THE LONE MEDIEVALIST
AS TEACHER

BREAKING FREE OF THE
CLOISTERED CLASSROOM
It’s perhaps inevitable for medievalists to feel a bit isolated. The very terms “medieval” and “Middle Ages” hardly conjure up positive images among the general public and even our non-brethren academics, resulting in such negative stereotypes towards the field that meaningful discourse can end before it even begins. When not surrounded by kindred specialists, it’s tempting to empathize with pre-millennial Irish monks sailing out bravely into the North Atlantic, pretending the professional solitude is precisely what we seek, even if it isn’t.

Those who study the Middle Ages could be forgiven for feeling that their situation is unique, that no one else could possibly understand the seclusion which comes with studying societies long ago and far away, with trying to appreciate mindsets and worldviews of people who often thought in fundamentally different, even perplexing ways. What else to do but don our emotional armor and carry on as academic outliers?

This is all a romantic notion, but probably an unnecessary one. As a medievalist, I’ll be the first to testify that fellow academics often can’t appreciate the nature of what I study and
all the attendant problems that crop up as a consequence of investigating a distant and foreign past. But some perspective is needed. Looking at the makeup of my own department— not a history department, but an interdisciplinary social sciences and humanities one, as is so often the case at smaller liberal arts colleges—it becomes apparent that the faculty mostly consist of one-off specialists like me. There are multiple political scientists, but their training and research foci diverge significantly, a pattern holding true for the sociologists and criminologists as well. While I’m the sole premodernist, my fellow historians’ interests are scattered across time and space, meaning they too, face obstacles to connecting not only with their history colleagues, but with the other social scientists. Our one anthropologist and solitary geographer can make valid claims to being the most isolated members of the department. Suddenly my predicament seems not so daunting in comparison with the latter two and is probably on par with the remaining departmental cohort. Maybe we’re all plying the metaphorical waters of the North Atlantic, but at least we’re doing so as a small, if dispersed, squadron.

Is academic isolation something that affects only my department? Hardly. My colleagues over in biology, to take but one example, find themselves in a similar predicament. Although they all fall under the same disciplinary rubric, their specialties range from cell biology to genetics to evolution to ecotoxicology. Like my own department, the biologists attest that there’s precious little overlap between their research fields. Scientists they all may be, but their common bonds get increasingly fragile as we expand their academic horizon to include such related fields as chemistry, physics and computer science. Our squadron of isolation might be growing into a bona fide fleet.

And yet, many of us do manage to communicate with each other—and it’s not just social niceties or the usual faculty banter. Nor is it only the historians talking substantively with other historians, but the biologists with the psychologists, the mathematicians with the writing faculty. Such interdisciplinary discourse might appear improbable on the face of it, until we remember the activity in which we all partake, and to which we
probably devote more time and energy than any other professional requirement, namely: teaching.¹

In 2009 I founded the Faculty Teaching Development Committee on my campus, and it’s met at least once a month during the academic year ever since. Instructors from across the spectrum of disciplines gather to talk about pedagogical scholarship, to host teaching- and learning-related presentations, to observe fellow instructors for non-evaluative purposes, and to view and discuss documentaries on issues in higher education. A parallel group on research development (of which I was a member) struggled to last for a single year, ultimately folding due to lack of participation. Why the different fates of these two groups?

A Personal Trajectory towards Teaching & Learning

A little personal reflection is perhaps instructive at this juncture. Besides the fact that my undergraduate training was not in history (I double-majored in mathematics and French), the impression I get is that my own graduate school experience was fairly typical. Attending two different research-oriented, large public institutions, I was primarily trained for historical research. Teaching was performed first as a teaching assistant, then as an instructor of my own courses as I neared degree completion. Pedagogical development was spotty, unsystematic and obviously of secondary import. After finishing the doctorate, I inevitably taught my medium-size, public university students the same way I’d done while a graduate student, thereby mim-

icking the instruction I’d witnessed while an undergraduate and teaching assistant.

