

## End-of-Course Reflections

**Course:** FWS 1101.102 – *Where the World Ends: Foundations of Medieval Geographies*

**Semester:** Fall, 2015

**Institution:** Cornell University

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### **Overall Impressions / Takeaways**

- This has been my favorite class to teach...excellent engagement and a strong, curious group of students
- I was worried somewhat about the readings, esp. *Timaeus*, but the class handled it well (mostly)
- This class was primarily engineering students, and they had a particular interest in assessing materials in a right/wrong framework
  - Makes sense for engineers, but it is problematic for taking medieval conceptions of geography seriously
- Communication with across campus with figures like coaches is highly important; my interactions with the wrestling coach reinforced the value of establishing relationships that go beyond complaining about student athletes
- I employed on more active learning, and kinetic learning, strategies and techniques this semester, to good effect.
  - Time spent on setting up and explaining things like jigsaws early in the semester pay dividends later on
- I had a student this semester who began to miss class, and eventually revealed that s/he was dealing with serious emotional issues. After several conversations of encouragement, I convinced the student to seek help through Health Services. The student dropped the class, but found the counselors and the University's services of great help.
  - Approachability pays dividends for students in ways that are sometimes unrelated to classroom work

### **Things That Went Well**

- The essay assignment that asks them to respond to a classmate's previous essay worked very well. I was concerned that, knowing that their response would be publicly available to the class on Blackboard, that they would either be too critical, or not critical enough. Almost all took it seriously.
- The essay prompt asking them to describe a theoretical Cornell was a great opportunity for them to show range of both imagination and research.
- The final research project was generally more fruitful than last year, in part because of added time spent on issues of researching maps

### **Things That Need Improvement**

- I introduced issues of projection and maps-as-argument too late in the semester. I put it at the start of the section on maps, but (for this class, at least) it would have been much better to have started the semester by trying to upset their faith in a solid geographic model

- Along those lines, end of semester evaluations showed that students did not grasp the connection between the geography described in Genesis or Mandeville's *Travels* as being the same thing as modern conceptions of geography
- I need to set up the "Imagined Cornell Geography" essay better. This semester I came up with the idea while on my way to class to give them a different essay altogether, so the scaffolding was not sufficient for some students

### **Problems**

- No major problems

### **Thoughts on Specific Lessons**

- The series of lessons where I asked students, in groups, to diagram the world as they could reconstruct it from the texts that they had read worked well. I need to give it a bit more time, in order to talk about everyone's drawings.
  - It would be nice, also, to make some sort of portfolio from the work
- The informal essays prompting students to use only "to be" or the passive voice continue to be among their favorites (or at least, among the lessons that they consider most effective) in our end of semester discussion.