



ORAL HISTORY LESSON PLAN

Upper Elementary School; Grades 4-5

Related Museum Programs: All

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

DESCRIPTION: Students utilize oral histories as a tool for learning about people, places, and events. As they explore a recorded oral history, they examine the nuances of conducting interviews and then practice their skills by interviewing one another.

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.
- Experience what it is like to participate in the interview process.
- Learn that successful interviews are a result of listening carefully and asking thoughtful questions.
- 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 oral histories help us to understand the past?
- What makes an interview successful?

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:

- Object Photos (located in appendix)
- Recording of Dora Heller Rich's oral history (available at www.tenement.org/education)
- Copies of Dora Heller Rich's Interview Transcript (located in appendix)
- Interview Worksheet (located in appendix)
- Story Worksheet (located in appendix)
- Pencils
- Loose leaf paper or notebook

VOCABULARY:

- Historian
- Oral History
- Interview

PROCEDURE:

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

- Listen and review the transcript of Dora Rich Heller’s oral history to become familiar with the material and background of the excerpt used in this lesson.

Part 1: Introduction

- Introduce the idea of oral history by asking students if they know any stories about themselves from when they were a baby.
- Instruct students to share that story with a student sitting next to them. Select a few volunteers to share their story with the class.
- Ask students how they know about those stories if they were not old enough to remember the events of the stories themselves. Help students arrive at the realization that someone else had to tell those stories to them.
- Explain to students that historians also collect stories about events, times, and places that they may not have a personal memory of.
- Reinforce that one way historians learn about these stories is by asking or interviewing people who do remember those events, times, and places to tell them the story. Clarify that this process is called oral history.
- Explain that the class will listen to an oral history given by Dora Heller Rich, a woman who emigrated from Austria in 1909 when she was 13. In this oral history, she tells what her life was like before she immigrated to America.
- Distribute transcripts of the interview so that students can follow along and take notes during the interview.
- Play the recording of Dora’s oral history.
- Ask students what information they learned about Dora’s life.
- Play the recording a second time, giving students the directions to pay close attention to the exchange between the interviewer and Dora.
- Facilitate a discussion about the interviewer’s role in encouraging Dora to tell her story. Some questions might include:
 - What role did the interviewer play here?
 - What did you notice about the questions he asked?
 - In what ways did this interaction feel like a conversation? How did it differ?
 - How often did we hear the interviewer speak? Why do you think that is?
- Help students realize that the interviewer’s questions and the interviewee’s responses are connected to and even dependent on each other.

Part 2: Activity

- Explain that in today’s lesson, students will do the work of historians and conduct an oral history.
- Have students brainstorm ideas for interview topics. Many events in the students’ lives can be investigated through oral history. Some examples might be the first day of school, graduation, winter’s first snowy day etc.
- Help students prepare questions to ask in their interviews.
- Discuss the difference between open-ended questions and closed, or yes-or-no, questions.
 - Example of an open-ended question: How would you describe your day?
 - Example of a yes or no question: Did you have a nice day?
- Record students’ suggestions of questions to create a “question bank” from which students can pull questions.
- Divide students into pairs and give them time to interview one another about their chosen topic. During the interview, have students take notes on loose leaf paper or using the Interview Worksheet (see: appendix). [As a variation, you can also have students work together to interview the teacher about his or her first day at school.]
- Literacy Extension: Assign students as home work to use their notes as the basis of writing their partner’s story on the Story Worksheet (see: appendix).

Part 3: Wrap-Up

- Bring the class back together to share what they learned and to reflect on the interview experience. Discussion questions might include:
 - What kind of information did you learn from your partner?
 - What kinds of questions provided the most information?
 - What did you enjoy about interviewing? What was difficult?
 - Where there questions that you were not able to get answers to?
 - How did oral history help us to learn about each other?
 - How did your interview compare to the interview the class listened from Dora Rich Heller?
 - What other events and experiences would the students want to learn about using the oral history method?

ASSESSMENT:

- Review the Story Worksheet.
- Listen to the interview questions students choose to ask.
- Ask students what they learned from their interviewees.
- Note whether or not students use their observations from listening to Dora Heller Rich’s oral history while conducting their interview. Did they focus on listening to the person they interviewed? How did they attempt to facilitate a conversation?

EXTENSIONS:

- Tell students to use what they learned in class to interview an adult at home or a family member about an event, time, or even another person. Have students compare and contrast these experiences with their experiences from this lesson.

- Have students “publish” their work and compile students’ “works of history” as part of a Classroom History Book.
 - On example of “publishing” could be having students create covers for their Story Worksheet.
 - One way to create a Classroom History Book is to bind together students’ Story Worksheets with a front and back cover and displaying the book in the classroom library.

- Watch a virtual tour of the Tenement Museum (http://www.tenement.org/Virtual_Tour/index_virtual.html) to get a sense of what life was like on the Lower East Side. Have students compare Dora’s life in Austria with her life on the Lower East Side.

APPENDIX: DORA HELLER RICH INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Source: Ellis Island Oral History Project, National Parks Service

Interviewer: Paul E. Sigrist Jr.

Interview Date: August 9, 1991

SIGRIST: Can you describe this town for me?

RICH: It was a very nice little town, very more or less modern. It had a nice synagogue, had a nice church. And there were two thousand citizens living there and about, say about fifty Jewish people, Jewish families. And it was pretty good.

SIGRIST: Was this an industrial town?

RICH: Industrial, no. Farming. Farming town. We had a countess. She owned the whole, all the fields and she employed all the Christian people, all the people, the non-Jews. The Jewish wouldn't work on the field. She employed them and they produced very nice wheat and barley and whatever they needed. And nice, nice fruit. We had fruit trees on our ground, beautiful fruit trees: apple trees, cherry, plums. We had our own cow and our own chickens--I used to feed the chickens myself--and ducks. And I used to take the little ducks out when they were first born and they would swim beautifully with the mother. And it was a nice little town. We were more or less sorry to leave it. But we had our own home.

SIGRIST: I was going to ask you, talk about your home. Can you describe it for me?

RICH: My home in Europe?

SIGRIST: The home that you lived in in this town.

RICH: It was a nice little home. We had two, two beautiful rooms and each room is a built-in oven. It was supposed to be for two tenants but we were four children, we occupied ourselves. And it was a nice life. It was hard. My mother used to work very hard with all...

SIGRIST: Do you remember what the house was made out of?

RICH: Made of?

SIGRIST: Was it a wooden house, a stone house...?

RICH: I think it was a wooden. It wasn't stone. The rich people have the stone. It was a wooden home with a roof made of, covered with hay, a roof, yeah. A wooden roof, too.

SIGRIST: And you said you had animals. Was there a barn with the house?

RICH: The animals were behind a separate; it was called a "cabin." The animals, they had it for them. And the chickens, they were on the lawn, we used to and the cow had a real home for herself. (She laughs) The cow had a calf there and I watched that calf be born and was running right away, yeah. It was beautiful. It was a real beautiful life.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW WORKSHEET

Name:

Date:

Interview Worksheet

Question:

Answer:

Question:

Answer:

Question:

Answer:

APPENDIX: STORY WORKSHEET

Name: _____

Date: _____

Story Worksheet

Write a story about the event you learned about during your interview.
