



MEDIEVAL HISTORY IN THE MODERN CLASSROOM

USING PROJECT-BASED LEARNING TO ENGAGE TODAY'S LEARNERS

by

LANE J. SOBEHRAD and
SUSAN J. SOBEHRAD

ARC HUMANITIES PRESS



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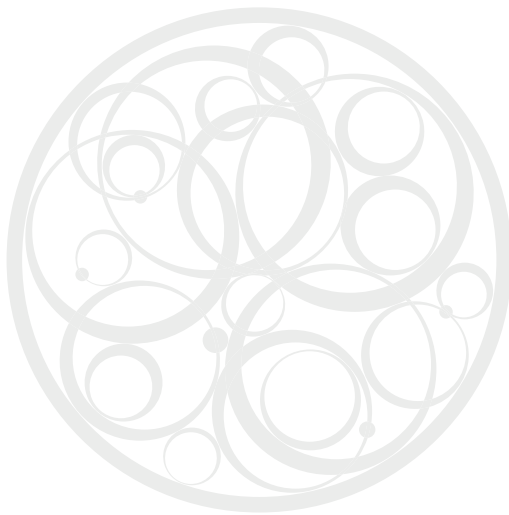
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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations.....	vii
Preface	ix
Chapter 1. Changing Perceptions in Teaching Medieval History.....	1
Chapter 2. Medieval History Course Design.....	27
Chapter 3. Active Construction of Knowledge and Intentional Planning.....	65
Chapter 4. Project Management.....	97
Chapter 5. Technology in the Medieval-History Classroom	149
Chapter 6. Medieval Studies Project Examples.....	171
Epilogue.....	189
Appendix A. Historical Standards.....	193
Appendix B. Sample Content and Skill Rubrics.....	195
Appendix C. Planning and Implementation Tools.....	210
Appendix D. Survey of Undergraduate Medieval History Courses in US Colleges and Universities	213
Index	219



LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

Figure 2.1. Sample Asset Map	52
Figure 3.1. Project Activity System	67
Figure 4.1. The Project-Based Learning Cycle.....	99
Figure 4.2. Adaptive Project Management.....	109
Figure 4.3. Deming’s PDSA Cycle.....	121
Figure 5.1. Multimodal Literacies within a Project Activity System	157
Figure 5.2. Community of Inquiry Framework.....	158
Figure 5.3. Internet Research Guide Mind Map.....	165

Tables

Table 1.1. Common Framework for Undergraduate Medieval History Courses	5
Table 1.2. Comparing Student Learning Outcomes to Assessments in Undergraduate Medieval History Courses	18
Table 3.1 Project Conception Planning Template	70
Table 3.2. Project Goals Planning Template	81
Table 3.3. Project Timeline Template.....	86
Table 3.4. Assessment and Reflection Planning Template	87
Table 3.5. Rubric Design Template.....	90
Table 3.6. Rubric Strand for Building Historical Knowledge Criterion.....	93
Table 3.7. Rubric Strand from Choosing Appropriate Sources	94

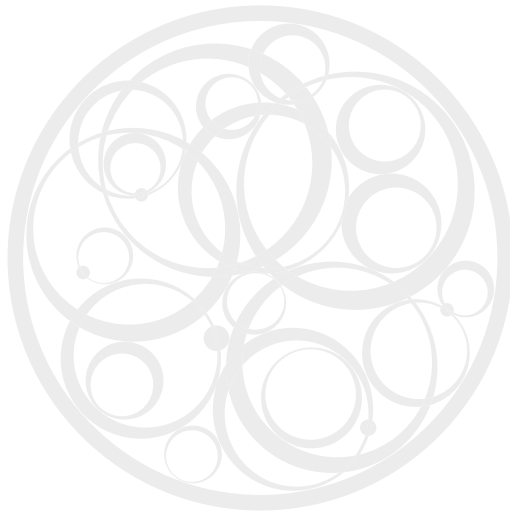
Table 4.1. Project Blueprint 102

Table 5.1. Digital Tools and the Community of Inquiry..... 160

Table 6.1. Scaffolded Assessments for a PBL Medieval Survey Course..... 171

Table E.1. Medieval History Courses at Accredited SACSCOC Institutions 191

Table E.2. Numbers of Medieval History Courses..... 191



PREFACE

THIS BOOK IS about teaching medieval history. The purpose of this book is to demonstrate how incorporating formal educational research and pedagogy into the undergraduate medieval history classroom can benefit the educational experiences of both instructors and students. It is our hope that medieval history instructors, most of whom have not had formal training in pedagogical theory and instructional strategies, will be convinced of the benefits of incorporating some of the ideas in this book into their own classrooms. Utilizing these educational best practices does not require instructors to gain mastery of an entirely different discipline or delay their research schedule in any significant way. It likely only requires a shift in instructional perspective towards *intentionality*. In the world of education research, intentionality means a continuous evaluation of what you are teaching and how your students are responding to it. Not only that, but intentional teaching necessitates deliberate and purposeful action in every phase of the teaching process from course design to small group discussion protocols, all geared toward specific outcomes you intend for your students to reach.

In many ways, this intentionality mirrors the process many of us use in the development of a research project. There are many occasions where a well-written section of a paper must be abandoned for the overall success of the project. Manuscripts and sources are not chosen at random as the evidence-base for a presentation at a conference, they are carefully selected for the anticipated audience. A book project cannot cover all topics associated with its subject matter, the scope must be carefully crafted and articulated in order for its arguments to reach a cogent conclusion. The same is true for teaching the Middle Ages. A well-liked lecture that is not cohesive with the rest of the course content should be left on the sideline as it is likely to confuse students who have thrown themselves into the medieval past for the first time. Source material and readings should not be selected only because of their importance in the medieval studies historiographic timeline, but also according to their accessibility and interpretability to novice medievalists, and their utility in helping students reach specific learning outcomes. There is no reasonable way a semester-long course can cover a millennium of medieval history, much less do so during a unit in a (History of) Western Civilizations course, making intentional course design essential in order for students to come away from your course with the desired interpretation of medieval people, systems, and institutions. More practically, intentional design allows the instructor to reduce preparation time, avoid common instances of student confusion, and ultimately result in better student work products.

Importantly, however, intentional teaching does not mean inflexible or unchangeable teaching. On the contrary, a clearly articulated theoretical framework, well-explained content, and relevant student learning outcomes allows a course to be more flexible and adaptable to the needs of its students *in situ*. That is, a course becomes a discrete system with transparent boundaries, rules, and expectations that are communicated and agreed upon by instructors and students from the start. For many of us, developing such systems should seem imminently medieval amongst the various *artes*, their

associated manuals (*praedicandi, dictandi, memoriae*, etc.), and a scholastic method that prized well-structured *lectiones, meditationes, quaestiones*, and *disputationes*. Scholarship has never argued such systems restricted the ability of medieval writers to express themselves, nor should medieval history instructors think that an intentionally designed course restricts their ability to craft a unique course. Below, readers will find readily adaptable, practical, and engaging teaching strategies designed for the undergraduate medieval history classroom.

However, it is equally important for the intentional instructor to understand the educational context from which their student audience enters the classroom. This is often difficult for collegiate history instructors, most of whom have little experience in or knowledge of the world of the Kindergarten/Nursery to Grade/Year 12 educational system (hereafter “K-12”) that provides them their undergraduate students. In a collegiate setting, this is also a difficult task in course environments that are not conducive to relationship building between instructor and student, such as a large, two-hundred-student course cohort (or section) staffed with Teaching Assistants or an asynchronous online course section. What is known, though, is that undergraduate history instructors receive freshly minted high school graduates whose most common experience in history classrooms was having to tackle by rote a mountain of state-mandated content standards to pass a state-mandated social studies multiple-choice assessment in order to fulfill a minimum standard for their high school diploma. To put this in context of other tested subjects, in the authors’ home state of Texas, the only state-mandated history assessment required for high school graduation is US History since 1877 (three social studies credits are required to graduate). There are thirty content areas and 109 named content standards required for this course (and 275 effective standards), significantly higher than, say, Biology, which has twelve content areas and fifty-one named content standards. The “success” of a school, according to state education agencies, is attached to students’ performance on state-mandated assessments aligned to these standards, resulting in a curricular focus that ensures students have an opportunity to master this laundry list of factoids and can fill in their answer bubbles. The only assessment that can cover such a swath of content in a reasonable timeframe is little more than a trivia test about historical topics that does not accurately or adequately represent the academic and professional discipline of history.

This is the history experience most students have that then enter into your undergraduate classrooms. Most have not written a history essay longer than a page or two, they have not done a research project, and their instructors’ experience was typically that obtained through a bachelor’s program. Students who have done some writing have primarily done so through the lens of literary interpretation, not historical investigation. Your average undergraduate student has no awareness or point of context for history as an academic discipline or professional field of research, much less *medieval* history beyond a general awareness of medievalisms through popular media. This is because most states, like Texas, only require students to be formally assessed in US History, and the only chance most students have to be exposed to medieval history during high school is in a unit during their World History class, which itself is often optional in state graduation requirements. Philosophical arguments about the importance of history aside, it

is thus unreasonable to expect students to be able to effectively navigate the traditional types of assessments seen in an undergraduate classroom because they have no prior educational experience doing so (for example, a time-constrained hand-written exam/essay, a prescriptive research project, essay with citations, written source reviews). That is, we cannot expect students to demonstrate competency in a set of historical skills they were never taught. Likewise, we cannot expect them to develop said historical skills in their undergraduate careers if we do not teach them. Or rather, if history as a discipline continues to argue there is a practical utility to the historian's toolbox beyond the history classroom, history instructors are best positioned to guide students in the appropriate acquisition and application of those tools.

Many undergraduate courses are guilty of the same content deluge as their K-12 counterparts, as our investigation of medieval history syllabi below describes. Think of one of your medieval history courses. One of your likely expectations is that students are able to communicate with some degree of nuance and complexity about goings-on in medieval society through the interpretation of texts. Reflect on how much time in a given "lower division" course (that is, one aimed at students in the first two years of undergraduate study) you spend *explicitly* teaching the historical skills needed to effectively accomplish that goal. Have you ensured your assessments actually measure the outcome you intended? Do you explicitly address the components of a good historical essay? How do you communicate this information to students? What examples do you provide them? Do you provide opportunities to practice low-stakes writing in order for students to get direct feedback before the high stakes essay or exam? Do you provide a rubric that explains what the expectations of the essay are prior to its submission? Do you teach students *how* to read a source, rather than simply assigning sources to read? Or discuss how to navigate a research platform like JSTOR?

