

Mellon Initiative Course Revision Grant Report

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HIST 3433: The Middle Ages in Film

Spring 2016

What course did you modify? Tell us about it (e.g., dept, level, type of students, goals, etc.). Why did you choose to modify this course?

HIST 3433: The Middle Ages in Film has been approved by the UCC in 2015 and fulfills the Written Communication requirement for Pathways. I taught a version of this course in 2012 (HIST 3392: Special Topics), but Spring 2016 was the first time I taught this as a 4-credit course. The course is designed for advanced students in History, Medieval and Renaissance Studies, or related fields. The semester was divided into three units, each focused on one medieval-themed film. Students wrote three papers, using each film as a jumping-off point for historical research.

I had been meaning to update this course for some time, and I was pleased to be able to offer it as part of the Pathways curriculum. I was also glad to be able to offer Middle Ages in Film as a 4-credit course: I require a substantial amount of reading, writing, and independent research, and it was important to me that students received an appropriate amount of credit for their work.

What assignment or course module did you add? If possible, please include an attachment or link to the actual assignment. Why did you choose to add this component? What were the goals of the assignment or module? How did you assess the assignment?

The assignment I revised in this iteration was a final research paper of 10-12 pages, which required students to build on the skills they developed throughout the semester. Paper 1 (due in February) established basic research skills, requiring students to develop a historical question and conduct secondary research that will allow them to propose logical, evidence-driven answers. Paper 2 (due in March) focused on primary source analysis, requiring students to conduct close readings of medieval texts and contextualize their ideas with secondary research. The final Paper 3 (due in May) required primary text analyses and extensive secondary research, but also a historiographical review: students were required to evaluate key themes in the secondary literature surrounding their topic and situate their own original arguments in relation to those themes.

Paper 3 asked students to research, write, and think like professional historians. The objective of this assignment was for students to produce an advanced-level historical research paper that adhered to the conventions of the field; I hope that this work will serve as a template for future upper-division research papers in History and other fields of the humanities. Accordingly, this assignment focused on working with secondary scholarship at a sophisticated level through historiographical inquiry. On the one hand, the historiographical review (i.e. a literature review) required students to find relevant and seminal scholarship. Rather than settling for the first hits in their database searches or selecting sources with little thematic connection, students needed to access secondary sources that engaged with one another in order to write an effective review. On the other hand, by using the historiography section as a jumping-off point for their own analysis, students had an opportunity to add their own voices to a wider scholarly conversation. Overall, I am confident that this assignment inspired students to think of their research as an authentic scholarly endeavor.

What worked? What didn't work? Why? Any surprises?

The greatest challenge for students was the historiographical element of this assignment. Although they had already written two papers driven by secondary research, the idea that secondary scholarship could itself be the subject of critical inquiry was new to several students. Accordingly, much of our in-class work during the month of April was devoted to modeling and practicing historiographical analysis: I assigned historiographical articles for us to dissect and discuss in class; I gave students time in class to work through the major themes of articles they had read and annotated for their research; and I required a draft of the historiographical review, which I returned with feedback before the final paper was due. Because I required students to submit all of their preliminary and classroom assignments with their final papers, it was clear that this work was instrumental as they developed their topics and drafted their essays. I also required students to annotate my comments on their previous essays and include these with their final papers.

A majority of students completed these assignments and attended class regularly, and these students produced excellent final papers. For a handful of students who had struggled earlier in the semester, the final papers showed marked improvement. For the most advanced history majors in this class, the final papers were extraordinarily sophisticated, thoughtful, and well-researched. I am confident that the long-term work that went into this assignment enabled students to develop their ideas and research over time, allowing them to pursue the most relevant sources and revise their own analysis as they wrote.

However, the most surprising thing about this assignment was that several students simply skipped the preliminary work, even though completion of these assignments contributed significantly to the final grade on Paper 3. I suspect some of this had to do with timing: students were scrambling to complete projects in all of their courses at the end of the semester (see more below). I did make some changes to the original assignment to accommodate the end-of-semester crunch, such as reducing the number of annotated bibliographies and omitting a detailed paper outline which I had planned to require.

What would you do differently next time?

The biggest problem with Paper 3 was that I didn't allot enough time for students to complete the assignment: even though they had nearly a month to work, that month included reading and exam period, and most students were completing major assignments for other courses simultaneously. In the future, I would aim to begin work on this assignment earlier, to avoid the final crunch time at the end of the semester.

In addition, I would aim to begin discussions of historiography earlier in the semester. Even though most students had strong historiographical reviews in their final papers, this was a new concept for many—and one which they had to learn quite quickly. I hope that assigning historiographical articles in the first two units of the course will make this type of writing more familiar, as well as providing a range of examples for students to draw upon as they begin writing their own historiographical reviews.