The Ballad of the Lone Medievalist

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Interdisciplinary/Team Teaching and the Lone Medievalist

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Being the only medievalist on one’s campus can be lonely, not because one’s colleagues are unwelcoming or uncollegial, but because the language of our intellectual passion is missing from campus. It’s not merely that those around us are not reading the same journals or attending the same conferences that we enjoy, but that their very definition of medieval is likely to be far removed from what we actually study, given medievalism’s powerful influence on the portrayal of the Middle Ages in contemporary literature, film, and pop culture. Moreover, when it comes to the humanities, current political forces, with their emphases on the practicality of a college degree, are far more likely to promote the study of modern languages, politics, and religion than their medieval cousins, reaching across cultures geographically, but less often temporally. As a result, the lone medievalist may come to feel isolated, and even unappreciated, regardless of his or her actual rank or relationships with fellow faculty.

One solution to this isolation is to reach out through team-teaching, particularly interdisciplinary team teaching. Over the last few decades, studies have consistently shown that creative, energetic interdisciplinary team-teaching can produce improved student learning outcomes, as well as a positive intro-
duction to the values of a liberal arts education.\(^1\) Moreover, the connections formed through interdisciplinary team-teaching can be brought to bear on our own research, as medieval studies itself constantly embraces new theoretical approaches from a wide range of disciplines.\(^2\)

Non-medievalists may find this claim dubious, presuming that most of a medievalist’s expertise is not only archaic, but also esoteric. What, one might wonder, has a medievalist to contribute to a biology or accounting course? Of course, the answer partially lies in the nature of a medievalist’s education. Regardless of our specific discipline, the alterity of the Middle Ages demands that medievalists spend time learning about its material and philosophical landscape, its economics as well as its religions, and its iconography as well as its languages. To explore even a small part of our field requires us to push past disciplinary boundaries or risk making gross errors in plausibility and fact. Evidence may be found most dramatically in the “What Every Medievalist Should Know” lists originally constructed by James W. Marchand in the 1990s and distributed on the Medieval Texts – Philology Codicology and Technology listserv (MEDTEXTL).\(^3\) Marchand describes these lists as “meant for the beginning-to-semi-advanced graduate student,”\(^4\) and they are a bibliography for beginning medievalists encompassing music, science, rhetoric, art, literature, history...well, it is an enor-

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2 See, for example, the importance of environmental studies in producing the ecocritical approaches to medieval studies in the work of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Lisa J. Kiser, or Lesley Kordecki.


mous list, added to over the years by other listserv participants. Marchand himself was a German professor, but that is a fact that would be impossible to deduce from the list itself. To one who studies the Middle Ages, a single discipline is never enough.

As a result, then, of the interdisciplinary nature of medieval studies, the lone medievalist is well prepared to make intellectual connections with scholars throughout a college or university. As the lone medievalist at Wofford College, a small, private liberal arts college in Spartanburg, South Carolina, I have found ample opportunity to collaborate with my colleagues across campus, specifically through two important programs at the college: the interim term and the interdisciplinary learning communities.

Wofford operates on a calendar consisting of two thirteen-week semesters interrupted by a four-week session each January referred to as interim. Created in the 1960s, Wofford’s interim “permits and encourages teachers and students to explore the new and untried, and in doing so to run risks that could not be justified in the semesters,” and is therefore a perfect venue for a medievalist to create team-taught courses with non-medievalists. In January 2000, I had my first experience with such a course. Jameica Hill, from the Department of Chemistry, and I team-taught an interim course titled, Weird Science: A History of Science and Pseudoscience, in which we explored scientific theories from the ancient world through the nineteenth century. Topics included Ancient Egyptian astronomy, Babylonian mathematics, Islamic alchemy and astronomy from the Middle Ages, and eventually eugenics, spiritualism and telekinesis. Of course, to make sense of these bodies of knowledge, we addressed not only technological innovation, but also economics, religion, and politics. The students in this class, as in most interim courses, came from many different majors and included both first-year students and juniors and seniors. They were enthusiastic and

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5 I should note that Caroline A. Mark, formerly Caroline A. Cunningham, of the Department of Modern Languages at Wofford, was also trained as a medievalist; however, she currently defines herself as generalist.

refreshingly willing to suspend what they thought they knew about the universe and imagine it defined by ideas and cultures with which they had little familiarity. As a younger professor and someone new to Wofford, I found this class invaluable to my growing understanding both of our student population and of the challenges and skills of my colleagues in the sciences. Moreover, as we explained and illustrated long-supplanted ideas about the cosmos, we were reminded of just how compelling some of them could be.

