

## Episode 5: Heather Blatt on Gaining a Global Perspective through Global Medieval Literature

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>>STEPHANIE DOSCHER: You are listening to Making Global Learning Universal: conversations about engaging diverse perspectives, collaboration and complex problem solving in higher education--on campus, online in local communities and abroad. I'm your host Stephanie Doscher, director of Global Learning Initiatives at Florida International University and coauthor of *Making Global Learning Universal: Promoting Inclusion and Success for All*.

>>HEATHER BLATT: If all of that I teach is a view of the Middle Ages that is homogenously white, even if that's part of my specialization, I'm leaving my students open to how the Middle Ages has been weaponized by white supremacists and so that really started pushing me to change my approach to Medieval Monstrosity and lead me in the direction of global learning and global studies as a way to reconsider what I was doing in the classroom.

>>STEPHANIE: Heather Blatt is an associate professor of English and she's developed an FIU global learning course that could hardly sound less global in its title, Medieval Monstrosity, but really couldn't be more global in its content. This course is all about how peoples and cultures view themselves and define who is other. Heather uses Western and non-Western literature, criticism, art and maps as entrees for students to reorient historical and modern perspectives on the world and ultimately their own positionality. Heather talks about how even a course in medieval literature through global learning can impact a student's civic mindset and how global learning influenced even her own research. It's really packed with resources that faculty across the curriculum including the STEM disciplines, could use to reorient perspectives, bring other voices into the classroom and ground global learning. You can link to all of these in the show notes. So here's Heather Blatt.

>>STEPHANIE: All right. So Heather, I think we need to start at the very beginning, which is with the title of your course, Medieval Monstrosity. Tell us more about the course, what it is about before you revised it for global learning. And maybe even a little bit about what first sparked your interest in revising it to become a global learning course?

>>HEATHER: I've been teaching Medieval Monstrosity for seven years. I think it was one of the first courses I ever developed, and I developed it first as a graduate student, still finishing my PhD. I came to the topic mainly because I was trying to think about how to make medieval literature interesting to students. And I was like, what is more interesting than monsters? And so in it's very, very first iteration, it was actually monsters and aliens where all of the historical readings were about monsters. And then we did a bunch of contemporary readings about aliens because one of the aspects of monstrosity that I would argue is the more comfortable we become with a monster, the more we have to displace what's monstrous onto a next iteration. So for example, we were afraid of vampires. We make vampires fearful, right? Early vampires are kind of hideous creatures. And then we get to Twilight and we fall in love with vampires. And vampires are sparkly and they're sexy. So now we have to make werewolves scary. And then werewolves were a little scary, but then we start falling in love with the werewolves. So then we're like, well, what's next? Zombies. Zombies can't be sexually attractive, but no, we write a movie about teenagers falling in love and one is a zombie? So we keep kind of displacing things

onto the next monster, and aliens seem to me to be the ones that we struggle more to grapple with in those ways. So I started off by partnering monsters and aliens. But once I was hired by FIU, I was given the luxury of designing a class completely about medieval literature. So I was like, no more aliens. All monsters, all the time. And the very first version of the course that I taught here at FIU was--fell within the remit of my position in the sense that it was not only all medieval monsters is all monsters from middle English texts. And so it was a very monolingual representation of early and late medieval British culture that I was offering my students. And I thought that that was a great luxury on my part to be able to be that focused on the field that I'm specialized in in terms of literary history. But over time I started to question that choice in terms of what perspective on the Middle Ages it was providing my students and what ideas about the middle ages they were leaving the class with, in part because it falls into--the topic of monstrosity--falls into some stereotypes about the middle ages where it's just, you know, a benighted culture. Everybody kind of is brutish towards other people and so on and so forth. And monsters in medieval literature are both entertaining but also indicative of what cultures don't like. And monstrosity in medieval literature as far as I've been able to explore it, is almost exclusively used by a dominant group against a population that they don't like. So it's used to kind of further oppression. And so you're exposed to readings on monstrosity that are grappling with issues like sexism, with issues like racism. And I slowly began to realize this. This was not my first realization when I started teaching the course either. And I have then, I then started both expanding the kind of linguistic, cultural context of the courses. And that coincided with some significant major upheavals in medieval studies that have happened in recent years where we've begun grappling with our responsibility as medievalists for how the Middle Ages is being weaponized by white supremacists. And if all of that I teach is a view of the Middle Ages that is homogenously white, even if that's part of my specialization, I'm leaving my students open to how the Middle Ages has been weaponized by white supremacists. And so that really started pushing me to change my approach to Medieval Monstrosity and lead me in the direction of global learning and global studies as a way to reconsider what I was doing in the classroom.

>>STEPHANIE: That is fascinating because I'll be honest, I remember when we first started working together and I thought, hum, Medieval Monstrosity, let's start with medieval. It's so far away. What's global about this very, very specific time period and then the concept of monstrosity, I was completely unfamiliar with it as a theme within literature. It pushed my boundaries and I was wondering what's the way in to what's global?

