From parchment to pixels or pixels to parchment?

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Abstract

A knowledge of palaeography, the study of old handwriting, is essential for anyone wishing to identify, read and interpret records from earlier centuries. Palaeography is a subject offered by Aberystwyth University to campus-based, distance learning and life-long learning students following academic, vocational and non-vocational courses. This project is currently in its early stages. It seeks to use a blended-learning approach to reinforce key information previously provided to students in only written form, to clarify the link between the theory and practice of palaeography, and to enhance student engagement. This will be achieved by the creation of a collection of re-usable learning objects in a multi-media form for the benefit of a range of learners. The project consists of three inter-related parts:

1. Bite-sized video clips - the first strand involves the production of a series of short videos, each of which will concentrate on the handwriting of a specific time period. To maximise student interest and engagement with the subject, each video will focus on a local historical feature of that period and an associated record. Each video will begin with a site shot and commentary to put it in context, followed by examination and discussion of a relevant record to illustrate the key characteristics of handwriting of the time. In an attempt to increase inclusivity, two versions of each video will be produced: one which is multi-media and the other consisting of images and transcripts; the former may assist students with dyslexia, for example, and the latter those with impaired hearing.

2. Online presentations by experts in related relevant areas - the second strand of this project consists of the creation of a library of recordings of presentations by experts in related fields. Accompanying slides, illustrations, and bibliographic material are being incorporated into the learning objects, which are, again, available in multi-media and visual-only forms. This will enable off-campus students to access specialist information not normally available to them. Also, it offers students with a particular interest, further opportunities to view relevant presentations.

3. Interactive online exercises - the third strand will be a collection of interactive online exercises based upon the content of the first strand, and constructed using Wimba Create, with the objective of enabling formative self-assessment.

All these learning objects are being made available via the VLE to registered students pursuing courses in palaeography at Aberystwyth. Users of these learning objects will be canvassed in order to:

• evaluate the utility and value of the learning objects
• assess how they can be improved
• obtain views on how the project could be extended and enhanced

Future developments will be guided by this feedback.
Introduction

Palaeography and diplomatic is the study of handwriting and the structure and form of documents. It forms a key module within the Department of Information Studies' (DIS) Archives Administration course, taught at Aberystwyth University (AU) since 1956, and is also made available to Masters and Doctoral students following courses in related disciplines, such as English, History and Welsh. Since 2002, increasing numbers of people have opted to pursue the Archives course via distance learning. These off-campus students attend three study schools in Aberystwyth. The second school is almost entirely devoted to practical work in support of the Manuscript Skills module. In more recent years, with the upsurge in interest amongst the general public in family and community history, palaeography has been offered as part of the university’s extra mural Certificate in Genealogical Studies, run by the School of Education and Lifelong Learning (SELL). Lifelong learning students have the opportunity to follow two palaeography modules, which are taught weekly at the university with visits to local archive repositories to carry out practical work.

In line with the seven foci of the DIS Learning and Teaching strategy, which address the aims of the University’s Learning and Teaching Strategy, the purpose of this project is to enhance the learning experience of all students studying palaeography and diplomatic at AU. This will be achieved in a number of ways, which will be discussed in the project outline below.

This paper will outline the purpose of this project, discuss developments to date and the administration and findings of the pilot study, before presenting conclusions and plans for future developments.

Outline of the project

DIS at AU has offered its vocational training courses in mixed mode since setting up a specialist Open Learning Unit (OLU) in 1993. Parallel courses leading to the same qualification are offered face-to-face for campus-based students and via distance learning for people who wish to study whilst working in a relevant field. Campus-based students are able to take specialist modules developed primarily for distance learners, via open learning. Distance learners attend, on

