

Voices of Experience: Oral History in the Classroom

Marjorie McLellan: Tell us about your community, how you came to adopt oral history as a teaching strategy, and the project that you've developed with your students.

Rich Nixon: We are a rural district, and it's a fairly large high school, about 1,300 students, four grades. The county is adjacent to the county that has the capital city of Raleigh, and yet there's quite a difference in the two counties. Our county is very agricultural. Tobacco is still the most important crop. As a result, it doesn't have anything like the type of population that you have in Wake County, where Raleigh is. However, the interstate has come through, and now people can live in the western part of our district and get to Raleigh and the Research Triangle just about as quick as they could if they lived in the northern parts of the city. So we're getting into part of our district a pretty good influx of people who are not natives of the county, and they're bringing in new experiences, new frames of reference. They look outside the county for their jobs, which is changing our makeup.

I teach United States history courses to 11th graders, and over the past four or five years I've become interested in oral history as a way of taking advantage of resources in the community. I frequently do a lot of small types of projects, sometimes nothing more than an assignment to go home and talk to Momma and Daddy about something. Usually I'll have the students write it down and come in and talk about it. Every once in a while I get ambitious, and we go into some major project. I had one we started, and my ambition was more than my capabilities. We got into it, did the interviews, wrote it up, and kind of stalled. The next year I got better organized and found a bit of funding and was able to put together a book on the oral history of the fifties in the local community.

Audience: How did you pick that topic?

Nixon: When I first started teaching, I said to my students, "Go talk to your grandparents about the Great Depression." And along the line you realize that your students' grandparents weren't alive during the Depression. They weren't that old. I realized that we're losing resources, people are passing away, and their stories are going with them. So a year before we did this project, I worked with the class on talking to their grandparents about the World War II experience at home. I sent the kids forth, and they came back with all this great stuff. Then I said, "I'm going to start looking for other people's advice on how to do it," and came across things like

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permission forms. That's where I went, "Uh-oh. Better just put this in the folder. We've had fun, the kids have learned to work with this, and stop there." Next year I did the ground work, got the permission form and everything. I didn't want to do World War II again, and the fifties is a very fascinating topic for the kids. Plus, we could talk to the parents, most of them, too.

Susan Moon: I'm very rural Georgia and I'm very small town. Our school population is about 650, almost 700, that's grades nine through twelve. My ratio is fifty percent black and forty-nine percent white. And it's a lower socio-economic area. No matter what race you are, you usually eat free lunch. I think the majority of our families are single-parent families. We've had several migrant workers come in, not a lot, I think we have twelve that are in the high school. And we have students who have come over from India whose parents are running the motels.

In the summer of 1990 I was looking for the ten hours to renew your certification, and they were offering a course called Foxfire I at North Georgia College. It was the first course I've ever taken in my life that—education courses especially—I took back to my classroom and laid it out on the table, and just whew! You know, it just went on in all different directions. I ended up taking the Level II course, and I went to a Foxfire-sponsored folklore institute at Western Carolina the summer of 1992.

I teach one totally Foxfired class; it's called "Creative Writing for Publication and Computer," but the students named it "Back Roads" because we are a small school located in rural Georgia. We do a lot of different things. We do the school newspaper, and we do the literary magazine, but we also collect oral histories of people in the

town. This year we worked on something called “Elder Tales,” where my students wanted to go out and get stories from their grandparents and bring their grandparents to the classroom.

Toby Daspit: New Iberia is a community of about 30,000 in southwest Louisiana. [There] is only one public high school in the town, about 2,000 students, approximately thirty percent African American, seventy percent white. Most of the students that we have in the course are from the lower socio-economic class—my understanding is students have three options, two options if you’re not going to go on to college: to work at the port, Port of Iberia, or join the military.

