Teaching Latin Palaeography on the Net:

Pros and Cons

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At first thought medieval Latin palaeography and the latest advances of modern technology do not have very much in common, one might even describe them as antithesis to each other. However, there is a strongly rising tendency in the academic world to use the internet more and more as a tool for teaching university students. Presumably, the idea is to save time and resources, but could the outcome also be beneficial from the academic point of view? Does the teaching also improve quality? My aim in this paper is to take a closer look into a pilot project for teaching medieval Latin palaeography on the internet.[1]

The course was created in 2002 and has been taught twice after that. The present paper is mostly about reflections on the experiences of teaching palaeography on the net, what were the pros and the cons and what would be the balance? What is said below about medieval Latin palaeography can be extended, *mutatis mutandis*, to cover other branches of palaeography as well. Alas, due to legal and copyright issues, the course material has to be maintained on pages that are available only with a password, and hence there is no point in providing a link to them here. Consequently, the discussion below must be based on my experiences in general and I cannot provide any concrete pictures and examples from the course material.

However, what I can do is to provide a very short description of the course format. The course concept is based on three different areas. The first area, let us call it the palaeography section, includes scanned pictures of the original manuscripts. This area also includes an introductory essay on the history of Latin palaeography, scanned examples of standard abbreviation, an annotated bibliography, and links to other palaeography sites on the net. The second area, or medieval Latin section, includes the same texts in

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[1] The course material was produced by Jussi Hanska and the technical side, such as creating the files and net pages as well as reproducing the pictures and planning their representation on the net, was done by Jouni Keskinen from the University of Tampere and Pekka Tolonen from the University of Turku. The course was created with the *WebCt* software. I use the sword *pilot project* only to describe the situation in Finland. Elsewhere in Europe, similar projects have been carried out, and there are numerous web pages either created for the teaching of Latin palaeography, or at least useful in it.

transcriptions and commentaries on the abbreviations and the difficulties involved in each transcription. The third area, or teacher's section, includes tentative translation of each text, commentaries on their cultural history, and suggestions for further reading concerning each text. To keep the material interesting, the texts included have been chosen in such a way that they are either well-known, for example Gregory VII's *Dictatus papae* and the forged "Constantine's donation", or are otherwise particularly interesting.

Each of these three areas can be made available for the students or kept hidden from them. Hence, if the course is about Latin palaeography, the students get to see the first area. There they have ten texts of increasing difficulty. Hence text number one is very easy (in fact, it is not palaeography in the strict sense of the word, but a few lines taken from an early *incunabula* book) and number ten is a relatively difficult fifteenth-century cursive hand. The students are given one text every week to be transliterated. They have to send their transcription to the teacher of the course and when everyone has done so, the teacher will provide them with the model transcription and his comments on the mistakes and other issues that came out of their transcriptions. Depending on the time and interests of the teacher, he can also send Finnish translations of the texts, some cultural historical commentaries, and suggestions for further reading for those interested.

In the *WebCt* system there is also a discussion area in which the students can have consultations with the teacher, or with each other. The discussion area is also useful for sending model answers and other feedback to the students. The system also allows teachers to control which pages have been opened by individual students and how many times and when they have been logged into the system. The same monitoring system allows the teachers to easily check which students have been active in the discussion area.

Let us start with the positive sides of net courses on palaeography. By its very nature medieval Latin palaeography is a branch of learning that interests very few selected people. There are a few obvious reasons for that. Firstly, students in these courses need to have at the very least basic knowledge of the Latin language, preferably much more. The better command one has in Latin, the better equipped he is to learn palaeography. The number of such students in any university, not to mention individual departments, is extremely limited. Secondly, all of those who have the necessary linguistic abilities are not necessarily interested in medieval

studies, in fact, a great many of the Latin students are exclusively interested in classical antiquity.

In practise, this means that organising courses on medieval Latin palaeography is a very difficult task. One needs to have a certain number of students to get the go ahead and financial support from the head of the department. In the world of limited resources it has become exceedingly difficult to explain why universities and individual departments should organise expensive lectures for five or six students. Enter the greatest benefit of internet teaching; they can, and indeed, in Finland have been, organised jointly by different universities and departments. If there are only five interested students, it is hardly cost efficient to organise a course, but if one gets those five students from four or five different universities, all paying their share of the expenses, the situation is completely different. This was the case with the last Internet palaeography course I gave during the spring term 2004. The participating students were based in four different Finnish universities. If the courses are organised in one of the major European languages, there is no reason why they could not be organised jointly by universities from different countries, which would make them even sounder from a financial point of view.

