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

The Big Questions:
• How does recording and preserving one artist's story in his or her own words help us to learn more about that person's life as well as our own lives?

Project Description:
Students prepare to interview artists for their oral history projects. The students conduct interviews using recording equipment and transcribe the interviews to be archived and used for further learning.

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Thinking Skills, Learning Goals, and Assessment Criteria

The student...

THINKING SKILL: Research
1. Goal: Applies search strategies, locates appropriate and varied information, and distinguishes between primary and secondary sources. *(Social Studies 1.1.2b)*
   Assess: Researches background information for the person s/he will interview.

THINKING SKILL: Reflection and Communication
2. Goal: Selects language that is respectful of others' feelings and rights and adjusts language to the situation. *(Communications 2.1.1)*
   Assess: Reflects on expectations and perceptions about the interview and uses appropriate tone and verbiage for the interview, respecting the interviewee.

THINKING SKILL: Analysis and Response
3. Goal: Listens critically, builds upon ideas of others, and asks clarifying questions *(Social Studies 2.1.3a)* *(Communications 1.1.1, 1.2.1)*
   Assess: Develops interview questions with appropriate follow-up questions.
Instructional Strategies

CLASS ONE – Preparing for Practice Interviews
1. Students prepare for conducting their own oral history interviews of artists by interviewing each other about a favorite activity. Ask each student to select and write down an interview focus: what activity will be discussed in the interview. This activity can be an arts activity or not. It can be playing a sport or a game, creating a craft or collection, or doing anything else that interests a student outside of school.

2. Introduce the sample interview questions. Explain that these questions are derived from EMP|SFM’s actual interviews.

3. Encourage students to customize and re-write the questions to relate specifically to the activity being discussed.

CLASS TWO – Conducting the Practice Interview
1. Have students review their questions. They can trade their questions with a different partner from the person they are going to interview to make sure they are clear.

2. Encourage students to add follow-up questions, not listed on the question sheet, when appropriate.

3. Give the student pairs 20 minutes to conduct the interviews. Let them know that it is not a race to see who can complete the interviews first. Have them conduct the interviews at the pace of a normal conversation.

4. After each student gets a chance to interview and be interviewed, go over the process with them. Discuss what was easy and what was hard? Which questions might they change, delete or add?

5. As a class, develop guidelines for interviewing and some tips that might make the interview go more smoothly the next time.

6. Hand out the “Tips on How to Interview” from the Oral History Association and compare these guidelines to the ones they developed as a class.

CLASS THREE – Selecting an Artist to Interview

Note
This unit is designed for each student to complete an individual oral history with an artist of his or her choosing. If you have limited time or don’t feel your students will be able to individually contact artists to interview, you can follow the guidelines for the Artist Group Interview in which the class interviews one artist together (see appendix).
1. Distribute HANDOUT Unit 2.4 with guidelines for locating an artist and setting up an interview.

2. Encourage the students to find artists that they connect with in some way. Perhaps an artist is:
   - Engaging in an art form they practice or enjoy
   - From a culture they are associated with or interested in
   - Considering a social or political issue that is important to them
   - From their neighborhood
   - Someone they know: a relative, a friend, etc.
   - Working on something they don’t understand and want to know more about.

3. Have students research background information about their artists, if available.

4. Encourage students to use an additional research strategy like creating biographical information questionnaires to send out to the artists in advance of the interviews. Questionnaires can ask for information about where the artist grew up, his/her education, and his/her current work. See HANDOUT Unit 2.5 for sample biographical questions.

5. Discuss with the students the differences between reading a person’s biographical information and asking someone about his biography through a questionnaire. Which do they think will provide the most accurate information?

6. Ask students to journal what their expectations are about meeting and interviewing an artist.

CLASS FOUR – Determining the Interview Focus and Questions
1. Once each student has a) determined interest in an artist; b) researched the artist; and c) examined pre-conceptions about the artist, then have each student determine a focus for the interview. Either present the following list of topics or brainstorm with the class on how an interview can be focused.
   - a specific time period within the artist’s career
   - an event that the artist was involved in such as a concert, exhibition, festival, etc.
   - an issue or cause that is important to the artist
   - influences in their childhood, education, from other artists
   - an era the artist was a part of
   - an artistic movement or culture that the artist was part of
   - how their art form shapes their identity
   - the business of their art
   - advice they would give to someone wanting to pursue this art form
An interview can focus on more than one of the topics above, but probably should not address more than three topics because the interview will take too long. An interview should take about 45 minutes to an hour.

2. Once the focus of the interview has been determined, have each student develop questions that relate to the focus topic. Students can go back to their practice interview questions as a guide.

3. Students can also use the “Types of Questions” form from the Oral History Association to help customize and expand their interview questions.

4. Students should also keep in mind the guidelines for developing good interview questions. (Check for Understanding Point)

CLASS FIVE – Interviewing Equipment and Procedures
There are several existing curricula that offer specific technical information on conducting oral history interviews and using recording equipment. Any of the following www.empsfm.org/education/index.asp?categoryID=23&cclD=193 can walk you through the process. You may want to ask the students to research the different resources and decide on one to use a class or develop their own class guidelines based on various aspects of the resources listed below.

**StoryCorps:**
This project developed by Sound Portraits Productions in collaboration with the Library of Congress and public radio stations nationwide to record personal histories across the country offers a “do-it-yourself” guide to interviewing on its website. Information can also be found about interviewing kits that include equipment that you can rent—your interview can be sent back and stored with the collection in the Library of Congress.

