

# Oral History in the Classroom:

## Integrating Faith, Learning, and Service

We took off [from the Nazi slave labor camp]. Then when we got into the woods—we had planned for this and so we had our civilian clothes—if I would call them that. Underneath we purposely put 'em on underneath under our uniform, and so we got into the woods, we took off our [prison] uniforms [and] threw 'em away. And so the first night out... it was so dark! Oh my land! And all of the sudden we hear this voice, "Halt!" What? And we looked around. And there was a German guard. "Halt! Where are you going?" He talked German, we could understand German—we talked German. "Where are you going?"<sup>1</sup>

**W**hat happens next? The rest of the story is available on the McKee Library Knowledge Exchange (Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, Tennessee, U.S.A.).<sup>2</sup> The man telling this story makes history come alive as very few history teachers do. Teachers often struggle to engage students in their classrooms. One methodology that many educa-

tors have found that fits well with their larger pedagogical approach is to build living, breathing history into the curriculum. They ask their students to conduct oral-history interviews with the people who lived through the events described in their textbooks, as well as many they will never encounter in their readings. This type of assignment not only helps students engage with their community in meaningful ways, but also helps to preserve the stories of those who have

experienced so much—struggling with economic depression, or fighting for civil rights, freedom, and equality. These are stories that matter—stories that when woven together, form the fabric of a nation.

The secondary-level history teacher will often hear students repeat the mantra, "I am just bad at history," or "History is so boring," and the college classroom is no different. The reality

BY KRIS ERSKINE

is that no one is “bad at history.” When I hear this from my students, I remind them that history is not just about dates and long-ago events, as many students believe. History is about understanding how we got here, where we come from; about understanding why history arcs, and where we are on that arc. It is about thinking critically about the past and knowing that there is an historical reason that brings a person to this page, reading these words at this moment.

While most students are not going to be professional historians, many are sincerely interested in history and genuinely hoping to learn something from their classes. This seed of interest planted by the teacher may grow and bloom as they learn about the important role students can play as “grassroots journalists, citizen historians,” as Viktor Chagas wrote in his 2012 article of the same title.<sup>3</sup> The oral historian is not only a historian, but also a social scientist; he or she preserves and shares knowledge from a past event, while also forming a new memory from a present event.<sup>4</sup> The challenge for the educator is how to convey to the high school or college-age young person the concept of the student as a truly irreplaceable cog on the wheel of social science, and to do so within the inherent restraints of the academic calendar.

### Why Consider an Oral-history Project?

History teachers understand the expectations and limitations placed on them at the start of the academic year. Textbooks cover a longer period of time as more history is written, yet the length of the academic year remains unchanged. Training students to conduct an oral-history interview consumes precious class time, and there is a learning curve. For the student, too, this activity is time intensive. This reality must be factored into classroom planning during the project. Yet, rather than slogging through another lesson for which students have no interest and

will retain little, the educator can send them into the community to engage in memorable living history that can have a significant impact on their lives. During each semester that I have employed oral history in my classroom, there have been students who approached me about conducting a second interview for extra credit. I always say “Yes.”

Although many of the events covered in class happened decades ago, too far back for the modern high school or college student to easily relate to, when these students meet someone who actually lived through these times, the history that once seemed distant and boring now feels as though it is happening right in front of them—marching for civil rights in Selma, Alabama; storming the beaches of Normandy; escaping from a Nazi death camp; flying combat missions in Vietnam; or riveting airplane wings together at a factory in Dearborn, Michigan, during World War II. In the moment of the interview, this could have happened

just yesterday, not a half a century ago or more.

