

Oral History Center

How to Build a Class Around Oral History

September 2020

For more information on curriculum, see the [Oral History Center website](#).

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How to Do Oral History in the Classroom

Oral history is a popular and immediate way of getting students to engage at a personal level with the past. There is a multitude of oral histories online, including from our collection, as well as guides and resources for how to use oral histories in your classroom. Please consult links here below or on the resources page of the Oral History Association to learn more about working with existing oral history collections.

But what if you want to have students do oral history during a semester-long class, or even a quarter, which is ten weeks? What follows is a set of suggestions for how to plan and organize a ten-week exploration of oral history, which is probably the minimum period of time you would need to actually complete a set of interviews. This plan can then be scaled appropriately to a longer semester-length class, or even a full school year if you want to do this with juniors or seniors in high school.

What Is Oral History?

Oral history is an interviewing process that places the person being interviewed, what we call the “narrator,” at center stage. You’ll notice that in other types of interviews, with journalists for example, the interview is part of the journalist’s larger story. There might be a brief quotation from the interviewee, and the interviewee usually does not have a chance to review what the journalist wrote to verify that the quotation is correct.

The practice of oral history, by contrast, puts the narrator in charge of their part of the project. Interviewer and narrator work together from beginning to end to make sure the recorded story is what the narrator wanted to tell. In other words, the process of working with and doing oral history is itself a process of social-emotional learning, and a model of behavior for young people in a time of relative isolation, misunderstanding, intolerance of difference, and the cultivated mistrust of expertise. Here we’ll outline the steps to take with your students, as well as the pedagogical value oral history can have if you keep some of these questions below in mind.

Oral History as Evidence

A key question worth exploring with your students is about the nature of oral history as evidence. What kind of knowledge is oral history? Does a person’s memory of an event have the same truth value as something that was written down at or near the time the event occurred? Is memory reliable? If so, in what sense? Does one person’s memories stand up to the official story of how an event unfolded? Is each person’s story of equal value?

These questions can be answered by working with the students through examples that are relevant to them. However, what we typically say is that oral history is not about verifying facts. But we would also say that oral history is never just a recorded opinion. Oral history is the recording and interpretation of the facts of a person's memories, life experiences, identity, expertise (in whatever form that might take), and way of understanding the world. A memory may be determined, by researching other historical materials, to be inaccurate, exaggerated, or a complete fabrication. But the fact of the memory is historically significant. Even its deviation from other historical evidence can tell you something about what one person, or even groups of people, thought was important enough to remember and recount in a certain way. The stories we tell each other become an important part of the fabric of our culture, and the variations in stories from person to person reveal the rich texture of human history and teach us to be humble and careful about how we interpret the past.

Time Frame of Oral History Projects

Ideally, give yourself a good amount of time to develop the connections and contacts you will need to set up the right environment to allow the students to hit the ground running. During the class, students will need to learn what oral history is, to choose and connect with prospective narrators, to explore existing oral history projects and transcripts, to learn interviewing techniques and become familiar with the necessary technology, to conduct the interviews, to analyze and interpret the interviews, and to produce one or more final assignments using the interviews. In ten weeks.

Learning Objectives

Informational Text

According to Common Core state standards, 70% of course content must be "informational text," which means non-fiction, primary-source documents, words used in the "real world." With oral history, you get the best of both worlds, a primary-source historical document and a narrative that facilitates student engagement.

Media Literacy

With oral history recordings—either audio or video—you can compare text transcripts with audio/ video, sometimes of the same interview. We have this capability at the Oral History Center with our Oral History Metadata Synchronizer, in which the transcripts are synched with the video of the interview. Another criterion for the Common Core is media

and digital literacy. You'll be able to get students to work with different media and discuss the pros and cons of each. What information is communicated in a video that is difficult or impossible to convey with the printed word? Is working with transcripts easier in some ways than with interview recordings? How can different media be combined to provide compelling secondary narratives?

Social-Emotional Learning — Trust, Listening, Engagement

One of the byproducts of the practice of oral history is learning how to empathize with others—to understand more about backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints that are different from one's own—and how to reach out to and interact with others in a respectful and kind manner. Students learn how to build trust with a stranger from the ground up, and how to retain that trust by being accountable to other people. Perhaps the most important skill is listening. Listening, as you know, can be optional in a classroom, as students can disengage in the quasi-anonymity of a large classroom. With interviewing, you are face to face with someone. Disengagement is not an option. But students also learn that listening is hard, that it is an active process that can require a lot of practice. We at the Oral History Center are still learning to listen.

