

Teaching Medieval Studies with a Modern Learning Management System: Top Hat in a Medieval Seminar

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The malaise in Medieval Studies can no longer be overlooked. Apart from some select universities in North America, the number of students who actually learn any medieval language, apart from Latin, which ought to be a must at any rate, is steadily declining. There is no longer any noticeable interest among university administrations to support research and teaching of medieval culture. In a world of consumerism and corporatization, growing numbers of students opt for professional training instead of education. If the Humanities are in danger, if History as a subject matter is at risk, then Medieval Studies faces maybe some of its highest hurdles at the current stage and age. Faculty positions in English, Spanish, French, Art History, German, and so forth, focused on the pre-modern world, are no longer filled, and the drum-beat of postmodernity is getting louder by the day, if not the hour. Hip hop is more important than solid philology; the study of consumerism pushes aside the study of medieval cathedrals, to formulate the apocalyptic vision in a little overdramatized fashion.

Whole centuries of cultural and literary history are at risk simply to disappear from public view, and universities at large seem to be fixated on the emerging Industry 4.0, with its robotization and computerization. STEM drowns out STEAM, i.e., the inclusion of the arts and the humanities within the context of advanced education at the college level. By the same token, Business, Marketing, Engineering, Law, Medicine, and many different Science fields seem to attract ever more students because they allegedly promise a more successful transition after graduation into the professional field. How could then the study of the Middle Ages hold its own in a universe determined by daunting presentism? (Classen 2012a; Classen 2016; Classen 2018a; Classen 2018b). What is the relevance of history for us today, and in the near future? (Hunt; MacMullen), and can we really afford to ignore the past at a time of an accelerating paradigm shift?

Subsequently, I will first outline how the decline in Medieval Studies could be sustained and reversed by a selection of different course topics moving us outside of the traditional disciplinary limitations. Secondly, I will examine the properties of the LMS Top Hat from a practical, pedagogical, and methodological perspective. Thirdly, drawing from both critical points, I will conclude with reflections on how all this might offer itself for the innovation, reinvigoration, or re-energization of teaching the Middle Ages in the postmodern classroom. The argument to be developed here does not aim at competing more aggressively with other cultural time periods (classical antiquity, the Baroque, Enlightenment, etc.), but at the consolidation and self-respect of Medieval Studies as a viable, productive, meaningful, and future-oriented field of study, and this in the twenty-first century (cf. *Teaching Beowulf*; Classen 2015).

In a series of articles, I have endeavored over the years to outline strategies how to support Medieval Studies, how to justify them both to our students and to the public from a philosophical, ethical, spiritual, moral, or cultural-historical perspective (most recently, Classen 2019). Idealistically speaking, there would not be any reason to worry about the teaching of that past culture today because it offers an infinitude of highly significant insights, understanding, spiritual visions, aesthetic, ethical, moral, and religious perspectives that undoubtedly would appeal to the present student generation and the public if they would be willing to be exposed to that world in theoretical and practical terms.

Curiously, if we consider the huge domain of modern video games, card games, practical games (Society of Creative Anachronism), music, movies, novels, and the like, we would have to reach the very opposite conclusions concerning the relevance of that past world (Moberly and Moberly). The Middle Ages are more 'in' than maybe ever before, but all that popularity determined by the entertainment value does not translate into actual academic engagement both in terms of teaching and research.

The purpose of this paper, however, is not to reiterate the jeremiads of the past and to wallow in our own misery. There are many different factors to be considered in assessing the current conditions of Medieval Studies, some of which we as individuals can influence and determine, while others are far beyond our reach. Here I want to examine very practical, pedagogical strategies and technical tools that can be easily utilized by any teacher dedicated to

medieval culture, as long as s/he is allowed to teach that subject matter in the first place, whether in French and Italian Studies, in Spanish and Portuguese Studies, in German Studies, or any other language department, in History or Anthropology, Art History or Music History.

