

THE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT GAME PLAN

AFTER THAT QUICK flight through five centuries of public engagement in medieval Europe, it's time now to talk about maybe the most important thing of all: how to *implement* that model today. Unfortunately, we can't just copy everything Peter Damian, Hildegard of Bingen, Henry Suso, and the anonymous owner of Inc. 1699 did in the Middle Ages and paste it into our modern day. As with anything from the medieval past, the strategies they followed and the assumptions that lay behind them were plugged into a cultural context that no longer exists, and recreating that context as they knew it is not really an option for us. Fortunately, medievalists today do not need to become hermits, prophets, cart-drivers, or late medieval urban dwellers to adopt any of these medieval solutions. Instead, all we need to do is to focus on the public engagement tools themselves in order to isolate some basic but effective mindsets and practices that can be adapted into our context more easily. Having done that, it's time to focus on how you, dear reader, can incorporate all those medieval solutions into your own work.

That's why I like to think of this final chapter as a "game plan." By the time you've finished reading this, I'd like for you to have a good sense of how you might start laying the groundwork for doing effective public engagement based on whatever expertise or interest in medieval studies you either already have or are working to develop. Here's how we'll do it. First, I'll lay out all the cards by briefly going through the whole medieval public engagement model again. Then, I'll recommend some simple activities you can do to start practicing each of the four medieval solutions right now, at the same time as you're doing (or learning to do) everything else that a professional medievalist needs to do. Again, even though I'm talking mainly to medievalists here, I think these same activities can work for scholars in any other humanities field, as well. As you'll see, these suggested activities are neither super labour-intensive nor terribly time-consuming; their main purpose is to get you really thinking about how you can effectively engage audiences outside academia with your medieval expertise. The more you practice these methods and mindsets (especially if you're early in your career), the better prepared you'll be to build productive connections with all kinds of audiences when you're done.

At the end of this chapter, I hope you'll be able to see a way out of the public engagement funk medieval studies is in. After all, most of the ideas I have about putting the medieval model into practice are about changing one's mindset more than anything else; if you adopt these medieval solutions, you'll find yourself thinking quite differently about what you know about the Middle Ages and what impact it can have. Once you've gotten past the field's structural roadblocks, I'm confident you'll be able to ask the right kinds of questions and give the right kinds of answers in the right kinds of ways to help all kinds of audiences outside academia see the value in what you know about the Middle Ages. If you're a grad student, adjunct, or independent scholar worried about the job market, I think this chapter will help you learn how your work can help make you an appealing candidate to employers of all kinds. On the other end of the spectrum, if you're a more senior academic or tenured professor, I hope this chapter will help you advocate for the field in your department and/or institution, recruit more students, and support developing or early-career medievalists to develop effective public engagement skills as well. In short, I hope this model will help every medievalist set themselves, their colleagues, and the field up for success in the future.

Recapping the Medieval Model of Public Engagement

The medieval model begins with the Life of Service Conviction. As we saw with Peter Damian, this mentality makes it possible to do all the work necessary to make some kind of impact in the world. Thanks to the Life of Service Conviction, intellectuals felt a profound sense of responsibility to use their prodigious knowledge and highly-specialized skillsets to make some kind of meaningful difference in the world outside their elite circle. Even they knew that was a huge challenge, but because the Life of the Mind Excuse wasn't standing in their way, it was one that they confidently embraced. We can see that going on in all the work they produced, which was carefully shaped and packaged in ways that would get their expertise out in the world most successfully. In Damian's case, as we saw, this meant expressing himself mainly through letters, the genre that was public and persuasive enough to make people understand how they had to think and behave in the world.