To us, the primary decision medieval historians must make is whether or not their goal for a course is to be a content delivery system where students are mostly learning *stuff* about the Middle Ages, or if content can be used as a vehicle to impart some of the unique skill set of the medieval historian that will benefit them after final grades are submitted for your course. If the former, an instructor may as well send copies of their lecture notes to students on the first day of class and have a multiple-choice exam at the end of the semester. The "sage on a stage" style of lecture from Leopold von Ranke's nineteenth century classroom does not meet the needs of students in the twenty-first century. Just as historiographic trends change over time, teaching is a dynamic practice, and we should therefore change our practices in the classroom to fit current understanding about learning processes just as we adapt our research practices in recognition of new knowledge or interpretive frameworks.

Additionally, in an increasingly business-minded institutional setting, history department budgets are often determined by figures like enrollment, majors, and graduates. As a result of declining enrollment over the past twenty years, many history departments have stacked their faculty with courses to align with these budgetary restrictions, especially junior and adjunct faculty who may teach five or more courses in a given semester. Many history departments often have only one medievalist, whereas the commonly required US History survey provides some guaranteed job security and enrollment for

our Americanist colleagues. In more than a small way, the most important audience medieval historians engage with is their students. If a class does not meet minimum enrollment numbers it gets cancelled. Poor course reviews may affect non-tenured faculty's ability to receive tenure. Getting students invested in the Middle Ages ensures the next generation of scholars starts off on the right foot and secures those all important dissertation committee chair positions. Our field of medieval history depends on students, and so this book was written with the intention of making students' educational experience with medieval history, even a brief one, a valuable learning experience.

Chapter 1 begins by contextualizing what we see as critical discussion points in medieval studies in our current twenty-first century context. In recent years, medieval studies has had to engage in critical conversations about diversity and inclusivity, the potential "globalization" of the field, declining enrollment, an increasingly constricted job market, and the role of medievalists as moderators of these conversations. In our survey of undergraduate medieval history courses, it became apparent that while instructors oftentimes state learning objectives and define criteria for assessments or activities, they were often included as compliance artifacts rather than utilized as intentional course design elements that can provide alignment between skills, content, and assessments that allow an instructor to create a more cohesive course structure that results both in better outcomes for students and increased positive student affect towards the course. Activities should *not* be restricted to undifferentiated benchmark assessments with vaguely defined skill sets found at the top of syllabi. Thus we suggest that the basic educational theory and pedagogy surrounding project-based learning (PBL), is an effective framework to facilitate authentic educational experiences for undergraduate students to interact with major discussions in medieval studies and engage in the professional field of history at a level appropriate with their experiences.

Chapter 2 begins with a review of the historical roots of project-based learning, continues with an outline of the PBL process, and establishes the importance of cultivating a collaborative, supportive classroom culture. We explore the need for change in the undergraduate classroom and contend that, while undergraduate instructors appreciate the need, many are not prepared to make the changes necessary to develop courses that are more enticing and impactful for students. We assert that one of the goals of undergraduate courses is to introduce students to a professional field of study, and thus the activities in those courses should reflect the *real* work of the field and help students navigate its foundational components while respecting the unique socio-cultural lens each student is bringing with them. In other words, teach students about medieval history by *doing* medieval history. We propose PBL as a solution to these dilemmas. We introduce seven essential components of PBL, synthesized from existing research in a variety of settings and adjusted specifically to meet the needs of undergraduate historical investigation, which act as the critical framework for a successful intentionally designed course.

Chapter 3 discusses *why* PBL is a particularly attractive instructional approach for historical studies through the extant evidence that shows the qualitative and quantitative outcomes for students who have participated in effectively-designed PBL classrooms. In particular, we argue that when intentionally guided by an expert instructor,

PBL provides practical experiences that allow students to develop effective skills for their historian's "toolbox." That is, the "authenticity" that is integral to the effective implementation of PBL stems from collaborative practice that will allow students to walk away from a medieval history course not only with an understanding of the medieval past, but also an appreciation of what a medieval historian does and how the skills honed during a historical investigation are applicable in a variety of professional settings beyond the college classroom. The chapter emphasizes intentional planning, and explains the process in detail, from conceptualization and ideation to the design and creation of the rubrics that guide student learning throughout the PBL cycle.

Chapter 4 describes the discrete components of a project cycle in the context of an undergraduate medieval history classroom. The nonlinear nature of instruction in the PBL process makes its implementation complex, requiring the orchestration of multiple components simultaneously. Because each component has a specific role to play both in the students' successful completion of a project, as well as in acquisition and utilization of the skills and knowledge needed to complete the project, we describe effective ways to organize coursework, beginning with introducing the project to students with an engaging preliminary event. We introduce a variety of PBL tools and artifacts that can be immediately adapted into any reader's undergraduate classroom, along with design elements such as discussion protocols and formative assessments that offer students scaffolded opportunities to engage in the *real* work of a medieval historian in their daily classroom experience.

Chapter 5 continues by contending that part of any medieval history courses in the 2020s and beyond must assist students in navigating virtual and digital spaces where they will encounter information about the Middle Ages. It would not be an overstatement to suggest that the bulk of medieval history research now occurs in some type of digital modality from conception to publication. Therefore it is critical for medieval history instructors to provide guidance to their students on how to identify, navigate, and use the various systems that are critical to any investigation of the medieval past. These systems comprise new literacies that we have learned to adapt and utilize to the great benefit of medieval scholarship. Though often with a different content focus, undergraduate students are digital natives of these new literacies, and it is a critical instructional strategy for instructors to recognize that the digital diaspora provides an effective, engaging landscape from which to engage students in medieval inquiry beyond text on a page in narrative format. Engaging students in the current work of medieval historians necessarily means engaging them in activities beyond source reviews, narrative construction, and content regurgitation. If the goals of medieval history include communicating ideas and findings to audiences, then *doing* medieval history includes coding, web development, social media, image processing, and other digital spaces that act in conjunction with traditional research and writing systems.

Chapter 6 offers classroom artifacts for exemplar projects that can be adapted to a medieval history course as the reader sees fit. Several projects are summarized at three different time scales to fit undergraduate history courses that may have a medieval component. The first is a semester-long project most appropriate for a standard medieval survey course such as "The Middle Ages, 500–1500 CE." This project offers a guiding

structure throughout the semester that engages students in their own interests in the Middle Ages while providing the instructor much greater flexibility in addressing the core content of the medieval period. The second project type is intended to be a discrete unit within a course. A course could be designed using a series of these shorter projects to better define the content areas covered in the course, or by using a single project as a culminating event that allows students to demonstrate the historical skills learned during the course. The third project-type is a short-term project with a limited scope. This limited outcome project is intended to teach specific historical skills or address common misconceptions related to medievalisms, and may be used in conjunction with the unit project or other limited outcome projects.

Lastly, readers will find supporting documentation in the Appendices that offers a crosswalk of commonly used historical competency standards, provides additional exemplar documents for classroom instruction, and presents the raw data and methodology for our survey of medieval undergraduate history courses. It is our hope that this interdisciplinary work will show medieval history instructors that there are benefits to incorporating some of the best practices and strategies touted by their colleagues in colleges of education, as well as demonstrate that there are ripe research opportunities to continue to develop effective instructional practices for the medieval-history classroom and their impact on undergraduate student learning outcomes. A good medieval historian should also be a good teacher; and it is our hope this book will help readers, at least in some small way, accomplish that.

Chapter I

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS IN TEACHING MEDIEVAL HISTORY

IN THIS CHAPTER we

- Examine the occurrence of medieval coursework in higher education.
- Consider reasons for transforming course expectations.
- Analyze development of course outcomes.
- Explore rationale for changing assessment practices.
- Review the historical foundations of project-based learning.

Current Perceptions of Medieval Studies

Collegiate instructors at every level have observed developments in educational scholarship that propose intriguing, fascinating, and (dare we say it?) *innovative* ideas for restructuring the traditional classroom experience.¹ Many of these ideas have proven effective in a research setting with externally funded tools and dedicated support staff; in settings where students are opting-in to activities outside of their credit-bearing classes; or as a siloed instructional plan that engages students with a particular text in a new way. However, it is more uncommon to find a methodology or curricular framework that can be practically, meaningfully implemented into day-to-day teaching. Whether due to the requisite faculty research burden, the sisyphian struggle to conquer administrative tasks, or simply lack of experience, many collegiate history instructors have a difficult time implementing new teaching strategies into their courses, even those strategies that already have a track record of success in a school setting.² The project-based strategies presented here will provide evidence-based, sensible ideas that the authors hope our colleagues will consider adapting to their own medieval history classrooms.

The underlying contextual basis for these strategies and ideas is understanding undergraduate students' perception of the field of medieval studies and their prior experience with it. For an overwhelming majority of students, an undergraduate medieval survey may be their only exposure to the Middle Ages in their collegiate careers, even if they attend a four-year institution. For students at a two-year institution, often the only option in the course catalogue is the first half of a Western Civilizations course

¹ Joshua Eyler, *How Humans Learn: The Science and Stories Behind Effective College Teaching* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2018), 149–70.

² Michael Klymkowsky and Melanie Cooper, "Now for the Hard Part: The Path to Coherent Curricular Design," *Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Education* 40, no. 4 (July–August 2012): 271–72; Melanie Cooper, Sonia Underwood, Caleb Hilley, and Michael Klymkowsky, "Development and Assessment of a Molecular Structure and Properties Learning Progression," *Journal of Chemical Education* 89, no. 11 (2012), 1351–57.

sequence. In the state of Texas, for example, there are 142 regionally accredited institutions that offer history courses. Seventy-one of those are community colleges. Between the 2015–2016 and 2019–2020 academic years, only *one* community college listed a course with significant medieval history content, not including those with Western Civilizations.³ Twenty-one institutions did not even offer Western Civilizations. As of the 2017–2018 school year, Texas community colleges enrolled 1,055,021 students, as compared to 1,117,044 students enrolled in four-year institutions in the same time frame.⁴ That is, just under half of all college students in Texas will likely only have a single unit during one semester to learn about the Middle Ages. Even then, there is no guarantee the instructors have been formally trained as medievalists. Nationally, student enrollment may indicate a similar concern, as there were 8,885,098 community college students and 13,264,308 undergraduate students in four-year institutions during the 2017–2018 school year.⁵ If we consider the number of students transferring from two-year to four-year institutions, the numbers look even more dire.

