

Oral history in the classroom

Oral history provides benefits that other primary sources cannot.

Kathryn Walbert

Historians and history teachers have a wide range of primary sources upon which to draw when we approach the past. Newspapers, census data, diaries, letters, photographs, memoirs, and other documents all surely have their place in both the historian's research and the classroom. But oral history has several unique benefits that no other historical source provides.

Oral history allows you to learn about the perspectives of individuals who might not otherwise appear in the historical record. While historians and history students can use traditional documents to reconstruct the past, everyday people fall through the cracks in the written record. Politicians, activists, and business leaders may show up regularly in official documents and the media, but the rest of us very seldom do. Chances are, if someone had to reconstruct your life story from the written record alone, they would have very little to go on — and the information they would be able to gather would reveal very little about the heart and soul of your daily life, or the things that matter most to you.

Oral history allows you to compensate for the digital age. Historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can rely on extensive correspondence and regular diary entries for information about life in the past. But in today's world, telephone, email, and web-based communication have largely replaced those valuable written records. Without oral history, much of the personal history of the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries would be lost to future historians.

Oral history allows you to learn different kinds of information. Even when we do have extensive written sources about someone — such as a politician — we may not have the kind of information we want. Newspaper articles, speeches, and government documents may reveal significant useful information, but those kinds of sources often neglect more personal and private experiences. Through oral history, you can learn about the hopes, feelings, aspirations, disappointments, family histories, and personal experiences of the people you interview.

Oral history allows you to ask the questions you're interested in. If you are a historian studying Frederick Douglass and you have a burning question about his life, the best that you can do is to hope that, through a creative reading of the existing sources, you'll find the answer somewhere in his papers and other contemporary documents. But by talking to people in your community about the past, you can ask what you want to ask and create the source materials that will help you answer your questions.

Oral history provides historical actors with an opportunity to tell their own stories in their own words. Through oral history, interviewees have a chance to participate in the creation of the historical retelling of their lives. Unlike Frederick Douglass who is long dead and cannot complicate, extend, or argue with our understanding of his life, living historical actors can enrich our understanding of history by telling their version of events and their interpretations in their own words.

Oral history provides a rich opportunity for human interaction. History, after all, is all about the human experience. Through oral history, researchers and interviewees come together in conversation about a commonly shared interest — as with all human interactions, this has the potential to be tremendously rewarding for both parties.

Oral history and student learning

By Kathryn Walbert

Linking students with the people who lived the history they're studying can dramatically enrich the classroom experience.

Oral history not only enriches our understanding of the past, but also holds the potential to dramatically enrich the classroom experience. Oral history projects can help students from early primary grades through the college level learn an amazing range of content knowledge and skills.

Oral history can help students learn new historical content.

Through oral history, students can reinforce their knowledge of the historical content presented in the Standard Course of Study by hearing about historical events from people who remember them and can make a personal connection for them. But they can also extend their knowledge of history beyond what's in their textbooks. Through oral history, students can learn about the everyday people who don't appear in history books, uncover the ways in which major historical events reshaped their own communities, and document history that is too new to appear in books, recording events that are still unfolding.

Oral history can help students learn research skills.

Oral history is a valuable historical research tool, one that students could use in research projects for classes in junior high, high school, college, and beyond. Done well, oral history also involves a substantial amount of background research prior to each interview, enabling students to gain familiarity with more traditional written sources and the use of library resources.

Oral history can support good writing skills.

When students write up their projects, whether in a formal research paper, an informal reaction paper, or a journal entry, they can develop writing skills that will serve them well in the future. I have found that while students often put little effort or creative energy into standard historical term papers, they do some of their best writing on oral history assignments. In part, I think this is because they have another person's words to inspire them — when they interweave the interviewee's comments with their own words, their own writing seems to rise to the level of their interviewee's narrative. But they also seem to write about these projects with a greater sense of commitment because they come to care about the subject of their paper through the interview process. While it's easy to dismiss the importance of a paper about the causes of the War of 1812, for example, it's much harder to write a thoroughly disinterested and sloppy essay based on riveting stories your much-loved grandfather told you about his Korean War experience (especially when that grandfather has asked if he can read the paper when you're done with it!).

Oral history can teach students valuable critical thinking skills.

By its very nature, oral history raises important questions about what matters about the past. By focusing on everyday people, oral history fundamentally challenges the historical canon which, too often, assumes that the only important stories about the past are those that are told by or happened to powerful and "important" people like presidents, generals, business leaders, and activists.

