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Importance of Oral Histories

The concept of oral history is one of creating an alternative textbook in order for the students to view a different perspective of an event. By creating an alternative text through oral history, students are able to realize that all historical events are truly an interpretation (Johnson, 2007). The use of oral histories creates an atmosphere of active learning as compared to the passive learning associated with textbooks (Putman & Rommel-Esham, 2004). Oral histories are types of communication in which “history evokes a narrative of the past, and oral indicates a medium of expression” (Portelli, 1998, p.23). Oral histories allow a person to hear stories from people as they reflect on snapshots of their lives (Butler, 2008). Oral histories can also be called life stories. Insomuch as these life stories serve as a primary source of information and will assist students in expanding later research projects (Brent-Goodley, 2006).

Suggested Teaching Strategies

Teachers who do not possess a proper foundation of instruction should shy away from assigning oral history assignments. A strong foundation of instruction and modeling is essential to assist students in understanding the importance of the oral history stories they are about to collect. When addressing oral histories, the instructor should initially assign readings that will promote the students’ understanding of the importance of oral histories (Porter, 2000). Additionally, instructors should take advantage of those historical events in the curriculum which provide the opportunity for explanation and discussion of oral histories. For example, when the instructor is teaching about George Washington, he should ask the students to think what questions they would ask President Washington if they could travel back in time and personally interview him. By doing so, the instructor allows the students to put themselves in the perspective of an interviewer which is the basic premises of oral history (Porter, 2000). While instruction concerning oral pedagogy is important, the instructor should not down-play discovery learning as it is best for the students to operate in a discovery method. By using intuition they are allowed to operate more freely (Steinberg, 1993).

Oral History Methodology

When approaching oral histories in the high school setting, a teacher may wish to employ a structured or combination approach. In a structured approach, the student, or interviewer, will prepare a proposed list of questions to be asked to the interviewee. This approach, however, allows for more flexibility as it can be easily altered by simply having the student write fewer and more open-ended questions. By reducing the number of questions the student is not restricted to

a set script, thereby, allowing the interviewee to go off-track. With this method the interviewer is employing a semi-structured approach. To accomplish the semi-structured approach successfully, the interviewer must be prepared to patiently wait during long pauses that may occur during the interview while consciously attempting to bring the subject back on topic. As a result of this conundrum, the interviewer may wish to employ a combination approach rather than relying solely on the structured or semi-structured approach. To facilitate the combination approach, the interviewer should have a prepared list of key questions to ask the interviewee. However, to avoid confusion, the interviewer should be prepared to only ask a few pertinent questions and to reduce the structure if necessary (Butler, 2008).

Having written prepared questions may provide immeasurable assistance to both the interviewee and interviewer in helping to solve unexplained situations when certain concerns pertaining to oral histories may arise. One such concern occurs when there is a void of available critical knowledge of a subject in a certain event. This void in knowledge may result from the interviewee having disconnected himself from past events because he either did not recognize the importance of such events or he did not have the abilities or tools to understand and address them (McLaughlin, Kershaw, & Roberts, 2007). In order to effectively combat this disconnect, the interviewer should have in his possession a strong basic understanding of the events in question. At the same time, the interviewer should compile a list of thought-provoking questions which were chosen based on their relevance in evoking additional valuable information.

During an oral history interview, the interviewer should refrain from correcting the interviewee. Rather, the interviewer should recognize when inaccuracies appear and guide the interviewee into a topic where the inaccuracy or disconnect would not be present. Oral histories facilitate shared understanding, generate connections and equalize relationships (McLaughlin, Kershaw, & Roberts, 2007). Oral history assignments open the door to increased understanding of self and others (McLaughlin, Kershaw, & Roberts, 2007). Students, who too often see history as simply the memorization of names, events, and dates, have the chance to be historians themselves and experience the joys of historical research (Bain, 2004).

