



E-LITIGIS: VIRTUAL TEAMWORK SPACE

Monica Vilasau Solana Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Spain

Elisabet Gratti Martinez , Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Spain

Jordi Casamajó Dalmau, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Spain

Summary

There are vast amounts of content on law on the internet, with large databases of sentences and jurisprudence that can be accessed via companies that work to index and classify this material, but it is complex and formal content that is used by legal experts and hard for lay people to understand. The eLitigis proposal looks to create new content from that already existing and encourage the participation of students interested in the field of law, allowing them closer contact with the legal content that professionals work with on a day-to-day basis.

The project developed and started up a games system based on Web 2.0 applications where participants play a number of roles. Specifically, this pilot test involves the roles of the judge, prosecution and defence; though the development has general aims and can be extended to other roles. eLitigis has thus created an open and participative web space where the general public, students and experts can play, create content and learn. It is a meeting point that encourages teamwork and where the content produced is both valued and evaluated. Thus, the sentences, the edicts, that the users play with are assessed and validated by experts to ensure their quality, whilst allowing for the language used to be intelligible and accessible to all.

1.- Presentation of e-litigis

Within the framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), one of the competences to be found in the professional profile of a graduate of law is leadership and teamwork. This competence has, to date, been underdeveloped in the teaching of law at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Open University of Catalonia, UOC). Indeed, one of the backbones to the UOC's teaching methodology is continuous assessment which involves setting students periodic tests to be resolved individually, and then corrected and marked. The marks obtained from these exercises form part of the student's final course mark and have always been strictly required to be completed individually.

Thus, the UOC Law and Political Sciences department urgently needed to address this and create mechanisms that allowed for the exercise of these leadership and teamwork competences. This was even more important given the fact that the Law and Political

Sciences department rolled out an EHEA Degree in Law in September 2008. One of the mechanisms involved the design and implementation of the e-litigis tool.

e-litigis is a tool that lets users work on leadership and teamwork competences in a virtual learning environment. It is based on a new methodology where cases have been created that have to be resolved by the students working as a virtual team using free software tools. The learning is then assessed based on their acquiring competences. This experience has led to the creation of an area with a series of computer tools (wiki, forum, calendar, chat, tutor noticeboard and disk space) and the writing of a series of cases and learning guides to be discussed and resolved as a team. A key factor in the e-litigis learning process is the tutor, who guides and assesses the work carried out by students.

The design and implementation of e-litigis has been interdisciplinary, involving Law faculty, IT experts and methodologists.

With regards to the specific teaching, the e-litigis tool was introduced in the February-June 2008 Law course on the UOC's Virtual Campus. The subjects chosen were Civil Law 2 (contract law) and Civil Law 4 (family law). The methodology was introduced in pilot test classrooms that were created in each of these subjects.

The idea behind e-litigis was to simulate an actual trial. The civil trial begins with the filing of a claim against an individual which means an action has to be drafted. The defence then has to draft a response to this action and finally the judge has to hand down a sentence. The aim is to create groups of students to take on the different roles and resolve the case set out together and virtually.

Each class is randomly divided into groups. Each group is then divided into 3 sub-groups, and each of these sub-groups takes on one of the different roles: prosecution (who have to draft the action), defence (who have to draft the response) and judge (who have to draft the sentence). Each sub-group is made up of 3 or 4 students. The teamwork is carried out as part of these sub-groups. Each sub-group has to jointly draft (as a team) the action, response or sentence. As the aim is to simulate as normal a trial as closely as possible, each sub-group intervenes successively.

As has been said, a key factor in this process is the tutor, who guides and supervises the drafting of the respective documents. As and when they have access to the work carried out, they can correct and offer guidelines with respect to the content.

In order to aid use of the tools introduced in the classroom, and the wiki in particular, there is someone available to offer support and answer the doubts that students may have.

