Out of the Classroom and into the Community: Oral History Projects for Gifted Learners

Teaching history as a "textbook bound" subject is static and boring. Encouraging students to get out of the classroom to interview family and community members facilitates students' historical thinking. Interviewing others about their perspectives and experiences allows students to use the tools of the historian and—according to educational experts—improves students' attitudes toward history (Jenks, 2010; Whitman, 2011).

Early adolescent gifted learners (ages 10-15) require instruction of a sufficient range of complexity to ensure challenge. These learners also need instruction that offers the flexible pacing and flexible grouping arrangements (NAEC, 2004) that oral history projects can provide. This article describes how upper elementary and middle school teachers can effectively use oral history projects to stimulate early adolescent students' historical understanding, critical thinking, and creative expression.

What is Oral History?

Oral history is a process that collects and records spoken memories of the living (Ritchie, 2003). Oral history is "a method of teaching that accepts the principles of creating and utilizing recorded interviews for the purposes of instruction" (Lanman & Wendling, 2006, p. xviii). Educational scholars note that using oral history projects in schools helps make the past relevant (Hill, 2001), enrich literacy skills, provide direct connections with history, enliven the standard curriculum (Jenks, 2010) motivate civic engagement and understanding about democracy (Mills, Schecter, Lederer, & Naeher, 2011), and may even provide new primary source materials about local phenomenon (Spears, 1999).

Collecting oral history interviews involves students in the use of speaking, listening, reading, writing, and problem-solving skills. Even very young students can ask family members questions and recall their responses (Boyle-Baise & Zevin, 2013). In addition, teachers who use oral history projects are implementing instruction tied to curriculum standards. One of the goals of the Common Core English language arts standards, for example, is the promotion of historical thinking. By engaging in research and interviews about real-world topics and issues, through interacting with non-fiction and informational text, and while writing and editing interview stories, students strengthen literacy and critical-thinking skills.

For active upper elementary and middle school learners, a key strategy of oral history projects is that educators take students outside the classroom walls and into the community where they learn that history is about people like themselves. Busby and Hubbard (2007) recommend teachers "have the courage to realize that students learn best by uncovering and creating material on their own, rather than simply uncovering it" (p. 369).

Choosing Themes for Oral Histories

Depending on the population of students you are working with, it might be helpful to identify a theme that the class will focus on for the project. This will allow the students to have conversations with each other and conduct research in a similar field and manner. Teachers who have used oral history projects in their classrooms suggest identifying oral history themes that focus on general concepts such as culture and/or ethnicity in the family or community. Students in upper elementary or middle grades, for example, may diversify their focus by developing interview questionnaires about Inventors and Inventions, Running for (or Serving in) Political Office, Holiday Celebrations, War-Time Experiences, and Dating (or Marriage) Customs.

Another potential interview theme is how people experience giftedness across a lifetime. Gifted students might be motivated to interview gifted adults about their schooling and/or career experiences. The process of collecting oral history narratives about whether or how gifted learners were challenged, and the subsequent analysis of interview themes—either individually or in small groups—can be a very beneficial experience for students. Even though each of the students should complete his/her own interview and produce a product, the exploration of the theme and associated research can be conducted in small groups, with the teacher grouping according to project theme. For example, students conducting interviews about traditions in the community might explore the areas they wish to find out more about, helping each other come up with great ideas for questions.

Taken a step further, the process of grouping can come in handy if the students are indeed going to work together...
as a small group. In this way they can work with the theme and then divide responsibilities among group members according to interests and expertise during both the interview process and the development of a product.

Planning an Oral History Interview

Once a topic or topics for the oral history project is identified, think about where and how students will go about scheduling and conducting interviews. Will students conduct one-on-one interviews, or work with partners? What questions should be included in the interview? Using a KWL chart can help students decide what questions need to be asked: What do we know about the topic? What do we want to know about the topic? And, after some preliminary research has been done, students ask the question What have we learned about the topic? Mindmapping apps such as Inspiration also can be helpful at this stage of the oral history project.

Open-ended questions are vital to obtaining detailed responses from interviewees. Questions that result in anecdotes or stories are much more effective than those that require a one-word answer. For example, a question such as “What was your school day like?” is much more likely to elicit a detailed response than the question “When did you go to school?” Providing students with an Oral History Interview Checklist can go a long way toward ensuring quality interview experiences over time (for a checklist example, see Hickey, 1999).

Other important facets of the oral history project to be sorted out include who will be (or should be) interviewed? How much time will each interview take? Will interviewees receive a copy of the transcribed (or recorded) interview and, if so, who will be responsible for providing the copy to them?

Oral History Products

All oral history projects result in some sort of primary source students and others can consult and reflect upon. Ideally, students will use their imaginations as well as their editing skills to create a product that may be shared with interviewees and others. As students edit their interviews and organize them for classroom presentation, encourage them to consider ways they might share their findings with individuals both inside and outside the school. Students or groups of students may want to publish their projects as online and/or hard copy resources, PowerPoint or Keynote presentations, or YouTube audio/video clips. They may elect to use digital story apps and strategies to share single interviews or multiple interviews based upon a single theme. If your community has a cable television station, contact the station early in the project about the potential for airing community interviews. Contact the local public library’s local history representative to learn about resources that may be available to help students with their background research and to find out about adding your students’ project to the library database.

Conclusion

Oral history projects can be an effective instructional strategy for challenging and enriching social studies in upper elementary and middle grades. Teachers should begin planning early for the oral history project and should allow both flexible scheduling and flexible grouping to benefit developmental and educational needs of high-ability learners. Possibilities for oral history products and/or publications are virtually unlimited, and should, if possible, involve community resources and organizations early in the project.

Teachers who want to know more about using oral history in the classroom should consult published and online resources for additional information (see lists below). THP

Resources for teachers


Lanman, B. A., & Wencling, L. M. (Eds.), (2006). Preparing the next generation of