In the fall of ‘91, a colleague of mine in the Iberia Parish Special Education Department, Carmelite Blanco, and I took a course in Foundations of Education at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. The goal of the course was to create a project to assist “at-risk students,” it was the hot term back then. And, it just so happened that Carmelite had contacts with Shadows-on-the-Teche, which is a National Trust plantation home there. Shadows-on-the-Teche is unlike other plantation homes, it’s right smack in the middle of downtown New Iberia. I mean, there’s a bank next to it, a restaurant across the street, it’s right there. You can’t avoid it if you live in the community.

Shadows-on-the-Teche was in the process of self-evaluation, and they were moving toward projects aimed at inclusion, including the marginalized African-American experience. And Carmelite created this class called “Out of the Shadows,” working on this metaphor of pulling out African-American history, especially history that was so important to this plantation. It never went further than the class at this point, and most of us, including myself, were extremely skeptical. She envisioned students spending their spare time after school digging into plantation documents and letters. The next spring, I was approached by Carmelite and some members of the school board with the idea of teaching a course called “African American Studies: Oral Traditions of the African American Community in Iberia Parish.” What happened in the interim was Carmelite didn’t let the idea go. She pushed it, and staff from the Shadows also pushed this idea. I knew nothing about it. I just sort of jumped headlong into it.

We had to go to the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to get approval to teach it. So we submitted something that said what the objectives are. And I hate behavioral objectives, because the world is not that nice and tidy, so they’re real nebulous: to “heighten student awareness of African American history,” to “develop research skills,” to “investigate different methods in which history can be studied and presented,” et cetera. Or things like, “the teacher will evaluate student products according to criteria established.” And they approved it.

The years that I taught the course, along with Jamie Credle and Pat Kahle from the Shadows, there was only one white student that took it, it was just African Americans. At the end of every year, we had a public program where the students would share their interviews and other documents that they produced with the public. The first year we did an oral history of the integration of Iberia Parish schools called “Crossing the Color Line: An Oral Perspective of the Integra-

tion of Iberia Parish Schools.” The next two years, we decided to go back as far as we could with the elderly members of the community. We did “A Journey Through the Years: An Oral History of the 1930s and 1940s in Iberia Parish,” and “Somewhere in the Neighborhood: African American Communities in Iberia Parish During the Jim Crow Era.”

McLellan: How do you prepare the students to do oral history? What kinds of work do you do before you send them out to do interviews?

Moon: We do a lot of brainstorming those first two weeks of school, where we sit and talk about what is out there in the community. I usually bring in a touch of humor, too, by reminding them that every town has its local characters. We also get rid of some of the [stereotypes]. Teenagers have a tendency to think that in every small town in America, “There’s nothing to do. What’s the first thing I’m going to do: leave.” They start getting interested, and they talk about, “Well my granddaddy used to do that,” maybe milking cows or whatever. Brainstorming opens up the rapport, too, with the students, because nobody can put a wrong answer on the board when you’re doing that. And then we decide which one of these things we want to focus on, and how we’re going to do it.

Before I send them out on an interview, we practice interviewing each other. Then we bring in a speaker, and they practice interviewing skills in the classroom. They get so many points every time they ask a good, open-ended question, and they get minus if they ask a question that can be answered “yes” or “no.” By the end of six weeks, they are ready to go out and try some of it on their own.

McLellan: Do you set up contacts ahead for them to interview?

Moon: The students themselves have to set up the interview, contact the person, tell them when we’re coming, how many people are coming. Foxfire says that everything comes from student involvement, and they’re responsible for all of that. Each group sets their own deadline about when they’re going to have this done, and when the transcripts are going to be finished. They tell me what they want to do, and that’s when it gets engraved in stone. Then it’s on the calendar in writing. By the end of the semester, all the work has to be transcribed and in. That portfolio of their work becomes their final exam.

Parents have to sign off on insurance forms at the first of the year. We make sure that insurance form is filled out and parents have signed it, indicating it is all right for those students to go off campus. See, I’m not with them. They go off without a chaperon. Of course, I’m dealing with older students usually, too, eleventh and twelfth graders, and the Back Roads class is nine through twelve. So the little ones go with the older ones, and that makes them grow up. In fact, my ninth graders probably like the class better than any of my other students. They feel big because they’re in there with the seniors and the juniors, and they get to do a lot of things that other people [don’t].