None of this is to say that the instruction I’d observed or received was of poor quality, though in hindsight, some probably was. But like the vast majority of other history PhDs who are lucky enough to land full-time positions, I found myself the lone specialist at an institution (not my current one) whose prime directive was not research but teaching (in fact, we didn’t even offer a history major). Much criticism has been directed toward the current model of graduate education for precisely this reason — that it’s incommensurate with the actual work in which most of its alumni will engage.\(^2\) In the field of history, only a small minority (perhaps 25%) of PhDs will end up at research-intensive institutions.\(^3\) In my case, the signs of a mismatch appeared early. To take but one example, students had no idea how to read primary sources — documents which I knew were important and felt compelled to assign, but which I rarely even got to, given the “coverage” approach (an issue discussed below) I took to my courses. Despite generally positive student ratings, I knew I had a teaching problem, but I couldn’t put my finger on precisely what it was, let alone how to fix it.

I was quite fortunate that, in my third year on the job, my campus formed a scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) cohort as part of a system-wide initiative in public higher education. I successfully applied to the program and was exposed for the first time to pedagogical literature. One of the first ar-

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articles I read, by SoTL pioneer Randy Bass of Georgetown University, was nothing short of an epiphany: teaching problems aren’t “bad things”; rather, just like in our traditional research, such problems represent opportunities to explore, grapple with, improve upon and share.4 I was naively astonished that other academics — and not just historians — struggled with the same issues I did, and I was likewise astonished at the volume of scholarship pertaining to matters of teaching and learning. This was a new but exciting field to me, one which transgressed disciplinary boundaries, so that my isolation as a medievalist was no longer a liability. I became a mentor to new initiates to the SoTL program; I collaborated with instructors across a wide range of disciplines; I received a year-long teaching fellowship; I met Randy Bass, and even traveled to Georgetown to do some work with his Visible Knowledge Project; I actively experimented with new (though not always successful) approaches to teaching the past; and I began sharing my experiences at conferences and in publications.

Those first five years were critical, as I’d been at a crossroads without even knowing it. It would’ve been easy — maybe even typical — to blame my early teaching problems on the students, to continue instructing them in the same flawed ways, to pour my efforts into the research for which I’d been specifically trained while in graduate school. Maybe that would’ve brought even greater professional success, depending on how one measures it. But my chosen path positioned me well for when I moved to my present position at a small liberal arts college contained within a larger private university. Classes are small, allowing me to work closely with students in ways I couldn’t at my previous institutions. My knowledge of pedagogy and professional development also permitted me to establish the teaching development committee described previously, thus overlaying a SoTL framework onto a college where it previously hadn’t existed, and replicating the process of bringing together colleagues

from across the disciplines. Looking back, it’s hard to imagine I made a bad career choice by devoting so much time and energy to teaching and learning pursuits.

Teaching & Learning Issues as Shared Experience

Teaching has been described as an act of isolation. On the one hand, the term is ironic: by definition, teaching involves interacting with those being taught. But there’s validity in the phrase as well, insofar as we tend to spend very little time actually observing what our fellow academics do as teachers. There’s the obligatory teaching observation for annual review and promotion purposes, and we tend to collectively gripe about flagrant student behavior and administrative shortcomings. Yet, substantive, evidence-based pedagogical discourse requires a serious commitment. Even at self-identified “teaching first” institutions, faculty performing risk-reward calculations may conclude that the surest path to professional success lies not in pedagogy, but in traditional research. Matters of teaching and learning thus get shunted to secondary positions of importance, leaving us much the poorer for it: there is more overlap in our classroom challenges than we may realize, so that teaching constitutes a lingua franca for academics who might otherwise have difficulty communicating across their disciplinary divides.

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7 In this vein, see Peter Burkholder, “Transcending Disciplinary Boundaries: Conversations about Student Research Projects,” Faculty Focus (23 June 2014), http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/
research development committee, mentioned earlier, folded for lack of establishing these intersections.

What common issues do medievalists and other academics face? How do these issues transcend the field of medieval history and allow for productive conversations with those outside of our subject area? When it comes to how faculty teach their disciplines, the overlaps are potentially many. One might think that an undergraduate survey course on medieval history would have little in common with, say, a calculus or political science or pharmacy course. But that’s only if we remain locked in our disciplinary silos, thinking of our classes as collections of course-specific material where the students’ job is to master content. The latter is what leads to an incoherent, balkanized undergraduate curriculum where there are no obvious connections between classes, where integrated learning happens only by happy accidents. Making matters worse, experts and non-experts arrange and connect knowledge in fundamentally different ways. While a professional historian can readily appreciate how a communications, writing or math course could benefit those enrolled in history classes (and vice versa), students tend to view such offerings as discrete units to satisfy graduation requirements and with no obvious overlap or mutually supporting attributes.\(^8\) Such a tendency is further reinforced if those other courses emphasize gaining knowledge over the development of higher-order modes of understanding.