New undergraduates in the United States are unlikely to have had much exposure during their secondary (high school) years, either. Twenty states do not leave students in publicly-funded schools any opportunity to engage meaningfully with medieval history if they graduate with the required minimum social studies coursework.⁶ In twenty-two states, students' primary opportunity to receive medieval content is during a required world history course. Such trends apply to advanced courses, too. Beginning with the 2018–2019 school year, College Board removed the pre-modern curriculum for their Advanced Placement (AP) European and World History courses, meaning students enrolled in this advanced coursework will only engage in content from 1450 CE to the present.⁷ Thankfully, some adjustments have been made to this chronology. Stu-

3 The authors have compiled this data from publicly available course catalogues.

4 US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), twelve-month enrollment component 2018–19 provisional data. <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/Search>, accessed March 2, 2020.

5 US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). twelve-month enrollment component 2018–19 provisional data. <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/Search>, accessed March 2, 2020.

6 "Graduation Requirements for the Class of 2015: A 50-State Look," Achieve, November 16, 2016, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://www.achieve.org/resources/graduation%20requirements/publication>; "Civic Education Policies: High School Graduation Requirements—December 2016," Education Commission of the States, December 2016, accessed February 22, 2022, <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/MBQuest2RTANW?Rep=CIP1601S>.

7 *AP European History: Course and Exam Description—Fall 2019* (New York: College Board, 2019), 7; Alia Wong, "The Controversy Over Just How Much History AP World History Should Cover," *The Atlantic*, June 13, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/06/ap-world-history-controversy/562778/>. College Board describes itself as "a mission-driven not-for-profit organization that connects students to college success and opportunity. Founded in 1900, College Board was created to expand access to higher education. Today, the membership association is made up of over 6,000 of the world's leading educational institutions and is dedicated to promoting excellence and equity in education. Each year, College Board helps more than seven million students prepare for a successful transition to college through programs and services in college readiness

dents enrolled in AP World History for the 2019–2020 school year covered content from 1200 CE to the present, and College Board has committed itself to developing an AP World History: Ancient course and exam provided there is enough interest.⁸ Whatever the result, students will still receive minimal medieval content in a World History course and the European history course still starts at 1450. Moreover, the 100,655 students who took the AP European history exam in May 2019 comprise less than 1 percent of enrolled high school students in the United States, and less than 3 percent each of the eleventh or twelfth graders most likely to take the test.⁹ In even starker comparison, the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, while offering a number of opportunities for medieval history content, is statistically insignificant at this scale, where there are fewer than 11,000 candidates in all of North and South America.¹⁰

All this is not to suggest there should be a ubiquitous inclusion of the Middle Ages in courses of study at the secondary or collegiate level, only to illustrate that the average experience with the Middle Ages of a student entering college in the United States is minimal, at best. This demonstrates, too, that any time spent with students in the medieval world is precious, indeed. Students that likely have very little knowledge of the Middle Ages during their secondary education are equally unlikely to gain much more exposure to it during their collegiate tenure. That is, even for students whose futures include graduate education in medieval history, they are more likely than not entering their undergraduate journey with little explicit instruction on medieval history. It is thus critical for the public perception of the Middle Ages by future members of the general public (in other words, college students) that their minimal exposure to medieval history through a survey course is handled deftly and carefully to ensure instructors are utilizing effective teaching strategies and resources that allow a course to communicate the essential characteristics of the medieval world to a student likely learning about it for the first time. Equally important for the future of medieval historical studies is that students who are predisposed to pursue it as a career are captured through course

and college success—including the SAT, the Advanced Placement Program, and BigFuture. The organization also serves the education community through research and advocacy on behalf of students, educators, and schools.”

8 *AP World History: Modern: Course and Exam Description—Fall 2019* (New York: College Board, 2019); “AP World History: Modern: Course and Exam Development,” AP Central, effective Fall 2020, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/pdf/ap-world-history-modern-course-and-exam-description.pdf?course=ap-world-history-modern>.

9 “Student Score Distributions: AP Exams—May 2019,” <https://secure-media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/pdf/research/2019/Student-Score-Distributions-2019.pdf>, accessed February 22, 2022; US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Statistics of Public Elementary and Secondary School Systems, 1980–81; Common Core of Data (CCD), “State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education,” 1985–86 through 2016–17; and National Elementary and Secondary Enrollment Projection Model, 1972 through 2028. (This table was prepared March 2019.)

10 “The IB Diploma Programme Provisional Statistical Bulletin: November 2019 Examination Session,” International Baccalaureate Organization, 2020, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://www.ibo.org/contentassets/bc850970f4e54b87828f83c7976a4db6/dp-statistical-bulletin-november-2019.pdf>.

experiences which mirror professional experiences (a hallmark of project-based learning) that make the field an attractive academic field to medieval historians.

A common hurdle will be addressing medieval preconceptions students have acquired through popular media while avoiding reducing an entire survey course to addressing various iterations of “Darke Age” and medievalisms. This is not a new problem for medieval historians. Charles Homer Haskins addressed this issue nearly a century ago, contending that, “Both continuity and change are characteristic of the Middle Ages,” but “This conception runs counter to ideas widely prevalent not only among the unlearned but among many who ought to know better. To these the Middle Ages are synonymous with all that is uniform, static, and unprogressive. ‘Mediaeval’ is applied to anything outgrown.”¹¹ That is, if college instructors are to show students the dynamism and diversity of the medieval world, we must meet them where they are, both intellectually and culturally, and more scholarship from medieval historians is needed that reflects such effort. Journals such as *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching* would reasonably reflect this kind of work, but their entries overwhelmingly address teaching medieval literary topics and skew towards English literature, in particular.¹²

Cliff Rogers’ project, “Quantifying Siege Warfare in the Middle Ages” is a prime example of student-centred learning that is authentic and effective, but unrealistic for most collegiate settings.¹³ In this project, Rogers, professor of history at West Point, engages his small group of cadets in intensive workshops, during which they interact directly with texts about the Hundred Years War in order to quantify particular linguistic instances in them and gain insight in the role of siege warfare during the Hundred Years War. They are doing scholarly research guided by Rogers and will be co-authors on the publications that result from the project. For any student of the Middle Ages, much less the undergraduates participating in Rogers’ initiative, there is no better experience that illustrates what academic historians do than investigating primary sources, presenting the finding of that investigation at a conference, and eventually publishing that research in a peer-reviewed journal.¹⁴ Yet, opportunities like this are the exception, not the norm. The setting of a highly selective military academy provides an environment that is conducive to the very kind of academic activity Rogers is pursuing. Most undergraduate students engaged in the study of medieval history will not be guided with an individual-

11 Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), 3.

12 “SMART Back Issues,” *Studies on Medieval and Renaissance Teaching* (Wichita: Wichita State University, 2020), accessed February 22, 2022, https://www.wichita.edu/academics/fairmount_college_of_liberal_arts_and_sciences/smart/backissueSMART2.phpno. 2019spring.

13 Clifford Rogers, “Ongoing Research Projects,” https://www.westpoint.edu/history/profile/clifford_rogers, accessed March 1, 2020; Peter Konieczny, “Interview with Clifford Rogers,” *Medieval Warfare Podcast*, June 18, 2019, <http://medievalwarfare.libsyn.com/mw16-researching-military-history>, accessed March 1, 2020.

14 Clifford Rogers, “Medieval Military History II: Conducting an Undergraduate Research Lab,” 54th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Michigan, May 9–12, 2020, <https://wmich.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/u434/2019/medieval-congress-program-2019.pdf>, accessed March 1, 2020.

Table 1.1. Common Framework for Undergraduate Medieval History Courses

Targeted Learning Goals	
<p><i>Think critically about the nature of the past</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognize an expanded geographic view of medieval Europe Describe patterns of continuity and change over time during the Middle Ages Understand the medieval era was not monolithic, but a collection of complex cultural relationships Master core content within the chronological scope of the Middle Ages <p><i>Develop basic historical skills</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluate primary sources in the medieval milieu Read/critique scholarly publications Construct evidence-based arguments Engage in discussion/debate of critical topics Navigate basic research tools 	
Grade Weight	Assessments
15 percent	Discussion and Classroom Participation
30 percent	Written Assessments
40 percent	Examinations
5 percent	Quizzes
10 percent	Projects

ized or small group mentoring relationship that Rogers is able to provide, but through courses that allow students to meet their general education requirement or as part of a degree program requirement. This novitiate audience needs to have an intentionally constructed curriculum with clear student learning outcomes, assessment framework, and pedagogical choices, such as project-based learning, that support students in a community of learners instead of as monolithic objects of instruction if the study of the Middle Ages has any hope of being appropriately interpreted, and if medieval studies has any designs to recruit students to be our successors.

Revising Expectations in the Medieval Survey

As the preceding section has suggested, collegiate instructors would be well served in adjusting both their expectations of student competencies in undergraduate history courses and what the learning outcomes of those courses ought to be. Additionally, students are generally not coming to post-secondary education with any knowledge of the Middle Ages, and instructional time is often limited. Project-based learning (PBL) is a pedagogical framework that can be used to establish student-centred methods of instruction that lead to development of historical skills in the medieval history classroom. However, in order to frame how PBL strategies can be implemented, it is first necessary to describe the broader landscape of undergraduate medieval history courses

in order to reasonably suggest a reorientation of commonly used instructional practices. To do this, we wanted to establish what the most common learning objectives are in undergraduate medieval history courses and how instructors typically assess students' progress towards those goals. We surveyed a wide variety of undergraduate medieval history courses from across the United States from the last decade or so, and categorized them according to the standards that resulted from the American Historical Association's 2016 Tuning Project.¹⁵ All told, we identified and reviewed over 360 unique student learning outcomes, and over 530 unique assessments. We aggregated the most commonly used learning goals and assessments to write the learning goals and inform the grading weights in Table 1.1.

