Daniel F. Melleno

Department of History

Creative Projects as an Inclusive and Engaging Alternative

The Challenge

In my AI Society course on medieval travel I was tired of assigning boring "comprehension" papers and trying to teach non-history majors to write history papers. I wanted an assignment that would be both fun to complete AND fun to grade. At the same time I was seeking a way to make often very unfamiliar material more accessible and relatable to a wide variety of students and to design an assignment that catered to varying learning styles and interests, regardless of the academic background of the student in question.

The Approach

Instead of a paper I decided to design a creative project centered on the production of an original piece of travel media. Students would be responsible for either re-casting a personal journey in the style of one of our medieval texts, or recasting one of our medieval texts into a different style. This was defined quite broadly; students could paint, draw, write, record, or take any other approach they wished.

The goal was for students to demonstrate an understanding both of some of the central themes of the class and of the function and utility of genre as a means of representing and understanding travel.

In addition to the creative piece students had to write an introduction where they discussed their goals and approach, discussing key issues, ideas, and themes from the class that influenced their production and using at least two of our readings to contextualize and flesh out their own creative choices.

How it Went

It went great! The actual items produced were almost across the board more interesting, more creative, and more demonstrative of the student's learning than a series of essays would have been. On the whole students seemed to really like the project itself as it gave them a considerable amount of agency over the final project and let them focus their efforts on the materials and ideas that most interested them. While for some students this agency caused some anxiety (something we worked to alleviate via project proposals and mandatory office hours) and although some students opted for the path of least resistance (in this case writing a series of letters) the majority of them produced truly original material in ways that I could not have anticipated before receiving them.

By pairing the creative work with the more academic introduction students were also driven to actively evaluate their learning experience in the class but within a context very different from a formal paper. The argument was now focused on how and why they choose to apply class materials, lecture information, and group discussions to their own output. At the same time they more actively engaged with questions of authorship and genre production, putting themselves into the shoes of the pre-modern authors and travelers as they worked to emulate medieval styles or distill medieval concerns into new contexts.

Advice for Others

First and foremost, have a clear and explicit goal behind your creative project. It is not enough to want to do something "fun." There needs to be a set of clearly articulated goals and outcomes for both the students and yourself. The students need to have clear guidelines within which they can flex their creativity, otherwise they are liable to freeze up or to miss the deeper academic elements in favor of "flash." You need clear guidelines because otherwise grading a number of disparate styles and genres can be quite challenging. Since "quality" can't be as important as "intent" both teacher and student need to be clear on what that intent should be and how to signal it across a variety of contexts.

In terms of what I'd do differently next time, I want to present a broader range of potential genres throughout the class both to help stimulate creativity and to help them see the consistent elements that transcend genre. I also experimented with some form of group rubric building and found this to be more frustrating than helpful as the students invariably had lower and less clear standards than I was willing to apply for a final project. As such, I'm still trying to figure out a better way to make the "final" project more anchored in the class as a whole, from Week 1 to Week 10.

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