

ICT, CoLs, CoPs, and Virtual Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Every day, information and communication technologies (ICT) are extending their influence on knowing and transmitting knowledge. They act on humankind at different levels: the individual, the society, and the community/organization. The Internet more than other instruments in the past is changing human customs and knowledge strategies mostly due to the online information systems developed during last few years.

BACKGROUND

The experiences described below were from the author in cooperation with M. Palma (professor of Latin paleography) while working on special Web sites to be used in paleography for research and teaching. The Web sites were not e-learning platforms but were used as content management systems (CMS), learning management systems (LMS), computer-supported collaborative learning systems (CSCLS), and knowledge management systems (KMS).

The use of the above systems is based on the hypothesis the author shares with M. Palma: that ICT and especially the Internet cancelled the temporal gap existing between research and teaching time (at least in paleography). Due to the Internet, in fact, scientists can immediately publish the research results; it becomes, then, more and more difficult to separate the proposal of new scientific paradigms from their translation into educational and didactical materials.

Web Site “Didactical Materials” for Latin Paleography

In the Middle Ages different scripts were used for handwriting documents and their study is based on the analysis of charters and manuscripts. The main problem scholars and students have today is often the simple access to these materials due to security and preservation reasons. Furthermore, proceedings of conferences and meetings are usually printed some years later and it is very difficult, if not impossible, for scholars, to report the meaning of a hypothesis or the relevance of a discovery to their students, contextually to their proposal.

To respond to the above problems, a Web site was planned to make available the following:

1. Didactical materials for a course on Latin paleography, that is, the plates reproducing the pages of manuscripts and the transcription of their texts.
2. Texts freely extracted and translated from printed or electronic documents, or made available from the authors, and collected in various sections: from codicology to cataloguing and preservation, and so forth.

It has to be noted that the experience of the didactical materials' Web site is mostly unique, not only for the systematic nature of the plates and for the presence of their transcriptions, but also for the documents reported among the texts; many of them are, in fact, papers concerning recent research topics, produced for special events (i.e., mainly conferences) and made available from the authors for didactical purposes.

The Web Site “Women and Written Culture in the Middle Ages”

The main aim of this dynamic Web site (Cartelli, Miglio, & Palma, 2001) was the systematization of the data emerging from the research while leading to an instrument helping scholars to find new elements for further studies.

Data appearing relevant to the scientific community were:

- **For the Scribes:** (a) the name of the woman as it appears in manuscripts, (b) her qualifications (i.e., if it is known whether she was a nun or a layperson), (c) the date or the period she belonged to (up to the 15th century)
- **For the Manuscripts:** (a) their shelf marks (i.e., town, library, and number of the manuscript), (b) the place and the country where they were written, (c) the date or the period they belong to, (d) the authors and titles of the texts, (e) the bibliography or its source of information.

Furthermore it appeared important to show for each woman the manuscript(s) she wrote and vice-versa, and if possible and available, at least an image of the copyist's hand.

The site has two separated sections: one being operated only by editors (to insert, modify, delete the data stored in the database), thus ensuring the scientific validity of the information reported; the other is at everyone's disposal to obtain the list of all women and manuscripts in the database, or to make queries concerning women and manuscripts with specific qualifications.

The Open Catalogue of Manuscripts and the Martyrology of Arpino

At the basis of the Open Catalogue of Manuscripts are the results of recent studies concerning the use of the Web for the publication of catalogues of manuscripts (Cartelli & Palma, 2003b). In its final structure, it is an information system devoted to the management of documentary information in ancient libraries and it is based on the use of the Internet and especially of the Web for managing and accessing data. It is composed of five sections: (a) the first one contains documents explaining the history of the library and of its manuscripts; (b) the bibliography ordered by shelf mark and, eventually, alphabetically and chronologically, is housed in the second section; (c) in the third section are the descriptions of the manuscripts; (d) the fourth section is devoted to the images of the highest number of manuscripts in the library (potentially all); (e) the fifth and last section consists of a communication subsystem granting the easier acquisition, writing, and editing of texts (Cartelli & Palma, 2002).

In Italy the Malatestiana Library in Cesena, an ancient library founded in late 15th century decided to adopt the Open Catalogue for its 453 manuscripts and their catalogues and activated all the sections the author hypothesized for its structure.

On another hand the Martyrology of Arpino, as a single manuscript kept in the church devoted to Our Lady in Arpino (a small town in central Italy), had the suitable features for the creation of an Open Catalogue (Cartelli & Palma, 2003a) made by a single manuscript and a special site for it was carried out in the Faculty of Humanities.

The Bibliography of Beneventan Manuscripts

The BMB experience (*Bibliografia dei Manoscritti Beneventani—Bibliography of Beneventan Manuscripts*) started in 1992 with the main aim of collecting the quotations of Beneventan manuscripts (i.e., medieval books written in the South Italian national script) by means of a program called BIBMAN. In 1997, the first Web site was developed to make it faster and easier for scholars to download new bibliographic data (nearly monthly).

Recently many problems with the BIBMAN program resulted in a plan to carry out a new Web site: the BMB online (Cartelli & Palma, 2004). It is an information system where various people with permission can store the quotations of Beneventan manuscripts and it can be freely queried by general users. Persons entrusted with the task of collecting the quotations of Beneventan manuscripts are grouped into three categories:

1. contributors, who can write, modify, and delete bibliographic data for the materials assigned to them
2. scientific administrators, who can manage all data and write, modify, and certify bibliographic materials (this last operation being done only once because certified records cannot be accessed for revision)
3. system administrator, who is allowed to do all operations including the modification or deletion of certified data

The access to certified bibliographic materials is possible according to different query pages: (a) by author, (b) by manuscript, (c) by contributor, (d) by one or more words or part of them concerning the title, location, or bibliographical abstract of a given publication.

It has to be noted that in the system are also implemented: (1) a closed communication subsystem made by an electronic blackboard guaranteeing an easy exchange of messages among contributors, (2) some special functions, available only to system administrator, for the production of the printed version of the yearly collected data.

ICT, CoLs, CoPs, AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES IN PALEOGRAPHY

The systems and Web sites described above were carried out by the author at different times but were suddenly introduced in everyday teaching and research work. The effects they produced are analyzed in what follows:

- The students attending the paleography course found the plates on the Web site of Didactical Materials (both for the analysis of the scripts and for training themselves in the transcription of the texts) very useful and were instantaneously led to the themes of most recent research studies and to the debates in the paleographic community. Furthermore, after a very short starting phase, during which people had to be repeatedly invited to submit materials for publishing on the Web site, the number

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