

Case Study: Decision Explorer® and the Delict Game.



Dr Paul Maharg, of the Centre for Professional Legal Studies, University of Strathclyde and Banxia Software Ltd are, by chance, based in the same building at 141 St James Road, Glasgow. But we were unaware of each other's existence until recently. Banxia is an independent company, but it has connections with the University (apart from the fact that some of us used to work there!)

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This article was written for the University of Strathclyde newsletter “Prism”, to alert university lecturers, researchers and students to the existence of Decision Explorer® and how it can be used with students to help them develop a number of important skills. As an example of how you might use Decision Explorer®, here is an illustration of how Dr. Maharg proposes to use the software.



Paul's background is in literature and education as well as law. His thinking about communication and the representation of argumentation in law has been influenced by the mind mapping and concept mapping literature, as well as theories about thinking from rhetorical literature. At the time he contacted us, Paul was looking for a tool that could be used to help students develop their skills in legal argumentation. Having been involved in a Teaching and Learning Technology Programme (TLTP) project at Heriot Watt University (The CLASS project) and then working on a TLTP project in law, Paul needed a concept mapping tool which could be used as part of “The Delict Game”. The Delict Game, co-written with Professor John Blackie, is a prototype for a TLTP computer-based learning program, which takes a fresh approach to teaching the law of Delict (Tort) and the skills of legal argumentation. The Delict Game allows for three levels of learning, with target audiences ranging from first year students with little contextual knowledge of the law to post graduate students, with a well-developed knowledge of the law. The Delict Game courseware will be a Web-based resource, which can be accessed and used by students and staff in law schools throughout the UK.

Paul believes that there is a need to have on the virtual desktop the same tools that exist on the real desk top – the virtual equivalent of the “back of the envelope”, scrap paper, the note book, things which encourage “non-linear” thinking. Every tool imposes its own constraints - and as Paul points out: “Word Processors constrain your thought, they affect the way that you review your work ... In writing essays the students can get bogged down in concentrating on details in the essay rather than focusing on the lines of argument. Using a concept mapper can help students to manipulate ideas before they set out to write formal prose.” This is where Decision Explorer® comes in.

Paul and John found out about Banxia and Decision Explorer®, in the first instance, via the world-wide web and then serendipity - through seeing our name on the board in the entrance hall at 141 St James Road. We were able to help Paul plan how the software might be used by

Case Study: Decision Explorer and the Delict Game (Contd.)

students. The law students will be using the demonstration version of Decision Explorer[®], which is limited to 30 concepts or nodes per model. In this instance the limitation on the size of model which can be built is seen as an advantage, because it encourages the students to think more clearly about the most critical aspects of their argument. As Paul puts it: “Without the limitation every little thought would be included which could lead to a bewildering variety [in the model]. So the 30 node constraint is a good constraint, especially given that you can use the memo facility”. The memo facility allows you to attach additional information to concepts (nodes), beyond that which is shown on the map display.

For his own use, Paul says that he found Decision Explorer[®] really easy to work with, once he got the hang of double clicking to create concepts and mastered a few of the other basics for building a model. In terms of building more complex and larger models for his own work, Paul feels that if he was developing a complex argument with a larger number of nodes in the model, he would start sharing the model and developing it with other people. Providing a means to help draw out and make explicit individuals’ ideas and understanding of a situation is one of the primary purposes of Decision Explorer[®].

And for the future? Paul thinks that: “In the future other lawyers and law schools will make use of concept mappers. There are many areas of the law where on-line tools, like Decision Explorer[®], can help. Lawyers use diagrams in their work and concept mappers are also useful to students as a study aid for summarising lots of text.”

The development which led to Decision Explorer[®] was started at Bath University by Colin Eden and his team, over 15 years ago. It was continued in the Department of Management Science at Strathclyde University when, with other team members, Colin Eden, Fran Ackermann and Matthew Jones transferred to Strathclyde from Bath. In 1995 the software, which was by then known as Graphics COPE, was licensed to Banxia Software Ltd for further development and commercial release. Prof. Colin Eden and Dr. Fran Ackermann remain at Strathclyde University, in the Business School, while Matthew Jones founded and works for Banxia Software Ltd. A bibliography which includes some of Colin Eden’s and Fran Ackermann’s publications on cognitive and causal mapping can be found at www.banxia.com/dexplore/debiblio.html. Colin and Fran’s research and consultancy work is generally related to strategic management issues, but has also included litigation work. The software itself has proven to have a very wide range of applications.

For further information about Decision Explorer[®] and how it can help your business, research or teaching please contact:

Banxia[®] Software Limited
PO Box 134, Kendal, LA9 4XF, UK
Phone: +44 (0) 870 787 2994
Fax: +44 (0) 870 787 2995
Email: info@banxia.com
Web: www.banxia.com

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