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MEDIEVAL DAY AT REYNOLDS: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY LEARNING EVENT

BY NANCY S. MORRISON

Medieval Day at Reynolds turned a typical Friday class day into an interdisciplinary learning event, which joined faculty and students into a community of learners. From classrooms issued tales of Viking and Mongol conquests, religious crusaders, deadly plague, and majestic cathedrals and art, all told by costumed faculty members with expertise in medieval studies. In the

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commons area, medieval enactors helped participants learn how to card, spin, and weave, to dance, and to use broad sword techniques. Tastings of medieval foods satisfied, and games brought laughter.

Many positive outcomes came from the event. One such outcome was the involvement of faculty, staff, and students in a single event. Sometimes it is difficult to know all of the fulltime and part-time faculty members in a college, especially if they are working in other departments

or locations. Medieval Day brought faculty from many disciplines together, connecting them in a common interest and purpose. It featured learning activities for the students, and professional development opportunities for the faculty.

Since the event provided integrated, multi-sensory, brain-based learning for all involved, another outcome for this event was that it enabled community college students to recognize the interconnectedness of their coursework. Students often lack the background knowledge to understand how many disciplines may intersect and combine to explain a specific era. This absence of essential prior knowledge leaves students staring at their instructors with blank expressions, clueless as to what is meant by references and allusions. Also, this deficiency is a disastrous problem in reading, when students cannot

understand what writers are trying to convey. Medieval Day addressed this need by providing background knowledge for participating students.

The idea for the event developed as Carolyn Quenstedt, an adjunct history instructor, and I, an Assistant Professor of Reading, met to work on ways to add reading skills to content area instruction. Our focus on students' lack of prior knowledge and their inability to understand textbook references created a desire to help them. This discussion developed into a plan to create an interdisciplinary program about a topic our students would find engaging. We wanted a topic that grabbed their attention, included new information not yet learned, and added meaningful general background knowledge and understanding. Our objective focused on building students' background knowledge and providing an enjoyable day of activities and presentations. Our feeling was that an interdisciplinary approach would encompass enough information that meaningful associations would occur, promoting retention. Additionally, the collaborative approach provided the opportunity for the college community to come together in a joining of faculty and students from different campus locations, allowing connections between disciplines and levels of accomplishment. This was a chance to get to know each other as colleagues and to learn as fellow students.

Now we needed to choose a topic. Carolyn's involvement with a reenactment group made this easy. As a long time member of the Society for Creative Anachronism, a national group concentrating on medieval times, Carolyn could connect our proposed idea to educational, hands-on demonstrations. This made possible a kinesthetic approach to learning. Harry Potter and video based medieval themed games could initiate students' interest in the program. Eureka! Now all we needed were some faculty members who could give presentations on medieval topics and had the time to prepare and present. Again, the experts and subjects came easily to mind. The ideas flowed to many different subject areas including history, art, architecture, culinary arts, engineering, physical education, horticulture, science, medicine (nursing), and of course, English. That basically covered our college's curricula.

Next, we needed to get approval from our program heads and deans. When they gave us the go ahead, we met with the college's grant advisor to see what funding might be available. What we found was disappointing. It seems that if you want support from grants, you need to invite the public. However, we wanted a college activity, rather than a Richmond event. As a result of this restraint, we relied on our Student Life activity funding to supply money for medieval food tastings event. Our Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences, and a staff member of the College Foundation found funding so we could pay honorariums to the reenactment group and to the adjunct faculty who gave presentations.

We were out of the starting gate. Now we needed to schedule the event and facility. We needed a day when classrooms would be available for presentations and when no other events, such as the VCCS Conference, were scheduled. We settled on Friday, April 1st as our date, thinking we might have a nice sunny spring day. (What a false hope that proved. It was cold and rainy. Our planned outside events moved indoors, which to our surprise worked out, although more crowded than it would have been outdoors.) Moreover, this event gave us the opportunity to more fully utilize the rented space at Ginter Park and to familiarize students with this location which was being used during construction projects on the other campuses.

We scheduled our expert presenters, allowing for their class schedules. We wanted to have both adjunct and fulltime faculty participation in order to showcase their expertise and to join disciplines in a common goal of instruction. Here is our schedule of presenters and their topics, which shows the diversity of the faculty's subject areas:

“Ring Around the Rosie: A History of the Plague” - Carol Rodi, Instructor, Assistant Coordinator, Nursing Retention Specialist

“Witen thy Worlds: Read and Speak Middle English” - Jason Lira, Instructor of English

“Muslim’s View of the Crusades” - John Herbst, Adjunct Instructor of Religion

“Gothic Art” - Karen Steele, Adjunct Instructor of Art History

“East and West Expansion: Mongols and Crusaders on the Move” - William Seay, Adjunct Instructor of History

“Breton Lais by Marie de France, 12th Century English Secular” Author” - Jayne Harding, Adjunct Instructor of English

“The Age of Vikings” - Thomas DeMayo, Assistant Professor of History

“Medieval Alchemy and the Philosopher’s Stone: The Story that Harry Potter Didn’t Tell” - Sev Sinanian, Adjunct Instructor of Chemistry

As you can see, we did not represent every department. The faculty from the foreign languages, culinary arts, and horticulture were willing to present, but could not, due to conflicts of scheduling. The ESL students considered providing information on their country of origin in the medieval period, but lacked the necessary research and preparation time.