>>HEATHER: One of the first pieces of criticism that I began using when I started teaching monstrosity several years ago is an essay by a critic, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, also a medievalist called *Monster Culture Seven Theses*. And in this essay, which has become a kind of foundational work in the field of monster theory, he posits seven different arguments about how to understand the cultural work performed by monsters. For example, monsters police the borders of the possible. You find a monster at the border of what a culture finds acceptable or unacceptable, and what's unacceptable becomes what the monster does or what the monster represents. So, a culture can kind of understand itself by encountering the monster, which tells him that there's a cultural limit right there. And Cohen's work itself was both trans-historical and transcultural. He was drawing on texts from *Beowulf* to *Frankenstein*. He was looking beyond the shores of England, but at the same time, he mostly sticks with a western canon. And so when I started teaching monstrosity and wanting to expand it globally, I was able to draw on resources where other people had started thinking about monstrosity beyond western literature. And yet very little of that was focused on the Middle Ages. And when it was focused on the Middle Ages that often focused on art for example, as opposed to literary works. So it's clearly a topic that spans cultures, even in the Middle Ages. People in England and France, Germany, in the Arabian Peninsula, in Persian cultures, in Chinese cultures, in Japanese cultures, in African

cultures are thinking about monsters and telling stories about monsters, but they're also doing things that are culturally individuated with those.

>>STEPHANIE: Cool, so you use art in your course as well? You bring that in?

>>HEATHER: I do bring it in. Although it's very much a kind of supplement. But one of the ways in which I help orient students to the impact of different perspectives is through the use of medieval maps, western and non-Western because maps tell stories and they're also very graphic, very visual representations of the stories cultures want to tell about themselves. So a popular map in medieval Europe is called the TO map. It represents the three continents of Europe, Asia and Africa as different parts segmented by a T, where Asia is at the top, Europe is on the left and Africa is on the right and in the center of the world where that T intersects is Jerusalem. Because this is a story being told from a Christian perspective in which Jerusalem is a foundational city. And then the O represents the globe of the world and they were thinking of the world in the Middle Ages as a globe. So that story, the TO map is telling a particular story about parity between these three continents, proximity to a centralized place that's religiously significant. But what you also find in maps that follow the TO style over time is that monster start to populate the borders. They become at the edges of the O. And from the perspective of somebody who works in medieval England like me, this is really interesting because England is at the borders as well. It's at the very fringe of Europe. It's by the edge of the O. It's not close to Jerusalem, it's close to the monsters. So there's a really interesting connection there to how the art of the map provides a kind of graphic representation about a particular culture's perspectives on themselves. And you can compare it to something like the great Ming world map, which is a map of the world from a Chinese perspective, from the 14th century, if I remember correctly, the date and it's a map of Europe and Asia and Africa in which Africa is a tiny, teeny little promontory and the entire continent of Africa is a tiny, teeny little promontory and Europe is barely there at all. And the entire expanse of the centrality of that map graphically is mostly China.

So I thought that that was when I used it in my classes this semester. I thought it was a really great entree into thinking about how different cultures have completely different perspectives on the way that they relate to each other. So both the TO map and the China, the great Ming world map, our maps in which relations with others are figured into how they see the world. They're not presenting a map only of England or only of Europe or only of China, other places and other peoples are represented there. And there are other maps and atlases in the Middle Ages that do this in an even more detailed way in these two examples that I've provided. But they give this really great kind of entree into reorienting perspectives from both our modern perspectives, how we would graphically think of the world and the medieval perspectives of Europe and China.

>>STEPHANIE: Oh, that's fascinating. So part of opening up the course is thinking about the different ways of representing a story: orally, through the written form, through the map, through other forms of art. You know, something that you have touched upon a couple of times is the, which I've heard is this concept of otherness, right? So who am I, who is the other and the relationship between the concept of monstrosity and otherness. And this reminds me of something that you sent me. You sent me a reflection that one of your students wrote and you said, this is the reason why I am teaching this class. And, and I'll quote from the student's essay, the student says, who knows what one can learn and what has possibly been ignored through the years. Why does this, why did this student's reflection really get at what you were, what you're trying to do with the course?

>>HEATHER: One of the new additions that I developed for the course this year, which was completely tied to an only possible because of the presence of non-Western texts in the course --was inviting students to think about not just the perspective on monstrosity of these different medieval cultures, but what it means to be an ethical and responsible reader of literature. And what kind of work does our own theoretical frame bring two or predetermined in what we find in the texts that we study? And so I had started earlier on in the semester when we started entering into connections between monstrosity and racism, introducing students to the concept from Said's Orientalism of East versus West, self versus other. And one of the points that Said raises is that we are in many ways culpable as an institution, the university is culpable, for the imposition of Western frameworks on non-Western cultures. And I was reading that and discussing it with my students and started thinking about, in fact that's one of the things that we were doing in this course. We were taking a concept of monstrosity defined by a Western scholar working within Western texts and even though they were multicultural, they were still all Western texts. And so as we began in the second half of the class engaging more frequently and more profoundly with non-Western examples of monstrous literature, I started asking my students to question not only the perspectives of the texts, but question what we were bringing to them in terms of the theoretical tools we were using to analyze them. And this student's reflection I thought just really wonderfully returned to that. As one of his final, the student's final gestures in the class to think about what we might be missing by not attending to the ways that non-Western peoples understand the world or non-dominant Western identities. People who are queer or who are Latinx or who are part of an ethnic or racial minority. How do they have ways of understanding the world, maybe also of understanding monstrosity that are alighted or overlooked or not even registered when what we're working with or the theoretical tools created by a dominant western culture.