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1 ILM1820 Medieval and post-medieval palaeography and diplomatic
3 14 campus-based students are pursuing the MScEcon in Archives Administration for the year 2009/10. The current number of students registered on the distance learning equivalent course is 137. Figure correct on 23 April 2010.
4 DSM3810 Manuscript Skills, which is a 10 credit module concerned with post-medieval palaeography and diplomatic.
5 Homepage of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Aberystwyth University. Available at http://www.aber.ac.uk/sell/ Viewed 30 April 2010.
6 HA104 Deciphering old handwriting (10 credits) HA207: Reading historical documents in local archives (20 credits)
7 The Department’s learning and teaching priorities are based around the following foci: flexibility, innovation, collaboration, employability, reflection, equality, and staff development. Department of Information Studies. Learning and Teaching Strategy, 2004-2009, Aberystwyth University. February 2007, p1.
8 These are as follows: “facilitate the enhancement of learning and teaching; improve the learning and teaching infrastructure; promote and reward excellence in learning and teaching; develop innovative new modules and programmes; develop collaborative links in the delivery of learning and teaching.” Ibid, p1.
9 Students are provided with a module pack, training by members of the OLU in time management and other essential study skills, and then work through the materials at a pace to suit their own circumstances. They can contact academic staff via the VLE with any questions they may have and they are encouraged to interact with distance learners studying the same module in order to pool ideas and offer mutual support. Assignment submission dates are pre-determined
average, three study schools and receive tuition and guidance in study skills required for this mode of learning as well as introductions to the core modules of their courses. Whereas campus-based students attend lectures, seminars and practical sessions, distance learners are supplied with their learning materials in an open learning format. Unfortunately, apart from the occasional guest speaker at a study school, the distance learners do not benefit from presentations by specialists. In an attempt to rectify this situation, for the palaeography students at least, it was decided to provide online recordings of invited speakers which could be accessed by palaeography students at an appropriate and convenient point in their studies. It is hoped a series of online presentations will be created so that current students, following courses in whatever mode, will be able to benefit from talks which are not repeated in subsequent years. Campus-based students would have the opportunity to see the presentation again at their leisure, while distance learners would be able to experience some of the sessions normally unavailable to them. Lifelong learners pursuing a course in palaeography for their own satisfaction, rather than to enhance future employment opportunities, will be given an insight into the learning experience of those enrolled on more formal vocational and academic courses. This may encourage some to pursue a similar course in the future.

A number of websites have been developed by archive services, either alone or in collaboration with academic departments within universities, which offer guidance with reading old handwriting together with interactive practical exercises of varying difficulty. Efforts elsewhere to use technology to provide guidance and additional practice of transcription are apparent, although they are not necessarily made freely available to all via the web. These websites are the modern equivalent of the more traditional practice of working through hard copy graded examples and checking transcripts against a master version in preparation for reading authentic documents.

Apart from providing guidance and practice in reading old handwriting, it was felt that there is further scope to make use of new methods to present information to students in a variety of forms which would help to embed it in their minds. Until now, students on the Aberystwyth palaeography courses have been supplied with handouts providing key information about the characteristic letter shapes and abbreviations associated with a particular hand of a certain period, which has been reinforced by looking at examples at http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/palaeography(Viewed 30 April 2010. Users are given basic information on how to read and transcribe documents dated between 1500-1800 and then have the opportunity to put theory into practice with online examples of varying levels of difficulty. A joint venture between the Department of English Local History at Leicester University and the West Sussex Record Office resulted in an interactive website featuring medieval as well as early modern scripts, enhanced by an extensive bibliography of works of an academic as well as more practical nature. Department of English Local History, Leicester University. Medieval palaeography. Available at http://paleo.anglo-norman.org/palindex.html(Viewed 30 April 2010. Academics at Leeds University created an interactive program to assist MA Renaissance Literature and PhD students learn to read C16th and C17th Secretary Hand. Digitised images of documents were incorporated into a computer program, mounted on the web, and then students’ transcripts of the images could be checked against a master version which would highlight incorrectly transcribed words. Booth, A., Lindley, D. and O. Pickering. (2006). “Learning Secretary Hand: an interactive tutorial.” In ed. Hanrahan, M. and D.L. Madsen. Teaching, technology, textuality: approaches to new media. Palgrave, 162-177.
within documents, before finally attempting to read the document as a whole.

Figure 1. Example text.

