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### *Using Oral History in the Classroom*

The oral history *process* is as significant to students as are the products, i.e., tapes, transcripts, websites, slide shows, radio programs, booklets, etc. Regardless of grade level, students can benefit by using oral history methods in the classroom.

The following tips for using oral history in the classroom are augmented by CCRH and adapted from “Learn NC,” a program of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/oralhistory2002/764>, accessed March 24, 2009.

According to Learn NC, the K-3 curriculum focuses on the familiar, making oral history a good way to learn. Their suggestions for using oral history in the classroom would work well at any age. Ideas include:

- Students interviewing one another.** Students can list and share experiences that are similar and different. This process promotes cultural and interpersonal understanding.
- School-based projects:** expand into the community with the school as the main setting; work in teams; create bulletin board displays, group presentations, short books, or simply hold class discussions.
- Interviewing Guest Speakers.** Talk with students about good oral history practice before their guest arrives so they develop open-ended questions and listen attentively.
- Listening Stations:** students can benefit from listening to tapes (about community's past or specific topics). After listening, students could summarize them in writing, compare different experiences, or represent in artistic forms, such as drawing or skits. Have students build an archive for future students.
- Model Interviews:** interview guests in front of students, then open up for questions. Record interviews so they are available at listening stations.

By 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade, students could conduct interviews themselves, either in a classroom setting or with family members and friends of family. By middle school, students can handle more complex topical issues. This is a good time to pair oral history methods with other historical sources to expand students' critical thinking skills, their understandings of place and people, and

to deepen understanding of their own communities. Oral history methods are also a great way to facilitate students' interpersonal communication skills and to teach them professional civic behavior (i.e., letter writing, phone calls, and follow-up). By 8th grade students could conduct full-fledged oral history projects.

As they enter high school, students become even more capable of tackling complex projects, including analysis, and presentation. In addition to the previous suggestions, and as age appropriate, integrate oral history into the classroom and other curricula by:

--**Broadening Student Horizons:** Invite guests from other places or who have specific topical experiences (wartime, civil rights, technological and social change). Have students prepare in advance through researching connected topics, taking notes, and preparing questions.

--**Focusing on Communities in Transition:** oral history can help students to understand change in their own communities. Such change could be demographic (migrations of various groups of people) or connected to broader external events. Students could interview classmates of differing origins or who have recently migrated, foreign exchange students, and vice-versa, to develop broader community and global understandings.

--**Making the Distant Relevant:** help students learn about the fall of Apartheid, the rise of visual media, or other major historical events. Students could listen to recordings, read newspaper coverage, talk to real people, and stage a mock debate.

--**Integrating Family History:** inter-family interviews can help students to understand major historical themes and complexities, like the civil rights movement, labor unrest, the rise of environmentalism (or its opposition), and/or the women's movement.

--**Life History Interviews:** use individual life as a view into a variety of past events in U.S. history. Students could keep a journal comparing their interviewee's memories. They could also use the interview or series of interviews as the basis for a term paper.

--**Demonstrating Diverse Viewpoints:** students could interview various people about historical topics. Teachers could facilitate developing relationships with local retirement communities. Students could interview, create slideshows or tape presentations, panel discussions or public events at the center. Students will develop a sense of the subjectivity of historical inquiry, the complexity and challenges of human memory, and the ways in which variables such as race, class, region, gender, age, etc. shape both experience and memory.

--**Develop Creative Products:** students could develop analytical publications, creative writing projects, websites, performances, documentary films, power point presentations, slide shows, exhibits, websites, etc.

## *Questions and Tips for Planning a Classroom Oral History Project*

### **1) What are your goals?**

Don't try to do "everything." Determine what you want your students to learn, how long the project will last, and then plan for ways to make it successful.

**2) How will you manage the time involved?** Create a timeline for the activities, including research time, discussion, production, etc.

### **3) How will you teach your students about interviewing?**

Try to bring in a professional oral historian. Contact local colleges, universities, libraries, historical societies, etc. Training will help to give nervous students the confidence they need.

