2007-2008 Assessment of Portfolios for Program Assessment

Thought Courses

Specific courses for which there is material in the portfolios:

- PHIL A405: History of Medieval Thought (Gossiaux)
- PHIL U270: Philosophy and Religion in the Middle Ages (Gossiaux)
- RELS A200: Early Christian Thought (Goodine)
- RELS U285: Heresies and Heretics (Goodine)

1. Do the students demonstrate satisfactory progress on learning objectives (see Assessment Matrix)?

C1: Yes. Students in Dr. Gossiaux’s classes explore such importance issues in medieval thought as the relationship between faith and reason, the nature of universals, the existence and nature of God, and the Latin West’s accommodation of radical Aristotelianism. He also explores contemporary issues in the study of medieval philosophy (e.g., what is the status of “Christian philosophy” in the Middle Ages). In Dr. Goodine’s A200 class, students are introduced to the major theological formulations of the early Church (especially Christology) in the process of articulating its orthodoxy, and in both of her courses to the heresies (including Gnosticism, Arianism, and Pelagianism among others) that challenged the creation of those positions.

C2: Yes. Dr. Gossiaux’s courses cover many of the most important thinkers of the Middle Ages, including Anselm, Abelard, Bonaventure, Aquinas, Siger of Brabant, Boethius of Dacia, Scotus, and Ockham, as well as the important Arabic thinkers Avicenna and Averroes. The major writing assignment for A405 also requires students to examine the thought of other major thinkers and ideas not necessarily covered in the class. Dr. Goodine’s courses introduce the foundational writings and ideas of (on the orthodox side) Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine as well as (among the heretics) of Arius, Apollinaris of Laodicea, Nestorius, Pelagius, Peter Waldo, Joachim of Fiore, John Wyclif, and Jan Hus.

C3: Yes, especially in PHIL A405, where Dr. Gossiaux considers the development of medieval thought within the contexts of the West’s interaction with the Islamic world, the development of the universities, and the condemnations of 1270 and 1277. Dr. Goodine’s courses also seem to take into account historical and social developments and their influences on the development of Christian orthodoxy and competing heterodoxies.

In general yes, at least for the philosophy courses. Exams demonstrate that students are able to summarize and analyze the thought of major medieval writers such as Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Averroes, and to show differences and influences among them.
E1: Yes. Students in both philosophy courses write extensively, including both papers and essay exams. Student materials are not available for the religious studies courses, but the syllabus indicates that the major course (A200) includes a paper and essay exams, while the Common Curriculum course (U185) includes a substantial comparative paper and exams that include short essays with multiple-choice and true-false questions.

Yes, in all the courses students are required to write in a variety of forms and must engage in original research.

E2: Materials for this area are not available. Syllabus examination suggests that only RELS-U185 includes a presentation.

Formal in-class presentation, apart from participation in discussion, does not appear to be a requirement of three of the courses under consideration. RELS A200 does include presentations of the students based on their term projects.

2. What is the weakest aspect of the Thought courses based on student portfolios? How should this be addressed?

There are no significant weaknesses in the work done in philosophy courses. Since student work is not really available for the religious studies courses, it is not possible to say much here, except to reiterate the fact that there is little truly medieval material in these courses—which is not a flaw of these courses, but a sign of a real staffing shortage in the Religious Studies Department.

There is currently a gap in post-Augustinian theology that can only be remedied by the hiring on of theologians with medieval competency.

3. What is the strongest aspect of the Thought courses based on student portfolios? Why?

The amount of time spent dealing directly with primary texts is perhaps the main strength of the philosophy courses. Many essay questions ask students to explain the stance of various writers, and sometimes to compare them. Students show in their answers that they are not simply parroting back what they have read in a textbook, but they have clearly read and at least to some extent digested the authors in their own right.

Dr. Gossiaux is clearly presenting his students with some exciting material! He also proves himself to be a meticulous and encouraging grader of assignments, taking the time to point out even basic matters to students (such as the difference between theological and philosophical issues).
The breadth of thinkers and ideas covered in these few courses and the minimal overlap among them. I don’t think Boethius of Dacia is being read by undergraduates at most universities.

4. Are additional learning objectives being met in the Thought courses?

Student work shows how philosophy and theology intersect with other aspects of medieval culture, thereby at least in part meeting many of goals A1-4, especially A3 and A4.

5. Additional comments or concerns?

Dr. Gossiaux seems to be developing quite a following among students. Ideally it would be wonderful to free him from some other teaching obligations so that he might develop another course or two in medieval studies.