That conviction, in turn, made it obvious that professional medieval intellectuals needed Genre Diversity to be successful. Blissfully free of Genre Dependency, they embraced the chance to be creative about how they shared their knowledge with everyone else. Hildegard of Bingen's career is a testament to this; she understood perfectly that the spiritual message the Living

Light commanded her to share was too big and too important to be contained in just one genre. If she was going to convince everyone to start embodying monastic virtues, she needed to broadcast that message in as many different genres as she possibly could, so that she could offer her diverse audience multiple points of access to the content of her visions. Importantly, though, the *Riesencodex* reminds us that, despite their differences, all those expressions were equally a part of the same mission, and, thus, equally valuable. Hildegard was exceptional in a lot of ways, but not in this; the diverse body of work left to us by medieval intellectuals show that they too understood the value of sharing their expertise in a variety of formats.

That realization made it easier for intellectuals to get out of their proverbial carts, roll up their proverbial robes, and wade into the proverbial mud to do some Audience Development. Elite intellectuals, despite all their lofty training, recognized the simple truth that it's easier to make a difference with an audience that you know very well, but getting to that point takes more than the wishful thinking and luck that the General Public Fallacy relies on. They knew that it took the kind of time, effort, and patience we saw in Henry Suso's decades-long service to Dominican nuns. In all that time, Suso never took anything for granted; he made sure that he nurtured the relationship he had with the sisters in all the ways that he could, especially by being present with them and listening to them. Ultimately, all his effort putting his audience first paid off in more ways than one; this mutually-beneficial relationship both made his own work better and helped bring it to audiences well beyond Dominican convents in the German lands, which ultimately allowed him to serve his neighbours as much as Eternal Wisdom wanted him to.

I can imagine that the last part of the medieval model of public engagement, Audience Empowerment, was the most difficult one for professional intellectuals to do in medieval Europe. Then, as now, there was a lot of safety and comfort in Gatekeeping, and there were plenty of intellectuals in medieval Europe who wanted to keep certain aspects of their work out of the hands of the uninitiated. But, despite all those concerns, there were still many elite intellectuals who were willing to open the door to intellectual culture so non-experts, even ordinary laypeople, could come in. The manuscript we see in Inc. 1699, for all the things we don't know about its owner, is clear proof of that. On the one hand, we can see all the hard work of translating, excerpting, and adapting that professionals must have done to make all the theological and devotional material in the book accessible to laypeople. But we can also see an ordinary layperson confidently and enthusiastically devote their financial and intellectual resources to creating, using, and even

adding to a personalized devotional program for themselves and, quite possibly, others as well. I think professionals would have been delighted at that, because, in the end, books like *Inc. 1699* were physical evidence that all their public engagement was working.

I've found a lot of comfort and inspiration in this medieval model. Precisely because we have so much evidence that these solutions worked in the medieval past, I'm confident that an adapted version of that model can also work for us today. And, as I mentioned earlier, I don't think it requires us to also get degrees in marketing or communications at the same time as our advanced medieval studies degree to do it. All we really need to do is avoid the structural roadblocks that are holding us back from seeing what kind of impact our expertise can make. So, in the sections that follow, you'll find some simple activities that you can do to make public engagement a central part of the work you are already doing as a medievalist.

How to Implement the Life of Service Conviction: Make an Echoes List

Let's start where the medieval intellectuals started, because, not to sound like a broken record or anything, the whole public engagement endeavour really begins with the Life of Service Conviction. As we saw in chapter 1, medieval studies' future depends on all of us, even those who are just in it to contribute to scholarship or out of love for the weird coolness of the Middle Ages (both of which are perfectly wonderful things, by the way), being able to confidently and compellingly talk about the value the field creates for everyone else. This medieval solution can help us do that. The end goal here is a field that *insists*—repeatedly, publicly, and sometimes even forcefully—that medieval studies are relevant to our contemporary society, and that there is room in the field for everyone.