>>STEPHANIE: So we happen to be in an institution that is very diverse. We are a majority Latin American Hispanic Institution. We have many international students, first generation students. And what I think I hear you saying is that you opened up the course and invited students to connect personally with the concept of monstrosity to go beyond analyzing the concept solely in the frame of the past and in the frame of another geography. But to bring it home, if you will, to make a connection between the past and the present between oneself and other and even perhaps the otherness to oneself. Do discussions in your course get personal, and if they did, how do you negotiate that space moving from a very scholarly, more traditional exploration of the subject matter into the global learning space where we've got these kinds of more personal connections?

>>HEATHER: That's such an interesting question because it touches on some of the aspects of pedagogical theory and research that I've tried engaging with and that I found actually really helpful for me as I started reevaluating what this course could become. And as a result, some of the course design creates moments where I not only create these intentional connections between the past and the present. So for example, after we read and discussed a medieval literary work, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, which was a travel narrative, enormously popular in the late Middle Ages, so popular that it was among Christopher Columbus' personal library. So it can be said to have been one of the texts that shaped how he saw the people that he encountered. And one of the notable features of Mandeville's travels is that it starts by proposing that it's going to be a travel guide, how to get from England to Jerusalem. But once the writer gets to Jerusalem, everything keeps going. It keeps going east and further east and further east and further east all the way to China. And it talks about Mongol cultures and medieval Muslim cultures, Islamic cultures of the Arabian Peninsula and Indian cultures. But it's also the further east you go, the more monstrous the people become. They start having the heads of dogs. There are people with one foot. They don't have proper heads, their eyes are embedded in their chests. There are magic serpents that protect trees with gloriously tasting

fruit that doesn't travel. So part of Mandeville's rhetoric, one might say, pushes people, pushes as western readers to see the east as desirable place that they want to go to, but also because of his use of monstrosity, it's suggested the people who inhabit it, the native people who live there are improper and immoral in ways and therefore not good custodians of the places that they live in. So it motivates western readers to see the world as something that they should have custodianship of, that they should have access to and be able to use. And this is something that informs Mandeville. So monstrosity and racism start to intersect very profoundly in that text and in very troubling ways. And as we began wrapping up our analysis of that text, I asked students to watch a contemporary documentary. It's called Real Bad Arabs and it talks about the representation of Muslims and Arabic peoples in contemporary Hollywood films. And we had an entire discussion focused on that text in which students started making these connections between the past and the present themselves, so that they started to articulate both how troubling it is that they can see Islamophobia is having it a thousand-year tradition. And what does that mean to us today to grapple with it? How does it mean that we have to recognize it, not simply necessarily as a momentary expression, but it's something that has roots that stretched back hundreds of years and what does that call on us to do? And I stage that conversation or I structured that conversation in response to pedagogical theorization by Paulo Freire and The Pedagogy of Oppression, which talks about the way in which we structure the import and the weight of colonialists' perspectives even by centralizing the authority of the teacher in the classroom. And so for that particular class, I gave my students a couple of guidelines, which I wrote on the whiteboard for them. And I then had them rework the class into a circle and I sat outside of it and I said nothing the entire class. I said, these are the guidelines for your discussion, but this is your discussion to have, it's yours to manage and this is a learning experience in which you are going to construct what you learned from it. And that's a practice that I returned to-- a few other occasions in the class where I really wanted to drive home that study monstrosity not only invites us to kind of understand different perspectives, but also question our own in an institutional sense and in this sense of the kind of power structures of the university and emphasize that students can be producers of knowledge. They're not just drawing from me a bunch of things that they don't know and walk out knowing something more. But I want them to be active creators and active critics of what they're learning

>>STEPHANIE: Bingo. So you just hit right upon one of the essential characteristics of global learning, which, you know, we define it as this process that involves diverse people in a collaborative effort to analyze and address some kind of problem that transcends borders. Borders of difference and those could be geographic borders, timebound borders, cultural borders, gender based, you name it. Disciplinary borders. And what I hear you talking about is this concept of monstrosity used as a tool for-- it can iterate racism. Is this kind of a problem that that transcends borders and your strategy, your teaching strategy to engage your students in a more collaborative effort to grapple with that problem is to be more the guide on the side. So are there any other strategies that you use in this course or any of your other courses that achieve that same purpose to move from the sage on the stage to the guide on the side so that your students can produce new knowledge through the interaction of their perspectives?

