Keeping It Old-School on the New Faculty Majority

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I have the good fortune to teach in an English department at a Big 12 school. While it is not as well-funded as, say, the mechanical engineering department or any of the departments in the business school, it does have a fair bit of resources available. Tenured and tenure-track faculty members are eligible for travel support, research grants, sabbaticals, and college- and university-wide awards that carry substantial stipends. Training programs and continuing education opportunities are widely available, as well, and the building in which the department is housed is one of the oldest on campus, constructed in a fine style and solid enough to withstand tornadoes and earthquakes.

Adding my voice to the Ballad may be a bit of an oddity, as I am not the only medievalist in the department. There is one other, a tenured associate professor who specializes in Old English. I am the only member of the department who specializes in Middle English, however, and the only one among the many contingent faculty in the department who specializes in medieval literature of any sort. While I am privileged among the academic precariat — I have office space in which to meet with students, a desk and computer with which to do at least some of the work involved in my position, an annual contract that lends
itself to renewal, and some health care benefits — I am nonetheless in a position that typically has me teach so-called service courses. In my time in my current position, I have only once been assigned to teach a class that explicitly includes my area of expertise: a sophomore-level survey of British literature, spanning its beginnings through 1800. In such a course, I could give no more than a few weeks to my general area of expertise and even less to my specialty of Malory and his transmission.

In the courses more commonly assigned to me — the commonplaces of first-year composition and general introductory literature, as well as technical writing — I have even less formal opportunity to do so. While a survey of early British literature has to include Middle English works and can easily include specific authors of note, composition programs increasingly push against the use of literature as a teaching vehicle, general literature surveys tend to work with much more recent writings, and technical writing focuses so tightly on the purportedly practical that anything other than sober workplace writing is looked at askance. That such classes, both in my current department and at many other institutions, prescribe standard textbooks and, in no small number of cases, assignment sequences serves to restrict them further. Those who teach such classes, most commonly adjunct and other contingent faculty, commonly operate under conditions that preclude them from spending much time away from the work of teaching them.¹ Thus, those of us who are medievalists within English departments and similar institutional groups find ourselves pressed for how we can remain immersed in our chosen fields amid the demands of earning our too-often too-small paychecks.

Some ways of pushing back against that pressing occurred to me more or less by chance as I taught in another position. As a full-time instructor at a technical school in midtown Manhattan, I worked with students whose academic and socio-cultural backgrounds do not register as conducive to the liberal arts

educational tradition in the United States. Many of them, immigrants or the children of immigrants and dramatically underserved by their educational experiences in the United States and elsewhere in the world, struggled with conversational modern English, let alone the arcane convolutions of historical Englishes seemingly far removed from their experiences. In trying to reach them, to connect with them so that we could move forward in the classroom together, my own limitations became evident. I did not—and, I regret to add, still do not—have much access to their backgrounds; I worked around the situation by embracing more fully the passion I have for my own educational foundations, almost retreating into the past to address the present. To my early surprise and continuing pleasure, it worked. My doing such things as integrating Anglo-Saxon-style riddles into first-year composition classes, tracing receptions of the medieval in later literatures in general literature surveys, and presenting research and edited materials in medieval practices to technical writing classes has helped both to ensure student success—making keeping a job and its too-necessary paychecks more likely—and to keep me engaged with, if not abreast of, my chosen field of study. I add my voice to the Ballad with the hope that such strains may be taken up by others who will sing them better than I.

First-Year Composition

Like many others who teach off the tenure track in English departments, I am often assigned to teach first-year composition. This has been true everywhere I have taught at the college level, from my graduate school through working in New York City and into my present position. As I write this, in fact, I am assigned nothing but first-year composition classes, and while the assignment has certain benefits—I only have one prep this term, and I have fewer than 75 students across all four sections, so that I only have so much grading to do at a time—it does see me operate under a fairly strict programmatic doctrine. Major assignments for the course are centrally predetermined in terms
of weight in the course, genre of composition, and page length/word count. The same was true of similar assignments at other institutions where I have worked; the kinds and sizes of papers I was expected to cover were set before I even received my teaching assignments each term.

