

Oral History Education

How students can be empowered to connect to history and bring it to life.

Students from the Journeys of Reconciliation Project



There are four categories identified by David Kolb's work on experiential learning and learning styles theory, called the Four Learning Styles Inventory (4 LSI). The 4 LSI are based on: Feeling (concrete), Thinking (Abstract), Doing (active experimentation), Watching (observing, listening)

Another useful study identifies 7 intelligences: (Garner's study at Harvard school of education). These 7 intelligences include music, math/science, language, critical thinking, and artistic intelligence.

Oral history projects in the classroom facilitate learning through language skills, artistic intelligence and critical thinking. Most importantly, it incorporates all four of Kolb's learning styles.

Oral history projects also provide the opportunity for students to question assumptions, motivate them to make sense of history, and give them perspective through multiple voices.

Building understanding and building community: oral history projects build community, and raise awareness of a shared past. For example, the civil rights oral history projects underway at the University of Louisiana, the University of North Carolina, and the Southern Poverty Law Center are documenting the history of civil rights through the voices of ordinary people. These projects are also part of the process of healing in many cases. This social context of history enhances learning for students because history moves from an abstract subject to a real life subject that matters today.

Warm-up Exercise

- Choose one of the two quotes below and write down the thoughts and words that come to mind.
 - “How we understand the past is the most important element determining the future.”
James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword*
 - “The past is myself, my own history, the seed of my present thoughts, the mould of my present disposition.” R. L. Stevenson

To spark dialogue with students about why we study history, these quotes have been useful to launch the discussion.

One way I have used these quotes: write each quote on a large piece of poster-sized paper and hang along the walls of the classroom. Place colored pens near each poster and ask students to write down their thoughts about the quotes on the poster itself. Ask a student to stand next to each poster and read the responses to the quotes. This exercise can be done at the beginning of the training as a “warm up” exercise.

The first quote often leads students to talk about how the past links to the present and the future, as well as to “how” we understand it -- through the interpretation of past events by historians and authors, through primary resources and museum exhibitions, documentaries, etc.

The second quote often leads to a discussion of history and self identity. How do we each build our identities over time with the influence of historic events? How did the Civil Rights Movement affect individual identity for those who were activists? For those who witnessed events and grew up during that time period? Is there an historic event, local or national that has impacted your students’ identities? I.e., the events of 911, Hurricane Katrina, etc.

Oral History Defined

- Oral history is a process for recording and preserving first-hand information in a structured interview setting, and making the story available to others.
 - Oral history must be evaluated in light of its strengths and weaknesses. Each interview is a snapshot of a particular period or event and is shared based on the individual's memory of those events, biases, and other influences.

Oral history interviews create primary source materials that provide personal perspective on historic events and periods. This is a good reinforcement for students to build their understanding of primary and secondary sources. It is also empowering for students who participate in an oral history project because they become active participants in the creation of an historic record.

Oral history interviews have been used to complete gaps in the historic record, as well as to provide multiple perspectives on an event. Sometimes what is learned is not the facts of what occurred, but how the event has been remembered and therefore understood or misunderstood. One of the best examples of this is the historic research conducted by oral historian, Alesandro Portelli, for his book, *The Order Has Been Carried Out*. His book details the experience of a Nazi massacre in Rome as told by the families and communities affected. There was shame and misunderstandings held by many, as this event affected many people very profoundly. Portelli's study enabled these families and communities to build a better understanding of what occurred and how it was experienced by those who lived it. His writings point out the dangers of misremembering the past. To hear a lecture by Professor Portelli about oral history interviews, go to http://www.archive.org/details/Oral_History_Interview_Portelli.

Oral History Defined

- At its core, oral history is a dialogue, however, the interview needs to be focused on facilitating so that the narrator is empowered to tell his/her story.
- It can be used to create a more balanced historical record because oral history records offer many perspectives on history.
- Oral history helps us to “understand how history **as lived** is connected to history **as recorded**.” – Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts*, Cambridge, 1992.

Collective Memory

- What is “collective” memory?
 - Is it agreed upon? By whom?
 - What is an example?
 - I.e. stereotypes of Native American’s as naïve savages versus Europeans as “civilized” explorers was seen throughout American textbooks for many years.
 - How is collective memory promoted?
- Oral history is a valuable tool used to provide a contrast to, or even contradict the “collective” memory of events. Oral histories can demonstrate common beliefs or they can provide a “check” on mythologized accounts of history.

Collective memory can be the result of diligent, careful work done by historians and writers. There are both good and bad examples seen in our school textbooks, popular literature, museums, etc. Collective memory can lead to “institutionalized knowledge” or “sanitized” versions of history.

Questions:

Does “collective” memory lead to “collective” indifference?

Can oral histories combat this indifference? How?