### Planning the Oral-history Assignment

An oral history is both a record and the product of a process by which an interviewer gathers eyewitness or personal oral testimony from someone who has lived through a historic event or period. A typical oral-history assignment or larger project consists of one or more students identifying someone to interview who has lived through the event or time being studied, recording and transcribing the interview, and then making it available as part of an online or physical repository for historians around the world. Additionally, copies of the interview are shared with the family of the person who was interviewed. It is essential that students receive training on how to conduct the interview and how to record and store the information collected. For this to happen smoothly, several steps must take

## Tips for Success

1. Conduct a mock interview in the class with a real subject.
2. Create an interview guide for your students.
3. Contact local nursing homes, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) posts, or church pastors who can help you develop a list of willing interview subjects. Establish a protocol for screening potential subjects.
4. Provide the students with sample interview questions and have them conduct two interviews. The first should take only a few minutes and should give the students a basis for developing questions for an in-depth interview. The teacher should review the questions with each student before the second interview.
5. Ask students to submit an annotated bibliography of the sources they have consulted in preparation for the second interview.
6. Speak with a local university or special-collections archivist or librarian who can provide tips for your students on using a voice recorder or who is willing to work with you on preserving the oral histories.
7. Educators engaged in online teaching generally find that this project converts well to the online classroom, but it may need some adaptation.
8. Creating and distributing individual folders for each student generally proves useful. Folders will include sample interview questions, a release form, a guide for taking field notes, and any other instructions.

place prior to, during, and after the interview:

### **Pre-Interview Steps<sup>5</sup>**

1. *Establish clear goals for the oral-history assignment.* Each oral-history project should have clear goals. Typical questions that should be asked and answered prior to students conducting interviews include *Why is the information being collected? What purpose will it serve? Who will have access to it? How will the information be used?* These should be carefully considered and clarified so that students and those that they will interview know the end goal.

2. *Determine how and where interviews will be stored.* Before sending students out to find potential subjects, teachers need to decide how the collected oral histories will be stored and preserved since the ultimate purpose of this process is to preserve the memories and histories of those who have something to share. Libraries (both public and private) are good places to start since some have repositories where these types of artifacts are stored. Other libraries collaborate with larger institutions such as the United States Library of Congress, which has an ongoing oral-history project. A clear plan for how the recordings (video and/or audio) and transcripts will be stored should be in place at the beginning of the project to prevent the loss or misuse of the materials collected.

3. *Create consent and release forms.* Another pre-interview step is creating the consent form that will inform interviewees (also referred to as “narrators” in the literature) of their rights/copyrights, any restrictions regarding how their story will be used, and their right to stop the interview at any time should they feel uncomfortable. The consent form should be created before students begin interviewing and should clearly align with the goals of the project. At the college or university level, consultation with the institutional research committee or some similar body will help establish clear consent language that explains the interviewee’s rights and

how the content will be collected and distributed. High schools or colleges without a research committee or review board should consult with a local library or connect with an organization such as the U.S. Library of Congress or the Oral History Association at <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/>, which provide helpful guidelines on how to craft a consent document. Typical matters to consider include the following: Who will own the copyright of the interview—the

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interviewee or the institution? Will the interviewee be able to access the interview transcript to make edits or revisions? What about confidentiality or permission to use? Will the interviewee be allowed to use a pseudonym? Will historians be able to use the material at will, or will they need the permission of the interviewee? Interviewees, once identified, will need to provide consent for their narratives to be used in accordance with the

project’s goals. These goals should be clearly established at the beginning of the project so that interviewees will know why their stories are being collected and how they might be used in the future.<sup>6</sup>

### **Finding Interview Subjects**

Who is assigned to find the interview subjects, and where can they be found? Teachers can identify individuals in the community who might serve as potential subjects, especially if a specific area of history is being studied. For a more general oral-history project, students can identify individuals within their families, local communities, and churches.

By assigning oral-history projects, schools and educators have a great opportunity to serve both the community and the church, and to connect students to their own family history. History has also made the Seventh-day Adventist Church unique: its historic stance on the military and members’ experiences while serving (Project Whitecoat veterans, conscientious objectors, medics, combat infantrymen), missionaries, retired pastors, school administrators and teachers, firsts (first woman, first Adventist, etc.), and members who participated in or experienced the racial integration of Adventist institutions are examples.

