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***Mens*, *Manus*, and Medieval Literature at MIT**

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Abstract

This brief essay describes a few things I've learned pedagogically from students and colleagues in STEM, with examples of how I've brought those perspectives in the classroom. It concludes with some reflections on how those pedagogical experiences have informed my recent research.

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Mens et manus—mind and hand—is the motto of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It suggests that we should hold the abstract or intellectual (*mens*) in productive tension with the concrete or practical (*manus*): benefiting from both, allowing neither to dominate. Ideally, a comparable symbiosis informs the relation between research and teaching, the subject of this special issue of *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession*. Literature at MIT (Lit@MIT) offers a distinctive lens onto those roles, for in important respects, we function like a Small Liberal Arts College (SLAC) within a big, STEM-focused R1. That SLAC-ness is both structural, in the sense that our faculty teach equally at all levels (i.e., "freshman comp" through senior capstones) of an entirely undergraduate, almost wholly seminar-style curriculum; and cultural, in that our small classes and emphasis on community mean that in many undergraduates' first semester especially, we may be the only professor who knows their name. That is just one sense in which the humanities humanize MIT: concretely (*manus*), not just abstractly (*mens*).

This mission is more sincere and more effective when we try to learn from students and faculty colleagues in STEM, just as we hope they will learn from us. And as undergraduates across the country look increasingly toward STEM as their primary course of study, more colleges and universities may come to resemble various kinds of institutes of technology. In that spirit, I offer a few things that I've learned pedagogically from colleagues and students, with a few concrete examples, which are included here as a list of Dropbox links at the end of the essay. MIT is unusually intense, and an outlier even among technical schools, and so what works here may not elsewhere; my approach may, however, be portable in so far as it meets the students where they are. I've found that teaching STEM students in ways that play to their strengths, while also pushing them to expand their intellectual comfort zones, builds credibility with them.

That credibility, in turns, helps pitch the proposition that it is worth working harder than necessary in order to understand old poems with no obvious use-value—even in a world dominated by the demands of the present and the needs of the future. Making that case to tomorrow's leaders seems essential if the faculty positions and budgets that enable humanistic research are to survive. Therefore, I see putting energy into teaching as an investment in building the communities that will benefit our research into the future. And it's why I'm so grateful to Katherine Little and *New Chaucer Studies* for having compiled these essays.

I. A Few Propositions, with Examples

1) The "problem set" assignment and assessment model can be helpful.

By "problem set," I mean an exercise framed as a stepwise series of tasks that have relatively clear, objective standards of assessment. Many STEM classes, especially at the introductory level, are organized around weekly or biweekly problem sets: questions, scenarios, or puzzles that test and reinforce key concepts and skills. Perhaps because they're used to the genre from their other coursework, I've found that problem sets work well with MIT students, especially in giving them skills necessary for success with more traditional literary essays, like using the *Oxford English Dictionary*. At the intro tier in particular, such an early series of tasks takes pressure off students and demystifies potentially rarified forms of intellectual labor.

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Inspired by my colleague Mary Fuller's introductory class on "Reading Poetry" (Open Course Ware 2018), for example, I've begun teaching literary close reading as first a series of low-stakes noticings, which students perform on various textual and cultural objects. In my own version of the same class, we take turns noticing things—data, facts, stuff—about the remarkable poem "my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell" by Gwendolyn Brooks (1963). After that group work, I offer a list of 20– 30 things I noticed about the poem: not as an answer key (since inevitably students notice things in class that I don't, which is empowering for them), but rather to illustrate some of the kinds of things one might notice. Students then submit their own list of noticings about a different poem as the next step toward their first graded close reading essay (Dropbox 1).

Such models can accommodate a wide range of pedagogical contexts. In a writing-intensive class on the Trojan War, for example, students compare three translations of the same Sappho poem, considering page-layout and textual apparatus: close looking to complement close reading, here building toward one-on-one conferences (Dropbox 2). (Exploring textual editing, translation, and page layout is one way my research interests find their way into my classrooms.) I ask students to submit PDFs of their markups of the text(s), which gives them another mode of demonstrating engagement, and so another way into larger, more abstract conversations such as those proposed at the end of the assignment.