Course Preparation

Identify willing narrators. Far in advance, you will want to identify a pool of narrators who agree to be interviewed by students. It would be great to tie the oral history project in with a specific set of historical events, or a particular place. One idea is to do a project on the history of the neighborhood where the school is located, or the history of the school the students attend. This can encourage the students to view themselves as part of a larger community, with all of its historical challenges.

Seniors centers, VA halls, and certain rest homes may be good candidates for narrators. Some rest homes specialize in memory work and would appreciate the stimulus that oral history interviewing could provide. Of course, in these times, the COVID-19 pandemic means that social distancing may be of paramount concern. Please see our resources on remote interviewing for more on how to interview safely. A default choice is to have students interview their parents or other relatives. While this is certainly an option, we want to encourage students to interview people with whom they do not already have a relationship. Not only does this promote their social and emotional learning and related skills, it also happens to be best practice in oral history not to interview people with whom the interviewer has a previous relationship.

Pre-Interview

Once you have narrators lined up, have the students reach out to them for a preliminary interview. This is an opportunity to build rapport with the narrators, but it is also where the students will learn what the narrator wants to get out of the experience, what they wish to speak about, what they do not want to talk about, and what kind of background research students will need to do in order to have a productive interview with the narrators. Students should take notes but not record the interview, except to do a test run of a Zoom remote recording, if that platform is being used. This is an interview about the recorded interview to come, so narrators should feel comfortable asking questions and discussing the topics to be discussed in the actual interview.

Consent and Legal Release Forms

One aspect to prepare is some kind of consent form that the narrator reads and signs. The document should contain information about the project and what to expect, and explain that the narrator controls the process until you ask them to sign a legal release transferring copyright to the school so that you use the oral history in a published project, online or otherwise. If you just plan on doing class presentations, legal releases are not necessary. However, it's a good idea to get them done to give you the flexibility in your project and to teach the students about respectful research practices and the responsible stewardship of someone else's words.

All of this advanced preparation is so important. Students should prepare a list of topics to discuss and share them with the narrator in advance. They should also discuss the purpose of the project, the method of recording, what will happen to the recording after it is finished, and if the narrator will receive a copy (they should). This can be part of the consent process. This way, the narrator can feel comfortable about the interview and will be inclined to trust the interviewer more, so that when the recording begins, everyone can relax and feel free to be spontaneous. By the same token, students should not prepare a list of questions to ask. The temptation will be to hide behind them, or just read them aloud in sequence. This is an awkward, strange encounter for the narrator. Are they speaking to the interviewer or to a list of questions? Students should ask spontaneous questions within the bounds of the agreed-upon topics, but should also have a good enough relationship to the narrator to be able to ask a follow-up question on a new subject that the narrators bring up themselves.

Ultimately, the preparation is to ensure the comfort of both narrator and interviewer during the recording. If enough preparation is done in advance, the interview goes

smoothly. And that's an important goal. You want to have unbroken interview with the narrator, with as few interruptions as possible, so that it stands as a raw recording of an interview session. You don't want numerous moments where the narrator says, "Oh, we can edit that out later, right?" or "What were you going to do with this interview again?" Narrators should expect the entire raw recording to be kept together as a piece. If they are unhappy with something they have said, see below, in Transcribing, Archiving, and Project Management.

Interview Setting — Sound and Light

As part of the trust issue, you want your narrator to look as good as possible. Students will need to ask in advance about where the interview will be recorded. A smaller room (smaller than 12 x 15 ft.) with carpet and/or plush surfaces is ideal. A home office or den, even a bedroom, might be best. For safety's sake, if student interviewers are doing the interviews in person, perhaps think about a buddy system where two or more students help with the setup, recording, etc.

Minimize all types of noise (large computer fans, refrigerators, etc.). Ask the narrator to ask other members of the household to be as quiet as possible. Note that people often misunderstand what transmits sound and what doesn't. We want to avoid having people work in a nearby kitchen, flush toilets, or have phone conversations in an adjacent room. It's ideal for other people to be outside of the space altogether. Of course, this is a luxury many of us do not have. We understand that we need to work with what we have, with young ones, family members working from home, or narrators living in institutional settings as part of the mix. Let's just do what is possible to control the sound and the light. Another way to look at it is that background "noise" can be another set of data for future historians to explore, so students should not feel bad at all about not having a totally quiet environment!