Do medievalists aspire to instill not just content, but more sophisticated ways of thinking in their charges? I’ve never met one who doesn’t make that claim, but good intentions don’t necessarily yield desired results — much as I learned in my first two years of full-time employment. There’s been precious little ac-

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\(^8\) See Susan Ambrose et al., *How Learning Works: 7 Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), ch. 2: “How Does the Way Students Organize Knowledge Affect Their Learning?”
tual research done on how college-level historians in general, and medievalists in particular, actually design and teach their classes. But what little there is suggests that what’s called the “coverage model” predominates. That is, the past is an agreed-upon story, an assembly of people, places and events, and a quality history course dutifully “covers” this material. The disturbing logical corollary: a “better” course delivers even more content. The threat of inundating students with a tidal wave of factual material looms large, especially in medieval courses which routinely treat hundreds of years’ worth of history. Content does matter, but it can become tyrannical, crowding out the higher-order thinking skills faculty identify as crucial to a college education.

Even if a general story of the Middle Ages could be agreed upon—and I have grave doubts about that prospect—medievalists inevitably would have to pare down that content as a matter of practicality; lone medievalists may feel especially apprehensive about the selection process. After all, their courses may be the students’ only exposure to the Middle Ages, so culling anything may seem like sacrilege. But this constitutes a false choice and a misapprehension. First, the “problem” of cutting


10 Opinions on the role of content are overviewed in Burkholder, “A Content Means to a Critical Thinking End: Group Quizzing in History Surveys,” The History Teacher 47, no. 4 (2014): 551–78, at 552–55. Faculty’s expressed views on the importance of higher-order learning (e.g., critical thinking) as opposed to content mastery are found in Arum and Roksa, Academically Adrift, 35–36. But the authors demonstrate that college education falls well short of achieving those goals; ibid., 73–77.

11 The inherent problem of selecting topics and chronologies for the Middle Ages is touched on in Joel Rosenthal, “Teaching the Medieval Survey: All of Europe!!” Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching 23, no. 1 (2016): 135–46. Rosenthal addresses real issues pertaining to subject matter selection, but he also inadvertently highlights the problem of beginning course design with content as opposed to learning goals.
content is an issue only if content mastery is the primary learning goal of the course — and as indicated above, most medievalists, and faculty in general, would reject that premise, even if their course designs and teaching practices say otherwise. More likely, it is the habits of mind of historians in general, and medievalists in particular, that we seek to introduce to, and develop in, our students. The history of the Middle Ages serves as a necessary and vital context in this pursuit, but knowledge of the medieval period is a means to a higher and transferable cognitive end, not an end unto itself.  

Second, the solitary premodernist can find solace in the fact that teachers in all disciplines face the same impossibility of covering it all, and thus that selective treatment of material is an inevitability and a skill going beyond the confines of medieval history. It’s easy enough to appreciate how related disciplines in the humanities and social sciences necessarily choose what topics to cover and which texts to use. It’s also understandable that success in some courses (e.g., calculus) is predicated on a certain degree of mastery in a prerequisite (e.g., algebra). But even the sciences share with medievalists the pedagogical conundrum of content choice and selecting from methods for introducing, explaining and working with basic course material. Rather than viewing our classes primarily as vehicles for content delivery, Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe argue persuasively for “backward design,” that is, building our courses around desired learning goals and assessment from the outset. Only when the latter issues are identified and agreed upon is content marshalled to serve those needs, instead of the reverse.  

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12 On the need to actively use content, not just cover it, see Maryellen Weimer, “Diversifying the Role Course Content Plays,” Faculty Focus (24 September 2014), http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/course-content-can-fulfill-multiple-roles/.

