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Slow Teaching with Gawain

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Abstract

This essay describes my pedagogical shift while teaching online during the COVID-19 pandemic. I switched to classes structured by slow, careful translation of medieval texts, with positive effects on student attention and participation.

My first time teaching online during a pandemic was, as one might have predicted, less than stellar. Summer semester at the University of Bonn begins in the middle of April. This means that unlike my North American colleagues, I had a few weeks' warning that our courses would be going digital before classes started. I read all the essays I could find about how to organize online teaching for students who did not sign up for an online course, considered the ethics of cameras and synchronous instruction, explored the possibilities of our clunky web client and our impenetrable document sharing website, and accepted that I would have to adjust the reading load a little. It was not clear whether our students would have the computers and internet connections necessary for live instruction, so I decided to make my courses asynchronous, with optional live meetings to keep them on track and to answer questions about the material. Isolated at home, I had just enough time to work out a complicated set of smaller assignments that would allow students to keep up with the course work, and I developed lengthy checklists so they could stay on top of that.

My courses did not go brilliantly. Students were distracted by the pandemic and unmoored without regular, mandatory classes. I, too, was distracted by a child at home and administrative crisis management at work, and found myself responding to posts on our course forums late into the night. When I saw the direction things were going in, I began offering more Zoom sessions that students could attend on a voluntary basis, but this was not enough to pull the whole class along. My students told me they were having trouble concentrating on their reading, much more so than in regular years. I had begun the summer semester with good intentions, wanting to design flexible courses that would be accessible to the greatest number of students. But my coursework was needlessly complicated and did not have the firm hand of an attendance policy to keep students moving forward. It is possible that there was no right answer for the summer of 2020—after all, when I did hold Zoom meetings, both my poor internet connection and those of the students stopped our discussions as soon as they started. But I knew that I wanted to do things differently for our winter semester.

My first instinct was that I should try doing the opposite of everything I had done in the disastrous summer. Instead of asynchronous teaching, I would hold a class at each scheduled time, though I might not force my students to sit on Zoom for the full ninety minutes of a regular seminar. I also decided that it should be possible for students who were struggling to get work done on their own to participate in class even if they had not done the reading. To achieve this, I made my peace with cutting my reading lists even further than I had in the first summer of COVID-19. I was going to try for a no guilt—or at least low guilt!—teaching model. We would do a lot of reading aloud in class, and close-read our texts collaboratively. The minimum my students had to do was show up.

I still wondered how I was going to run a discussion on Zoom, however. Even in a normal, non-pandemic semester, getting a dynamic class discussion going is hit or miss. Some students do not do the reading. Others do, but need time to formulate their thoughts in English, which for most of them is a second or third (or fourth!) language. How would this range in skill levels transfer to a screen, I wondered, especially if half of them kept their cameras off? How would I bring students into the conversation whom I had never seen? Then I had an idea.

A few years earlier I had read the manuscript of an essay collection edited by Catherine Karkov (2019), which has since appeared under the title *Slow Scholarship: Medieval Research and the Neoliberal University*. Inspired by the Slow Food movement founded in Italy in the 1980s, the book's UK-based

contributors reflected on their own experiences of engaging with the objects of their study over longer periods of time, and on how this way of working conflicted with the pressures of REF evaluation cycles (REF stands for Research Excellence Framework, and it is “the system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions” [UKRI 2020].) I liked the ethos of this project a great deal, counteracting as it did a development in academe that has been damaging to scholars and scholarship alike. So why not slow teaching, I wondered? Why did I feel such a need to cram as many texts into a semester as possible, only to treat each of them cursorily in a few days of class? What would happen if I took up the pandemic’s broken promise and actually slowed down?

I was teaching an MA course that semester which, in regular years, would meet twice a week for ninety minutes. I decided that instead of picking a theme or genre and teaching a number of texts associated with it, I would read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (SGGK) with them, slowly, in Middle English. This was more of a risk than it might seem. My upper-level undergraduates often have had several courses in medieval literature before they reach my seminar, including a standalone introduction to Old or Middle English. But my MA students are a mixed lot. Some have had ample training in medieval literature in an English context. Others have had Latin and Old Norse, Middle High German, French, or Italian because they are getting an MA in Medieval Studies. The majority of my MA students, however, have never taken a course in medieval literature before. They are good at interpreting texts and synthesizing critical literature, but I teach Old English in translation to them and tend to assign easier Middle English that they can handle in one semester. Even though they knew what they were signing up for, I realised there was a good chance my students might be overwhelmed.

