed to sponges that absorb information."

The Taylor Library in partnership with the School of Law creates the conditions for a smooth transition into higher education. This includes acquisition of skills integral to studying law and conducting legal research. Through the activities described in this chapter, students also learn library skills, which is a desired learning outcome at the University of Aberdeen. The system has been in place for many years and cultivates a way of thinking that can later be taken into the workplace. This applies to not only their confidence in finding information with which to support an argument but also their aptitude in using different formats. Indeed, there are a number of law firms who have extended collections of law reports and journals on paper; a legal professional must be able to use whichever resources are available.

APPENDIX

Excerpt from the survey

Rating the Library Exercise (Fig. 13.1)

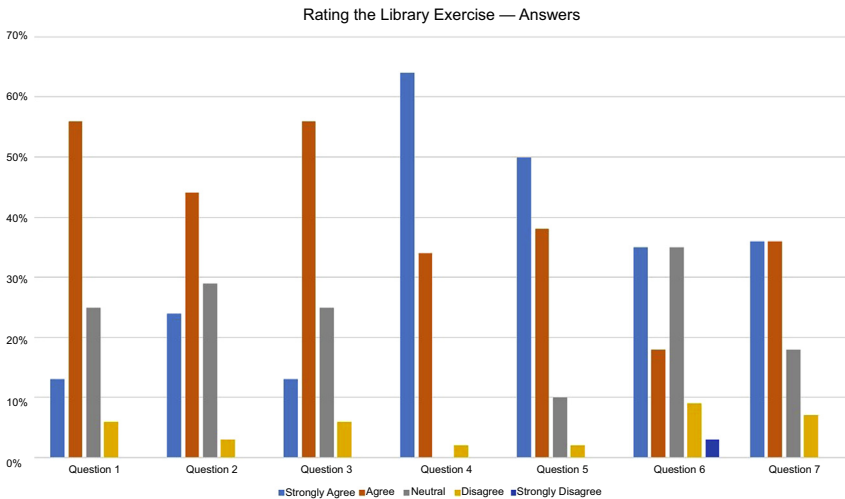


Figure 13.1 Answers to Library Exercise survey.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1.					
2.					
3.					
4.					
5.					
6.					
7.					

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