>>HEATHER: I rely a lot on small group activities as well and small group collaboration because it achieves some of those same goals. And I also asked students to adopt particular roles when they're in small groups. So the role of the facilitator, the role of the skeptic, the role of the note taker and the role of the presenter are just a few of the roles that I turned to fairly frequently. And I emphasize that I expect students in each group to rotate who takes on which role. Because part of what I'm trying to cultivate there is both, again, a kind of collaborative sense of ownership over what they're learning. The facilitator is not there to be the talking person. Those facilitator's role is to elicit from their colleagues, from their classmates, and make sure

everybody's voices heard. And at the same time, I want everybody to have that experience or to have that challenge.

If it's not a role that they feel comfortable necessarily inhabiting, I want them to be able to try it and giving them the opportunity to try it in a small group can also feel much safer for them. So that's something that I do. And then something I tried this year for the first time, and I'm going to revise it slightly, but I was really pleased with how it came out. Ties to one of the kind of fundamental challenges of working with monstrosity, which is that as I mentioned earlier, it almost always works in the Middle Ages in particular from the perspective of a dominant culture towards a minority group or population. So it also is deeply tied to sexism and patriarchy, for example. It's tied to a lot of different ways that people choose to discriminate amongst each other. And so what we aren't hearing very often or at all really are the voices of people who are in those groups who are targeted for that kind of treatment. So if for example, medieval women are targeted by a lot of different monstrous texts or the texts themselves aren't necessarily monsters, but they're focused on monsters that are attentive to or attuned to ways that the narrative wants to represent women as monstrous. How were women themselves writing about their own experiences in the Middle Ages? And this was something that I was struggling to figure out how to address throughout this semester because nobody in the Middle Ages as far as I've yet been able to find who is from one of these minority groups uses monstrosity the other way around. Nor do they explicitly counter monstrous narratives. So how do I get those other voices into the conversation? And I decided to try to structure it as a final project that asked my students to kind of collaborate with writers of the past. So for the most traditional form, the research project, I asked them to choose any of the literary texts that we'd read from the Middle Ages about monstrosity. And then go to other writers from that culture who shared the identity that was being targeted by monstrosity and figure out what were they writing about, how are they expressing their own experiences. So antisemitism and monstrosity become linked together. And yet there are a number of medieval Jewish writers who have interesting and fascinating things to say, some of which are travel narratives as well. So other perspectives on the world. There are Muslim travel writers of the Middle Ages. There's a medieval English woman, travel writer, Margery Kempe, who goes to Jerusalem and travels by herself. And, and so I invited students who chose that particular option to amplify the voice of a medieval person who belonged to a group targeted by monstrosity by thinking about the connections between the monstrous narrative and the experiences of the person who wasn't necessarily writing back against monstrosity, but who was claiming the space for their own voice. And then there was a pedagogical option where I ask students to identify one of the gaps in the class. For example, we don't really talk that much about LGBTQ issues even though there are some ways in which they're tied to monstrosity in the Middle Ages. So I invited students to find examples of a Western and non-Western text that addressed a gap in the coverage of the course and to think about what it would look like if that student taught those texts to their classmates. And one of the students who chose that option decided to explore the narratives of native American peoples. And he was working with stories about the Wendigo or Wendigo. I'm not quite sure my specialization. So he was looking at Ojibwe narratives about Wendigos and developed a pedagogical project in which he paired that with the medieval texts to think about toxic masculinity and its connection to monstrosity. So, and then the third option was a creative option where I invited students to rewrite the perspective of one of our narratives from that of the monstrous character to unsettle it from the narrative from within.

>>STEPHANIE: So what I hear in this course is a whole lot of decentering going on there is decentering of the idea that monstrosity is simply a medieval English concept. There's decentering going on in the maps. There's decentering going on in the predominance of the written language as the content that you're going to discover and grapple with in the course. And then there's your own decentering in the classroom. And all of these things are opening up

your students to making these very, well, some might say abstract or obtuse or distant, very distant types of, of connections. To me that seems like you're taking the class to the edge, right? Because you're not so much in control of exactly what's going to be covered, of exactly what students are going to be learning in the class per se, of what you're going to assess. So I'm wondering about how that makes you feel as a faculty member? As a teacher? Has that felt uncomfortable? what's been your own personal journey taking your course from a more traditional teaching style to this much more open and vulnerable space?