Oral history also introduces contradiction into the historical record. If you ask twenty people of various races and economic classes what it was like to live in the South under segregation in the 1950s, they will invariably tell you twenty different stories, many of which conflict with one another. Despite their differences, however, each of these stories may be thoroughly true from the perspective of the teller. Oral history, then, questions the idea that there is a

single monolithic truth about the past and, instead, posits that there are multiple truths that bear consideration, each of which can tell us only a piece of the whole story. Students may have to grapple with a contradiction between what their book says about an event and what their interviewee reports, finding ways of explaining the differences and deciding which account they find more credible or persuasive. Learning how to interrogate sources, compare varied accounts of the same event, and consider the biases and perspectives inherent in any research source can help students not only understand their interviews, but also think more critically in a broader sense.

Oral history can help all students feel included.

Oral history can allow students with less well-developed reading and writing skills to learn a great deal about the past and produce successful, motivating projects. Often, students who do poorly on library research-based assignments in my classes have outshone their peers as interviewers, in part because interviewing relies on a substantially different skill set than meticulous library research. Creative options for final projects, like performances, websites, documentary films, museum-like exhibits, or slide-shows with audio clips from interviews, can help students with learning differences or other reading and writing limitations to demonstrate their historical understanding and their analytical skills without feeling discouraged by their academic weaknesses. Oral history projects that allow students to interview family members or people in their own communities can also help international students and recent immigrants share their community's story and educate their classmates about their culture, perhaps easing the transition to American schools.

Oral history can help students feel a personal connection to the past and to the life of their community.

When students sit down to talk to an older person in their community about the past, history ceases to be that anonymous sequence of meaningless names and dates and starts being something that happened to (and because of!) real people like themselves — people with feelings, hopes, and aspirations much like their own. Oral history allows students to understand the past in a first-person way and to gain a palpable sense of the joy, pain, sorrow, fear, and hope that others experienced as history unfolded. Far more often than I ever would have expected, my students tell me that after finishing an oral history assignment for my class, they decided to go back and interview other people about the same event, or to conduct further interviews with their interviewee to get "*the whole story*." Others remark that they never knew that their grandmother was such a fascinating person, or that their hometown had such an interesting past. Building these kinds of connections between students and older people in their hometowns not only creates a better understanding of history in our students, it also creates stronger communities, a goal far more worthwhile than a score on any standardized test.

Oral history can help students develop valuable interpersonal skills.

Oral history forces students away from the Internet, video games, and television and into the presence of living, breathing human beings. Good interviewers have to be outstanding listeners and careful observers in order to ask thoughtful follow-up questions and constantly evaluate their interviewee's responses, emotional state, and stamina. They must also be carefully attuned to the messages they are sending with their own body language, tone of voice, phrasing, and vocabulary. They need to be able to put another person at ease and to develop a relationship of trust and honesty with the person their interview. Becoming a skilled interviewer not only helps students succeed on an oral history assignment, it also helps them become better conversationalists, more mature listeners, and more poised speakers under pressure, skills that will serve them well in college or job interviews as well as daily interactions with others.

In short, oral history is both a critical methodology for the historian and a valuable pedagogical tool for the social studies teacher. Through oral history projects, students can

reap tremendous rewards both educationally and personally, and teachers can enjoy watching students come to care about a subject that was previously dismissed as boring and irrelevant. These kinds of projects require careful planning, instruction in not only history but also interviewing technique, and patience, but they are well worth the time and effort.

Ten questions for planning an oral history project

Kathryn Walbert

How to ensure that your project will run smoothly and have results that will inspire you and your students.

Because oral history projects can require a major commitment of time from teachers and students, it's important to take the time in advance to consider issues that can arise and how you will deal with them. A little planning will avoid a lot of frustration later and help to ensure that your students get as much as possible out of the project. (Some of these issues are more important for more complicated projects at the middle school and high school level; for simpler K-5 projects, you may find that some of these issues can be avoided.)

What are your goals?

Thinking about the goals for the project early on can help you choose an appropriate scope for your project, set a timeframe for its completion, and select the readings, guest speakers, and in-class activities that will make it a success. For example, if the main goal is to help students learn new content information, you may not want spend a lot of time debating big questions about objectivity in research, but if the main goal is introduction to a research methodology, you might very well include those sorts of conversations in your lesson plans. By thinking about what you want students to get out of the project in the early planning stages, you can make sure that you spend your time and energy achieving those goals instead of trying to "do everything."

How will you manage the time involved?

Oral history projects can be very time-consuming. In addition to your planning time, your class may need to learn about the topics or time periods at hand, conduct background research, find interviewees, learn oral history techniques, practice interview skills, conduct interviews, transcribe or index parts of their tapes, discuss their findings, and produce some sort of final project. You will probably want to create a time line to help you fit all of these steps into the year's curriculum.