Framing assignments like problem sets also helps me as a teacher, in that it streamlines assessment and makes it easier to turn things back to students quickly, which helps them process the feedback. A stepwise list of tasks and relatively objective metrics for evaluation also depersonalize the process, which reduces my own anxiety around student assessment—especially early in the semester as I'm still getting acquainted with the class as a whole. For that reason, I've found versions of the problem set model helpful in senior seminars too, especially for teaching concrete skills that students may not have developed previously, such as working with scholarly articles (Dropbox 3). Another exercise teaches them how to use the online Middle English Dictionary via what I call "word dives" into interesting words from Chaucer's *General Prologue* or *Knight's Tale* (Dropbox 4). Such skills enhance class discussion and build toward the seminar paper or final project.

The rise of generative AI offers additional opportunities for problem set-like assignments, some of which might serve as a final project. My Spring 2023 "Trojan War" class, for example, asked students to grade ChatGPT's response to an essay prompt on the *Oresteia* that I've used since graduate school (Dropbox 5). Having them use the same grading rubric by which they were evaluated earlier in the semester proved empowering—and, for at least one student, offered helpful perspective on how hard grading essays can be (Dropbox 6).[1] Students' reflections on the assignment, and on AI in particular, were both thoughtful and illuminating; with support from MIT's Teaching and Learning Lab, I'm working with an alumnus of that class, a computer science major, to build generative AI into some of the assessments of my next version of "Reading Poetry."

<u>2) Once your problem sets have given students some basic tools, encourage them to make things.</u>
STEM students often think of themselves as makers, and my teaching became more rewarding when I encouraged students to bring that part of their brains to literature. I started doing this as a way of

[1] I've adapted this rubric from versions by Stephanie Bahr and Scott Saul; thanks to them both for the model.

getting a handle on Malory, whose Morte d'Arthur occupies us for half the semester in 21L.460, "Arthurian Literature" (Open Course Ware 2013). Knights and readers alike are constantly getting lost in that text, and so I invited students to make something that constituted an interpretation of how time and/or space operate in relation to some core theme. An accompanying write-up explains their process and uses textual evidence to make the case for their project and its vision. Elizabeth Dougherty's (2014) article "*Le Morte d'Arthur* and the engineer" tells the story of one such project. Students' creativity in subsequent iterations of the class has yielded a hoard of ingeniously conceived, intricately engineered forms of bookish craft.

MIT's Beaver Press Print Shop (2024) is another great example of tapping into STEM (and especially engineering) students' beaver-like drive to build and make things. The Print Shop's Gutenberg-facsimile wooden letterpress was built from scratch by students in 2016, and it continues to serve as the centerpiece of a history class on "Making Books: The Renaissance and Today" (Open Course Ware 2016). It also creates other pedagogical opportunities beyond that class: in "Arthurian Literature," for example, we visit the press to reinforce the difference between Caxton's printed text and the Winchester manuscript. That example highlights another way my research has been shaped by teaching MIT students: their interest in the concrete and material has sharpened my own intellectual interest in the *Pearl*-Manuscript as hand-held literary matter. I think one reason for the large cluster of MIT faculty with book-historical interests, across periods and geographies, is that many of our students naturally get excited about the material text, and their enthusiastic response reinforces the intellectual excitement of the research area.

Of course, not every class or content area encourages literal, physical making. In other pedagogical contexts, translation and imitation can activate similar energies while staying at the level of the written word. Translation exercises might be linguistic and literary, an obvious choice for classes working with Old or Middle English (Dropbox 7); or generic, like translating sonnets into prose as a way of grasping poetic quiddity (Dropbox 8). Imitation has a distinguished pedagogical history among composers and language-learners, in particular, and can help students take ownership of the material—indeed, feel part of a cultural tradition. (Encouraging students to feel at home and welcome in cultural history is one value of such maker-oriented projects more generally.) In the "Trojan War" class, for example, inhabiting the radically different voices of Sappho, Homer, or the Gawain-Poet, both enhanced students' appreciation of the literature and allowed them to articulate powerful things they might not otherwise have been able to (Dropbox 9). Composition can work similarly: my "Reading Poetry" class includes a unit on the sestina, whose strict form makes it popular among amateur poets, and one option for students' final project is to compose one themselves, explaining their decisions and reflecting on what they learned (Dropbox 10).

