Research Stories

Video tales from the summer associate workplace

By Susan Herrick

A constant challenge for academic law librarians is to keep apprised of the changing research environments that our law students encounter in employment settings and to make sure that our formal and informal research instruction is relevant to the realities of legal research in the workplace. Further, we are always seeking ways to attract positive attention to the library and to legal research as an integral aspect of legal education.

The idea for what became the “Research Stories’ video clip project sprang from at least two sources. One source was the success of a program that the library has hosted several times in varying forms, aimed at preparing students to handle legal research in summer employment. One feature of these programs was a panel of law students discussing their previous summer research experiences, which was always warmly received by the program attendees. The other source was a suggestion made at a library professional staff meeting about public relations initiatives for the library that would raise our visibility to the law school community.

Inspired by the notion that law students relish hearing about their peers’ summer work experiences, as well as by the increasing use of YouTube and other video by academic institutions as a communication and public relations tool, I decided to develop a few video clips focusing on legal research and to see where the project went. At the outset I was unsure of the response the idea would elicit from prospective participants; further, I had only vague ideas about how and where we would use the video clips, beyond hoping to feature them in our Introduction to Legal Research course. Two misconceptions I had at the outset were that I might have difficulty persuading law students to take the time to participate and that the project would take up only a little of my time while yielding rewarding results. While the results were in fact very rewarding, the other two preconceptions turned out to be manifestly inaccurate.

Beginning the Process

On the positive side, recruiting law student participants was much easier than I expected. I contacted several students that I knew from research courses and other interactions. I was surprised and pleased by the enthusiasm with which they agreed to participate. Some of these students suggested the names of peers who also were willing—even eager—to participate. In fact, only one of the students I initially approached declined to participate on the grounds that he had done very little research in his previous summer job.

My primary criterion for recruiting individual students was a sense that they would feel comfortable in front of the camera and be articulate in discussing their research projects. However, I also wanted to incorporate several types of diversity. First of all, recognizing the wide variety of students’ summer experiences, I wanted the clips to reflect different types of employment settings. Second, I sought to illustrate specific areas of legal research such as secondary sources, statutes and legislative history, case research, and law-related research, such as medical and scientific topics. I was also concerned about individual diversity; I wanted participation from both genders as well as representative inclusion of various racial and ethnic groups.

Achieving a range of viewpoints and experiences proved to be reasonably easy. I recruited students whose summer employers included small, medium, and large law firms; private companies, including an energy company and a home health care services company; the homicide division of a state’s attorneys’ office; a city district court judge; an administrative law judge for the Veterans’ Administration; and a law commission in a Western European country.

Another issue that occurred to me early in the process was the desirability/necessity of obtaining releases from the students to allow us to publish their presentations. Because I originally envisioned using the video clips principally in the context of our Intro to Legal Research course, either by viewing them in class or posting them behind a password on the course management system (in this case, Blackboard), I did not initially request a release from the participating students. I asked the participants to sign a release later, when the quality of the clips inspired me to investigate further ways to use them. Drawing from several examples, including one used by the law school for symposium presenters and one used by our social work school for student simulations, I developed a simple release that covered, among other possibilities, posting the clips on our website. With one exception, the participants signed the release without hesitation.

Another initial step was to obtain the input and cooperation of our Media Services Department. I was fortunate to be able to work throughout the project with the same instructional media specialist, whose expertise, patience, and interest in the project were invaluable to producing the clips.