In a conversation with a campus-based dyslexic student last year, the idea of providing an audio version of the theory of palaeography handouts delivered via the VLE or podcast was mooted. The student felt that listening rather than reading would help her to absorb key information more easily. However, it is preferable to see particular letter shapes and abbreviation signs than to attempt to describe them in words. For instance, the second letter in the example (Figure 1) on the left hand side is a long forked ‘r’, the bar mark above the word indicates missing letters and the sign at the end which looks like the number two with a vertical stroke through it denotes a -rum ending. The word reads as ‘nostorum’. 12

In the last year, there has been further impetus to provide alternative forms of learning due to the enrolment of someone with a hearing impairment on two of the SELL palaeography courses. It is unreasonable to expect a person to look at a document whilst lip reading or following a signer. One solution is to make a copy of the document available with the key points superimposed so that the student knows what to look for and how to interpret them.

It is clear that creating multimedia learning objects is an approach which could help to increase inclusivity of the palaeography courses and prove beneficial to all the students pursuing them. There are a number of opportunities to attend training courses within the University that offer ideas on how technology can be used to benefit learning and teaching and provide participants with the skills and technical support to turn these plans into reality. Funding is also available through the Gwella Project for the development of small e-learning projects and to enable staff to attend relevant workshops and conferences.13

Project development

Taking into account the nature of the subject, the needs of the students and currently available technology, this project has been separated into three strands, which are outlined below.

Strand 1: Bite-sized video clips

A series of short video clips will be created which will focus on the key features associated with particular forms of handwriting from the C12th to the C19th. These learning objects will provide a summary and a revision aid. Documents will be chosen which contain clear examples of classic forms of abbreviations and letter shapes associated with a particular hand and, where possible, they will be linked with the local area to heighten interest.

Identifying and selecting the right documents takes time and careful thought. Copyright will have to be obtained to use images of these records. Only then can attention be turned to providing a coherent commentary, which will both engage the attention of the listener as well as educate them. It is hoped that putting the documents


Nexus. Sharing good practice in technology-enhanced learning at Aberystwyth University. Aberystwyth University. Available at: http://nexus.aber.ac.uk/xwiki/bin/view/Main/ Viewed 30 April 2010.
into context by providing a brief explanation of their purpose and incorporating images of the area in which they were created will assist in this process.

This part of the project is in an early stage of development but work has begun to identify suitable examples of documents and locations for the clips.

Strand 2: Online presentations

Strand 2, consisting of filming and processing presentations by guest speakers to make them available online to all palaeography students, is more advanced than the first strand of the project. The first such presentation was delivered by Dr Elizabeth New of the Welsh Medieval Seals Project.

Raw Material. The presentation was filmed using a Panasonic NV-GS500 mini DV video camera. The form of medium was chosen by default since that was only equipment that was available at the time. It is a good medium in many ways: relatively cheap, compact, commonly available and easily stored. However, it suffers from the disadvantage that the duration of a tape is only sixty minutes, thus entailing a pause to change tapes if the presentation exceeds this time. Whilst a tape change is quick, it does cause an interruption to the flow of the talk. The camera was capable of operating in LP (Long Play) mode, which extends tape duration to ninety minutes, but the associated reduction in quality due to the introduction of compression artefacts was unacceptable.

In order to be as unobtrusive as possible the camera was operated from the back of the room, about ten metres away from the presenter. At that distance it was still easily possible to get a close up view of the presenter; the camera is equipped with a 12x zoom (actual focal length unknown but appears to cover a range of approximately 35mm to 420mm in terms of “35mm equivalent”). Although the presenter used PowerPoint slides to accompany her talk, no attempt was made to capture them as it was understood that the PowerPoint file would be made available after the presentation.

