

Project: Teaching the Medieval Mediterranean: A Sea of Problems & Possibilities

My participation in this NEH seminar was motivated by problems encountered when teaching a Mediterranean history course. A few years ago, my department implemented an ocean basins history sequence required of our history majors, and I've had charge of teaching the Mediterranean (the other water bodies covered are the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans). Though trained as a medievalist, I don't specialize in Mediterranean history, per se. But I've taught almost 20 different history courses at FDU, with 12 of these being new offerings, so I initially didn't anticipate any issues with developing a Mediterranean history class – especially since I had complete freedom to choose the content parameters and approaches.

I soon discovered, however, that this course presented special problems. Foremost among them was the general dearth of texts (especially secondary ones) targeted at an undergraduate audience. This is quite unlike the other water bodies mentioned above, especially Atlantic history, to which an entire textbook sub-industry seems to be devoted. Thinking I must be overlooking something, I scoured publishers' websites, queried textbook representatives at book fairs, and even attended a world history conference in London in 2008, the theme of which was “The Sea: Highway of Change.” But the results were not promising.

Thus, my first iteration of the course in fall 2008 felt short, in my view. Some of the texts (e.g., Henri Pirenne's famous *Mohammed & Charlemagne*, 1951) were too difficult for most of the students, though in the case of Pirenne I was able to supplement it with a number of useful primary sources. Other texts, such as Katherine Reyerson's *Jacques Coeur* (2005), were suitable for the audience, but seemed a bit isolated from the rest of the course. Moreover, the class admittedly didn't have any strong, discernable theme or central learning question. At the NEH institute, I thus aimed to discuss both text issues and teachable themes for a course focusing on the medieval Mediterranean.

Findings & Guiding Principles

My “research” at the institute mostly consisted of conversations with presenters and other attendees about possible approaches to a medieval Mediterranean course. Moreover, my residence in Barcelona gave me ample time to rethink what I wanted my students to take away from such a class, and to embed graduated learning goals into it. (In addition to my faculty position at FDU, I

also run its faculty development program, so these are the same types of problems I often encounter in that latter capacity.) The very theme of the institute – Muslims, Christians & Jews – seemed like a worthwhile approach, and I received expert guidance from others on how I might build a course around such a theme.

Effective course design is something that I've studied, implemented, and even presented on at conferences – but I'd mostly failed at it my first time around with the Mediterranean course. So, it was back to the drawing board. I'm a big fan of the “backward design” of courses, as described by such teaching specialists as Dee Fink (*Creating Significant Learning Experiences*, 2003), and Grant Wiggins & Jay McTigue (*Understanding by Design*, 2001). The approach argues that instructors should start with the most general learning goals first, and then work backward from there to actually constructing the course. Yet, too often, instructors do precisely the opposite: they count the number of course meetings, subtract out days for miscellanea, and then slot in content that conforms to the schedule. Though this is technically “design,” it's design that fails to place student learning at the forefront. In addition, I also think highly of Ken Bain's recent work, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (2004), wherein he draws attention to such things as an “authentic learning environment” and “expectation failure” as necessary components to effective teaching. Finally, I'm motivated by the generally accepted notion that, for deep learning to occur, students must construct their knowledge, not simply receive it.

Thus, my most general learning goals and methods of assessment – and these apply, to varying degrees, to my other courses as well – are as follows:

- **A certain mastery of raw facts relating to the subject matter.** Facts *do* matter and students are tested on them, to an extent. However, this is a course more concerned with theoretical constructs and ways of knowing, rather than with names, events, dates, etc. *Assessment method:* Class discussion, papers.
- **An ability to interpret primary sources in a sophisticated manner.** Getting students to “think like a historian” is a main goal, and the interpretation of primary sources is a vitally important skill to that end. In the process, students will hopefully see that history is more than just an accumulation of raw facts. *Assessment method:* Class discussion, papers.
- **An appreciation for historiography.** History is not simply “one darn thing after another.” History is dynamic, so the class will work on students' appreciation of the discipline's ongoing processes and controversies. *Assessment method:* Reading and interpretation of secondary literature; class discussion, papers.
- **A decent command of written English.** Students should be able to write papers that are largely free of grammatical and mechanical errors, and that exhibit

appropriate style and formatting for an intermediate-level history course. *Assessment method*: Self-described.

- **A willingness and ability to discuss historical issues with faculty and peers.** Students should be willing and able to share their findings and ideas with the class on a consistent basis. *Assessment method*: Class participation; consistency in preparation.

The reader might intuit that this course is largely discussion-based, run almost like a seminar (made possible by a manageable size of about 20 students), and it is further informed by Sam Wineburg's much lauded *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (2001).

Description of the New Course

The course has been entirely rebuilt, and now consists of five units. In the first, I seek to ascertain what "baggage" students bring to the course; to establish the physical parameters of the medieval Mediterranean, especially as contemporaries saw them; and to build a familiar framework into which students can place new knowledge. This was accomplished by:

- having students write a preconceptions essay;
- reading and discussing selected chapters from David Abulafia's *The Mediterranean in History* (2003);
- examining and discussing ancient and medieval maps of the Mediterranean; and
- discussing students' own relationship with a nearby body of water, the Atlantic Ocean (though significantly, none of the students refer to the Atlantic as such).

The second unit of the course (in process, as of this writing) consists of a study of relationships between Christians, Muslims and Jews on the Iberian peninsula, using the *Song of the Cid* (2009 translation) as our principal text for examination. I've used this text in other courses for other purposes, but typically with great success. It's a fun and engaging story, but it also exhibits evidence of the complex relationships between three religious groups. Our key unit question is how Christians, Muslims and Jews interacted with one another, and whether these interactions establish a model of mutual tolerance, hostility, or something else entirely.

The third unit very consciously continues the aforementioned learning question, though this time the principle texts represent Muslim and Jewish perspectives. Under examination are Usama ibn Munqidh's *The Book of Contemplation* (2008 translation), and Benjamin Tudela's *Itinerary* (1907 translation) to see if the proposed models from the second unit hold true, or whether they require modification.

A fourth, brief unit features two guest lectures on medieval Famagusta by Prof. Michael Walsh of Eastern Mediterranean University in Cyprus. Although the exact content of these meetings is still in flux as of right now, Prof. Walsh's willingness to travel to the U.S. specifically to teach a section of this course was something I couldn't pass up. (Many thanks to my school's Office of Global Learning for helping offset Prof. Walsh's travel expenses.)

The last unit carries on the questions of units two and three, though this time, the class examines how Mediterranean people of different faiths viewed a common, non-human element: Black Death. After an introduction to the background of the disease, students will analyze more than a dozen contemporary accounts of Black Death from Christian and Muslim perspectives, with particular attention paid to Jews' treatment in the context of this crisis. Once again, the issue of whether people of different faiths viewed Black Death in similar fashion or not will shed light on the complex nature of Mediterranean relations, and will call on students to support or modify their conclusions reached in previous units.

A final exercise is one of metacognition, where students assemble a portfolio of all their work, and submit it along with an essay that asks them to reflect back on their preconceptions assignment from the beginning of the semester.

Concluding Thoughts

I anticipate that this iteration of the course will have its flaws, but I'm also confident that it's a much more coherent, authentic, and learner-centered introduction to Mediterranean history than was my previous version of the class. I can't overstate how valuable it was for me to have access to so many experts in the field during my month in Barcelona, and to get exposure to so many new readings on and approaches to the medieval Mediterranean.