That kind of advocacy doesn't come naturally to everyone, and it certainly isn't taught in a traditional graduate program. Medievalists have gotten better at doing this in the recent past, but there's still a long way to go. So I'd like to suggest an activity that, over time, will help you learn how to start building up your awareness of the ways in which medieval studies can intervene in areas outside academia, whether you are starting a graduate program or entering emeritus status. Before you even start it, though, you might need to make a slight but significant adjustment to how you think about what you, as a medievalist, actually *know*. Remember, the Life of the Mind Excuse would have you believe that all you know is some very specific information about a narrowly-defined aspect of something in the

distant past that matters only to a niche group of scholars. If you want to get more in line with the Life of Service Conviction, though, what you *know* is this: how and why human beings think and act in all kinds of ways. See the difference? Think about it for a second; medievalists have expert-level knowledge of how and why human beings in the Middle Ages did things like solve problems, manage money and resources, deal with emotions, interact with their environment, start and resolve conflicts, make art, and all kinds of other things. Well guess what? Humans are, right this minute, *still doing all of those things*. Sure, they don't do them in the same ways or for the same reasons as medieval people, but the fact remains that all the work you will put in (or have put in) to become a medievalist means that you will have a lot to say and contribute to any attempt to understand, guide, or influence how people think about and do things today. In short, this little shift in perspective can help you start realizing that your "niche" expertise *matters right now*.

Once you've got that idea firmly in your head, you're ready for the activity: making an "Echoes List." It concerns what I call "echoes," which is a slightly fancy term for those moments when something medieval reminds you of something modern, or vice versa. So, for example, if learning about Louis IX resettling Levantine converts in France in the thirteenth century makes you think of immigration in Europe today, that's an echo. I've found that these echoes come at different volumes; some are pretty faint and weak ("This kind of makes me think of"), but others are loud and strong ("Oh man, this is *just like*"). I'm willing to bet that you hear these echoes quite a lot as you're going about your medievalist life, and that's where this activity comes in. You see, the Life of the Mind Excuse would have you ignore or downplay those echoes, but the Life of Service Conviction wants you to take them *very* seriously. That's because they are signs, however slight, that the things we know about the medieval past can actually contribute something to modern concerns. So, the point of this activity is to help you start using those echoes to explain what your work can do for the so-called "real world."

Here's how it works. The first thing to do is simply to *pay attention* to the echoes when they show up. When they happen, I encourage you to take a moment to think about why it came up for you. Why do you think [medieval thing] reminded you of [modern thing], or vice versa? How strong would you say this echo is? Once you get a bit better at paying attention to echoes, it's time to take some notes, something I assume you're already doing all the time. So, at first, when you hear an echo, make a note. These notes don't need to be long or discursive if you don't want them to be. At this point, the

goal is to start making a habit out of recognizing and articulating the connections between the Middle Ages and the modern day.

If you're a graduate student, this habit will come in very handy when you enter the more advanced stages of your graduate work, that is, the time when you become an expert in some aspect of medieval culture. As your engagement with medieval stuff intensifies, I expect the echoes you encounter will start getting louder, stronger, and, quite likely, more focused. I think the same process will also happen if you're a more advanced medievalist, especially when you're starting a new project. Either way, when the echoes intensify, you'll be ready for the next stage of the activity: compiling a list of echoes in a notebook, spreadsheet, bulletin board, whatever. The entries don't need to be super long or detailed; something like "Bernard of Clairvaux flipping out over losing his seal makes me think about fake social media accounts" will do just fine. The important thing is to record whatever connection you're seeing between the medieval and the modern. Every now and again, you should read over that list and think about what it's telling you about the broader implications of your work. Your results may vary; you may find that your project is resonating with all kinds of things in the modern day, or (more likely, in my experience) you'll see a relatively short list of very strong resonances with a few modern things. If you have the chance, it would also be a good idea to set aside some time to try and learn why these resonances are happening for you. If something especially intriguing comes up, add that to the list, too.

