

# Fish Bowls and Bloopers: Oral History in the Classroom

The interview is the highlight of an oral history project for many students. To strengthen their ability to conduct an interview in the field successfully, students should have multiple opportunities to explore the interview process. Students afforded a chance to practice, discuss, observe, and model interviews bring confidence and sensitivity to the actual interview. The following sample activities are just a few ways that the classroom can provide a forum for developing good interviewing techniques.

## Fish Bowl Interviews

Fish bowl interviews take place when the teacher interviews a guest on the topic under investigation in front of the entire class as a way to model the process. This allows students to observe an interview in progress and give feedback. The teacher and guest should sit either in front of the class or in the middle of a circle of students, facing each other while being tape recorded. The teacher should use this opportunity to model the kind of interview she/he expects from students.

Prior to the interview, the teacher should explain what he/she wants the students to observe; the teacher could also brainstorm with them and uncover what they would like to learn from the interview. After the interview, the teacher should allow ample time for a discussion and review of the interview. The issues and questions raised in this forum provide teachers with an opportunity to address the concerns students as they envision themselves as the interviewers.

Many teachers incorporate additional writing assignments; after the interview students could write about one of the following:

1. Describe examples from the interview that did or did not meet the guidelines you have been learning for good interviewing.
2. What did you learn about your topic from this interview that you probably would not have learned from a newspaper or textbook?
3. Now that you have seen one, describe how you imagine you would feel conducting an oral history interview.
4. Write about something the interviewee said that stood out for you.
5. Write one or several questions that you would have asked the guest if you had been the interviewer.
6. Write a list of suggestions to the teacher about how to improve her/his interview techniques.
7. Describe what would have been the hardest part for you if you had been the interviewer.
8. List questions you have about conducting an interview.
9. Write a thank you note to your guest describing what you learned from the interview and asking any questions you still have.
10. What are three questions used in this interview that you would like to use in yours. Why?

## Role Playing

Role playing a variety of interview scenarios is also helpful. One can do this over time as part of a series of classes (e.g., ten minutes of role playing per class) or as an entire class. A couple of examples are:

- 1) Students role play the first two minutes of the interview process (arriving, greetings, finding a place to set up equipment, warm up, first questions).
- 2) Students role play a 2-3 minute series of interview questions and answers focusing on a particular characteristic of good interviewing, e.g. active listening, ability to ask follow-up questions, sensitivity.

After each role play, the class gives the performers feedback about what went well, what they might improve, what was missing, etc.

## Bloopers

This is another form of role playing that students enjoy. Pairs of students receive an index card identifying one rule for or characteristic of a good interview. Students, in pairs, get five to seven minutes to create a scenario that will demonstrate a violation of the assigned rule. The student pairs take turns enacting their scenarios in front of the class. One student plays the role of interviewer and the other, the narrator. The class guesses which interview rule has been violated and the enactors tell them if they are correct. In these engaging performances, students observe or enact both “bloopers” and consequences including: beginning the interview abruptly, asking questions out of sequence, being rude, forgetting batteries, and making an awkward closing. Students “see” the implications of being or failing to be thoughtful interviewers.

## Paired Interviewing

Interviewing each other in class as part of a paired activity before they go out to do their taped interview is quite helpful to many students. The practice interview can be short; ten minute activities in class in which each member of the pair has five minutes to practice with the other, followed by a brief discussion in class of how it felt, what was hard, and what was easy. Even short practices can begin to build familiarity with the process. In addition, these short interviews stimulate a lot of discussion; students with reluctance or concerns often are willing to share their experiences as they “debrief” after these classroom sessions.

## Invented Transcripts

Reading invented transcripts of interviews is an activity that works well after students have been introduced to the characteristics of a good interview. Students can identify what good or bad interview characteristics the transcripts contain. This works as a whole class or small group activity.

A few sample assignments used with invented transcripts are: 1) All students receive copies of the invented transcripts. Two students, one as narrator and one as interviewer, read the interview out loud. As they watch, students check off each instance of bad interview practice. At the end of the reading, teacher facilitates a discussion of student choices.

2) Class reads one or two interviews and inserts follow-up questions wherever students feel they are missing. A discussion of individual choices could further clarify the need for, and the characteristics of, follow-up questions.

3) Class reads an interview silently checking off each place where it feels the interviewer failed to follow good interview strategies. Class then discusses its choices and identifies which interview guidelines it felt were overlooked.

4) Class reads an interview making a list of which interview strategies are used in the interview, citing examples.

The sample invented interviews that follow were designed by a teacher whose students were preparing interviews about an exceptionally snowy and cold winter that had just passed. She used these in class to help her students strengthen a variety of skills and to review some of the interview guidelines they had been learning. (I = Interviewer) □

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# Interview 1

I: Hello Mr. Lampett. Where can we talk? Where can I set up my tape recorder?

L: Over here near the couch, next to the window. Sure is hot today.

I: Okay, Mr. Lampett, want to get started now?

L: Okay, sure.