Practical Dimensions of Oral Histories

With an eye on practice and implementation, a teacher should recognize the ultimate goal of oral histories which is to use insights gained through the oral histories to eliminate barriers that otherwise would possibly interfere with potential future partnerships, or perceptions, the students may have (Barclay-McLaughlin, Kershaw & Roberts, 2007). By creating stronger partnerships and eliminating barriers the teacher and school are able to build stronger ties to the community. The actual interview and learning relevant historical facts to aid with the interview should be a fun and pleasurable experience for the students. The first step in an oral history project is for the interviewer to gain a strong understanding of the event they will be later discussing during the interview. The more knowledgeable the interviewer becomes concerning the history surrounding the event, the stronger the interview questions they will compose (Lyons, 2007). Once the interview process has been satisfactorily completed, the student should prepare a written essay detailing the interview. It must be remembered, however, that in some cases following the interview the students may need to conduct further research of their own into the subject matter

of the interview. This additional sleuthing may be necessary in those cases in which the interview divulged additional, but vital information or facts, of which the student was unaware (Lyons, 2007). The interviewer may also wish to use technology to assist in recording the oral histories. A redundant, yet key, process can be used in order to safeguard accurate transcribing of the information. In this process, the interviewer can employ an audio recording device while simultaneously taking notes during the interview session. The students should be informed that use of the *split page* note taking process is recommended in order to strengthen the process.

When discussing oral histories, teachers should avoid the pitfalls of requiring the interviewers to solely present reports describing the information that was discovered in the interview. Rather than having the students simply report their findings, the teacher should conduct a practical role playing activity which includes the new information obtained from the interview. Once an oral history project is completed, the students should enter the classroom prepared to share their information as well as to engage in possible role playing (Barclay-McLaughlin, Kershaw, & Roberts, 2007). The ability to role play allows the students to place themselves inside a participant's shoes while, at the same time, conjecturing about what they, the student, might have visualized or done differently during the event in question had they actually been physically present. While conjecture in social studies is sometimes difficult and often best avoided, this type of role playing is desirable because it is primarily based on facts revealed during the oral history projects. The oral histories, combined with role playing, allows the classroom to initiate a dialogue which will move us beyond what some researchers have stated as "You don't know what you don't know" stage of social awareness (Barclay-McLaughlin, Kershaw, & Roberts, 2007).

Ethical Dimensions of Oral Histories

One major benefit of oral histories is student understanding that they are being asked to put a human face on a historical event. It should be cautioned, however, that even when accompanied with by a human face, some events may invoke negative viewpoints and opinions such as racism or social intolerance. Accordingly, negative and unacceptable ideas such as racism, hatred or intolerance in general will still need to be reported. At the same time, students need to be cognizant that some people may have a total lack of understanding of facts, or in some cases, a completely erroneous belief of certain events in question (Lyons, 2007). In that event, the interviewer should rely on his own questioning ability, as well as his knowledge of the event at issue, to filter the interview and collect the most salient facts. In addition, in some cases, poor memory can signify that people are unable to remember many of the events the students wanted to discuss and write about (Lyons, 2007). In these situations, it may be helpful for the student interviewer to involve the interviewee more intensely in reviewing and giving final approval of the notes. For example, when the student interviewer compiles his field notes following the interview he may wish to review the notes with the interviewee in order to verify the accuracy of the interviewee's recorded statements. This way, if the interviewee recognizes an inappropriate or inaccurate comment the interviewer can immediately correct the error or inaccuracy, thus avoiding detriment to the case. Even if this is the case, the student interviewer should always be prepared for inappropriate comments while possessing various structured questions which are intended to assist in bringing the discussion back on topic. Another area of preparation is to have the

interviewee sign an informed consent decree. This signed form will assist to document the fairness of the oral history. The goal is for the student interviewer, together with the interviewee, to chronicle and explore the interviewee's experiences as they relate to the questions being asked. The review of the final notes by the interviewee, coupled with having a signed informed consent document, assists the interviewer in achieving a strong ethical final product.

Suggestions for Finding Participants in Oral Histories

For various oral history projects, the identification of available participants ranges from being easy to very difficult. Unless the teacher has prior knowledge of a specific interviewee, the task of finding someone suitable for interview can often be very challenging. With this stated, there are some general resources which can assist the teacher to locate and identify suitable and qualified individuals for interview.