The upshot of this activity is that, by the time you complete your PhD or your project, you'll also have a list of the possible ways your particular medieval expertise connects to modern concerns, practices, and institutions. This, in turn, will help you understand—and help *others* understand—what you can do with your medieval expertise. Had I done this activity while I was working on my dissertation, for example, I would have realized much sooner that my expert knowledge of medieval letter-writing could be useful for political campaigns, public relations firms, or marketing departments, because I understood how individuals and institutions could safely and responsibly communicate their ideas and brands in a relatively unregulated media climate. You will learn different things from your Echoes List, I imagine, but the overall result will be the same: you'll know how your specialized medieval expertise can serve a variety of modern publics.

Implementing Genre Diversity: Medieval Resource Reviews

I think implementing Genre Diversity should be easier for you than the other solutions, since we already have so many good examples of medievalists sharing their expertise in innovative ways that you could use for inspiration. But, even with those examples, medieval studies' debilitating case of Genre Dependency still makes it too difficult for many medievalists to imagine how producing anything other than a scholarly publication will advance their career, especially while they're still in graduate school. So, in this section, I'm going to introduce you to activity that will, I hope, help you start to think about how you can share your expertise in different genres.

Success with this activity really boils down to answering two simple questions that I first heard in 2016 in the chilly, windowless office of my friend and colleague Jennifer Wolfe, who was then the Digital Librarian in the Newberry's Digital Initiatives and Services department. I had gone there to discuss what kinds of digital resources we might put together for the Religious Change project, and I was nervous. You see, during my interview for the job, the one question I think I could have answered better (that's a polite way of saying "totally bombed") was about digital humanities. I didn't have a lot of experience with them at all, and I was quite worried about having to suddenly take the lead in developing them. So at the beginning of our meeting, I launched into a long (as I remember it) rant about everything I didn't know about digital humanities. After patiently sitting through all of that, Jen simply asked "Well, what do you want people to know?" After thinking for a bit, I answered that I had never quite been able to get my students to understand just how important the technology of the pamphlet was to Martin Luther's success. I had tried everything: I talked about it a lot in class, I assigned scholarly readings making that point, and I showed a bunch of images of pamphlets in my lecture PowerPoints, but my students just never seemed to "get it" in the way that I wanted.

After that, Jen asked me another question, one that I realize now is the whole key to Genre Diversity: "*How can you help them learn that?*" In all my time as a professional medievalist, I had never seriously thought about a question like that before; as far as I knew, I had already done everything I possibly could. When Jen asked it, though, it dawned on me that there were other genres that could express an important historical fact that the traditional scholarly publication, lecture, or PowerPoint couldn't. Our conversation led us to develop an interactive map, *Tracking the Luther Controversy*, that showed how the Reformation took place through

pamphlets.¹ Finally, I had a way for students to visualize debates over Luther's ideas pinging from one pamphlet to another, which helped the students see how much work pamphlets were doing and how much more Luther used them than his Catholic opponents, which helped him survive the church's attempts to silence him. Much to our delight, we later learned that the resource, as one instructor put it on social media, "gave great context" when other instructors taught their students about the Reformation.

These two questions—"what do you want people to know?" and "how can you help them know it?"—are, I now realize, the cornerstone of developing Genre Diversity. The second question is particularly critical, because it's the one most concerned with format and genre. To go back to my pamphlet example, this was the question that made me think about *how* I could express the urgent, rapid-fire nature of pamphlet literature in the sixteenth century, something that didn't come across in the more traditional scholarly formats I'd tried. To help you learn that as well, I'd like to suggest an activity that will hopefully help you develop an understanding of the variety of ways in which different formats can express your knowledge.

Since medieval intellectuals were much better at public engagement than we are right now, the sources they left to us (which, again, happen to be the entire foundation of this field) were carefully designed to effectively engage different audiences in a variety of ways. Collectively, then, the sources we look at in our research (chronicles, poetry, music, visual art, architecture, etc.) are like a set of tools that can be used to share content with various audiences. So, the better you are at understanding how those sources functioned as tools of public engagement in their own time, the better you'll be at understanding what contemporary public engagement formats you could use to tell people about them now. The key to developing that mindset is an activity that I always assign to students in my graduate seminar on digital humanities that I've taught a few times at the Newberry: writing reviews. Now, to be clear, I'm not talking about the formal one thousand-word scholarly reviews you'll find in journals or on listservs, but the kind of reviews that ultimately explain whether you should patronize a business, buy or use a particular product, visit a museum on vacation, and the like.

