

Vietnamese Americans

LESSONS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

LESSON 7

Oral History and Multiculturalism

SUBJECTS

World History, American Experience, World Literature, American Literature, and Multicultural Education

OBJECTIVES

1. To observe the human or personal side of history by learning about the people in the community who are essentially “living” histories.
2. To compare the histories of different ethnic groups and to locate areas or patterns of commonality.
3. To identify the cultural diversity and history of the local community, and to appreciate the contributions that members of diverse cultures or ethnic groups have made to the economic, political and social development of the community.
4. To understand the social, political, and economic conditions that force individuals and families to take drastic measures such as moving to a new area or another country.
5. To open a new avenue for communication with an older generation.
6. To follow the process of preparing a manuscript for publication, including gathering information, organizing, writing, editing, rewriting and formatting.
7. To appreciate the interrelationship of literature and history.
8. To realize that history is constructed, and that students can participate in writing history.

STANDARDS SUPPORTED

This lesson supports national social studies standards, Strand II: Time, Continuity and Change, Strand IV: Individual Identity and Development, and Strand V: Individuals, Groups and Institutions.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

5 class periods

Copies of Handout: Interview Outline (This particular outline was previously used in an interview of a former South Vietnamese military officer who spent close to a decade in a Vietnamese Communist re-education camp.)

Copies of Handout: Sample Agreement Form for Interviewee

Tape recorders and, at most, two blank recording tapes for each team of students.

Note: Teachers may want to do additional research in the area of oral history. An internet search on “oral history” or “oral history guide” will give you an abundance of resources. Also, your local college or university may house an oral history program that could provide additional resources.

HOW TO DO IT

INTRODUCING THE PROJECT

Introduce the oral history project to the students and tell them that they will be working as teams on the project.

Explain to the students that many historical documents and books tend to focus on famous people and big events, and tend to ignore ordinary people and everyday events. But everyone has a story to tell about his or her life; we all have interesting life experiences to share.

Oral history preserves the stories and conversations of people who have participated in or lived through important political, cultural and/or economic developments in modern times. Oral history captures these direct personal experiences and eyewitness testimonies.

An oral history project involves students in the pursuit of history, where they learn new, unexpected facts and stories that strengthen and personalize their own knowledge of history. This is their chance to participate in the actual writing of history.

DEFINING THE TOPIC

The first step is to define the main topics or subjects to explore. Explain the purpose and objectives (listed above) of the project to students. General themes of the project are “multiculturalism,” “diversity” and/or “immigrants and immigration.”

Ask the students to identify all the racial and ethnic groups represented among the inhabitants of the local community. To further define the main topic, ask the students to brainstorm historical events or experiences often shared by members of each ethnic/racial group. Topics you might suggest:

- Experience of a Vietnamese refugee who escaped Vietnam in the late 1970s and 1980s.
- Experience of a Vietnamese prisoner in a Communist re-education camp.
- Adjustment and acculturation experiences of newly-arrived immigrants and refugees from Eastern Europe or Africa.
- Native American childhood memories of separation from families and tribal affiliations.
- Experiences of African Americans in schools prior to and after the Brown vs. Board of Education case (desegregation).
- Experiences of Japanese Americans in U.S. relocation camps during World War II.
- Experiences of European immigrants during the Depression.
- Life as Latino migrant workers in the early 20th century.
- Factors that influenced decision to immigrate to the U.S. or to move to your community.

RESEARCHING FOR BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Divide the class into teams of two students each. Team members should decide on topics of interest to them – topics or subjects they would like to further explore.

To better prepare the students for the interview, ask them to conduct some background research on the topic or subject of choice. Information could be gathered on specific topics derived from the brainstorming session or on general characteristics and experiences of ethnic/racial groups.

Suggest they look at newspapers, magazines, textbooks, novels, maps, photographs of an era or place, internet census data and other websites. Remind students to record their thoughts and formulate questions that they may want to ask in the interview.

IDENTIFYING THE NARRATOR

After further defining the purpose and focus of each project, each team will identify an individual who could help shed light on the chosen subject or information they have gained from the background research.

To foster understanding of different groups, each team must choose an interviewee who belongs to a different racial or ethnic group than those of the team members. Ask the students:

- Where they would likely find people who are willing to volunteer for the project?
- How could they widen the pool of potential interviewees?
- Who are some of the people they know in the community? Neighbors? Other teachers and administrators in their school? Members of their church or temple? Immediate family members or relatives? Grandparents? Members of civic groups, senior citizens center, or community organizations? Parents of friends?