2.- Technological aspects of the tool

On the basis of that needed to simulate a trial, an informational and educational environment was developed that let users participate to generate content. This user participation was collaborative, allowing them to form teams and thus create social networks in which they could interact. The site was presented as a kind of game so as to stimulate participation and creation, as the contents were to be used to generate yet more content by those involved.

Another aspect that was taken into account was usability and user-centred design, in order to ensure simple participation that let users enjoy using the environment and supported their learning process.

A range of tools were employed, including web 2.0 tools, to aid the participants' generation of content and teamwork. These tools allowed group members to interact and participate. The classroom structure included a tool that grouped the students together for teamwork. They then took on the role they were randomly assigned and had access to a series of tools including forums, chats, noticeboards, wikis, calendars and disk space.

All these tools were integrated into the UOC's learning system. Their integration required the use of authentication and authorisation methods to assign permissions and roles to users. This allowed us to interconnect different tools written in different programming languages, such as Java and PHP, or open-source software tools.

One of the challenges for the tool was to enable participants to generate content based on the case set out that would then be used by the other participants (the next sub-group to intervene) to generate yet more content. To achieve this, we looked for a system to generate content sequentially (Fig. 1) involving a teamwork system throughout. As a result, the sub-groups have a time limit for the generation of the content which has to be used by the next sub-group of students. This process uses time-limited spaces that open and close the user permissions to see the content generated.

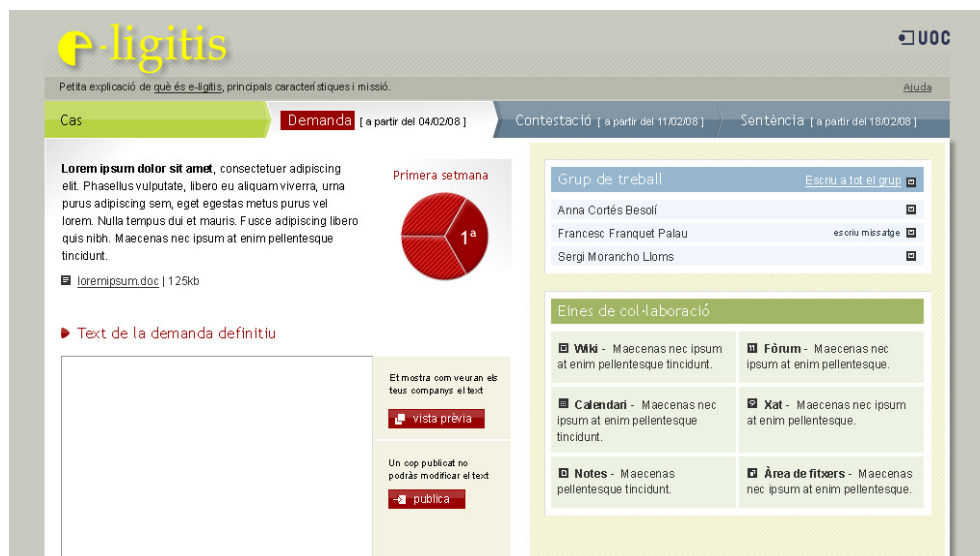


Fig. 1

3.- Application of the tool and the methodology in the teaching

To implement the e-litigis tool in Civil Law 2 and Civil Law 4, we took as our basis a complex case that involved a wide range of questions to be looked at throughout the course. The aim was twofold: analysis of the applicable institutions, and teamwork to produce a single document that met the requirements of the case set out, in terms of the sub-group role assigned.

This case study allowed the students to work on a series of competences:

1. Acquiring academic and disciplinary knowledge

With regard to family law, a divorce case was taken as the starting point to look at all the aspects relating to alimony, custody of children, filial relationship or settlement. With respect to contract law, a case of the sale of defective goods was looked at so as to study aspects

such as the law governing warranties on movable property, the law on latent defects, and compensation for consumers, damages or harm to third parties. This allows for the review of all the institutions studied and worked on over the semester and the definition of their legal roles. Likewise, questions that affect civil law as a whole are handled so as to simulate a real case perfectly, letting students learn how an actual civil case works.

