Introduction

To paraphrase Studs Terkel, one of America's most famous oral historians, “Oral History is not just the song. It is the singing.” Terkel celebrated the art of oral history and in this curriculum guide we slightly alter that sentiment and explore the oral history of the arts – including music, visual arts, theater, dance, and literature. We are inspired by the oral histories that Experience Music Project and the Science Fiction Museum have conducted for the last 13 years, accumulating over 400 interviews on popular music and science fiction. The lessons in this guide, designed for teaching middle and high school students, go beyond learning about the EMP oral histories to helping students learn oral history methods and give them a chance to reflect on the work of artists and the roles that they play in our culture.

What is Oral History?

Oral History is the oldest form of history telling. Histories were told orally long before they were written down as is evident in the traditions of the African griots or Native American storytellers. In the twentieth century, oral history became well-known through the Federal Writers Project of the late 1930s and early 1940s and its efforts to collect thousands of stories about how ordinary people coped with the Great Depression. Oral history continued to be an important way to capture the histories of often-overlooked populations and to bring diverse perspectives to historical events. In fact, the very act of recording an oral history is a historical event. The person being interviewed might never have had a chance to tell his or her story if it were not for participating in an oral history project.

Students may already have done interviews for a journalism class or a project. You may want to discuss their experience with doing or reading interviews—perhaps they have read magazine or newspaper interviews of artists. Although there is cross-over in interviewing for media and for oral history, it is important to clarify for students that oral history is a more open-ended process than journalism. Oral historians do not emphasize searching out specific information the way journalists often do in order to get their stories and meet their deadlines. An oral historian usually has a focus to his interview, but he should be open to receiving unexpected answers and pre-examines his possible biases if he does have expectations of the interview. Oral history is part of a historical investigation process that lives on beyond a print date. As Donald Ritchie, author of Doing Oral History, explains, “an interview becomes oral history only when it has been recorded, processed in some way, made available in an archives, library, or other repository, or reproduced in relatively verbatim form as a publication….oral historians seek to leave as complete, candid, and reliable a record as possible.”
**Why Use Oral History in your Teaching?**

When students are able to conduct oral history interviews they get a much deeper understanding of history than from just reading about it in a textbook. They get to actually make history by doing interviews. This sense of empowerment can engage the students and further their learning. As well, the anecdotes and personal memories that interviewees tell can help the students feel more connected to history. Perhaps they can relate to the interviewees’ experiences, or the fact that they “know” someone involved in history may draw the students into wanting to learn more.

Oral history is not, however, a perfect historical method. It can raise many issues that are important for students to consider when investigating historical questions. Students can consider the pros and cons of using primary vs. secondary source material. How valid is the information they receive from an interviewee? Is it colored by emotion, time, nostalgia, bias or mis-remembering of information? Students conducting interviews can think about how their relationships to the interviewees might affect the interviews. Realizing what they bring to the oral history interviews helps them focus on when to listen, when to ask questions, and when to comment--important for an interviewer to understand, but important life skills as well. Other skills that are honed in the oral history process include writing and editing as they transcribe the interviews, review the transcripts and use them for other written pieces. As most oral history projects can be extensive class endeavors, taking at least a few weeks, students also practice management of time, materials, technology, and information.

Oral history is a learning process that can cross many disciplines. Where do you think an oral history project can fit into your curriculum? For instance, skills necessary to do oral history are aligned to historical investigation skills used to study history and social studies. In addition, an oral history project can incorporate research, writing, and analysis into an arts class. In fact, depending on the topic and interviewee, the oral history process can inform almost any class subject; students can interview a scientist for a science class or athletes for health and fitness classes.

At the end of an oral history project, students will know that learning is not unique to one information source and that many different people in their lives can be their “teachers.” Students can also see that their work has made a contribution to their community and can be a valuable resource for other students who use their oral histories for research.
Why Interview Artists?

