Remote Legal Research Training for the ‘Denmark–Myanmar Programme on Rule of Law and Human Rights’ during the Pandemic’.

Ruth Bird, Consultant

Introduction

After I retired from the Bodleian Law Library in 2017, I was offered the opportunity to do some consulting work, and I have undertaken several projects in the past four years. From 2017 to 2019 I worked as the eLibrary Myanmar Project Capacity Building Manager for EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries), training academic law librarians. This work included travelling to Myanmar twice a year to undertake the training in a range of topics which included staff management, collection development, and general skills updates for our colleagues at several universities.¹

It was an enjoyable role, in part because the coordinators who worked with me were very capable librarians, and because the librarians we worked with were such enthusiastic participants in all the training. Being able to work with them in person was a bonus, because it enabled me to see their libraries, the work conditions, and also to meet some of the students and academics whilst I was in country.

In August 2019 I was sub-contracted to undertake legal research training at a couple of Myanmar universities, Dagon and East Yangon, for the Denmark – Myanmar Programme on Rule of Law and Human Rights (which I will abbreviate to DIHR). The DIHR has invested in a programme of establishing Human Rights Resource Centres at those universities, providing several hundred monographs and textbooks on human rights issues.

In addition to this support, the DIHR also worked with the Department of Education in Myanmar to introduce Human Rights as a subject in the law degree throughout the country. This came to fruition in late 2019, when HR became a compulsory subject in the third year of the degree.

There was a concern that the academics, researchers and librarians did not have adequate skills to obtain full value from the online legal resources provided to the universities via EIFL’s establishment of online database access in 2016. As a result I was asked to provide training in person in August 2019, specifically dealing with the available legal e-resources.

The five year project that EIFL had been initiated in Myanmar ended in December 2019, and that was the end of my contract. However, I was happy to hear from the Denmark – Myanmar Programme on Rule of Law and Human Rights in February, asking me to provide a similar training course to a new group of legal researchers from different universities, and also to librarians from all the Myanmar universities that offer the law degree.

At the time I was on extended holiday in Australia, and the proposed work was just enough to keep me from too much shopping and too many lunches and coffees, so I happily agreed.

¹ I described this work in *A retirement of sorts* Australian Law Librarian, v. 27, no. 3 2019, pp129-133

The training was to take place in late May, with the academics and researchers, and then again in September with a group of librarians from all around the country coming to Yangon.

As with everyone else around the world, my best laid plans were disrupted in mid-March. I was booked to fly back to France when the Covid 19 lockdowns were announced, and with the uncertainty, I decided to extend my stay in Melbourne. I thought at that stage there would be no way of doing the work planned for Myanmar in May and resigned myself to a long 'iso' of books, Netflix and knitting.

However in April Louise Simonsen Aaen, Deputy Team Leader & Senior Legal Expert from the DIHR contacted me again to see how I would feel about delivering the training online. I thought about it for a few minutes and decided that this would be a great new learning experience for me, and potentially a successful alternative for the academics and researchers.

We had agreed on a three day programme which would comprise 8 modules, and a series of exercises at the end of each presentation. There were a number of issues to address if we went online, related to the software we would use for the delivery of the modules, for the interactive sessions, and for a means of assessment via a version of exercises.

Learning the software

DIHR settled on using Google Classroom, with a shared folder on Googler Drive. I have not used Google Drive for personal cloud storage because I am a Mac user, and use iCloud instead, but having used it a little with EIFL it wasn't all new to me, though different enough initially to provide one or two stressful moments.

We had to ensure our software would work on smart phones. The academics and researchers were not on campus, they were all working from home, and few, if any, of them have their own computers. So they would be using their phones for access, to follow the presentations, and to complete the quizzes.

There were a series of processes involved in modifying the work I had already prepared to make it suitable for online delivery. My presentations were in Powerpoint – I was so pleased I had resisted using the approach used by Prezzi, that would have been just too hard to adapt for this situation.

1. Google Slides

When loading the presentations to Google Drive, converting them to Google Slides was beneficial, because it means that they take up less space on the Drive and they open more easily for the users. It was necessary to check for some changes in the conversion, for example some fonts were changed and also spacings on slides changed. But whilst it took a little time to correct this, it was generally seamless.

2. Google Documents and Sheets

As with the Powerpoint, Mr Google prefers the converted version of Word documents and Excel spreadsheets. Again, easily done, but checking and proof reading was essential.