Planning the Recordings

Once I had my recruits lined up, I felt it was important to determine more specifically what they would describe and discuss for the recordings. Because I wanted the clips to feel spontaneous and genuine, I tried not to over-interview or extensively prep the participants beyond getting a feel for what they had done and how they might present it. If a student had more than one research project he or she was willing to discuss, I would select the one(s) that met my needs for coverage of various types of legal
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Next time
I plan to continue this project in the upcoming academic year in order to add to and update the batch of clips we have. In future endeavors I will do the following to enhance both the process and the end product:

- Obtain a release from each student at the outset.
- Give more thought to the background and setting, and encourage the participating students to wear something in a bright or dark color to provide some contrast in the image. I did not request that the students wear anything in particular, as a result, students wore a lot of gray and oatmeal colored clothing that blended into the background, which was a blank wall in a law school conference room. A background of books or even office furniture and plants would have considerably enhanced the visual appeal of the clips.
- Do a little more pre-recording preparation with the students. This should save time later by minimizing editing, while still allowing us to maintain the spontaneous feel of the clips.
- Anticipate technical glitches. A few students reported having difficulty viewing the clips. Mac users needed to download Flip4Mac in order to watch the videos. Wireless users in our building experienced difficulty opening the clips, although students connecting directly to the network did not. We have also encountered some problems with people using Windows media files from outside the law school, depending on how tight the security was on their wireless connections.

Closing Thoughts
First of all, I must note that working on this project was a lot of fun. It’s always rewarding to listen to our students talk about research and to hear how what we (try to) teach them translates into success in their summer jobs. Also, working with the media specialist in editing the video clips proved to be challenging and interesting, although more time consuming than I might have thought. Perhaps today’s students are more accustomed than we might anticipate to the idea of having their images displayed and broadcast. As noted above, only one student expressed reservations about having her clip made available on the open web. I was touched by the time and effort that participants invested preparing for the taping and by the enthusiasm and pride with which they described their summer research projects.

New ideas for utilizing video clips continue to arise. We have barely scratched the surface of the various ways that we could utilize the clips or expand upon the project. We will be showing the clips this year in our introductory research course, either individually or further edited into a combined presentation. The project also inspired me to investigate ways to foster collaborative work among law students in advanced legal research courses by having them develop a film clip describing a team research project. Further, I plan to consult with our career development staff to obtain their input and cooperation in using the clips with students; I also plan to speak with the resource development office regarding the clips potential to reach alumni. Also, some of our local private and government law librarians have expressed interest in exploring ways in which they could participate in the project—perhaps by developing videos that could be used in summer or new associate training.

The opportunity for law students to learn from their peers about legal research was welcomed by both participants and the viewers of the clips. This approach validates what we as librarians teach, as well as apprising us “ivory tower” academics of what our students are experiencing in the employment setting. It is for these reasons that I am eager to explore further ways to incorporate “Research Stories” into our formal and informal research instruction, as well as to use them to raise the library’s profile both within and outside the walls of our own law school.

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memorials

AALL Spectrum has been advised of the deaths of Kevin M. Hale, Dan F. Henke, and Susan J. Martin.

Mr. Hale was a librarian at State of New Jersey Law Library in Newark for over two decades. As a lifelong resident of Metuchen, New Jersey, he was also a member of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society. Mr. Hale joined AALL in 2000 and was active in the New Jersey Law Librarians Association, serving on the executive board and as chair of the Government Affairs and Legal Information Committee. He died on September 12.

Mr. Henke was professor of law emeritus and law librarian at the University of California. He earned his B.S. in Foreign Service and J.D. from Georgetown University and a Masters in Law Librarianship from the University of Washington. Mr. Henke received the AALL Marian Gallagher Award for Distinguished Service to the Profession in 1995. He served as co-founder and president of the Western Pacific Chapter, chairman of the Law Library Journal Committee, and local arrangements chairman of the 1962 Annual Meeting in San Francisco. Mr. Henke died on September 8.

Ms. Martin was director of the reference and research division at the L.A. Law Library. Born in Cheshire, England, she was a graduate of California State University Fullerton, Western State University College of Law, and Florida State University. Ms. Martin was a member of AALL since 2003. She died on August 8.

AALL Spectrum carries brief announcements of members’ deaths in the “Memorials” column. Traditional memorials should be submitted to Janet Sinder, Law Library Journal, University of Maryland At Baltimore, Thurgood Marshall Law Library, 501 W. Fayette Street, Baltimore, MD 21201-1768; jsinder@law.umaryland.edu.