UNIT 3 – Inspired by Artists: Using Oral History

The Big Questions:
• How can learning about the lives of artists from the artists themselves inspire our creativity?
• How does what we learn from artists encourage us to learn more in other areas of study?

Project Description:
Students use their completed oral histories of artists as inspirations for their own creative responses and/or further study.

Sequence of Classes:

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Thinking Skills, Learning Goals, and Assessment Criteria

The student…

THINKING SKILLS: Creation and presentation
1. Goal: Creates a product that uses social studies content to support a thesis and presentation in an appropriate manner to a meaningful audience. (*Social Studies 1.1.3f*)
   Assess: Develops a presentation showing the historical context of the oral history interview using various media.

THINKING SKILLS: Transfer and creation
2. Goal: Develops an arts presentation integrating the arts with other content areas (*Arts 4.1.3*)
   Assess: Creates a work of visual art or music that reflects issues of identity and making art.

THINKING SKILLS: Application and extension of knowledge
3. Goal: Generalizes or extends information beyond the text to a broader idea or concept. (*Reading 2.4.5*)
   Assess: Uses the oral history text to develop a theatrical work that extrapolates from the interview information to present issues addressed in the interview.

THINKING SKILLS: Research
4. Goal: Analyzes sources of information appropriate to a specific topic or for a specific purpose. (*Reading 2.3.2*)
   Assess: Applies understanding of oral history to develop biographical writing and literature analysis.


**Instructional Strategies**

**CLASS ONE – Reviewing the Interviews**

1. Have students spend time analyzing the interviews they conducted as they studied EMP|SFM’s interviews in Unit 1. Students can then work in small groups to share their analyses with one another.

2. Reviewing the interview outline and transcript, the students can use the questions from Unit 1 to analyze their own work.

3. As a class, discuss if there are things they would do similarly or differently in another oral history interview.

4. Also have the students revisit their thoughts on “Who is an artist?” and “What is oral history?” that they wrote down on the WORKSHEET Unit 1.1 and WORKSHEET Unit 1:3.

5. Discuss with the class if anyone’s opinions about artists or oral history have changed now that they have been through the process of conducting an oral history project. What made them change their minds?

6. You can also discuss as a class whether they liked learning about artists and history through oral history. For which students is talking to someone a more engaging way to learn history than reading about it? For which students was learning through oral history not as interesting as other ways to learn? Validate all the students’ different learning styles.

7. After their analysis of their own interviews, students can apply what they have learned to creating another project inspired by the oral history. (*See lesson ideas below.*)
CLASS TWO – Oral History as Inspiration

Below are mini-lessons for a range of subject areas. Each lesson uses the students’ oral history interview to initiate the learning process. Each project could take about one week of class time.

Music:
1. Artists are often inspired by other artists. How could the artist you interview inspire you?
2. Have the students review the interview outline and transcript of the artist they interviewed (or they could choose an artist that another classmate interviewed.) What one or two themes can you relate to in your own life?
3. Ask students to compose a song based on these themes.
4. The following EMP|SFM lesson plans can help to introduce song elements and lyric writing:
   - Elements of a Song: Name that Term:
     http://www.emplive.org/documents/education/NameThatTerm_lesson.pdf
   - What Lyrics Say:
5. If the student interviewed a musician, listen to and read the lyrics to one of the musician’s songs. Compare what you learned from the lyrics to what you learned about this person through his or her oral history interview.

History:
1. Use the oral history as a basis for an exhibition of the work of the artist. Ask the students to think about how they can take the transcribed text of the interview and make it three-dimensional. That is, what objects or artifacts can explain the artist’s life and work?
2. Present the students with the criteria that their presentations need to include a variety of media: auditory, visual, written, and tangible.
3. The presentations can be exhibited in the classroom or throughout the school and parents and other classes can be invited to view the exhibition.
4. Students can also prepare their presentations for History Day. More information on History Day is available at www.nationalhistoryday.org.
**Visual Arts:**

1. Artists often discuss the close relationship between their identity and their art form. Making their art is not just a job; it is integral to who they are.
2. Inspired by the artists’ discussions of identity, ask the students to think about different aspects of their own identity. Start with a pre-writing or concept-mapping exercise to have the students outline the all the pieces that make up who they are.
3. Offer the students materials to create identity collages. Collage materials can range from magazine cut-outs, to found objects, to their own drawings or writing. Have them choose materials that are representational or symbolic of different parts of their lives—for example, different roles that they play at school or at home or different interests that they have.
4. Students can also make similar collages about the life of the artist they interviewed based on what they learned from speaking with him or her.
5. Ask students to reflect on the similarities and differences between the collages of their identities and the collages they made of the artists.

**Theater:**

1. Ask students to read through the transcript or listen to the oral history interview and select a passage in which the interviewee talks about a memorable event or occurrence. Perhaps it was a visual artist’s first exhibition or a musician’s first live performance.
2. Have the student choose a partner. The two students can work together to develop a role-play of what might have happened on this occasion.
3. Students can write dialogue that might have occurred, taking into consideration aspects of the artist's personality that they learned about while interviewing the artist.
4. In developing these short scenes, or vignettes, students script out the story to a clear beginning, middle and end.
5. Each pair of students can take turns working on each other’s scenes, and then groups can perform for the class.
6. Students can peer-assess the performances using a rubric measuring the story development, the characterization, and dialogue.
7. Peer critiques can include a discussion of whether there was more information needed to flesh out the scene and where the students could do research for further information.
Writing/Literature:

1. Biographies often begin from oral history interviews. The information that the students learn from their oral history interview with the artist in addition to any other information researched can be the basis for a biographical essay.

2. To write a short biographical piece, the following writing prompts can be helpful:
   a. “What was it like when..?” – This could be a good place to start when writing about an artist who is concerned with preserving a cultural tradition.
   b. “Where were you when it happened?” This can be used when writing about an artist who discusses a major event that affected him/her personally and/or in his/her artistic career.
   c. Choose a voice – Have students experiment with writing the biography in first person and third person. First person voice is the way oral histories are usually presented in writing. However, a problem arises when there is clarifying information that needs to be added for the reader. What are the advantages and disadvantages of writing a biography in first vs. third person? Have students write passages in first and third person and compare which way seems more compelling for the reader.

3. Students can also read biographies of artists based on oral history interviews and analyze how the author handled the issue of voice, as well as clarifying information or correcting misinformation. Also, how does the author’s involvement in the biography affect the reading? Does the author put him or herself into the narrative or is s/he an omniscient narrator? (See the Resources section for list of biographies based on oral history interviews.)

Further Study:

• An oral history project can be a great catalyst for developing a cross-disciplinary project. If you are able to work with a team of teachers, each team member could lead students in oral history projects and then develop a follow-up project in a different curricular area. A display of all the different projects together could lead to great school-wide discussions about the role of artists in our society and the importance of learning about history from multiple sources and perspectives.