



University of Michigan Provost's Teaching Innovation Prize

2012 WINNER



THERESA TINKLE
Arthur F. Thurnau Professor
English Language and Literature
LSA
tinkle@umich.edu

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Teaching Smarter, Not Harder: Improving Students' Close Reading Skills Through Interactivity

Innovation Description

Three innovations stand out in this re-invention of English 350, a survey of literature before 1660. First, instead of prioritizing highly specialized knowledge of cultural contexts, the instructional team prioritized undergraduates' development of close reading skills. Second, the usual order of things in a large lecture course was reversed in that students spent more time performing close readings themselves, and less time merely observing instructors' demonstrations of the skills. Third, the introduction of technologies less commonly used in the humanities made it possible for students to receive meaningful feedback on varied forms of practice *without* increasing grading time.

In the 2010 course, multiple-choice quizzes in CTools spurred engagement with the material and mastery of the shared language needed for literary analysis. Professor and GSIs alike wrote economical comments in response to essays, targeting just one or two areas for each student's future attention.

In the 2011 iteration, many quiz questions were converted to i>clicker questions and employed during lecture. Students began posting close readings on CTools and commenting on their peers' posts before discussions. A newly created assessment rubric with clearly described levels of achievement boosted the new cohort's performance from start to finish (as compared to the 2010 cohort).

Student Comments

In a hall "filled with more than 50 students, every single one showed complete engagement with material that was truly difficult, but was made amazingly accessible."

"By the end of the first class...all 80 students [were] performing impassioned close readings of Chaucer and roaring with laughter at the meatier bits of wit."

"Improving our skills of close reading – something that is often hard to learn even through one-on-one engagement – was accomplished stunningly, even in a lecture hall of so many students."

"Lecture was constantly a place where we as students were given a genuine role in the learning process."

"The deliberate and organized use of lecture slides and i>clicker polls drew in all students by asking for interpretations of lines, words, and entire text themes [and then pushing] us to find evidence for our poll responses by turning to the books in our laps."

"Performing in front of others has the potential to be a nerve-racking, alienating experience, but when everyone's doing it, no one looks ridiculous."

Examples of Teaching Innovation

The Execution of Charles I

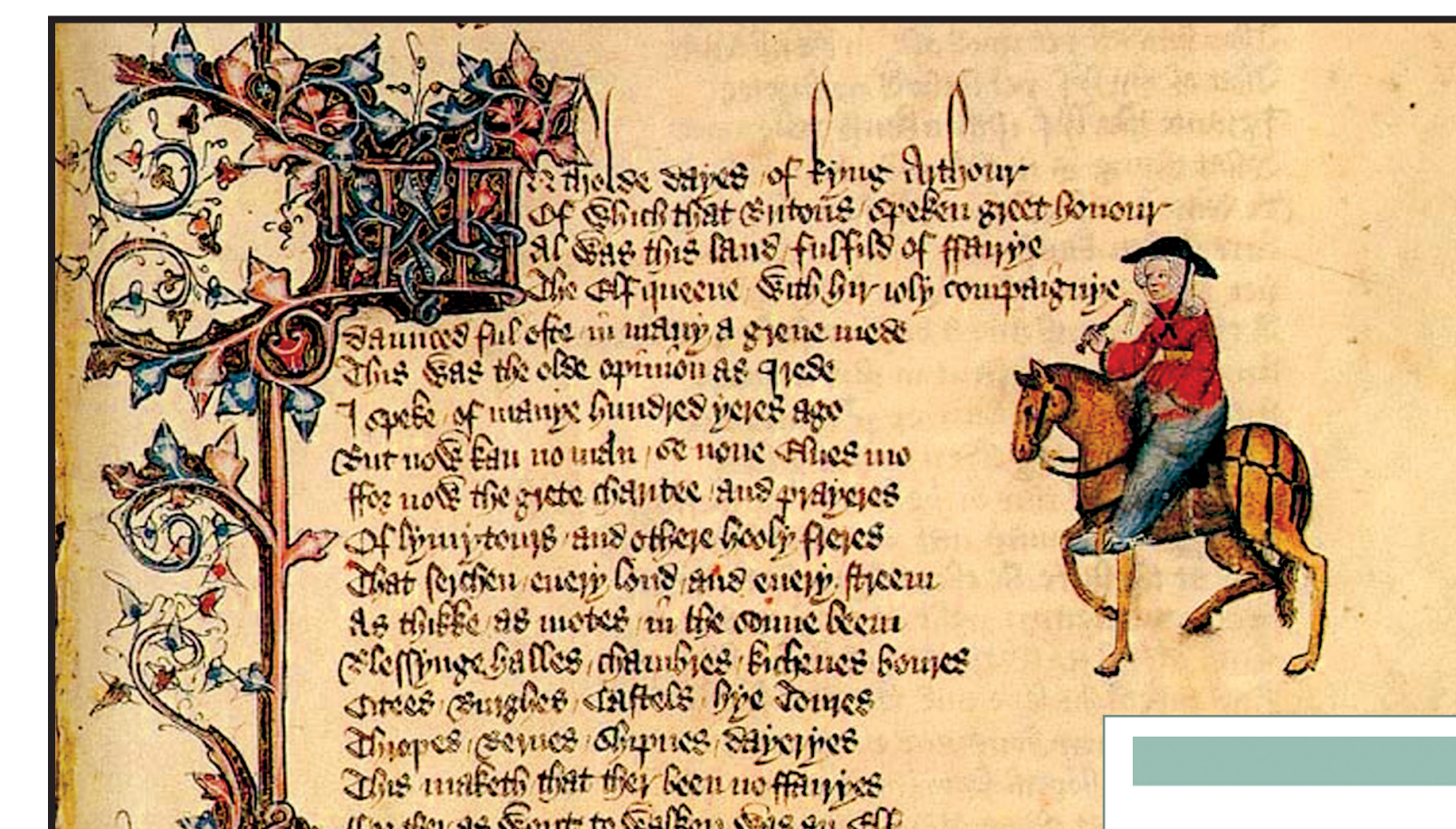


Students vote with i>clickers and then defend their interpretations of King Charles I's final speech.

Charles I's Final Speech

Which of the following quotes to your mind best captures the character of Charles in his final speech? (pp. 1741-44)

- A. "God's judgments are just upon me"
- B. "I am an innocent man"
- C. "I pray God it be not laid to your charge"
- D. "I am the martyr of the people"
- E. "I die a Christian"



Alison of Bath on Sex

Which of these statements best characterizes her attitude?

- A. "I have piked out the beste, / Bothe of hir nether purs and of hir cheste"
- B. "In wifhood wol I use myn instrument / As freely as my Makere hath it sent"
- C. "What sholde I take keep hem for to plesse, / But it were for my profit and myn ese?"
- D. "For winning wolde I al his lust endure, / And make me a feined appetit"
- E. "I loved nevere by no discrecioun, / But evere folwede myn appetit, / Al were he short or long or blak or whit"

Questions spur students' historical empathy and ability to interpret literary works from past cultures.