Repositioning HEL in the General Education Curriculum

Felicia Jean Steele, The College of New Jersey

At many institutions, medievalists in English departments teach the History of the English Language as a senior-level or 400-level course, taken by students at the end of their careers as English majors. For many preservice teachers in English programs, HEL may be their very last non-education course, taken at the same time or even after their student teaching experience. At The College of New Jersey, the core faculty responsible for teaching HEL are all medievalists, both early and late; we have repositioned HEL, making it part of the first year sequence for English majors who intend to be secondary educators. In addition, the course has been repositioned so that it might serve as part of the general education or "Liberal Learning" curriculum at The College as a course that examines "Social Change in Historical Perspective."

As a consequence, the course offers students an opportunity to see language as part of the foundation of their intellectual development as future middle school and high school teachers rather than as a "senior option." It also requires and engages students in active learning and provides students with an opportunity to examine standard language ideologies in an interdisciplinary context. I contend that the History of the English language is uniquely positioned to reach across disciplinary boundaries just as medievalists must do in order to research and teach in our field. Faculty who teach HEL engage with history, geography, culture, ideology, and literature in ways that can capture the imagination of students otherwise reluctant to take English department courses, especially in literature written before 1800 or outside of the United States. Students in HEL courses must explore issues related to material culture and technology in ways that embrace interdisciplinarity and that engage multiple modes of learning. As a result, HEL is not just a niche course appropriate for seniors who will be teachers, who must take the course because of external certification requirements, but a course appropriate to students who seek a broad, interdisciplinary experience that allows them to explore the ways in which language can be impacted by technology, materiality, colonialism, migration, ideology, and art. As higher education across the country sees declining enrollments that result in the consolidation of departments and the shrinkage of majors, especially in the humanities, repositioning of HEL into the intellectual foundation rather the periphery will yield dividends for us, attracting students to medieval languages and literatures. [PPT slide 1]

All college and university faculty have to engage in extensive programmatic assessment as part of our institutional mandates and accrediting processes. Since HEL maps onto accreditation standards set by NCTE/NCATE, we at The College of New Jersey have run our course through three major rounds of assessment since 2004. [PPT 3] In addition, our department, as part of its assessment process, examined three graduating classes that produced "super-teachers." These fifteen "superteachers" (teachers who had gone on to win state teaching awards, become active in their professional associations, write books on pedagogy, etc.) all identified having HEL—which they had in their first semester as a result of a scheduling serendipity—in their first year as a transformative experience. As a result of this information, and other factors, we decided to pre-enroll all entering first year future secondary educators into HEL the fall of their first semester. In the past year, TCNJ introduced a a languages and linguistics major as well. So, our course, which runs at 28 each fall, has twenty to twenty-five seats set aside for first year secondary eduators, while the remaining eight are spread across linguistics majors, speech pathology majors, transfer students, and students from outside the language-based majors and minors who take the course to fulfill their general education requirements.

Melinda Menzer, in her contribution to Chris Palmer's and Colette Moore's edited volume, describes different institutional positionings of HEL at length. At her institution, Furman University, HEL "now fulfills the general education requirement in the social sciences," called "Human Behavior" (Menzer 253). Menzer's essay elaborates on the process she went through to secure this designation and the campaign she had to wage to make the case that the study of language was central to the study of human behavior. She also addresses an issue that I suspect will be familiar to an audience of medievalists. According to Menzer, "An HEL course did not seem to fit" in the English major or the English department. "And a course that does not seem to fit can easily become a course that is not valued, and the instructor who teaches it risks marginalization, even obsolescence" (253). I suspect that many of us who teach early literatures, particularly very early literatures, such as Old English, may encounter some of the same dynamics within our programs. If we rarely get to teach in our research area, how necessary do we seem to be to our colleagues?

Thus, from the outset, at my institution, HEL is a course that stretches across at least three positions if not four: it provides instruction in language variation (across time) that is necessary for the success of pre-service teachers who will face language variation within their classrooms and must do it in a way that does not marginalize students who may speak stigmatized varieties of English or who are English language-learners; it provides an introduction to the concerns and methodologies of historical linguistics and philology; it serves to provide students with an opportunity to think historically, using primary documents to examine the role of multiple actors in history. As a general education course, it is also expected to provide students with exposure to discipline-specifc tools and techniques.

For the remainder of my talk, I want to present three tasks that my students complete during the semester that acquaint them with the expanding set of tools available to students of historical linguistics, and that also invite students to consider issues related to ideology, particularly standard language ideology. As Anne Curzan describes in the volume, HEL "must give a prominent place to standardization and prescriptivism, given their role in regulating—or trying to regulate—diversity and variation in the spoken and written language" (180). The exercises that I will discuss in this presentation provide students with an opportunity to consider history, textuality, technology, and economics within the discussion of standardization.