My plan for managing the language difficulties was, despite Zoom as our room, some pretty old-fashioned pedagogy. We would focus on the basics. After a brief introduction to Middle English, I would assign a little over 100 lines per class from the Everyman edition of the Pearl Poet’s works (Cawley and Anderson 1983), which has modernized spelling, marginal glosses throughout, and translations for harder lines. Students would read the assigned passages on their own, making sure they could at least decode the text. If they wanted to double-check their understanding against a published translation, that would be fine. The more ambitious might look up words in the *Middle English Dictionary* online (Regents of the University of Michigan 2021), something I would also model for them in class. During seminar, I would go down the attendance list and have each student read a few lines aloud, then encourage them to attempt a translation. Then I would work collaboratively with the class to refine it. I would ask them to reflect on the literary aspects of the poem as well, but I expected that for the first few weeks most of our focus would be on understanding the meaning of the text.

The class that gathered in mid-October over Zoom was one of the larger groups I have had for the MA seminar. Unsurprisingly, many had little or no background in medieval literature, though I did also have a few students who had done ample medieval coursework and were auditing the seminar for fun. I had suggested that everyone read through a translation of the poem before the course began, but not all chose to do so. All of the students had to work intensively in the first month, while I did my best to encourage them along with promises that the reading would get a lot more manageable, if never really easy. (Despite what I thought of as a minimal approach, preparation for each class still took them hours.) One or two students tried to read from published versions of the poem when it came their time to translate, but a few pointed questions about how they had rendered individual

words made it clear they would have to deal with the Middle English, even if that meant less fluent results.

I kept to the promise of slow teaching, however. If a student struggled with a line, I asked the rest for suggestions and repeated the better ones. I turned often to the *Middle English Dictionary*, which I shared with them using Zoom's screen share feature, and showed them how I would go about searching for a word, and the payoff of looking up nuanced vocabulary. If a student came up with a decent translation off the bat, I would ask the rest of the class if they had any questions about it, to make sure no one was left behind. I realised that in my regular seminars, I tend to give most of my attention to the students who are keeping up with things, since they are the ones who speak the most. But since a base level of participation was mandatory in this course, I wanted to make sure that everyone had a chance to understand what we covered in class. Although I had intended to stop our classes earlier so as to prevent Zoom fatigue, in fact we wound up filling the ninety minutes almost every time, working together in a concentrated way.

What surprised me about the process was how much easier discussion became, I suspect, for everyone involved. For a regular seminar I prepare a brief introduction and a series of questions, points, and page references; on good days we hit a flow and I can jump around my notes to keep the conversation moving, and on bad days I try one question after another to inspire my students to talk about the reading. With the *SGGK*, all I did was ask, now and then, if anyone had anything to say about the section just translated. Usually, they did. In fact, they soon began to raise their voices if it seemed like I was going to move on too quickly without asking them. Some had questions, others brought up parallels in German or French medieval texts, while yet others (who knew the whole work) reflected on how the passage fit into the larger scheme of the poem. I would let the conversation go on for as long or as little as it took, and then returned to my attendance list and called on the next person to translate.

The deeper we got into the semester, the more time we spent on discussion. At one point the students had gotten the hang of working through the Middle English — it was not easy, necessarily, but they had imbibed more of its sounds and patterns. I never skipped the reading aloud part of translation, by the way, but offered corrections judiciously, to the more confident students. As we got deeper into the plot, the students had increasingly more to say, so that I began some classes by letting them have the first word and simply guiding the conversation that ensued. This meant that some of the later classes had no time left for translation, but we always knew that option was on the table, even for a few minutes. Reading aloud, translating, and discussing the language of the poem were the framework on which our class was built, but there was flexibility within that to shift focus, to take on a larger perspective, and to tease out the larger issues brought up by the poem. After we got our bearings I also put optional secondary readings on our class site, and students began bringing those and the fruits of their own reading to the discussion as well. Every now and then I also took some time to ask them about their experience of reading and translating Middle English, what kinds of things they noticed about their progress. This was an opportunity for me to get feedback from them, but also for them to learn from each other's working processes.

The *SGGK* seminar was, from beginning to end, one of the happiest experiences in my teaching career. The evaluations I received a few weeks after the end of the course confirmed that students felt the same way, though it was already clear in class. Attendance was excellent, and so was preparation.