Three components to oral history

- Discovering:
 - Research / preparation
 - Gaining understanding through multiple perspectives
- Documenting:
 - Interviewing techniques
 - Recording methods
 - Archiving and making them available
- Interpreting
 - Transcriptions, classroom presentations, journal articles, website information, multi-media presentations

This Power Point presentation is designed to teach students how to prepare for and conduct interviews. A second presentation is being developed to provide information on documenting and recording interviews, and a third for interpretation.

Discovering

- The process of oral history interviewing is a discovery for both the interviewee (narrator) and the interviewer. Self discoveries are often made during this process. While this can sometimes be difficult, it is often enjoyable for the interviewee and can be a benefit to them as they gain more understanding of their past.
- For the interviewers, the discovery is a continuum, beginning with preparation and research and ending with reflection and interpretation.

Discovering:

Ask students to identify sources and methods for their research in order to prepare and gain background information they will need in order to develop their interview questions so that they will be informed interviewers. Preparing ahead of time with research will help them gain trust with the interviewee, and will be a clear demonstration of their genuine interest in the topics their interviewee will be covering.

Discovering: Preparation

- Know the topics you will be talking about during your interview
 - Read secondary sources such as news articles, journal or magazine reports, to get a general overview.
 - Phone the interviewee and conduct an informal pre-interview so that you can identify the topics in more detail. Ask the basic biographical questions, such as dates and place of birth, education, job, family. (You can also begin filling out a biographical information form.)

It is important to be prepared so that students can be confident and relaxed during their interviews.

Note taking: Students can keep a journal (hand written or on their computer) of their oral history project that includes notes from research, from their phone pre-interview, and their thoughts after reflecting back on the interview itself. From their early notes they need to identify what research is further needed to gain a better understanding in order to prepare interview questions. What do they already know about the topic? What are their gaps in knowledge that they can pursue in their research?

Sample forms, such as the Biographical Data form are available to download as a pdf on the Resources page.

Discovering: Myths and Assumptions

- What is a myth?
- What is an assumption?
 - We all make assumptions, and we share common myths about the past, about people, and about places.
 - Why is it important to identify the myths and assumptions related to the topics of your interview?
 - How do we overcome them?

Facilitate a discussion with your students about myths and assumptions. Suggested exercise: start the class discussion by asking students to write down the myths and assumptions commonly made about teenagers and talk about them. Then ask them to write down, on a separate piece of scratch paper not in their journal or binder, the myths and assumptions made about the topic or historic period they are covering in their interviews. Ask them to share what they have written down. Then pass around a waste basket for them to throw these myths and assumptions into as a representation of setting them aside.

It is important for interviewers to gain more awareness of the biases, myths and assumptions they may have (we all have them) related to the person and topics they will cover. After identifying them, it is then important to stay aware of them and to try and set them aside during all phases of the process. The result will be an interview that explore the interviewee's experience and perspective, not one that reinforces the perspective of the interviewer.

Documenting: Preparing Interview Questions

- Background / Biographical questions
- “How” questions: Develop questions that explore how the interviewee became involved in the topic at hand.
- “What” questions: Ask questions that give understanding as to what the interviewee did, and what did the interviewee know at the time.
- “Why” questions: How does the interviewee assess and understand the experience today? What did it mean and why?
- Where and When: Be sure to include specific questions about place and time/date.
- Ask non-judgmental questions with respect.

Documenting: Preparing Interview Questions

A student’s oral history interview will create a useful record of history if they prepare well and conduct an interview that covers first-hand information as much as possible. Therefore, they will need to know the types of interview questions to ask, and make their questions specific to the interviewee. An interview that encourages detailed storytelling and is based on first-hand accounts of events will be much stronger than one that is general and focuses on opinion or second-hand information. For example, “Can you describe that day from the beginning to the end?” Another example, “What did you observe, see, smell, hear that day?”

Open ended versus closed questions

Talk with the students about the difference between an open ended and closed question. Most of their questions will need to be open ended in order to encourage storytelling. Ask students to offer examples of both.

For example:

“Tell me about your home town,” is an interview question that encourages descriptive storytelling. “Where did you grow up?” is a good “ice breaker.” It will help to follow-up with an open ended question, “Could you tell me about where you spent your childhood?”

Directing the Story: Who is the director?

- How do you help an interviewee share his/her story?
 - There is a commitment to understanding history through the eyes of the interviewee. Ultimately, the interviewee is “in charge” of their own story and will have their own style of communication. However, you may need to insert questions in order to meet this goal.
 - Be flexible and give them time to let their story unfold. Follow-up questions are very important in order to clarify or more fully develop a story. If you have a question to clarify something your interviewee has just said, wait for a pause, or jot it down and ask it later. It is very important that you do not interrupt.
 - The key to facilitating the interviewee’s storytelling is your active, deep listening.

