

Oral History: Learning About History Through First Account Narratives

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Overview

Oral history is a way to learn about history by talking to people who lived through a particular period in time. With this lesson unit, you promote learning about history and civic ideals during the Jim Crow and civil rights eras so that young social scientists can consider not only the historical relevance of the times, but also their commitment to form a more perfect union and just citizenry.

Taking their name from the Tuskegee Institute, the Tuskegee Airmen, also known as the Black Birdmen and the Red Tails, were the first African-American pilots in the United States military. Preceded by other African-American pioneers in flight, they helped to "lift the veil of ignorance" from mainstream society.

The Lesson

Anticipatory Set

1. Engage students in a class discussion by asking them the following questions:
 - What does the term Civil Rights Movement mean to you? What images does it evoke in your mind?
 - Do you know anyone who remembers the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s?
 - Were they excited by the changes that came with the movement?
 - Do you know whether someone in your family remembers watching Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., or the events of Bloody Sunday on television? Did someone in the family protest or demonstrate?
 - Do you know people who were angered or frightened by the changes that came with the Civil Rights Movement?
 - What were the most vivid memories of individuals who lived through these times?
2. Have the students read any of the **first account narratives** on the site.

Procedures

1. Determine if students will work alone or with a friend to conduct interviews, ideally several interviews, keeping in mind that they may need to contact interviewees after school or on weekends.
2. Encourage students to identify potential interviewees, perhaps a family member or neighbor, who lived during the 1950s and 1960s Civil Rights Movement. To balance the range of possible backgrounds, have students select individuals who may provide different perspectives because of ethnicity, sex, age, where they lived during this time, etc. of background.
3. Determine if students need practice conducting an oral history interview. If so, plan one for the classroom as a model of "how to do an oral history." Then, invite a guest for the whole class or a small group of students to be interviewed. This eliminates initial transportation and equipment problems and provides pupils with practice before they interview on their own.

4. Have students identify questions for the interviewee and submit queries ahead of time for reflection. They can also present additional questions at the interview. Remember, the best questions are open-ended ones. Also, make sure students keep questions to a manageable number.
5. Determine how students will document the information from the interview--tape recorder, note taking, video, or all three. If students use a tape recorder, determine who will transcribe the tape. Remember, too, that youngsters will find a tripod useful for videotaping.
6. Before students begin their own interviews in the neighborhood, at family gatherings, etc., determine how they will share their findings with peers, so they can identify emerging patterns from the interviews, and a larger audience.
7. Have students assemble all equipment before their interviews: notebook, pencils, tape recorder, tapes, extension cord, batteries, and video, if desired. An external microphone is always preferable for clarity. Make sure students have organized questions ahead of time--they also can include spontaneous queries--and have practiced operating the equipment.
8. You may have students begin with sample interview questions, such as:
 - How old were you during the 1960s?
 - Where did you live?
 - What is the earliest thing you remember about the Civil Rights Movement?
 - What events do you remember as most important to you?
 - What do you remember hearing about segregated schools? Did you attend one?
 - Did you participate in the Civil Rights Movement by marching, by writing letters, or in any other way? What did you do?
 - Did you know anyone else who participated in the Civil Rights Movement? What do you remember about them?
 - Did the Movement alter how you view segregation? In what way(s)?
 - As you reflect on desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement, what positive impact do you believe this had on our country?
 - What things do we still need to do to promote freedom, social justice, equality, and human possibility in our nation?
9. Be sure you keep your students' maturity in mind when planning this task. Your goal is to help them develop a greater understanding of the Civil Rights Movement and conduct research like social scientists, so you may need to tailor the above suggestions to your class.
10. As students edit their interviews into final form, encourage them to include the most interesting parts of the interview and not necessarily every word from their findings.
11. Finally, find interesting ways to celebrate pupils' oral research. You may compile interviews in book format for the school library or write an article for the school or town newspaper or a television story about pupil findings. Or, why not plan a "Read Aloud" of students' oral history interviews and children's books about the Movement with parents and peers. Or, you may have other ideas to enhance pupils' appreciation for this important time in our history.