Churches are filled with people who are eager to sit down with someone to tell their stories. Some of these individuals are no longer easily mobile or able to regularly attend church or are widowed and have no family nearby. Many just want to share their wisdom and experience with the next generation. This presents a precious opportunity for preserving institutional history. Depending on the size of the class, and the size of the local churchgoing population, a teacher could work with multiple churches, as well as with various religious persuasions.

Many students will interview their own grandparents who, for years, may have resisted talking about some their experiences but will open up

when approached by an interested grandchild. Some of these individuals experienced violence in the American South during the Civil Rights era, or escaped genocide in Rwanda, and some of them saw things at war that are simply too painful to speak about. Some lost spouses and children in various wars or acts of terrorism.

### **Background Research and Pre-interview Meeting**

Once interviewees have been identified, teachers and students can work together to verify that the individuals are reliable sources of information. This can be done through investigating the persons' background by talking with others, or even checking to see if anything has been published by or about the individuals in books, magazines, or other publications. This step is important, specifically if working with sensitive populations. For example, a few of my students have interviewed homeless veterans, an important but difficult demographic to reach. All effort should be made to ensure students' safety, especially if they are working with individuals who are not known to them or their immediate community.

An informal pre-meeting is always a good idea.<sup>7</sup> This could take place in person or by telephone or video call. Meeting with the prospective interviewees gives students the opportunity to discuss the purpose of the assignment, the consent forms, and to build a level of comfort with the potential interviewee. Some may choose to precede this meeting with a formal letter of introduction that not only introduces the students but also outlines the goals of the assignment. The level of formality can be determined prior to students launching into the assignment.

Some students will not request, or need, guidance on choosing an interview subject. But others do not have any close relatives, or at least any who can produce a substantial interview, or perhaps the available relatives are

aging and do not remember their stories well or cannot be interviewed by phone. This is where students can shine as community servants. Teachers can build relationships with churches, with local nursing homes, and with the local Veterans of Foreign Wars command post (or some other military organization). There are always people who want to tell their stories. Greeters

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at big-box stores are often retirees, and fast-food restaurants are often the gathering place for veterans who can often be found, mid-morning, reading the paper together or drinking coffee. One student interviewed a poll volunteer whom she met while voting. Although students often focus on veterans, less-represented groups should also be sought, such as women and minorities, as well as recent immigrants. The voices of certain groups are often suppressed or ignored because for centuries, history has fo-

cused on the macro players and events. Therefore, teachers and students need to reconstruct the roles of those who are absent from the pages of our textbooks, and thus from the pageant of our lives and national narratives. Within the stories, students will hear and preserve not only important memories, but also the keys to understanding various subcultures. Judith Flores-Carmona and Kristen V. Luschen, in their book *Crafting Critical Stories*, argue that incorporating oral history in the classroom creates for students a frame of social justice, and this is ultimately what historians and history educators seek for their students—for them to engage sufficiently with the subject matter to understand the significance of each person in society, and why these roles matter.<sup>8</sup>

### **Developing Questions**

This entire process will help students prepare appropriate questions to ask during the interview as well as provide an opportunity to get to know their interviewees a little better. Interview questions should be short and open-ended; they should allow interviewees to tell their story. Questions can cover a range of topics, but ultimately should align with the period of history or event being studied, and what the interviewees recall about growing up during that time, living through that event, the role of faith or religion in their lives, family traditions, and how the time period/event impacted their daily lives and choices.<sup>9</sup> Interview questions should provide interviewees with opportunities to reflect and recall. While these types of memory questions help to relax interviewees, they also provide the interviewers with information about personal experiences, which can lead to follow-up questions that help gather additional information. Information-gathering questions are more focused on an event or period of history.