I: Mr. Lampett, what do you remember about the winter of '94?

L: It was long and cold.

I: What else do you remember?

L: Our heater broke down.

I: Did you go to work everyday?

L: Yes, I did.

I: Did you shovel your own snow, or did you pay someone to do it?

L: I paid two young people from the neighborhood.

I: What did you wear to keep warm?

L: I wore long underwear. I wore waterproof boots. I wore two pairs of socks.

I: Did you stay warm that way?

L: Yes, I sure did.

I: Mr. Lampett, how did you get around that winter?

L: Oh, I used the buses.

I: Do you think you watched more television than usual?

L: Not really. I read a lot.

I: Any problems in your house?

L: A huge branch hit our porch roof and cracked it.

I: That must have been a mess.

L: Yes, it was. It really was.

I: Is there anything else you can tell me about that winter?

L: I baked a lot of cookies.

I: I love cookies.

L: I do too.

I: Well, thank you, Mr. Lampett, for spending this time with me.

L: It was my pleasure.

# Interview 2

I: Hi, Uncle Joe, thanks for making the time to let me interview you for my project at school.

J: It's my pleasure. What do you have in mind for us today?

I: I'm going to tape record your memories of the winter of '94, remember I told you on the phone.

J: I remember.

I: Where should we do it?

J: Outside, on the porch, it will be cool there.

I: Okay, is it okay to begin?

J: Fine.

I: Uncle Joe, what stands out for you the most about that winter?

J: There was just so much snow and ice, it never seemed to end. I began to think that maybe something had happened to the world's climate . . . that global warming stuff.

I: How did that make you feel, thinking it could have happened because of global warming?

J: I felt a little scared, or doomed, or something.

I: Why, what did you think was happening?

J: Oh, maybe some environmental catastrophe, that we were ruining the sun or something.

I: Did you really believe that?

J: Not exactly. But because the snow and ice lasted so long for so many days, I did begin to wonder if some permanent change had occurred in our weather system.

I: How long exactly did this snow and ice last?

J: For five months.

I: Oh, no, I don't think so. The other person I interviewed told me that it lasted for seven weeks.

J: Oh, I guess I'm wrong then.

I: You said the snow and ice lasted a long time. Describe what it looked like outside your house during that time?

J: There was six inches of snow on the ground, the branches on the trees were filled with snow several inches high sometimes and other times covered with ice. The path to my door was always slippery. I kept trying not to fall wherever I walked. People couldn't move their cars because of how high the snow was. I worried a lot that my kids would hurt themselves.

I: What else did you worry about?

# Characteristics of a Good Interview

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1. Come to the interview well prepared with background knowledge of the subject, familiarity with your equipment, a document that the narrator will sign giving you permission to use the tape recorded interview, and interview questions.

2. Make the narrator as comfortable as possible; polite, friendly behavior will put your narrator at ease. Interviews should not begin abruptly. Take the time to introduce yourself and to talk about your project. For example: "Hello Mr. Johns, I'm Jane Smith. How are you today? Thanks for taking the time to let me interview you about life in West Philadelphia for my school's oral history project. Where do you think we should sit to do the interview? We need a quiet place."

3. Take the time to find a quiet spot in which to conduct the interview (singing birds, ticking clocks, appliances, and friendly pets all add distracting noises to the recording). Set up the tape recorder between yourself and the narrator. Before you turn on the tape recorder, ask if the narrator is ready to begin.

4. Begin the interview with a few simple questions that the narrator can answer easily and comfortably.

5. Ask questions one at a time and do not rush the narrator to respond. Silences will make for a better interview; pause at least ten seconds before asking a new question.

6. Speak clearly so that the narrator can easily understand and hear you. Keep the questions as brief as possible so that what you are asking will be clear to the narrator.

7. Ask as many open ended questions as possible. These questions encourage the narrator to tell stories rather than to give yes/no answers.

8. Listen actively to the narrator's answers and then ask follow up questions like, "how did you feel about that?" or "what happened next?" to bring out more details before you go on to the next question on your page. Respond appropriately to the narrator. Pause or say something like "that must have been difficult" if the narrator describes a painful memory.

9. Do not contradict or correct your narrator and keep your personal opinions to yourself as much as possible. Do not ask leading questions like: "Tell me about that winter, you must have had a miserable time."

10. Do not rush the end of the interview. Have a good closing question that helps the narrator summarize or come to a conclusion. Always thank your narrator for the time and generosity in helping with this project. Remember to have the narrator sign the document or release form.

# Labor History Follow-Up

Studying photographs for details can reveal much about a person, an event, a place, or a historical period. Used critically, visual images often can be as important as original written documents or printed text in helping historians understand and write about the past. To use this follow-up properly, refer to the two-page photo-spread on pages 66-7 of the *Magazine's* Labor History issue (Winter 1997, Vol. 11, No. 2). This follow-up was put together by Robert D. Reynolds, Jr., the late Stuart B. Kaufman, and David L. Parker.