Unlike a number of other courses described in the Palmer and Moore volume, my HEL course continues to use traditional periodization as an organizng principle, so we discuss Old, Middle, Early Modern, Modern, and Contemporary Englishes. We cannot, however, discuss all of the subsystems of language (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, the lexicon, and pragmatics) equally for every period. Therefore, particular periods tend to do most of the heavy lifting for specific subsystems or linguistic phenomena. When we discuss Old English, particularly late Old English, we are attentive to historical language contact in England itself.

The first task that I want to discuss is one that combines geographical and historical thinking in students' exploration of the impact of Scandinavian languages on the History of the English language. According to Matthew Townend, "Norse continued to be spoken in the north of England certainly into the eleventh century, and quite possibly into the twelfth in some places" (66). It is difficult to capture the spatial dimension of this language situation without examining maps in some detail. Most HEL textbooks include the tried and true map of the boundaries of the Danelaw, even though that concept is itself problematic in terms of its historicity. When my students encounter this map, it means relatively little to them, especially since typically the only geographic detail that it includes is the city of London, if that. HEL textbooks often provide two types of evidence regarding Scandinavian influence on English: lists of doublets, such as *shirt/skirt* and *church/kirk,* and placename evidence, such as the distribution of towns that include the element *–thorp*, *-ness*, or *–by.* The Jorvik Viking Centre in York offers a complete list of Norse place elements, and a number of maps are available online, but my students, who have little exposure to British geography, tend to glaze over when we start looking at these lists. For the class session where we discuss Norse influence on English, I ask students to bring laptops or other Internet-enabled devices to class. I divide them into groups and introduce them to three resources: the Open Domesday project index of places mentioned in the Domesday book of 1086 < <https://opendomesday.org/place/> >, the Gazeteer of British Placenames <<http://gazetteer.org.uk/>>, and the My Maps feature of Google Maps. Then I share with them a map that I produced using the Open Domesday project to identify towns that use the elements "church" and "kirk" that certainly existed in 1086, the period when Townend contents one might still have been able to find speakers of Norse. "Church" is mapped in a dark red and "kirk" is mapped in blue. If we put this map next to a map of the "Danelaw," we can see the correspondences. The isogloss line between "church" and "kirk" falls right along this historical political boundary.

Once I divide students up into groups who are responsible for different quadrants of the map, I ask them to examine the spaces in between the "church" towns and the "kirk" towns and observe where they see other transitions between place name elements. I encourage them to use the "Key to English Place-names" from the University of Nottingham <http://kepn.nottingham.ac.uk/> to learn more about the names of the surrounding towns. I ask each group to choose two towns, one with a name that shows the influence of Norse on its place-name and another that shows evidence of English elements, and learn a little bit about the history of the towns. When we get to the end of the course, where we talk about dialects of English in Great Britain, we can examine samples of speech from those towns. Most of the time, there aren't dialectal differences in Present Day English, but sometimes there are. As a result of this exercise, students are already thinking about geographical dialectal variation as we move into our discussion of Middle English.

When we come to the conclusion of our discussion of Middle English, we have to address the fossilization of the English spelling system and the emergence of standardizing pressures as a result of the Chancery Standard and the printing press. A typical text for students to encounter at this point in an HEL course is Caxton's preface to his 1490 translation of *Eneydos* that narrates the misapprehension of the word "eggs" as a "French" borrowing by a Thames valley woman. Although excerpted in many HEL textbooks, the passage doesn't always stick in students' minds, nor do they often read or pay attention to Caxton's account of visiting the "lord abbot of Winchester" and encountering Old English texts. On those occasions where I've asked them to do more "active puzzling out", they have remembered the passage more effectively. For this exercise, I duplicate images of an excerpt from the prologue drawn from the British Library website < <https://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item126611.html>>. In small groups, they're tasked with puzzling out what the facsimile says. They make a stab at transcribing the text, and then I distribute a copy of the same passage in Furnivall's 1890 edition. Once they are finished marveling at the "long –s-es" and ligature characters, we look at a page from the Ellesmere manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales* < <https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll7/id/2838/>>. Once again, in their groups, they select a couple of lines to puzzle out. We discuss the replication of manuscript hands in early printed texts and begin to talk about scholarly editing, selection of base texts, provenance, and other issues relevant to their literature courses. On good days, we are also able to discuss why they read the *Canterbury Tales* and not other Chaucerian texts that were more popular, such as *Troilus and Criseyde*, and why the don't read Caxton's translation of the Aeniad.

As students study Early Modern English, we examine the expansion of the English lexicon, both through the adoption of "inkhorn terms" and through borrowings resulting from the beginning of British Colonial ambitions. Through this set of exercises, students engage a topic of linguistic significance, the lexicon, but must do so within a historical and geographical framework. Additionally, students must make use of digital resources that allow them to practice research skills that are transferable into other courses and into the workplace.