Cryptic Texts & Multiple Histories

In his useful though idiosyncratic study of the habits and practices of the country’s best college teachers, Ken Bain introduces the idea of the “expectation failure.” This is a situation where students are confronted with the fact that their extant modes of understanding won’t serve them in a new context, and ideally this permeates the college landscape. (The ubiquitous notion that medieval seafarers thought the earth was flat is a simple example of this type of learning impediment.) Such failures are not a bad thing; on the contrary, they’re essential to pushing students into new, more sophisticated ways of thinking.⁴ What constitutes a substantive expectation failure in history courses, medieval or otherwise? There are several candidates, but I’ll limit myself to just two here: first, the productive reading of primary sources, which requires metatextual analysis and empathy; and second, grappling with and evaluating the ever-changing past, as manifested in historiography. Both of these tend to receive minimal attention in K-12 education (with Advanced Placement courses being a notable exception). In fact, a broad survey of the general public’s pre-college experiences with academic history exposes an emphasis on dry and seemingly useless content. Most students thus arrive in college history classrooms with a simplified view of the past, one which is static and generally agreed upon, and their perceived job is to absorb and reproduce as much information about that past as possible.⁵ Hitting stu-


dents with expectation failures is one way to shake them out of such complacency.

Students’ reading and understanding of primary texts has been studied extensively by Stanford University’s Sam Wineburg, and his findings have had a tremendous impact on history education. In particular, Wineburg has examined how expert historians and their non-expert students read primary sources, and the differences are striking. Before even reading a primary source (or any text, for that matter), experts employ a “sourcing heuristic” in order to locate the reading in time and place, and to determine whether the author is credible and consistent with other sources. Once this is established, the experts don’t read the document but interrogate it, analyzing it not so much for information as for evidence. They understand that what’s not written but implied is probably even more important than what’s stated explicitly, and they constantly check the document against itself for consistency and bias. Non-experts, on the other hand, view a text as a text as a text. They read it in linear fashion for information which is assumed to be true and limited to what’s written on the page. Perhaps Wineburg’s most astounding finding is that professional historians will read primary texts on a far more sophisticated level than students, regardless of whether the latter have more knowledge of and training in the historical context of the document. In other words, a practicing medievalist will likely outperform a college student with a concentration in U.S. history when it comes to interpreting documents from colonial America. The takeaway is that training, experience and habits of mind are far more important to this basic historical skill than possessing a repertoire of content knowledge.¹⁶

Getting students to read primary sources productively is a difficult task, but perhaps especially so in medieval history

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courses. Students come to these courses with deep temporal and geographical chasms separating them from the subject matter and with a host of biases, usually negative on the whole. (If you doubt the latter, ask your students to write a preconceptions essay at the start of the semester for your next medieval course. Their views will be instructive.) These non-experts must be broken out of a reflexive urge to judge — and even mock or outright reject — the actors under consideration, thus requiring a concomitant need for historical empathy. Wineburg notes that premodern courses are particularly useful for developing this latter capacity, as the setting is too distant, too alien for the application of present-day understandings and values.\footnote{Wineburg, \textit{Historical Thinking}, 6–7.}

A recent reading of Abbo of St. Germain’s \textit{Bella Parisiacae Urbis} drove this point home well: the class couldn’t understand why an account ostensibly about a ninth-century Viking attack on Paris would get sidetracked on a bevy of miracle stories and the impossibility of a long-dead saint engaging in actual combat. Only by carefully sourcing the text and seeking to understand the author’s mindset could we get beyond judging the account for not telling us precisely what we — sitting in a distant, twenty-first-century classroom in suburban northern New Jersey — wanted to know. In the end, none of us, myself included, could pretend to fully comprehend Abbo’s worldview and modes of storytelling. Nonetheless, we had come to appreciate not only the events surrounding the siege of Paris, but the medieval values and attitudes of a person who actually lived through it — with all the attendant problems that arise from a biased, eyewitness source.\footnote{The account used in class was Anthony Adams and A.G. Rigg, “A Verse Translation of Abbo of St. Germain’s \textit{Bella Parisiacae Urbis},” \textit{The Journal of Medieval Latin} 14 (2004): 1–68. A more recent translation is \textit{Viking Attacks on Paris: The Bella Parisiacae Urbis of Abbo of Saint-Germain-des-Prés}, ed., trans. & intro. Nirmal Dass (Paris: Peeters Publishers, 2007).} Ultimately, many students need to confront the fact that not every text can be read the same, and that — despite their literacy, and however painful it is to admit it — they don’t know how to read primary sources very well.
This constitutes a metacognitive challenge to students, especially weaker and more inexperienced ones, whose educational self-assessments tend to be highly inaccurate. While some of these difficulties of literary criticism are specific to the medieval era, many of them are not, thus lending their applicability to other settings.