These resources include:

1. **Local Librarians:** Many community librarians are familiar with events happening in their area. By discussing the facts with the librarian, usually a noted expert on all things local, the teacher may be assisted to identify additional people in the area who are familiar with the topic.
2. **Local Community Leaders:** In the case of the civil rights riots, the teacher may wish to contact the local chapter of the NAACP. Furthermore, in various communities, local attorneys may be known for defending civil rights and its leaders.
3. **Local Religious Leaders:** Many church leaders are aware of members of their congregation who may have witnessed or have first hand knowledge of various historical events.
4. **Local Historians:** Generally located at institutions of higher learning, professors of history can be very helpful in directing teachers to people who may be interviewed. In addition to professors, most communities generally contain a local historian. The local librarian may be helpful in identifying local community historians.

In the following section, the reader is presented with ten potential oral history topics for teachers for the State of Illinois. Below each possible topic is an overview with three suggested strategies or questions, as well as useful resources, which the teacher may consider.

Suggested Oral Histories

1. 1993 Upper Mississippi River Flood



Overview: Due to an above average autumn rainfall coupled with a heavy winter snowfall, the Midwest region experienced its worst flood ever. The resulting flood cost an estimated 20 billion dollars in damages and affected both financially and personally the entire geographic region in the State of Illinois.

Teaching Strategies:

- a. View the perspective of the individual citizen of Illinois as compared to what was reported by the national news. At what point did the individual citizen realize the severity of the flood?
- b. Examine the perception of preparedness felt by the Illinois citizen. Do they blame the state or federal government for the failure of the levees and ensuing flood?
- c. What economic toll did the individual and the citizens of Illinois as a whole experience as a result of the flood?

Sources:

Chagon, S. (1996). *The great flood of 1993: Causes, impacts, and responses*. Jackson, TN. Westview Press.

Friday, E. (1993). *The great flood of 1993*. Washington. D.C. U.S. Department of Commerce Press.

Kiley, M., Bauer, R., Erdmann, E., Herzog, B., Masters, J., & Smith, C. (1994). *The great flood of 1993*:

Perspectives on the flooding along the Mississippi river and its tributaries in Illinois. Champaign, IL, Illinois State Geological Survey Press.

Knox, B. (2006). *Flood! The 1993 Midwest downpours*. New York, NY. Bearport Publishing.

Tobin, G., & Montz, B. (1999). *The great Midwest floods of 1993*. Fort Worth, TX. Saunders College Publishing.

2. 1985 Farm Aid Concert in Champaign



Overview: Held on September 22, 1985, the concert, a brainchild of singer-entertainers Willie Nelson, Neil Young, and John Mellencamp, brought attention to the financial needs of America's farmers. With over 80,000 people in attendance, the concert event raised over 7 million dollars for America's family farmers.

Teaching Strategies:

- a. Discuss the plight of the American farmer and their need for financial assistance
- b. Examine the benefit of the concert and the success of the Farm Aid movement as a whole.
- c. Discuss the oral histories received and determine how many Illinoisans attended or remember the first Farm Aid concert. Do they recognize any significance of the event in Champaign?

Sources:

Nelson, W (2000). Willie an autobiography. New York, NY. Cooper Square Press.

Johnson, H. (2008). Born in a small town John Mellancamp. London. Omnibus Press.

McDonough, J. (2003). Shakey: Neil Young's biography. Harpswell, ME. Anchor Publishing.

www.farmaid.org

3. August 27, 1966 Race Riot in Waukegan, Illinois



Overview: A police officer and a patron at a bar in the 600 block of South Genesee Street got into a fist fight which sparked one of the largest riots in Illinois history. After four nights of rioting, the police were forced to seal off a 35 square block area of the city. By the end of the riot, hundreds of people had been arrested, twelve people hospitalized, and the whole nation was watching the State.