The most common Targeted Learning Goals are generally unsurprising, though it should be noted that learning outcomes specifying content and knowledge acquisition were twice as common as any other category. Overwhelmingly, summative assessments (such as mid-term exams or final course papers) were preferred to formative assessments (such as quizzes and writing responses), with summative assessments typically making up about 70 percent or more of the final course grade. A majority of courses rightfully place an emphasis on summative writing assessments, usually some combination of primary source responses and essays that require students to summarize assigned primary source readings combined with additional material from lectures and secondary reading assignments. Undergraduate instructors seem to agree that this type of assessment should be the primary method of evaluating a basic mastery of medieval content areas and historical literacy. Summative examinations were nearly universal across the surveyed courses, typically composed of a combination of constructed-response and selected-response questions. Constructed-response questions include short answer questions, key term identification, and brief essays. Selected-response questions include multiple-choice, matching, and fill-in-the-blank. Explicit formative assessment in these courses typically included participatory assignments such as in-class discussion, web-based discussion boards, and the ever-vague "participation" category. These assessments typically revolve around a curated list of major themes or topics in preparation for summative assessments, to reinforce the targeted learning goals of the course, and to track student comprehension of course material.

Yet, rarely is there explicit mention of instructional time dedicated to developing the necessary historical skills that would allow students to be more successful on these assessments. Experiential learning will occur during the course of a semester, of course, but relying on students to acquire these skills largely on their own is not likely to produce the desired learning outcomes nor generate student disciplinary interest. This is nothing new to education either, as teachers have been noting for millennia that instruction is more effective if it supports students' natural interests in the field ("*hinc satis elucet maiorem habere vim ad discenda ista liberam curiositatem quam meticulosam necessitatem,*" or: So it is perfectly clear that untrammelled curiosity is a more effective

15 The full results of our college course survey can be found in Appendix D.

aid to learning than any pressure born from fear) and it is differentiated to accommodate different type of learners.¹⁶

As mentioned, in a North American secondary school setting, most students will encounter the Middle Ages in a world history course or an advanced elective course such as AP European History or an IB history course with a content focus on Europe and the Mediterranean. Student competency in these courses is ultimately judged in ultra-high stakes summative assessments through a district/state standardized test that affects high school graduation or an AP/IB exam that determines a student's ultimate success or failure in the course. Much has been said about the flawed use of high-stakes testing to track student progress and competency, but this assessment model has negatively affected instruction, too, by narrowing strategies to focus on test preparation in order for instructors to meet accountability goals and decreasing instructional time in non-tested subjects.¹⁷ And indeed, many social studies instructors have observed decreased instructional time for their content because it is not a tested subject.¹⁸ Narrowing curriculum and decreased instructional time contrast with the consensus standards of collegiate instructors displayed in Tables A.1 and A.2 (see Appendix A) that emphasize skills and competencies best developed through formative assessments that take more time and a reduced role for summative assessments.¹⁹

Contrasting with the systematized content and learning goals of AP/IB and state educational standards, medieval history (and medieval studies) has no definitive set of content or process standards in either an undergraduate or secondary school setting in the United States by which to rate student progress or competency and, to our knowledge, no large-scale qualitative analysis of medieval history courses has ever been attempted.²⁰ That is, there is no way to determine whether or not students are actually learning

16 Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, ed. J. J. O'Donnell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), bk. 1, chap. 14. Translation taken from Loeb Classical Library, available online.

17 Michael Hout and Stuart Elliott, eds., *Incentives and Test-Based Accountability in Education*, National Research Council (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2011); Kevin Welner and William Mathis, *Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act: Time to Move Beyond Test-Focused Policies*, (Vancouver: British Columbia Teachers' Federation, 2015); Joan Herman, "The Effects of Testing on Instruction," in *Redesigning Accountability Systems for Education*, ed. Susan Fuhrman and Richard Elmore (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), 141–66; Daniel Koretz, *The Testing Charade: Pretending to Make Schools Better* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), esp. 1–11, 21–36; Anonymous, *From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 4 of the No Child Left Behind Act* (Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy, 2006), 95–96.

18 "Learning Less: Public School Teachers Describe a Narrowing Curriculum," Farkas Duffett Research Group, March 2012, 5–7, 11, 13, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/cc-learning-less-mar12.pdf>.

19 Paul Black and Dylan William, "Assessment and Classroom Learning," *Assessment in Education* 5, no. 1 (March 1998): 7–74; Paul Black and Dylan William, "Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards through Classroom Assessment," *Phi Delta Kappan Magazine* 80, no. 2 (October 1998): 139–48; Paul Black, Christine Harrison, Clare Lee, Bethan Marshall, and Dylan William, "Working Inside the Black Box: Assessment for Learning in the Classroom," *Phi Delta Kappan Magazine* 86, no. 1 (September 2004): 8–21.

20 Our research resulted in precisely one attempt to establish content standards for a medieval

something in a medieval history course beyond localized, anecdotal evidence and tracking course evaluations. Lacking the robust quantitative models for student growth used by the educational entities, the suggestion of this book is that medieval history instructors would be well-served by using an intentionally designed course utilizing an evidence-based, established pedagogical approach like project-based learning that will not only result in a more effective and positive learning experiences for secondary and post-secondary students, but also provide a framework from which student learning can be more formally evaluated.²¹ Such evaluations would allow instructors to track changing trends in students' interests in medieval history, adjust assessments based on student performance, and provide evidence for tenure-track instructors on the effectiveness of their teaching.

At the same time, medieval history instructors are affected by and participate in the larger issues surrounding social studies education noted in this chapter, and are an integral part of their development as professional historians, but medieval history has its own particular disciplinary issues that are distinct from the American and Modern historians that predominate the historical profession in the United States.²² Medieval historians operate in a pre-modern world whose extant evidence was produced primarily by a powerful minority who directed how historical memory and meaning was constructed.²³ In addition, the popularity of medievalisms and modern presentations of medieval topics makes for a field that must be carefully navigated to avoid cultural misappropriations for current political perspectives and prevent students from falling into anachronistic interpretations that depict the Middle Ages as a less interesting version of Middle Earth or Westeros.²⁴ There has been at least one significant call to develop a disciplinary frame-

history course: Timothy Hall, "Medieval Studies: A Standards Based Approach," *Scientia Scholae* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2005).

21 "The Impact of Formative Assessment and Learning Intentions on Student Achievement," Hanover Research, August 2014, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://www.hanoverresearch.com/media/The-Impact-of-Formative-Assessment-and-Learning-Intentions-on-Student-Achievement.pdf>; W. James Popham, *Transformative Assessment* (Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2008), 15–23; Ceyhun Ozan and Remzi Kincal, "The Effects of Formative Assessment on Academic Achievement, Attitudes toward the Lesson, and Self-Regulation Skills," *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice* 18, no. 1 (February 2018): 85–118.

22 See, for instance, *46th Directory of History Departments, Historical Organizations, and Historians, 2020–2021* (n. pl.: American Historical Association, 2020). A digital version that is continuously updated exists, but it requires being a member of the AHA, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/directories>.

23 See, for instance, Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Rosamond McKitterick, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Leah Shopkow, *History and Community: Norman Historical Writing in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1997); Elma Brenner, Meredith Cohen, and Mary Franklin-Brown, *Memory and Commemoration in Medieval Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

24 Walter Kudrycz, "New Romantics: Literature, Literacy, and Late Twentieth-Century Understandings of the Middle Ages," in *The Historical Present: Medievalism and Modernity* (New York:

work by Vicky Gunn and Leah Shopkow more than a decade ago, which they state will require “an openness to the dynamic complexities of both learning and teaching and their impact on how a discipline develops.”²⁵ It is the argument of some that a concerted effort on developing good teaching practices is to the benefit of students’ educational success and the reformation of humanities fields that have seen progressively fewer graduates and majors over the last fifteen years.²⁶ Gunn suggests a shift away from “transmission and delivery” in favour of “mutual practical hermeneutics” in order to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population of students, cultural issues which the field of medieval studies has responded to in recent memory with the rapid growth of studies on race and racism in the Middle Ages and an effort by professional societies to ensure that statements of diversity and inclusion are clearly communicated to their members and the public.²⁷ The goal, Shopkow continues, should be to work *with* students to generate new knowledge and new interpretations, moving away from the traditional model which does not serve the best learning interests of students. However, looking at two publications devoted to teaching the Middle Ages, *The Once and Future Classroom* (previously *Scientia Scholae*) published by the Teaching Association for Medieval Studies (TEAMS) and *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching*, it is clear that what medievalists generally consider good teaching is coming up with innovative ways to administer core content rather than investigating broader instructional methodologies.²⁸

Gunn and Shopkow suggested collaborative teaching, active learning, diversifying instructional modalities, and starting to critically evaluate the teaching practices of medieval history as potential avenues of progress. Project-based learning provides one framework of possible solutions which, if implemented, will provide useful data for further investigation into medieval teaching practices. The targeted learning goals and assessment models observed in our undergraduate survey have been compared to widely adopted secondary school history and social studies standards. Three examples

Continuum, 2011), 191–216; James Smith, “Medievalisms of Moral Panic: Borrowing the Past to Frame Fear in the Present,” in *Studies in Medievalism XXV: Medievalism and Modernity*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2016), 157–72; Erin Labbie, “Pop Medievalism,” in *Studies in Medievalism XXIV: Medievalism on the Margins*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2015), 21–30.

25 Vicky Gunn and Leah Shopkow, “Doing SoTL in Medieval History: A Cross-Atlantic Dialogue,” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 6, no. 3 (Oct. 2007): 255–71 at 267.

26 Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education, *The Future of Undergraduate Education: The Future of America* (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2017), 12.

27 Gunn and Shopkow, “Doing SoTL in Medieval History,” 260; Jonathan Hsy and Julie Orlemanski, “Race and Medieval Studies: A Partial Bibliography,” *Postmedieval* 8, no. 4 (December 2017): 500–31; Chris Jones, Conor Kostick, and Klaus Oschema, eds., *Making the Medieval Relevant: How Medievalists are Revolutionising the Present* (Berlin, De Gruyter, 2019); “Race, Racism and the Middle Ages,” *The Public Medievalist*, February 2017 to present, <https://www.publicmedievalist.com/race-racism-middle-ages-toc/>, accessed February 22, 2022

28 C. T. Wood, “In Medieval Studies, is ‘To Teach’ a Transitive Verb?” *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 3–13; F. Kiefer, “Renaissance Design: An Interdisciplinary Approach,” *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 3–13.

are noted here, with additional content frameworks provided in Appendix A. Notably, the process standards from the *C3 Framework for Social Studies Standards* adopted by twenty-three US states, the results of the American Historical Association's (AHA) 2016 Tuning Project, and the most recent modification of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for Social Studies seem to generally align with the common elements of undergraduate medieval history courses.²⁹ The explanation for this alignment is likely medieval history faculty reflecting the broad professional standards of academic history as the AHA Tuning Project suggests, but this admittedly unremarkable data point is important to establish for a few reasons.