The second important benefit is also connected to the numbers of students. Let us, for the sake of argument, assume that such a miracle would happen that one would find twenty students who are well and truly interested in Latin palaeography in one university. If one were to organise such a course in a classroom, there would be the problem of giving enough attention to each student. The standard system of teaching palaeography is to do exercises under the supervision of the teacher who circulates in the room, and gives immediate feedback as well as some good advice when the students stumble into problems, which of course is guaranteed to happen with palaeography. To teach efficiently with such a method the maximum reasonable number of students is somewhere around twelve to fifteen. The problem is that while twelve to fifteen is the maximum group for efficient teaching, twenty is the minimum group for cost efficient teaching. Twenty students, alas, is by far too large a group for a teacher to have enough personal contact with each of the students. This will nearly always result in unsatisfactory learning results.

Teaching on the net makes this problem disappear. Each student feels that the teacher's messages are directed to him or her personally and, since the teaching is not tied to a short period of time on a particular day, students can address the teacher with a question or problem whenever they

want, and expect to have an answer within a reasonable time. Furthermore, in addition to the availability of the teacher, there is another, in my opinion even more important advantage in net courses, that is, the possibility for the students to communicate with each other through a discussion forum in the course area. My personal experience is that during my courses, the students have taught each other perhaps even more than I have taught them. I am convinced that they would not have learned more by attending traditional classroom lectures where the students' consultations with each other are generally restricted to the person sitting next to them.

The third advantage of the net courses is that the course material, once it is made available for the students, is easier to consult than in classroom teaching. If we think about the texts themselves, the best way of teaching palaeography is to have access to the original manuscripts. There is nothing like the real thing. However, the libraries and archives are not very enthusiastic about the students occupying the limited seats reserved for the scholars, and they are even less enthusiastic about the students handling their precious manuscripts. Therefore, it is very rare that one gets to organise palaeography courses with the authentic manuscripts. There are few exceptions to this rule, such as the few palaeography courses that are actually organised by the libraries and archives to train new staff, such as the *Scuola della biblioteconomia* in the Vatican Library.

The next best to the real thing are good reproductions on the net. With modern technology, especially scanners and digital cameras one can do miracles! In fact, it is possible to have reproductions that are easier to read than the original manuscripts because the size of the text can be enlarged and the background can be manipulated to make the actual text more visible. In any case, the result cannot be worse than photocopies made from microfilms that have been the traditional teaching material in Latin palaeography classes.

The fourth benefit of the net is that it is very easy to give the students access to the basic tools one needs to do the transliterations, that is, catalogues of abbreviations and dictionaries. There are several Latin dictionaries on the net and it is reasonably easy to scan the most important abbreviations for the students. I have found that the scanned pictures of the standard abbreviations in the course material are much more informative than the hand written signs one finds in most palaeography manuals and guide books. Furthermore, the students can have easy access to a number of web sites that specialise in medieval Latin palaeography as well as other sites that can be useful (such as the search engines of the Vulgate Bible on

the net). Some of these links can be provided in the course material, but in my experience modern university students are very talented in finding more themselves.

All the above mentioned good things brought about by internet teaching are very significant, but, alas the life is not just dancing on the roses, and hence there is the other side of the coin too. Internet teaching does bring in some risks, and some negative issues, too. This latter part of this short essay is dedicated to these cons.

Let us start with the risks. Firstly, there is the general problem of the attitude towards teaching and universities in the society at large, and especially at the administrative sector outside and above the universities, that is, in the case of Finland the Ministry of Education. While I only have first hand knowledge of the Finnish situation, it is very plausible that similar problems are encountered elsewhere too. The major problem is the general attitude towards internet teaching. It is clear to any self respecting member of the academic community that teaching on the net should be just one more tool for the universities to use to carry out their traditional mission, that is research and teaching, nothing more and nothing less. However, there are clear indications that, and I do not think that I am suffering from paranoia (at least not more than any academic person by the nature of the job is), that net teaching has become popular lately, not because it is perceived as an valuable addition to our means of teaching, but because the civil servants up in their ivory towers are counting on hammering down the expenses of the university teaching. To a lesser extent it seems that net teaching is encouraged and given some financial support because it simply is a fashionable thing to have.

These attitudes cause problems because cutting down costs of university teaching means in practise cutting down the fees paid to the teachers. Making one teacher do the job of three with the help of net teaching easily leads to several misconceptions. The worst of those is to assume that anything and everything can and should be taught on the internet. In the worst case scenario this would lead to an abolishing of departments in some universities because "it is enough to have one university that teaches history, the rest can take those courses from the net". Admittedly, the worst case scenario is not very likely, but there are still potential problems. Increasing net teaching will quite likely eventually lead into diminishing the amount of traditional classroom teaching. This is problematic for the quality of university teaching and for those researchers

who cover their low wages by getting extra income from part time lecturing at the universities. Their courses are the first ones to be chopped.