I also make sure that Back Roads is always the last class of the day, something I look forward to. I used to hate sixth period, but I look forward to sixth period every day. And it comes after lunch, which gives us that other half hour in there if we need [it]. That gives them an hour and a half for interviewing and things like that. A lot

of my students do work after school because they have to, and so this gives them a chance to go during the class. They don't miss another class now.

Nixon: I have something of an advantage where I have them for an entire year, so you can ease them into it. Most of the students would much rather come in and sit down and listen to me talk to them all period and tell them what it is I expect of them. It takes a while to try and get them used to how you have *them* do the work. And I try as much as possible to get out from in front of the classroom. So from the beginning of the year, we work a lot with facsimiles of documents and activities which force them to work with material, which is an unusual process for a lot of them. By the time I'm ready to talk to them about this, they see it as just, "Well, here comes something else." It's almost as if they're used to it.

Once they get started, it's almost as if it's a revelation that older people had an existence before the children were born [laughter], and they find out that, "Hey, guess what my folks used to do," or, "Guess what my grandparents used to do." Going in, it doesn't seem like a lot of fun, but they're always somewhat amused by the responses that they get. And likewise, the people they talk to are always interested in talking, and so it works well once they get into it.

Daspit: When you mention community, I'm interested in pedagogy of place and how place works to sort of destroy this notion that we can universalize history especially and that we can teach United States history to everyone in the country and set these national standards. It's just not that simple. And, like *Foxfire*, what emerged from the course was a pedagogy from the students. We didn't know what we were doing getting into it, although we knew that we wanted oral history as a central part of it.

Originally our idea was to sort of fill in the gaps, what's missing in history. The first year we identified for them who were the big figures. You know, we definitely want to interview this person, because he was superintendent, we definitely want to hear this person because he was at the school at this time. And what happened the second and third years was what I now see as a real political move from the students, because they resisted this notion of we identifying who they're going to go out [and interview], and they turned more to family members who many of them claim they had never spoken with before, at least not about these issues.

As far as preparing them, practice, doing peer interviews, a mini-interview, which is sort of a mid-term grade. We also have them for a whole year and have the beautiful luxury—I was given \$5,000 a year

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to purchase equipment, to bring in speakers, and that’s primarily due to the director of Special Ed. who freed up some money. We would bring in five or six major speakers during the course of the year. That was really nice, to have people who’ve done oral histories, and hundreds and hundreds of them, sharing their experiences.

McLellan: What kinds of problems or obstacles have you had?

Nixon: The biggest problem I had is the crowding in of so many things I have to do in the course. Both of the major projects that I did, I would sit down and set up a timeline, and we would start pretty much on schedule, but then as we moved through the year, situations developed, and things happened unexpectedly. You get behind here as we need to spend a little bit more time on this than anticipated, and so this deadline gets moved. And then all the minor irritations: you can’t get into the computers this day because somebody else is already there, or the copier is broken down. All those kinds of things pile up, so that by the end of the year, if you’re not careful, you’re sitting there two thirds through, and a week to go.

Daspit: One of the biggest obstacles came from the students themselves, and it was their perception of what history is. They never viewed this as a history class. They always view it as something “other.” They said, “This is not history. We’re talking about community figures, and then we start talking about parents.” Even with the people you interviewed, that familiar response. Well, my own mother told me, “I don’t have anything to tell you, you should go talk to so and so.” So just disrupting that whole question of what is history, what isn’t history.

The major obstacle was transcribing and shifting deadlines because of that. We realized there was a need to provide background information in general African-American history, which took time away from the training and oral history methodology. So our students, basically the last day of school, were turning in transcripts. The last thing they do is turn in an interview. Usually it’s handwritten, which we accept, because most of them don’t have

typewriters at home, or don’t know how to type, or we kept trying to get access to computer labs and ran into problems. Students say, “I have to work today. I couldn’t get to the interview.” They don’t believe you. How long can it take? That’s a big obstacle of them doing it the night before, and trying to pace these things. It’s just a long, tedious process.