Amid the programmatic standards, however, there has been a certain percentage of the grade left to the instructor’s discretion. My first-year composition classes have seen some of that discretionary grading assigned to student professionalism. Since first-year composition can serve as microcosm for college as a whole, and since many students at the kinds of schools where I have taught are first-generation college students, having an explicit set of expectations for behavior in the new and unfamiliar environment serves well; it helps to clarify matters generally unfamiliar to many students. More of the discretionary grading, however, is devoted to homework assignments and quizzes. For the former, I ask students to bring in early versions of their papers for peer and more formal review, practices that some students report appreciating greatly.

The quizzes I assign my students often work with riddles, either adapted from such texts as the Exeter Book or written to follow the models of those riddles. With the adaptations, I translate or take a translation of some of the shorter riddles, make small adjustments to the modern English texts to account for cultural changes, and embed proofreading errors of the sort I have noticed frequently in the papers students had recently submitted to me. These typically involve comma usage deviating from the style manual from which my class operates — generally either MLA or what is laid out in the prescribed textbook. Students are asked to proofread the riddle, offer an answer, and explain from the details of the text why the answer they provide is correct; only the proofreading and the argumentation are as-

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sessed. They thus simultaneously receive practice in reviewing texts for mechanical correctness and arguing varying interpretations from textual evidence—both goals common to writing courses and expectations about writing courses other instructors, in English and in other disciplines, often have.

Two examples can usefully illustrate the process. Riddle 50,\(^4\) for instance, I cast for my current (as I write this) students as “By two dumb things is a warrior brightly extracted brought into the world in wonder for the use of lords. For the hurt of the other foe bears it against foe. Strong though it is it is easily bound and obeys well serving quietly if people tend it duly and feed it fairly. It offers them comfort and happiness in life but it rewards with destruction those who let it grow proud [sic]. Say what it is.” The answer given to the original riddle is “fire,” and while only a few of those enrolled in my classes got the answer “right,” many of them did well on the tasks of proofreading and of explaining the validity of the answers they did provide. One convincingly argued that the riddle, as presented, refers to a Chihuahua, demonstrating not only a welcome willingness to engage odd interpretations, but also a sense of play appropriate to the riddles themselves and a burgeoning ability to offer and substantiate an opinion about a text based on it and attestable experience. Meanwhile, I got to practice my admittedly rusty skills at translation and adaptation, as well as finding easily accessible sources of data from which to conduct future research (since I am not on the tenure track, I have to consider that I may have to relocate, and an online research apparatus makes relocating easier). Each suggests itself to me as a good thing.

I did something similar with Riddle 61.\(^5\) The students in my classes as I write this received it as “I have often been trapped in a closet. On occasion I have been taken out and delivered.” Each suggests itself to me as a good thing.

\(^4\) “Riddle 50,” Online Corpus of Old English Poetry, http://aspr.oepoetry.ca/a3.22.50.html. The translation, which is admittedly loose and adjusted to suit the purpose to which I put it, is mine.

\(^5\) “Riddle 61,” Online Corpus of Old English Poetry, http://aspr.oepoetry.ca/a3.34.1.html. The translation, which is admittedly loose and adjusted to suit the purpose to which I put it, is mine.
other as bidden and that other would poke his head inside me. From below with me upturned he would join with me in a tight fit. If his strength kept up some sort of hairy thing was bound to fill me [sic]. Say what I am.” To be sure, the text is changed from its original — for which the answer is given as “ornamented shirt” or “helmet.” Many students came up with an answer much like that, noting that some kind of shirt or hat is what the text describes. One who stands out explained the answer by way of a story, making a narrative to account for the answer; for the student, the riddle describes a turtleneck whose owner has grown heavier between winters and struggles therefore to wear something that had fit easily before. Again, the students were afforded the opportunity not only to proofread, but also to argue from textual evidence and even to exercise their creative repertoire, and I was able to work on translation and adaptation. Classroom and program purposes are served no less than my own interests; everybody wins.