Over the past fifteen years, I have continued to team-teach the interim course when I get the chance. I have taught a course on the works and influence of J.R.R. Tolkien with a psychology professor and a course on puppetry with a post-colonialist. I’ve taken groups of students on a cultural tour of Ireland with an expert in modern literature and a trip to Prague with a history professor and expert on the Cold War. Each of these experiences has allowed me not only to offer my expertise on medieval culture and literature to my students and colleagues, but it has stretched my own intellectual horizons, prodding me to think about the structure of the medieval romance in relation to theories of narrative from neuroscience or about what eco-feminist theory can reveal about the landscape of Avalon. Moreover, I’ve been able to make connections outside of Wofford, not only on our European trips, but among the arts community in Spartanburg, when, for example, I helped teach a course in pottery designed by one of our neuroscientists, who went on leave, and team-taught with local artist Ann Gleason at Spartanburg’s Chapman Cultural Center. It is difficult to underestimate the value of these connections, particularly at a small college: the more I know about what my colleagues do, on and off-campus, the more effectively we can advocate for one another, support one another, and assist one another in both teaching and research.

Not long after I received tenure at Wofford, we began a program to encourage the creation of learning communities during the regular semesters. Under this program, two courses would be linked by a common theme, and students would take both courses as a block. Given the difficulties of scheduling, it wasn’t
possible for me to participate with my 300-level courses, but in the spring of 2011, Dr. Charlotte Knotts-Zides, a professor of mathematics, and I linked her course in first-year mathematics with my English 102 course in writing about fiction to create a learning community titled Math, Murder and Mystery. The courses combined practice in quantitative reasoning and the art of deduction with literary analysis and research skills. On first glance, it may not appear that my training as a medievalist contributed to the success of this project. On the contrary, however, my previous study of Chaucer, Boethius, and Jean de Meun is what prepared me to consider the connections between aesthetics and science and, specifically, between literature and mathematics. And watching our students struggle with and overcome their fear of mathematics, as well as Dr. Knotts-Zides’s patience in nudging them forward, inspired me to create more carefully scaffolded assignments. Just as she encourages students to practice simple and then more complex problems, using repetition and reinforcement to gain the skills demanded by her discipline, I’ve created a set of four interlocking exercises for learning citation methods that precede the first paper assignment in my current 102 classes, an approach that has not only improved my students’ skills, but has reduced their anxiety in learning them.

Not everyone is comfortable with the idea of opening one’s course to a second professor; it necessarily requires the surrender of some autonomy in the classroom, and I myself highly value that autonomy, since it speaks of respect and confidence in the skill and dedication of faculty to the art of teaching. Nevertheless, each of my experiences team-teaching at Wofford has been of long-term benefit, both for my students and for me. Unfortunately, there are forces in academia that discourage this kind of experimentation. Campuses with rising enrollments but fewer faculty hires find it difficult to justify the supposed inefficiency of assigning two professors to a single course, as Wofford has done for many interim classes, and we may find it a serious logistical challenge to link two courses and persuade students of the benefits of signing up for both. Moreover, in a time of budget constraints, money or course release for course develop-
ment may be difficult to find, and many faculty may consider team-teaching an ethically dubious practice if it increases the number of adjunct appointments on campus. And the assessment movement, which was just beginning when I was hired at Wofford, can, if handled badly, turn creative pedagogical experimentation into a nightmarish stream of paperwork.

Nevertheless, team-teaching, particularly interdisciplinary team-teaching, has allowed me in particular to connect with colleagues from disparate fields of study, improve my own teaching, and explore intellectual realms that I might avoid if I had a medieval studies program on campus to encourage a more narrow and demanding concentration on my own speciality. I have not become a generalist at Wofford; I still teach and conduct research in my own field, but I think my understanding of academia as a whole is both broadened and deepened by stretching outside of that field when I have the opportunity.