We can rest assured that medieval research by itself continues to be in relatively stable conditions, considering the wealth, if not flood, of modern studies published as monographs, edited volumes, or articles. There is also a growing number of important blog sites, a variety of specific sites on social media, and other outlets focused on the Middle Ages. The publishers of scholarly books continue to produce an amazing number of titles, as the review sections in relevant journals indicate, such as *The Medieval Review*, *Speculum*, *Mediaevistik*, or *Studi medievali*. The pertinent symposia and conferences such as in Kalamazoo, MI, and Leeds, UK, might face a slight decline, but they are still highly attractive and bring together huge numbers of medievalists, young and old, from all over the world. In North America, there are still relatively many universities that house Centers dedicated to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance or the early modern age at large (<http://www.medievalists.net/2013/08/medieval-studies-programs-in-the-united-states/>). Many of the major, but also smaller libraries across the country and elsewhere have not particularly reduced their efforts in collecting significant titles in the pre-modern world (editions, translations, studies).

Moreover, the massive digitization of medieval manuscripts, incunabula, and early modern prints easily confirms that modern technology has actually been a boon for Medieval Studies, often putting them in the forefront of the Digital Humanities. The number of scholarly journals dedicated to the Middle Ages has not declined; and those that shut down were replaced by others. All this should actually bode well for the teaching of the Middle Ages at least on the college level, within research, and in major libraries, many of which are working hard at making available massive amounts of medieval manuscripts, incunabula, and early modern prints to scholars all over the world, both free of access or for a charge (<http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/>; <http://faculty.arts.ubc.ca/sechard/512digms.htm>; <https://digitalmedievalist.wordpress.com/>; <http://sites.nd.edu/manuscript-studies/category/the-profession/the-future-of-the-humanities/>).

Before we proceed to examine how to promote the teaching of medieval topics, however, let us remember one of the fundamental truths of all teaching at all school levels. Ultimately, what matters is not so much the content, but the teaching and learning environment, the

instructor, and personal dedication to teaching itself. An enthusiastic and passionate teacher can bring any subject matter to life (see the brilliant movie of a highly motivated math teacher, “Stand and Deliver,” 1988; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stand_and_Deliver). Of course, the current student generation has changed considerably, and hence also the expectations of students, teachers, parents, and administrators, and the preparation on the side of students have often fallen by the wayside. Fundamental texts such as the Bible or many of the Greek and Roman classics are no longer part of the standard reading lists at high schools or in undergraduate classes, not even to mention such critically important works by St. Augustine, Boethius, Bede, Macrobius, or Martianus Capella. Art history and philosophy have often abandoned their previous focus on the pre-modern world; and linguistic skills are dramatically reduced, preventing most students from reading the original texts (*Aspects*; Classen 2012b). We can no longer assume that freshmen (first year students) have the standard knowledge in history or philosophy as we were used to in the past, which requires us to pursue fresh approaches and lowering the expectations at least in measured steps in order to build up a new cohort of future students who will appreciate both old and new coping strategies in the field of Medieval Studies and are inspired by the vast range of opportunities provided by any investigation of medieval culture, literature, the arts, or religion relevant for us today.

Subsequently I want to examine one peculiar and rich approach to the Middle Ages at least in classes offered at the college level, based on many years of ever-changing experiences. Those changes were the result of constantly emerging challenges and new administrative conditions, so I would like to claim that teaching medieval literature, philosophy, religion, or art history today constitutes not a barrier, a losing battle, but a fantastic opportunity, and this also for the youngest generation, commonly equipped with sophisticated and powerful smartphones but sometimes with little smarts (pardon my French!). Much depends on the methodology, the teaching technology, the teaching materials or texts, and of course, on the personal relationship between students and instructor, not to forget the interactions among the students as a class.