Moon: I think you touched on this a little bit. There are still a lot of students out there who are used to the traditional, the structured—you come in, that teacher dictates what you’re going to do and you do it. You spit out exactly what she spit out, just regurgitation. And they have a problem, a lot of them, and those are usually the ones that will get out at the end of the first semester. They tolerate it, but, “No, this is not for me.” I would like to do a study on the type of students that this type of instruction draws, because the ones that get in there and really like it stay. They take it all four years. And others want me to stand up and tell them what I want to do.

In that particular class, it has to come from them. I facilitate, I do not dictate. I put a piece of tape on my mouth and sunglasses over my eyes so they can’t read my eyes, because a lot of times students do what they think you’re going to like. I’ve got these dark sunglasses I put on, with a piece of tape across my mouth, and I do not say a word while they’re doing that. I don’t want them to see my eyes or let my mouth come open. You have to be a little crazy to do these things. [laughter]

Nixon: I do much of the same thing, turning it over to the kids as much as I can. As far as the focus of the project, I kind of tossed out the fifties. From there we talked about what do we want to know about it. Then we just threw things up on the board, just ideas we threw out, and tried to come up with a list of questions for interviews that would get at those things. After the students did the interviews and made the transcripts, they came in and as a group arrived at what four or five general areas that they thought the material could be grouped in. Then it was a process of putting them into small committees. The [class] would regroup, and take the material and go to each person’s interview and say, “Well, this part of the interview should be with this committee. This part of the interview should be over here.”

At that point, I’m just the ringmaster to make sure that we can get in labs when we need to get in labs, and make sure they have what they need. It really takes very little work once they get going, because you can see them take ownership of it. They become interested in making sure that what they’ve got is what they want. They’ll argue about where this passage belongs, whether it’s here or should it go in here. Sometimes nobody wants this thing: “It belongs to you, put it in your section.” So once you set this thing in motion, the best thing to do is just stay out of the way and make sure the logistics are taken care of, and they can run it from there.

Kuhn: What about administrators?

Moon: I’ve been lucky. I’ve had a very supportive administrative team. My superintendent’s son married a student who was an original Foxfire student, and that helps a whole lot. [laughter] He likes a lot of innovative things. Now I did have, pardon my expression, the “principal from hell” five years ago who did not,

and it was difficult.

Kuhn: Describe what his reaction was and how you overcame it.

Moon: [He felt] that I was doing nothing in my classroom. He always observed my Back Roads classroom, it was always the one with the children doing these 500 things at one time. But, even though I still hope I never see him again, I think he did realize that learning was taking place. The proof is in the pudding. If you talk to the students that are involved in these kinds of programs, then you see the energy and enthusiasm. So, the administration has been very supportive.

In other words, my students leave campus all the time, and there's nothing ever said. That level of trust has been established and built over these last five years, because I didn't trust them when I first started this. I'd call and check. Then we'd have a little thing, too, where when they'd go on an interview, the person had to write when they got there, how they behaved, and when they left, and then they'd get so much time to get from that place back to school. After school was not a problem, but they still have to have the time they came and the time they left. It covers my behind is what it does. If anything happens, I've got, "Well, they were there at this time, and they left at this time." You have to take care of those things. And if you do, the administration sees that these children are not going out and going to McDonald's or whatever when they're supposed to be at the interviews.

There are exceptions. I have had a student that went to McDonald's instead of where he was supposed to be, so he did have to go and serve detention for three days. But he no longer goes off campus—he can't leave during class time. His work has to be done after class, and it kills him. Because of that one time he can't go [off campus for the rest of the semester]. All his work has to be done at school or after school. And you have to be consistent with that, too, because you can't afford to have that trust level destroyed. That's important.