First, if expectations for introductory undergraduate medieval history courses had, for some reason, *not* aligned with common secondary school process standards, it would have meant that there was considerable disconnect in the expectations and standards of secondary and post-secondary history courses. In addition, if the common elements of introductory medieval history courses differed significantly from the discipline core of an organization like the AHA, it would mean medieval history, for some reason, was an outlier in academic history, thus requiring some new method of approach. As it stands, however, medieval history can be evaluated from a broader lens. Second, it is important to establish the parallels between secondary and post-secondary expectations for historical skills as the former should be preparing students for the increased rigour of the latter. However, a number of national studies have shown that students are consistently not ready for university, and state policymakers are still trying to determine what “college ready” means.³⁰ It has been established here that this discrepancy is, perhaps, not a gap in standards, but perhaps may be a gap in pedagogy and assessment. In the United States, state assessment models are either wholly selected-response questions such as the STAAR tests in Texas and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, or a combination of selected- and constructed-response questions such as Ohio's State Tests or New York's Regents Exams.³¹ Some states have opted to remove social studies assessment in favour of emphasizing more general literacy skills and to decrease the amount of testing required of students. California, for example, has not had a statewide history or social

29 19 Tex. Admin. Code §113.42.c.28–31 (2019) (Tex. Ed. Agy., TEKS for Social Studies); Michael Hansen, Elizabeth Levesque, John Valant, and Diana Quintero, *The 2018 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well Are American Students Learning?* (Washington, DC: The Brown Center on Education Policy, 2018), 21.

30 Anonymous, *The Condition of College and Career Readiness: National, 2012* (Iowa City: ACT, 2012), 7–8; Justine Radunzel and Julie Nobel, *Tracking 2003 ACT-Tested High School Graduates: College Readiness, Enrollment, and Long-Term Success*, ACT Research Report Series (Iowa City: ACT, 2012), 15; Emmy Glancy, Mary Fulton, Lexi Anderson, Jennifer Dounay Zinth, and Maria Millard, *Blueprint for College Readiness* (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 2014), 48–52; Anonymous, *Remediation: Higher Education's Bridge to Nowhere* (Indianapolis: Complete College America, 2012), 6.

31 “STAAR Released Test Questions,” Texas Education Agency, https://tea.texas.gov/student-assessment/staar_released_test_questions/, accessed February 22, 2022; “Ohio's State Tests,” Ohio Department of Education, <https://oh-ost.portal.cambiumast.com/>; “Social Studies Regents Exams,” [New York] Office of State Assessment, http://www.nysedregents.org/regents_ss.html, accessed February 22, 2022.

studies examination since 2013.³² Thus, when students enter into their college history courses with high stakes writing, they are less likely to have developed the necessary skills to demonstrate proficiency.

For most who teach medieval history, the largest impact made by the discipline is not a new methodological paradigm or groundbreaking discovery, but the education of students. Students who, perhaps only in a principled belief in the benefits of a classical liberal education, have no practical use for medieval historical content. So what benefit does the Middle Ages bring to these students' educational journey? It is the historian's toolbox, filled with techniques, strategies, and skills that benefit the intellectual, emotional, and social well-being of students. Supported by a PBL framework that has proven results, medievalists can do their part to close the college readiness gap and help ensure their students start down a path to educational and professional competency.

Yet, it is the plight of history instructors that they are left with the task of covering an overwhelming amount of content under a constrained time frame. This is especially true in an undergraduate setting. In a world history class this means as little as two weeks, or as little as four lectures, might be devoted to the Middle Ages—though admittedly every other geographic area and historical era is under similar constraints. However, even in a dedicated medieval survey, covering a thousand years of history from three continents, dozens of cultures, and a complex interaction of peoples far removed from our modern experience is an impossible task, especially so for introductory classes with many students who are encountering the Middle Ages for the first time. This results in instructors including as much critical content as they reasonably can and, even then, important subjects are excised. The historian's toolbox is often laid aside in these courses, as there is minimal time for assessment, much less research methods. PBL offers instructors an alternative. Rather than loading students down with as much information as possible, students can focus on learning deeply about fewer topics while learning the skills of a historian so that at any point they can investigate historical events in a way that allows them to make connections between past, present, and future.

The rich landscape of medieval history is a perfect backdrop for the development of authentic historical skills.³³ For many students, medieval primary sources are difficult to dissect because the translated grammar does not always align with students' prior reading experiences, there are key terms that lack any significance upon a first reading, and the author's point of reference is far-removed from anything relatable to digitally-native students.³⁴ Take this example, written by an Oxford student to his father in the early thirteenth century:

32 Nancy McTygue, "What You Need to Know about California's New History-Social Science Framework," California History-Social Science Project, July 14, 2016, accessed February 22, 2022, [https://www.scooe.org/plisd/history/Documents/Framework percent20Q percent20and percent20A percent20from percent20CHSSP.pdf](https://www.scooe.org/plisd/history/Documents/Framework%20Q%20and%20A%20from%20CHSSP.pdf).

33 Tricia Seifert, Kathleen Goodman, Nathan Lindsay, James Jorgensen, Gregory Wolniak, Ernest Pascarella, and Charles Blaich, "The Effects of Liberal Arts Experiences on Liberal Arts Outcomes," *Research in Higher Education* 49 (2008): 107–25.

34 Ane Linvedt, "Teaching Students to Interpret Documents," *Perspectives on History* 42, no. 9

B. to his venerable master A., greeting. This is to inform you that I am studying at Oxford with the greatest diligence, but the matter of money stands greatly in the way of my promotion, as it is now two months since I spent the last of what you sent me. The city is expensive and makes many demands; I have to rent lodgings, buy necessaries, and provide for many other things which I cannot now specify. Wherefore I respectfully beg your paternity that by the promptings of divine pity you may assist me, so that I may be able to complete what I have well begun. For you must know that without Ceres and Bacchus Apollo grows cold.³⁵

For course content, this is a good source to use because it can be assigned to students in its entirety or with complementary sources, it is an experience relatable to students, and it opens course options to discuss the development of the medieval universities and learning communities. “Promotion,” “necessaries,” “paternity,” “divine pity,” and the three Roman gods are likely stumbling blocks for students, but they will still be able to communicate the general message of the letter—send more money, dad. The goal of readings like this one is to get students to engage with the medieval past on its own terms, master some basic medieval content, and use it as a tool to teach a historical skill. One traditional method of incorporating this source into a course would be to spend five or ten minutes connecting it to the topics and themes of the lecture it was attached to, then include it on some assessment later in the course. But the traditional methods of doing so seem to be failing in schools and on campuses across the US.³⁶

Instructors should be moving away from the transmittal model of lectures and slides being passed from instructor to student, opting instead for a more active learning model such as PBL that increases opportunities for interactions between instructors and students, which has been convincingly shown to increase student achievement in information processing and production.³⁷ From the perspective of PBL, the student letter above becomes a much different historical object. It is an unremarkable text uninvolved with any notable historical event or person, but it is an exemplar of history from the bottom that is essential for anyone interpreting the past in the last sixty years. Students do not have to rely on a short italicized introductory paragraph to explain the basic context of the letter; they instead begin formulating questions and avenues of inquiry. This may lead students to investigate what Oxford was like in the Middle Ages, or what daily life in the thirteenth century required, or what sort of classical knowledge existed in medieval England. All of these are worthy subjects of investigation that will require students to master fundamental medieval content areas and historical skills in the course of inquiry. In this context, the course instructor gives up control of content direction in favour of skill acquisition.

(December 2004): 23–25; available online.

35 Charles Homer Haskins, trans., “The Life of Medieval Students as Illustrated by Their Letters,” *The American Historical Review* 3, no. 2 (January 1898): 210. Original is in London, British Library, Add. MS 8167, fol. 104.

36 Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1–33.

37 Adrianna Kezar and Dan Maxey, “Faculty Matter: So Why Doesn’t Everyone Think So?” *Thought and Action* (Fall 2014): 30–31.

Rethinking Outcomes for Meaningful Learning

Establishing realistic student learning outcomes is essential if a course is going to be held accountable for an authentic learning experience. However, more than a few historians have criticized their utility. Molly Worthen and Erik Gilbert, for example, have both written opinion pieces lambasting the practical utility of both assessment and student learning outcomes, arguing that assessment largely contributed to the problem of administrative redundancy in higher education and has no measurable, positive impact on student learning.³⁸ Worthen and Gilbert affirm that instructors simply do not want to assess students beyond a bare minimum and that even if they did, the type of learning historians need to evaluate is exceedingly difficult to measure. On the other hand, it may be that history departments (and many other departments, for that matter) are using bad methodologies and poor data collection tools because their training and expertise is on historical methods and research, not educational methods and research.³⁹

Though the debate around assessment in this context is about institutional assessment, it should impact instructors' perspectives on course assessment. That is, the fundamental purpose of assessment is to establish what a student should be learning, then determine whether or not a student is learning it. There need not be lock-step agreement amongst instructors about specific learning outcomes, but as noted it would be unusual if an instructor's desired learning outcomes in any given undergraduate history course differed greatly from the core competencies and learning outcomes established by the American Historical Association's 2016 Tuning Project (see Appendix A.2). Student learning outcomes can be written haphazardly in order to fulfill departmental or accreditation requirements, but taking the time to intentionally create them is a key component in effective instruction.⁴⁰ Many instructors may approach student learning outcomes on an individual course basis, but there is an opportunity to align these outcomes across courses, a department, or college.⁴¹ Student learning outcomes provide meaningful opportunities for collaboration within a department and across disciplines, but only if there is buy-in from instructors.⁴² Student learning outcomes should also be

38 Molly Worthen, "The Misguided Drive to Measure 'Learning Outcomes,'" *New York Times*, February 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/23/opinion/sunday/colleges-measure-learning-outcomes.html>; Erik Gilbert, "An Insider's Take on Assessment: It May Be Worse Than You Thought," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 12, 2018, www.chronicle.com/article/An-Insider-s-Take-on/242235.

