

## **“Performing the Middle Ages and Student Learning”**

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This project reflects on the performance of medieval literature and how its performance may enhance the student’s learning experience. This research examines whether performance might allow modern readers a different means of access to medieval literary texts. Based on reception theory, which highlights the performative, and potentially re-creative, aspects of medieval literature, this research explores whether students come away with a deeper understanding of medieval literature when they re-create it in performative play rather than simply reading it. Further, it asks whether performance affects the student’s classroom experience more generally.

The teaching and learning questions that I investigated included: How can medieval literature be made relevant to today’s college students? How can a course on medieval literature be conducted in an engaging, dynamic fashion rather than the more typical lecture format that might at first glance appear to be most appropriate, especially considering the unfamiliarity of medieval literature and the foreignness of the cultural context(s) of the Middle Ages? What does student learning look like when performance of medieval literature is the primary learning activity?

Recent texts on the intersections of performance and pedagogy tend to highlight the potentially transformative role of the former in particular relation to issues of identity, and especially ethnicity, in the classroom. Such texts as *Performance Theories in Education: Power, Pedagogy, and the Politics of Identity* (edited by Bryant K. Alexander, Gary L. Anderson, and Bernardo P. Gallegos) and *Ethno-techno: Writings on Performance, Activism, and Pedagogy* (by Guillermo Gómez-Peña, edited by Elaine Peña) ground classroom pedagogy within a cultural studies framework.

As a scholar of medieval literature, I used such texts as my *point de départ*: the critical work on reception theory—as a means by which to understand medieval literature from the point of view of the audience—places a central focus upon the reception of a text as a creative interpretation. Rather than focusing on issues of identity, then, I centered my project on issues of transcultural and transhistorical perspectives, focusing specifically on how the performance of medieval literature might actively and creatively engage the students, and thereby enrich their learning.

Performance, I found, opened up a space for the dramatization of interpretation, which was useful for students to understand difficult—and rather foreign—concepts from past cultures. I encouraged the students to apply the techniques of performance in order to think critically about this rather “foreign” literature, especially when it appeared not at all dramatic in nature. Performance allowed these modern readers a different, and perhaps more accurate, access to ancient and medieval texts. The students learned to actively interpret what appeared to be simply a poem, rooted in words fixed on a page, by exploring its musical and performative contexts. Such performative re-interpretations allowed students to experience literature as it would have been often received by a medieval audience: in the space of a public reading or performance. More important, students were more actively engaged in “reading” texts from this performative perspective. This project, an inquiry into how performance and the arts, and in particular the medieval arts (lyric and other types of literature), offers new approaches to our critical goals of improving and measuring student learning. It examined the way in which the body—especially the moving, active, and engaged body—can transform the classroom experience of the usually

“passive” student, affecting positively the students’ perceptions not only of the class in specific but of the university as a whole.

In a broad sense, then, I explored the definitions of and reflections on the performance of medieval literature as a learning activity, and how it enhanced the student’s learning experience.

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