How will you teach your students about interviewing?

Students will get the most out of an oral history project when they approach it professionally. In order to do so, they will need some training. Is there an experienced oral historian or an oral history program in your community that might be able to assist you? Contact local colleges and universities, libraries, museums, and historical or genealogical societies for good contacts. If you can't find a professional to assist you, can you do the training yourself based on books, articles, the Internet? However you choose to conduct training, try to anticipate students' concerns. Even the most confident teenagers can become nervous wrecks when they start thinking about sitting down with someone twice their age for an hour or more. Students often worry that the interviewee will dislike them, that they won't think of good questions, or that the interview will be plagued with awkward silences. Training can go a long way toward alleviating those concerns and giving students the confidence and skills that they will need to produce high-quality interviews.

Will your students work alone or in groups?

Since an oral history project is a long-term undertaking, sometimes it makes sense to allow students to work together and share the burdens of research, question-writing, and

interviewing. If you decide on a group project, you'll want to consider whether you want each student in the group to interview someone individually or whether you will allow students to conduct their interviews as a group. Will you permit any students to opt out of conducting their own interviews and, instead, read an interview or take on added responsibilities for their group's final paper? By thinking about what parts of the oral history experience you want everyone to have and what parts you want students to do in collaboration with others, you'll be able to set fair and consistent group work policies right from the start.

Will students choose their own interviewees, or will you handpick them?

There are pros and cons to each approach. Students tend to get more excited about interviewees they choose, but some students will invariably have trouble finding someone to interview, particularly if they procrastinate. Left to their own devices, most students will choose someone they know well, like a relative or family friend. These can be incredibly rich and rewarding interviews. (You'll be surprised to learn how many historically interesting people are related to the students in your class!) But if you want students to experience interviewing someone they don't know, or if you want to make sure that students all cover a particular topic, relying on their personal connections can prove problematic. In some cases, it can save time for the instructor to create a list of interviewees who have interesting stories to tell, who have already agreed to participate in the project, and who should provide positive experiences for interviewees. The instructor could even arrange for those people to come to the school so that students could conduct interviews during school hours. Whether you or the students choose the interviewees, you'll want to clearly define the criteria for interviewees in the project: Does the person need to be over a certain age? Does s/he need to remember particular events? Can s/he be related to the student?

What will happen to the tapes after they are collected?

Too often, students record wonderful oral histories and then wind up throwing the tapes in a dresser drawer or taping the latest CD over them accidentally. You might consider ways of preserving your students' work by creating an archive in your school library or donating the recordings to an organization that can preserve them and make them available to future researchers. If you plan to make the tapes available to outside researchers, you will need to be sure to have students and their interviewees sign a legal release form, giving you permission to make the recordings available to others. If you are donating the recordings to a local archive, its staff can assist you in creating a simple release form. Alternatively, copies of sample release forms are available on a number of oral history websites. However you decide to archive the original tapes, you may want to make arrangements to dub "working" copies for students to use in crafting their papers or other projects, as well as copies to give to interviewees as a "thank you" for participating in the class project.

What will you do about equipment?

Will all interviews need to be recorded on tape, or is it okay with you if students just take notes? (Keep in mind that notes will not allow them to quote their interviewee verbatim in later projects, and will not preserve the unique flavor of the spoken word — a critical part of oral history.) If students must tape interviews, will the school provide recorders on loan? Can students use their own tape recording equipment? Typically, the best recording quality will be achieved by using a tape recorder with some form of external microphone and by recording on high quality 90-minute tapes. Particularly if you plan to archive the recordings, you may want to require a specific brand of tapes so that students don't use the 99-cent bargain tapes, which often produce poor-quality recordings and tend to break upon repeated listening. You may also want to incorporate practice using tape recorders in your training sessions.

What will students do with their raw interviews?

It can be tempting to ask students to transcribe their full interviews, but transcription is an art unto itself and is incredibly time consuming — even experienced transcribers can require 5-6 hours per hour of tape to make a good transcript. An alternative can be to ask students to

transcribe one good story from each interview, or to ask them to create a "tape log" in which they listen to their tapes and make lists of topics covered, jotting down a counter number each time the topic changes. Some oral historians experiment with "ethnopoetic transcription," using unorthodox line breaks and changes in their text font, capitalization, size, and color to try to represent the flow of the language in a particularly evocative story. These activities can be fun for students and give them a taste of transcription without requiring hours of transcribing.

What will be the final product?