The results are anecdotal, certainly, but it is an anecdote of which I have seen versions for some years. The student examples noted are not the first to make such comments and move in such directions. I have occasionally received some questions from other faculty and program administrators about the practice; how it connects to outcome statements does not always present itself clearly. But many of my colleagues, as well as members of the hiring committee that brought me into my current position, have expressed interest in or appreciation of the technique, commenting favorably on it. Many of my students also report enjoying the riddle exercises — helpful for the evaluations upon which so much work off the tenure track depends — and they report benefiting from them. My own observations suggest that, after a few attempts, student performance on the riddles — and on their other writing assignments — increases sharply. For me, for my classes, it has been effective, and it has been a way to keep myself in practice on something related to what I do in a class that typically is not.
General Introduction to Literature

As noted above, I have been afforded the opportunity to teach in my area of study at my current institution. It has been some time since I have gotten to do so, however; I am far more likely to be assigned to teach a general literature class than one in any specific area. I, and those in positions similar to mine, are likely to be given classes that try to “cover the breadth” of literature in three genres: prose fiction, poetry, and drama. They seem always to display a presentist bias; many operate under programmatic standards for textbook selection, and many common textbooks struggle to go even so far back as Shakespeare (although the Norton Introduction to Literature, a fairly standard textbook, manages to include Aesop, Sophocles and Petrarch — but nothing from older forms of English appears in its table of contents\(^6\)). They seem, too, to be full of students who know they are in the class because they have to be in it and hate to be in it because of the obligation. Incorporating the medieval into a present-biased class replete with unwilling students is something of a challenge, but it is hardly insuperable.

Two methods of doing so suggest themselves to me. The first stems from a practice I began in my first-year composition classes and have transferred to other classes I have taught: composing assignments alongside students. That is, I write responses to the assignments I give my students — or something close to them. To expand on the idea: my literature classes typically follow one of two assignment sequences. In the first, students are asked to draft a conference-length paper in stages: beginning abstract, annotated bibliography, exploratory essay (four to five pages, something like 1,400 to 1,750 words, exclusive of bibliography), and conference paper. This is in addition to quizzes, out-of-class online discussions, and an institution-mandated in-class final exam. The topic is usually assigned as something in the standard textbook but not covered by the assigned reading

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list. In the other, students are asked to draft several shorter papers, one on a work in each of the major genres covered. Again, topics are usually assigned as items in the standard textbook but not covered by the assigned reading list.

In either case, I write papers alongside the students, drafting an abstract or an annotated bibliography as they are asked to do, composing short papers or conference papers alongside them — but mine focus on my own needs, rather than addressing the materials assigned to the students. I frame the divergence as allowing me to produce models for the students that do not entail me doing their work for them — and they do so, helping the students to see the form of the work I want from them while allowing them the freedom necessary to conduct that work for themselves. Students tend to express their appreciation. I recently conducted an anonymous survey of my classes through a Google Form, and results note that many value having examples of work to follow and want more of them to be developed. When I have asked past classes about the examples, albeit less formally, I have received similar replies. It also allows me to generate essays for my own purposes, whether for professional development and service activities (writing samples are helpful in academic and professional portfolios, and some societies ask for short essays from members) or for my own conference work at Kalamazoo and elsewhere. The practice also registers well with administrators, as modeling desired behavior is an excellent pedagogical practice, and students appreciate both the explicit models and the implied sympathy of them.

