Principles and Best Practices for ORAL HISTORY EDUCATION (4-12)

CLASSROOM GUIDE

Introduction

What is Oral History?

Oral history is the recording in interview form of personal narratives from people with first-hand knowledge of historical events or current events.

Why integrate oral history in your classroom curricula?

Oral histories can be used as primary sources or as case studies, which connect to core curricula and interdisciplinary subject areas. First-person documentation lends a personal dimension to history. Oral history methodology develops critical thinking, and organizational and communication skills. It helps teachers meet state and national standards by aligning classroom work to skills outlined in the Common Core.

The interviews can be used in multiple ways such as in the course curriculum and in planning public presentations by students. Interviews raise student awareness about particular issues or moments in history. Oral history projects help students develop public speaking skills, improve communication and social interaction, learn multimedia technologies, and build a sense of community. Oral history fosters intergenerational appreciation and an awareness of the intersection between personal lives and larger historical currents. Oral history projects inspire active participation in history and civic life and strengthen a desire to pursue further education.

Created by Debbie Ardemendo, Apollo Theater Education Program, and Katie Kuszmar, Notre Dame High School, San Jose, and Educational Advisory Board, Voice of Witness

Principles and Best Practices for Teachers and Students

This document outlines principles and best practices adapted for 4-12 classrooms based on the Oral History Association's Principles and Best Practices and the American Folklife Center's documentation and preservation guidelines and standards. It is organized by three main stages of an oral history project—pre-interview, interview, and post-interview. This document is not meant to be a primer on conducting oral history projects; you can find many sources on the internet and in libraries.

Before deciding to implement oral history methods in your teaching, determine why you want your students to learn how to conduct oral history interviews. Do your research. Look at guides and curriculums for information and inspiration.

Essential questions to consider are: *What resources are available? How will you record, disseminate, and preserve the interviews? What are the student learning outcomes? What is the time frame for the project?*

The more proficiency you gain in oral history methodology, the better equipped you will be to integrate these tools into your classroom curricula in order to help students enjoy learning and to thrive academically.

Pre-interview

Introduction. Establish purpose and make clear curricular connections. Become familiar with oral history methodology and highlight the skills that oral history projects will develop. Share examples of exemplary oral histories. Explore project ideas to get excited about the possibilities.

Student investment. Foster students' interest in the project by having them participate in classroom discussions to determine the aims and objectives of their work, based on their unique interests and class content focus. Consider the varying levels of student abilities and interests, and determine what roles they can fulfill based on desired skill-building objectives.

Consider Dissemination Process. Based on the objectives and purpose of the project, determine how the interview will be circulated, posted or shared. Throughout the course of the project, you will need to let the narrator know how you intend to use the interview.

Narrators. Find narrators relevant to the project focus. Begin by brainstorming ideas for potential narrators: ask students, families, and community members. The teacher should make first contact through an email, a phone call, or regular mail, establishing the purpose and, procedures, approximate interview length, and interview schedule. Clearly explain to potential narrators the aims and goals of the project, why and how their perspectives are important in meeting the project goals, and how their interviews will be used subsequently.

Narrator rights. Narrators hold the rights to their interviews until and unless they transfer those rights. Narrators voluntarily give their consent to be interviewed and understand that they can refuse to answer a question at any time. Offer to give the narrator a copy of the interview in a mutually agreed upon format. Remember that the narrator has the right to receive a copy of the interview and use it as they wish. Let narrators know that you will keep them informed of projects that utilize their interviews.

Interview length. Determine approximate length of the interview before interviewing, based on the skill levels of students, subject matter, and the narrator's unique circumstances.

Research. Prepare for the interview by conducting careful research that is both subject-focused and contextual. Quality research can create rapport with the narrator and hone interview questions that inspire storytelling. Students should read and listen to both primary and secondary sources related to the era, topic, or theme of their interviews.

Interview questions. Compose a preliminary interview outline of topics or list of questions based on project purpose and research. The questions are not meant to be followed in exact order when conducting an interview, rather they establish guidelines for the interviewer and focus the conversation. Generally, interviews should ease the narrator into storytelling and reflection while also drawing out information and insights from the narrator's point of view on specific topics and events.

Equipment. Every effort should be made to use the best quality recording equipment, given available resources and accessibility. Become familiar with your equipment through repeated practice in the classroom, whether you record in audio or video.

Preservation and Storage. Consider how best to preserve the original recording and any transcripts made of it and to protect the accessibility and usability of the interview. Consult guides and websites for the latest archival standards for the media format used. At the outset of the project, talk with your school or local librarian about the school's capacity to store and provide access to the recordings. These considerations will help you select your equipment and structure your interview.

Interview space. Determine a space to conduct the interview, considering all the variables to an interview, including equipment capabilities, comfort level, sound, power and/or lighting considerations, and location unique to the narrator's story. Get out of the classroom if possible.

Interview

Narrator care. Show respect for the narrator at all times. Before starting the interview, build rapport with the narrators by helping them to feel comfortable and ensuring that their needs are met. Remind narrators of their rights and the goals of the project. During the interview, take care of the narrator to accommodate tiredness, emotions, breaks, or needs. Allow the narrators to tell their stories in their own words and from their own perspectives. Interviewers must take care to avoid making promises that cannot be met. Avoid stereotypes, misrepresentations, or manipulations of the narrators' words.

Description. Tag the interview in order to establish an organized archival index, including names, date, time, location, and subject matter of the interview.

Interview length. Be aware of the time frame that you established when you first contacted the narrator and stick to it. Prepare your topic list and plan the interview so that the conversation covers the desired content, if possible. Be mindful that the interview is not too brief, but don't prolong the conversation merely to fill up time.

Being present. Listen carefully and stay focused, so that the project focus is balanced with what the narrator chooses to relate. Not all prepared questions have to be asked — follow-up questions based on critical listening create quality interviews and allow for the narrator to reflect and expand on the topic at hand.

Expecting the unexpected. Anticipate that the interviews might not go as planned. In many cases the unexpected turns of an interview may redirect the focus or deepen understanding of the subject that was first established.

Release form. Explain the reason for and the details of the release form, which are to enable further use and distribution of the interview. Narrators may continue to hold the copyright to their interviews unless they transfer those rights. Take time to describe to narrators the ways that their interviews might be used, including online usage. Make sure that you get the release form signed, or, if necessary, record a verbal agreement allowing for such uses.

Post-interview

Organization. Document the process, including the preparation and methods used for archival purposes and project development. This will help with student assessment and to determine if project goals and objectives have been met.

Preservation and Storage. Follow up on your initial plan for storing your recording, transcripts, and other materials from your project. Ensure that the storage methods and media that you use will allow these materials to be useful to future listeners and readers despite changes in technology. Work with your school or local librarian to develop ways and means to allow easy access by listeners and readers for years to come.

Reflection. Ask students to reflect on the interview content, process, and product. Revisit original project objectives, and analyze whether and how the project's purpose was met and how the methods might be refined for future projects.

Dissemination. Create and share the oral history project in a way that stays true to the narrator's voice, while highlighting the objectives and purpose. Keep narrators informed about how their interviews are being used. Offer to give the narrators or their families a copy of the interview and your project.

For more information about the Oral History Association: oha@gsu.edu, 404.413.5751
Website: oralhistory.org

For more information about the American Folklife Center 101 Independence Ave., SE Washington, DC 20540 folklife@loc.gov, **Website:** www.loc.gov/folklife

Community School 154, Harriet Tubman Learning Center, 5th grade students interviewing a Significant Elder of Harlem. New York City. Courtesy of the Apollo Theater. Apollotheater.org