

A DESIGN FOR FACILITATING INTERGENERATIONAL INTERVIEWS USING U.S. HISTORY

In autumn 2007, Monica Gorman, a high school teacher at Westview High School in Beaverton, Oregon, contacted Jane McDowell, the administrator of a nearby retirement community (Claremont), to discuss intergenerational interviews about the Great Depression and World War II. The interviews would be between juniors studying U.S. history and Claremont residents. As her school district's coordinator for the Portland State University (PSU) Teaching American History program, Gorman was inspired by the ideas of Karin Magaldi, a dramaturge at PSU's School of Fine Arts. Magaldi stressed the power of engaging students in collecting and then enacting oral histories. Gorman wanted to test this idea with her students.

Claremont, a 55-and-over golf community, has 556 homes and 900 residents with an average age of 72. It seemed the perfect connection to Gorman. Claremont provides independent "resort" living. Westview High School's diverse population (2700 students; 40% Asian and Latino; 25% on free and reduced lunch) provided an interesting counterpoint. McDowell enthusiastically agreed with the concept. She e-mailed residents, inviting them to share personal stories with the teens. Many responded promptly; others learned about the project by word of mouth and signed up later. Eventually, 20 residents volunteered to be interviewed about the Great Depression, and 32 pledged to share their WWII experiences.

Gorman wanted to engage her students personally in discovering and writing history. For this project, she wanted her students to go beyond interviewing older relatives. She wanted them to work in groups to interview one adult, discuss what they heard, explore its meanings, and together create a drama to convey the historical richness of what they heard. Together, they could compare and contrast the stories of their interviewee with the history in textbooks, videos, and encyclopedias. In this way, they would not just consume historical writing, but would write it themselves. Gorman also hoped her students would explore the power—and dilemma—of taking a stance in writing history as they compared interviewee stories with other historical sources.

As Katherine Scott Sturdevant writes in *Bringing Your Family History to Life through Social History*: "For the parties involved, an oral history interview is often an intense memorable moment of bonding and coming to greater mutual empathy and respect...an oral history interview can be a life-changing event for all concerned."¹ Gorman and McDowell were hoping for a life-changing event!

FIRST INTERVIEW: THE GREAT DEPRESSION

In October, 2007 Gorman's class walked to Claremont to interview "children" of the Great Depression, now in their 80s. McDowell arranged the meeting room for a panel discussion, to help seniors support each other's memories of the 1930s. Students took turns posing questions for panelists to answer.

¹ Sturdevant, Katherine Scott. *Bringing Your Family History to Life through Social History*, (Cincinnati, OH: Betterway Books, 2000), p. 124.

One senior described the value of a nickel in the Depression: it would buy “the biggest ice cream cone you’ve ever seen, or a great big bag of candy, or a comic book!”

“How much was rent back then?” one student asked. Seniors looked at each other, puzzled. None of them knew anyone who rented a home in the 1930s, though a few knew of sharecroppers. Everyone else owned their homes.

Seniors didn’t focus on deprivation as much as on other aspects of daily life. One described selling newspapers for a quarter a week—and confirmed that he got to keep his quarter rather than contributing it toward household expenses.

Early in the interview, one interviewee eased concerns and uneasiness in both groups by establishing an atmosphere of mutual respect. A student asked, “Do you think that my generation has gotten too much without working for it, that we don’t know the value of money, and that too many things have been given to us?” A pleasant retired history professor responded: “No generation can judge another. My generation went through things that you can’t imagine, in terms of deprivation, ‘making do,’ and struggling to make ends meet. In turn, your generation faces things that *we* can’t imagine. Your world is more dangerous and stressful in its own right. We can’t grasp the concerns and fears you face. We cannot judge what you are dealing with. The best we can all do is to value the experiences of the other generation and assume that all of us did or are doing the best we can under the circumstances in which we live.”

As he spoke, students began smiling, and the seniors began nodding in agreement with him. Magic was occurring.

Now the students were ready to talk to the elders! They were hungry for connections and personal stories. The history professor had “leveled the playing field” with his comment, something that all intergenerational interview project coordinators should consider doing in order to invite equality, comfort and honesty into the conversation.

The questions posed to the panel seemed directed at confirming textbook information, more than collecting individual experience. That later changed, and the students became more engaged during the interviews of individuals, which followed the panel discussion.

After the first twenty minutes, students divided into groups of three or four. Each group sat at a table with a senior interviewee. Seniors shared photographs from the 1930s. They spoke of feeding hobos, growing vegetables, and eating meals lower in meats and higher in vegetables, and of using homemade bread as filler, since few could regularly afford meat.

After the interviews, students and residents mingled together and enjoyed light refreshments provided by the students.