Like primary source analysis, historiography represents another essential “expectation failure” to an understanding of the past. *When and why did Rome fall? (Or perhaps it didn’t really “fall” at all!) Why did the Crusades take place? How literate were medieval populations? Did the mounted knight “dominate” the military landscape?* To students nourished on an unchanging, omniscient story of events as told through textbooks — a story with little hint of doubt or disagreement among practitioners — the notion that historians are uncertain of much and argue about nearly everything is both novel and unsettling. From their everyday lives, even novices can readily appreciate that the stories we tell about the past will vary, sometimes considerably so. It need not be that one story is “correct” to the exclusion of all others, though that may be the case in some simple instances. Yet, prodding students to apply such personal knowledge to an understanding of broader history is a challenge, one which, when things go wrong, can come down to direct questions to the professor about which interpretation is right and which isn’t.

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I know of no surefire or easy path to teaching an appreciation for historiographical debate, but I do know that exposing students to such ambiguity is essential to their transformation from history students to budding historians. I would further argue that an ability to weigh the relative merits of evidence-based scholarship is a skill which must be taught explicitly, repeatedly, and even to the exclusion of some precious content. Nor can an introduction to historiography (or primary source analysis, for that matter) wait until an upper-division methods or capstone course: developing these skills takes a tremendous amount of time, effort, failure, and readjustment. Using the first year or two of an undergraduate curriculum primarily to instill basic content is to kick the can down the road — and it’s unlikely the foundational material will even be retained unless actively used for some more ambitious purpose. Finally, one can readily grasp how this is a teaching and learning problem extending beyond medieval history, or even the entire history subject area, for that matter. How is the teaching of professional debate and ambiguity handled in other fields? What constitutes reliable evidence and methods of interpretation? What forms of assessment best measure a student’s mastery of such difficult material? Are some topics or methods more conducive to teaching these skills than others? Basic teaching questions like these are helpful for starting discussions and forging collaborations between medievalists and non-medievalists alike, and thus serve as a pathway out of disciplinary isolation, if one chooses to take it.

Knowing vs. Understanding as Common Pedagogical Ground

The possibilities for such cross-pollination between fields were driven home to me during a teaching development session with chemistry faculty. Discussing the role of factual material within the context of cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham’s excellent book, Why Don’t Students Like School?, we stumbled into the matter of the history curriculum at my institution. History majors, I explained, have course requirements, including pre-
requisites for some courses as well as intermediate- and advanced-level obligations. But mostly, within their major, these students are free to choose from classes in U.S., African, Asian, Latin American, Middle Eastern, European, and world history offerings delving into myriad topics spread over various time periods. In addition, non-majors can — indeed, are encouraged to — slot in to many of these classes without prior training. The chemists, drawing on their experiences in the sciences where accumulated knowledge is viewed as essential, couldn’t understand how this was possible. “How could a person take a course on the Middle Ages without first taking one in ancient history?,” they objected. “How could a student possibly understand a class on post-World War II America without a solid grounding in what came before?”

I initially tried to explain that success in a history course isn’t so much a matter of knowing lots of previous history, although that can certainly help; rather, it’s more a function of higher-order thinking skills such as analyzing, evaluating, synthesizing and explaining — skills that can develop elsewhere and are transferable from one course setting to another. This predictably went nowhere. So, rather than continuing to address their protests directly, I turned the tables. “The periodic table of elements is fundamental content for any chemistry course, right?,” I asked. Of course, they agreed. “You’re all chemistry professors. How many of you have the periodic table memorized?” Well, none of them — but the information on that table is easily retrieved, obviating the need to commit it to memory. The key, they insisted, isn’t knowing the table top-to-bottom, but understanding how it works. Thus, what an outsider views as essential knowledge may not be so essential after all (quod erat demonstrandum). More importantly, despite the distance separating our fields of expertise, we concurred that cultivating habits of mind, as opposed to imparting raw information, was an educational goal in both of our disciplines.

The above anecdote necessarily suggests that there are common teaching and learning issues between historians, regardless of the subfield of study. This isn’t to suggest that medieval history
courses are somehow interchangeable with their non-medieval counterparts. But there are threads of pedagogical continuity binding medievalists with faculty in other areas of historical expertise, thereby offering even the “lone medievalist” some camaraderie with his or her institutional peers. My creation of an archive-based research assignment is a case in point: students investigate Gilded Age documents from the family estate now serving as our college campus, but they do so by employing the medievalist’s methods of diplomatics. Only by consulting with my Americanist colleagues and reference librarians was the project even possible.\textsuperscript{20} The American Historical Association’s “Tuning Project,” which I joined in early 2015, is predicated on teaching and learning overlaps between the subfields of history and constitutes an extra-institutional opportunity for solitary medievalists to collaborate with fellow historians.\textsuperscript{21} Such work is critical to establishing a desired learning arc throughout not only an individual course, but an entire curriculum. It requires recognizing both the common and unique elements of our craft, collaborating with colleagues, and wrestling with the very nature of what we seek to do as history educators.

