California State University, San Bernardino

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Innovative Course Redesign Grant Reports   Teaching Resource Center

David Marshall CD Summer 2009

David Marshall

David W. Marshall
Department of English
dmarshal@csusb.edu
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Course Development Grant (Summer, 2009):
Studies in Medievalism: Piers Plowman & the Medieval Poverty Tradition

Project Goal:
The project aimed to develop a new course for the rotating topics in the English Department's catalogue. The new topics course focused on the uses of the medieval in our own modern times and asked students to employ medieval texts as a means of both re-contextualizing current issues and motivating engagement with such issues in real-world terms. Moreover, the assignments sought to make a shift in the teaching of medieval literatures—and hopefully, with application to my other courses, literature in general. The innovations I proposed in this project center on a shift from purely observational responses to a synthesis of observational and production-oriented ones.

When Implemented (Quarter the course was taught):
The course was taught in the Fall quarter of the 2009-2010 academic year.

Brief Description of the Project (as described in the proposal):
This course employed four different assignment types that each required development.

1. **Weekly de-centered readings** provided the class with a wider breadth of information by requiring each student (or pairs, depending on class size) to read a different chapter, article, or short story on poverty to create discussions in which students synthesize localized expertise to generate new ideas around a given topic.

2. **A weekly journal** documented student experiences in the service-learning portion of the course. The journal responded to weekly prompts that drew together service-learning experiences with the medieval texts relevant to that week.

3. **A modern allegory**, the So-Cal-legory, pushed students to *use* literature to rethink their experience of poverty in Southern California. With *Piers Plowman* as an example, students produced allegories that treat the moral, social, or political aspects of poverty, offering a position on that issue.

4. **A collaborative class project** that creates an installation or web-based information center. The assignment produced a multi-media project that discusses poverty in relation to medieval discussions of the subject, making use of student-produced text, photography and video.

To prepare for these activities and the nature of the class, I proposed to do the following:
*   **Conduct research on poverty in both the medieval and modern contexts:** This research will produce readings on modern poverty that can be juxtaposed to the medieval texts I have selected. While I have expertise in the medieval literary sources on the attached syllabus, I require increased

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familiarity with later treatments of poverty as well as the historical studies of the medieval treatment of the issue.

- **Increase my awareness of service learning strategies for assignments:** I will research journaling assignments that best draw experience and textual knowledge into productive relationships and produce my own samples as models to students. Additionally, I will research models for the information center project, so as to further define the assignment and research and devise grading rubrics for creative assignments.
- **Investigate display spaces & opportunities for the final project:** The goal of the final project will be to produce an information center that can be installed on-site to increase public discussion of poverty, so I will locate on-campus and in-town sites for that display.
- **Develop knowledge of multi-media projects and design:** While I am knowledgeable in web-based design, the collaborative project will require production and implementation of student videos and photography, alongside student-written text. I will research and consult with colleagues to that end.

How the Project was Implemented (including how it differed from original plan):

To derive the readings for what I termed "de-centered" readings, I initiated research into medieval poverty through historical, archaeological, theological, and literary sources, as well as research into sociological and historical studies of modern poverty. I located chapters and articles that revolved around discreet themes. In class, students were broken into reading groups, each responsible for their piece of what would be a big puzzle.

Groups were given fifteen to twenty minutes to review their reading and discuss what they deemed to be 1) the central argument, 2) the most interesting idea, and 3) the way it connected to and advanced our class investigations. Each group then presented their article to the class. Each group was responsible in the discussion for offering ways their reading connected to that of presenting groups. That exercise often filled the first hour of class. We then turned to a medieval literary text or experience with modern poverty and discussed it *in light of* the de-centered reading work. While I had in the proposal anticipated this as a weekly exercise, we ended up employing it five times in the quarter, primarily because I feared an over-routinized student experience.

What, to a large extent, brought the medieval and modern elements together was the service learning partnership with Central City Lutheran Mission. I met with Rev. David Kalke, who was eager to involve us in whatever activities of the mission that we might like. We ended up identifying two: Half the students assisted with the men's shelter—which involved helping the homeless men to fill out forms as well as just spending time talking to them and playing cards—while the other half assisted with the after-school program—helping kids with homework and such. I, meanwhile, served lunches as part of the soup kitchen. Those three distinct sets of experiences—made possible by the unique nature of CCLM—enabled the class to see multiple facets to poverty and poverty relief. While service was not part of the assessed activity in the class, making students responsible for the service work was effected through the journal assignments.