Will students just produce an interview on tape, or will there be some written component? Will they produce any kind of written transcript or log? Journal entries about the process? A paper? (If they must write a paper, how long will it be? Should they do other research in addition to their interview? Can they work collaboratively?) Oral history projects can result in final products that go well beyond the tapes and written work — be creative in thinking about the possibilities. Students could produce exhibits that incorporate photos, research documents, and excerpts from their interviews. They could write and perform a dramatic performance based on their interviewee's stories. They could develop a slide show or oral presentation in which they play some excerpts from their interview and discuss them with the class. Artistic students could create a visual art project that incorporates interview themes. Students could create a documentary film or a website to share their research with a broader audience. You might create a long list of possible "end projects" and allow each student or group to choose.

How will your class give something back to the community and the people who participated in their interviews?

Oral historians are acutely aware that our interviewees give us a tremendous gift when they invite us into their lives and share their stories with us. It's important for us to acknowledge that gift, treat it with respect and, when we can, give something in return. Will your students write thank you notes? Send copies of tapes to their interviewees? Will the class invite interviewees to hear see their final projects, or to attend a class performance or slide show in the community? This is an opportunity for you to model appropriate behavior for researchers while also building good will in the community.

Help with answers

As you seek answers to all of these questions, try to connect with oral historians in your community and with other teachers doing similar projects. You may be surprised by how generous the scholars in your community can be with their time and expertise.

Connecting with community through oral history **Jean Sweeney Shawver**

Through interviews and photographs, students in Harnett County learn about their community's agricultural past and present.

"Although I had heard the stories all my life, I guess I never really listened." That was the common comment I heard from the composition and photography students who completed an interview with a local farmer, current or retired, for my photography course last fall. Usually the interview subject was a relative of the student — a grandfather or father — or sometimes a neighbor. With either subject, the interview project gave my students the reason to ask and really listen to the stories of farming in Harnett County in the last 60 or 70 years.

Our first step in the project was to read and discuss the readings prepared for us about North Carolina farm life in the first half of the twentieth century. Because I teach English/Language

Arts and photography and have a minor in history, this project let me combine those interests and help my students to relate those areas. In the next step, my students wrote their interview questions, which we reviewed and discussed. Then they taped their interviews on a borrowed school recorder or on their families' mini-recorders. The longest and most challenging part was the transcription of their interviews. When they visited their interview subject, they photographed their subjects, the farms, equipment and buildings. In the school darkroom, they developed and printed the photographs to complete the project.

The students learned the hardships of life on a farm before World War II, before mechanized farming, with a mule and one's own labor. One especially poignant story was that of a young man, a teenage high school student whose father had mangled his leg in a mowing accident. The young man found the courage and calm to drive his father on roads that were barely roads in the late 1940's to Rex Hospital in Raleigh to have the mangled leg cleanly amputated and then to leave school to tend the family farm to support his family. To his credit, he later earned his high school diploma.

One student interviewed her father, a current farmer and agribusinessman, to reminisce about the purebred hogs they raised when she was a little girl ten years ago. Most students learned that while they look for activities today to fill the hours of their day, their predecessors tried to survive the work schedule from daylight to dark, six days a week, sometimes seven, after church.

In the spring of 2001, I was given a brochure about the Summer Teachers' Institute sponsored by the Southern Oral History Program at UNC-Chapel Hill and the North Carolina Humanities Council. At the Institute, I learned how to combine language arts and history and photography, which was a fresh, intriguing concept for me. In the fall semester, my composition and photography students interviewed their subjects. All the materials will be presented to the Southern Oral History Program.

Since we are a block schedule school, I have just met my new students. After they feel comfortable with the first photography assignments, we will begin the readings and the process anew.

Oral history links and resources

Kathryn Walbert

Guides, tips, lesson plans, and examples of student projects on the web.

Organizations and programs

Oral History Association

<http://alpha.dickinson.edu/oha/>

This site includes information about OHA events and on joining the OHA, as well as information on their many useful oral history publications.

Southern Oral History Program, UNC-Chapel Hill

<http://www.sohp.org/>

This extensive website provides information about the latest research conducted by the SOHP, including interview excerpts that you can read and listen to online. You will also find detailed instructional information, a well-developed bibliography, and a series of links.
Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University

The Center for Documentary Studies

<http://cds.aas.duke.edu/>

uses photography, filmmaking, oral history, folklore, and writing as tools to explore community life. The site includes exhibits, information about current documentary projects, and Putting Documentary Work to Work, a *"step-by-step guide designed to help community organizations develop and conduct their own documentary projects using a camera and tape recorder."*

Instructional/how-to

How-To from the Southern Oral History Program

<http://www.sohp.org/howto/index.html>

This comprehensive site features an electronic version of the SOHP's popular guide book, information about recording equipment, tips for successful interviews, and copies of the SOHP's release forms and other official documents.