Communication styles are important to talk about briefly with students so that they will be open to listening to someone from a different generation, culture, etc. -- Someone different from themselves. A person’s way of talking, tone, cadence, pace and vocabulary are all part of the record the student is creating in addition to the story itself.

Active, deep listening:

Model active listening with the class, and when they are ready to do “mock” interviews with each other, they can practice this important life skill.

Active listening includes:

1. Good eye contact (no note taking);
2. Full attention (cell phones are off);
3. Time (students need to set-aside 2 to 3 hours, and not have to rush off to an activity, otherwise both the interviewer and interviewee will feel rushed.)
4. Sincere interest (research and preparation ahead of time)
5. Respect -- listen without judgment

Active Listening: What does it mean to you?

- 1. Good eye contact: Do not take notes;
- 2. Full attention: Turn off cell phone;
- 3. Time: Set-aside 2 to 3 hours, and don't schedule something you have to rush off to, otherwise both you and the interviewee will feel rushed;
- 4. Sincere interest: Research and preparation ahead of time;
- 5. Respect: Listen without judgment;
- 6. What would you add to this active listening list?

All that jazz . . .

Studs Terkel, a treasured oral historian, explains that,

“ like good jazz music, a good interview has a theme that follows a beginning, middle and end. The interviewer will need to improvise, but return to the theme.”

As students prepare their interview questions, they can think of the story unfolding with a beginning, middle, and end -- the order and form of their questions will help create the storyline. Flexibility, however, is very important, as Terkel states in his quote, the interviewer will need to improvise as the story unfolds, but return to the theme.

Interview Techniques: Introduction

- Be patient as the storyteller “positions” his/her story -- let it unfold.
 - Vocabulary / use of language: I.e. Try not to interrupt, but go ahead and ask if you need to clarify.
 - Speaking rhythm of storyteller -- each person is different.
 - Note: Most interviewees will prioritize and organize topics on their own. Give them the opportunity to do that before you interject questions. Other interviewees will need you to help them organize their thoughts through the questions you ask.
 - Follow-up questions are very important – practice them with friends/family.
 - Be comfortable with pauses so that you do not miss a thoughtful response. If your interviewee pauses to think, use the 10 second rule: count to ten before asking the question again, and try to re-phrase the question.
 - The more attentively and deeply you listen, the more forthcoming the interviewee will be.

Follow-up questions play a vital role in developing an interviewee’s story. The skill involved for the student is that of an active listener. It is through active, deep listening to the interviewee that will trigger a follow-up question that sparks more discussion about an important topic or story. Students often need to have this modeled or demonstrated for them, and also given an opportunity to practice with a partner (see Mock Interview at the end of the slides.)

For example:

Interviewee: “During the Depression, we still lived what I would call a ‘rich’ life”

Interviewer: “Could you tell me what you mean when you describe your life during that time as ‘rich’?” What are some examples that would give me a better picture of what a ‘rich’ life meant to you at that time? What does it mean to you now?”

Tips on interviewing:

- Do not challenge or contradict the interviewee. Remember, this is her/his story.
- Empathy: It will be important to have and to show empathy during your interview. Interviewees may have strong feelings about what they experienced. You may need to pause and give more time, and to sensitively acknowledge their feelings.
- Your own feelings: You may have feelings as you listen to your narrator's story. Be aware of these feelings, and maintain composure. You may need to share your feelings with your classmates or teacher following the interview, however it is important to be respectful of an interviewee's privacy.

Interviewers should keep a journal of thoughts, notes related to their experience. Following the interview, students can write an evaluation of the interview as part of the record and may want to bring in their own observations, experience and perspective.

The Role of Oral History

Recording Untold Stories

Example: Clayborne Carson

Listen to excerpt (9 minutes) of oral history interview with Clayborne Carson at www.oralhistoryeducation.com (or another interview of choice).

One of the roles oral history plays in our understanding of the past is to record the untold stories of ordinary people.

(The link on YouTube is:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fc3vR8DdrPw>)

Questions for class discussion:

Do you like the questions that were asked? What questions would you like to ask that were not asked by the interviewer? What did you learn from this interview? What did you like about this interview? What didn't you like?

Interview Questions

Be prepared AND flexible

- Begin with a few easy questions to “break the ice.”
For example: Could you please tell us your name and a little about your background? Where were you born? Would you tell us about your family? Where did you spend your childhood?
- Many of your questions will ask why: Why did the crowd do that?
- Some questions will ask how: How did that event affect you?
- Suggestive questions: Could you tell me more about that experience?
- Questions that help to describe or define: Could you describe what happened? Would you explain what that means?

Ask the students to create a list of topics the interview will cover.

Pre-interview on the phone/in person: gain background information to develop questions and to direct your research.

Create a list of questions. Develop a compilation of these questions, or create the list as a group and provide copies of this question list prior to the interview. Students should review their question list before the interview, and can use it as a checklist during the interview.