Gorman observed that even her most reluctant, disengaged learners participated in the interviews with total focus and impeccable courtesy. Talking to seniors was profoundly different from regular school.

Back in class, Gorman’s students wrote about their experiences. In their writing, Gorman found that students linked the stories of the seniors effortlessly to text discussions of Depression era life

and to videos of the Depression they had seen in class. They wrote with passion and excitement—and deep personal conviction.

Meanwhile, the seniors told McDowell how enjoyable the interviews had been and expressed their interest in participating in the next interview.

SECOND INTERVIEW: WORLD WAR II

Students arrived at Claremont for the World War II interviews on a wet, chilly December morning and were welcomed by Big Band music. Most Claremont participants had served in the Armed Forces or worked stateside during this era. The War had taught them about sacrifice and about dedicating their efforts to something larger. The group fit anchorman/author Tom Brokaw’s definition of “The Greatest Generation.”

First, a former USO singer addressed the whole group. [photo available—of her during WWII] Then teams of students joined seniors at tables. Students heard stories about living in London during the bombings; losing friends and brothers; managing a household and earning a wage while a husband served; fighting on Iwo Jima; performing in an all-girl jazz band; and women drawing “seams” on their legs when they couldn’t buy nylon stockings.

These interviews were based on personal experience much more than the Great Depression interviews had been. The seniors were young adults during WWII; that era has been central to their lives, no matter what their role in it. In these second interviews, the students’ questions enriched textbook information with personal experience—they had “gotten” the point of oral history interviews.

Refreshments were homemade WWII cookies based on rationing recipes, prepared by seniors. Students were amazed that, even when sugar, butter, eggs and other ingredients were in short supply, families found ways to bake tasty treats. The seniors’ extra effort touched the teens.

Seniors reported their thoughtful responses to student questions about the internment of Japanese residents. Clearly, students had been listening when a classroom guest speaker had spoken about spending a few childhood years in a camp in Idaho. Some Claremonters had lost friends and neighbors to internment camps. One spoke of the fear of German-Americans on the East Coast, that they too would be rounded up—even as they felt safer because they, as Caucasians, were not as easy to identify visually as the Japanese were. Seniors also told McDowell about the students’ interest in their personal opinions and analysis. In the first interview, some questions seemed directed at confirming textbook information. The seniors noticed the deeper thought that students had put into their WWII questions.

PRODUCTS AND RESPONSES

Creative Dramas: Following the two interviews, Gorman asked her student groups to create plays based on the histories they’d heard. For two weeks, students worked in groups to do background research for their plays. Gorman worried that she was asking too much of her students. Some groups struggled. They met outside of class, so Gorman couldn’t monitor the progress or quality of their work. One of the two classes seemed unfocused and nervous; these students struggled generally in school. Some groups seemed to have nothing to practice and

talked vaguely about plans. Gorman decided to trust the students, especially since most researched intensely in the computer lab and appeared well focused during class. After all, the classes had invited seniors to their school to watch their creative dramas.

Nevertheless, this was a worrisome project for Gorman. She had never pulled off anything this sophisticated with students. Would students skip school that day? Would they present the historical material with respect and sensitivity? Gorman wondered if her students would rise to the challenge, or if she had set herself and her students up for disaster.

The dramas were performed in two adjacent classrooms. Each senior received evaluation forms that invited comments about each drama, as well as suggestions and compliments for the students. They were asked to be gentle with their feedback—creative drama was new to these students and they might get facts wrong, or misrepresent history.

Students arrived and immediately grouped together to set up. They greeted the seniors with shy smiles, and then focused on the performances ahead. Then they presented their dramas, one by one, with uncharacteristic focus and seriousness. They acted their plays with professionalism and heart. Gorman watched, transfixed by their maturity and eagerness.

After the dramas, chips and cookies were enjoyed as the students mingled with the seniors, conversing in happy tones.

Without exception, the seniors told Gorman how deeply the presentations touched them. Several took her hand, with heartfelt thanks for helping the students learn their stories—and inviting the students back to Claremont as often as possible for more interviews.

Evaluation comments included “What is amazing is how accurate they were;” “Your students did an amazing job of recreating history;” “It was deeply moving!” “Your students were so mature. They did a lot of research.” Monica was as surprised as the seniors were at the quality of her students’ work. They had cared deeply about what they produced, not because of the grade but because they were using stories from the lives of the adults in the audience.

Student after student surprised Gorman. One boy came out of character at the end of his group’s presentation on Pearl Harbor to thank those in the audience who had been in the Armed Forces. He explained that he had a cousin in Iraq and added that he now understood the depth of that generosity. Another group’s play detailed the life of an adult who was a child in London during the bombings of WWII. In the classes leading up to the presentation, students focused totally on their skits and on researching the relevant history—this, despite this class’s struggle to turn work in and remain engaged.