3. Google Quiz

The Google Quiz format is one way to provide a series of exercises at the end of the presentations which help test the comprehension and understanding of the sessions. It is pretty good software, allowing a variety of responses, from multiple choice to check boxes to short and long form answers. Answers can be embedded in the writing of the quiz, so the quizzes are 'marked' on response, and on review the marker can enter correct answers as feedback. The software enables the results to be emailed to the participants, as well as providing charts and summaries for the presenter. I also used the quiz for pre-training and post-training surveys.

4. Google Meet

This was previously known as Google Hangouts, and it enabled Zoom style meetings of all the participants. This was the most challenging part of the online experience, details further on.

5. Google Classroom

Google Classroom was used as the delivery method for our teaching sessions. It aims to simplify creating, distributing, and assessing assignments or modules of work. It streamlines the process of sharing files between teachers and students. It was here that we stored all the modules and quizzes, and we made them accessible on given days at allocated times, much as you would with a series of lectures.

6. Loom

When it became evident that offering the presentations live would technically be a bit of a challenge, I decided to use Loom software (<https://www.loom.com>) to record myself addressing the presentation. The resulting presentation is stored on the Loom website, and the links to it can be included in the work modules for access at any time. The presentation can also be downloaded and stored with the other material on Google Drive.

Delivering the course

I was able to base the structure of the course on the programme we had delivered in August 2019. Thus we had three days, with the 8 topics divided up into timed chunks, each one having a quiz at the end of it. On the third day we organised a six hour Google Meet session for all participants, to enable us to go through each module and quiz, and enable interaction between participants and with me.

In Myanmar the access to eresources is on campus only, via IP addresses. The complication of participants working from home meant access to three of the databases was not going to be possible unless we obtained password access. I was extremely grateful to W.S. Hein, vLex-Justis and Oxford University Press who gave us access free of charge for the duration of the training.

In the lead up to the training, each presentation was translated into Myanmar language, so the researchers were able to access both versions. Even though in theory the librarians speak English, their written skills are better than the oral skills, and as many legal terms and concepts are quite specific, this helps ensure full value to all participants. When we do face to face training there is a translator, so this added step was essential. It meant ensuring all the modules were ready more than two weeks ahead of the programme delivery so the translator could prepare them.

We sent our Pre Training and Post Training Surveys to everyone, also in English and Myanmar. This was to enable self-evaluation of their skill levels before and after training.

Google Classroom allows 'assignments' to be hidden from participants until a time allocated by the teacher. There were three sessions a day, and the modules were made available from a set time, and then left open. The participants could do them at any time, eg, in the evenings, if that suited them better. The quizzes were provided in English and these had to be completed before mid morning on the third day. The quizzes had been adapted from the exercises that had been set in the face to face sessions. The benefit of this approach was that the work had to be done individually; in the August sessions many participants worked in groups to do the exercises. The drawback was that system wanted exact wording for answers, so there were more multiple-choice options than I would have liked. But generally it worked well.

I was online throughout the three days of the course, even though it wasn't necessary for the first two days. But if anyone had questions I could answer them straight away, all online, and I could also monitor the take up and the responses as the modules and quizzes were being accessed.

The third day on Google Meet was a chance for all participants to be involved. We scheduled a 6 hour session with a one hour lunch break. It went quite well, helped a lot by having our translator available for the entire virtual meeting. Google Meet also offers a chat option where the comments can be made as the session progresses. A lot of use was made of this and it helped that everyone could see the chat as each query or comment came up. Many of the participants are not confident enough to speak English, even though they understand it, and the chat provided a good alternative. Not all the students had their video on, so often all I saw was their names.

DIHR had provided all of the students with extra storage for their phones so they could participate without using up their own allocations. It was another of those things that had to be considered when going online instead of working face to face.

Conclusion

The training went far better than I would have anticipated, and the feedback from the participants was overwhelmingly positive with one caveat – at least half of them missed the human interaction. I also missed this. I found it interesting doing the exercise of recording myself speaking to my presentations. These are planned to take about an hour in a face to

face situation. When I just spoke to them on camera, it lasted about 35 minutes. It shows how much spontaneous interaction is missed when something is pre-recorded.

In the current situation we find ourselves in, we have all had to adapt our practices to ensure we still provide a service to our users. Being adaptable and willing to change the approach we take to meet the changed circumstances is something everyone has had to do, and even though I am no longer working in libraries, I was so grateful to have some of that experience. I will be repeating the exercise, but in an adapted format, with the university librarians later this year, again addressing the legal resources for those librarians who have had limited exposure to online law reference work. A bonus of having created a Google Classroom is that we can re-use some of the resources with a new cohort.

I hope that we will eventually return to face to face teaching and working, as nothing can beat it, in my opinion. Nonetheless, it's great to know that there is excellent software to provide alternative approaches when needed.