Daspit: As far as administrators go, it surprised me the amount of support that we found. Part of it may have been because we technically were coming through the special education division and the gifted program, and principals in general tend not to interfere with those goings on. At least, I got lip service from everyone saying, "We support what you're doing." I just think they ignored us for the most part. We filed through the office twice a week, heading onto a bus, and came back later. No one knew where I was. I'd get messages, "Where were you sixth hour?" "Well, at the Shadows, remember?"

Nixon: I haven't run into any administrative problems, possibly because I just do it and figure it's easier to beg forgiveness than get permission. Also thus far everything that I've done has involved mostly students working with their families and family members and is an outside assignment that doesn't involve leaving school. They do it at home. The Cruising project had a several week period for interviews. We started talking early in December or late November about the process and brainstormed what we wanted to know about the fifties. Then they had Christmas holidays to do the talking, which is a good time, because that's when families get together. Now that

dreaded conversation with Aunt Sally, here's what I get credit for. [laughter] So that has not been a problem.

I was able to get a bit of money from a local organization that supports schools and offers mini grants, which was enough to pay for the binding and the paper that we used. We bought tapes from the educational foundation—the tapes are still stored there at the school for future use. We did all the publishing on the copier at school and used computers at the school to do the printing with the original. When we did the permission form, interviewees knew [their interview] was going to be included in the book, they would be identified by name, we included biographical information, the tapes would be stored and could be used in future classes. The money we got from the organization was enough to cover all the expenses, and the project was done without really much disruption of the normal school day. So I've not yet come up with too many administrative obstacles, and financial ones I've been able to get over, also.

Moon: We don't have those kinds of funds. There's no budget or anything. I never knew what money was when it came to doing this. To make my money to publish my magazines, we sit outside of a little cafe called the Pastime Grill and rock all night long, begging, "Please, give us some money!" I do everything I can. We wash cars, we do everything.

We sell our magazine, but we don't sell it to make a profit, we sell it to pay for it. And we have started to have subscribers out in the community in the last couple of years because they've seen the first three years of work. We used to have a local Hallmark shop, and they'd sell—and our Pastime Grill, because we've rocked in front of it. And we just publish the magazine once a year, so that makes a difference.

Kuhn: Who decides what goes in and what doesn't go in there?

Moon: Students. Because that magazine is theirs, they've worked on it, it should be what those students want in that magazine. It has to be their work. But you can see a difference in the type of writing. In other words, there are fewer mistakes in the last magazine

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than there were in the first one, and it looks a little bit more polished, because they've learned how to use computers, to which we've gotten access.

Nixon: To me at the time—and I still think that—the process was much more important than the product. When we envisioned this, my main goal was having them do some type of authentic research rather than the type of research that we can do in a public school library that has a limited budget. This was something different. They can't go to the encyclopedia or go to a book that has been on the shelf for a very long time and look up something, because they actually have to go out and do real research. So for me, it was an opportunity to give them a chance to do some authentic research and work with some real material to sharpen their skills as historians, look at how to work with it, how to revise it, and at the same time work on their writing and communication skills. All that was really what I wanted to get at. The book was kind of the icing on the cake. The printing of the book was almost a reward for the students and for the participants. When I wrote for a mini grant, the idea was to make sure we had enough money to print a copy for each student and participant, so that we could give something to everyone. Anything extra we would give to libraries, school libraries and local libraries,

because it definitely is a community interest type thing.

Daspit: The public program was the big thing that [my students] worked on, and they did everything. They would tell us, "This is what we want," or, "We'll make this. This is the format that we want." We have videos of those programs. They're pretty neat. The program would typically involve some reflection of what they'd done during the year. You know, "My name is so and so, I interviewed"—and they either interviewed one or two people, depending on the year—"and we talked about this, and this is what I learned from it."

McLellan: Who is the audience when you do this presentation?

Daspit: Parish library meeting room, about 75 chairs or so, and usually we're pretty full. Again, you can't divorce this program from the African-American studies aspect, because here's a southern plantation in conjunction with the school system offering a program where eighty to ninety percent of the audience is African American. I think that's relatively rare. The students would each invite up to six people, friends and family. We learned an interesting lesson trying to get the elderly members to come to public programs, which is that about seven o'clock at night is too late for many of them. We often had a disappointing turnout from some of the people who were interviewed, but we tried.