Sound quality and clarity are important aspects of this undertaking, especially as one of the objectives is to maximise inclusivity. The aim is to capture the presenter’s voice clearly and with as little interference from ambient sounds as possible. The distance between the presenter and the camera made the use of the camera’s built-in microphone impractical: the quality would not be good and all extraneous sounds would be recorded in addition to the presenter’s voice. Accordingly, the sound was acquired via a radio linked lapel microphone (Sony UWP-V1 kit). The camera has an input for external microphones; this is an important feature when choosing equipment for this purpose. In this instance the sound level was set to ALC (Automatic Level Control). This is the standard and “safe” option on most video cameras: the recording level of the sound is set automatically by the camera to ensure that it falls within acceptable limits: neither too loud, so that it becomes distorted, nor so low that it becomes inaudible. The level is monitored and adjusted by the camera throughout the recording. The advantage of this is that it is reliable; the disadvantage is that during the inevitable pauses in a presenter’s talk, the level is automatically increased and then any extraneous, and unwanted, sounds (such as nearby computer fans, fluorescent lights humming, and so on) are faithfully recorded. The alternative is to set the level manually. This requires a sound test before the actual recording in order to establish the volume of the presenter’s voice and then setting the level accordingly. If this approach went according to plan, it should dramatically decrease the intrusion of unwanted sounds. However, with this particular camera at least, although it is possible to see a display of the sound level while recording, it is not possible to adjust it without stopping the recording and then starting again. It seems that many, perhaps all, presenters are not good at anticipating how enthused and animated they will become during the course of their presentation, and how much the level of their voice will increase; thus a perhaps rather diffident sound check before the event gives a false impression of the volume to come. It
might be that other cameras would permit manual adjustment during filming; this would avoid the distressing dilemma of the operator watching the sound level meter straying hopelessly off the scale and wondering whether to interrupt the recording (and the perhaps presenter) in order to rectify the problem.

As already mentioned, the presenter had undertaken to provide the PowerPoint file for our use, thus giving us access to the images which were used during the presentation. There were also a number of seals which were shown directly to the audience and not illustrated in the slides. These were photographed after the presentation using a shadowless lighting stand and a digital camera. The former proved to be a pointless refinement since the raised designs on the seals are only clearly visible when they do create shadows; the best images were obtained by using asymmetric and oblique illumination.

Processing. The video material was transferred (via Firewire) from the camera to the PC using the video editing program “Serif MoviePlus X3”. It was then copied in its entirety onto a DVD. This allowed it to be watched and parsed into thematic sections based on the logical structure of the talk.

Because of the overall length of the presentation, it seemed sensible to provide the user with the option to view it in sections rather than just one long video: they may not have time to watch the whole thing in one go, or there might be sections which are either irrelevant to them, which they could avoid, or of particular interest, which they could view again.

The times of these section breaks were noted and then used in the video editing program to insert chapter markers. Each “chapter”, of which there were seven, was then exported as a separate video file. The format “Windows Media Audio and Video” (*.wmv) was chosen as it provides a good compromise of file size and quality and is easily incorporated into applications.

Table 1 gives the names of the sections, their duration in minutes and their associated file sizes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Time (mins)</th>
<th>File size (MB)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What are seals?</td>
<td>20.01</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are they made of?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Preservation of seals</td>
<td>8.42</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How are seals used?</td>
<td>19.51</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Types of seals</td>
<td>15.33</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What is shown on seals?</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Recording seals</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td><strong>71.31</strong></td>
<td><strong>529</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Names of sections, duration and file sizes.

In addition to the video, there were the still images to be incorporated into the project; some were from the presenter’s PowerPoint slides and some were photographs taken of the materials used in the presentation. It was eventually decided to use Microsoft PowerPoint to combine these resources and provide an easy way for the user to access them. A bibliography had also been provided by the presenter and this too could be included in the output.

Each section was watched again in order to produce a text transcription; this would eventually be provided for users with hearing difficulties. The transcription also contained notes and times of the use of images and objects during the presentation. This additional information was used to add the images to the appropriate slides. A text box containing an appropriate caption was grouped with each image and then timings applied to each to set the moment of their fade in and fade out.

The PowerPoint slide show begins with an opening title page. This automatically fades into a Contents page after a few seconds. The Contents page (Figure 2) has a list of section
headings; each heading is in fact a link to the slide in question. Each section slide has a title, a box within which the relevant video file plays and varying numbers of still images, each with an informative caption. At the bottom of each page there is an array of four control buttons to aid navigation within the show. They are: “Contents”, which goes back to the Contents page; “Previous” and “Next”, which are self-explanatory; and “End”, which ends the slide show. The general layout of all the slides is the same; consistency should make navigation easier for the user.

