



Sustainability Project
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Sustainability Concept implemented: Sustainable textiles and clothing

In the Fall 2014 semester, I implemented a sustainability module into my iteration of the History Capstone Seminar (History 480), a course that is required for all History majors. The theme of my version of the seminar is daily life in the pre-modern world, particularly the Viking Age. Students learn hands-on approaches to History and History teaching by examining how historians and archaeologists use artifacts to study and recreate medieval lifeways.

In September, the students and I started a course theme on textile production. On the second day of class, we harvested the UWGB flax garden and set up the retting pool. Retting is a process that helps release the fiber from the stalk through a bacterial process. When the course reconvened the following week, we discussed further how flax was made into linen and clothing. It is an arduous process that takes many months. Students were struck by the amount of work involved, and how precious clothing would have been to medieval people. Discussion focused on the massive volume of clothing modern people have and why (fashion trends, consumerism, the availability of cheap clothing made in Chinese factories, globalization). We discussed definitions of sustainability and that medieval people would not have viewed their textile tradition in sustainability terms, but that modern society should. And learn from medieval traditions.

The discussion on sustainability and textiles continued a few weeks later when the students and I spent a weekend at a recreated 'Viking' farmstead in Central Wisconsin. Our hosts taught students how the Vikings made clothing using various weaving techniques.

The last phase of the discussion occurred in November when Jeremy Pingel, Director of our local Good Will, visited our class. Students were particularly fascinated by the sheer volume of donated clothing, once again highlighting the wastefulness of our society juxtaposed against the usage patterns of medieval people.