The Oral History Project:

Bridging the Gap

Between History and History-Makers

PROJECT CROSSROADS

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THE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:
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Introduction: Oral history is the study of the recollections and reminiscences of living people about the past. From the time when hunter-gatherers sat around their campfires telling stories to teach and entertain their children, the oral tradition has been the basis of human history. Stories in oral cultures have long been the primary means of teaching history, language and values, and of training the memory.

Although 19th century scholars tended to view western civilization through the lens of documentary analysis, the advent of the telephone and tape recorder in America served to reaffirm the history-making capacity of the spoken word.

This curriculum unit can be used by teachers across the curriculum to help students develop both academic and interpersonal life skills. The oral historian's learning tasks may include background research, generating questions, interviewing, transcribing audio tapes, writing, revising and desk-top publishing. At the same time, your student historians stand to gain an informed appreciation for the varieties of human experience, and to discover for themselves that "regular people" make history, too.

Objectives:
1. To bridge gaps: between history and history-makers; student, curriculum and community; & the written and spoken word.
2. To make history relevant for students.
3. To build listening, memory and language skills.
4. To analyze the framing of questions and the effects of editorial decisions.
5. To promote both pride in one's family culture and respect for diversity.
6. To create historical documents.

Level: Secondary and Middle School.

Time: Oral history can be pursued as an in-depth project (1 week to 1 month); or you may wish to use aspects of this curriculum as single lessons.

Materials: For formal interviews, you will need tape recorders and audio tapes, and access to typewriters or word processors.
PART I: Preparing for the Interview

1. Discuss with students: What is history? How is history made? What are ways in which history is recorded? Are they equally valid? (Is a book or scholarly paper a more accurate story of the deeds of human beings than the stories your grandmother or great-uncle told about your family’s history? To what extent does factual data tell us the truth about what and how things happened?)

2. Help the class choose an oral history project. ((Please see Addendum A: "Possible Oral History Projects" for suggestions.)

One of the fundamental social gaps bridged by oral history projects that between young and old. For this reason we recommend (time permitting) that you introduce your students to oral history studies through family history as recalled by elder family members. When students interview elder family members they are not only cracking the silence which all too often surrounds the elderly, but they are learning, first-hand, how history is made.

"History is not usually what has happened," the philosopher Indries Shah once remarked, "it is what some people have thought to be significant." Your students can find out what elder family members consider to be significant by talking with them informally, or by developing a comprehensive list of questions such as those suggested in ADDENDUM B. Examples of bits of remembered history from the wizened mouths of elders can be found in ADDENDUM C.

Listed below are a few suggestions for infusing oral history into social studies curricula: (Also see ADDENDUM C: "Oral History Examples from Literature and History")

A) While studying slavery, have students read oral histories from former slaves.

B) Oral histories are available from World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the 1991 War in the Persian Gulf. In addition to reading and reporting on these, you may wish to have your students interview war veterans -- and/or individuals who were associated with an enemy nation.

C) To study a movement or era (e.g., the Great Depression, the McCarthy Era, Civil Rights, the Labor Movement), have students interview people who were involved.

D) To deepen understanding of a social issue (such as race relations, environment, feminism, homelessness or the AIDS
epidemic), ask students to interview individuals affected by the phenomenon.

3. Divide students into working groups of 2 or 3, and help them begin their background or field research. *It is important that they research the period or issue chosen for the oral history project. This process helps them begin to think through the scope and context of the project, and also provides the historical setting and background information necessary to frame relevant questions for the interview.*) Advanced students may wish to posit a hypothesis from which to proceed.

4. Ask the class to brainstorm a list of potential interviewees in the community.

5. After selecting an interviewee, working groups contact that person to request an interview and set up a meeting time and place. *(The interviewee often finds it most comfortable to meet in his or her own environment, but you will want to judge the appropriateness of this in individual cases.)*

6. Help working groups generate a list of good interview questions.
   The interviewer's first question should be designed to put the interviewee at ease. It should be something familiar to the speaker which is easily answered in some detail.
   Interview questions should be *open-ended* rather than *open-and-shut*. Some comparative examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLOSED</th>
<th>OPEN</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Were you drafted?</td>
<td>- How did you get into the service?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- How many men were in your outfit?</td>
<td>- How would you describe some of the men in your company?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Were you worried about the environment?</td>
<td>- What caused you to get involved in the environmental movement?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Were you angry about that?</td>
<td>- How did you feel? What was that like for you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Did your grandmother have old-fashioned ideas?</td>
<td>- What were your grandmother's ideas or attitudes? How did she express them?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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7. Have working groups order their questions in terms of logical flow and sensitivity to the speaker. *(You may wish to explain to them, however, that the list is not a blueprint but a tool*
to help them order and clarify their thoughts and goals for the interview. In fact, they can expect the speaker to flit from point to point -- a reflection of the way in which the long-term human memory actually works.)

8. Prep the class on the interviewer's primary role: that of good listener. Discuss what it means to listen -- perhaps ask students to analyze the listening skills of a person they like to talk to. You may want to pair students up and have them practice questioning, speaking and listening on topics of personal history. (The interviewer's primary function is to let the interviewee know -- through attitude and demeanor -- that his or her story is interesting and important.)

Part II: Conducting the Interview

The interview is the heart of the oral history project. A good interview requires social skills (demonstrated respect for the speaker) as well as clear thinking and careful listening. It is a process in which students learn by doing.

There are of course many ways to do oral histories -- e.g., informally, using paraphrasing rather than exact quotations, with or without note-taking or tape recorder, and even as an active participant in an activity. You may wish to walk your students through some of these processes before approaching the formal interview.