39 David Eubanks, "A Guide for the Perplexed," *Intersection: Journal of the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education* (Fall 2017), 4–13 at 4.

40 What Works Clearinghouse, *Using Student Achievement Data to Support Instructional Decision Making* (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2009).

41 Trudy Banta and Catherina Palomba, *Assessment Essentials: Planning, Implementing, and Improving Assessment in Higher Education*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 16–30, 41–53.

42 C. J. Grindley, A. Bernal-Carlo, S. Brennan, P. Frenz-Belkin, R. Gampert, I. Li, C. Mangino, and L. Zoe, "Pulling It All together: Connecting Liberal Arts Outcomes with Departmental Goals through General Education," *Peer Review* 12, no. 1 (2010): 27–29.

measurable, that is, the instructor should be able to determine whether or not students are approaching, meeting, or exceeding the expectations associated with a given learning outcome.

From the data collected in our undergraduate course survey, it is clear that instructors think that students' primary purpose in an undergraduate medieval history course should be content acquisition, and the preferred method for assessing student achievement of learning outcomes is either through examinations or written assignments. The highest frequency of assessments also reflect this emphasis with constructed response exams (15.3 percent), primary source reviews (12.9 percent), essays with 1,000–1,999 words (9.5 percent), and participation (9.3 percent) holding the top spots. This data prompts questions about instructional intent. Based on the descriptions provided for their student learning objectives, learning how to create a historical narrative and argument was only cited in 10 percent of learning objectives despite writing assessments being weighed heavily on assessing students' learning and being the among the common types of assessments given in a course. So, this means that either there is a disconnect between student expectations articulated by instructors and the subsequent evaluation of those expectations, or that the kind of writing instructors are expecting students to do does not involve creating historical narratives and arguments. About one-fourth of the 34.61 percent weight given to writing assignments were essays which, based on descriptions provided in the syllabi, the authors are interpreting as assessments intended to demonstrate the basic tenets of historical argumentation that includes providing evidence and support from primary and secondary sources. These expectations should be made clearer to students, many of whom have yet to have any substantial experience writing at a collegiate level, much less have proficiency at it.⁴³

Based on how student learning objectives were written and assessments designed, medieval history instructors would benefit from a more structured student learning outcome development process. Ronald Carriveau, for example, offers an accessible three-level model for student learning outcomes that instructors can place into their syllabi immediately, offering a useful framework from which to build assessments with targeted learning goals.⁴⁴ The basic tenet of this framework is to distinguish overarching pedagogical goals from course specific learning targets, thus more easily allowing an instructor to provide information to their department or institution on overly vague institutional student learning outcomes like “critical thinking,” while at the same time providing students clearer connections between assessments and course expectations. For example, a course from 2016 titled “Late Medieval Europe” offered at a four-year public institution includes a student learning outcome with the expectation to “Learn to read primary sources critically and secondary sources analytically.” While a good outcome to target for students, assigning specific assessments to measure this goal is prob-

43 National Center on Education and the Economy, *What Does It Really Mean to Be College Ready? The English Literacy Requirements of First Year Community College Students* (Washington, DC: National Center on Education and the Economy, 2013), 21–23.

44 Ronald Carriveau, *Connecting the Dots: Developing Student Learning Outcomes and Outcome Based Assessments*, 2nd ed. (Sterling: Stylus, 2016), chap. 1.

lematic: a history course based largely on primary and secondary sources could reasonably include every assessment as part of this measure, thus diluting the usefulness of assessment to measure student learning progress. The matter further devolves for this course as no assessment descriptions or explanations are provided beyond their titles. This lack of detail prevents students from establishing clear expectations for the course, and makes it harder for the instructor to ensure their assessments are providing measurable information about student learning. Even if the instructor might add additional detail during lecture, any undergraduate instructor knows how little attention students typically pay during the explanation of a syllabus. In this structure, exemplar student learning outcomes for a medieval history survey might look like the examples below:

1. Students will demonstrate a basic understanding of diverse cultures.
 - 1.1 Students will analyze human culture in the context of the medieval world.
 - 1.1.1 Students will recognize how humans in the past shaped their own unique historical moments and were shaped by those moments.
 - 1.1.2 Students will interpret the complexity and diversity of situations, events, and past mentalities.
 - 1.2 Students will infer the impact of medieval cultures on the present.
 - 1.2.1 Students will compare eras and regions of the Middle Ages in order to define enduring issues.
 - 1.2.2 Students will apply historical knowledge, skills, and habits of mind to the problems of the present world.
2. Students will demonstrate an understanding of the chronology, facts, and major events of medieval Europe from 500 to 1500 CE.
 - 2.1 Students will analyze the role of significant people and groups in medieval history during major events from 500 to 1500 CE.
 - 2.1.1 Students will analyze the role of significant people and groups in medieval history during major events from 500 to 1000 CE.
 - 2.1.2 Students will analyze the role of significant people and groups in medieval history during major events from 1000 to 1500 CE.
 - 2.2 Students will demonstrate an understanding of continuity and change in medieval European society, politics, and culture.
 - 2.2.1 Students will describe the major events of medieval Europe from 500 to 1500 CE.
 - 2.2.2 Students will explain the central role of religion in medieval society.
 - 2.2.3 Students will evaluate the varying roles that certain demographics played in society including women, peasants, nobles, slaves, merchants, clergy, pagans, and soldiers.

3. Students will read critically and analytically.
 - 3.1 Students will interpret and analyze primary sources.
 - 3.1.1 Students will understand past events from multiple perspectives.
 - 3.1.2 Students will develop empathy for people in their unique historical moments.
 - 3.2 Students will interpret and analyze secondary sources.
 - 3.2.1 Students will summarize, compare, and synthesize scholars' historical arguments
 - 3.2.2 Students will evaluate scholarly arguments, explaining how they were constructed and might be improved.
4. Students will create historical narratives and arguments.
 - 4.1 Students will demonstrate proficiency in crafting organized, well-supported responses to historical questions about the major events in medieval Europe from 500 to 1500 CE.
 - 4.1.1 Students will compose writing artifacts that detail the causal factors of major events in medieval Europe
 - 4.1.2 Students will present an argument derived from the fundamental processes of historical research and writing.

The subsequent development of assessments to measure these outcomes thus becomes more straightforward because they can target specific learning outcomes. Intentional design elements of this kind are essential in a project-based learning classroom where students are likely to be working on varying topics and progressing at different paces throughout the course. Course components, conscientiously built on a foundation of specific learning outcomes, allow the instructor to be flexible in the delivery of the course to meet student needs and the students to feel more confident engaging in an academic discipline with which they have little experience.

Transforming Assessments in Medieval Coursework

Following course expectations and delivery of content, assessment is of major concern for instructors (and most students). In higher education, it is important to clarify that *assessment* here refers to the educational assessment of student learning, learning progress, and academic achievement in a given course, rather than the programmatic assessment of a departmental degree plan or institutionally driven student learning outcomes.⁴⁵ Instructors at every level are familiar with a variety of assessment types and have constructed perceptions of them and their uses based on their own educational experiences,

⁴⁵ For example, the Association of American Colleges & Universities' Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) system, <https://www.aacu.org/value>.

research, and administrative roles. In parallel, students' perception of assessment often differs dramatically from an instructor's perception. Due to this interpretive variability of assessment, it is important to establish some technical vocabulary in order to more precisely address the development and implementation of assessment and knowledge acquisition in medieval history courses. Fundamentally, assessment is a *methodological approach* that informs instruction and a *systematic evaluative process* of student learning.⁴⁶ The purposes of assessment are myriad. Paul Newton, for example, has identified seventeen distinct purposes of assessment.⁴⁷ More than a few scholars have developed similarly complicated breakdowns, but most are too diffuse to be practically utilized in a setting outside of formal education research and scholarship. Instead, the authors have synthesized some of this information with the intention of being more immediately applicable to course construction, which are adapted below from Gavin Brown's clear, precise breakdown of the complex considerations in assessment. An instructor may reflect on the following three questions during the development of their courses to ensure their assessment appropriately meets the prescribed instructional needs of the chosen course content and anticipates the learning needs of students:

- Is the assessment useful for one or more of the targeted learning outcomes in my course?
- If it is useful, when should the assessment take place during the progression of the course?
- Independent of timing, is the assessment aimed at student growth or at evaluating the quality of student achievement?

The first question tackles the intransigent opinion of some academics that spending intellectual capital on assessment construction is largely a wasted effort and that student learning outcomes only exist in syllabi to fulfill a requirement dictated by institutional administrators. Such opinions are a self-perpetuating cycle. Hastily constructed assessments linked to ill-defined learning outcomes are unlikely to be able to convincingly demonstrate how students learn in a given course. Regardless of the individual process used, student learning objectives must be both *meaningful* and *measurable* so that assessments can be created that link to specific outcomes. That is, instructors

46 Gavin Brown, *Assessment of Student Achievement* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 1; Tina Isaacs, Catherine Zara, Graham Herbert, Steven Coombs, and Charles Smith, *Key Concepts in Educational Assessment* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), 1; P. E. Rawlusk, "Assessment in Higher Education and Student Learning," *Journal of Instructional Pedagogies* 21 (October 2018): 1–34 at 2; Susan Butler and Nancy McMunn, *A Teacher's Guide to Classroom Assessment: Understanding and Using Assessment to Improve Student Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 2. See also C. Keith Waugh and Norman Gronlund, *Assessment of Student Achievement*, 10th ed. (New York: Pearson, 2013).

47 Paul Newton, "Clarifying the Purposes of Educational Assessment," *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy, and Practice* 14, no. 2 (July 2007): 149–70; Elizabeth Archer, "The Assessment Purpose Triangle: Balancing the Purposes of Educational Assessment," *Frontiers in Education* 2 (August 2017): 2; available online.

should be able to articulate the connection between course expectations and assessments in order to determine the degree to which individual students and the entire class achieved. For example, a learning objective that states students should be able to “Analyze significant issues in the Middle Ages” is a poor foundation for any assessment because it is too broad without further explanation.