**4) Will your students work alone or in groups?** Think about what parts of the oral history experience you want your students to have. Can they do research instead of interviewing; work on the final paper, read an interview?

**5) Will students choose their own interviewees, or will you handpick them?** Do you want them to have the experience of talking with someone they don't know? It helps to define the criteria, i.e., age, particular events, whether or not family members are okay.

### **6) What will happen to the tapes after they are collected?**

Work with an archive or create one in your school. Use a release form. Keep preservation in mind--be sure to duplicate.

**7) What will you do about equipment?** Is there a local organization willing to support funding? Be creative. Contact local oral history organizations for information about resources.

**8) What will students do with their raw interviews?** Will they transcribe? If not, have them transcribe several good stories, create a tape log/index. Try ethno poetic transcription, i.e., playing with line breaks, fonts, capitalization, size, etc. to reflect meaning.

### **9) What will be the final product?**

Be creative: just tapes? A paper? How long? Should they do other research? Work collaboratively? Have students create exhibits with photos, documents, and excerpts, dramatic performances, films, and website; have students come up with the list of possible products and work on the one they like best.

**10) How will your class give something back to the community and to the people who participated in their interviews?**

## *Using Oral History in the Classroom, Teacher Resources*

### **Print Resources**

- Lanman, Barry A., and George L. Mehaffy. "Oral History in the Secondary School Classroom." Los Angeles: Oral History Association, Pamphlet No. 2, 1989.
- Lanman, Barry A. and Laura M. Wendling, eds. *preparing the next generation of oral historians: An Anthology Of Oral History Education*. New York: Alta Mira Press, 2006.
- Ritchie, Donald A. "Teaching the Cold War through Oral History." *OAH Magazine of History* 8 (Winter 1994): 10-12.
- Sitton, Thad, et al. *Oral History: A Guide for Teachers (and Others)*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983.
- Wood, Linda P. "'What Did You Do in the War, Grandma?' An Oral History of Rhode Island Women During World War II." *Social Education* 58 (February 1994): 92-93.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Oral History Projects in Your Classroom*. Carlisle, PA: Oral History Association, 2001.

### **Web Resources**

- Baylor University Oral History Workshop for Teachers on the Web,  
[http://www.baylor.edu/oral\\_history/index.php?id=56907](http://www.baylor.edu/oral_history/index.php?id=56907)
- ERIC Digest, "Oral History in the Teaching of U.S. History," <http://www.ericdigests.org/1996-4/oral.htm>
- Library of Congress, the Learning Page, "Using Oral History, Lesson Overview,"  
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/oralhist/ohhome.html>
- Oral History Association, <http://www.oralhistory.org/>
- Oral History Association Pamphlet Series, <http://www.oralhistory.org/publications/pamphlet-series/>
- Walbert, Kathleen and Jean Sweeney Shawver, Learn NC Editions, "Oral History in the Classroom,"  
<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/oralhistory2002/762>
- Wood, Linda, Prentice Hall E-teach, "A Guide to Using Oral History,"  
[http://www.phschool.com/eteach/social\\_studies/2003\\_04/essay.html](http://www.phschool.com/eteach/social_studies/2003_04/essay.html)

### **Student Projects**

- Center for Columbia River History, "Columbia Super Sleuths Capstones Web Pages,"  
<http://ccrh.org/comm/slough/sleuths.php>
- Center for Columbia River History, "Vancouver African American History Project,"  
<http://www.ccrh.org/center/vaahp.php>
- Defending Wild Washington, <http://academic.evergreen.edu/w/warway24/>
- Rocky Gap Mountain High School, "The Bland County History Archives,"  
<http://www.bland.k12.va.us/bland/rocky/gap.html>
- South Kingstown High School and Brown University, "The Whole World Was Watching: an oral history project of 1968," <http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/1968/>
- South Kingstown High School and Brown University, "What Did You Do In The War Grandma?"  
[http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/WWII\\_Women/tocCS.html](http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/WWII_Women/tocCS.html)