>>HEATHER: It's definitely been a challenge and sometimes it makes me sad, but at the same time I find it a challenge that I enjoy confronting. I'm sad sometimes in the sense that although I started off as a grad student very fearful about teaching, I found that I really enjoyed it. I found that I loved talking about something that I knew a lot about it and I loved being able to share that with my students that I've had to kind of give up. Definitely. And I can still shape it by structuring what questions I'm inviting students to consider and what I'm setting them up to explore. And that has both been very rewarding as well as a really kind of interesting challenge and a little bit of a occasion for mourning the loss of something that I enjoyed. But I think that it's a loss that's necessary. And so I have had the great pleasure of working with folks at the Center for Advancement of Teaching at FIU here. And I've really learned a lot from colleagues in medieval studies who have been confronting my field and colleagues in my field with what kinds of ways we're approaching, how we teach and what we teach and what does this call on me to do as a white cisgendered woman who's aware of certain types of power that I wield and not necessarily somebody who wants to be invested in those types of power or who wants to counter those types of power. So it's invited me to do a lot of work in terms of how can I address this in my class and how can I do it in a way that's responsible and minimizes the kind of problems that I see teaching the topics that I'm teaching as well. I'm teaching texts that are, are sexist, that are racist, that are working to subordinate different peoples because that's how monstrosity functions. And so the topic itself has kind of invited me or prodded me to revisit some of my foundational assumptions about what it means to be a teacher. And sometimes I miss it, when I'm sidelining myself from the conversation. And literally putting myself outside the circle of discussion. I miss not having that option to contribute, but I think sometimes it's a very necessary thing to give up. And I think it's necessary partly because I want my students to become confident at their own critical thinking skills. And if I'm always there leading or trailblazing, if I'm always the out there in front, if I'm always the one setting the terms, that doesn't necessarily happen to the degree that I think is possible if I pull back. But it is an uncomfortable process. It's uncomfortable for me as a specialist in medieval literature who is trained to work with medieval English texts to work outside of England to work outside of the Middle Ages and to think about how do I responsibly work with texts from other cultures. I'm not trained as a comparative literature specialist. But even that, the developments in my field over the past few years have called upon me to kind of reconsider that centrality. So it's definitely been a challenge. It's been an uncomfortable one at times, it's been one that sometimes makes me a little sad for the world that I used to inhabit, but that was a world that was deeply informed by certain types of privilege that I really don't want to continue promoting.

>>STEPHANIE: What I think is really interesting is it sounds to me like you are, that would help you develop a bit of an empathy for your students as they are transforming their own perspectives on the world through these texts, through the reflection on their meaning and how they see others, how they see themselves as the other. That was one of the things that struck me in the reflection that your student wrote. The first thing, I'm not sure if it's a he or she, but that they said as a Latinx individual, this is how I have been transformed. This is how I see that there are many different ways of seeing the world and it's not so much that one is right or wrong, but that they are different and that they need to be reconciled. So these are some big problems that we have in our present society that we're grappling with the issues of racism and

sexism. Do you find students starting to think about their new ways that they can approach these issues in their present lives as a result of taking this course that is about the past?

>>HEATHER: I would love to think that every student walks out so transformed. I'm not, you know, the degree to which students continue to see the applicability of the material is always very individual and always kind of going to vary in different degrees based on the interest in the experiences of the student. I feel fairly confident that no student walks out of that class, able to look at a monster the same way as they looked at monsters coming into the class. And that is partly because they do see the degree to which monsters are culturally freighted. It that they are deeply resonant with a culture's values and meanings and perspectives. And what I hope is that and what I still find a challenge is that in dealing with issues of ableism or sexism or racism that I not further entrenched those practices. So if I'm showing students how a monster linked to ableism invests itself in and starts to construct difference, to what degree could a student learned from that how to do it on their own? And that still troubles me and I haven't really identified a particular solution other than to continue to show the damage that these kinds of practices cause. So I also invite students to empathize not only with themselves and with others, but also try to empathize historically and across cultures. And that's one of the things that I thought that the creative rewrite final project option really kind of created space for. In order to rewrite a text, one has to inhabit the perspective of a different person and seeing how the students who took that up and it was the most popular of three final project options by a significant percentage. Was it reassuring to me in a way that they were seeing opportunities to understand different people then themselves or to write back against a kind of dominant narrative and say, no, this is what could have happened or this is how it connects to today? I had a student who, one of the texts that we read in the medieval literature from Europe portion of the text is a story that is a prologue added to a popular historical chronicle tradition for Britain. And it's the story about the settlement of the aisle of Britain. And the traditional narrative is that a descendant of Anise named Brutus, no connection to Julius Caesar's bad best friend, arrives on the island of Britain and finds it inhabited by giants. He and his compatriots kill off all the giants an interesting act of genocide and settle the island. The prologue that we read seemed to have been created in part to try to figure out how the giants came to be on the island to begin with. And the way that this prologue explains the situation is that a long, long, long time ago, there was an emperor of Syria and he had 33 daughters whom he marries off to other kings. The marriages were not necessarily arranged with the daughters' investment and they are very unhappy at the results. Because they're unhappy, they don't get along with their husbands. Their husbands initially start off by trying to give them gifts and, and be nice to them, but that doesn't make them any less unhappy. And so the husband started beating them and that surprisingly still fails to make them less unhappy. Eventually things fall out so that all 33 women kill their husbands and their father cast them off to sea in a ship without a rudder and they float around for a while, eventually land on an aisle and start to live there and make it their home. And in that story, they are without men, but they kind of miss that opportunity. And the devil who is always one ready to exploit any available opportunity happens to cast his eye on the island and sees these women in certain type of thirst and satisfies that thirst and they give birth to giants. And this was the story that so many of the students who chose the rewrite project wanted to return to and rewrite the story of 33 Syrian women who were making England their home and they wanted to rewrite it, modernizing it, and they wanted to rewrite it from the women's perspective. And a couple of the rewrites that were just so fascinating. One of them took up the aspect of the women's Syrian identity and explored what that would be like if some elements of the story, not all 33 daughters, happened to take place today. What would it be like to be a contemporary of Syrian woman to be pressured into a marriage one was unhappy with and what choices could one make as a result of that? Another student took the story and relocated it to Nicaragua and had the women become perceived as witches. I think [indiscernible] is the term that the students used and explored ideas about sexism and