One group presented the seniors with a scrapbook instead of doing a drama. Photos taken during the interviews were intermingled with quotes from student essays and from interviewees, clipart of 1930s and 40s items and more. The scrapbook became another testimony to the profound influence the interviews had on students’ historical thinking. These students wanted to showcase the stories they heard and their fellow classmates’ reactions to them. They prepared a lovely and meaningful memento demonstrating their learning.

After their presentations, they were extremely proud of their accomplishments. One girl, who normally struggled in school, told Monica, “I found this project extremely inspiring. I really wanted to do my part for my group and for our guests. It made history come alive to me so much more than if we had studied from a textbook. And I felt so much more responsible for getting more work done than I normally do. It really helped me do well in class.” A top student stayed one day after class and waited till the others had filed out. “I wanted to tell you how important it is that you continue doing this projects for all your students, every year,” she said, her eyes filling with tears. “It was one of the most powerful experiences I have ever had in a class. It was really amazing.”

Gorman later said, “I hadn’t realized how cynical I had become. Students crave connection and meaning. Presenting these dramas transformed my students into gift-givers and meaning-makers. I was dazzled by my students—moved to tears of pride by all of them.”

THIRD INTERVIEW: VIETNAM/CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

In May, 2007 students returned for a third round of interviews, this time with younger Claremont residents (in their 50s and 60s). Although students had heard that the Vietnam era was too painful as an interview topic, McDowell assured Gorman that many seniors were eager to explore lessons learned.

Students interviewed men who had been in Vietnam command positions, and a mother who sent her son to Canada to avoid the draft. Some had participated in civil rights battles, women’s liberation, and the hippie movement. Many talked about 60s music. Students and seniors bonded strongly this time, since the era felt recent to the students—many had seen *Forrest Gump*. Some students’ parents and grandparents had participated in the war or taken stands for or against it.

Gorman coupled this visit with a tour of the Portland Vietnam memorial so that students could compare it to memorials in other cities that had been studied. They compared and contrasted the ways in which various cities interpreted and memorialized the event. Students wrote biographical sketches of their interviewees. Gorman collected these into a book and gave it to Claremont. Again, students displayed great earnestness and pride in preparing their essays, because they knew the seniors would receive them.

THE ADMINISTRATOR’S PERSPECTIVE

McDowell made the seniors comfortable by providing a framework in advance: (1) how long the interviews would last; (2) how many students would be interviewing each homeowner (a ballpark number of “two to six” was acceptable); (3) what sort of subjects might come up; and (4) whether they should plan to stay and visit with the students after the interviews.

After the first interview, the seniors’ enthusiasm grew and they looked forward to the next interview. One advantage of holding the interviews at Claremont instead of at the school: soldiers could bring armaments and weapons to show the students—which would not have been permitted on school grounds. Interviewees brought other memorabilia that they might have been reluctant to take to a large school for fear of losing it.

Gathering interviewees to visit the school after the second interview was easy. When the date was set, many adjusted their schedules to attend. They looked forward to seeing “their” students again and went with the expectation of being entertained by the creative dramas. They were honest, but not cruel in their evaluations.

The seniors thoroughly enjoyed their time with the students. They, too, welcomed the intergenerational conversations and were inspired by the opportunity to influence a student’s learning and understanding of the times the seniors had lived through.

McDowell was fascinated by Claremonters’ interactions with students. She saw a kindness and approachability that was not always evident when they were among their peers. They were genuinely interested in the students’ thoughts about the interviews and their answers. They were eager to attend the creative dramas, and thought the plays were a wonderful product. It was heartening to see how ready the seniors were to accept the students as they were and to do whatever they could to encourage an interest in history.

THE TEACHER’S PERSPECTIVE

From this experience, students learned a lot about the complexity of history. They realized that there is no one correct perspective or answer to the big questions of history. Students loved comparing notes about the varied perspectives they’d heard in the interviews. Clearly, the dry, distant presentation of historical facts often in textbooks and classroom activities had introduced only one dimension of our history. They were learning, as Sam Wineburg said, that “historical thinking...is neither a natural process nor something that springs automatically from psychological development”² because the doing of history cannot provide us with definitive answers. Instead, when we hear multiple perspectives, we gain wisdom about the human struggle and respect for multiple ways of seeing the past. Ultimately, the students learned there is no final answer about the events of the Depression and World War II.