Once the slides had been assembled satisfactorily, the next task was to make the presentation available via the VLE. It was already appreciated that PowerPoint deals differently with video data compared with still images. The latter are incorporated into the PowerPoint file, the former remain as external files which are linked to the presentation. In some respects this is an advantage: if the video files were all contained within a monolithic file it would take a very considerable time to load and open, even over a very fast network connection; if the video files remain external to the PowerPoint file and are loaded only when required, the presentation can start much more quickly.

The disadvantage is that the video files can easily become disconnected from the main file if its location, or theirs, is changed. This was a problem when mounting the presentation on the VLE: whilst there was no difficulty getting the presentation to work as far as text and images were concerned, the video was initially difficult. Despite using the “Package for CD” function in PowerPoint, which is supposed to produce a self-contained collection of files ready for distribution, collecting the output into a Zip file and then uploading that to the VLE, the reliability of the video element was poor. This may in part be a feature of our particular instance of the VLE and so is not of general interest. The solution under our circumstances was to put the video files in the web space of one of the authors and then create links to them from the PowerPoint file. This works because the location of the video files is then known and stable. On the other hand, within the VLE it seemed that the absolute location of the files would sometimes change over time; these changes seem to be known to the VLE and any links which it manages are updated accordingly but links within a file (such as our PowerPoint file) are not updated and so cease to work. The current solution is not a good one; it sufficed for piloting purposes but a more robust solution will be sought.
In keeping with the objective of increasing inclusivity, the transcript of the talk was to be made available. This would be of obvious benefit to those with hearing difficulties but may also be useful more generally. To this end, the verbatim transcript was first lightly edited to improve readability; the edited version was passed back to the presenter for approval. In fact the presenter carried out further slight editing and added a little more information for clarity. The same images as those used in the PowerPoint slides were then added to the text, using the location data already inserted into the original transcripts. This was carried out in Microsoft Word but the final product was converted (via OpenOffice’s “Write” program) into a pdf file to increase accessibility. This too was mounted on the VLE, alongside the PowerPoint slide show.

This project is user-centric and thus feedback is an important element in the process; it is intended to use feedback to guide the progress of the project, both in terms of usability and content. To avoid missing an opportunity to elicit feedback from a particular group of students, the PowerPoint presentation and the transcription were made available to them on CD while the above mentioned problems with the VLE delivery route were addressed. This seemed to work well, but is not a favoured delivery route since the original agreement with the presenter was that access to the material would be restricted to registered palaeography students. Access to content via the VLE is controlled; control is lost once a CD is handed over. To at least partially address this issue, the students who were given a CD were asked to sign a form explaining its conditions of use and obliging them to either return or destroy the CD by a certain date.

**Strand 3: Interactive online exercises**

Interactive online exercises are being created using Wimba Create\(^\text{14}\) to help students assess how well they have understood particular learning objects associated with the first two strands of the project.

It can be seen from the opening screen (Figure 4) how the learning object has been set out and how it should be used. In the case of the seals presentation, transcripts were used to formulate a mixture of closed and open questions, split into seven sections along the lines of the presentation itself. The quickest ones to answer are the multiple choice questions, which require the participant simply to click the correct answer and then check the answer, such as in Figure 5. Anyone clicking the wrong answer in this type of question is advised to try again.

Feedback is provided for the more challenging open questions, so that the participant is left in no doubt of the correct response and has no need to access the presentation itself to check upon the accuracy of their answer. For instance, see Figure 6. The concluding section of this learning object includes details of where to go to find further information on the subject (Figure 7).

For completeness and accuracy, the presenter of the seals talk was asked to comment on the nature of the questions posed and the answers provided. After a few minor adjustments, the questions were typed into the Wimba framework and turned into an online self assessment, which has since been mounted on the Blackboard area reserved for Resources for Palaeography. It will be linked to the seals presentation by being stored within the same folder.