Stress the importance of safety for the students. Are they personally familiar with the potential interviewees? Do the interviewees come from a trusted source? The teacher can also have his or her own list of trusted individuals who would be willing to participate in the project. Interviews could also be conducted on school grounds.

Make sure that the people chosen by the teams somewhat represent the actual diversity of the local community.

PREPARING THE INTERVIEW OUTLINE

With the information obtained from the background research, each team should construct an interview outline. Provide students with copies of the Interview Outline Handout as a sample.

The interview outline is a general list of topics and questions; students should use it to help them in their interviews, but should not strictly adhere to it. The interviewers should remember to maintain the oral history as an open-ended process that allows the interviewee to shape the narrative in his or her own style. An oral history may not necessarily be sequential or chronological. The interviewer is there to simply guide the narrator.

CONTACTING THE NARRATOR

Now, each team should contact the person it plans on interviewing to ensure their cooperation. Explain to the potential interviewee the purpose of the class oral history project, ensuring that they know its plans and intentions. Give the interviewee a general outline of what will be covered in the interview. Make sure the interviewee knows you will be taping the interview. Also, provide an estimate of the length of the interview.

The next step is to arrange an interview appointment at a time most convenient for the narrator. It is recommended that teams reconfirm in advance just to be sure.

CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

Remind the teams to practice using any equipment, such as a tape recorder, before the interview. Use good quality, 60-minute tapes. Remember that tapes have a few seconds of “lead time,” so warn students to not begin recording the moment they turn on the tape recorder. Students should label tapes by writing the narrator’s name, date and purpose on each side of the tape. If one side is blank, write “blank” on it.

Upon arrival, students should politely greet their narrator, introduce themselves, and thank the narrator for volunteering. Once the narrator and interviewers are settled and the equipment is ready, the students should record on the tape the date, location and the names of participants of the interview. To help smooth the interviewing process, students should not turn the tape recorder on and off; they should do so only when the tape needs to be turned over or when the narrator asks for it to be turned off.

Students should begin the interview with the most general question to see where this leads them, before asking

more detailed questions. Basic questions include: “Can you tell me about...?” or “Can you describe...?”

Students should ask open-ended questions and avoid questions that result in “yes” or “no” answers. Ask follow-up questions that would yield the most detail. Remember to formulate and ask questions that answer “who-what-when-where-and-why.”

Students should not strictly adhere to the interview outline. Students should listen attentively, and follow and pursue the direction of the interviewee’s narrative with additional questions that could capture more detail, rather than simply moving to the next question on the interview outline.

Remind students to be flexible. They should not let periods of silence fluster them. Ask only one question at a time. Keep questions short and clear. Do not interrupt. Give the narrator a chance to think about the question. Allow plenty of time for the narrator to answer. Respond positively with nods and smiles.

Students should be polite and respectful of the narrator’s wishes. If the narrator asks for a break or that the tape recorder be turned off, the team should comply.

Since this oral history project is a team effort, suggest to the students that they take turns asking questions. Remind them to respect and to consider each other’s feelings, opinions and input.

Remind students to take notes during the interview, as a reminder for later questions, clarification of details or additional research.

Also, students should pay attention to non-verbal cues, which may improve the students’ analysis of the interview and the narrative. Some behaviors could be captured on tape, such as long pauses, laughter, or sighs. But there are equally important non-verbal behaviors; for example, the narrator may become particularly nervous, distracted at specific points in the interview, or may tear up as they narrate.

Students should end the interview at a reasonable time. One and one-half hours is usually enough time for the scope of this lesson.

Once the interview is completed, thank the narrator for volunteering and sharing. Remind the interviewee that the narrative will be used for the class project, and ask the interviewee to sign the agreement form (please see attached sample agreement form). Take the time to thank the narrator and answer any questions the narrator may have about the project.

Before the students depart, they should leave contact information (classroom teacher’s information) for the narrator in case he or she would like to contact someone about the project. Remind students to send a thank-you card or letter to the narrator shortly after the interview.

PROCESSING THE INTERVIEW

The teams should get together as soon after the interview as possible. This could be for a short period of time, but it is important for the team to process the interviewing experience and to take additional notes of each member’s observations and thoughts.

The next step is for students to transcribe their interviews. First, students should attempt to record the narrative verbatim and ignore grammatical structure. After completing the transcript, students should help each other with the editing process, with final approval from the teacher.

The final stories could be completed in a variety of formats, from question-answer to story narrative. All final stories should give credit to those who contributed information for the project. Photographs, newspaper clippings and other documents could be incorporated into the story.

At this point, teachers have discretion on how the students should present their stories in a final product. Teams can simply turn in their stories or make presentations to the rest of the class. Or, to make this class project more exciting and worthwhile, consider the possibility of publishing the oral histories as the final product of the project — a compilation book of oral histories of real people from your local community.