Students receive a worksheet that prompts them to examine two lexical resources, the Oxford English Dictionary and the Lexicons of Early Modern English project from the University of Toronto. The first task asks students to use the Advanced Search feature of the Oxford English Dictionary to find examples of words borrowed into English during the period 1500-1700 from a variety of different languages and language groups, including Greek, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Persian, Indian Subcontinent Languages, German, Dutch, Russian, Scandinavian, Turkish, Arabic, Hebrew, Malay, Japanese, North American Languages. After years of collecting a comprehensive set of borrowed words starting with the letter 'A', I now stipulate that they must select words from different letters of the alphabet. In addition to writing these words down, they are also asked to save the pages to their class Diigo bookmarking and annotation account so that they can use them later for another exercise. Then they are asked to search three of their words in the Lexicons of Early Modern English. Finally, they choose one of those words and are directed to examine the text of first citation more carefully and learn something about the text itself and its author. To illustrate, I've chosen the word "Jackal" to demonstrate how this might work. According to the OED, "jackal" is "Of multiple origins. Partly a borrowing from Turkish. Partly a borrowing from Persian" ("jackal, n."). The first citation is from ”S[amuel]. Purchas, *Pilgrims* (1625) viii. ix. 1337 About Scanderone there are many ravenous beasts about the bignesse of a Foxe, commonly called there Jackalles" ("jackal, n"). The OED makes additional research about the text a little easier than I would like—students simply click the link to the text and then follow the pathway to the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Since our institution also subscribes to the DNB, they learn immediately that, "*The Pilgrimes* (as it is usually known) was the culmination of almost twenty years' collecting oral and written accounts of travels in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. It was based in part on Hakluyt's remaining manuscripts, which Purchas had acquired about 1620...*The Pilgrimes* combined editing with editorializing to comprise the bulkiest anti-Catholic tract of the age and the last great English work of geographical editing for almost a century. Its four volumes traversed the world from the ancient Near East to the latest English colonies" (Armitage). *Pilgrims* is also as source of illustrative quotations for 35 other words and phrases, including *almond*, *grey parrot*, *guana*, and "to stretch one's legs". Thus, this particular example demonstrates how significant a specific text can be to the expansion of the vocabulary. We spend a whole class period discussing their results from this worksheet, where we tease out the geographical range of encounters between speakers of English and speakers of other languages, and the vectors through which those words enter the language, as well as the ideological projects of many of the texts that provide first citations.

In their progress through these three exercises, students learn significant information retrieval skills that will serve them as they move through the college's curriculum no matter what their major. In addition, they learn the importance of geographical visualization to our understanding of linguistic data, and they learn something about lexicographical method in a more hands-on way. As part of the first year curriculum, HEL positions my students to excel in research tasks that require extensive use of library resources, it acquaints them with national libraries and international scholarly projects, and they engage with major digital humanities projects. Even though they engage with the artifacts in their digital facsimile, my students also have a sense of the importance of material culture and print artifacts for the study of the English language. Most significantly, I can now articulate to my colleagues (and my students share with them as well) the skills that they have acquired in the course. Thus, we have been able at The College of New Jersey to reposition HEL from the margins of the English major into the intellectual core of the institution, and we have been able to do it with all of the seats in the course filled, much to my dean's relief. But there are other effects: my early modern British literature survey and the survey of British literature to 1700 have run at their cap since this change in the curriculum. Last year, I even had four science majors in British literature to the 1700s because they had heard through the grapevine that they would learn to use some of these digital tools (and that Chaucer was dirty). But Middle English runs at capacity and our senior seminars on Chaucer and John Donne make their enrollment targets. My department finished a cycle of self-assessment and a minor curriculum revision this winter and not one of my colleagues suggested that we should change the HEL requirement for teachers or the stipulation that students needed to complete one course in early literatures. Both of these parts of our curriculum have been under siege in every other assessment cycle that I've survived. I believe that other institutions may find similar results with such a curricular shift.

Works Cited

Armitage, David. "Purchas, Samuel (bap. 1577, d. 1626), geographical editor and compiler and Church of England clergyman." Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. May 24, 2007. Oxford University Press. Date of access 7 Jan. 2020,

Curzan, Anne. "Prescriptivism and Teaching HEL." In Moore and Palmer, 178-186.

"jackal, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/100499. Accessed 7 January 2020.

Menzer, Melinda. "HEL and General Ed Requirements: Finding a Place in the Liberal Arts Curriculum." In Moore and Palmer, 253-258.

Moore, Colette, and Chris C. Palmer. *Teaching the History of the English Language*. Modern Language Associaton of America, 2019.

Townend, Matthew. "Contacts and Conflicts: Latin, Norse, and French," in Lynda Mugglestone, ed. *The Oxford History of the English Language*. Oxford University Press, 2008