Here I want to introduce and examine the Learning Management System (LMS) produced by a Canadian company, Top Hat (<https://TopHat.com/>), founded by Mike Silagadze and Mohsen Shahini in Waterloo, Ontario, in 2009, and consider how it has helped deeply to modernize, innovate, and transform the traditional class on medieval literature into a seminar in

which students from the twenty-first century happily joined me in my efforts to bring the medieval world to life in a meaningful and relevant manner. I myself was introduced to their software about four years ago and have used their system ever since with ever better results, which has been a boon for Medieval Studies, at least within the framework of some of my courses. First, here a quick overview of courses where I have used Top Hat with great success. As I will argue, the sophisticated combination of the latest teaching technology with an innovative concept of how to teach the Middle Ages proves to be highly attractive and makes courses with medieval themes rather appealing, especially today in a postmodern environment.

Those courses I am offering within the General Education program at the University of Arizona represent not simply what I am required to teach, but much more what I am actually researching parallel to teaching, just as in the case of this article. Instead of pursuing a narrow thematic topic, derived from a selection of German literary texts, these courses address the following, rather diverse themes. Tier One: Eroticism and Love in the Middle Ages; Tier Two: Medieval Answers to Modern Problems; Tier Three: Toleration and Tolerance in the Middle Ages; also Tier Three: The Enigmatic Middle Ages; also Tier Three: War, Death, and the Hero in Medieval Literature; also Tier Three: Religion in German Culture.

Some of those are more focused on literary texts, others take a broader view and include philosophy (Boethius, John of Salisbury, Nicholas of Cusa) and religion (St. Francis, Meister Eckhart), and some pursue a more pragmatic path in cultural-historical terms. Students who enroll in any of these courses come from many different disciplines and need the credits to fulfill their General Education requirements. Several central and strategic questions present themselves almost automatically: What makes these courses attractive? How can one make these courses meaningful, relevant, and stimulating? How can one utilize such courses to address the fundamental concerns pursued by the General Education program? In other words, how can we appeal to the administrators who are ultimately in charge of all course offerings, and convince them that also classes dedicated to the pre-modern world are of critical relevance for the present student generation? And, how can a focus on the Middle Ages address the fundamental concerns that are supposed to be addressed in a General Education course?

While in previous years I would have offered a range of rather traditional answers (history, cultural awareness, literature, hence basic education in the Humanities), I increasingly

tend to refer to Top Hat initially as the essential technological tool that allows me to achieve a host of more broadly conceived, but perhaps also more appealing goals that combine past with modern ideals and objectives in a highly pragmatic fashion. Those pertain, for instance, to the development of communication skills; the ability to express oneself in writing; to promote the core strength of debating issues; and only then follow the usual outcome strategies: knowledge of the Middle Ages, awareness of major medieval literature, and familiarity with outstanding medieval philosophers, theologians, artists, and poets. In a way, this approach mimics the medieval model of teaching the *trivium* first, before accepting students on the higher level, turning to the *quadrivium*.

Although the software offered by Top Hat is gaining in public respect, still a vast majority of my colleagues, whether in Marketing, Engineering, Biochemistry, or History are either not aware of it or do not want to experiment with this new LMS; it is, however, one of the best LMSs I have encountered so far, and it is certainly highly valuable for classes on the Middle Ages as well. Top Hat itself boasts on their webpage: “Top Hat is now used at 75 percent of the top 1,000 leading colleges and universities in North America, with millions of students learning on our teaching platform” (<https://tophat.com/company/top-hat-story/>). However, based on my own experiences with undergraduate and graduate students and faculty across the country and across the disciplines, the rate of familiarity with Top Hat and the willingness to invest in their software as an LMS is considerably lower, though unjustifiably so.

What can one do with Top Hat? The range of possible functions is quite extensive, and I myself cannot claim to be familiar with all of them, but every semester I discover new features and learn along with the support staff of Top Hat. On their webpage they have a chat function that grants the user the option to communicate easily and quickly with one of the staff persons in case of problems or difficulties.

