Getting Medieval: Open Access and Networked Pedagogy

Suzanne Akbari
s.akbari@utoronto.ca
University of Toronto, Canada

Alexandra Bolintineanu
alexandrabolintineanu@gmail.com
University of Toronto, Canada

Getting Medieval: The Many Middle Ages is an undergraduate course, a digitally-inflected introduction to the global Middle Ages. *Getting Medieval* functions as an experiment in networked pedagogy, drawing on the expertise of faculty researchers, curators, and digital scholarship specialists. Students read medieval texts, handle related medieval artifacts from the University's special collections, and curate digital collections and exhibits that bring together texts, artifacts, and digital repositories from around the world. Students also attend biweekly guest lectures by faculty researchers and cultural heritage professionals. Our course is predicated on open access--to a wider Middle Ages than the traditional western European canon reveals; to open-source, open-access platforms for public scholarship and digital collections; to a technical infrastructure open to members of the university community; and to the fragile artifacts of the medieval past from the vaults of local cultural heritage institutions.

We conceived the course as a series of moments in time and space, moments defined by literary texts and related physical objects—when possible, objects from the University of Toronto's Malcove Collection, which students can visit in person. For example, the unit on Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales invited students into fourteenth-century England, along the road from London to Canterbury. Students learned about medieval pilgrimage and religious practices around relics. In this context, they encountered Chaucer's pilgrims—and especially the false-relic-peddling Pardoner. And in this context, too, they touched and handled a twelfth-century French reliquary from the University of Toronto's Art Centre. The course focuses on a wide variety of times, places, and literary texts, beyond the traditional western European focus of Medieval Studies: from eighth century Anglo-Saxon England and the Old English *Beowulf* to tenth century medieval Spain and the interweaving of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian theological and poetic traditions in the region of Al-Andalus; from the eleventh-century Japanese imperial court and Murasaki Shikibu's courtly *Tale of Genji* to the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman court and the lays of Marie de France; from the cultural crossroads of the Ethiopian capital of Axum in the thirteenth century to the cultural crossroads of the French capital of Paris in the fourteenth; from the East-West journeys of Asian, Middle-Eastern, and European travelers along the Silk Road, to the journey of Geoffrey Chaucer's pilgrims from London to Canterbury. To do these varied traditions justice, we invited guest speakers to introduce their research. In one class, students listened to an Old English lexicographer talk about linguistic archaeology at the Dictionary of Old English. In another, they learned about a digital collection of medieval Tibetan letters, and they turned the pages of a twentieth-century Tibetan book which maintains medieval book forms. In yet another, students experienced a lecture that turned into a performance of medieval drama. The lectures provide access not only to the usual undergraduate curriculum, but to a range of faculty-led research projects that showcase the range of Medieval Studies at Toronto.

The digital inflection of the course is twofold. First, students examine how the times, places, texts, and things we study are represented in digital projects and repositories, from the Dictionary of Old English to the International Dunhuang Project. Second, students are invited to create public-facing scholarship themselves: After they visit the secure storage spaces of the Malcove Collection and receive the curator's guidance on the care, handling, and cultural context of artifacts, students handle medieval artifacts; study them in the context of our local collection and of digital repositories around the world; and produce a public, curated digital collection and exhibit, linking the artifact to the course's thematics, in the open-source content management platform Omeka. In so doing, students practice close reading and slow looking, examining an object in cultural and literary contexts. They also learn about digital collections—from the digitization of materials to data curation and digital preservation—and about scholarly communication possibilities in the digital age.

We designed our digital assignments with access in mind. The students' initial contact with the secure

vaults of the Malcove Collection offered hands-on, immediate, physical access to the artifacts—and included a discussion on the kinds of information such access provides, information unavailable in a digital medium. The software platform Omeka itself is free, open-source, with significant traction in DH pedagogy. Our hosted Omeka instances allow students to complete the work even if they only have access to public university computers. Our tutorials guide students through the work in interactive workshops conducted in university computer laboratories, ensuring that students without a laptop, or without prior technical experience, are able to complete their work in a supportive environment, with help close at hand. But this level of access requires significant logistical work and infrastructure. Students have access to faculty research projects thanks to the Centre for Medieval Studies' network of scholars. Students are able to use university laboratories because we make arrangements in collaboration with digital scholarship librarians to provide access to this portion of UofToronto's computing infrastructure. Students are able to experience relevant artifacts from the Malcove collection so closely because of a course-long collaboration between its Collections Manager, Heather Pigat, and the course instructors.

Thus *Getting Medieval* functions as an experiment in networked pedagogy. Biweekly guest lectures, robustly integrated into the curriculum, invite a network of faculty researchers and cultural heritage professionals into the undergraduate classroom; and the open access requirements of our digital projects draw on the institution's physical and human infrastructure—from special collections of medieval objects to computing facilities; from curators to medievalists to digital scholarship specialists. As we invite our students on a time-travelling journey across the global Middle Ages, we rely on a network of guides to open points of access along the way.