

We are All Historians: Kelly A. Roark's Teaching Philosophy

In Why History Matters, Gerda Lerner insists that we are all historians. One of the founders of women's history and emeritus professor at the University of Wisconsin, Lerner has influenced generations of scholars in Madison and beyond. Her perspective on pedagogy has guided my approach in the classroom. When we imagine ourselves, our lives, and our place in the world, we craft a story about how and why we came to be where we are. Even if students have struggled with previous coursework that engages the past, I believe we can all meet at this point: telling our own stories. With this foundation it is possible to draw students into historical issues of greater complexity, divergent sources, and challenging critical analysis.

Many students learn best by doing, and I integrate both the content and the practice of history into my course design. College students enter the classroom with widely different experiences and learning styles. Learning the craft of history gives students real tools useful in problem-solving and critically assessing information. The skills necessary to identify primary sources, evaluate secondary sources, craft arguments, muster well-sourced evidence, and write clearly are integral to the historians' craft. These are some of the most valuable skills of the historian and are particularly useful to students as they navigate the overwhelming amount of information available on-line.

It is one of my goals to give students the tools to see the past all around them, wherever they are. As an environmental historian, I believe that actual places are one of the best ways to learn about the palimpsest of history. If at all possible, I take students out of the classroom to local history sites, research libraries and archives, or even on a tour of the college grounds. Along with my fellow teaching assistants, I took my environmental history students on a field trip around the University of Wisconsin campus. We posed questions, looked carefully at both important architecture and ignored spaces, and imagined the place in different eras. Following the field trip, students revealed that they now thought differently about the place; one student complained that he usually had plenty of time to make it to class, but now his trek "brought up so many issues" that he had to sprint for the last half of his route to avoid being late.

I have gained important teaching experience at the University of Wisconsin, leading discussion sections of both a freshman-level survey of U.S. History and a senior-level environmental history course. The courses allowed me to design writing assignments, lead students through the research process, and evaluate students' progress in developing their critical

thinking and communication skills. Creating a classroom environment in which students feel free to express divergent viewpoints, mentoring students as they develop their own intellectual perspectives, and a particular emphasis on clearly conveying ideas through writing are the main elements of my teaching philosophy.

Before entering graduate school, I worked and volunteered for a number of public history organizations and am deeply committed to bridging the divide between public and academic history. My work at the Wisconsin Historical Society integrated public and academic history and persuaded me that the skills and strengths of public history and local history deserve attention in university classrooms. Historical sites engage their diverse audiences with equally diverse approaches to education. In both lectures and small-group discussions, I try to provide students with a broad spectrum of ways to engage the past. Role-playing and debates ask students to use their historical imagination by standing in the shoes of a variety of figures from the past. Interpreting political cartoons, artwork, and images give students another way to see the history they study. I also use real problem-solving and technology to help students develop their skills.

By promoting students' curiosity about their world and working to provide the skills they need to grapple with the complexities of the past, I hope to empower them as competent, engaged, and active citizens in the professions they choose and communities they call home.