UNIT 1 – The Artists Speak: Analyzing their Oral Histories

The Big Questions:
• What can we learn about a person, a time period, or a culture by listening as the person discusses his or her life?
• What roles do various types of artists play in our society?

Project Description:
Students analyze selected oral history transcripts and videos from EMP|SFM oral history project. They deduce from what they read or hear the focus of the interview, the perspective of the interviewee, and the context in which the interview occurs. They can then relate what they learn from the oral history to conducting an interview of their own.

Sequence of Classes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>What is oral history and why do oral history of artists?</th>
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<td>EM</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Analyzing the EMP</td>
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Thinking Skills, Learning Goals, and Assessment Criteria

The student...

THINKING SKILLS: Examine and Analyze
1. **Goal:** Examines and analyzes how artists have influenced society. *(History 1.3.3)*
   **Assess:** Brainstorms the aspects of an artist's identity and the roles that artists play in our society.

THINKING SKILLS: Comprehend
2. **Goal:** Generates and answers questions about the text before, during and after reading to aid comprehension. *(Reading 2.1.6)*
   **Assess:** Determines the effects of the context of EMP's oral history interview on its content.

THINKING SKILLS: Distinguish and Infer
3. **Goal:** Distinguishes between fact and opinion *(History 3.1.3b)* and analyzes the underlying perspectives, beliefs and/or assumptions. *(Reading 2.4.7)*
   **Assess:** Identifies aspects of EMP oral history interview that are subjective and factual.

THINKING SKILLS: Compare and Analyze
4. **Goal:** Analyzes multiple perspectives of a time period or event *(History 1.1.3b)* between different forms of text. *(Reading 2.3.1, 2.4.6)*
   **Assess:** Describes differences between information gathered through oral history interviews and other methods.
Instructional Strategies


1. Introduce the class to the project of conducting oral history interviews with artists. Begin with brainstorming questions of “Who is an artist?” “What does an artist create?” “How does someone know that he or she is an artist?”

2. Ask follow-up questions such as: “What roles do artists play in our society?”, “What kind of training or education must you have to be an artist?” “Who decides you are an artist?” “Why might you want to be an artist? Why not?” Have students write down their responses and keep them posted during the oral history project so that they can be considered throughout the project and revisited at the end.

3. Ask each student to think about someone he or she knows who is an artist: musician, dancer, actor, visual artist, writer, film-maker etc. This person can be an amateur or professional artist. This person can be someone they know personally or someone they don’t know but have learned about in other ways. Have each student free-write about this person, his or her art and why this person might make art.

4. Now brainstorm with the students “What is oral history?” Record these responses and post along with the responses about artists.

5. With the students make a list of what we can learn about history from oral history that is different than from reading about history in a textbook.

6. Add a column about what we can learn about artists, in particular, from doing oral history interviews.

CLASS TWO – Experience Music Project and Science Fiction Museum’s Oral History Program

1. Introduce the EMP|SFM oral history project [www.empsfm.org/programs/index.asp?categoryID=60](http://www.empsfm.org/programs/index.asp?categoryID=60)

2. Play a video clip from an EMP|SFM oral history of Izzy Young (found at [www.empsfm.org/inc/vidpopup.asp?file=izzyyoung&path=education/curriculum&label=izzyyoung](http://www.empsfm.org/inc/vidpopup.asp?file=izzyyoung&path=education/curriculum&label=izzyyoung)) and then hand out a transcript of the interview and biography of Izzy Young.

3. Ask students their initial impressions of the clip. What one or two things about what this person said struck you? What will you remember about this interview when you think about it later today?

4. You can also discuss with the students the differences between viewing the oral history video and reading the transcript of the oral history. Which was easier for them to understand and why? Did it make a difference to hear someone's tone of voice when speaking as opposed to just reading the words he spoke? This could lead to a discussion about the differences between how one speaks and how one writes and why grammar and punctuation are sometimes used differently in speech and writing.
CLASS THREE – Analyzing the EMP|SFM Oral Histories
1. Play the video clip again, but this time hand out a list of questions for students to consider. Ask students to review questions before watching the video again. They can also review the transcript as they answer the questions. (Check for Understanding Point.)

CLASS FOUR – Comparing Oral History to Other Sources of Information
1. Compare the oral history to another source of information, such as a newspaper article, music critic’s review, or literary account. Students can research other sources on their own, or you can provide them with the one in HANDOUT Unit 1.6: a newspaper report on the Washington Square riots of 1961.

2. Discuss the advantages of learning about the arts from an oral history rather than another account.

3. Optional: You can also have students compare different points of view through oral history accounts of the same subject matter in two interviews that both discuss the effect of AIDS on the arts. Students can read and view Disney songwriter Alan Menken’s reaction to the illness of lyricist and close friend Howard Ashman and compare with Kate Pierson’s account of the death of fellow B-52s band member Ricky Wilson. An extension of this activity could be for the students to research how AIDS has been covered in the media, particularly in the reporting of the deaths of public figures like musicians.

Further Study:
View/listen to/read oral histories of artists in other art forms. (See the Resources website www.empsfm.org/education/index.asp?categoryID=23&cclID=193 for other examples of online artist oral histories.) Look for commonalities across the interviews, such as:
- What are their artistic influences?
- What are the effects of the artists’ education and upbringing on choosing a career in the arts?
- What are the similarities and differences in the artists’ creative processes?
- What drives the artists to continue to create?