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The students also created a tour of the Shadows. We took a tour of the house, and we said, “We can do better,” because the word “slave” was thrown around, but there was no personal identification. They had read the inventories, we knew the names, we’d done genealogies, so they created a tour, and that was for a similar audience.

Audience: How do we fit in the fact that a lot of students don’t have a very good background in history, or have to take standardized tests?

Moon: I’ve never had trouble meeting state curriculum [objectives] for anything I do in that Back Roads classroom, because it covers just about everything. They’re editing, they’re writing, they’re speaking, it’s public speaking in a way. And it’s real world connections and it’s real life skills that they get. They read all this world history, and it doesn’t mean a thing to them out of the textbook, but when they are living it and seeing it in real life, it makes a big connection for them. As a teacher of writing, I have a tendency to think that students do a lot better writing on things that they’re interested in.

I still worry about the standardized testing, because everybody wants you to prove that your way works. I’m in the process of researching that through the Georgia high school graduation test; and my Back Roads students usually are the top students in our school on the writing part of the test. But I don’t know if that’s because they’ve had this and had to do all the editing and revising, or [because] they had good English teachers along the way, too.

One thing that concerns me, too, is my grading and my students. Even though I’ve been doing this for five or six years, I still get so excited about what they’re doing, it’s hard to be objective. In other words, if I get excited I wonder if I’m being objective enough, because very few people—you have to work hard to fail Back Roads. In other words, you have to really be doing nothing. I worry about that aspect of it, about authentic assessment, and I’ve tried to address that through going to different workshops.

It’s something I think comes with experience, too. I don’t think any other teacher can tell you what happens, it just kind of falls into place. You get to the point that if you know your students, you know that you’ve done the right things and that they’re doing the right things.

Nixon: In North Carolina, we have tests for some courses, and United States history is one of them. I’ve never been very impressed with the whole idea, and while test makers work hard to improve the tests, I’ve never been impressed with the test itself. It generally consists of questions that are very trivial in nature. As a result, I don’t pay it a great deal of mind.

What I do is go in and do what I think is the best job I can do, and I’m driven more by my fascination with history and this desire to instill that fascination in students than I am with the test. I just don’t worry about it. My kids do well on the state test and on the advanced placement test. Every year I have those who I think will do well, I have a few who disappoint me, and I’ll have some who surprise me. So it kind of works out. And then, I’m not really worried if the state’s test scores are awful. I mean, what are they going to do? To

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be honest, state bureaucracies hold up these test scores, but I’ve yet to see anything happen because test scores are low. I don’t think that’s going to happen, but even if it did, I’m willing to say, “Look, I’ve been teaching for sixteen years, and you’re going to tell me what one year—What did I do? Did I go to sleep or something?” I really just don’t worry about it, and the test takes care of itself.

Daspit: One of the first courses I took in my doctoral [program], we had to write an autobiography. The first question we asked was, “How are you going to grade this? Someone had an “A” life, and someone had “C” and “D” lives?” The same thing with these [interviews]. Who am I to sit there and say, “This is a better interview than this one is”? Yeah, there are strategies that we can discuss to try to avoid the yes/no answers and things of that nature, but if someone sat there for an hour and had an interview, I’m not going to jump in and say, “Yeah, but the topic was this.” That’s the beauty of oral history. I just did an interview with the person who developed the program with me. We talked about the beauty of going in not knowing what was going to happen, and being willing to turn the authority over, and saying you don’t know what’s going to happen once that tape recorder goes on.

Kuhn: How do you get your students to do better interviews?

Moon: Practice, and also those classroom interviews when we have speakers come in. We do have speakers that deliberately answer those yes/no questions with “yes” or “no,” and everybody just sits there. And then an older student will say, “What has been your most memorable experience?” That gets the conversation going again, and then we all know that we’ve messed up and had a yes/no question.

