

Johanna Mellis  
Teaching Statement

My experience in oral, public, and World history undergirds my practice of giving Ursinus students tangible opportunities to humanize individuals' complex histories, and connect them meaningfully to contemporary issues, their lives, and the public. I aim to create an environment whereby students assume responsibility for their learning and for cultivating an inclusive class community. This culture facilitates open dialogue about people's difficult histories, wherein we question why individuals became victims, bystanders, resisters, perpetrators, or—as Primo Levi described—behaved in some “gray zone” in between. In order to explore these often-ambiguous positions, we explore primary and secondary sources to ask how power structures shape people's histories, and how those histories are represented today. When I apply these practices to experiential assignments, my Ursinus students not only learn how to confidently formulate their ideas. They also grasp how to present historical experiences in a meaningful, nuanced manner to different audiences.

In order to foster students' learning and appreciation of people's myriad pasts, I position myself as a conversation facilitator and center class around discussion activities. This approach ensures that students are empowered to take ownership of their intellectual development, rather than sit passively in the course. By maintaining high expectations for class engagement, students rise to the challenge and improve the motivational, learning management, and analytical skills necessary for their active learning. Organizing classes in this manner also tasks students with maintaining the inclusive environment that I structure for them. We thus collectively learn to respectfully discuss our interpretations of how and why people behaved in certain ways in the past. To prepare for discussions, students alternate between writing Canvas Engagement Posts and selecting quotes to analyze in Reading Quote Assignments. Since introducing the Reading Quote Assignment in my Common Intellectual Experience (CIE) class, I saw a drastic increase in students' ability to identify important excerpts and analyze them with their peers. For example, with little prodding from me, in less than one class students collectively pinpointed Michel de Montaigne's argument in the essay “Of Cannibals” about the role and purpose of alterity in early modern Europe, as well as in our communities today. The combination of the short writing assignments and my discussion approach thus reinforces students' engagement and capacity to respectfully articulate arguments about people's difficult pasts and choices.

My course, “A World at War: A Global History of WWI,” exemplifies how I scaffold classes in ways that teach Ursinus students to humanize power relations and recognize *their* power in interpreting the past. The course focuses on comparing how people at all levels attempted to achieve aims during the conflict such as independence, socio-economic stability, and the entrenchment of colonialism across the world. To explore these myriad experiences, students are examining sources ranging from correspondence, reports, to excerpts from diaries and memoirs. They particularly enjoyed the historical fiction novel *Three Day Road*, which details the trials faced by two indigenous men in Canada's forces. Students empathetically analyzed the two soldiers' lives, and assessed how Western racism undergirded their experiences. In a longer paper, many students chose to continue exploring the topic by analyzing the soldiers' coping mechanisms in handling the double assault of the front line and racism. Importantly, we devoted an entire discussion to the implications of the recent discrediting of the author's claims to indigenous heritage. Students critiqued historical and cultural appropriation, and the power we wield in selecting, analyzing, and presenting history to others. These exercises gave the class a firm foundation for the role-playing required for the Mock Versailles Negotiation later this

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month. Each student will further engage in the theme of historical representation, and the Western-dominated process of “peace-making” efforts. Through these activities, my Ursinus students are honing their ability to humanize and analyze the power of sources and history, as well as the writing and presentation skills to express these global power differentials to others.

I moreover employ “Connection Assignments” in each course to engage Ursinus students in relating historical events to contemporary society. These vary in form from 1-paragraph submissions to in-class discussions. Students frequently respond to questions such as “Why does today’s topic matter to you or society?” Other times, they identify and examine how a TV show, film, or book portrays a concept from class. The assignments require students to connect historical moments to their lives, explore how histories are presented in different mediums, and how visual portrayals shape historical narratives and memory. I initially conducted these assignments in the last five minutes of the class period. My students’ enthusiastic responses, however, convinced me to allot extra time to allow for more thorough examinations of the connections between the past and present.

My commitment to teaching students to connect more intimately to their learning and the past culminate in the various oral and public history initiatives in my courses. The Historical Letter and Commemoration Proposal in my “Nationalism and Memory in European History” course this semester is one such example. Students selected a European minority group and are writing a first-person account about the group’s experiences and a proposal to advocate commemorating the group’s history through a memorial. My students will vote on their favorite proposals and work collectively on the selected ones for their final assignment. During the team-building activity they will develop the assignment further by expanding the proposal’s justifications, the proposed outcomes for visitors, plans for engaging with their community, and potential political and/or funding issues they might face. By collaborating on an engaging memorial that represents a minority group’s past to a mass audience, students are “thinking through” the complex process of public history and advocating for others. Just as importantly, the tangible nature of the assignment increases its meaningfulness to students. The topics of students’ projects range from a traveling exhibit about Berlin’s prewar Jewish community, a mural dedicated to two Dutch female resisters, to a festival celebrating the Roma background of *flamenco* culture in Spain. Although the students have not yet reached the group stage of the assignment, multiple students expressed their genuine interest in the project to their peers in and out of the classroom.

Implementing dynamic, public history assignments with Ursinus students brings my teaching practice full circle. Structuring courses around readings and activities that facilitates their active learning in various aspects of oral, public, and World history makes history tangible and meaningful to students. My Ursinus students learn how to turn an analytical yet empathetic eye to historical figures who, on the surface, may seem dissimilar from themselves. They moreover develop the skills to use history to understand the present, and present historical experiences in formats suited to different audiences. When utilized in the rigorous atmosphere in Ursinus’s History Department, my courses will continue to allow students to actively and confidently cultivate the skills, habits, knowledge—and importantly, the lifelong desire—to seek out the power dynamics that impacted how individuals interacted with each other across cultures and eras, and in the world today.