Finally, questions that give interviewees a chance to summarize or give their opinion and interpretation

## Challenges Teachers Should Address With Students

1. Students will frequently have difficulty developing questions. It is useful to spend some class time thinking out loud and in groups about question development.
2. Students will not know how to approach topics that are painful and difficult for the interviewee to discuss (including those with veterans). Educators will need to address this with some redundancy in the weeks prior to the deadline.
3. Students may have trouble scheduling interviews that work for both themselves and the interviewee. The teacher may need to be somewhat flexible regarding deadlines.
4. Students may struggle with keeping the interviewee on topic. An interview subject's stream of thought often veers away from the topic of the interview. Students should plan to gently, politely, bring the interviewee back to the topic when possible.
5. Even when the student does everything right, sometimes the interview does not go well. Students should be reassured that they will be graded on the strength of their preparation and interview questions, not on the temperament of the interview subject.

of events are essential. They help make the interview more conversational and richer in content.<sup>10</sup>

Some questions may trigger painful memories. Students should be reminded of this during the pre-interview period and taught how to respond—when it is appropriate to just listen, redirect, or pause the interview to give interviewees time to regain composure.<sup>11</sup> As stated earlier, interviewees give consent to share their stories, so there is an understanding that they are willing to share even if the topic might stir up an emotional response; however, there is no way to predict how an interview will go. For this reason, consent forms should provide interviewees with the option to stop the interview if they do not wish to continue.

### During the Interview

Some interviewees, though willing, may be hesitant to share their stories. To help young people comprehend an interviewee's hesitation to speak openly, a teacher might request students to think about the most difficult

thing they have experienced in their own lives, and then, after a few moments, ask them if they would be willing to sit down with a stranger and share these painful memories. This provides perspective so that by the time the interview occurs, the student will be able to ask thoughtful, sensitive questions. If the students fail to approach the interviewee with a sense of respect, and instead try to finish as quickly as possible, this will produce hurt feelings. An oral-history interview makes knowledge available to others, but it also creates a relationship between the speaker and the listener, between a school and a church or community. If the listener is not prepared to listen, the final product may not be worth preserving. When a grandparent or other relative is the one being interviewed, this is less likely to be an issue the teacher would need to resolve.

### Handling Sensitive Topics

An important aspect of training

students to conduct oral histories is teaching them how to handle sensitive topics, or how to avoid them completely. Students, in their eagerness to hear entertaining stories, often do not initially consider the painful memories that oral histories will resurrect. Teachers may want to conduct a mock oral history in the classroom with an authentic oral-history subject who can tell a good story but who also is willing to explain the feelings and emotions that the topic may conjure up over the course of the interview. This sensitivity training is, perhaps, one of the most important aspects of teaching students to conduct an interview. If the student sounds rehearsed, or uninterested, or is flat and unresponsive, sticks only to a prepared script, or his or her body language or facial expressions convey a negative judgment, the interview is less likely to yield a useful, and preservation-worthy, end product. In some cases, the subject will simply shut down and end the interview.

Some students may interview individuals who are not citizens of the country where they reside. Often, the stories that students hear describe the lives of ancestors who came from other parts of the world. These may include some who fought in Korea against the United States, or who were Vietnamese snipers and spies during the Vietnam War, or whose family members were killed or maimed in the atomic blasts in Japan in 1945. These are sometimes difficult memories; interviewees may use language or share views that are unfamiliar or disturbing to the student. Focused, well-prepared questions delivered in a respectful and sensitive way may help to tone down or eliminate some of the tension; however, memories might trigger more passionate responses, and students should be prepared to record rather than sanitize the stories told. This is a marvelous opportunity to record such stories and for them to learn about the history of their family, their church, and their country.