Make sure the narrator is well-lit. An incandescent floor or table lamp to one side can be good. Overhead lighting by itself can look bad, like an interrogation room, especially if it casts long shadows on the face. If the camera is facing a window, close the blinds or find another spot if the narrator is too much in silhouette. If students are recording in person, it can be a bit easier to help decide on how things sound and look.

Interview Technology

The most accessible technology students will have is a cellphone, either their own or one they can borrow. (About 3% of students in California do not have access to a smartphone.) If your school has recording devices that can be signed out by students, so

much the better. Students can record either audio or video with a phone. With video, they will need to figure out a way to keep the phone still while recording. Cellphone stands that hold up a phone for video recording are inexpensive, though every additional cost reduces student access to this project. Recording audio only may be the most accessible option. Students can download “PCM Recorder Lite” to their phones (whether Android or iPhone), which allows them to record in high-quality audio. Make sure to point the bottom of the phone toward the narrator, although newer phones have multiple microphones in different locations on the phone. Recording in MP3 is an option using the “Voice Memos” app on every iPhone or its equivalent on Android.

Remote Recording by Zoom

Due to the COVID-19 shelter-in-place, many teachers are already aware of the potential of Zoom. If your school does not have a Zoom account, check here to request that it be added: zoom.us/education. Normally, we would advise that students record their remote interviews using Zoom. We have a set of instructions for Zoom recording. A basic, free Zoom account will allow you to have a video interview, but it will not give you the option of cloud recording, which is what you need to record the interview through Zoom. However, students could follow the same protocols above with their smartphones and just point the bottom of their phone at their computer or tablet screen. There are ways to record with Skype using voice-over-internet-protocol (VOIP) software, but using PCM Recorder Lite on their phones just might be easier.

Finally, it might also be a good idea to bring your tech-savvy students into the conversation. It's likely that quite a few of them are up to date on the latest videoconferencing and recording options, and it's also likely that our advice, no matter how often we update this site, will be out of date.

Our Zoom recording protocols document is under our Related Resources tab, along with a webinar on how to record using Zoom.

Transcribing, Archiving, and Project Management

Due to time limitations, you may only get as far as having the students do the interview, give the narrator a copy, and create some kind of final report on the experience in class. If this is as far as you go, the students do not need to get a legal release, as they will not be published anywhere.

However, you might get more student engagement if there is a semi-permanent home

for the interviews, and if the students can do some interpretive framing work around them. If this is your type of class, and you have the time, read on.

Public vs. Private Project

Now that the students have recorded the interviews, you'll want to do something with them, assuming you have the consent of the narrators in a signed legal release form. However, narrators need to be able to review what they said in order to make changes before the interviews are made public. Some may wish not to have the interviews made public. Others may wish to cut part of the interview out of the public version. That will probably be too complicated to manage for a class. It's probably best to stick with publishing unchanged only those interviews whose narrators are satisfied with the outcome.

How do narrators get to see or hear their interviews in order to judge if they will sign a release or not? One option is to transcribe the interviews, but it might be easier to just send the narrators a copy of the recording for them to review and also keep. So, as part of the legal release process, students send the narrators a copy of the interview. If the narrators are satisfied, they either sign or do not sign the legal release. Some narrators will sign a release at the end of the interview, knowing they didn't say anything they wouldn't wish to be public. Those that do sign the legal release have now granted you a way to make the interviews public.

Transcription

Transcription can be a powerful way to make the interviews more accessible and easier to work with. There are machine transcription services that do a pretty good job of generating a draft that students can correct. Students can then create blog posts, traditional essays, infographics, and other multimedia assignments by drawing quotations from the interviews. Given enough time, students can work in teams to analyze and synthesize themes across multiple interviews.

Web Hosting

You may want to create a website to host the completed interviews. There is some work in organizing such a site. If you have digitally inclined students, you might be able to get them to build the site, or if your school has resources for online projects, make use of them. Again, depending on time and grade level, students can work together to produce original content based on multiple interviews.