In our survey of instructors who taught undergraduate medieval history courses in American colleges and universities over the last decade, we looked at over 600 individual assessments (531 unique assessments) and over 360 unique learning objectives (see Appendix D). We categorized each assessment using axial coding based on the descriptions provided, allowing up five category labels for each assessment. For example, an assessment asking students to evaluate Ernst Kantorowicz’ *The King’s Two Bodies* would be labelled as an “essay” and a “book review.” Using this methodology, 239 (39 percent) assessments were coded as including essays of varying lengths.⁴⁸ This aligns with the overall weighting given to writing assessments across all evaluated syllabi at 34.61 percent. Based on the preference of instructors for writing assessments, it should be reasonable to expect learning outcomes to reflect expectations for students to be developing skills related to the historical writing process. This was not the case. We coded each student learning outcome in the same manner as the assessments based on the American Historical Association’s Core Competencies and Learning Outcomes developed as part of the 2016 History Tuning Project. Core Competency 5, “Create historical arguments and narratives,” was used to identify student learning outcomes that explicitly mention writing, totalling only 74 (10 percent; for which see Table 1.2 as reference).

Table 1.2. Comparing Student Learning Outcomes to Assessments in Undergraduate Medieval History Courses

Learning Outcome	Percentage of unique SLOs	Assessment Type	Aggregate Percentage of Grading Weight
Building knowledge	76.9 percent	Examinations	36.44 percent
Recognizing historical complexity	34.1 percent	Writing assignments	34.61 percent
Developing methods	36.5 percent	Classroom contributions	13.58 percent
Analyzing the historical record	31.0 percent	Projects	8.17 percent
Creating historical narratives and arguments	20.3 percent	Quizzes	6.31 percent
Active citizenship	5.2 percent		

⁴⁸ If constructed response assessments are included, this rises to 275 (55.5 percent)

In short, there is a disconnect between what instructors are expecting students to be able to do from the assessments they are giving and what they are telling students they expect them to be able to do through their student learning outcomes. Similar disconnects can be observed in other categories. 37 percent of learning objectives indicate an expectation for students to engage Core Competency 1, "Building historical knowledge." This should correlate with a similar emphasis on assessments that evaluate students' summative knowledge of historical content, largely through exams and quizzes with selected and/or constructed responses. Yet, only 90 (18 percent) of assessments were exams, weighted 36.44 percent overall, and 81 (16 percent) were quizzes, weighted 6.31 percent overall. Furthermore, most assessments in a medieval history course are individually created and administered by the instructor without being subjected to peer review or quality control in a manner similar to their historical scholarship. That is, both qualitatively and quantitatively, the validity and reliability of assessments in medieval history classrooms to establish an accurate measure of student learning progress and student achievement is dubious.

Instructors, then, should reconsider the default undergraduate assessment structure of three exams and a final (or final essay) for their course, and instead consider implementing intentionally constructed assessments that point at the heart of their interpretation of the fundamental characteristics of the disciplines of history and medieval studies. Our data suggests that current efforts to do so are inconsistent, at best. Instructors should consult within their department and colleagues at other institutions about the content and construction of their assessment to provide it with quality control and, critically, have an evaluative framework in place that establishes what learning progress should look like in their course for different types of students based on different demographic information and students' skill sets at the beginning of the course. Such measures will aid instructors in establishing accountability for themselves, provide meaningful evidence for continuous improvement of a course, make incorporating a co-instructor or teaching assistant much more efficient, and enable a department to quantitatively point to data that show the benefits their teaching brings to their institution.

The second question suggests the importance of implementing an assessment at an appropriate juncture to give students opportunities to close gaps. From students' perspectives, incorrectly selected responses on an exam do not provide effective constructive feedback that allows them to address deficiencies in their historical skill development, it only identifies content areas they have not mastered, either through rote memorization or analysis. That is, students primarily understand they got an answer wrong. This is not to say critical thinking and reading cannot be assessed by the instructor using multiple-choice questions, only that the average undergraduate student whose experience with assessment has largely been high stakes standardized testing in a public high school setting are more likely to associate incorrect answers with failure to achieve rather than as an opportunity for growth.⁴⁹ This can be mitigated somewhat if an instructor debriefs the class on the reasoning behind the construction of individual

49 Emer Smith and Joanna Banks, "High Stakes Testing and Student Perspectives on Teaching and Learning in the Republic of Ireland," *Educational Assessment, Evaluation, Accountability* 24 (2012):

questions, but such an instructional tool was not observed in any of the syllabi surveyed for this book, nor is it likely that instructors spend sufficient time linking individual questions to targeted student learning outcomes. For the instructor, effective assessment is as much a diagnostic exercise as it is a tool for observing student performance. That is, like any historical investigation, instructors may only use extant evidence. A richer corpus of texts usually offers the chance to interpret the past more comprehensively, argue more convincingly, and address it with greater nuance. It is not surprising, for example, to observe that scholarship on the Vandals is relatively sparse compared to something like the Hundred Years War.⁵⁰ An instructor would be hard pressed to convincingly argue they have effectively developed their students' historical and medieval skill sets based on assessments disconnected from any established learning outcomes and brief, time constrained writing assessments inconsistently graded without an intentionally designed framework of what constitutes good historical writing.

The third question opens a discussion as to whether student improvement or student performance is more important in a collegiate setting. Both have a critical place in the implementation of a course, but it is important for an instructor to intentionally and purposefully think about how their assessments balance them. In introductory history courses, this balance usually involves an instructor deciding how to distribute a reasonable reading load, rote assessments, and writing assessments. However, for the latter in particular, there is a tendency in history courses to require writing assessments without providing explicit writing instruction during the course. That is, instructors expect undergraduate students to have a certain writing competency prior to enrolling in their course, and that experience should allow them to successfully complete writing assignments. However, data has shown students are *not* prepared when they get to college. If instructors' intent is for students to become more proficient writers through critical reading and class discussion and by practicing on writing assessments throughout the semester, it must be supported by explicit instruction on how to do it. Based on the data provided above, writing can be reasonably suggested as the most common and most important form of assessment in a medieval history course. However, less than 15 percent of student learning outcomes in these same courses target writing development as a course objective and those objectives occurred in less than half of the syllabi used despite writing assessment occurring in nearly every syllabus.

Why are these writing assessments used? Is it to assess student mastery of the relationship between a designated set of primary and secondary sources? Is it because the primary product of most historians is writing of some kind, and thus writing *must* be assigned to our students? More to the point, for every instructor that at some point bemoaned the writing deficiencies of their students, what steps were taken to address those perceived deficiencies other than requiring writing assessments? There is evidence to suggest that many students do not enter college with the literacy skills necessary to succeed in college-level coursework or leave with the writing skills required for

285–88; Pedro Noguera, “How Listening to Students Can Help Schools to Improve,” *Theory into Practice* 46 no. 3 (2007): 205–11.

50 Andrew Merrills and Richard Miles, *The Vandals* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 16–26.

the workforce, but regardless of the reason, those students enroll in medieval history courses every semester.⁵¹ However, there is also evidence to suggest that students are not ill-equipped, at least not any more ill-equipped than their peers over the last century.⁵² Indeed, Andrea and Karen Lunsford found that between 1988 and 2006, first-year college students were writing more (2.5 times more on average) and that the emphasis of first-year writing programs was mostly on argumentative and research-based writing. The suggestion, therefore, is that students' ability to think critically is likely not the underlying issue in students' perceived struggle to express ideas on a page. It is, perhaps, the *assessment* that is attempting to evaluate students using a method that does not capture a realistic representation of student ability. On the other hand, state-mandated testing in high school does not emphasize an evidence-based approach to research that requires a synthesis of complex information in order to complete a writing product. State educational agencies and the College Board, for example, provide a high-stakes, closed environment in which students write by hand, without access to the internet or other research materials (though there is movement to switch to computer-based testing). The same is true for many undergraduate history surveys, often with the addition of a time constraint to fit within a single class timeslot and extends even to doctoral students in history departments who might be required to complete their comprehensive or qualifying exams in a closed office using a computer disconnected from the internet. All three settings do not reflect an authentic historical research environment in the twenty-first century if, indeed, one of the purposes of a history course is to help students develop some of the skills of the professional historian.

After all, academic writing is *hard*, and consistent writing productivity is difficult even for veteran academics.⁵³ And perhaps this requires a change in perspective for instructors, where assessment is not an indicator of performance, but used to connect an instructor to the needs of a given class.⁵⁴ The purpose of assessment should be to provide feedback to students and instructors. It should promote self-reflection for students to assert agency in their navigation of a course and their general learning process, and serve as benchmarks for instructors to identify growth areas for their students and for the continuous improvement of their course. It is thus critically important for instructors to think about the *types* of assessment a course might include. To reiterate, educational assessment refers to tasks in a course used by instructors to collect data and provide feedback about student progress, performance, and achievement. Though there are various methods of categorizing assessment, *assessment for learning*, *assessment as learning*, and *assessment of learning* are a straightforward, uncomplicated set

51 Hart Research Associates, *Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015).

52 Andrea Lunsford and Karen Lunsford, "Mistakes Are a Fact of Life," *College Composition and Communication* 59 no. 4 (June 2008): 781–806.

53 Helen Sword, *Art & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017): 78.

54 John Warner, *Why They Can't Write: Killing the Five Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 28–34, 57–72.

of terms. Instructors may be familiar with other assessment terminology such as formative/summative, low-/high-stakes, and standards-based. These terms and others, useful in their own right, seem static, suggesting that an instructor simply chooses a summative assessment or a low-stakes assessment to incorporate into their courses. Referring to assessment *for*, *as*, and *of* learning instead suggests a dynamic process which reiterates the underlying purpose of assessment is, in fact, *learning* rather than performance evaluation.

Assessment for learning is a term popularized by Paul Black and Dylan William, initially stemming from their work with The Assessment Reform Group (ARG), a group of researchers funded by the Nuffield Foundation from 1996 to 2010 that aimed to ensure assessment policy and practice incorporated evidence-based research into curricular reform throughout the United Kingdom. Assessment for learning is broadly governed by three considerations as to the underlying purpose of assessment, beginning with a diagnostic assessment of where students are in the learning process of a given content area.⁵⁵ Second, students should begin learning what they need for the course, but doing so with an explicit set of learning criteria that builds on what they already know and explains the significance of what is to be learned. Third, students are best able to pursue learning by receiving constructive feedback that has clear links to the designated learning goal(s), looking back on what has already been learned and looking ahead to what will be learned.