First, Top Hat allows the instructor to take attendance, either just once, or as many times as one likes per class session. I normally assign 10% to attendance overall for the entire semester, so the actual number produced is then proportionately translated. This method thus makes it possible to reward students when they attend even at times when most others skip class to go home early for Thanksgiving, for instance. If a group of students leaves early, I can simply take attendance again and thus reward those who sit through the entire class.

More important, with the help of Top Hat I can check every day when the class meets whether students have done their homework or not. One can ask specific questions about a name, a date, a text title, a genre, etc. This might be tricky at times if the programmed answer then slightly deviates from the answers submitted by students. However, here we face immediately a productive alternative because if students mention their own, actually valid, answers for which they did not get points, the difference can be discussed. If students produce reasonable arguments justifying a slightly different answer (with or without an article, lower or capital letters), I can then quickly insert that into the system and thus make it valid as well. Alternatively, a multi-choice system can be utilized, which actually serves well for mid-terms, finals, or other types of exams. These kinds of questions can be very useful especially in scientific fields. The multiple-choice questions can consist of thoughtful statements and make students reflect more in depth about the meaning of a text or idea.

For a class in the Humanities, a different format proves to be highly productive. Both the text selection and my approach to teaching those courses on medieval literature and culture invite debate about specific points. Examining the *lais* by Marie de France, for instance, especially “Bisclavret,” we easily run into the thorny issue whether the wife or the husband are to be condemned, criticized, blamed, or rejected (ed. Waters). How are we to evaluate the decision by Eliduc’s wife in the eponymous *lai* when she voluntarily withdraws from her marriage so that her husband can marry his new love? Marie was a powerful poet who deserves our greatest respect, but not so much because she might have provided black and white comments about her male and female characters (Kinoshita and McCracken). Instead, there is always much room for debate, but normally many students are either too shy to engage in such a debate with their peers, or they resist the invitation to engage with the instructor. However, literary texts serve essentially not only to convey, for example, cultural or religious knowledge, but instead they also, and much more critically, constitute narrative platforms to explore the infinitude of human experiences, sentiments, problems, and other issues, and this mostly through a historical lens.

Ideally, as I commonly suggest to my students, the literary analysis ultimately leads to the exploration of the eight C’s: communication, commitment, community, compassion, collaboration, cooperation, courage, and compromise. Pursuing a medieval perspective proves to be highly successful in that regard, whether we turn to Don Juan Manuel’s *El Conde Lucanor*

(1332) or to Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1350). Without fully implementing the principles of the flipped classroom, an effective and reliable LMS can achieve the transformation of the traditional model of teaching into more collaborative learning situation.

Top Hat offers the almost perfect solution, as far as I can tell. The system contains the option to present questions for which students earn only participation points, whereas points for correctness are not given. I tend to introduce the issue, test students' familiarity with the text, and then post the debate question. There are at least two options: students can answer and be identifiable by name, or they can answer anonymously. If there is no danger of losing points if the answer is incorrect, the instructor can easily go through all answers as they are projected on the screen and choose several for a critical examination by the entire class.

Students know that their statements are visible to the entire class, so there is a natural effort to provide the best possible answer in writing. Those statements can then be read out aloud, either by the author or by the instructor, and the entire class is subsequently invited to reflect upon the validity of that statement. Top Hat archives all those postings, which allows both students and the instructor to go back and review what had taken place in class.

Of course, all this requires that every student has access to the internet. But they can use whatever equipment they possess or borrowed from the university to achieve that goal, without the need for anyone to purchase a new equipment. Other LMS's require the acquisition of a clicker, for instance, or some other electronic tools which often do not live up to our expectations. But in contrast to all other computer programs, as far as I know, Top Hat has proven to be most reliable, robust, self-explanatory, and transparent. The instructor can always go back into the system and correct the expected answer, add an additional answer, and can thus respond to the students' input in an honest, trustworthy fashion.