Baylor's Introduction to Oral History

http://www.baylor.edu/oral_history/index.php?id=23566

These pages provide in-depth information on interviewing technique, possible uses of completed interviews, and ethical considerations. An extensive bibliography makes this site a very valuable resource.

Educational resources — American West Heritage Center

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

These resources from David Sidwell provide useful information about the value and practice of oral history. In his "How to Collect Oral Histories" section, Sidwell provides a series of solid tips for conducting an interview, including an example of a personal history release form and a list of possible interview topics.

Oral History in the Teaching of U.S. History (*ERIC Digest*)

<http://www.ericdigests.org/1996-4/oral.htm>

Why and how to conduct an oral history project, with references.

How to Prepare and Conduct an Oral History Interview

<http://www.byub.org/capturingpast/>

Dos and don'ts for planning, conducting, and preserving an oral history interview, with sample topics and questions for a life history interview. From KBYU, Brigham Young University.

Tips for Oral History Interviewers

<http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/resources/rohotips.html>

Good, quick advice from Willa K. Baum, Oral History for the Local Historical Society.

Lesson and unit plans using oral history

Using Oral History

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/oralhist/ohhome.html>

From the Library of Congress Learning Page. *"This lesson presents social history content and topics through the voices of ordinary people. It draws on primary sources from the American Memory Collection, American Life Histories, 1936-1940. Using excerpts from the collection, students study social history topics through interviews that recount the lives of ordinary Americans. Based on these excerpts and further research in the collections, students develop their own research questions. They then plan and conduct oral history interviews with members of their communities."*

Learning About Immigration Through Oral History

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/97/ohl/ammem.html>

A year-long interdisciplinary project plan designed for middle school, developed by Barbara Wysocki and Frances Jacobson as part of the American Memory Fellows Program. Students interview immigrants in their own communities and compare the stories of these contemporary immigrants with those found in American Memory collections online. The plan includes instructions for practicing oral history techniques by interviewing teachers and family members, including a lesson on asking good questions. A final essay serves as synthesis for the project.

Student projects on the Web

What Did You Do in the War, Grandma?

http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/WWII_Women/tocCS.html

An Oral History of Rhode Island Women During World War II, produced by students in the Honors English Program at South Kingstown High School, 1995. The Web site includes transcripts of twenty-six interviews conducted by students, as well as background about the topic and the project and a brief essay called *"Teaching English via Oral History."*

The Whole World Was Watching: An Oral History of 1968

<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/1968/>

A joint project between South Kingstown High School and Brown University's Scholarly Technology Group in which 10th-grade students interviewed Rhode Islanders about the year 1968. The website contains transcripts, audio recordings, and edited stories from the interviews. *"Their stories, which include references to the Vietnam War, the struggle for Civil Rights, the Assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy as well as many more personal memories are a living history of one of the most tumultuous years in United States history."*

The Stories of the People

<http://www.bland.k12.va.us/bland/rocky/gap.html>

Rocky Gap High School students in Rocky Gap, Va., have interviewed members of their community and posted transcripts to the web. The site is based in the Bland County History Archives, and it includes links to Rocky Gap High School as well as other oral history sites. copyright ©2002.

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/>

Kathryn Walbert holds a Ph.D. in United States History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She directs LEARN NC's efforts to develop instructor-led and self-guided materials for professional development in a range of topics in United States and North Carolina history. She has developed and taught online courses on *"The Civil Rights Movement in Context"* and *"North Carolina American Indians."* She is also the author of several articles for LEARN NC, including a series on using oral history in the K-12 classroom and *"Beyond Black History Month."*

A long-time associate of the Southern Oral History Program, Walbert has been using oral history in her own research and training others in the craft for over ten years. Her doctoral research focused on Southern women, both black and white, who became teachers after the Civil War, and the role of teaching in shaping their identities. From 2001 to 2003, she was an academic skills instructor at Duke University. She now serves as a consultant on U.S. history, oral history, and academic skills to LEARN NC and other organizations

Jean Sweeney Shawver, a teacher of English, photography, and yearbook journalism at Harnett Central High School with 28 years' experience, was a Claude Worthington Benedum

Scholar at Marshall University where she earned her magna cum laude bachelor's degree. She is a nationally certified journalism educator and a National Endowment for the Humanities Seminar Scholar. In addition to various teaching awards, she is a contributor to several civic organizations.

All educators, parents, and interested members of the community are welcome! All of our resources, except for online courses, are free and open to the public

LEARN NC!

<http://beta.learnnc.org/>