Although there are several good curricula on conducting classroom oral history projects, none of them focus specifically on interviewing the musicians, visual artists, dancers, actors and writers in our communities. In addition to teaching oral history skills, this curriculum addresses the questions of who artists are and what roles they play in our society.

Students may already know about artists who have well-publicized lives and have been interviewed in the media many times, but through an oral history project they can also discover lesser-known or amateur artists in their communities or even their own families. Students can consider what makes someone an artist and what drives him or her to create art whatever form it takes. Interviewing artists will help the students learn about the artists’ lives and their creative processes, and it will also help the students learn more about themselves. Artists often express that making art is intertwined with their identities. Even famous artists can surprise you when you hear or read their interviews by revealing that they too have insecurities and concerns about who they are. Knowing this, students can reflect on their own identities. Meeting and interviewing artists may also shatter some pre-conceptions that students have about artists, while at the same time making them realize that artistic creativity can develop into many different potential career paths.

More on Oral History and Teaching

There are several good resources that clearly express the benefits of teaching with oral history. To delve further into the pedagogical aspects of oral history as well as read about successful oral history projects that teachers have conducted, the following are recommended reading:

Lanman, Barry A. and Wielding, Laura M. Preparing the Next Generation of Oral Historians: An Anthology of Oral History Education. Altamira Press: 2006. This anthology includes articles about teaching oral history from elementary school to the university level. The articles are written by the teachers who conducted the oral history projects and provide both success stories and cautionary tales of approaching oral history in the classroom.

Siler, Carl. R. Oral History in Teaching of U.S. History. ERIC Digest ED393781. www.eric.ed.gov. This brief article on the online Educational Resources Information Center database gives a concise justification of the educational benefits of using oral history. This could be a good resource for a teacher to share with school administration or fellow teachers in gathering support for a school-wide oral history project.

Whitman, Glenn. Dialogue with the Past: Engaging Students and Meeting Standards through Oral History. Altamira Press: 2004: This text written by a history teacher who has successfully incorporated oral history in his teaching for since 1991 offers very practical tips on how to conduct oral history interviews and lists of ways to connect the oral histories to the community. The author also outlines how the oral history process meets education standards and theories such as Multiple Intelligences, Bloom’s Taxonomy and Habits of Mind.

Wood, Linda P. Oral History Projects in Your Classroom. Oral History Association, 2001. This curriculum guide explains how to develop and conduct an oral history project. It provides many useful guidelines and forms the students can use, from a sample letter to a potential interviewee to tips on how to interview and charts for keeping track of the interview equipment. Synopses of oral history student projects are provided throughout the text, which is written in a dense paragraph format not as a lesson plan outline.
EMP|SFM’s Oral History Resources:

In addition to using this online curriculum guide, teachers from around the country have access to a database on EMP|SFM’s website of oral histories collected in the fields of music and science fiction. The interviews are with a wide range of people who involved in these fields, from musicians to business people, writers, filmmakers, visual artists, and even theme-park designers and give a broad perspective on how popular music and science fiction affect our lives.

Teachers who want to learn even more about teaching with oral history can register for an online teacher course which will be comparable to a ten-hour seminar and for which professional development credit is available (to learn more, contact 206.770.2766 or visit www.empsfm.org/education/onlinecourse.asp?courseID=1).

If you are in the Seattle area, don't miss the Oral History exhibition, *Sound and Vision: Artists Tell Their Stories*, opening February 28, 2007. The exhibition will feature excerpts from more than 135 filmed interviews as well as listening stations that feature artists talking about particular songs and a personal history booth where visitors can contribute their own thoughts and experiences to the EMP|SFM collection. Teachers can bring students to experience the exhibition as part of an EMP|SFM school tour by registering online at www.empsfm.org/education/index.asp?categoryID=22. For more information about the EMP|SFM’s Oral History Program go to www.empsfm.org/programs/index.asp?categoryID=60.