A second method of incorporating the medieval into a general introduction to literature class is somewhat more time-intensive and complicated than drafting examples for students that happen to coincide with already-standing research projects. The approach is to frame the course as a whole in terms of source or reception studies, centering course discussion and assignments on the identification of medieval figures and tropes in the later literatures on which prescribed texts for such classes focus. It can work in conjunction with the first method to good effect, with the instructor drafting a paper making use of the
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technique as a model for students to follow in their own work. The practice does conduce more to *medievalism* than to the *medieval*, as such, since it looks at presentation and interpretation of the medieval rather than at the medieval itself. Even so, it requires a deep understanding of the medieval to carry out well, and guiding students to the development of such understanding does much to help reinforce an instructor’s own knowledge of medieval and related materials.

Deploying the source/reception studies approach requires substantial narrowing of the medieval, traces of which are to be sought in the later literatures treated in the usual literature survey. As traditionally defined, the medieval in English covers a thousand years and several languages; constraints of program-standard textbooks and syllabi will not permit more than a brief synopsis of the whole, and administrators are not like to approve of deviating from the “regular” course by such a large degree. Such constraints *will* permit narrower attention to a specific period, work, or restricted body of literature, however, if it is presented as a frame for inquiry. For example, Arthurian legend exerts significant influence on the later literatures of the English-speaking world, including those works most likely to be treated in a general literature survey, or in the genre fiction that students are far more likely to read willingly and in the other media they consume. Assigning students to read selected passages from major Arthurian works such as Malory and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (in a reputable translation, given the course) could be presented as background readings to help them carry out explications of the texts assigned in the class. How the assigned texts correspond to and deviate from the patterns asserted in the Arthurian literature could be used either to explicate how the medieval is reinterpreted by the postmedieval or to investigate specifics of how the prevailing concepts change over time. Either is a legitimate exercise in a general literature survey, amenable to the purposes to which such courses tend to be put. Both help the medievalists among the contingent faculty often assigned to teach such classes to work within their fields while addressing the work they must do for their paychecks.
Technical Writing

Contingent faculty are perhaps less likely to be assigned technical writing classes than they are to be assigned first-year writing classes or literature surveys. Often an upper-division class or a class taken during the last semester of a two-year program, technical writing is usually required of students in engineering and medical fields, meeting programmatic and institutional accreditation requirements and ostensibly helping students in those fields learn how to address those outside their fields in writing in professional contexts. For example, several of the accreditation standards descriptions provided on the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) website speak to the need to prepare students to do such things as “assist in the creation of an effective project plan” or “explain basic concepts in management, business, public policy, and leadership; and explain the importance of professional licensure.” Technical writing classes address those needs. They are commonly assigned to full-time faculty brought in as specialists in that area, but “commonly” still leaves much room for contingent faculty and non-specialist faculty to be assigned to teach sections of the course. They often do so under supervision and narrow prescription of policies and procedures meant to ensure equivalency among sections of the course taught within each term and from term to term.

When I have been one of the contingent, non-specialist faculty assigned to teach technical writing, I have worked within typically narrow strictures. At my current institution, technical writing is an upper-division class taught across a number of sections, and it is considered a component of the professional writing program offered at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Most sections are taught by graduate students in rhetoric and composition, many of whom specialize in technical and profes-

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8 Ibid.
sional writing; the remainder are taught by full-time contract faculty—visiting assistant professors. Major assignments are determined by program dictates, much as, and for much the same reasons as, are those in first-year composition. Their genres and requirements are standardized across the many sections of the course taught each term, ostensibly to ensure equivalence across the sections, with some discretionary grading allocated for homework assignments and in-class exercises.

As I teach the course, I work to provide models for my students to follow no less than I do for my first-year and literature students, although the nature of the research I do and the assignments the students face makes it more of a challenge for me to draft those examples. What I tend to do instead is to use the need to find examples for my students to review (both as models to follow and as exercises in critique and interpretation of technical writing so that they are made more familiar with both reading and writing technical documents) to stimulate my own journal reading. It is easy to let such reading slip aside, after all, against the demands of a more-than-full teaching load, but integrating those teaching demands with ongoing professional reading helps with keeping current—and it tends to help administrative assessments of teaching practices in that it connects the work the students do to practical examples.