Another problem is that there are people who have the odd misconception that internet teaching is somehow easier and less time consuming than holding traditional lectures and seminars. Therefore the fees paid for planning and teaching internet courses tend to be lower than those paid for classroom teaching. In reality, teaching an internet course properly is more time consuming than traditional teaching. Therefore, if one is paid equal or, which alas, is not unheard of, smaller fees, it means in practise that the wages of university teachers are cut down in real terms. This is something that must not be accepted. If the financial problems are not solved in a satisfactory manner there will be major problems with motivation of the teachers. Even considering the high motivation and the so-called protestant work ethics of the Finnish university teachers, it is questionable whether courses and teaching in the future will be at the high level where they could, would and should be.

Once we get past the initial enthusiasm, teaching, and especially planning new courses, will wither away if the same unfortunate system of financing continues. In modern societies where politics of education are often carried out, not in the long term planning, but according to what is fashionable, there are problems introduced by the missing continuity. One is not very tempted to put one's time in developing internet teaching when it is obvious that within the next few years the fashion changes and the initial funding provided for the e-teaching will be cut down and the above mentioned economic problems will increase.

That much of the risks. Now it is time to concentrate on the negative sides already evident. Even considering everything said in the first part of this essay about the easy communication and possibilities of giving equal advice to all of the students, the fact remains that an internet relationship, no matter how good it is, cannot totally replace the classroom situation and direct, face to face, communication between teachers and students. For example, motivating students in a classroom is much easier than doing it with e-mail messages. It is very difficult to get one's personal charisma to work through the Internet.

From the philosophical point one could add that depersonalization brought on by the ever growing amount of e-teaching is destroying one of the foundations of the modern university system as it was born in the High Middle Ages. University has always been, it is, and it definitely should remain a community of professors and students – *universitas*. Here one

needs to emphasise that university has functions that go beyond the immediate learning results of individual courses and producing degrees. It should continue to reproduce this scholarly community and that is something that cannot be done on the net. Hence, there should be a considerable amount of occasions where the members of this community meet each other, during and outside teaching.

To go into more practical problems and ones particularly involved with teaching of medieval palaeography we must consider the legal issues. When one is taking copies of microfilms and using them to teach in classrooms, one might break some copyright regulations. While such offences are naturally regrettable, and I personally do not by any means wish to recommend breaking laws and regulations for anyone, it is equally true that no one is interested in complaining, not to mention filing a lawsuit against a university teacher taking few photocopies without permission.

However, when one takes pictures with a digital camera and puts them on the net, the situation gets more complicated, especially, if the university owns the site. The copyright problems may turn out to be problematic for three reasons. The first one is that some copyright holders do not allow any reproducing at all, but demand that they should do all the reproductions themselves. Sometimes they will demand way too much time and money and even the quality of the results cannot be guaranteed.

The second problem is that some copyright holders are willing to let you scan or take pictures of the material, once they have had several board meetings about the issue, and you have filled out fifty-seven sheet applications in triplicate. If one is willing to go through this bureaucratic jungle to get the eventual permission to publish this or that picture on the net, the final outcome can very well be permission to use the picture for five years, after which the licence must be renewed. This is not a totally hypothetical example, but not wishing to burn any bridges I will not mention the name of the institution in question. The third problem is that some copyright holders are very efficient, friendly, and most of all unbureaucratic. They will easily give a permission to make any reproductions one wants to, and use the material as one sees fit, as long as they are paid, as a small compensation for their efforts, the nominal fee of 300 euros for the publication of each and every picture. Because of these problems, the temptation to use material illegally is great, but the consequences can be unforeseenly expensive if one does.

Measuring all the above mentioned pros and cons one ends up with the conclusion that the traditional way of teaching Latin palaeography,

especially if one can use the actual manuscripts, is a slightly better alternative if it is possible. However, teaching Latin palaeography on the net does have its advantages and it is a by far better option than not teaching palaeography at all. In the Finnish case, considering the sorry state of Latin teaching at the universities in general, it seems obvious that e-teaching is the only way to organise regular palaeography courses. Therefore, it is highly recommended to keep improving the existing internet courses, and even planning new ones. In practise this means that the people involved should do everything and anything in their power to stop the above described risks involved in e-teaching from happening.

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