**Strength in Collaborative Numbers**

Delving into fundamental problems of teaching and learning is not without risks. First, there are the perceptions of colleagues to contend with. While in my own case I’ve mostly found support for pedagogical inquiry, traditionalists might object to “wasting time” on such issues, especially if these efforts are seen as detrimental to performing the “real work” of subject-area research. Faculty are sensitive to this bias against teaching development even at self-proclaimed “teaching first” institutions, where the surest path to tenure and promotion is perceived to

\textsuperscript{20} The project is described and evaluated in Peter Burkholder, “Getting Medieval on American History Research: A Method to Help Students Think Historically,” *The History Teacher* 43, no. 4 (2010): 545–62.

be discipline-specific publications and grants/awards.\textsuperscript{22} Having a core group of colleagues who are sympathetic towards pedagogical exploration can help ensure that teaching and learning investigations are not in vain from a professional standpoint.

Second, students might not like the types of instruction and course design that emerge from teaching development and learner-centered curricula. It’s not for nothing that Wineburg calls “historical thinking” an “unnatural act”: the close reading of primary sources for agendas and implicit evidence is something most students have not been trained to do, nor have they been confronted with multiple interpretations of the past. Moreover, these are not quick and easy skills to obtain. They take a great investment of time and effort (learning specialists cite the “ten-year rule” as the necessary minimum to develop true expertise), and failures along the way are practically guaranteed.\textsuperscript{23} Getting students to make the necessary investment in new forms of learning, to develop novel skillsets, to realize their understanding of the past has possibly been simplistic and inadequate—all but the most serious and motivated might reflexively reject these premises, and demand a return to a simpler, more familiar “absorb and replicate” style of learning. There is growing evidence and consensus that active learning techniques yield better results than passive ones.\textsuperscript{24} But we also know from cognitive science that, as strange as it sounds, the brain is designed \textit{not} to think—and when thinking does occur, it’s hard work.\textsuperscript{25} Professors who push their students into intellectual zones of discomfort may find themselves punished at the end of the semester with poor student evaluations which are com-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} See note 6 above.
\item \textsuperscript{23} On the so-called ten-year rule, see Daniel Willingham, \textit{Why Don’t Students Like School?} (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 139–40.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Willingham, \textit{Why Don’t Students Like School}, 4–9.
\end{itemize}
monly misinterpreted and, for better or for worse, often carry enormous weight in faculty reviews. Thus, medievalists and others who opt for more challenging but ultimately more rewarding learning environments face potential trouble on both flanks: dissatisfied students and skeptical faculty/administrators. Formal teaching development programs are essential to legitimizing the more ambitious learner-centered approaches and providing cover to those faculty who choose to take risks in the classroom.

One would think that investing a great deal of time in pedagogical literature and research would bring definitive answers to fundamental teaching and learning questions. I’ve been closely involved in such work for over a dozen years now, and indeed I’ve found closure on a handful of issues. My efforts and successes have been recognized with multiple awards at the institutional and national levels. But as with the research in our disciplines, recognitions don’t buy answers: an attempt to solve one problem usually begets several new ones, with the latter often being even more intractable and vexing than the original inquiry. I’m reminded of the futility of chasing a rainbow; yet, it’s the very act of chasing, not arriving, which ultimately matters in our research and professional development pursuits—and it’s both pleasant and advantageous to share the journey with colleagues, be they medievalists or not.

So, in the end, even as the sole premodernist in my department and one of only two medievalists in my entire college, I’m

not so lonely. Just as Latin served as the common tongue among the educated in the medieval West, the language of teaching is a convenient and valuable bridge spanning not only the history subfields, but disparate and seemingly unrelated disciplines. And that’s a good thing: If I remember right, many of those isolated monks who sailed into the North Atlantic didn’t fare so well when the Norse came along. *Ex pluribus fortitudo!*