2. Identifying and linking the legal institutions studied and applying theoretical knowledge to actual events
3. Finding out about, consulting and using sources of juridical information (jurisprudence, legal and doctrinal)
4. Reading, interpreting and drafting well-grounded legal texts
5. Learning to put forward legal arguments
6. Searching for solutions when assessing a legal problem
7. Ability to structure information
8. Ability to analyse and summarise
9. Work with ICTs
10. Organising one's own work and study
11. Teamwork, both in discussion and preparation of the case, and in drafting of a document.

Alongside the case study, the students are also provided with a guide with the following contents:

Introduction to the subject
Outline
Assessment of the case
Aims for each sub-group
Competences to be worked on
References to relevant doctrine
Bibliography
List of jurisprudence (guidelines)

Once each sub-group has written the corresponding document and following student assessment, example answers were published so that students could have point of reference to compare their work to.

Students had to work together to come to consensus on the document required. This teamwork was carried out in a virtual environment through the use of wikis and forums. The members of each sub-group had to establish their own methodology (eg, distributing the tasks involved), initiatives and the specific schedule so as to resolve the case, bearing in mind that they had to hand in the document before the deadline established on the classroom's calendar. In short for the prosecution and defence, it was the simulation of the work carried out in law firms. For the judges, the collaboration between students reflected that carried out by the magistrates in a civil court. The work had to be carried in a way that the tutor could follow their progress and make any necessary corrections. Once the tutor had given definitive approval, the students in the prosecution sub-group published the action in

the area specifically designed for this, making it available to those in the sub-group who had to draft the response and the sub-group that had to draft the sentence. This sequence was followed for each sub-group. Once the document had been published on the deadline set, it could not be modified.

Although guidelines were given alongside the case study, each sub-group was free to include those aspects they deemed appropriate for a complete analysis of the case in question.

Assessment of the work carried out was based on two aspects: firstly, on the document produced jointly, and secondly, on the individual work.

The document written together (the action, response or sentence) was assessed in terms of its being correct legally. To assess this, the use of the corresponding legal texts, jurisprudence and doctrine was taken into account, as was the arguing of the case and the use of the necessary lines of procedure (in short, students' level of acquiring the competences described above was assessed).

Taking into account that each sub-group only hands in one document (and that these documents are not assessed individually), in order to assess individual work everyone had to take part in the drafting of the document and their participation had to be made public so that the tutor could monitor it. The tutor had access to the various teamwork areas and tools, so that they could adequately monitor each student. Likewise, students were in constant contact with the tutor and could ask them about any questions and doubts that came up.

4.- Conclusions

The final assessment of the tool has been very positive. In academic terms, all the students taught using this methodology passed the subject. Likewise, the level of satisfaction among the students was high. They highlighted the fact that they had gained a more in-depth perspective of the subject in an enjoyable format. However, they did point out negative aspects in terms of the greater workload for the same number of credits as other subjects and the fact that not all members of the teams worked equally as hard.

The tutors rated the students' levels of implication, motivation and the documents drafted very highly. They also stressed that teaching using this methodology required much more work than in the classes that did not use the tool.

One problem that has not been entirely resolved, given the structure and sequential participation of the students, was that while one of the sub-groups was working on their corresponding task, the other sub-groups were inactive. This led to complementary activities being created (further reading, drafting conclusions or assessing the work done by others). Nonetheless, this remains a point that could be improved in the methodology applied.

In conclusion, we consider e-litigis to have been a very useful tool for acquiring the competences that make up the professional profile of a graduate in law, and leadership and teamwork in particular. Likewise, it is a methodology that can be applied to teaching in many other subjects, provided there is some aspect that needs to be discussed from a range of different points of view.

