

- How might teachers of pre-modern history and literature help students think about "unfamiliar" medieval texts in relation to "familiar" digital ones?
- What are some of the potentials and pitfalls of these comparisons, and what do students actually make of them?

A sample comparison: Like hyperlinked webpages, highly glossed medieval manuscripts allow for "many voices" on one page and can be read productively in many different orders.



The Class

Reading in the Middle and Digital Ages, a first-year writing seminar (FWS) I taught in the fall of 2012 and the spring of 2013 **Demographics:** eighteen students in the fall, thirteen in the spring; mostly freshmen, from a variety of programs and colleges; an even mix of men and women Six essay assignments explored a variety of questions and issues: e.g., the book as a technology; the Canterbury Tales in medieval manuscripts, modern printed books, and online; the roles of glosses and commentaries in manuscript and digital cultures **<u>Field trips</u> to Cornell's Rare and Manuscript Collections (see images)**

Teaching Medieval Books in a Digital Age

For modern students, the

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Students enjoyed visiting Collections, where they had opportunities to handle mediev nanuscripts. Pictured here: Book of Hours from c. 1400.

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The Literature

A special issue of Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching (2012) was devoted to the teaching of book history in the undergraduate curriculum Articles were uniformly thoughtful, detailing the authors' experiences teaching classes similar to my own However, the literature, it seemed to me, did not make a concerted effort to incorporate students' feedback and

students' voices in a systematic way







I accumulated "data" on my classes from a variety of sources: student essays; my handwritten marginalia on their papers; mid-semester and final evaluations; short surveys after essays 4 and 5 (in the spring only); and my typed comments evaluating their essays. Sample student feedback from evaluations and surveys:

"The in-class activities and discussions enabled me to have a better understanding of how [medieval] texts were produced and the visits to the Rare Books Library further backed my understanding of these texts."

2) "To be honest, [before the Chaucer assignment], I had never even thought about these different features of books [i.e. their formats and page-layouts]. Books were just something that I read and [their] marginal spaces and illustrations were of no concern. However, the assignment and all the activities encouraged me to look at (books) from a different perspective."

Based on my review of the above-mentioned data, I isolated and discussed several key themes. Here I will mention two:

The Allure of the Medieval Book. As evidenced by the first quote above, students uniformly reported enjoying visits to Cornell's Rare and Manuscript Collections. I suggest that the "experience" of holding a medieval book can be a powerful draw for students. I encourage teachers to consider their special collections libraries as active instructional resources that can help connect the medieval past with students' present. 2) Framing Medieval-Digital Comparisons. Teachers of pre-modern history and literature are understandably wary of undergraduates' proclivity for making trans-historical generalizations. Comparisons between medieval and digital modes of textual production need to be made sensitively and rigorously. The more I taught this course, the more I felt that what I was trying to do was to equip students with a set of tools to interrogate different kinds of media. As evidenced by quote two above, students are rarely asked to think about the *forms* in which texts are manifested. Close attention to the material forms of medieval texts, I suggest, might help students think more about the digital forms that surround them.

Cornell University Center for Teaching Excellence

The Data

The Results