The assignments were integral, in fact, in drawing the various components of the class. Not having employed journals before, I elected—as in the proposal—to provide prompts that linked the readings in medieval literature and history to the experience of the service component. Having a clearly worded prompt that required a certain type of response made assessing what amounted to personal statements easier. Students were offering their own subjective positions, not necessarily right or wrong, but the clear prompt made them responsible for taking into consideration the specific aspects of the texts and experience that to which I directed them. The So-Callegory was another directed assignment that stipulated just a few required elements: that it take up a specific aspect of poverty (medieval or modern), that it offer a didactic position on that aspect, and that it be allegorical (either by allegorizing a real-life sort of story or by personifying ideas and institutions and narrating their interactions).

The multi-media project was initiated by identifying three aspects: construction, production, and implementation. Construction required investigating display potentials. I designed a free-standing display structure that could accommodate didactic placards, video, and photography. The design is collapsible, to facilitate transporting.

The production aspect required developing the assignment by which students would develop the actual display. I settled on a generally-defined task so as to allow the students room to define their own class project: they were to produce photographs of modern experiences of poverty to be accompanied by didactics that explained the significance of the photo in light of medieval understandings of poverty and poverty relief; they were to produce a video to serve as an introductory overview that would explain the medieval sense of poverty and poverty relief and its potential for helping us to reconceptualize our own relationships to the issue.

The implementation has proven to be the most challenging component. I practiced film-editing with the Microsoft program, Movie Maker, and developed a short discussion of the photographs of Dorothea Lange. The students did excellent work with taking photographs and producing video footage. I also consulted with Brad Owen of the Communications department on the video production.

Despite my consultation and work with Movie Maker, I had failed to anticipate the obvious problem of students having experience with such technology, including web-site construction, which was always the plan B. Meanwhile, I had consulted with contacts at an art museum on how to implement the video. The costs involved with the video made it prohibitively expensive. As a result, the display has been altered so that we will display photographs with didactics, and portions of the video script will be an introductory placard.

Results of the Project:
The class turned out to be one of my most successful to date, though not, perhaps, for the reasons I had anticipated. It was a small class—only some thirteen students—and that size promoted an intimacy conducive to some intense conversations. The end result was that students reported that no class in their college experience had done more to change the way they understand their communities and their places in them. How we got there was surprising to me.

What I found in leading the class was that my research into medieval and modern poverty produced terrific pieces to a complex puzzle—how to put them together. That assembly did not occur until we began the quarter, reading over a few weeks some medieval texts with several modern ones alongside. Students seemed not to grasp how to make connections between them until I scrapped a class plan one day and led them on a review of the texts, in effect aiming at producing an initial synthesis of the various ideas on poverty. At the time, I saw potential in medieval concepts being applicable to modern contexts, but actualizing that potential happened for all of us on that one day. From then on, we all seemed to gain a clearer sense of what medieval theories of poverty and poverty control could contribute to modern manifestations of the problem.

Students consistently came in with new experiences and observations, and some seemed to find a sense of purpose in redefining a sense of community around the medieval notion of mutuality. For example, when two students came in reporting a need for clothes and toiletries at the shelter, the class organized an impromptu campus clothing drive. I filled my van twice taking all that they collected over to the mission.

The weakness in the class was the multi-media project. I failed to fully account for just how large a project that really was. The student groups were, I believe, felt too insecure in their lack of familiarity with the video aspect of it, leaving a tentative group led by an inexpert instructor. The photography aspect and didactic labels were successful, but the video involves too many different aspects to expect students to produce a three-minute video of images, sounds, and talking heads. Despite my obsessive reading on the subject and dozens of hours working through the process myself, I failed to realize that all my work still left them without the sort of experience and training to pull the video together.

Additional Comments (Lessons Learned, Insights, Future Plans, etc.):

I am pleased with the results of the project as a whole, and I am eager to try to course again. While the video component of the project continues to dog my conscience, I've learned from the experience: when I'm working on an isolated project, thinking big and complex is good; when I'm leading a class through a project, thinking big and complex needs to be tempered by an increased awareness of what student groups can realistically accomplish in a short quarter.

The greatest success of the class, however, has to be the degree to which students reported having felt like their sense of the world had been drastically altered. This was not my most challenging class in terms of academic work, but it was the most challenging in terms of asking students to confront social issues on a personal level. That success will outweigh my failure on the video.

I would like to repeat the course soon, though I'd like to experiment with the social issues. I am imagining a course on environmentalism that takes as its medieval connection the ways in which landscape and geography were understood—perhaps leveraging the magic of medieval romance spaces.