How to Interview: www.storycorps.net/record-your-story/cant-come-to-us/diy-guide
Interview Checklist: www.storycorps.net/record-your-story/cant-come-to-us/diy-guide/checklist
Rent a Story Kit: www.storycorps.net/record-your-story/cant-come-to-us/storykit

**Baylor University Institute for Oral History:**
Introduction to Oral History: This online booklet was written about conducting a professional oral history project, but gives very concise and thorough information about everything from budgeting, ethical and legal considerations, and choosing equipment to interview tips. It also focuses on proper ways to archive and store oral history tapes. This resource would be useful for an extensive school-wide project.
www.baylor.edu/Oral_History
Do History: Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History:
This curriculum is written for classroom teachers. Some of the most helpful aspects are an interview tracking form and the guides to analyzing and refining the interview process.
http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html

The Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide:
The focus of this guide is on interviewing the “tradition-bearers” in a community. The sample questions section may be especially helpful to students interviewing folk artists or artists representing a cultural tradition.
The sample forms provided can also be adapted for this project.
www.folklife.si.edu/resources/pdf/InterviewingGuide.pdf

American Memory Project, Library of Congress:
Provides a concise guide to doing oral history projects and using the resources from the American Memory Project.
http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/oralhist/ohguide.html

Books you can purchase that include clear instructions on how to conduct oral history interviews include:


Teacher Tip:
Understandably, one of the biggest hurdles for conducting an oral history project in your class is getting the necessary equipment. Oral historians agree that having quality recording equipment makes a big difference. Find the list of necessary equipment and the list of companies that provide grants or in-kind equipment donations to schools at www.empsfm.org/education/index.asp?categoryID=23&ccID=193.
CLASS SIX – Outlining and Transcribing the Interview

1. Once the oral history interviews have been recorded, students can decide how they would like to transcribe them. Probably the most feasible option is for each student to listen to his/her interview several times and select a 3-4 minute passage to transcribe.

2. To select the best passage for transcription, first have each student write a brief outline of his/her interview. In the outline, note the discussion topic every five minutes in the interview.

3. After the students have completed the outlines, ask each one to review the focus of his/her interview and select which passage best addresses the focus.

4. The general rule for transcribing is that 2 minutes of interview equals 1 page of typed transcript (single-spaced). A four-minute passage of recorded interview will take the average typist about 15 to 25 minutes to type. To make transcription most simple, students should wear headphones and be able to stop and start the recordings.

5. Have each student give his/her transcription draft to a fellow student and ask that student to review and comment on it. Are there any areas that are unclear? Or if there were parts of the recording that were difficult for the transcriber to understand, can the other student make them out?

CLASS SEVEN – Analysis and Reflection

1. Ask each student to trade his/her transcribed interview with a different classmate this time. This classmate should review the interview for points where s/he feels the information may need to be verified. For example, is there a different account of the same situation or event? If the information from the interviewee is different, how would you present it as such?

2. Ask each student to comment on the fellow student's interview transcription.

Teacher Tip:
Check out the section “Books based on Oral Histories” on the Resources web page to see how authors have dealt with this issue.

WORKSHEET UNIT 2.9
CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING POINT
Further Study:

- Focus on how we learn from asking questions, also called “Inquiry-based learning.” You can discuss how questions can lead to more questions and encourage us to think deeper about a subject. “Generative questioning” or questions can challenge our beliefs and assumptions and encourage us to broaden our thinking, as in the “Socratic method” of teaching. For an online workshop about Inquiry-based learning and teaching, check out http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/inquiry/index.html.

- Compare how one asks questions in the study of history or other social sciences and how one asks questions in the “hard sciences.” Often in the arts, questions are raised but not answered. Ask students to discuss if they feel that is okay. Do they feel comfortable or uncomfortable with asking questions that may not have clear answers?
Appendix: Guidelines for a Shorter Oral History Project

Class Interview of One Artist

1. The teacher uses the list of artists to contact in the Resources section to find what local artists might be available to interview.

2. The teacher presents the list of artists with their bios to the students. Discuss with them that you would like to invite one of these artists to the class for an oral history interview. Ask the students what kind of artist they would like to interview. What kind of artist might they personally connect with? Some things to consider may include whether the artist:
   • Works in an art form the students practice or enjoy
   • Is from a culture the students are associated with or interested in
   • Deals with a social, political issue that is important to the students
   • Is from the students’ community
   • Creates work that is confusing to the students and that they want to know more about.

3. Since students will probably not agree on which artist to invite, encourage them to come to consensus by way of a vote or some other method. They can also select a second and third choice in case their first choice is not available.

4. Invite the artist to your classroom for the oral history project. Review step 3 in the HANDOUT Unit 2.4 for suggestions on how to contact an artist and invite him or her to be interviewed.

5. Have students prepare the questions (see Unit 2: Class Four), and assign each student 2-3 questions to ask.

6. Have students review their questions and develop 1-2 possible follow-up questions each. Explain to students that they can use these questions as guides, but they really need to be listening to the responses to their initial questions and then be able to ask an appropriate follow-up question based on what they hear.

7. After the interview has occurred and is recorded, make several copies of the recorded interview on disc for students to check out and listen to. Each student is then responsible for transcribing the questions they asked and the artist’s responses. See the Instructional Strategies for Class Six on how to transcribe the interview.