## After the Interview

After the students have completed the interview and transcribed the sound file into a precisely formatted PDF, Word, or text document, they should immediately print a hard copy and deliver it to their interview subject.<sup>12</sup> They should also upload the history to a local library Website or other database. The teacher should ensure that students have a place to store these digital histories. For American students, one source worth considering is the U.S. Library of Congress' Veterans History Project.<sup>13</sup> The Library of Congress actively solicits student involvement in this process. In the early 2000s, it was widely reported that more than 1,000 World War II veterans were dying every day. Today, the National World War II Museum estimates that number is only in the 300s because the number of living World War II veterans is dwindling.<sup>14</sup> Veterans of Korea and Vietnam are not far behind. In other words, important memories are irrecoverably lost with each passing day. What better service to the community, to the church, and quite frankly, to your students, than to put them face to face with living history? This is a project that could be successful at the high school level, and with some creative modifications, with middle schoolers.

## Challenges

Collecting oral histories can be challenging. Often, during this process, students will cringe as they recall that their veteran interview subject used some rough language and told some off-color stories, or promoted objectionable views. They want to confirm that it is OK to omit these portions, or they will ask if they can start over with a less-offensive interviewee. Most historians would resolutely reject such a suggestion and would argue that rather than disposing of distasteful interview transcripts, interviewees should retain a record of these particular memories and experiences because they document the existence and participation of another human being in the events that shape human life. Historians

record and interpret history; they do not shape history to their own personal and moral convictions; to do so would be both dishonest and a disservice to their community and nation.

If students struggle with this approach, the teacher can engage the class in a discussion regarding the purpose of studying history. What should history reflect? Should it reflect the subject's memory and experiences, or should it reflect the interviewer's biases and ethical convictions? What is actually being preserved, and why? Educators should prepare students in advance; interview subjects can be abrasive at times, but students should

ensure that their facial expressions and body language do not cause the interview subject to disengage, become hostile, or shut down.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, it is also vital to collect and preserve the stories of daily life—those not tied to wars or major events in history: the stories of office workers who balanced accounts or sorted files; housekeepers or domestics who nurtured and cared for children and the elderly; medical professionals; teachers; veterans of various wars who

## Additional Resources for Teachers

The links below provide educators with both immediate resources students can use in the classroom and also a deeper well of ongoing best-practice resources for the teacher to draw from as oral history in the digital age evolves within the wider community of historians. Additional sources are nested within each of these dynamic links.

**Oral History Projects: Multiple Countries:** <https://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/emoha/world.html>

**Word of Mouth: Oral History in South Africa by Goethe Institute:** <http://www.goethe.de/ins/za/prj/wom/orh/org/enindex.htm>

**Library of Congress American Folklife Center:** <https://www.loc.gov/folklife/familyfolklife/oralhistory.html>

**Library of Congress Veterans History Project:** <http://www.loc.gov/vets/vets-home.html>

**Michigan State University's Getting Started With Oral Histories:** <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/gettingstarted/>

**The Oral History Review:** <https://academic.oup.com/ohr>

**The Oral History Association:** <http://www.oralhistory.org/resources/>

**Web Guides to Doing Oral History:** <http://www.oralhistory.org/web-guides-to-doing-oral-history/>

**Putting Together an Oral-history Project:** <http://www.mnhs.org/collections/oralhistory/ohguidelines.pdf>

**Library of Congress Oral History Collections:** <https://www.loc.gov/collections/>

**Planning Oral-history Interviews:** <https://www.loc.gov/folklife/familyfolklife/oralhistory.html>

**Principles and Best Practices for Oral History:** <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices-revised-2009/>

A great resource to listen to oral histories, in addition to the U.S. Library of Congress Website mentioned elsewhere, is the **University of North Carolina's Oral Histories of the American South:** [http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/browse/themes.html?theme\\_id=1&category\\_id=3&subcategory\\_id=89](http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/browse/themes.html?theme_id=1&category_id=3&subcategory_id=89)

served in clerical or medical roles; and any number of individuals whose daily lives contributed to the fabric of society. Their collective and varied memories reveal the most about the threads that weave the tapestry of every nation. Each student engaged in this process will learn to think critically about his or her place in context of history. This type of reflection truly facilitates inspiration and in turn, helps to produce better citizens.