(Teachers who have helped students publish a book of oral histories report that students feel a high sense of excitement and accomplishment after the book copies come back from the printer.)

ASSESSMENT/CLOSURE

After the class shares its oral histories, an important closure activity is necessary to help students evaluate their experience with the oral history project. A group discussion and/or writing assignment could address the following questions:

1. What did you learn from an oral history interview that you would not have learned from reading a book?
2. What did you learn that you did not know before about this particular person, historical event or time period, or ethnic/racial group?
3. Is there additional historical or other information that you would like to know or pursue about your interviewee, a particular event/time period, or an ethnic/racial community?
4. In hindsight, what could you have done to improve your oral history project (i.e., your interviewing skills or the questions asked)?
5. What, if any, skills did you gain from this oral history project (i.e. your speaking or communications skills, an ability to communicate with an older generation or your listening skills)?

SOURCES: ADAPTED FROM SEVERAL ORIGINAL LESSON PLANS BY ELAINE SEAVEY AND BY RICHARD OAKES PETERS; "AN ORAL HISTORY PRIMER" BY SHERNA BERGER GLUCK; AND THE INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO, "ADVENTURES IN ORAL HISTORY: USING ORAL HISTORY IN K-12," A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT OF CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, LONG BEACH AND LONG BEACH UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT AND DIRECTED BY SHERNA BERGER GLUCK AND KAREN HARPER.

Lesson 7: Oral History and Multiculturalism
Handout 7(a)

Interview Outline Sample

Topic: The Story of a Vietnamese Prisoner of War
Personal and Family Background

1. Tell us about growing up in Vietnam.

Where were you born/raised?

How many were in your family?

What did your family do for a living?

What do you remember about growing up there?

What was your schooling there?

What were your plans for the future when you were going to school?

What made you join the military?

Life in Vietnam

2. Tell us about your life in Vietnam after 1975.

Why were you unable to escape Vietnam shortly before or after the fall of Saigon?

When were you imprisoned by the new Vietnamese government?

Where was the prison located?

How were you treated in the prison?

What was a typical day in prison? Please describe?

Were your family members able to visit you in the prison?

When did the Vietnamese government release you from prison?

What was life like for you after your release?

Leaving Vietnam

3. Tell us when and how you left Vietnam.

How old were you at the time?

Why did you and/or your family leave?

What were your plans?

By what means did you leave Vietnam?

Did you leave any immediate family members behind?

Did you have any reservations about leaving your homeland?

4. Tell us what you expected life to be like in the U.S.

What was your definition of the American Dream?

What is your definition of the American Dream now?

Do you think you or your family can attain it?

Settling in the U.S.

5. Tell us your first impressions of the U.S.

Did you know anyone here?

Where did you first settle? Why there?

Did you know or meet other Vietnamese people here?

Life in the U.S.

6. Tell me about your life in the U.S.

How did you go about finding a job?

housing?

making friends?

What was the most challenging adjustment for you?

Have you experienced any acts of prejudice or racism?

How does your life here compare to your life in Vietnam?

7. Were you able to maintain Vietnamese customs? Language?

What difficulties did you face maintaining your culture?

To become an American, do you think you can retain your culture?

Did you maintain ties with Vietnam? Visit?

Reflections

8. Looking back on your experience, what would you have done differently?

Would you have stayed in Vietnam?

What would you do differently in the U.S.?

Lesson 7: Oral History and Multiculturalism
Handout 7(b)

Agreement Form

Your story (oral history) is valuable for our Oral History Class Project on the topic of _____.
We are students at _____ School.
If you are in agreement, please complete and sign the form below.

I hereby give to the ORAL HISTORY CLASS PROJECT and/or the _____ SCHOOL
for educational uses and purposes outlined in the class, the following tapes of the interviews recorded on
(dates) _____.

Unless otherwise specified below, I place no restrictions on non-commercial access to and use of the interviews.

Name _____
Phone _____ Email _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Signature of Interviewee Date

Name of interviewer _____ School phone _____
Name of interviewer _____ School phone _____
School Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Signature of Teacher Date

I wish to place the following restrictions on the use of the recorded interviews (please check and initial those restrictions you wish to place on the use of your interview(s)):

- ☐ I wish to be identified by a different name _____
☐ I wish to restrict access to the materials until (date) _____
☐ Other (specify) _____

I/we agree to abide by these restrictions

Signed by _____ Date _____
Position _____ Phone/email _____

If you should wish to make inquiries at any future date about your interview, feel free to contact _____
_____, teacher and project supervisor at () _____.