

PROJECT ORAL HISTORY

by

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History teachers frequently look for vehicles of instruction which will achieve content and research skill objectives while integrating the use of primary source materials. In addition, history teachers confront the frustration of trying to teach "everything which is important" within the confines of the school year. The following paragraphs provide suggestions on conducting an oral history project which carries the potential of achieving these objectives while lowering the levels of frustration often experienced by teachers of the "crowded curriculum."

First, select a specific time period to investigate through an oral history and define the parameters of the assignment.

Doing an oral history of the Fifties and the Sixties has been a successful project for contemporary high school students, ages 14 through 18. Having been born in the Seventies, high school students are motivated by a project which may replace a more traditional historical survey of the Fifties and Sixties. Requiring completion of this project by each student, the teacher will be able to organize class time for exploration of specific events, investigation of selected personalities, skill development or content analysis students probably would not discover through the interview process alone.

The following is a sample of the assignment given to students for their project:

Activity: Oral History of the Fifties and Sixties

Directions:

1. Select people to interview concerning their memories and experiences during the Fifties or Sixties.
2. Prepare interview questions and their sequence prior to the interview. Include questions about politics, economics, and

society of the Fifties and Sixties. Be prepared to build on what your interviewee says. Before interviewing, decide on the final form for your project.

3. This may influence your approach and method. You may wish to tape your interview and take notes from the tape or you may wish to take notes during the visit.
4. When the interview has been completed, prepare a summary/conclusion which includes the name of person(s) interviewed; where they lived during this era; relationship to you; commentary on the completeness and accuracy of information gained from the interview; and what you would do differently in approach and form if you were to do this project at another time.

Second, assist students in selecting appropriate and well-constructed questions.

The success of an interview is directly related to how well the interviewer has been prepared. While the list may vary for different age groups, the following sample questions were used by ninth graders.

Sample Questions for POLITICS:

1. What do you remember about the election of Eisenhower?
2. What were political campaigns like?
3. What was/is your feeling about Eisenhower as a President?
4. What do you remember about the Korean War? Do you know any Korean War veterans? What was their reaction to the police action and their treatment upon return home?
5. What do you remember about how the US and USSR got along during the Fifties and Sixties? What did Americans think of the Soviets at this time?
6. Did your home have a bomb shelter? What do you remember about Civil Defense? Was your family concerned about nuclear attack?
7. What do you remember about the U-2 incident?
8. What do you remember about the debates between Kennedy and Nixon?

9. What political arguments do you remember people making during this election?
10. What do you remember about the Cuban Missile Crisis?
11. What were you doing when you received word of the assassination of President Kennedy? What do you remember about reaction to his death?
12. What were your feelings about sending troops to Vietnam?

Sample Questions for ECONOMICS:

1. In what kind of work were you or your family involved?
2. What do you remember about the standards of living during the Fifties and Sixties? Wages? Cost of items?
3. Are you better off now than you were in the Fifties and/or the Sixties?
4. What are some of the price differences between now and then?
5. Were you and your family/friends concerned about environmental issues?
6. What kind of outlook did people have toward their occupational future?
7. What do you remember about buying items that were imported from other countries?
8. What kind of work were you doing during these decades? What was your degree of satisfaction with your job and working conditions and why?

Sample Questions for SOCIETY/CULTURE:

1. What do you remember about the civil rights movement?
2. What do you remember about what you saw on TV concerning what happened to civil rights workers in the South?
3. What do you remember about Martin Luther King, Jr.?
4. What do you remember about the urban riots?
5. What were the favorite pastimes of you and your family? Were they different in the Sixties than in the Fifties?
6. What favorite movies do you remember from these times?

Third, expect students to sharpen their communication skills through an oral history project.

This project is rich with opportunities for skill development for students. They will be required to orally interview their subjects

which will utilize communications and listening skills. Students are very likely to tape record their interviews and transcribe them which will require more listening, interpreting, and writing skill practice. As the students organize the interview information, higher order thinking skills will be used.

Fourth, help students in selecting an appropriate format for the final form of the project.

Options of form range from a tape of the interview with an oral analysis, conclusion/summary and evaluation to a question and answer manuscript to a narrative. Because most teachers can read faster than they can listen, beware of the pitfalls of having all students do a tape! Multiples of hour or even half-hour tapes will take a significant portion of your listening life!

Fifth, prepare students for inaccuracies in the reporting of events in interviews.

Since a major purpose in having students do this project is to develop an oral history, the teacher has to be aware of and not be offended by interviewees not always giving historically accurate and precise information. Frankly, this is a reality of life and the student cannot be held responsible for perspectives that aren't historically correct. However, the student can be held responsible for utilizing their textbooks, timelines, and other references and validating the information from the interviews while dealing with their findings in their oral or written analysis and summary/conclusion.

Sixth, allow students to be creative in the form with which they collect information.

Some students may express a concern that the person they wish to interview lives too far away and they can't talk to them. Enter the forgotten art of letter writing. Many grandparents are thrilled to get a letter from a grandchild and are especially adept at writing letters. This is also a motivation for the student to "get started" and not wait until the weekend or night before to do the project. In short, this project is reasonable for all high school ages and all skill levels.

Seventh, treat the finished product as an historical document.

Since many of these projects become a part of the student's collection of family history and high school memorabilia, it is prudent not to mark on the document. Even though the teacher risks being criticized for not making corrections, the student is more likely to value the paper or tape if the medium of the report is not scarred by comments and corrections. Teachers are well known for their ability to generate appropriate grading check lists and feedback forms for communicating with students. The teacher also needs to be consistently reminded that the major objective of this project is the development of process skills.

Todd's words below provide an excellent summary of the value of oral histories in the high school classroom:

Throughout this interview I learned a great deal about me we had never discussed before. Even though we disagreed on many topics and issues, I found that I think a lot now like he did when he was my age. I also realize that my opinions and beliefs will mature as I mature.

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