The instructor is also invited to post a question about the entire course and the success rate as perceived by the students, with the answers provided anonymously. This makes available the opportunity to adjust the course even in mid-term or to receive positive feedback. Once I also experienced a difficult technical situation in one of my last classes when the emphasis on Top Hat was the highest, with a maximum of points which students could earn. The classroom projector failed, and the technicians could not help. But not to despair, I inquired whether all

students were connected with the internet, and hence with Top Hat. Indeed, that was the case, so the problem was solved and we could proceed with the debates, questions, and comments.

One of the additional positive side effects with this LMS proves to be that students are constantly asked to use their smartphones, laptops, or other gadgets to deal with questions that are at stake in the class and write about the topic being discussed. The very common distraction through those electronic equipment is thus extensively minimized because they are suddenly functionalized as teaching tools. This also means that those students who are too shy to participate actively in the class are thus encouraged to do so by themselves without any embarrassment. The writing assignments have thus turned into empowerment mechanisms for all those students who are not willing to speak up in class.

The overall outcome has regularly been that students engage much more intensively with the teaching material and are constantly encouraged to write about it in a critical fashion. These short statements posted online often proved to be good theses statements, which allowed me to illustrate very specifically what a good example would look like. Requesting regular feedback from the students via Top Hat dramatically increased their ability to express themselves critically, cogently, and in a more sophisticated manner. When I polled the students about the impact of this LMS on their own learning experiences, I got, first of all, practically 100% approval that Top Hat had helped them significantly in my course and that they expected to receive at least a B, if not an A.

Second, the students provided most meaningful comments. Here are a few examples: 1. "What helped me is the semi anonymous nature of Tophat can make it easier to discuss some of the points of the texts. Because it is sometimes difficult for me to formulate thesis statements because I feel like I sometimes stating the obvious or what I think is obvious." 2. "I think tophat was useful to help me write because it pushed me to give a clear and condense answers." 3. "Yes, when it comes discussion, we get to see multiple perspectives." 4. "Yes, tophat has been a good platform for me to express my opinions about certain questions and allows me to read what other people believe." 5. "Yes Tophat has helped to improve my writing. It helps me generate thoughts better." 6. "I think that it has helped me a lot. One, because you know that other people are going to see your work. Two, because the questions encourage deeper thinking. Even though you are being prompted, you have to come up with your own ideas. You have to use more

independent thinking.” 7. “It has helped me because it really makes me think about what i am going to say. I can’t say something dumb because other people can see it.” 8. “I would say Tophat has been very beneficial when it comes to my writing. It helps generate thoughts for discussion which help get your point across whatever it may be. It also generates deeper thought which makes you further understand what you are talking about. It also helps writing clearly and direct.” 9. “I think that practicing writing our ideas down several times a class had helped our writing. I think that just talking about it doesn't really make you come up with an exact idea, but if you're writing you have to have an idea and defend it.” 10. “Yes it has. It has forced me to formulate an answer I can present to the class which requires a higher level of writing.” Not everyone was just as enthusiastic, some students opined that we could have used a similar LMS on D2L or another platform, while others believed that their writing was already good enough. Overall, however, the outcome speaks for itself.

There are also other features that deserve to be mentioned. One can use Top Hat to assign homework questions, timed specifically to impose work discipline. I have also used this LMS for exams, resorting to multiple-choice questions, which sometimes do not work out so well for more discriminating student. However, since students also have to write critical papers and have to produce a semester project, those shortcomings are easily compensated.