Several examples of useful models for technical writing appear in the pages of the October 2014 issue of *Speculum*. One is James A. Palmer’s “Piety and Social Distinction in Late Medieval Roman Peacemaking,” which explicates one of the variations away from medieval peacemaking deployed by Romans across the fourteenth century and discusses its purposes and effects. As a longer piece, it is one that does well to be made available to students in advance of the class meeting where it is discussed. Making it available to students allows them to review relevant textual and paratextual features of the document, including the declension of headings and deployment of cited materials and

addenda—all of which factor into principles of composition and document design on which technical writing focuses. It also allows them to read the text in detail, looking at concerns of diction and phrasing as deployed for an educated, intelligent audience composed of many non-specialists; *Speculum* is an explicitly interdisciplinary journal, its articles written and read by scholars in languages and literatures, history, architecture, music, and other fields. They cannot assume they are being read only by those in their own fields, and so they are forced to write more accessibly than they otherwise might—something which the students in technical writing classes are being trained to do. As the students find models of the things they are asked to do in their papers in the text, the medievalist instructor is given an opportunity to read the article, remaining abreast of scholarship in the midst of teaching a class outside his or her specialty.

Another article from the same issue of the journal that would work well with a technical writing class is Rachel Koopmans’s “Early Sixteenth-Century Stained Glass at St. Michael-le-Belfrey and the Commemorations of Thomas Becket in Late Medieval York.”10 As with the Palmer example, the length suggests that the piece be made available to students in advance of classroom discussion. Also like the Palmer piece, the Koopmans article allows students to see effective declension of headings, incorporation of addenda, and tailoring of diction to discuss detailed and complex concepts to those who, although educated and intelligent, are not specialists in the relevant field, exemplifying many properties of the best technical writing. The Koopmans piece also makes substantial use of visuals to bolster its argument, and the technical writing courses I have taught have been asked to emphasize the incorporation of visual data such as photographs, sketches, and tables—each of which Koopmans deploys to good effect in her article. The Koopmans piece thus presents itself as offering all of what Palmer’s does, and more, with concomitantly

superior effects for student learning and administrative appreciation, along with at least the same level of benefit to the medievalist instructor of a technical writing class.

There is a temptation to use actual medieval examples of technical writing as examples in the class as they appear to be more direct applications of the medieval to the course. Chaucer’s *Treatise on the Astrolabe* is easily described as a piece of technical writing, for example, “an elementary textbook meant of a young child” in which “Chaucer’s propositions are for a ten-year-old”\(^1\) — clearly a discussion meant for a non-specialist audience, such as technical writing classes often teach students to address. Problems with such an idea arise quickly, however. The language barrier, even to as accessible a Middle English as Chaucer’s, is difficult to negotiate for those outside of relevant fields. Similarly, access to useful editions of such texts, while eased in part through electronic means, is still not certain. On a more pragmatic level, program and department administrators, themselves not likely to be medievalists, may well react adversely to the presentation of texts in medieval languages to those who are not specializing in the study thereof. Struggling against such concerns may well be worth doing — for those whose positions are secure. For those who, like me, are members of the new faculty majority, holding contingent positions, such a struggle is likely to be counterproductive. Better, then, to rely on scholarship in modern English when teaching a technical writing class than to try to bring in the medieval itself, but even such a measure helps.

**Conclusion**

There are other classes medievalists among the expanding precariat may be asked to teach, and they will require other methods for incorporating strains of the medieval into the harmonies

they promote. Even in the kinds of classes discussed above, there may be differences of circumstance that prevent the teaching practices detailed above from working well. But perhaps even in such cases, they may offer some suggestion about how those among the new faculty majority can do something to keep their classes embedded in the old-school work they have studied.