It is proposed to ask the next cohort of campus-based and distance learning students to test the pilot version of the questions based upon the seals presentation and to request feedback on the value of this development. Modifications can be made as necessary. It is hoped that the final result will be an effective set of closed and open questions which will not only help students to gauge their understanding of a particular topic, but will help them to revise the topic

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\(^{14}\) Wimba Create is a tool with which to construct the exercises. Once created, there is no further need of Wimba. For details of potential uses of Wimba, see http://www.wimba.com/products/wimba_create/ Viewed 30 April 2010.
and then guide them to other sources of information on the subject.

**Pilot study**

As mentioned earlier, the seals presentation and transcripts were made available via the VLE and via a CD to students registered on various palaeography courses offered by the university in different modes, as well as to a small number of key staff. People were asked to view the presentation and provide feedback to assist future developments (see Appendix).

Table 2 provides details of those offered access to the learning object. The number in brackets refers to those who completed the questionnaire, which forms the Appendix. The category termed ‘other’ consisted of four members of AU staff and an external person, all with links to the palaeography courses.

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**Simple Learning Module**

**Table of Contents**

1. Introduction
2. Objectives
3. Information or Task
4. Selftest questions
5. You’ve finished!

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**Figure 4. Opening page.**

**Figure 5. Example of multiple choice questions.**
3. The preservation of seals

Can you list three items used in the Middle Ages to preserve seals as well and identify some of the potential problems of using these items?

Enter your answer in the space provided.

skippets

Hopefully your answer will have referred to skippets, rush guards and seal bags.

Skippets are normally metal boxes placed around an impression. A seal can't be taken out of an integral skippet, which occurs when the bottom cake of wax was put into the bottom of the metal box and then the tie or the tag was put through gaps. The cord was put on top and squashed in the top layer of wax and made the impression. Other types of skippets were placed around seals and were not as tightly fitting. In such cases, seals banged around inside the skippets and have often ended up as fragments.

Rush guards were twists of straw, grass or rush which were placed around the impression when the wax was still soft. Quite often the impression became distorted in the effort to put the guard around the impression to prevent it becoming worn.

Seal bags were sometimes made of old scraps of luxury materials and left deliberately unstitched in the lower portion so they could be flapped open to reveal the seal within without having to pull the seal bag off. Seal bags can make people more careless, so some seals kept in this way have become damaged. Sometimes, it seems that the seal bag material can leach into or draw water out of the seal itself - so often seals and seal bags are quite desiccated. Ironically, the seals have been damaged by the thing which was supposed to preserve them.

Figure 6. Example of feedback provided.

Simple Learning Module

You've finished!

As well as the online resource, campus-based and distance learning students should consult Unit 4 “Introduction to Diplomatic” of their Manuscript Skills module DSM03810/ILM1929. Part of this unit analyses the internal and external elements of formal documents as well as their structure. The Resource Pack for the module includes a paper on Methods of validation: signs, seals and signatures by Dr Susan Davies.

Learning learning students can borrow this pack from the Thomas Perry Library.

Figure 7. Final Page.
Course | Number offered access (and provided feedback)
---|---
MScEcon Archive Administration campus based | 14 (3)
MScEcon Archive Administration distance learning | 8 (4)
MA Medieval History campus based | 2 (2)
PhD campus based | 2 (1)
Genealogical Studies campus based | 4 (2)
Other | 5 (2)
TOTAL | 35 (14)

### Table 2. Courses with access to the learning object.

The timing of this exercise was unfortunate because the largest group given access to the learning object, campus-based students pursuing the MScEcon Archive Administration course, were completing assignments and preparing for a number of practical and theoretical examinations. However, it was decided to launch the beta version of the presentation at this time so that it would coincide with a study school which was attended by the distance learning archive students about to embark upon their palaeography module.

Five of the respondents were in their 20s, two were in their 30s, three were in their 40s, two were in their 50s and two were aged over 60.