Peer pressure has a lot to do with mine, as we go through the process, too. Those that are in that group that are doing that

I hope that the students saw then that what has been silenced is sort of the commoners' experience in history, and that those stories are important.

particular project will correct each other. "Why did you ask that?" But I do not let mine go with a written set of notes. In other words, they generate that set of questions, but they do not take a piece of paper with them. They have to go from what that person says. And that's the beauty of an interview, too, that these speakers take you in different places that you hadn't even thought about and give you different ideas about the project.

Nixon: I think part of it is picking the right people to interview. The students have, by looking at the century's social history—it's not as important to pick certain people. They're not going to someone like, "I heard somebody did this, let's go talk to them about it." They're picking people who they want to talk to, and they generally pick people who want to talk, and they talk about things people like to talk about.

It's interesting working with eleventh graders. Sometimes I will read a transcript and see a question asked, and then the response starts to head somewhere and the student goes right on to something else. And you want to say, "Why didn't you ask them about that?" But that's part of the fun of it. Sometimes they stumble on things and find out really neat things, and other times a door opens but they won't go in it.

Moon: When they come back from those interviews, I'll ask, "Why didn't you ask about this when she said that?" When they've had a really good interview outside the classroom, they come back, they're very animated and they start talking about what they learned, and that's sometimes a good way to subtly get into—and let them go back maybe. Because sometimes it takes more than one interview to get the stories we're trying to get, so then they'll remember that to ask the next time.

Nixon: One of the things that I try is come up with enough small questions that essentially are coming at the topic from many different ways. When we brainstorm, kids can come up with lots of different ways of essentially asking the same thing. Maybe this

one question didn't lead anywhere, and later they come back with something else that gets at what they wanted from a different angle. It's almost like the shotgun approach, fire and hope you hit something.

Daspit: I found that peer interviews are very useful, because knowing what it's like to sit on the other side of the microphone is really important. And I concur that the sharing of the stories from the interviews really helped a lot, because there was always one brave soul who goes out two or three weeks before they have to go out, comes back and shares. They learn wonderful things like, "As soon as that tape recorder went off, that's when the real good stories started."

We did generate questions together. "Behind the Veil" (A project documenting African-American life in the Jim Crow South, sponsored by Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies) had some sample questions and several other sources, although we urge them, "Please don't walk in with questions." I mean, maybe an index card you can peek at. Most students come back and say, "I asked the first question, and they just talked. Just went from there."

McLellan: How does this change the students? What do they learn doing it, and how do they come away different from this oral history project?

Moon: One thing that comes out of it, the generation gap in these interviews melts away. My students come back with so much respect for the older people they've talked to, especially the older people. They enjoy the interviews with the older people more than they do the ones who are maybe close to their age or close to my age, which is not ancient yet.

This little lady was almost ninety-two years old that we interviewed. This was the first black lady that we had gotten to interview, and all eight of my black students wanted to go over there at one time, and she's ninety-two years old. She said "Bring 'em on!" And they were so animated when they got back. They came back bursting back into the classroom. They said, "You won't believe this. Her grandmother was an ex-slave, and she lived in Pike County, and there's a place over there that you can go and see where she was actually born." So we took a trip in the next week. We all went over to Pike County where this lady was supposedly born, and Miss Bertha went with us. That was a shining moment in my teaching career, to hear those children and that woman; she was animated, because somebody cared enough to ask about her history. You know what I'm talking about? It made her whole life viable, and I think that was important.

Nixon: I like to think that it changes their perspective of history a bit, because it provides a living link to history. Unfortunately to most of them, history is the stuff in this book, and it's very dry and people act very serious and do very serious things, and it doesn't seem as if it was ever alive. But by talking with people about their past experiences, I think it changes their perception. They start to understand that even though people lived long ago doesn't mean they were a great deal different from the way we are today. I think that's the biggest benefit.