Curriculum Units Overview

The three units in this curriculum guide

1. introduce oral history to your students
2. explain how to conduct your own oral histories
3. use the oral histories as a starting point for further cross-disciplinary learning

**Unit 1 –The Artists Speak: Analyzing Their Oral Histories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>What is oral history and why do oral history of artists?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>EMP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Analyzing the EMP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Comparing oral history to other sources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Unit 2 – Your Turn: Doing Oral History of an Artist**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Preparing for practice interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Conducting the practice interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Selecting an artist to interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Determining the interview focus and questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Interviewing equipment and procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Outlining and transcribing the interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Analysis and reflection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Unit 3 – Inspired by Artists: How to Use Oral History**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Reviewing the interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Oral history as inspiration – Mini-lessons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Components of the Units

1. **The Big Questions:**
   Each unit begins with one or two “problems to solve” to present to the students. Finding the solutions to these “problems” gives the students a goal for completing the unit.

2. **Project Description:**
   This provides a short statement about knowledge and skills taught in the lesson and description of the project or performance the students will produce.

3. **Thinking Skills, Learning Goals and Assessment Criteria:**
   The higher-order thinking skills the students engage in are outlined, under which is described the goal of what the student will know or be able to do. The goals are derived from the Washington State Essential Academic Learning Requirements in the areas of reading, communication, social studies, history, and arts. Each EALR is referenced after the goal statement. The EALRs are comparable to the national standards and other state learning standards in these disciplines; if you are a teacher outside Washington State, you can use them as a guide to meeting other standards. (For a compendium of standards go to www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp). Then, coordinated with the goal is an assessment criterion which explains what you can look for in order to know whether the student achieved the goal.

4. **Outline of Instructional Strategies:**
   These step-by-step directions for completing the lessons are broken down by class time. These strategies lead students from warm-up discussion activities to having time to reflect on their work or transfer their understanding to other areas of study. **Teacher Tips** embedded in the Instructional Strategies provide helpful hints or explanations of the intent of the particular step in the unit. **Check for Understanding Points** are also listed in the Instructional Strategies (see Assessments below for more information.)

5. **Further Study:**
   This section offers ways to extend the lesson further or take the skills and understandings learned in the lesson and apply them to another curriculum area.

6. **Workbook:**
   Workbooks accompany Units 1 and 2. In each is a series of worksheets, handouts or guidelines which help step the students through the oral history process.
   - **Worksheets** are activities to guide students to analyze, write reflectively and/or assess their own work and others.
   - **Handouts** provide information or examples that students can use for their projects.
   The particular worksheet, handout or guideline necessary in the lesson is clearly indicated within the instructional strategies.
7. **Assessments:**

There are “Check for Understanding” points at the bottom of certain pages in the workbook. These come at a point when students have completed activities that lead to the achievement of the assessment criteria outlined at the beginning of the lesson. These “Check for Understanding” points can be filled out by each student as a self-assessment, or by a fellow classmate for peer assessment, or by the teacher for points towards a project grade. Each is in a checklist format. If it is an activity that your students are well-practiced at, say text analysis, you can expand the checklist to a rubric that meets your particular class criteria. Assessment criteria for conducting and transcribing of the oral history interview can be found in several of the existing “how to” oral history lesson plans listed in Unit 2. To learn about the Oral History Association’s professional evaluation guidelines, visit [http://alpha.dickinson.edu/oha/pub_eg.html](http://alpha.dickinson.edu/oha/pub_eg.html).

8. **Oral History Teaching Resources Web Page:** The Resources Web page, available at [www.empsfm.org/education/index.asp?categoryID=23&ccID=193](http://www.empsfm.org/education/index.asp?categoryID=23&ccID=193) lists websites with more information about teaching with oral history, sample student oral history projects and resources for contacting artists for conducting oral history interviews. It also lists resources for oral history recording equipment and a bibliography of student literature based on oral histories.