Teaching Strategies:

- a. Examine the oral histories and determine how various groups viewed the events that were unfolding.
- b. Because the event took place over 40 years ago, how has the length of time changed the perception of the actual event?

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- c. Connect the race riot of Waukegan with the Civil Rights Movement in general. Did the oral histories demonstrate an understanding of the connection between the Waukegan riot and the larger movement for civil rights?

Sources: [Note: There isn't a comprehensive paper on the events surrounding the Waukegan riot. However, these sources will allow the teacher to examine the anatomy of race riots.]

Barnes, H. (2008). *Never been a time: The 1917 race riot that sparked the civil rights movement*. New York, NY. Walker and Company.

Hirsch, J. (2003). *Riot and remembrance: America's worst race riot and its legacy*. New York, NY. Mariner Books.

Levine, E. (2000). *Freedom's children: Young civil rights activists tell their own stories*. New York, NY. Putnam Juvenile Publication.

Flamm, M. (2005). *Law and order: Street crime, civil unrest, and the crisis of liberalism in the 1960's*. Irvington, NY. Columbia University Press.

4. 1968 Democratic Presidential Convention Riots Chicago



Overview: Combined with the peak of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, the city of Chicago was faced with days of protest as the Democratic Party attempted to nominate a candidate for president. With the nation upset over the deaths of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, scores of protesters rioted with police in an attempt to have their voices heard.

Teaching Strategies

- a. Discuss the varying perceptions of people as related to their distance from Chicago. How did people living further away from the city view the actions unfolding in Chicago?
- b. Review the biographies of the protesters and compare them with the oral histories collected by the students
- c. Examine the various political view points of the oral histories. Ask the students how did Republicans generally report feeling about the riots as compared to that of the Democrats?

Sources:

Kusch, F. (2008). Battleground Chicago: the police and the 1968 democratic national convention.

Chicago, IL. University of Chicago Press.

Farber, D. (1994). Chicago '68. Chicago, IL. University of Chicago Press.

Schultz, J. (1969). No one was killed. New York, NY. John Schultz Associates.

Simon, R. (1968). The strategy of confrontation: Chicago and the national convention. Chicago, IL. Gunthrop Warren Press.

5. 1974 Completion of the Sears Tower



Overview: At its opening, the Sears Tower was the tallest building the world had ever known. Climbing 1,450 feet and sheathed in black aluminum and bronze tinted glass, the building was designed by architect Fazlur Khan. It stood as the world's tallest building until 1996 when it was surpassed by the Petronas Towers in Malaysia.

Teaching Strategies

- a. Examine the pride felt in the oral histories concerning the accomplishment of having the world's tallest building inside the State of Illinois.
- b. Have the students outline and classify the various verbs used in the oral histories to describe their emotions when, and if, they visited the top of the tower.
- c. Have the students argue the importance of having the tallest building for a nation's reputation. Did the oral histories show pride in the accomplishment or did the construction really have an effect on the normal citizen?

Sources:

Pridmore, J. (2002). Sears Tower: a building book from the Chicago architecture foundation.

Chicago, IL. Pomegranate Press.

Diemer, L. (2009). *Sears Tower*. New York, NY. Weigl Publishers.

www.searstower.org

6. 1979 American Airlines Crash at O'Hare



Overview: The single deadliest airliner accident on American soil. The DC-10 loaded with 258 passengers and thirteen crew members was headed to Los Angeles when, on takeoff, the left engine detached from the airplane. It was later discovered the engine had been improperly reattached to the wing during a routine maintenance approximately two months prior to the accident.

Teaching Strategies

- a. Using the oral histories, attempt to explore the safety of the airlines. During the interviews, did the students uncover any distrust of the airlines?
- b. Have the students examine the NTSB report (available online) concerning the cause of the crash.
- c. Examine the oral histories and determine if the crash led to a change in travel plans? Did people of Illinois choose to avoid O'Hara in the coming years?

Sources:

<http://www.airdisaster.com/investigations/aacrash.shtml>

Fulkerson, L (Director). 2004. *The crash of flight 191* [Documentary]. The United States: History

Channel.