Finally, a few words about this semester project, a portfolio. In my class “Medieval Answers to Modern Problems” we discuss many different kinds of texts from the Middle Ages, from Charlemagne’s *De capitulare villis* (ca. 805) to Nicholas of Cusa’s *De pace fidei* (1453), from Boethius’s *De consolatione philosophiae* (525) to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1370). Meister Eckhart is as much represented here as are Dante, Johann von Tepl, Christine de Pizan, Hartmann von Aue, Caesarius of Heisterbach, and St. Francis of Assisi (*Medieval Answers*). The variety of texts (all in English translation) facilitates the discussion of various fundamental issues concerning all of human life, here seen through a medieval lens. Students have to submit interpretive essays three times a semester, and then they are required to produce a portfolio on one of the texts by their own choice. In order to train them in bibliographical, art-historical, and analytical skills, they have to identify and reproduce an art object and a building from the same time period (e.g., in the case of Boethius, from ca. 525 C.E.). Then they need to identify the call

number (shelf number) of a manuscript containing that text in the original language. Subsequently they must produce two types of bibliographies, then select one article and summarize its finding critically.

If Top Hat might be too mechanical for some students, especially the use of multiple-choice questions, they have plenty of opportunities to engage with the reading material in a variety of fashions. Altogether, examination is de-emphasized, while essays, writing on Top Hat, and the portfolio assume center position. This would not quite be a flipped classroom, but the overall learning experience for the students proves to be outstanding. Here are a few statements posted anonymously at the end of week 10: 1. "These discussions have been very interesting in how we've been attempting to connect the distant past to the present. I think the both difficult and rewarding aspect of this class has been trying to decipher what these texts we have covered are trying to convey beyond the alien nature they have to us today. Overall, I think this course has been valuable in that it has let me directly look at sources of information that otherwise I wouldn't have done." 2. "There were a couple of instances where I have brought up this course over break to a couple of people including my parents. Our discussions in class are very interesting and it amazes me how we can learn things or at least see similar problems in today's society as we did hundred and thousands of years ago. We have learned how things still do happen that have happened over thousands of years and the messages we can learn from it is important. I see a lot of value in this course and really think the discussions help identifying problems we see today." 3. "Talking to my family about this course and our discussions has given me a unique perspective in looking at the modern world and how things haven't really changed. I have enjoyed the stories and I like that the class is a discussion so we can all express our ideas on how each piece speaks to us individually."

Again, not everyone expressed complete satisfaction, and some students were more critical, of course. Overall, however, there appeared to be universal agreement that the study of medieval texts by way of our modern perspectives, allows everyone to recognize or to discover powerful dimensions in human existence that simply never go away and constantly knock on our doors. Medieval literature or history are not simply dusty archival material, but profound challenges for our modern thinking, if we make a careful selection, choose meaningful literary texts or images, music or historical document, and combine the class discussion with the

intensive writing exercises through Top Hat (or similar online platforms, if available). The tool to assign timed homework online facilitates both the preparation for a new text and the deeper reflection on the class discussion *post factum*.

One negative flip side of Top Hat could easily be that students search too quickly for the right answer to a question on *Wikipedia* or other websites. But they often simply open the textbook and look for the right answer there because the web search proves to be too time consuming or useless. Instead of prohibiting this type of ‘cheating,’ often I decide to let it go or even give them the exact page number so that they finally look into the text after all and find the correct information there because the stakes in these quizzes are so low. Moreover, as we all know, literary analysis often depends on a very careful close-up reading of a passage, a verse, or simply a word. By posting questions on Top Hat, combining them with the reference where to find the passage under discussion, the ultimate goal is achieved, after all, because students thus are required to scour through the text and thus to identify the key word or phrase and thus begin to comprehend the importance of close reading.

As much as this course seems to fulfill a requirement in the history of literature only, the text materials often take the students into many different directions, investigating the meaning of happiness (Boethius), probing the conditions of women in the late Middle Ages (Christine de Pizan), wondering about the meaning of life in face of death (Johann von Tepl), or examining the comments about honor, treason, loyalty, friendship, and warrior ethics in the *Nibelungenlied*. Adding the alliterative romance of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, combining that with some of the verse narratives by Heinrich Kaufringer and the didactic tales by Caesarius von Heisterbach, creates a plethora of perspectives on life, both then *and* today. Economic, political, legal, and military issues also mattered centrally in the Middle Ages, so they come to the surface in that course as well. So, there is no question about the relevance of that world for us today, and hence of medieval literature or history for General Education today.