contemporary Nicaraguan society linked to the fault practices of the Quadra. And another student made some of those sisters queer and wanted to explore how monstrosity and queerness become linked together in contemporary society in the US. So that was a very satisfactory response to my concern about the degree to which analyzing forms of oppression might actually teach oppression as an unintended side effect by seeing my students so effectively and in such diverse and excitingly creative ways find the story of these women, one that they wanted to empathize with and one that they saw as relevant for so many different contemporary circumstances. Another one of the rewrites made them Latinx women living in homestead today, trying to deal with a thorny issue of inheritance. So it was really grand.

>>STEPHANIE: Okay. So this brings up a question for me because you know, in our workshop and in so much of the work that our center for the advancement of teaching and many centers use, we ask faculty to take a backward curriculum design approach to developing their course. So to first think about what do we want students to know and be able to do? How are we going to know that they are able to do that or know it? And then asking ourselves, what am I going to do---last, asking ourselves what am I going to do as a teacher to place the kinds of content and readings and engage students and teaching strategies that will prepare them to know and be able to do these things and to demonstrate those things. But more and more, I'm wondering if there's more to it than that. And that's coming from my conversation with you. So I imagine you went into the course of when you first developed it as a global learning course with certain learning outcomes in mind. How have those changed? Do you, do you still have the same intentions for those students? What might those be now? Or are you discovering that there are learning outcomes that students are achieving that were of no intention at all to you?

>>HEATHER: That's such a neat question. I think that what I was hoping to achieve. So I will say that the backward design process has also been kind of one of those things that I've had to reconcile myself to in the sense that I like so many of my friends and colleagues who we're literature specialists when we started designing classes of things that we were most excited about was the composition of the reading list. We went to our classes and were like, I'm going to make them read all these exciting things that I wish I could have read. And we started with the texts and anything beyond that was just a kind of byproduct. You got to read this awesome text that is the goal of this class. And that's where I also started and when I was asked to put objectives on my syllabus, I was like, this is a state law that is just created by people who have no understanding of teaching. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm just going to grab something off the Internet and I'm going to slap it on my syllabus there. I now have objectives and so I've realized that that is not necessarily an approach that for me has produced some of the more interesting pedagogical outcomes. That produces sometimes an engagement with a diverse syllabus but doesn't necessarily reach more deeply than an exposure to multicultural texts. And this is also a discussion that we've been having a medieval studies as we've grappled with the way that the middle ages has been caught up in narratives of white supremacy. Simply creating a diverse reading list is not going to leave students in any substantial way better off than had we not diversified the reading list. And so in designing the course for Global Learning, I've had to figure out what is it am I actually trying to do? And one of the things that I did not anticipate at all when I started redesigning this class and how it played out this semester was the way that we would start critiquing and decentering the very theory that defined the class. That was something that came up about purely because we were beginning to engage with non-Western texts that had clustered together in the second half of the syllabus and initially I thought that that division of the majority of the non-Western readings into the second half was a flawed element of my design. But as I started realizing, it created this opportunity for us to revisit the definitions and the theories that provided the foundations for the class, I realized that that worked out quite wonderfully because it gave my students opportunities to start critiquing the theories, revisiting them, thinking through different ways of approaching and trying to see how these texts were

defining monstrosity on totally different terms than the western text with which we'd started the semester. And so that worked so very well that I'm going to be revisiting the design of the course and the objectives of the course to think about that outcome as something I might want to acknowledge and build into the foundations in the sense that I don't want to create a global learning course that achieves any kind of global learning objectives purely because I've diversified a syllabus. I want things to reach much more deeply than that. And I think one of the great things that this redesign and the global learning program has offered me the opportunity to engage with is the responsibility we have to question the very foundational premises from which we start. What does it mean to be global? Who is defining global? What different tools do we have since we're approaching it in an academic context to understand and what different voices can we draw on in order to enrich the ways that we understand the texts and the cultures that we're exploring?

>>STEPHANIE: Do you recall what kind of sparked this desire in you? Do you recall anything from say the workshop that we engaged in or anything that you read along the way that sparked these ideas in you to have these kinds of questions?