For example, a medieval history course might start with a discussion about what prior experience students have with medieval studies or a short survey of students' majors and academic foci. A roster of twenty students including eighteen history majors in a survey course should impact an instructor's course delivery differently than a roster of forty students including only five history majors in an upper division course. And while such factors should not dramatically change the structure of the course, it should help temper the expectations of an instructor to not over- or underestimate the basic experiences and skills of their students and provide useful information for the day-to-day preparation of class materials. Establishing this type of basic information about students does not mean learning outcomes or expectations should be altered if the instructor has established them based on research and scholarly expertise, only that the instructor will need to adapt their instructional approach on a course by course basis to appropriately support students in meeting their outcome goals. For example, establishing the impact of religion on medieval societies is a common learning outcome in medieval surveys. Teaching at a religiously-affiliated, rural, private institution where students are predominantly Protestant Christians will require the instructor to address a different set of assumptions about religion than teaching in an urban, public institution where the student body tends to be more religiously diverse. In these variable contexts, it is critical for an instructor to establish clear, explicit expectations for the course, course learning outcomes, and course assessments. This allows both instructors and students to align their own unique experiences towards the intended outcomes of the course.

55 Isaacs et al., *Key Concepts in Educational Assessment*, 8.

Historians often make the assumption that the past has intrinsic value, and these implicit assumptions often guide historians' determination of what is critical to understand it.⁵⁶ Novice historians—students—might ask “What is medieval history actually for? What does it do? Why should we bother with it?”⁵⁷ Postmodern discussions of the relative value of historical topics aside, instructors will need to address this question and questions like it, leveraging their own expertise to align with Robert Bain's argument to, first, externalize all thinking in the history classroom and, second, create cultural supports for disciplinary thinking.⁵⁸ Telling students why a source was selected and offering tools to investigate it beyond a “measuring stick” assessment is just as critical for student learning as the content of the source. These hurdles to a nuanced understanding of history can be effectively addressed in historiography courses; however, students in introductory level courses will not have the advantage of that training. History courses that have an expected outcome that asks students to understand, as one syllabus notes, “the organization of medieval society,” certainly suggests content beyond staid coverage that only provides surface level coverage of important topics. Assessments can support these goals, even a more nuanced understanding of course content, but only if they are intentionally built to do so, their intent is clearly communicated to students, post-assessment feedback is given to students to reinforce learning, and the practical impact on student achievement is such that students continue to engage in the course rather than acquiesce to instructor opinion in pursuit of maintaining their overall grade point average (GPA).

Assessment of learning is more commonly known as *summative* assessment. This type of assessment determines a student's achievement in a designated learning area at a particular moment in time based on a set of standards.⁵⁹ How useful a singular performance of a student's learning may be depends upon the quality of the assessment itself and the competency of the people analyzing the assessment results. As noted above, state-mandated, standardized tests are often portrayed as bad summative assessments, both in their ability to adequately measure a student's achievement level (i.e., a poor-quality test), and in the way the assessments are deployed (i.e., low competency analysis of results). So, if an instructor, department, college, or institution wishes to use summative assessment as an evaluative tool to measure student performance and learning, it is critical that the assessments used are *valid*, *reliable*, and *fair*.⁶⁰ Validity, here, means

56 Samuel S. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 113.

57 Marcus Bull, *Thinking Medieval* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 99.

58 Robert Bain, “Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction,” *Journal of Education* 189, no. 1/2 (2008/2009): 159–67 at 160.

59 Connie Moss, “Research on Classroom Summative Assessment,” in *Sage Handbook of Research on Classroom Assessment*, ed. James McMillan (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2013), 235–56; Isaacs et al., *Key Concepts in Educational Assessment*, 12.

60 American Education Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education, *Standard on Education and Psychological Testing*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: American Education Research Association, 2014), 11–74.

using evidence and theory to help legitimize the interpretation of a given assessment for measuring targeted learning goals. Reliability helps ensure validity by looking for consistency within the assessment and during its analysis. Fairness recommends that assessments should provide a pathway for all students to be successful on an assessment by utilizing an assessment design that is universally comprehensible, accessible, and bias-free.

To more clearly illustrate these concepts, assume there is a medieval history survey with targeted learning outcomes, first, for students to develop skills to interpret primary sources and, second, to display an understanding of key content areas in the medieval world. Consider a traditional history department undergraduate assessment that might take place during a fifty-minute lecture in this course:

- 20 percent 10 selected response questions (e.g., multiple-choice, true/false)
- 30 percent 3 short answer questions (e.g., key term/concept identifications)
- 50 percent 1 essay question

An essay question that does not include a primary source text for students to analyze will likely make this assessment not valid, as it would be difficult to determine students' primary source analysis skills based on multiple-choice questions and identifications. That is, the instructor is not aligning their assessment with the established expectations and goals of the course. In a similar way, an essay question that presents students with a cartulary to evaluate when the semester has been spent looking at lyric poetry is potentially problematic. A valid assessment would use a sample text of a similar type (lyric poetry), as an instructor can reasonably expect students to be familiar with this textual genre due to coverage during instruction. A reliable assessment can change components without significantly affecting student outcomes. That is, students *should* be able to analyze multiple examples of lyric poetry without significantly impacting their assessment results because they have already spent time doing so prior to the assessment, during which they were guided by their instructor. A fair assessment is one that allows all students the opportunity to demonstrate the extent of their skills and competency in relation to the designated learning outcomes. In this example, the fifty-minute time frame might be a consideration for an unfair assessment practice depending upon expectations for the essay question. This may also compromise the validity of the assessment if the evaluation of primary source skills is meant to represent students' mastery of a skill critical to the historical profession, rather than their ability to write well under a constrained time frame. It may be more fair to offer a take home essay, which would remove potential barriers such as testing anxiety or physical difficulties in writing swiftly. It would also allow students to readily utilize notes and research to support their work, which is much more aligned to the actual practice of professional medieval history.

The preceding example suggests basic consideration in the microcosm of the individual instructor and individual course as it is the intended audience of this book. However, validity, reliability, and fairness are applicable at the department, college, and institutional level, too. In a given department, a faculty group which regularly teaches a sequence of undergraduate medieval history courses should be comparing assess-

ments, as one instructor's perception of low student performance may be an instructional issue rather than a factor of student competency on a similarly constructed assessment—that is, the assessment may be valid, but not reliable. Such topics have never been investigated in any meaningful way in medieval studies, and deserve more attention from medieval studies scholarship, but are unfortunately outside the scope of the present project.

Assessment as learning is the meaningful application of the previous two concepts. Instructors and students should both be able to utilize assessment as a tool to establish and reinforce norms for the course and classroom, and PBL inherently uses assessment to help students achieve learning objectives. At its core, the concept of assessment is a simple act of collecting information about individuals or groups of individuals in order to better understand them. Practically, however, the primary concerns of students, mostly likely, will be on the number or letter associated with each assessment. In theory, a student receiving a “D” grade may have learned a lot during a course, but that student will still be less pleased with the negative impact on their GPA than they are enthused about their growth in critical reading and writing or increased awareness of the medieval past.⁶¹ This is the basic and eternal educational debate between student growth and student achievement, with assessment playing a crucial role. If a student received a “D” or “F,” did they fail to reach a targeted achievement level or fail to develop their academic skills to a sufficient degree? That is, what assessments did the student complete that indicated some type of poor performance? For historians, the answer may be, regrettably, unknown. Bancroft Prize recipient Anne Hyde has stated that history professors “suck at assessment,” contending that there are five general reasons for this: first, we (historians) do not want to assess; second, we do not agree about what we want students to learn; third, we are not experts in the science of learning or the complexities of assessment and testing; fourth, what we want students to learn is difficult to assess; and lastly, politics.⁶²

Hyde's concerns are a biting critique at history faculty, but they may also speak to broader issues in academia. Instructors may not want to assess because it does not help increase job stability when 73 percent of faculty positions are off tenure track and directors of graduate programs maintain the opinion that, “you don't need to be a great teacher or even a good one. Just don't be consistently bad.”⁶³ Such a perspective will undoubtedly allow students to justify taking out large loans to enroll in a course with an

61 See for instance the guidance at Rutgers University for how students may perceive how “D” and “F” grades may impact on their overall GPA: <https://soe.rutgers.edu/oas/gpa-calculation>. Wikipedia offers an introduction to “Academic grading in the United States.”

62 Anne Hyde, “Five Reasons Why History Professors Suck at Assessment,” *The Journal of American Historians* 102 no. 4 (March 2016): 1104–7.

63 “Data Snapshot: Contingent Faculty in US Higher Ed,” American Association of University Professors, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/10112018percent20Datapercent20Snapshotpercent20Tenure.pdf>; Lance Fusarelli, “If I only Knew: Reflections for New Faculty Members,” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/08/06/seasoned-faculty-member-reflects-what-he-wishes-hed-known-new-professor-opinion>.

instructor who views their course as “a waste of...valuable time.” Assessment, properly done, should be able to adapt to many teaching styles and content choices without compromising disciplinary goals. So while medievalists might disagree over choosing Warren Hollister and Judith Bennett’s textbook over Julia Smith’s or arguing about which chunks of Chaucer best illustrate medieval society, there is common agreement that a central text is useful and literature helps bring medieval society to life.

Medieval historians are not experts in the science of modern learning and assessment, nor should they be expected to be, but their institutions are likely to have a department or college where it trains future instructors and education researchers. Collaborative relationships may prove beneficial and open up additional opportunities for external funding and publication. Stanford’s History Education Group is arguably the prime example of such collaboration. Student learning is *hard* to assess, regardless of content area, and none more so than writing-heavy fields like history. The US Department of Education spent millions of dollars developing a thirteen-step Assessment Design Toolkit intended to be used by teachers, educational institutions, and state education agencies to assist in assessment construction.⁶⁴ Millions more are available through agencies such as the National Center for Education Research (NCER), which has funded over \$281 million in literacy focused grants since 2002, noting in its request for applications that “Writing is vastly understudied in comparison to reading, and despite this important skill for both communication and learning, little is known about how writing develops and how to improve writing achievement for students.” That is, writing has been recognized as important, as has its difficulty to measure. Historians are well-positioned to participate in this process.

In part, Hyde’s concerns are the purpose of this book. Our experiences in higher education and those of our colleagues have been focused on either historical topics or education research, but faculty usually lack the scholarly bandwidth and appropriate time to do both. It is the authors’ hope that the educational focus of this book provides a more accessible and practically implementable method to engage medieval history instructors in the theory and application of educational practices in an undergraduate setting.

64 “Assessment Design Toolkit,” US Department of Education, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://oese.ed.gov/assessment-design-toolkit/>.