The employment of Top Hat integrates an intriguing technological component that offers diversion from the regular lectures, Power Point Presentations, and general discussions. Many students have confirmed that through this LMS they felt more encouraged to express themselves because they did not have to rush into making public oral statements and could calmly collect their thoughts and put them into writing. Top Hat thus becomes an intriguing equalizer because it

emboldens and supports particularly those students who mostly hesitate to speak up in public and it promotes also those who are more vocal and are then asked to formulate their thoughts in written words. The posting of answers on Top Hat facilitated the exchange among the students and made it possible for everyone to become more engaged in the class discussion.

Of course, Top Hat is not the panacea for all problems, since no technical tool can substitute for good teaching in personal terms. But the availability of this LMS certainly adds an innovative, invigorating dimension and indicates clearly that the study of the Middle Ages can easily be done by means of the latest teaching technology. Moreover, Top Hat does not lock students into a narrow and inflexible gridlock of questions and answers. The connection to the internet does not always work, of course; some students cannot afford to purchase the access to this software; and not every question posted online constitutes the most brilliant one. But there are various features that are equally accessible: word question, multiple choice, discussion, and even tournaments that would transform the class into competitive groups that all vie to win by way of finding the right answer or solving a problem.

As indicated above, we can approach the Middle Ages from many different perspectives, and each one might hold a significant answer for issues concerning us today, including tolerance, xenophobia, spirituality, rational explorations of the natural world, the erotic and sexual, war and heroic ethics, economic and political issues. Topics such as friendship, people and animals, individuals and the natural environment, weather and climate, medicine, astronomy and astrology, music and the aesthetic experience, etc. are all available when we investigate them through the lens of medieval documents. Top Hat proves to be an excellent ally in all our efforts to bring Medieval Studies into the twenty-first century, as students' comments and my practical observations from the instructor's perspective have richly and convincingly demonstrated.

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Appendix

Sample syllabus (leaving out all the required statements about policies, rules, opportunities, assistance, ethical standards, etc):

Ger / Hist 278 Medieval Answers to Modern Problems

GRADING: (100% total)

1. 2 in-class exams (10% for the first, 10% for the second exam = 20%): We will use the Tophat LMS, relying on multiple answer questions. The second exam will be more comprehensive, including the historical components once again.
2. 3 essays (6% for the first, 10% for the second, and 19% for the third) = 35%. Ca. 500 words for the first, 1200 words for the second essays, 1600 words for the third, 2 pt. spacing, font 12 pts. Times Roman, margin 1" on all sides. Always write down on the top right: your name, student ID, and word count. For rubrics, see below.
3. Portfolio: 25%. See below (100 points)
4. Attendance (10%) and Participation (10%): total of 20% (checked with Top Hat)

CLASS SCHEDULE:

Jan. 10, 2019: First Day of Class: Welcome and Introduction. 20

Let us discuss specifically what 5 of the most prevalent topics have always been for people throughout time. These will then be dealt with throughout the class looking at them through a variety of lenses

Jan. 15: We read the introductory text by Emily Amt and Classen: Historical framework, social structure, economic conditions

Jan. 17: Continuation with Amt/Classen: literature, religion, education, Jewish-Christian relations

Questions for group work

Jan. 22: Marie de France: "Guigemar," "Bislavret"

Jan. 24: Marie de France: "Equitan," "The Two Lovers"

Jan. 29: Marie de France: "Eliduc," "Les Fresne"

Jan. 31: Father-Son Conflict, Loyalty, Honor, Death

The Song of Hildebrand (55-56)