It is true that students sometimes wrote me in the chat that they had not had a chance to prepare, or said so when I called their name. I tended to nudge them to try anyway if the passage was not too hard, but if necessary I let them skip without fuss. (Internet connectivity sometimes forced this too.) They sometimes asked me the next class if they could take the turn they had missed during the previous session. In any case, every single voice was heard on a regular basis; even if they did not participate in the free-flowing discussions, they still had their turn with the text. It became evident that some of the quieter students were assiduously doing the work, but they now had a different way of engaging in class than through quick-moving dialogue.

There were intellectual payoffs too. The first—obvious, but still worth mentioning—is that taking a semester for *SGGK* allowed us to read the entire poem in Middle English. This is a poem I usually teach in translation, over the course of a few weeks. Even at what feels like a slow pace to me in a regular seminar, that means we dwell on the plot and the main themes and do a few close readings of key passages. Taking our time with it meant we observed the texture of the poem in a wholly different way. Because they had to work through the passages, students became attuned to the differences between those that were thick with specialized francophone vocabulary and those that involved quick-moving dialogues, such as the bedroom scenes. We were able to dwell on the ironic implications of a single word, and on the economic characterization achieved with one gesture. I asked students to notice the way the poet layered adverbs in a given scene to render it loud or fast or bright. If anything, by the time we reached the denouement of the poem, I felt we barely had enough time to do it justice. The selfish part of this method of reading is that it helped me refine my own understanding of the poem. But I saw, too, that my students were justly proud of their achievement in working through a difficult, long, exquisitely crafted medieval text. One mentioned, at the end of the course, that this was the only time in her life she was likely to do something like this. Another filled his Instagram feed with poems and memes inspired by *SGGK*.

I have asked myself why this class worked so well. Certainly, it helped to spend the semester with a poem that is both linguistically brilliant and intellectually provocative. The students were motivated too; another group might have approached the course with less vim. But I think there were aspects of the course design that helped. First, it was simple: no presentations, no busy work, no checkboxes to tick. Having one single poem, with roughly the same number of lines to translate per class session, gave the class a predictable quality. Beginning almost every class with translation also helped, as did the fact that I always went down the attendance list in order. In the world outside our rooms, COVID-19 infection rates and government regulations kept changing, but in class we had the same ritual, every day. I think the work of translation itself was also beneficial during a time of crisis. None of us had to keep a massive chunk of text in mind or be able to skip around in it. All twenty of us focused on the exact same lines. That was all we needed to do. It had a grounding effect.

Paradoxically, a predictable class ritual had a freeing effect on discussion. I no longer came to class with expectations about the kind of discussion that I would love to see develop, or fears about how I would keep things going for an hour and a half if they were quiet. I simply made it my job to guide them through the language of the poem. I also worried less about what was going on with the quiet students, since I heard from them regularly when they translated. I knew from previous experience teaching both Old and Middle English texts that most students tended to do better when I assigned less reading per class and took the time to work through it with them, but only during this

first term of the COVID-19 pandemic did I fully commit to designing a class according to that principle. Having such rich, engaged discussions arise organically out of the translation convinced me that I should do this in the future, even once we are back in physical classrooms.

There were also aspects of the course that made a virtue out of the digital environment we had been forced into by circumstance. The fact that I could pull up various online dictionaries and other resources spontaneously, without lugging a laptop to class and bumbling around with cords and turning out the light, was a major boon. Most students had their cameras on, but going through the attendance list and calling on students made sure I kept the ones with poorer internet connections in the loop as well. If students lost track of the lines we were working on, they could ask each other for help in the chat. The online course did not feel like a second-best alternative to a live classroom.

I was so happy with the results of this course that, when it came time to plan my third semester of online teaching, I structured both of my literature classes in the same way. Even with easier Middle English texts, taking our time paid off. The slower pace allowed enough time for students to bring up passages they found difficult. Having them translate key sections helped them see where they had skimmed over the Middle English without really understanding it, because it was just close enough to modern English that they felt they had the gist. Once again, translation served as the backbone of our time together, allowing us to find our focus and making space for all voices to be heard. It served us as barre exercises serve a ballet class: practicing basic skills every time we met gave us a strong foundation for more challenging work.

As I write this, it is not clear when I will next teach in the classroom. When I do, I know that I will take the lessons of this experience with me: that a literature seminar is not a race to get as much reading in as possible, that it is always worth returning to the fundamentals, and that taking time to make sure my students really understand the texts will pay off in more vibrant discussions in seminar.

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