

The Virtual Solicitors' Office

supporting students in the Law School

By Sarah King

Located in the Financial District of SHAREVILLE you will find the virtual solicitors' office. The development of this resource came about as a response to the challenge of how to inject realism into the experiential learning that our students undertake on the postgraduate Legal Practice Course in the Law School.

Over a number of years we had developed a problem-based approach to teaching, shaping both the knowledge and employability skills of our students.

“ paper based materials were not always an adequate means of representing the types of scenarios that our students might experience in practice ”



Shortlisted

In 2011, The Virtual Solicitors' Office was entered into the e-learning age awards, being shortlisted in three categories.



A Hub of Information

The administration area of the virtual solicitors' office is the starting place where students can explore and interact with virtual staff.

Our difficulty was that paper-based materials were not always an adequate means of representing the types of scenarios that our students might experience in practice. Setting out on paper that a client presents themselves in interview as anxious, tearful or angry does not provoke the same response in students as actually meeting that client virtually and seeing for themselves the state that they are in. Teaching using SHAREVILLE has allowed us to create a realistic virtual world where students can engage in activities that would be very difficult to replicate in class. As a consequence we believe our students are developing an awareness of their professional responsibilities and the impact that their actions might have on others by working in this virtual environment.

The aim of the virtual solicitors' office is to provide on-line problem-based scenarios, which relate directly to the sort of cases solicitors may come across in practice and are presented to students in a realistic way, using real people to play out scenarios that would commonly occur in the real world. It is hoped that by “experiencing” life in a virtual law firm this will improve the students’ enjoyment of, and engagement with the modules they are studying. Within the office we have a receptionist who greets anyone accessing the resource with a welcome to the firm and instructions on how to use the resource, a central administrative area housing a fictional Practice Manager and fictional Trainee Solicitors, (these roles were played by a real legal secretary and trainees working in law firms in Birmingham), and case studies relating to property, corporate and litigation matters.

Judith Willis, a former External Examiner on our Legal Practice Course

and now Higher Education Consultant has commented:

“The Legal Practice Course is vocational, preparing students for life in solicitors’ practice. Socialisation into the profession is a key element and the VSO successfully enables these students, within formal education, to experience situated learning that develops their understanding of their future community of practice. By incorporating a degree of relevance that is hard to achieve in a classroom, it successfully enhances learning ”

Our approach has also been commended by Sarah Knight, Programme Manager: JISC e-Learning Programme who comments:

“The development of this unique resource has enabled students studying law to have an authentic learning experience which will better prepare them for their work place environment.”

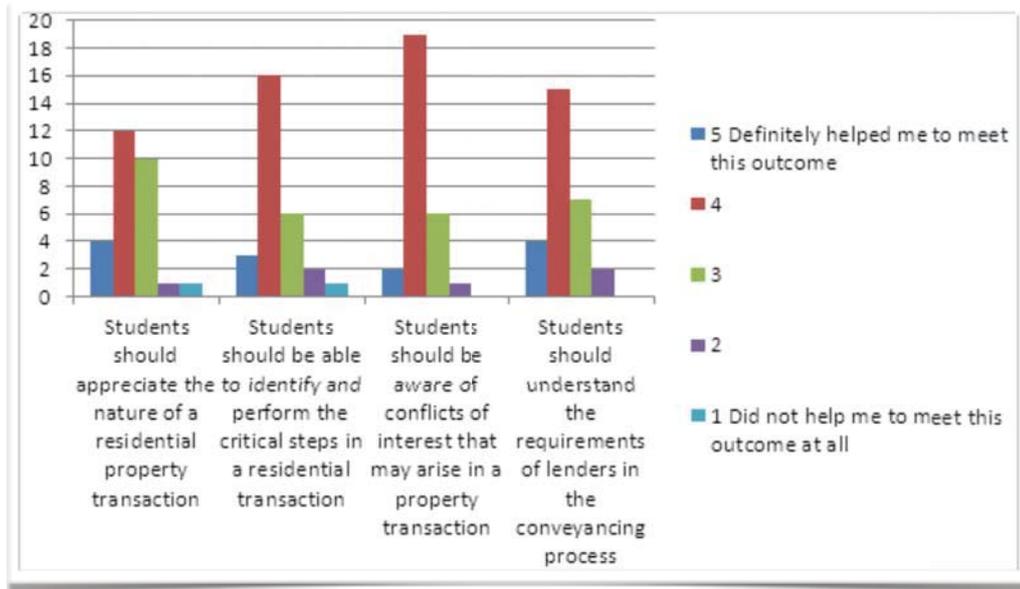
The virtual office has also featured as an example of exemplary practice in the highly acclaimed JISC Effective Practice in a Digital Age publication. The ‘Rethinking Learning Resources’ and accompanying video case study is available from www.jisc.ac.uk/resourceexchange.



“...this unique resource has enabled students studying law to have an authentic learning experience...”

Sarah Knight
Programme Manager: JISC e-Learning Programme

Most importantly the feedback from students is that using the virtual office is enhancing their learning experience. We undertook evaluation of our project in 2010/11 and asked students specifically whether the use of the virtual office helped them to meet the outcomes of one of their modules on the Legal Practice Course, Property Law & Practice.



The table indicates that a clear majority of students felt that engagement with the virtual office helped towards meeting the outcomes.

We have continued to add resources to the virtual office, most recently a new Litigation Office. We are also delighted that our work has been recognised externally. We were shortlisted in three categories at the eLearning Awards in 2011 and SHAREVILLE was also shortlisted in the Times Higher Awards in the same year. We are planning to continue to develop resources within SHAREVILLE that can benefit all students within the Law School.



This article was written by:

Sarah King
Senior Learning & Teaching Fellow, ELSS (Faculty of Education, Law and Social Sciences)