There are two levels to this activity, as I understand it. You could do them in whatever order you want, although I think the first level works better in the early stages of a research project, course design, or graduate program, when you'll probably be exposed to a wider range of medieval sources

¹ <https://publications.newberry.org/digital/luther-map/>.

thanks to your various preparations. Here's how it works. Whenever you engage with a medieval source of some kind, you should take some time (just a few minutes is all you need) to ask yourself a set of questions about it. As before, you could write your answers to those questions down if you want, or just do it in your head. Either works. The questions you ask here are geared towards understanding your gut reaction to the source, that is, why you liked, disliked, or felt indifferent about it. You can make up your own questions, but here's a few just to get you started: Do I like/dislike/feel indifferent about this source? Why do I feel that way? How do I wish this source were different? How does this compare to other sources that I like/dislike/feel indifferent about? After asking yourself these questions, you should answer them, *but...this is important...don't do any research*. Don't go learning all about literary theory or try to make yourself into an expert before you say anything, just go with what you feel and what you observe. As best you can, try to make sure that your answers have some detail. For example, say things like "I didn't like the *Summa Theologiae* because I'm a visual learner and there was too much text" instead of "I didn't like the *Summa Theologiae* because it's boring."

Again, you don't have to write any of this down if you don't want to; the point is that you start to make connections between your reactions to a particular medieval source and the rhetorical and technical ways in which that source works. After all, as we learned in chapter 2, medieval intellectuals were a lot more creative than we are, so the expressions of their expertise often engage audiences in ways (visually, aurally, textually, materially) that our scholarly publications don't. In this first level of the review activity, you're basically learning how to recognize the many ways in which medieval sources *talk to you*. Like any form of media, some of those ways will work for you, and some of them won't, but either way it doesn't matter. As long as you're thinking about how a medieval source speaks to a particular audience (i.e., you), you're well on your way to Genre Diversity.

The next level of this activity comes at a later stage in your project's development (if you're a graduate student, this would be after you've started researching for a dissertation or thesis). At that stage, you'll have chosen a particular medieval source (or group of sources) that you'll get to know *extremely* well, and you'll need that background here. At this level, your goal should be to periodically stop and make a review of your source that *recommends* it to a different audience. To do that, you should use another set of questions that try to dig further into how your medieval sources work. Again, you can make up your own questions, but here are some suggestions: How does this source express its content? What would someone need to

know or do to use this source properly? What sort of audience would find this approach useful? That last question is probably the most important one; whatever you're working with, you should try to think of some general type of audience that would respond well to how your source works. Something like this: "If you like colourful and shiny things, you would love to look at this illuminated Book of Hours!"

The whole point of the review activity is to help you recognize how different genres and formats engage their audiences. That's not something we can really get from scholarly publications, because that genre offers only one kind of engagement: the scholarly way. That's why the activity focuses on medieval sources; as we saw in chapter 2, they were produced in an intellectual culture that was much more naturally creative than ours, so they usually share their content in multiple ways that could appeal to various audiences at once. This activity will, I hope, help you become more familiar with that concept, which will then help you understand how those sources can speak to modern audiences today. It will also remind you how fun and interesting the source is, which will make it easier for you to get other people excited about it. Once you do that, I think you'll find it easier to imagine how you can tell those audiences something about medieval culture that a scholarly publication won't allow, and appreciate how this variety of expression gives a more complete and accurate picture of medieval culture.