The unfamiliar nature of such creative assignments forces students to slow down, which is one goal of my classes generally: to cultivate slowness in a relentlessly fast-paced world. (Close reading teaches slowness as well, which is why it features so prominently in my teaching and research alike, a point I'll come back to.) Many STEM folks both need and resist this training (remember Mark Zuckerberg's "move fast and break things?"); but many students, STEM or otherwise, may also reasonably feel that they don't have the luxury of cultivating slowness, especially those juggling family or work or other responsibilities or challenges outside the classroom. It therefore helps to make things easier for students wherever we can, and video modules offer one way of doing so.

3) Adding video can lower barriers and enable other modes of assessment.
Like so many of us, I first experimented with video teaching in the early days of the pandemic. I was teaching a half-term seminar on *Pearl* in Spring 2020: it started in late March, just after nearly all students had been sent home from campus and into lockdown. That meant our first meeting was on Zoom, while we were still reeling, and no one knew how e-class would work (could it?). Recording video footnotes to our discussions was one way of trying to build remotely, during lockdown, some version of the social-intellectual energy that successful in-person seminars develop more naturally. (I realize in retrospect that it was also a way of processing the fact of teaching *Pearl* through the first frightening days of a pandemic.) These video footnotes were little riffs (3–5 minutes) in which I expanded on a point we hadn't fully explored, maybe with a pivot to the next class (Dropbox 11). Sometimes it was just a cool thing I'd forgotten to mention.

Initially, my goal was just to keep the conversation going between class sessions, thereby helping create a sense of community that felt impossible otherwise. I think the videos helped in that regard, but I was surprised by how much they seemed to help on a substantive level, too: students seemed to be getting the poem better. I think that may be because the video genre encouraged greater uptake: before, I would have sent students an email on whatever the video footnote was about; but students have to read a lot, and for some, it may be easier to process things explained viva voce than in the dense walls of text we often favor as Literature scholars.

Since we were still remote in Fall 2020, I continued experimenting with video modules and built them into the course structure of my seminar on the *Canterbury Tales* more systematically, specifically as a way of teaching students to do close reading of Middle English poetry. Close reading is hard enough, and doing it in Middle English requires multiple levels and kinds of competence that can't be assumed, which some students will gain more naturally than others. Clear, task-based forms of assessment like problem sets can help, but I wanted to offer a model of how to pursue a single word in detail and relate it to a larger passage. So, I recorded a close reading of one interesting word from Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, putting it in the context of other assignments designed to strengthen their Middle English early in the semester (Dropbox 12). I could give this mini-lecture in class, of course, but having students process the information on their own allows them to do the work at their own speed and convenience, rewatching as necessary (or as directed). It also saves in-class time for thematic discussion and more advanced language work. Several student evaluations that semester appreciated the videos, so my next iteration of the seminar will add new ones on Chaucerian word order, pronunciation, and textual editing, among other topics.

II. Closing Thoughts: Embracing the Margins

Many readers will have their own versions of pedagogical hacks and exercises like those described above. Mine represent an effort to lower barriers and build community by meeting students where they are. Part of that means acknowledging that the dominant ethos of MIT, and of many STEM fields more broadly, prizes efficiency and utility: two virtues not often associated with medieval literature today. I've found it useful to acknowledge that fact, and to gradually ask my students to expand their conception of the useful. Some forms of the humanities' utility they accept without much resistance: that close attention to writing helps us clearly communicate complex ideas and arguments,

for example. All my classes talk a lot about writing for precisely that reason, but I try to convince students that finding and thinking about literary beauty is also useful because it can make their lives richer.

Somewhat counterintuitively, the humanities' marginal status can help make that case. To its great credit, MIT requires eight semesters of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (HASS) of all undergraduates, an average of one a semester. Many students take more, but many others take that bare minimum, which means that in any given semester, my class—and every other HASS instructor's—is often the only intellectual balance to a student's three or more "technical [that is, STEM-based] subjects."[2] This leads to a phenomenon students here have dubbed "proHASStination," which has a double meaning: to put off your HASS class because it's boring or pointless; but also, for others, to procrastinate on your technical subjects because your HASS class is actually really fun.

I emphasize fun because my class may be a student's only college-level exposure to the humanities, and I want them to leave likelier to read for pleasure than they were coming in. That makes them likelier to take more humanities classes at MIT and to support the humanities when they're out in the world, whether by buying books, donating money, or raising their kids to be readers. Fun can coexist with rigor, so I don't think I'm dumbing down the material with this approach. (Indeed, dumbing things down tends to make MIT students tune out; they like challenges.) But it does mean emphasizing the beauty of literature, and the delight that beauty can afford. Such beauty is no less important—or useful—for existing largely in the margins of a STEM-centric education and career.