>>HEATHER: There are so many different things. Kind of like a storm of fireflies that managed to coalesce and it was the interaction amongst so many of these things, one two that interacted in really productive ways are the exercise we did in the global learning workshop that invited us to take on different roles to address the question of a sea level rise in Miami from the perspective of different people. So a recent immigrant to Miami, the mayor of Miami, a representative from an insurance company, so on and so forth. And that happened, that exercise happened really close to the time that as a member of my department's Literature Gateway Curriculum Committee, we were revisiting the course outcomes for Lit 1000. And we decided really one of our key priorities was that students taking Lit 1000 be able to understand the way that literature opens up different perspectives. And so that exercise in the global learning workshop and that conversation we were having in the literature curriculum committee, Gateway Curriculum Committee happened to take place at a time when medieval studies was also just in the beginnings of having a significant argument really, that has continued to today. And one of the more prominent circumstances that generated that most recent argument was a speaker at a conference introducing himself as performing a minority identity because he gotten tanned at the beach before coming to the conference. And that generated a lot of discussion about the role of unconscious racism in medieval studies and the way that we ourselves can be complicit in systems of discrimination. And a colleague of mine, Dorothy Kim, wrote this essay that just spoke very powerfully and called upon medievalists very powerfully to rethink how we teach. And she wrote this essay called "Teaching Medieval Studies in an Age of White Supremacy." And that happened at the same time as I was doing this workshop and on this committee. And at the same time a group called Medievalists of Color. We're also calling on medievalist to diversify who we turn to when looking for critical voices in medieval studies. And another group were creating the global middle ages project which is a website and a variety of different projects, exploring global approaches to studying the Middle Ages. And so all of these different elements intersected kind of in the same semester. And I routinely revisit my classes and plan to redesign them and they just started sparking ideas for me. And one of the first responses I had was to design a course called The Global Middle Ages, which looks at ways that people are interacting across cultures during the Middle Ages. And we read everything from the Travels of Marco Polo to think about his experiences traveling among Mongol, the Mongol Empire. And we think about the Mongol Empire as a governing structure encompassing people from a variety of cultures and religious identities. And the Mongols more or less did not care anything about your individual beliefs as long as you paid your taxes. And that really wonderfully counters one of the stereotypes about the Middle Ages that we so often harbor, which is if you deviate from some dominant norm, you're going to die. And so that course started pushing me

further and further away from the western cannon that I had specialized in in grad school. and that my Grad school opportunities had largely taught me to explore. And these different committees, and the workshop and the classes started inviting me to think about how I could not only teach the material differently, but also change my pedagogical practices.

>>STEPHANIE: That's fascinating to me. So you had multiple invitations, multiple sources of support to, to change and learn yourself.

>>HEATHER: Yes.

>>STEPHANIE: Which then led to that kind of transformation for your students. So that brings me to a question that I want to ask everyone that we're interviewing, which is how has global learning changed you in terms of perhaps your professional work, or even your personal life?

>>HEATHER: Oh, it's had so much of an impact. It's been really interesting and very exciting in some ways. My specialization is not just a medieval English literature, but in particular book history. My first book focuses on participatory reading practices in the late Middle Ages. And I look at connections between how we read in digital culture today and how people in the late Middle Ages read, which -- it was super exciting. I really loved it. My second book is probably also still going to be more about readers and books as physical objects and the material culture of reading. But those things are also very distant from where we are culturally right now. And although they're contributing knowledge that is a constructive contribution to my field and expands what we know about certain things, they are also topics that have almost no stakes in the kinds of issues we're struggling with today. And I've been in the position of and probably also largely because having received tenure, I now have the privilege and the flexibility to reevaluate my research agenda and my pedagogical and agenda and think about what I can do differently in this next stage of my career. And so I've started pursuing research projects and writing projects that may not come to fruition for several years, but I feel have greater stakes in some of the issues we're struggling with today. So I've just submitted an essay on the Albina narrative that I was talking about earlier, analyzing it from an eco-feminist and object-oriented feminist standpoint to draw some connections between the ways that we structure access to nature today as primarily a domain for men and particularly white men. And looking at the kind of long medieval roots of that that can be tied back to the Albina narrative and bring the two moments closer together and to think about connections between sexism and access to natural spaces and how we cultivate nature today. And that's not a transition that I would have made without thinking about the implications of my research and what I could be doing to, to bring some of the struggles we deal with home to my own research. And then what could I give back?

>>STEPHANIE: So if you could recommend something to folks to help expand their global consciousness. Anything, anything you've read, anything you've seen? Do you have any recommendations?

>>HEATHER: I have so many recommendations. I have like a whole bibliography. And I won't, I won't belabor each thing that I would add, but I would say that one of the points of the global learning program that I really think is an important point is that not only should we be diversifying what we're reading in terms of a literature class, but also who's criticism we're attending to. And again, this is a claim that's been shared by the medievalists of color in my field. And that means for me just reevaluating so much from the practicalities of who I cite and whose work I make sure to read and what their own experiences are, but also the need to attend to different and diverse voices in my field, in pedagogical research, in my classes and everything that I'm doing as a scholar. And so it's been important to me to start looking for

avenues to explore different voices about experiences that aren't my own. And that encouraged me to understand my own positionality and the kind of unthinking assumptions that might shape how I design a class or the kinds of research that I do. And so in those lines, in addition to the essay by Dorothy Kim, which I would recommend any to anybody, even outside of medieval studies, Eduardo Bonilla Silva's *Racism Without Racists* has been super helpful to me as has been Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies*. Smith is an indigenous American woman who talks about how research is perceived among indigenous peoples and what does that mean for somebody whose job is tied to research. And so I found their work. I found Paulo Freire *Pedagogy of Oppression*, Bell Hooks' work Derald Wing Sue's *Race Talk* has been super helpful to me. It's a book I found through a CAT reading group this semester. And Sue talks about how to talk about race in classrooms. So that was a really helpful addition to my pedagogical resources to think about not only in line with Hooks or Freire-- do I want to decolonize my class, but what does this mean to actually do in practice? How does one achieve a race talk that is not traumatizing invites voices in, does not alienate people? And so I found that book tremendously helpful as well.

