



Introduction

For the autumn term 2005, a new module was prepared for delivery to first year undergraduates utilising the Images of Salvation CD-ROM as a core learning resource. The module was developed with three aims in mind:

- to introduce new history students to the process of studying history at under-graduate level;
- to introduce students to potential of different types of source material, in this case a range of biblical imagery, to enhance historical understandings;
- to explore the potential of Images of Salvation CD-ROM as a resource for teaching and learning at this level.

It was felt most strongly that in order to best satisfy these aims, the course should be located within an active field of study. To this end, a 20-credit module offered under the working title of 'Art, The Bible and the Medieval Idea of the Family' was prepared. The study of the family remains a very active area, and one that lends itself particularly to interdisciplinary approaches. It is, in addition, a field of enquiry to which the vast majority of new undergraduates will be totally new.

The course proved a popular option. The Department caps modules in this part of the curriculum to allow for one manageable seminar group. Thirteen students took the module, eleven from the single subject history pathway (including one overseas student), and one studying history with politics.

Module Outline

The course was offered in the form of an initial briefing plus eight weekly two-hour seminars. A member of the IOS project team, who introduced the CD as a resource and provided a basic explanation of how to access the files, attended the initial briefing session. Contact details were provided for the resolution of subsequent technical difficulties. (One student required additional support, the query being resolved by a single e-mail).

The eight weekly sessions fell basically into three main groups. Two introductory seminars were used to introduce the students to the structures of medieval society and aspects of the role of the image and visual culture. Within these seminars, the notion of the family as particular field of study was also introduced. The core of the course took the form of four 'case studies', each addressing a different aspect of the family and drawing on a particular range of images from the CD as evidence to illustrate and support discussion. On a weekly basis, nominated students were required to present themed seminar papers to the group introducing specified readings and material drawn from the IOS CD.

The course concluded with a field visit to All Saints church, North Street, York, where the students had the opportunity to see a particularly fine range of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century stained glass windows. Working in groups, the students then had the opportunity to draw the threads of the course together in a final session. As is customary, the students were invited to provide anonymous feedback to the tutor and the department.

Tutor's Observations

In general terms, the module may be considered to have been successful. Any first-term, first-year module must aim to teach the new students a great deal more than is simply in the curriculum. As a very crude measure of satisfaction with the module, in terms of attendance, out of a total of 112 potential attendances, 13 were lost due to ill health or other reasons. This is a little higher than the tutor would normally expect, but of these 4 were associated with a certificated serious illness and a further 3 with a family death.

The feedback forms were very encouraging. A high level of satisfaction was recorded, and much constructive criticism was forthcoming. In general terms the students felt they enjoyed the course and benefited from it. The format of the seminars was felt to be useful, and the group dynamic was welcomed by most.

In terms of critical comment, the students' comments on the whole bore out the general impressions of the course tutor. It was felt that overall, the module was a little over-ambitious in terms of its programme content. A number of students commented on the fact that they would have welcomed more discussion time and less formal presentation (including direct tutor input) time. Although all the sessions ran as planned, discussions were indeed frequently cut short. The

acquiring of confidence in discussion is a critical and time-consuming part of the process of undergraduate study. In terms of the initial three aims of the course, therefore, although aims two and three were met, as an introduction to the seminar process the course was less successful than it may have been. In order to reflect this, it is felt that future courses should be less ambitious in terms of their requirements for student led presentations, allowing instead more time for general discussion as an end in itself.

The second objective of the course was to introduce students to the potential of unusual types of source material. This is of course a difficult area to measure. From a tutor's perspective, it was clear that the students fell into three categories. There was a small number of students who immediately grasped the potential of visual sources (and other cultural artefacts) as evidence of particular ideological perspectives on a range of topics. This was evidenced by the willingness of these students to draw directly on the IOS CD for material to aid their seminar presentations and for illustrative purposes in their procedural essays. These students generally saw themselves as social or cultural historians, and had a previous background in literary study or in one case art history at AS/A2 level. In their essay writing, these students were keen to engage with issues such as the concept of childhood or gender. A second group, constituting the majority of the students, did not immediately grasp the concepts of using an image as a piece of evidence, but during the course made significant progress towards this level of understanding. These students typically viewed themselves as social/economic, or social/political historians. These students engaged most rapidly with the concepts of the study of medieval society, and were particularly interested in social structure and identity. This was reflected in their procedural essays, which concentrated generally on the larger issues of the role of religion in daily life, or the focus of the parish and its church as a centre for social identity. A small group of students struggled to engage fully with the topic area. Perhaps not surprisingly these students classified themselves essentially as political, or in one case military, historians. These students naturally felt most comfortable with the encyclopaedic essay topics exploring the principal features of medieval religious practice or the contrast between faith, pride and material wealth in the production and consumption of imagery.

The third objective of the course was to explore the potential of the IOS CD as a teaching resource. In terms of accessibility, the students found the CD easy to use and accessible. All of the students demonstrated their ability to draw on the content of the CD to a greater or lesser extent subject to the general comments above. This was most evident in the last of the case study seminars, when the discussion revolved around the portrayal of the Holy Kindred. By the end of this session, the group had collectively engaged with the concept that this particular, exceptional family could be drawn in a variety of ways, each reflecting different potential ideological perspectives. This session was in fact so successful that it highlighted the difficulties experienced in other weeks. This frustration is perhaps best described in terms of a failure fully to exploit the flexibility of the CD. Practical difficulties in accessing projection equipment (which should have been anticipated by the tutor and could have been avoided) resulted in the need to gather round individual PCs, or to work from pre-printed monochrome handouts. This can be addressed.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the module is the extent to which the subject and the resource required students to critically consider their own strengths and areas interests. By the end the module, the students had all, despite their levels of achievement, learned more about themselves and where they wished to take their subsequent studies.

Recommendations:

In its current form, this module would benefit from revision before being offered again. In terms of content, it is clearly over-ambitious. Fewer student papers at seminars and more discussion time are a must. It is perhaps also desirable to reduce the number of case studies being attempted, allowing a greater focus on fewer areas of study. The study focussing on the imagery of Noah, Abraham and Joseph as exemplars of age is superfluous and could be abandoned, thus allowing greater focus on marriage, parenthood, and the Holy Kindred.

An alternative approach may be to consider promoting the module as a second year 40 credit option. The greater time availability (and greater experience of the students) would allow the potential of the source and the subject to be more fully explored. In this case, a clearer distinction into theme seminars and related source base discussion groups may be highly productive.

The provision of full projection facilities is highly desirable to ensure the ability of the tutor and students to exploit the flexibility of the CD to its fullest extent is also essential.

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