How to Implement Audience Development: Get Involved

Like I said in chapter 3, Audience Development is a medieval solution that doesn't require a lot of adaptation. Every one of the stages we can draw out of Henry Suso's engagement with the Dominican sisters is something that would, generally speaking, be just as effective today as it was in the fourteenth century. So, if you want to develop an audience for your medieval work outside of academia, all you have to do is 1) commit yourself to doing it; 2) identify a specific audience to connect with; 3) be present with that audience to build a relationship with it; 4) listen to what the members of that audience want, need, or are interested in; and 5) share your knowledge in a way that matches those interests, wants, and needs. Easy, right? Well, not really. Audience Development still requires a lot of time and work, which means it is probably the most difficult medieval public engagement approach to work into your professional development or day-to-day work.

But fear not! I assure you there are some ways you can lay a foundation for successful Audience Development wherever you are in your career. Step 1, for example, is a freebie; you can commit yourself to developing an

audience long before you actually have the chance to do it, so you're already 20 per cent of the way there! Seriously, though, I think the activity that will set you up for the most success with Audience Development comes down to two words: get involved. Actually, sorry, let me add a couple more words to that: get involved *in something outside academia*. If you're a grad student; I bet you've heard that before; it has (thankfully) become pretty common for graduate programs to encourage students to "do something else" from time to time to help preserve their physical, spiritual, and mental well-being. You also might have heard from former academics giving career advice that "diversifying" your time is a great way to develop skills and contacts that will make you an appealing candidate for jobs outside academia.² If you're not a graduate student, I expect that you've already been diversifying your time, but if you haven't, I think it would be a good idea for you to start.

In any case, however it is that you get involved, you will also get better at developing audiences for your medieval expertise along the way. Whatever your "something else" is will give you the opportunity to get to know a specific audience better by spending time with them, sharing a particular experience with them, listening to them, and learning from them. With that in your back pocket, the only step that's left is figuring out how to share your content with them in way that you know they'll respond to (see previous activity). Once you do, quite suddenly, you'll find yourself 80 per cent of the way to mastering Audience Development.

How you "get involved" is pretty simple: find an organization, class, activity, or group of some kind that fits with your interests, passions, wants, or needs and, well, get involved in it. This could mean volunteering at a non-profit devoted to a cause that you care deeply about, joining a recreational league for a sport that you enjoy playing, getting involved at your child's school, working as a staffer on a political campaign you support, taking some kind of active role in your religious community, or attending a class to learn a new skill you've always wanted to try (like playing a musical instrument or making pottery). If getting involved in public isn't your thing, that's okay, too; you can learn just as much about what people outside academia want and need even if you just sit quietly in the back of a room, watch from the sidelines, or log into to an online community. Oh, and don't forget that spending time with your friends and loved ones 100 per cent counts as "getting involved," too. For our purposes here, the goal is to find yourself—in whatever way you're most comfortable—among a bunch of non-medi-

2 Cao, "Freeing the PhD."

evalists who also happen to share a particular interest with you. That really matters, because when people share a common interest, it's easier for them to talk to each other. And when people talk to each other, they learn a lot about each other.

Ideally, once you've been involved in your "something" for a while, you'll feel more comfortable sharing your medieval interests with this non-expert group. If you get to that point, just remember that you don't need to act like an expert in those non-academic spaces; nobody there is trying to test you or judge your worthiness as a medievalist. Hopefully, they'll just be interested in hearing more about another interest you have. But whether or not you talk about the nuts and bolts of your dissertation, class, or book project, I want you to think about getting involved as another way to make you a better medievalist. In fact, I wouldn't be at all surprised if diversifying your time helps you understand your work even better, because you'll have a clearer sense of how you might share it outside a scholarly field.

