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YOU MAKE ME FEEL LIKE DANCING: STUDENTS, SCHOLARS, AND SOURCES IN THE LAW LIBRARY

Jeanne Frazier Price*

Whatever good comes out of a library comes about because of the relationships among its users and its sources. In the context of a law library, it's the interaction between intellect and information that, at its most prosaic, determines the outcome of a dispute or the most efficient structure for a transaction. When lawyers and sources are perfectly matched, magic happens and something new—whether it's an unexpected argument, a different perspective on a long-standing problem, or a novel approach to how we think about the law—blossoms. Law libraries, and the librarians who bring them to life, are in the business of nurturing strong and useful relationships among sources and people. We structure a world of intangibles to enable discovery which, in turn, we hope, inspires justice and innovation.

Thanks to technology, the pool of potential partners in this dance among users and sources has deepened; matchmaking librarians can provide more and more resources—of all different natures—to our patrons. Whether law's inclination toward the empirical, the interdisciplinary, and the international is a function of technology and its ability to support those kinds of inquiries, or it is technology that reacted to those new directions, is less important than the fact that attorneys and scholars now bring to their work new authorities and new expertise. But it's not just the number of potential suitors and sources that has changed in the world of legal research. The ways in which researchers engage with authorities have multiplied and the strength and depth of those interactions—again, thanks to technology and the expertise of librarians—have intensified. Our role as academic law librarians has always differed depending on the people we serve. What technology has given us is the freedom

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to better marshal our expertise so that we can better serve different audiences.

“Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist.”

–Pablo Picasso

Good relationships are usually based on trust, which implies some sort of honest and true understanding of the other party. Students come to law school with very little, if any, understanding of the nature of authorities in law or how they are put to good use. A student’s relationship with those authorities is a very shaky one at its start.

Once in law school, students have ready access to traditional and technology-driven tools that open a world of sources to them. Although technology may help them discover familiar and foreign content, it is unlikely to help students understand the nature of a particular source as an authority. Technology makes access easy. It allows researchers to approach sources from different perspectives. Some research tools serve particular researchers and particular purposes better than others. As the tools continue to improve, search mechanisms will become more and more seamless, allowing users to access sources more efficiently. But without an understanding of the nature of authorities and the uses to which they are properly put, even the best tools do little to support good lawyering or good scholarship.

Technology has freed us from teaching students about the tools that provide access to sources; as a result, we’re able to focus on the authorities themselves. And that’s good news, as the number and nature of sources ever expand; conveniently, it’s much more fun to talk about the authorities themselves than the mechanisms we use to identify them. Without an informed understanding of the import and impact of authorities and the relationships among them, students can’t be expected to use them appropriately. But, armed with an appreciation of the different types, weights, and uses of authorities, students can capitalize on the connections that technology allows them to make.

“We have to continually be jumping off cliffs and developing our wings on the way down.”

—Kurt Vonnegut

Some of our best and most rewarding relationships arise out of unexpected circumstances and involve us in interactions that are unusual or otherwise out of our comfort zone. Our perspectives may change as a result and we may be more open to similarly unforeseen opportunities in the future. Technology facilitates equally rewarding relationships among sophisticated users of law-related information and non-traditional sources. When the best lawyers and scholars are hard-pressed to prove a point or accomplish a goal by applying traditional sources and strategies, they make leaps of imagination, incorporating novel sources and making connections that no one could have predicted. These sophisticated library patrons are nimble and quick; their agility in integrating these non-traditional sources into their arguments depends not only on an understanding of, and access to, the sources, but also on their capacity to see the sources in new contexts and to engage with them in non-traditional ways.

Librarians have always organized and arranged sources, making intellectual connections among things that are similar in one way or another, in the hopes of inspiring those who use our collections. In the physical world, our ability to identify relationships was limited, as was our capacity to illustrate the many facets of these relationships. Using technology, coupled with our own expertise, we can now make these intellectual connections among sources of many different natures and across any number of dimensions. Seeing once unrelated authorities in new contexts, tethered by a connection made visible by the arrangement, may inspire scholars and students alike.

Libraries have always been in the business of managing data and creating information. As legal scholars more frequently engage in empirical work, the library supports them by creating and maintaining data sets and ensuring that those resources—and the tools used to manipulate them—are open and available to other scholars, however, unforeseen those new applications may be. Our own archives can be rich fodder as well for the legal scholar or historian who wants to approach a topic from a different perspective, incorporating materials whose connection to a topic may be undiscovered. In each case, it's the law library—

capitalizing on technology, its collections, and the intellect and expertise of its librarians—that facilitates and even suggests these relationships.

Some relationships are long and quietly enriching. Others are short but dramatic and intense. Some relationships need a little prodding and encouragement toward what we know will be a worthwhile encounter. And still others need to be cut off at the pass. In relationships among users and sources, the library is the facilitator, the connector, and, for good relationships, we hope, the inspiration. We can foster much better relationships and more diverse ones with technology's help.