



ORAL HISTORY LESSON PLAN

Middle School; Grades 6-8

Related Museum Programs: All

BIG IDEA: Oral history is a tool for learning about people, places, and events.

DESCRIPTION: Students explore how historians use oral histories to understand events, people, and places from the past. They listen to two oral histories given by individuals who immigrated to the United States around the turn of century and conduct a critical analysis of the interviews in order to better understand the experiences described. Students are encouraged to make connections between the experiences described in the oral histories and their own lives.

OBJECTIVES: Students will:

- Understand that oral history is a way of gathering detailed information that helps us understand a specific time, place, person, or event.
- Connect past and present experiences.
- Understand that perspectives of events change over time.
- Understand that all of us have important stories to tell and perspectives to share.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- How do historians learn about the past?
- How can the past inform our understanding about the present?
- How can one's understanding of an event change over time?

TIME FRAME: 1-3 class periods. This activity has been designed to be customized to your learning goals and your students' individual needs. Choose to do the complete lesson plan or select parts with your students based on your schedule and objectives.

MATERIALS:

- Recordings of Morris Abraham Schneider's and Dora Heller Rich's oral histories (available at www.tenement.org/education)
- Copies of Schneider and Rich Oral History Transcripts (located in appendix)
- Pens or pencils
- Loose leaf paper

VOCABULARY:

- Oral History
- Perspective

PROCEDURE:

Pre-Lesson Prep (to be completed before the day of the lesson)

- Watch the video and review the Triangle Factory Fire fact sheet to become familiar with the material used in this lesson.

Part 1: Introduction

- Ask students if they know any childhood stories about their parents or grandparents.
- Instruct students to share those stories with someone sitting next to them.
- Ask a few students to share their stories with the class.
- Ask students how they know about those stories if they were not alive when those stories took place. Reinforce that information is often received through stories that people tell each other.
- Connect the exercise to the work of historians. Explain to students that historians learn about the past by asking people to tell them stories about it. These stories are called oral history.

Part 2: Activity

- Tell students that in today’s lesson they will explore two different oral histories in order to learn what it was like for immigrant adolescents to become students in America.
 - The first oral history is from Morris Abraham Schneider, a man who emigrated from Poland in 1920 when he was 10 years old.
 - The second oral history is from Dora Heller Rich, a woman who emigrated from Austria in 1909 when she was 13 years old.
- Distribute transcripts and play both recordings.
- Ask students what they learned about Dora and Morris’s experiences at school when they first moved the United States.
- Record students’ observations on the board. This is a good time to clarify some phrases and words from the oral histories. For example:
 - When Morris mentions he was put in 1A, he means he was put in a first grade class.
 - Yiddish is a language developed by European Jews over a century. It is primarily a combination of Hebrew and German.
 - The “reader” that Dora refers to would have been a sort of textbook.
 - “Julie” is German for July and “Junie” is German for June.
- Play the recordings again and ask students to pay close attention to clues that help us understand how Dora and Morris felt about these initial experiences.
- Collect and record students’ observations.

- Reflect on Dora and Morris’ experience in school. Have students attribute adjectives to describe the feelings and emotions captured within the oral history. Guiding questions might include:
 - What do you think it would feel like to be placed in a first-grade class at age 10? How might that help us understand Morris’s experience?
 - What do you think it would feel like to read in an unfamiliar language in front of your class? How might that help us understand Dora’s experience?
 - Dora laughed when she told the story about the students in her class laughing at her while she tried to read in English. If you were telling this story, would you have laughed? Do we believe that she would have laughed while recounting this story on the day that it happened?
 - Does anyone here have an embarrassing story from when they were younger? How has your telling of that story changed over the years? What does this tell us about how we should think about Morris’s and Dora’s stories—or stories like them? Can we take them as absolute truth?

Part 3: Wrap-Up

- Instruct students to write a short paragraph reflecting on Dora and Morris’ school experience. In what ways were their experiences different from Dora and Morris’s? In what ways were their experiences similar?
- Invite some students to share their thinking with the class.
- Encourage students to think about Morris and Dora’s stories whenever they encounter students who are new to their school, sports team, or neighborhood.

ASSESSMENT:

- Review the students’ reflective writing.
- Note what kind of details students were able to pull out from the oral histories. Did students pick up on how Morris and Dora might have felt?
- Note whether or not students were able to make personal connections to Morris and Dora’s stories.

EXTENSIONS:

- Have students interview a family member about their experiences when they were “new” in school and include that additional perspective in their essays.
- Instruct students to write essays comparing their experiences with school to Morris and Dora’s experiences. Have students “publish” their work by revising, editing, and typing up their essays to create polished final drafts.
- Facilitate a discussion about English as a Second Language (ESL) Education. First, read this article as a class: <http://www.publicschoolreview.com/articles/95>. Ask students how this debate relates to Morris’s and Dora’s stories. Ask students where they stand on the issue.
- Meet the Tenement Museum’s oral historians and read an interview about their work on our blog: <http://www.tenement.org/blog/?p=193>

APPENDIX: ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPTS

Morris Abraham Schneider & Dora Heller Rich Oral History Excerpts

Source: Ellis Island Oral History Project, National Parks Service

Interviewer: Paul E. Sigrist Jr.

Interview Dates: November 17, 1991 (Schneider) & August 9, 1991 (Rich)

Morris Abraham Schneider

Schneider: When we came we lived in Cherry Street just for about a half a year. And my first, when we came to Cherry Street, I started school two weeks after we came here. And not having any kind of schooling in Poland, I started--I was ten years old and they put me into 1A. And I came and I was absolutely, no English, the only language I knew was Polish and Yiddish. And they put me, I was the oldest child in the class and, it was a large class, and the teacher told the class to stand up. I, not knowing any English, I didn't know what she was talking about and I was comfortable seated and I sat there. And she came over with a metal ruler and she whacked me across my arm. I don't think they could get away with it today but then they did. And she whacked me across my arm. I got up very quickly and I also realized that I had to learn English very quickly, too.

Dora Heller Rich

Rich: When I first got into class I could read but not English. I could read Polish and German. And the German is more or less the same lettering as the English, so my teacher said, "I want to hear what, how you can read in German." She give me the English reader and I begin reading and I read every word in German. I didn't, I remember only one word: in "July " I said "Julie", "Julie." And "June" and "Junie." And the kids were laughing, they were hysterical. (She laughs) How I pronounced the words. That's how she found out what I knew in reading. And I got to it; I got to it pretty soon. My parents were surprised. There was another girl and she also went to school. And my father showed her how I could read. So he took me in there. He says, "You read and let her read. Let's see who knows better." So I knew better and in no time, maybe a month, I read good. And it was an interesting time, what can I tell you?