## How to analyze photographs

- \* Identify subject matter from the caption or information on the back of the photograph. Who are the people in the picture? What event is taking place? When and where was the picture taken? (Note: not all of this information may be available to you.)
- \* When information is scant or missing, check for internal clues. Style of dress (particularly women's clothing), furnishings, and automobiles are often keys that unlock information as to when the photo was taken. Other less obvious but dependable details for pinpointing time and place can be the topography, street signs, billboards, posters, dates on a wall calendar, book titles, product names on food, book titles, etc.
- \* Gather evidence from other sources. Look at other photographs by the same photographer. Search out other photographs containing similar actions or individuals. Consult old newspapers, maps, and landmarks for information about changes that might have occurred (e.g., if a building in a photograph was torn down on a certain date, the photograph was taken before that date). Seek out older individuals who may have personal knowledge of the person or event in a photograph.
- \* Be aware that a photograph may distort reality. Remember that many scenes are posed rather than candid. A photograph may also be excessively selective in its subject matter and exclude something that causes the scene to be interpreted differently than if the material had been included. In the nineteenth century, because exposures required much more light than today's automatic cameras, subjects were required to remain still for up to several minutes and so often appear unnaturally stiff and unlife-like.

## Classroom discussion and projects

Using the two-page photo-spread, study the turn-of-the-century photographs of Lewis Hine and the contemporary photographs of David Parker. Think about the expression "The more things change, the more they stay the same." Within the context of that expression, analyze the photographs to determine what they reveal about children in the United States working at the turn-of-the-century and children working today in countries such as Mexico, Nepal, and Bangladesh.

MARKET VENDORS. INDIANAPOLIS. INDIANA. AUGUST 1908

MARKET VENDOR. MEXICO CITY. MEXICO. JANUARY 1992

How are the two workplaces similar?

- \* Look at the products they sell, the way the goods are displayed, and the overall condition of the workplace.
- \* The facial expressions and body postures of the boys in the two photographs are very different. Describe the differences. Can you think of any possible reasons to account for the differences?
- \* Photographic technology improvements, and how the subject relates to the photographer can be considered factors.
- \* Items revealing the differences in time and place include: 1908—suspenders and caps worn by vendors; basket

# Labor History Follow-Up

the same as those being sold in the 1908 Cincinnati street vendor picture; 1908 vendors have a stiff unnatural pose. 1992—Spanish language on boxes and paperback book; 1992 vendor conveys a “streetwise” posture with a calculating look. (For more information read the captions of these photographs in Parker’s article in *Labor’s Heritage*.)

FARM WORKER. PEMBERTON, NEW JERSEY, SEPTEMBER 1910

BRICK WORKER, KATHMANDU, NEPAL, JANUARY 1993

How does the work environment in these two photographs compare?

- \* outdoor farm work versus outdoor factory work; both have heavy lifting and other strenuous physical labor.
- \* both children are very young; for more information read the captions of these photographs in Parker’s *Labor’s Heritage* article.

What are some of the dangers that a child might be exposed to at a construction site?

- dangerous equipment, extreme noise, falling bricks or other heavy objects

What are some of the dangers involved in farm work?

- \* pesticides even more dangerous to small children than to adults; harsh climatic conditions, especially the hot sun; threat of insect and snake bites

Many young children in the United States today still work on farms, either owned by the their families, or as migrant workers. How has farm work changed over the years? How has it remained the same?

- \* today there are fewer farms but many are large and highly mechanized. The tasks of migrant workers picking fruits and vegetables has for the most part remained unchanged.

STREET VENDOR CINCINNATI. OHIO AUGUST 1908

STREET VENDOR MEXICO CITY. MEXICO 1992

What is a street vendor? What products or services are considered street trade?

- \* shoeshines, newspapers, etc.; highly portable products or equipment

Has this type of child labor changed much in comparing 1908 to 1992? Compare these photographs with the market vendors of the same era. How are they similar? How are they different?

- \* Additional information: the 1908 street vendor’s name is Marie Costa (probably from an immigrant family); the time is ten a.m. on a Saturday (not a school day); note the umbrella which suggests she works long hours often in the rain or hot sun. Background details used in dating photograph include the girl’s apparel, style of baskets being sold, streetcar rail tracks, brick paving stones, street lamp design. The 1992 street vendor (often with her mother) sells home cooked chorizos (fried dough). The girl is ten years old and does not attend school; background details include the girl’s clothing, the automobile, the clothing and apparel of the pedestrians, including the briefcase, street pavement similar to 1908 photograph (older part of the city), style of basket used to hold dough.

Have the class discuss the top five reasons given in 1906 why children left school and joined the workforce.

- \* (1) Poverty (2) Tired of school (3) Because companions went to work (4) To get better clothes (5) Father’s laziness (6) Parents saving money.

Source: Edward N. Clopper, *Child Labor in City Streets* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1912).

Compare these reasons with reasons the class thinks are used today. Are they different or have they remained basically the same? Compare the situation in the United States with countries in the Third World. □