Indeed, medievalists are well positioned to make a case for the importance of margins. Inspired by Michael Camille (1992, 1998), I speculate to students that the ludic spirit of the Luttrell Psalter's margins, with their vivid rustic scenes and fantastical grotesques, helped medieval readers resume their study of the central psalm texts refreshed and with a broader perspective, the full page of their lives more fully in view. That's part of a broader pitch—which by the end of most semesters I feel able to make explicitly—that students should think *now* about how they will write the humanities into the pages of their own lives once MIT's HASS requirement no longer incentivizes them to do so. For many, that's about community: five alumni of my Old English class, for instance, spent the pandemic translating *Beowulf* together over Zoom, and they invited me to join them for their final session. They're all either grad students in STEM fields or working in industry now, and it was inspiring to see how central they'd chosen to make the humanistic margins of their lives.

Making that pitch to generations of MIT students—and seeing it work—helped shape the strongly reparative turn of my recent scholarship, especially *Chasing the Pearl-Manuscript* (Bahr 2024). Finishing that book involved reconceiving of it as a pedagogical project, in this sense: I want other people to love the *Pearl*-Poems as much as I do, and so I tried to keep my MIT students and colleagues in mind as I was writing, not just the small group of people already convinced of the *Pearl*-Poems' or the humanities' value. Put another way: I'm lucky enough to be paid to read and write about medieval literature (to spend over a decade studying four poems in one manuscript, in fact!), which is true of very few other people. Sharing what I found there is a kind of teaching, and the prospect of getting

[2] Somewhat confusingly, MIT calls individual classes (like "Arthurian Literature" or "Quantum Mechanics") "subjects" (hence "subject evaluations" instead of "course evaluations"). "Course" designates "course of study" (i.e., major); this being MIT, they're all numbered. So instead of "I'm a Physics major," you'd say, "I'm Course 8." (Literature is Course 21L.)

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more people to discover these poems—or to discover more in them—is what finally got the book over the finish line.

List of Dropbox Assignments

1. https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/rr4iouyj5f6dmpsw8aumq/Description-Assignment.docx?rlkey=tijrumf794ahxw925jx9hl1q0&dl=0
2. https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/8e904nqfg7ht6fwx1wdyy/Comparative-Sappho-Close-Reading.pdf?rlkey=w9ksyoedb0f64pxaco8vh07d4&dl=0
3. https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/sytp84l45vbd6psrdum2d/Working-with-articles.pdf?rlkey=9wgll2rpp1i3o08kec96k8x7h&dl=0
4. https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/ibyws5eat3rk75uwkpw2f/Middle-English-Word-Dives.pdf?rlkey=vatzf8gpz04j8fxjmvmf1ngz7&dl=0
5. https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/c2uxfjfx6jtvz8i2pq6k9/You-Be-the-Professor-Final.docx?rlkey=ppyjggq2z91xgwp9tledroz19&dl=0
6. https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/886xsh4f49uifs71odbi6/Essay-grading-rubric-6.19.24.docx?rlkey=l2az0qom95xwwup6doapdo8z4&dl=0
7. https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/qemqpf8tm3gb2a8e84vjd/ME-Close-Reading-Assignment.pdf?rlkey=8vp0qgmbr3jmhmc5l52tr3yqq&dl=0
8. https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/065h683iy7jpz9g929chr/Translating-Sonnets.pdf?rlkey=17r355xhh5t6kca426z97z3tq&dl=0. N.B. This exercise also appears on pages 204–206 of Fuss and Gleason (2016).
9. https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/ngke2thi9d35ez0vvr45h/Poetic-Imitation-Sappho-SGGK.docx?rlkey=5wkdlyhh5x5827zotev1580xa&dl=0
10. https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/x7ju308g9uamobf6p8j76/Sestina-Assignment.docx?rlkey=txulubj8ms1ukks9pv4b97yfh&dl=0

11. https://www.dropbox.com/s/256sfc133wn4jz7 Bahr%20Diptych%20video%20footnotes.mp4?dl=0

12. https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/eqpx5m952q7sk7h5uwaj8/Ransake-in-Knight-s-Tale-abridged.mp4?rlkey=0hycoivixlocydatytsjo4zsk&dl=0

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