>>STEPHANIE: Super. And we're going to link to all of those resources in the show notes and if you have additional ones, Heather, we'll definitely link to those as well. And, and just so that folks don't think that you have a reading group with cats. CAT is the acronym for our center for the advancement of teaching. Heather, I just want to thank you so much for delving more deeply into your course and going there to the edge of monstrosity with us. This has been a really enlightening interview for me. Thank you.

>>HEATHER: Thank you. It's been such a treat for me too. I'm so glad that I embarked on this redesign challenge and I'm really looking forward to seeing how students respond in the future to my classes. Had it not encouraged me to think about global in terms not only of the literary text, but in terms of the criticism and had the discussions in medieval studies, not also at the same time been calling upon scholars in medieval studies to do similar types of work. I probably would have stuck with the same few critics that I've been using fairly reliably in this class for several years, all of whom are white western scholars and focused exclusively on responding to monstrosity as it emerges in medieval European culture. But with those different kind of pushes motivating me, I was intentionally able to say this is a problem with the design of the class that I have to figure out how to address. And I had to look beyond my normal reading circle one could say for other voices that I needed to be sure to bring in. And had I not done that, some of the really transformative elements of the class that so profoundly shaped that student's response from that reflection assignment, that part of the class would never have happened at all.

>>STEPHANIE: Yeah. And what a powerful statement you just made about the influence of our disciplinary organizations on our pedagogy and that kind of advocacy for not just diverse content but diverse perspectives and going deeper into how we engage with those perspectives as researchers, as pedagogues. That has a really strong impact on an individual faculty across this country and across the world. So I think that's a really important point.

>>HEATHER: It's I think absolutely it's a necessary aspect that is not only shaping the course that I designed for this semester and how I'll be teaching it again in the future, but it's also dramatically reshaped my own research and whose voices I'm now being more alert to ensuring I incorporate and build on and respond to.

>>STEPHANIE: And who knows what kind of secondary impacts that that will lead to in terms of your students' activism and engagement as citizens in their community and in and in the world, which is why we call it global learning for global citizenship. I mean, you can, it can happen that

citizenship dispositions, skills, essential knowledge bases are built in a course on medieval literature. So that's a beautiful thing. I

>>HEATHER: I almost wish sometimes that I could have students experienced the course in two different tracks of time where they could have experienced the course before I redesigned it. And then the experience of course after I redesigned it because I'm not sure that students always pick up on how different the learning experience could have been for them. Had the class been organized a totally different way that I could have taught this same topic as I taught it for several years without any of these questions that were so provocative and so productive for my students' engagement and experiences in the course and what they learned from it. We wouldn't have talked about those at all five years ago. I wasn't asking them myself, I wasn't thinking about them myself five years ago, so I'm glad that they had that experience. I feel that the course is kind of what I wish I had been teaching it-- how I wish I had been teaching it all along.

>>STEPHANIE: That is a perfect place to end. I just want to, I almost want to just cry because this was such an interesting conversation and it was just a dream come true for me, Heather. How was that for you? It was great. I enjoy talking about how I've worked through this class and it's not very often that I get to talk about the kind of nuts and bolts thinking that went into the redesign and the kind of disciplinary and scholarly and pedagogical necessities that underlie the course.

>>STEPHANIE: Is there anything that we didn't discuss that you'd like to articulate about the course?

>>HEATHER: Five minutes ago I was thinking, I wish I'd said that and now I can't remember what it was.

>>STEPHANIE: Well, we could sit here for a minute.

>>HEATHER: I will say that I am, one of the changes I'm planning to make for next fall that I'm excited to do is I'm removing one of the critics whom students don't find add much to the class that the other critics that read haven't already covered or won't already cover. And I'm going to take that day and we're going to read excerpts from medieval writers who are women who are medieval Jews, who are Muslims who are not talking about monstrosity, but I want their voices to be present at the class. And so that's something I'm looking forward to doing next time around.

>>STEPHANIE: Thanks for listening to this episode of Making Global Learning Universal. This podcast is brought to you by FIU's Office of Global Learning Initiatives, Media Technology Services, and our Disability Resource Center. You can find all our episodes, show notes, transcripts, and discussion guides on our web page, [globallearningpodcast.fiu.edu](http://globallearningpodcast.fiu.edu) and if this episode was meaningful to you, please share it with colleagues, friends, and students. You can even give it a rating on iTunes. Thanks again for tuning in and for all you do to make global learning universal.

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The “Making Global Learning Universal” podcast is produced through a partnership between Florida International University’s Office of Global Learning Initiatives, Media Technology Services, and Disability Resource Center.

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