In the classroom, after the oral histories are transcribed and uploaded, the teacher has a great opportunity to open a discussion about topics that may have emerged during the interview. Some of these discussions can center on the role of faith. For a student of history, it simply can get no better than a soldier who served in Vietnam and reflects about his daily walk with God while dodging bullets and booby traps, or the story of a missionary in China who tells of negotiating the canals on his way to a rural medical clinic. However, some of the stories can raise questions. For example, although many veterans who come back from a combat theater do not attribute their survival to God's hand, others will fervently believe that God protected them from death and injury. This can lead to discomfort, perhaps, for some. This is a teachable moment and can lead to some genuinely soul-searching moments for the students: If God protected the people who are giving these oral histories—all of whom survived—then what about the good Christians, and even some Adventists, who came home in flag-draped coffins? Was there no "God's plan" in their lives? What about the non-Christians who *did* make it home? Or perpetrators of heinous crimes who managed to escape prosecution and go on to live prosperous lives?

For educators who continually strive to reach into the student mind and flip the "on" switch, this is a great context within which to start some of these harder discussions. What better framework in which to have this discussion than one that so clearly meant life or death for the individuals interviewed by the stu-

dents? Ultimately, the teacher may not have all of the answers, but in my classroom, students have reacted to this sort of open approach with deep reflection. These conversations help students frame their own faith and shape how they understand God and His role in their lives and the lives of others. This helps them as they prepare to enter a world where the faith they practice is the one that they have chosen to own.

Oral history is only one element of facilitating students on the path of self-discovery. It may also convince students who think history is boring, or that they do not perform well in this area, that history can be fun and that it matters. Just as important from a historian's perspective, with so few historians and so many storytellers, the only path to preservation for most of these stories is to enlist the army of grassroots journalists and citizen historians in our classrooms. ✍

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*This article has been peer reviewed.*

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**NOTES AND REFERENCES**

1. Interview with Jack Blanco, conducted by Vance Gentry on November 2, 2016: [http://knowledge.e.southern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1036&context=oral\\_hist\\_ww2](http://knowledge.e.southern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1036&context=oral_hist_ww2).
2. Knowledge Exchange is a platform on which faculty and students can publish their research. Knowledge Exchange's oral histories can be found at <http://knowledge.e.southern.edu/oralhistory/>.
3. Victor Chagas, "Grassroots Journalists, Citizen Historians: The Interview as Journalistic Genre and History Methodology," *Oral History* 19:11 (Autumn 2012): 60.
4. Ibid.
5. Oral History Association, "Principles and Best Practices for Oral History" (October 2009): <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices-revised-2009/>.
6. Ibid.
7. United States Library of Congress, "Oral History Interviews" (May 2015): <https://www.loc.gov/folklife/familyfolklife/oralhistory.html>.
8. Judith Flores-Carmona and Kristen V. Luschen, *Crafting Critical Stories: Toward Pedagogies and Methodologies of Collaboration, Inclusion, and Voice* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014).
9. Several resources are available to help students develop questions. Time should be given in class to consult with students as they develop their questions. This will help prepare them for those that might be sensitive or possibly trigger a negative response from the interviewee. See the U.S. Library of Congress, "Oral History Interviews;" Guidelines for Oral History Interviews—The History Channel: <https://images.history.com/images/media/interactives/oralhistguidelines.pdf>; Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage: <https://folklife.si.edu/the-smithsonian-folklife-and-oral-history-interviewing-guide/some-possible-questions/smithsonian>.
10. The History Channel, "Guideline for Oral History Interviews."
11. Oral History Association, "Oral History, Human Subjects, and Institutional Review Boards" (2018): <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/do-oral-history/oral-history-and-irb-review/>.
12. See Library of Congress, "Oral History Interviews."
13. The Library of Congress project can be found at <https://www.loc.gov/vets/>.
14. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, in 2018, only about 496,777 of the 16 million Americans who served in World War II were estimated to still be alive: <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/wwii-veteran-statistics>.