That happened for me during the last couple years of graduate school, when I joined the Adult Spiritual Growth Team at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in my hometown of Waukegan, Illinois. Working with the pastors to develop one-off devotional meetings and curricula for the Lenten spiritual education series started out as "something else" that I could do outside of my work to keep me sane, but I soon found it gave me a really interesting perspective on the kinds of spiritual instruction medieval religious thinkers were trying to do in their letters. Talking about that sort of thing with my pastors, who obviously had a lot to say about it, helped me get my head around how people like Hildegard and Peter Damian and all the rest condensed things like discussions of the Trinity into a form that ordinary folks could grasp. And that, as we saw in chapter 1, is something that later helped me engage other audiences in medieval history. So yes, diversify your time, but when you do, keep an open mind for how your "something else" can be an opportunity for you to plant seeds now that will grow into enthusiastic and interested audiences for medieval studies later.

Implementing Audience Empowerment: The Grocery Store Scenario

And now for the final boss. Even if you're a seasoned medievalist, it might be a while before you feel ready to tackle Audience Empowerment, and I wouldn't blame you. In some ways, this becomes harder to do the more expertise you gain, because you're much more aware of everything that non-experts *don't* know about your medieval topic. For graduate students, it might be even more difficult. After all, don't you have to wait until you have

the stranger replies, “Wow! That’s cool!” Now comes the most important part: *what do you do next?*

There are a whole range of possible things you could do at this point, of course, and I won’t try to list them all here, but I think they would all fall into one of two categories: unproductive and productive. The former category includes all the answers that Gatekeeping wants us to give, such as “quickly change the subject,” “just say I’m a student/teacher because they won’t get it anyway,” or “use a bunch of jargon.” The latter category, on the other hand, is what Audience Empowerment wants you to give, such as “I agree, it *is* cool!” or “Oh yeah, I love it, how about you?” or “Totally. What do you think is cool about it?” See the difference? The unproductive responses ultimately maintain a distance between medievalists and non-medievalists, the productive ones shorten or even eliminate that distance.

The productive responses do that by, as it were, handing the baton *back* to the non-expert and giving them the chance to speak. This really isn’t as radical as Gatekeeping makes it seem. When it comes down to it, we should want to talk about the Middle Ages with people who think they’re cool and interesting, *because we also think they’re cool and interesting*. It’s right here, in conversations just like this, that we can build that long-sought-for bridge between all of the popular interest in medieval stuff with the work we do as medievalists. The Grocery Store Scenario is a way for you to prepare for those critical conversations by imagining how you can talk about your work in a way that makes non-experts feel welcomed and valued.

This is not something one normally does in graduate school or during the usual course of an academic year, but it is something I do all the time at the Newberry in collection presentations, exhibition tours, and random encounters in the reading room. In all those cases, I do my best to *not* sound like a scholar; instead, I try to come across as someone who’s excited about and interested in medieval things. I have a couple strategies for doing that, too, and I’m happy to share those with you.

STRATEGY 1: *Don’t say “actually.”* “Actually” was one of my staple vocabulary words when I was teaching in grad school and as an adjunct; I used it a lot whenever students made an observation or declaration about the Middle Ages that, in my view, wasn’t quite right. So, for example, if a student said, “The church wanted the stuff in this book to be a secret because it’s written in Latin,” I would respond with “Actually, plenty of laypeople could read Latin in the Middle Ages.” I don’t recall it ever having much of a reaction in the classroom, but at the Newberry, I noticed that people’s enthusiasm or excitement noticeably dropped every time I said it. The reason why, I think, is that, generally speaking, people don’t like to be told that they’re

wrong, which is exactly what I was doing. Though no one ever said so out loud, their reactions told me that “actually” was a sign of me invoking my expert authority to shut a non-expert down. So, instead of doing that, I try to answer those comments in a way that validates their initial interpretation, like this: “Ah, that is a good observation! It’s true that most people in medieval Europe didn’t know Latin, so a lot of people couldn’t read this book. But you know what’s interesting? There were a lot of books made for laypeople that were in Latin, so that suggests that at least some of them could read it. So maybe this book wasn’t so secret after all.” That second answer was longer, to be sure, but I’ve found that people usually don’t mind, so long as I don’t seem to shut them down by saying “actually.”