Daspit: I was reminded of a story a second ago. We were on

a field trip to a plantation home, and learning absolutely nothing except what Hollywood films have been filmed at that site, and we walked into the old school house, and the bus driver, an elderly African-American gentleman, tagged along with us. One of the students said, "Well, what's this?" It was a potbelly stove, and the tour guide said, "I really don't know." The bus driver said, "I remember." And he went on for fifteen or twenty minutes talking about, "I had to bring the coal in every morning," and "You've got this soot all over your clothes." I hope that the students saw then that what has been silenced is sort of the commoners' experience in history, and that those stories are important. So I hope that it just gives a chance to recognize that they can be producers, they are producers of history. It's a question of realizing it and focusing it. And they also learn how difficult this is.

McLellan: What would you tell a new teacher to convince a school system in a proposal that this is a good thing to do?

Nixon: Well, the first obvious one is the content itself. The students are going to learn about whatever it is they're going to be looking into. If it's the thing I did on the fifties, content-wise they're going to learn what it was like to grow up in a small town in the 1950s. But then you also bring in the interview skills. You bring in the writing skills, especially. And in a state's course of study, there are certain historical skills which are supposed to be taught in addition to the content, [including] writing and questioning, and those skills also are in the English curriculum. So when you look at the skills aspect, it's very easy to come up with the things that the students are going to learn.

Moon: After you talk about the content, you also talk about the modalities that are going to be addressed—the jargon that the educators need to hear. In other words, what things are you going to incorporate through a series of presentations by speakers and involvement in community activities. All our speakers come from the community involved in the school. That's a good way to make them perk up and listen when they think the community is coming in.

Toby: I agree. "Collaborations in community," that's a big selling point, because I think school systems seem to be looking for those connections. Content area is another way that I would sell it, just kind of confessing that we've failed in a lot of respects in traditional methods, whether it's history or literature. And you can go to the literature to find that jargon. I mean we can all do the dog and pony show. You're tapping into "higher level thinking skills," and the "student generated experience"—

McLellan: "service learning"?

Moon: In your proposal, you are trying to appeal to different types of learners that are going to be reading that proposal, too, and you're going to be trying to excite each one of them about what you want to do in that classroom. And that's important.

McLellan: What would you warn teachers about before they adopt a project like this, and what reward would you point to that teachers or students could carry away from this?

Moon: Anytime you take on something like this, it is more than the normal eight-hour day. I mean, there's a lot of work

involved on your part to keep that momentum going. And sometimes at the end of the day, you're worn slap out, and sometimes your day doesn't end till nine o'clock at night. But the first reward I get from it is seeing students excited about learning and what they're doing. Their enthusiasm is contagious. That's the biggest reward for me, because I'm forty-four years old, but in my mind I'm eighteen, because I stayed there with them. I think this type of project is what keeps me young.

Nixon: My warning would be to make your project much smaller than what you think you can do, because what looks to be very manageable quickly turns into a monster. And she's right, the reward is that something has been done that's worthwhile and it's real, it's authentic, rather than you've gone through this year, and we've talked about the right things, and we've taken the proper tests. But you have something now that's a product of some type of historical inquiry.

Daspit: I think I would warn about some of the ethical issues that come up when we start talking about voice and representation, but that's also a reward, too, because you're digging into those questions as opposed to—it's a lot easier just to sit there and stand up in front of the class and lecture than to turn it over and say, "We're admitting we don't know what's going to happen." Money and time become really, really important, too. I mean, if you're talking about thirty-five students at a time, how do you do that? How do you get tape recorders to everyone? How do you share that? And the reward, it's the same from what I'm hearing from all of us. It's a real product for a real audience. Students are actually producing something that other people are going to see or talk about, and it's personally satisfying. I don't know how to phrase it any other way, but it's fun.

Moon: Can I take just one moment? I brought this quote, because it has become part of my philosophy. It's a quote by Aunt Addie Norton in one of the Foxfire books. This to me sums up what I'm doing. It says, "I tell you one thing, if you learn it by yourself, if you have to get down and dig for it, it never leaves you. It stays there as long as you live, because you had to dig it out of the mud before you learned what it was." That says a lot about what oral history does for everybody that's involved. □

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