Monica L. Mercado  
Postdoctoral Fellow, Bryn Mawr College

Teaching Statement

Before I was a college teacher, I worked as a museum educator and curator, and my teaching commitment was shaped early on by the history and art museums where I trained in New York and Chicago. Years of gallery talks and classroom visits, conducting object-based learning for audiences ranging from elementary schoolchildren to adult groups, fundamentally shaped my approach to the college classroom. Not only did I learn to communicate with a wide range of audiences of mixed levels and interests, but I also learned how powerfully students could connect with the thing—objects, artifacts, documents, and images that heighten our analyses of the communities we study. Today I approach my teaching responsibilities with an emphasis on reading and interpreting primary sources, and creating an intellectual community based on collective inquiry into what might at first seem foreign or strange—the handwriting on a yellowed 19th-century letter, a map of a familiar street block from one hundred years earlier, early photographs from our college archives—and I introduce these kinds of materials into both introductory and more advanced courses.

I have taught U.S. History at the college level since 2007, and achieve these goals by collaborating with fellow instructors, librarians, curators, and archivists, and by harnessing the wealth of open access digital sources increasingly available on our laptops and tablets. In the introductory core courses, this means breaking students into small groups to puzzle over the meaning of primary documents or feminist theory assigned, and integrating film, news reports, or oral history recordings into assigned readings. Not all students want to take on original research, which is why in a lecture course, such as the American Catholic studies introductory survey I taught at the University of Illinois-Chicago, I experimented with an extra credit assignment that asked students to visit their local Catholic parish in order to search out a brief history. With their daily Chicago commutes transformed into an introductory research task, students told me the exercise was their favorite way of applying what we learned in class to their everyday life—learning to look and ask new questions about the past. More recently, at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), I required students to map their communities as part of the urban history lecture course, “Women in the City.” Here, we often walked out of the classroom, exploring the built environment that scholars discussed in our readings, and the ways in which historians, artists, and mapmakers have documented the city. I organized hands-on research exercises at nearby archives, and using the artist books collection in SAIC’s own library. At the other end of the spectrum, in the senior thesis course I taught as a graduate fellow of the University of Chicago Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality, I focused on the crafts of research and writing—teaching students how to track down or create the original sources and data they need to complete a year-long, self-driven project, and assigning them article-length models of good scholarship to read and analyze. This model allows for students to begin seeing themselves as research scholars, learning how to build a compelling argument from multiple pieces of evidence.

I want my students to learn to track change over time; to understand that historical moments are not isolated events, but arise out of contexts and can be highly contested. We study ongoing problems more than finite events, and in doing so encounter a range of conflicting sources that require our interpretation. The small research seminars I design are often motivated by two different but often interrelated concerns linking theory and practice: one, to consistently make space for diverse stories in the study of women, gender, and sexuality; and two, to engage students with archives and/or community-based research. By partnering with the University of Chicago’s Special Collections Research Center during my Ph.D. studies, I created courses that stressed the importance of finding sources to document the experiences of individuals and communities often obscured from American narratives. In one instance, I designed and co-taught the undergraduate seminar
“Alma Mater: History of Women at the University of Chicago” in conjunction with an exhibition I was curating at the same time, on the same topic. For ten weeks, I taught U.S. women's education history through specific case studies drawn from the records of University of Chicago alumni, faculty, and staff. As part of their coursework, students learned to navigate the University archives, and made their way through finding aids and Hollinger boxes seeking out women’s stories. By the end of the term, each student created a portfolio of images and texts that were used to produce a companion poster exhibition, displayed on campus. As an added bonus, students served as a unique sounding board as I put the final touches on my larger exhibition project. Developing a public voice—be it in a formal exhibition, such as the “Alma Mater” course produced, or in the course blogs that my students at Bryn Mawr write—is integral to the 21st-century liberal arts curriculum, as our students learn, in the words of women’s historian Mary Kelley, “to stand and to speak.”

I see my job as facilitating opportunities to bring students closer to original sources, so that they become comfortable analyzing words and images, better able to interpret and build an argument using those sources as evidence, and then, for the advanced student, more skilled in independently locating these sources in libraries, archives and the world around them. But I also remain a student of teaching, seeking out opportunities to think critically about my role as an instructor and mentor to diverse communities on campus. At the University of Chicago, for example, I helped train newer graduate student teachers on topics from advising undergraduate research to using preferred pronouns in the classroom. As a Junior Fellow of The Martin Marty Center for the Advanced Study of Religion at the University of Chicago Divinity School during 2013-2014, I was given the space to think through the role of religion in teaching U.S. women’s, gender, and sexuality history, in dialogue with colleagues across religious studies. At Bryn Mawr, I take part in the Teaching & Learning Initiative and TriCollege Digital Humanities, learning from my colleagues’ innovative pedagogies. I have also written about my teaching for venues including the blog I edit, Educating Women (greenfield.brynmawr.edu), and the collaborative scholarly blogs Religion in American History (usreligion.blogspot.com), and NOTCHES\(\text{(re)marks on the history of sexuality (notchesblog.com). Many of my own syllabi are available online at my website monicalmercado.com and I look forward to sharing my teaching strategies with colleagues at the upcoming AHA 2016 panel “Teaching History through Archives” (tinyurl.com/AHA2016).