According to educational psychologist Jerome Bruner, the narrative story is essential to good history teaching. It helps students make meaning of the world, both past and present. Bruner encourages the exploration of local stories as being particularly meaningful to students. He also argues that students do not reach the same levels of reasoning about history at the same time. By interviewing, therefore, students of all levels explore history on both a personal and an analytical level. In their groups, students learn from and support each other in trying to piece together powerful personal stories and applying them to our collective national story.³

Students appreciate hearing stories of people who otherwise are absent from the history taught in school. History involves all our stories, yet students have been trained, however unintentionally, to think of history as something “out there,” involving big players and important people, not something of which we are all a part. People’s lives are involved. Bigger events provide people with opportunities to rely on their neighbors, look after each other, take stands on current events, and participate in the decisions of our government and public reactions to those decisions.

² Wineburg, Sam. *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Temple University Press, 2001).

³ Jerome Bruner, *The Culture of Education*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

Historian William McNeill writes that “history got into the classroom to make nations out of peasants, out of localities, out of the human raw material that existed in the countries of Europe and in the not so very old United States as well.”⁴ Students participating in this activity learned about the powerful forces of history, and learned that people in small towns and big cities throughout the U.S. shaped the Depression and World War II, even as they were shaped by it.

The ultimate reward of this project was that students formed connections with warm, welcoming older adults, an opportunity that many do not experience enough. Often, students’ extended families live far away. Many teenagers have little contact with senior citizens. Students showed respectful behavior and good manners, standing aside for adults, smiling, shaking hands. The seniors responded appropriately, treating the students courteously and as responsible people. The connections were quick and sincere.

These teens cared about history because the Claremont adults couldn’t wait to share their stories with them. Students wanted to be respectful and generous in return. This learning had deep meaning for them.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Key points helped the project along. Some of the following are the responsibility of the coordinators, the teacher and administrator. Others can only be done by the participants themselves.

- **Share mutual interest in oral interview and living history.** Gorman and McDowell enjoy oral interviews and living history—both were keen on this project. Both believed in the value of intergenerational activities. Mutual enthusiasm made it easy to promote the idea and generate interest. Regular phone calls and e-mails helped with logistics and details. Other keys to success were:
- **Keep all promotion upbeat and positive.** It is important to present the interviews as an opportunity to interact with another generation. Promotion should reflect the coordinators’ enthusiasm and should encourage enthusiasm from participants.
- **Prepare each in advance, so that both groups know what to expect.** Claremont residents were more willing to participate if they knew the length of the interviews, the format (how many students would interview each individual), the expected topics, whether memorabilia was allowed, and who would be in charge of getting the interviews rolling. The students, with their teacher’s guidance, developed questions in advance and worked within study groups. Their teacher ensured that they would be respectful and courteous.
- **Establish mutual respect.** It is critical for both groups to know that they will be treated with respect by the other. If the students think that they will be “lectured” on the ease of their lives and their access to material goods, they may be reluctant to participate. If the elders think that the students are “going through the motions,” without genuine interest, they may limit their responses and avoid becoming engaged by the process.

⁴ William H. McNeill, “Why Study History? Three Historians Respond,” in *Historical Literacy: The Case for History in American Education*, ed. Paul Gagnon and the Bradley Commission on History in Schools (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 103.

- **Allow the participants to guide and manage the interviews, to maximize their involvement.** After the groundwork is laid and the plan is in place, the coordinators' role diminishes during the interviews themselves. Monica and Jane walked around and observed the interviews in process (finding that a delightful time), but did not interrupt any of the conversations. Students enjoyed this opportunity to be part of the larger community—something they crave. Learning is often more about sitting still, listening, and repeating back through tests and assignments what the teacher wants. This opportunity allowed students to guide the learning. They developed and asked the questions. They continued the conversation. In follow-up classes, they decided what was relevant in their write-ups. Gorman found her job to be that of coach and inspirer. McDowell found her role to be first, a facilitator, and then post-interview, a sounding board. As soon as seniors knew the framework, they took it from there, eager to share their experiences with a younger generation. They needed no further guidance or encouragement. **They did want to discuss the experience with someone after the interview—to express their own learnings and reactions.**
- **Allow the students to select someone to interview.** Students proved to be interested in different aspects of seniors' experiences. Allowing the study groups to select their interviewee created good matches. The choice was less important in the Depression interviews, as all the seniors had been children. For WWII interviews, student selection was key. Some were interested in soldiers' stories, while others wanted to learn how people coped at home, or what the life of an entertainer was like. Soldiers and "Homefronts" stood on different sides of the room and students approached them. Coordinators made sure that each interviewee had students to talk with. Students became quite cognizant about how important this history was to the seniors they interviewed, as they gladly spread out among tables to begin the interviews. Every senior had two or three students interviewing him or her.

Jane McDowell and Monica Gorman, 2008.