At least 80% of the questions should be open-ended.

The questions will need to be modified to fit the needs of each interviewee.

Students will need to know how to ask follow-up questions that will be needed to clarify statements, For example: I did not understand Could you help me to understand that better?

Interview Questions Cont'd

- Can you tell me about your earliest memories i.e., on a farm/ranch?
 - What was a typical day like?
 - What were some important lessons learned during this time?
 - Was there a funny moment? What happened?
 - What was the most difficult time? Why?
- About events:
- Who was there?
 - Where did it happen?
 - When did it happen?
 - What caused this to happen?
 - What role did you play?
 - What was the result?
 - How did you feel about what happened?
 - How do you feel about it now?

It will be important to ask questions that establish whether the interviewee was an eyewitness to an event, a participant to an event, or whether he/she heard about the event from other persons.

More Questions

- Who did you rely on most?
- What helped you get through the tough times?
- What were your priorities during this period?
- What do you miss the most about that time?
- What are some myths about ranching/farming in Marin?
- Who were your heroes?
- Tell me about your friends
- Are there any stories you would like to tell that I have not asked?
- If you could give a message about your life and your experience to my generation, what would that be?

Cultural Issues

"In their rememberings are their truths."

-- Studs Terkel

- What influences our understanding of cultures, and the "labeling" of other peoples?
- We need to be aware of what influences our interpretation of a story. Our personal background may differ from the interviewee's, and so we need to remain objective and open to the message they are trying to communicate.

Facilitate a discussion about how we understand other cultures. One of the objectives of oral historians is to help communities and students to have the ability to make informed decisions as we learn from the past. Additionally, I would add to help students participate actively in a culturally diverse democracy.

Mock Interviews

- Choose a partner and spend five minutes interviewing that partner about their “every day” life. Switch and let your partner interview you.
- Discuss as a group: What are the challenges of the interviewer? What was it like to be interviewed?
- Was your interviewer an active listener? How could you tell?

Interviews can be intimidating for some. Conducting a mock interview is important for students to gain self awareness and confidence in this process.

Practice interviews

If time allows, ask students to interview a neighbor, family friend, or family member so that they can practice asking questions and active listening, then report back to the class what they discovered about themselves in the process.

Ideas and History

Draw a timeline for your subject, and on the top half write down the events you have learned from your research.

Underneath each event, write down the idea that relates to that event if there is one, and questions you have about it.

Place three or four large poster boards together on a wall and draw a line down the middle to create a timeline of events.

Place colored pencils or crayons next to the timeline and ask participants to write down the events and happenings they have learned about from their reading and research.

What are the most important events? Is there a consensus or differing opinions about what events were the most important? Can students explain why one event is more important than another? What is their criteria?

Ask students to think about the ideas that are connected to each event and write them next to each event on the timeline.

Explain that an important part of any oral history interview is the exploration of ideas. Ideas of individuals, of groups, of generations.

Therapeutic role of oral history

How do we deal with emotional issues?

- There are many “genres” of oral history: Biographical life reviews; project based stories focused on a particular event or time-period (like the Journey’s project); folktales; therapeutic reminiscing; public hearings
 - Example: South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). For about three years, the TRC listened to and recorded over 20,000 stories shared by ordinary people about their experiences with Apartheid. The TRC hearings were created as a method to help healing for individuals, and for their country as a whole.

For more information on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings following the end of Apartheid in South Africa, go to:
<http://www.info.gov.za/otherdocs/2003/trc/>

The following is an excerpt from Desmond Tutu’s foreword in the TRC report: “It has been an incredible privilege for those of us who served the Commission to preside over the process of healing a traumatized and wounded people. We are also deeply grateful to the thousands of South Africans who came to the Commission to tell us their stories. They have won our country the admiration of the world: wherever one goes, South Africa’s peaceful transition to democracy, culminating in the Truth and Reconciliation process, is spoken of almost in reverent tones, as a phenomenon that is unique in the annals of history, one to be commended as a new way of living for humankind.”

Resources:

Websites/Blogs	Books/Journals
Oral History Association: http://www.oralhistory.org	<i>Narrating Our Past</i> Elizabeth Tonkin, 1995 Publisher: Cambridge University Press
www.doingoralhistory.org	<i>The Voice of the Past: Oral History</i> Paul Thompson, 1988 Publisher: Oxford University
Maryland Digital Cultural Heritage Project: www.mdch.org/	<i>Dialogue with the Past</i> Glenn Whitman, 2004 Publisher: Alta Mira Press
Library of Congress: www.loc.gov	<i>Curating Oral History</i> Nancy MacKay, 2004 Publisher: Left Coast Press
www.studsterkel.org	Teaching Students How to Be Historians Glenn Whitman <i>The History Teacher</i> , Vol. 33, No. 4 (Aug. 2000), 469-481