7. 1958 Fire at Our Lady of Angels Elementary School in Chicago



Overview: The fire broke out on December 1, 1958, resulting in the deaths of 92 students and three nuns. An extensive investigation following the fire suggests that the fire was started in a trash can possibly by a student using matches. The fire made national headlines and led to a letter of condolence sent by the Pope.

Teaching Strategies

- a. In reviewing the oral histories, determine if people viewed fire safety in a different light as a result of the fire.
- b. Discuss the changes in fire safety since the disaster.
- c. Compare and contrast the various oral histories with other disasters. Is there a different perception because this tragedy occurred at a school?

Sources:

Cowan, D. (1996). *To sleep with angels: The story of a fire*. Chicago, IL. Ivan R. Dee, Publisher.

<http://www.olafire.com/>

8. Tri-State Tornado of 1925



Overview: This was the deadliest tornado in U.S. History. Unfortunately, due to the fact that the event occurred more 80 years ago, valid oral histories will be difficult to find. Therefore, a teacher should have his students interview children of survivors and discuss family

recollections or stories passed down concerning the F5 tornado which resulted in 695 confirmed deaths.

Teaching Strategies

- a. Compare the oral histories with Wallace Akin's compelling book. (Akin, 2004)
- b. Has the event caused a respect for nature's fury?
- c. Do the oral histories show preparedness for possible future tornados?

Sources:

<http://www.tornadoproject.com/toptens/1.htm>

Felkner, P. (1992). *The Tri-state tornado: The story of America's greatest tornado disaster*. Ames, IO. Iowa State Press.

Akin, W. (2002). *The forgotten storm: The great tri-state tornado of 1925*. Guilford, CT. Lyons Press.

9. September 15, 1972 4.5 Earthquake Hits Northern Illinois



Overview: This earthquake was felt by the majority of residents in Northern Illinois. Registering a 4.5 on the Richter scale, the earthquake caused minor damages to foundations and chimneys to buildings in the vicinity of the quake. This was the largest earthquake in Illinois since the 1909 magnitude 5 earthquake. On September 2, 1999, a magnitude 3.5 earthquake struck the same area.

Teaching Strategies

- a. Due to the fact earthquakes are not daily occurrences, discuss the changes people made following the earthquake.

- b. Examine the general feelings of surprise and concern felt by the residents following the earthquake.
- c. What was the economic toll on the residents? Have the students attempt to discover any existing structures or landmarks which may still bear the scars of the earthquake (sidewalk cracks, rehabbed buildings, etc.).

Sources:

Scarth, A. (2001). *Savage earth: The dramatic story of volcanoes and earthquakes*. London. Harper Collins.

<http://www.isgs.uiuc.edu/research/earthquake-hazards/pdf-files/eq-fct-nrth.pdf>

<http://www.isgs.illinois.edu/research/earthquake-hazards/pdf-files/qk-fct-damag.pdf>

10. June 27, 1955 First seatbelts required in the nation



Overview: In 1955 Illinois led the way in the United States by requiring safety belts in all newly cars. This landmark law angered some because they felt it violated their constitutional rights, however, today seatbelts are generally accepted as a fundamental safety feature in all vehicles.

Teaching Strategies

1. When conducting the oral histories, have the students discover what it was like before seat belts.
2. Discuss the benefits of safety belts.
3. Examine the oral histories to determine an overall perception of seat belts.

Sources:

Nader, R. (1991). *Unsafe at any speeds: 25th anniversary edition*. Boston, Mass. Knightsbridge Publication.

Adams, J. (1995). *Risk*. London. UCL Press.

Conclusion

The use of oral histories can assist the students in understanding the various perspectives maintained by individuals concerning historical events. Furthermore, by replacing direct instruction with exploration into interviews, the social studies teacher will be following a stronger and more diverse teaching style. By having the students go out into the community and discuss events with other people, the students are increasing their bonds with the community and thus becoming better citizens. The use of oral histories will greatly encourage the community to become more cognizant of their local happenings, and allow the interviewees to be more responsible young adults.

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