Finally, we wanted a website which would allow access to information about the presenters and their PowerPoint presentations, along with photos of the

reenactment group's activities and of students' participation. Karen Pally, an English instructor, produced a website which can be accessed at <http://medievalday.weebly.com>.

At last, we were ready for publicity. Reynolds' PR department put the event on the Reynolds' home page with a link to the website and the schedule of events. We produced flyers and plastered the campus with them. We put out crowns upon which we wrote "Medieval Day at Reynolds on April 1." The website was available with a preview of events and activities, including information about our contest for the "Medieval Champion".

To increase student interest, we planned a competition for "Medieval Champions," the day's participants who attended and participated in the most events. Stickers affixed to the cards after an activity proved students' participation. (Winners, those with the most participation as shown by the number of stickers on their cards, received tee-shirts with the Reynolds' logo or candy filled Reynolds' cups, all courtesy of the PR department. The grand prize winner won a Visa gift card. Prize winners received notification that they had won by phone, and their prizes were delivered to the Humanities, Social Sciences' offices on a campus chosen as convenient by the prize winner.)

Medieval Day arrived, and over five hundred students and faculty enjoyed learning together. In presentations, nearly two hundred faculty, staff, and students sat together as learners. We did activities such as dancing, weaving, combing wool, and playing games. We watched sword and heavy armored fighting demonstrations. We enjoyed sampling delicious treats prepared by the SCA. These tasty offerings included blancmange, a chicken and rice dish in almond sauce, fresh bread with honey butter, candied carrot casserole, fruit and vegetable tarts, cheeses, apples and grapes, and beverages.

As Benjamin Franklin noted, "Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn." Medieval Day provided that involvement. All of the participants' evaluations and comments were positive, verifying that this was a worthwhile event.

If you are interested in presenting a similar event, here are some suggestions to aid in your planning. First, research a topic that interests and fills the needs of your community. Next, look for experts and reenactment groups in your area. Make sure you find an expert or group that has worked in educational programs. The SCA group that provided the hands-on activities and demonstrations at our college routinely presents educational programs. Their focus on education supported our objectives. Someone on your faculty may be connected to a particular group. (The fact that we had this connection and Carolyn could coordinate well with the group made this part easier.)

Connect a reenactment group and their theme to your faculty. Look at your college's faculty to see what their interests and strengths are. For many, it will be obvious, while others may have outside interests which will fit in well with your planned event. And as academics, most faculty members are willing to do research on a topic related to their field. Think of many ways to connect all of the departments to the theme. Include adjunct faculty in order to showcase their talents and to let them know how much the college values them as an integral part of the college and as experts in their fields.

Once you have your idea, develop a committee, and get as many helpers as you can. We started out with a small idea that mushroomed into a complicated mass of activity and detail. We certainly needed more than the two of us. Find a "go to" person who knows who does what, and who can help you with finding out all the miscellaneous details you'll encounter. (I am forever indebted our division's administrative assistants, who always knew the answers to my questions.) As you plan your event, you will learn more about your college's staff and policies than you ever knew beforehand.

I'm sure you will encounter road blocks. We certainly did. You will find some people who will not be helpful. You will encounter policies that interfere with what you want to do. There will be times when you will be frustrated and disappointed. You will need to stay focused despite problems, and keep your focus on the end result.

Here are some additional suggestions for your "To Do" list.

If you serve food, check with safe food handling practices. We consulted with our culinary arts department to ensure we adhered to policies and practices. For example, we used gloves, and we made sure food temperatures were maintained.

I do not recommend trying to videotape presentations. It adds one more complication, and we found that the presenter's PowerPoints were actually better. If you want to preserve the information, ask presenters to add audio to their PowerPoints, or produce podcasts scripted for concise topic coverage.

Check with your campus Chief of Security to see if additional security officers are needed. One additional officer was requested for our event. You will need to check on your college's insurance coverage if the reenactment group is bringing any potentially hazardous or dangerous elements, such as chemicals, animals or weaponry.

To ensure participants' safety and enjoyment of activities, you will need to attend to various details that involve the activities with your campus facilities. Let the maintenance staff know about your event. Consider room set up and

clean up. For example, you may need to ask for additional trash receptacles. We alerted the grounds crew so their schedule for mowing the grass did not conflict with our plans for outside activities.

I hope you will try an interdisciplinary event on your campus. If you want to bring your campus together, an interdisciplinary event will join faculty from different disciplines. The event will introduce students from differing majors to new ideas and to new friends, including faculty, the reenactors, and their interest groups. Students' background knowledge will increase, which will enhance their reading and communication skills. An event such as this utilizes your campus facilities in new ways, and showcases its potential for growth. This type of event can enrich students' lives. What is provided in a day can last a lifetime for your students.

Note: If you would like to discuss your idea for an interdisciplinary event, please contact me at nmorrison@reynolds.edu.

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