Let them be vlogged! Video assignments for the Old English classroom

In my third-year, advanced Old English literature course, I have students make team videos (vlogs) as a replacement for traditional in-class presentations. I started this practice some five years ago, when I had students participate in ‘the Norman VlogQuest’ – rather than giving a lecture on the events leading up to the Norman Conquest and its aftermath, I would give each group of students one aspect of the Norman Conquest to work out in a video. One group would introduce the Bayeux Tapestry, for instance, while others would tackle such subjects as William the Conqueror, the Domesday Book, the Three Battles of 1066, the Harrowing of the North, Edward the Atheling and so on. Our class on the Norman Conquest would consist of watching and discussing the videos made by the students. Since the format of the videos was entirely free (apart from a length limitation of six minutes), the class stood out for its eclectic nature: some groups would have made informative PowerPoints with a voiceover, while others spoofed such reality shows as Keeping up with the Kardashians as Keeping up with the Godwinsons. The students rated this class very highly: they learned a lot and were happy to experiment with a new form of presenting information (often, students dread having to stand in front of a group, with only a PowerPoint presentation to back them up). As their tutor, I too enjoyed this class immensely and was particularly happy to have more in-class time in the other weeks of the course, since I did not need to incorporate a weekly student in-class presentation. However, I found it hard to judge the quality of the videos, in particular because most of them dealt with factual information (dates, names, events) and did not necessarily need to incorporate secondary literature of a

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4 For a description of this practice and the rationale behind it, see Thijs Poreck & Jodie Mann, “Blanded leornung: Three Digital Approaches to Teaching Old English”, TOEBI Newsletter 34 (2017), 5-13, http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M6WH2DD8B.
more interpretative nature and/or analysis of primary material. Often, what distinguished the various videos was the ability of the groups to work with video-editing software, rather than their appropriate handling of available source material and existing scholarship. Therefore, to improve my video assignment, I decided to go down a different route in subsequent years, focusing on the Exeter Book Riddles rather than the Norman Conquest.

In the new format, each group was assigned an Exeter Book riddle and they were tasked to make a video outlining the argumentation for at least two or three different answers, on the basis of existing scholarship; at the end of the video, they had to make a case for the answer that convinced them most. To ensure that they had an appropriate amount of material to work with, I selected a number of the shorter riddles for which multiple answers have been suggested. The following nine riddles made the cut:

Riddle 13: Butterfly cocoon; Alphabet; Moth; Fingers and gloves; Ten chickens; Ten pheasants
Riddle 17: Ballista; Fortress; Oven; Town; Forge; Inkwell; Phallus
Riddle 52: Buckets; Broom; Flail; Yoken oxen led into barn by servantress
Riddle 54: Baker’s boy and oven; Churn; Intercourse; Phallus
Riddle 64: Ringtailed peacock; Snake eating a bird; Horseman and hawk; Horseman; Horseman hawk servant; Falconry; Writing; Hunting; Ship
Riddle 70: Shepherd’s Pipe; Rye flute; Harp; Hurdygurdy; Organistrum; Shuttle
Riddle 74: Cuttlefish; Siren; Water; Swan; Soul; Rain; Writing; Sea eagle; Ship’s figurehead; Not a riddle
Riddle 81: Ship; Visored helmet; Weathercock; Man
Riddle 91: Key; Sickle; Keyhole; Phallus

The numbers are those of the ASPR edition by Krapp and Dobbie and the answers are those provided by Donald K. Fry in his “Exeter Book Riddle Solutions”, Old English Newsletter 15 (1981): 22–33, who also links to literature
for these solutions. Of course, students were also told to look for more recent scholarship on the riddles and many of them did, especially since more recent monographs on the riddles by Mercedes Salvador-Bello, Dieter Bitterli and Patrick J. Murphy are available online via Leiden University Library’s catalogue. Students were also directed to the very rich and informative *Riddle Ages* blog and they were all asked to read an introductory chapter by Jonathan Wilcox to make sure they each had the same amount of background information about the riddles more generally.

The form of the video assignment was still free, barring the length limitation of six to seven minutes, and the group entries were therefore still highly varied. Some took the form of PowerPoint slides with voice-overs, others used animations or stopmotion capture to make their vlogs, while one group made a spoof panel show *Riddle Solvers* with a variety of stuffed animals in the role of various riddle scholars arguing for their own solutions (see figures 1-4 for examples). For me as a teacher, this variety in form had a much smaller impact on how I could grade the contents of the videos than with the Norman VlogQuest, since each video, in its own unique way, had to incorporate secondary scholarship and demonstrate the arguments that scholars made (e.g., how they interpreted a particular word or phrase). The stuffed animal panel show, in fact, did this remarkably well, despite using an awkward *‘Allo ‘Allo!*-like accent for the plushy owl that purported to be a German scholar. I could grade their videos on the basis of how accurately they treated existing scholarship and how they handled the primary source material

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5 Fry’s article is available at [http://www.oenewsletter.org/OEN/archive/OEN15_1.pdf](http://www.oenewsletter.org/OEN/archive/OEN15_1.pdf)
to back up their own solutions. Since each group made a different kind of video and each treated a different riddle, the class in which we watched all of their products was as varied and entertaining as the Norman VlogQuest class and students thoroughly enjoyed it.

While I still value traditional in-class presentations as a way to help students get experience in presenting their own research, the digital video format has a number of advantages. The fact that they had to work together to make the videos, as well as the knowledge that their products would be watched by the whole group, encouraged co-operation and critical reflection among the students. As part of the assignment, they had to fill in a group assessment form in which they had to describe how they had divided the tasks and how they had worked together; they were also asked to write short and balanced reviews of the videos made by other groups. Many found these forms of assessing themselves and the works of others as enlightening as doing the assignment itself. Most significantly, the multimodal format of making a video forced students to try out new techniques to present their knowledge. The assignment stimulated the students’ creativity and gave them a chance to work together and practice new skills, such as animation and digital video editing. Presenting complex material in a video-format prepares our students for knowledge work in the 21st century, during which many people turn to video platforms such as YouTube for educational material. So, if you are considering incorporating student presentations into your course, but you are not willing to sacrifice in-class time, let them be vlogged!

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Fig. 1. Still from a vlog about Riddle 17, illustrating the interpretation of *ræced* ‘house’.

Fig. 2. Still from a vlog about Riddle 54, showing paper cut-outs of possible solutions.
Fig. 3. Still from a vlog about Riddle 13. The gameshow *Riddle Solvers* with among its contestants Franz E.

Fig. 4. Still from vlog about Riddle 91, an animation that highlights phrases in the translation that support the solution ‘key’.