

End-of-Course Reflections

Course: FWS 1101.102 – *The Briton's Britain: Constructing Medieval England*

Semester: Fall, 2016

Institution: Cornell University

Overall Impressions / Takeaways

- I was nervous about the assigned readings for this class. Because of page limitations, most FWS classes use a larger number of smaller readings. This class read only a few, long books. I was esp. nervous about Bede's *EC*, followed up immediately by Geoffrey of Monmouth's text.
 - It mostly worked well. There was some disagreement at the end of the semester about whether or not it was too much reading in the same books, but the class was more-or-less evenly split over which text might be trimmed down
- This class had one student who both enjoyed standing out and who often made strident, ideologically-driven pronouncements about the readings
 - The student actually made for a very good foil, and I enjoyed having this person in class. But I'm glad there was only one of her/him; having several people like this student in class could be difficult.
- Tying the historiographical approach of the text to issues of both space and ethnic identity proved a useful way of asking students to think about the texts together
- Using Anderson's *Imagined Communities* as the major piece of theoretical framing for the class worked well, but it would be good to find ways to bring in the rest of Anderson's ideas (beyond the first several chapters that we read)
- It is imperative that for the Zotero lesson students come to class having already installed and tested the program. It might be worth requiring then to go for help to a reference librarian

Things That Went Well

- Using *Transition to College Writing* worked well as a way to focus attention on issues of writing. These were not popular readings, but they provided students with a common vocabulary and a useful overview of writing for college
- Teaching Zotero instead of citation was highly successful. Students gained a tool that they can actually use in future non-humanities classes, and I got a semester of perfectly citations
- Requiring page or word counts for drafts meant that student review days were more productive
- Watching the BBC show about the Anglo-Saxon conquest in class worked well because we could stop it and talk about the narrative process of the film's arguments. In our discussions at the end of the semester, many of the students pointed to this as the point when they first really started to grasp the idea that history truth is constructed and argumentative, rather than absolute.

Things That Need Improvement

- I'm not wholly sold on the first essay question, asking students to define history. It has some advantages in that it can be done in the first week, and it shows whether students are

thinking about history as the events of the past, or the accounting of those events. It is, however, too open ended.

- I needed to push back harder, earlier, against the use of “bias” as a category for assessing medieval historical texts. It is too easy a crutch
 - Also, part of the work of the class should be in getting students to the point of understanding all historical writing to be socially constructed, and, therefore, biased in some way or another
- There were three young women in the class who sat with each other and almost never participated in class discussion. I did not do a good enough job of separating them out via active learning techniques and making them engage more readily with the rest of their peers

Problems

- No major problems

Thoughts on Specific Lessons

- The lesson asking them to try to account for the history of a 5-second period of time was useful for demonstrating the futility of thinking that one could write a complete and unbiased history
- The lesson on blog writing gave students a better sense for the importance of consistency in markers of formality, both in writing their own work and in assessing others’