Below are steps for conducting a formal interview, with the intention of transcribing, editing and rewriting:

1. To conduct a formal interview, students will need to take along a tape recorder and a 120-minute tape. If they are working in groups of 2 or 3, one person might be responsible for asking the principal questions, while another makes notes of points to return to, further questions to ask, and details to research or validate. A third person (your more reticent students, perhaps) might work the recording equipment and later take on the bulk of the transcribing.

2. After students introduce themselves to the interviewee, they should thank her or him for agreeing to be interviewed. The note-taker should courteously request the correct spelling of the person's name, and also record the date and setting of the meeting.
3. Once the interviewee is at ease and begins to talk, the interviewer should attempt to explore one idea thoroughly before moving on to another. (However, human memory is impressionistic by nature, and so people rarely come out directly with clear and complete answers. The astute interviewer will listen for phrases or unfinished sentences which seem to suggest the interviewee’s deeper concerns or ideas, and circle back to them when possible.)

4. The interview can be concluded once there is a sense a completion, or exhaustion -- whichever occurs first! If a further interview session is desired, students should ask the interviewee if this would be convenient, and establish a time and place. Before leaving, the students should remember to thank the speaker for sharing his or her story with them.

Foxfire editor Eliot Wigginton on questioning the interviewee:
What you want an informant to do is get into a topic and then begin to expand, and inside the expansion all kinds of things happen. You try to get the kids to ask the same question in a hundred different ways. You know, 'How did you do such-and-such? Well, did anybody else in your family do it any differently?' You keep beating around inside that topic as much as possible -- 'Have you ever heard of it being done another way?' Then, if possible, you give the kids some information before they go out on a topic that they can carry with them, like other alternative ways of doing something...

Part III: Follow-Up

Younger children, or those who are not proficient writers, need not be required to write up their interview in a formal manner. They might simply give an oral interpretation of what was said -- perhaps exhibiting photographs or other items pertaining to the subject. Students who do tape-record the interview could select significant or colorful bits of it to play for the class. Sometimes a student will elect to videotape an interview, and present that.

Perhaps the most important thing -- in terms of both learning and evaluation -- is that the student demonstrate a personal connection with the interviewee and elicit, to the best of his or her ability, the pertinent story. The oral history project is a collective effort which speaks the loudest when many different stories on a theme are represented together.
Ideally, the oral history project draws the community into the classroom. When community members agree to come into your class and present their oral histories to the entire group, the whole community is much the richer.

Steps you may wish your students to take after conducting more formal interviews are as follows:

1. Discuss with the class their experience as interviewers. (Did the field research turn out to be useful? Was the opening question an effective ice-breaker? Did careful listening seem to elicit fresh information from the interviewee? Did he or she appear to enjoy talking about the subject? During the process, did the interviewer discover angles of questioning which had not been apparent before? What did s/he hear that was particularly surprising or illuminating? If the groups were to do the interview over again, what would they do differently?)

2. Returning to their working groups, ask students to decide what form they think their interview material should take: Would it work best in question-and-answer form or as a narrative? How long do they expect their finished piece to be? How much editing and cutting will it require? Are there any substantive gaps in information or story-line? Will they need clarifications from their interviewee? And within their group, are the tasks equitably divided so that everyone participates in editorial decision-making and in the final product? (You may need to monitor this last point.)

3. Working groups transcribe their tapes, integrating any notes or material from follow-up conversations.

4. Groups begin to write up their material from the transcriptions. (You can be of enormous assistance here by moving from group to group and offering particular feedback on the interrelationship of form and content.)

5. Groups rewrite their oral history drafts into formal, polished products.

6. The class may wish to collect their histories into a book-like format, and offer copies to interviewees as well as the school and town libraries. Your class may even decide to stage a "publication event" and invite the community into the school or classroom to hear the oral histories read aloud.
7. In the best of all worlds, interviewees are invited into the classroom to answer questions raised by their oral histories and perhaps to tell a follow-up story.

**Conclusion:** Pearl Sunrise tells us that the traditional Navajo storyteller always ends a tale or lesson by saying, *Think about it.* "That meant, digest it, retain it," she said. "Because some day your children will depend on you to teach them these things." (From an article in the Santa Fe Reporter by Jo Ann Baldinger.)

Now your class may be ready to discuss what they learned in the process of becoming oral historians. (*E.g.*, *What is history? Who makes history? What is the role of language in the creation of history? How many points of view can be valid all at once? What does the human voice convey that the written word cannot -- and visa versa? In what ways might oral historians be said to be bridge builders?)


CUENTOS Telling Our Stories (By Elders of Nursing and Senior Centers of Northern New Mexico), Vol. II. Santa Fe: Open Hands, 1983. (Send $5 plus $1, postage and handling to Open Hands, Inc., P.O. Box 1025, Santa Fe, NM 87504.)


POSSIBLE ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS FOR CLASSROOMS

An Oral Autobiography (Interview yourself on tape recorder; add reports from parents, grandparents and siblings about your past.)

A Memory Book (Interview a grandparent or senior member of your community.)

Family Life Histories (Interview family members about ancestors and forebears.)

Community Experience of a War (World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War, Persian Gulf War...)

An Immigrants' Oral History

An Environmental Oral History (Interview the elderly concerning personal experience of changes in the local environment during their lifetimes.)

An Oral History of Community Trades and Professions

The Oral History of a Neighborhood (Urban or rural)

The Effect of a Significant National or Local Event on the Community

The Oral History of Traditional Crafts (See Foxfire accounts.)

Ethnic History Projects

Local Lives in Politics/Local Lives in the Arts

An Oral History of a Social or Political Movement

Folklore Studies (and Ethnic Variations)