STRATEGY 2: *Admit Ignorance.* As you probably know, it’s hard to feel comfortable doing this in academia, where it seems that admitting you don’t know something is a sign of weakness, even if you’re a tenured professor (Quick sidebar: it is not). I thought that mindset didn’t make any sense while I was in grad school, and yet I still found myself staying silent at lectures or in discussions when I didn’t feel I was an expert more times than I like to admit. At the Newberry, though, it’s a different story. If I’m not an expert in something, I’ll say so (“Well, I’m not an expert in that”). If I get asked a question I don’t know the answer to, I’ll say that too (“Good question! I’d have to look that up”). And, if I’m not sure whether my answer is right, I’ll also say that (“I think it could be [answer], but I could be wrong...”). This strategy is *extremely* helpful for making the field more welcoming, because it helps get rid of the common perception that you have to know *everything* about the Middle Ages before you can say *anything* about it. The people who aren’t experts are, for the most part, already perfectly aware that they don’t know everything about medieval culture, and it seems that they find it comforting when “experts” like me admit that we don’t either.

STRATEGY 3: *Share the mic.* I’ve noticed that, when we medievalists get the opportunity to talk about a medieval thing in a non-academic space, it’s hard for us to resist jumping up on the stage, grabbing the mic and talking about it like we’re giving a lecture or a conference plenary. That means monologuing about something for a long time and sharing a ton of details without giving the other person a chance to speak. But I’ve learned at the Newberry that, while people love to learn new things, they usually don’t love being lectured to. As Henry Suso knew, conversations are a whole lot better for building productive connections with other people, so I try to do everything I can to teach people about medieval things that way. When I do—and I can’t emphasize this enough—there are four words I always say that matter more than almost any other, and that I encourage you to use as much as you can.

Ready? Here they are: *what do you think?* These words are the whole key to Audience Empowerment. I expect they're already very familiar to you, especially if you've been teaching; medievalists ask their non-specialist students this question all the time, which makes it all the more strange to me that we don't seem to ask it in any other context. People excited about the Middle Ages (and, again, there are more of those than you might think) *want* to talk about it with experts, but we rarely give them the chance to do it. So, whenever I say, "What do you think?" to someone at the Newberry, I'm really giving them an invitation to join me in the work that professional medievalists do: try to understand why medieval people did what they did. By sharing the mic, I help people feel not only like they're allowed to do that work too, but that I'd be happy if they did.

I don't expect you to have a ton of success with the Grocery Store Scenario right away. Depending on how long you've been in your program or teaching at a university, it could be hard to imagine talking about what you do in an open and inviting way. If that's the case for you, keep at it! Like any medieval intellectual knew, the more you run through those hypothetical scenarios, the easier it will be for you to make a non-medievalist feel like there is a place for them in our cool and interesting field. Oh, and one more thing: there will always be times when we as medievalists need to pull rank and tell people they're wrong, like anytime we see someone promoting the white supremacist version of the medieval past. In those cases, it's our responsibility to make sure we set the record straight (you can definitely use "actually" in this case). But the rest of the time, we should be going about our work outside of academia in a spirit of humility instead of authority. That, really, is what Audience Empowerment is all about: letting others use their perspectives, knowledge, and enthusiasm to make our field better.

And there you have it! Successful public engagement in four stages. If you work on incorporating these activities into your graduate training or your ongoing professional development, I'm convinced that they'll help you develop the skills and mindsets you need to build productive connections with various audiences outside academia about medieval studies. Right now, it may seem difficult to imagine that making a list of echoes, writing reviews no one will see, getting involved in something unrelated to your work, or pretending to be stuck in line at a grocery store will do anything to solve the crisis of medieval studies. But the more you work on them, the better at public engagement you'll become, because you'll have exactly what your medieval predecessors had (and what Sad Ovid doesn't): the confidence that your work matters to the world *and* the skills you need to effectively explain why. Good luck!