All respondents had access to the internet: one at home via dial-up, eleven at home via broadband, nine could use the university network, and two access the internet at work. Nine of the fourteen respondents had two means of accessing the internet. One person accessed the presentation using the supplied CD and the VLE, eight used the CD only and five used the VLE only. People had different experiences when accessing the learning object, possibly due to their internet connection. On a scale 1 to 5, where 1 indicated no problem at all and 5 meant users were unable to access the presentation, five people selected 1, four chose 2, and three people each marked 3 and 4. One person did not answer this question. Those with access problems supplied further details, such as:

- "the video is a bit sticky and the end of each section is not especially clear and may have broken off at some points."
- "I couldn’t play the CD on my Mac book so have had to play it at work. I couldn’t access the presentation on Blackboard with my VPN on or off."
- "the video took ages to download and then the streaming of the video was not smooth. It kept stopping which made it difficult to follow. The transcript took 6 minutes to download. In fact I had moved on to complete this questionnaire before it appeared."
- "Film froze (picture still whilst commentary continuing)."
- "The audio-visual was very straight forward. The power point took a little more time to access but was good once I had navigated the different links."

These comments were not entirely unexpected given the problems encountered making the video and sound work simultaneously. Increased compression of the files should reduce the time taken to download the video in future.

Six people viewed the presentation in both formats, seven selected the audio-visual version, whilst one looked at the transcripts only. Three respondents indicated that they would find the audio-visual version useful, whereas the other eleven stated that they would like access to both formats. Seven people were interested in having podcasts and ten wanted a DVD version of the presentation. One person did not state any interest in other methods of delivery. These results endorse the value of providing information in more than one format to
enable students to use the format(s) most suited to their style of learning.

Although the questionnaire asked people to comment about the interest and value of each section of the presentation, for the purposes of this paper, a selection of comments about the presentation as a whole have been included to provide a flavour of the responses to this initiative:

“Dr. New’s expertise and enthusiasm for what some might see as a niche area is inspiring. The whole presentation is incredibly enlightening and useful.”

“Brilliant presentation-excellent images, especially pictures of damage to seals.”

“I was actually at the talk Elizabeth gave so only dipped into the presentation. Excellent idea – the sound quality was correct and the picture quality was good. I was a little unsure of just watching Elizabeth’s head and would have liked to have seen a few wider shots (apologies if this happens later). Brilliant idea, please let’s have more!!!!! Thank you.”

“Fascinating throughout.”

“For a first time effort this is excellent. I look forward to more!”

“Listening to and watching the presentation on a live CD was both interesting and innovative.”

Out of the ten responses to the question asking for feedback about aspects of the presentation which could be improved, three said “none”, one commenting further that it was a “lovely way of learning about seals, and I had the option of rewinding [sic] and listening a second time.”

Others had useful comments, which, where practical, the developers will attempt to incorporate into an updated version. Examples include:

“I couldn’t change the volume once the power point was running but you can change it if you are running it through media player.”

“The files are very large and could pose problems with students who do not have high spec computers and internet access. I also would like to see sub titles which would allow deaf students to follow the presentation with ease.”

“I felt it would have been better to have the text on the same time as the visual presenter.”

“A time scale for each topic. A ‘fast forward’ option.”

“Would it be possible to be able to search the sub-sections?”

A number of useful suggestions were provided for future presentations to these students, which have been noted. Final comments about the development were, on the whole, very positive and extremely encouraging. These include:

“I think this is a very useful development, particularly for distance learners. The presentation was very easy to access and I particularly liked the way that one was able to “dip” into the different sections and view them separately at leisure.”

“A regular podcast would be fantastic... although would this only be available to current students? How about putting something similar into the public domain? It could get people interested and contacting the university for further information about short courses. I know I would miss not being able to access the level of knowledge that has been available to us whilst studying at Aber. Thank you.”

“I thought it was excellent. The seals presentation was fascinating and I believe would be an enhancement to the students’ learning experience.”

“File was quite large to download especially as the only time I can download documents is in the evening when Broadband in my area runs quite slow. Overall though very good and useful project.”
“Although I’m not formally studying this topic (I am just the [BSL] interpreter!) I found it extremely enjoyable and fascinating. A wonderful tool for learning. This would benefit most students – and it would be fantastic to have it also for showing examples of different hands. Ideally I feel it is better to have text and visual / film on the same document which means the same access for all, not just this version or that version.”

