Hands-On Research Makes History Incredibly Interesting for Students

Professor Brandy Thomas Wells uses historical newspapers to promote hands-on learning and critical thinking at Oklahoma State University

History As Interpretation

Oklahoma State University’s history department’s philosophy is that history is “more than just a collection of facts about the past. History is community, debate, identity. History is our map to the present.” Dr. Wells embodies that philosophy in how she introduces historical research to her students.

Dr. Wells teaches that history is less about finite facts that are printed in a book and more about continuous interpretation and conversation. For this reason, many of her courses include a primary sources assignment as an opportunity for hands-on learning to start the conversation. She encourages her students to use the library’s resources and think like historians and dig into resources such as microfilm and online newspaper databases such as ProQuest Historical Newspapers and then return to class ready to discuss their findings.

Newspapers are useful for research at all levels but are accessible and less intimidating to 101 students as an entryway for investigation. Through historical newspapers students can witness history as it happened and develop critical thinking skills as they interpret what they find. History is not done – it is moving, living, breathing. Through their research, students enter the story where they see the conversation in the public sphere, witness the sensationalism and gain clues and terms to further their research.

Sparking a Love for Investigation

Instead of prescribing topics, Professor Wells gives students a time period to research and encourages them to dig into newspapers with their own interests in mind. Often students discover something new about a topic and even about themselves. For example, one zoology major chose to study the history of zoos in Oklahoma and how they were reported in newspapers. She loved the process so much she ended up asking Dr. Wells to be her mentor. Another student who was planning to be a high school teacher, would get engrossed in her research for hours. She fell in love with the investigative part of history and now she is pursuing a Ph.D. in history.

“Students come to class thinking history is boring with rote memorization, but newspaper assignments remove that notion and show them how history is so incredibly interesting.”

– Dr. Brandy Thomas Wells

STUDENTS WHO ELECT to take Professor Wells’ survey course of American History are from a variety of majors needing to fulfill a core requirement. They often expect a survey course where they are presented with facts with the expectation of rote memorization through quizzes and papers. But what they encounter instead is an experience that challenges their assumptions and sparks their imaginations.

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Student-Led Research
When students own their research and can synthesize and hold discourse, it prepares them for future scholarship and work opportunities. Dr. Wells has a collaborative approach with her students and often uses their findings to supplement her lectures for future classes. As an example, when students compiled research about Senate Bill One in Oklahoma, Dr. Wells decided to incorporate that in her lessons going forward. Whenever she tells students that what they are learning is the result of students’ research, their eyes light up. They see the possibilities of what they can do.

Professor Wells invites students to become fellow practitioners in historical research. This is best demonstrated in how she incorporated the study of Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 in her senior-level class on digital methods in history. The focus of the class project was the “Women of Black Wall Street” where students researched and wrote biographies of 10 influential women of the Greenwood District. The students were enthusiastic to research and help tell the stories of these incredible women. They used a variety of primary source materials including newspapers. The result culminated in a website – blackwallstreetwomen.com.

Filling in the Gaps
Brandy Thomas Wells is enthusiastic about the use of newspapers not only in the classroom but for her own projects. Wells is currently writing a book on Black women’s internationalism and historical newspapers have been key in her research. In her investigation of Black women from the 1890s through the 1960s there is no archive collection for Black women internationalism so a good place to start is looking through historical newspapers. From there she can identify the names of women and the major initiatives that they worked on to gather the clues for further research in other primary sources or continue her research in the newspapers when no archives are available. Historical Newspapers and in this case Black Historical Newspapers act as a way of filling the gaps and offering clues for deeper research.

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