Feb. 5: 1st exam: multiple choice questions reg. the historical time frame, Marie de France, *Hildebrandslied*, all on tophat

Feb. 7: Hildebrand, cont., and, for a contrast, Kaufringer, no. 21

Feb. 12: We begin with our preparations for the portfolio. Please go to the library and bring a single-authored book on some of the texts with you to class today. Everyone with a name ending on A-C: Boethius (or medieval philosophy); ending on D-G: *Nibelungenlied*; ending on H-N: Marie de France; ending on O-R: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; S-T: Abelard, ending on U-W: Heinrich Kaufringer; ending on X-Z: Dante. Try to find a monograph of recent vintage (not prior to 1970, or so). We'll read for today: *Nibelungenlied*: 1-15

Feb. 14: *Nibelungenlied*: 16-22

Feb. 19: *Nibelungenlied*: 23-30

Feb. 21: *Nibelungenlied*: 31-39

Feb. 26: 1st essay due in class: write either on Marie de France, *Hildebrandslied*, or *Nibelungenlied*. I can give you these options, or you can choose your own. Please pay attention to the instructions above.

Feb. 28: Kaufringer: "The Cowardly Husband." Then: "Our Lady's Tumbler." As background, if you wish, see, for instance, Le Thionet (photos) Le Thionet (video I, with speaker) (video II, only music in the background) (video III, with Gregorian chant). You may want to read this article: A. Classen, "The Human Quest for Happiness and Meaning" in *Athens Journal of Humanities and Meaning*, 5:2 (2018): 179-206 (<http://www.athensjournals.gr/humanities/2018-5-2-3-Classen.pdf>).

Spring break March 2-10

March 12: Final discussion of the "Tumbler." Then: Introduction to Boethius

March 14: Boethius, Book I.

Homework assignment: Find a recent critical study on Boethius, either online (in a journal) or in the library (paper copy), read it and summarize it critically. Please report back to the class what the individual scholar's contribution was on March 19

March 19: Boethius, Book II

March 21: Boethius, Book III

March 26: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

March 28: 2nd essay due in class (deal with one text we have discussed since the first essay, such as one or two lais by Marie de France, the NL, or "Our Lady's Tumbler." We are reading: *Sir Gawain, and the Green Knight*, or Kaufringer, no. 1 (contrastive approach).

April 02: Continue with Kaufringer no. 1. What do we make out of this story for us today? Is there no clear human justice? We also read: Abelard, 247-248

April 04: Rationality, Critical Thinking: Abelard, 249-252

April 09: Completion of Abelard: focusing on Heloise's comments (253-55); Kaufringer: No. 7; 2nd paper is returned today

April 11: For a contrast, we read: Kaufringer: no. 13, no. 18

April 16: If you want to rewrite your second essay, it will be due on this day, in class. Bold all changes and submit both the old and the new version (staple both together). Only the second grade will count, so watch it, it could go up (I hope so), or down! We read: Dante Alighieri: Midlife Crisis, Meaning of Life, Love: We begin reading Dante's Inferno (139) Questions. (Video 1; Video 2; Video 3). Life of Dante

April 18: Roger Bacon: new text, please read online by clicking on the link to the left. I have also edited the text for you. Click here. We also read: Heinrich Kaufringer, no. 4

April 23: 3rd essay due in class (deal with one text only covered in class since the 2nd essay). You must be present in class to submit the essay! We read: Heinrich Kaufringer: No. 8: "The Search for the Happily Married Couple"; No. 25: "Seven Deadly Sins."

April 25: 2nd exam

April 30: Deadline for portfolio, submit online, 1 p.m. Presentation of a sample of how your portfolio should look like. Last day of class. We'll read: Kaufringer: No. 6: "The Cowardly Husband"; No. 14: "The Innocent Murderess"; No. 29: "Fight over Love and Beauty."

Final reflections: What have we achieved, what have we learned?