“This is an excellent idea.”

“I liked the idea of videoing presentations and then making them available to students online.”

“This is a very useful and well thought out idea. The video for me is the easiest way to follow the seminars and if I do miss or do not understand something the first time around the transcribed notes of the seminar are very useful.”

**Conclusion and future developments**

Though the project is at an early developmental stage, initial feedback from the questionnaire indicates that students are keen to have information presented to them in a number of formats and welcome this development. Distance learners benefit from presentations which they would not normally attend, campus-based students are able to revisit particular sections of talks and do not have to rely upon memory alone for information. The next phase of the project will concentrate upon gauging the efficacy of the self assessment questions based upon the seals presentation and then creating the first of a series of bite-sized palaeography clips.

An area entitled Resources for palaeography has been created on Blackboard, the University’s VLE. The two developers of resources for this area will be able to add students following registered course in palaeography at Aberystwyth to this area, which will contain a suite of bite-sized video clips, a library of presentations and associated self assessment questions. Evaluation forms will be posted to this site so that users can provide the developers with feedback to enable the learning objects to be improved as deemed necessary.

Two more presentations provided by guest speakers have been videoed; processing the captured data will begin in the near future. In due course, consideration will be given to holding a number of focus groups, made up of students following various courses as well as staff in related fields, in order to assess the value of the new developments and gather opinions concerning future innovations.

**REFERENCES**


APPENDIX: Evaluation of the presentation about seals

The presentation about seals is the first in a series of multi-media resources designed to complement and enhance your learning experience. It would be very helpful if you could answer the following questionnaire to enable us to evaluate the resource and to guide future developments. All responses will be anonymised. This should take no more than 10 minutes of your time.

A. About you
1. Are you:
   - male □
   - female □
2. Please indicate your age:
   - under 30 □
   - 30-39 □
   - 40-49 □
   - 50-59 □
   - 60+ □
3. Which course you are following?
   - MSc Econ Archives Administration □
   - MA History □
   - Genealogical Studies □
   - Other – please state ....................
4. Are you following your course:
   - On campus □
   - Via distance learning □
5. What sort of access do you have to the internet? Tick all that apply:
   - None □
   - Home: Dial-up □
   - Home: Broadband □
   - University network □
   - Work network □
   - Other – please state ...........
6. How did you access this presentation?
   - Moodle □
   - Blackboard □
   - Other – please state ............
7. How easy did you find it to access the presentation, where 1= no problem at all and 5= unable to access. Please circle:
   1  2  3  4  5
   Please state any problems encountered ........
8. Which format did you use?
   - Audio-visual (i.e. sound and images) □
   - Visual only (i.e. text and images) □
   - Both formats □
9. Which format(s) would be useful to you?
   - Audio-visual (i.e. sound and images) □
   - Visual only (i.e. text and images) □
   - Both formats □
10. Would you be interested in other methods of delivery, such as :
    - Podcast □
    - DVD □
    - Other – please state ..................
C. Use
11. In Table 3, please
    - indicate which sections of the presentation you have viewed and on how many occasions. If you viewed a section more than once, please indicate why in the comments section
    - rate each section of the presentation and the presentation as a whole for interest, where 1=very interesting and 5= not interesting at all;
    - rate each section of the presentation and the presentation as a whole for value to your studies, where 1=invaluable and 5=irrelevant.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>No. of times viewed</th>
<th>Interest</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. What are seals?</td>
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<td>3. Preservation of seals</td>
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<td>4. How seals are used</td>
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<td>5. Types of seals</td>
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<td>6. What is shown</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Recording seals</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Bibliography</td>
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<tr>
<td>Whole presentation</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3. Survey grid.*
D. Improvements and developments

12. Please state any aspects of the presentation which, in your opinion, could be improved.

13. How could this be achieved?

14. Please indicate any other topics which you think would make useful / interesting presentations.

15. Do you have any other comments about this development?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Your help is much appreciated.