INTEGRATING ORAL HISTORY INTO THE CLASSROOM CURRICULUM: A TOOL FOR HELPING STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THE AMERICAN AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Valerie Grim
Indiana University

INTRODUCTION

Most American high-school graduates have not taken courses that examine the experiences of minorities in the United States. Many come from towns and communities where few African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans reside. Some have never had direct contact with a member of a minority culture. Into this experiential void go impressions drawn from radio, television, films, documentaries, newspapers, and magazines. More often than not, the information students, who belong to the majority culture, get from the media prejudicially reinforces stereotypical images of minority populations.

Therefore, when many students arrive on college campuses, they are ill-prepared to communicate with each other, especially with minorities. Many are insensitive to racial issues, and out of ignorance behave offensively and make insulting remarks. Because of an institutional need to counter both unintentional insensitivity and a resurgence of racism on campus, multicultural advocates are working to establish ethnic departments and programs at colleges and universities where they do not exist. They are having to fight to ensure the survival of programs already in place. Advocates of the curricular study of human diversity are also pressing faculties to incorporate in mainstream academic coursework an appreciation of the minority experience. Afro-American Studies and Women's Studies classes, they argue, should not be the only courses that mention Blacks and women in America. While debates and discussions are taking place on how to integrate the minority experience into the curriculum, some professors are creating innovative techniques to provide students with a more diverse education. Oral history is one of the teaching-tools some of them are using, not only to broaden their students' knowledge, but also to improve their students' perception of people who do not share their background and experience.[1]

Teaching History 20(1). DOI: 10.33043/TH.20.1.3-19. ©1995 Valerie Grim

---

[1] Nicholas J. Karolides and Laura Quinn, eds., "Curriculum Development," *Wisconsin English Journal* 29 (October 1986), 1-36. See also Yolanda T. Moses and Patricia J. Higgins, "Anthropology and Multicultural Education: Classroom Applications," symposium presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Los Angeles, 5 December 1981; Margaret L. Giesbrecht, "Developing an Oral History Project to Help Students and Teachers Analyze and Understand Educational change," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, New Orleans, 17-20 February 1988; Fran Andrew Stone, "Using Oral History in Educational Studies," *Multicultural Research Guide Series*, no. 1 (Storrs: University of Connecticut, 1977); Ursula Casanona and Alice Trujillo Budd, "Oral Histories of Latino Academics: Work in Progress," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, 27-31 March 1989; Zdena Manulle Gretel, "The Study of Family History Research Projects in a Senior Seminar," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, 16 (Spring 1991), 27-32; and Jean Gandesberg, "Listening to See: The Place of Oral History in Composition Classes," *Journal of Basic Writing*, 8 (Winter 1989), 311-319.

This article summarizes the results of a classroom experiment that involved the integration of oral history into the curriculum. It shows that this research methodology is an effective classroom technique in bringing history alive. It discusses the theory, the preparation, and the application of oral-history research. To illustrate how students interpreted and contextualized information, it presents and analyzes excerpts from students' papers. In the concluding analysis, it examines descriptions of students' reactions to this assignment, and shows that students become interested in learning when they actively take part in the process.

THE AFRO-AMERICAN HISTORY COURSE

At Indiana University during the fall semester of 1991, sixty juniors and seniors were enrolled in Afro-American History, a course offered by the Department of Afro-American Studies. Of these students, there were 34 Caucasians, 23 African Americans, two Asians, and one Native American. The students were majoring in business, criminal justice, journalism, psychology, English, political science, and Afro-American Studies. Only ten had taken courses on the African-American experience in the United States. Some had learned academic skills in critical thinking, but more than half had not. Many had neither written research papers, nor participated in designing or carrying out research projects.

Recognizing that history and critical-thinking skills had to be taught simultaneously, and that students needed to move beyond reading history as the only means through which to understand the African-American experience in the United States, I introduced oral history in such a way as to provide students with an opportunity to interact with each other while engaging in dialogue with people whose perspectives the lectures and required readings may or may not have covered.[2] As an

---

[2] When students have not taken courses that examined the African American experience, it is often difficult to engage them in conversations about theories pertaining to Black people. It is equally difficult to get them to apply concepts and critical thinking to course materials. Recognizing that students in this class lacked the background to discuss historical significance and context, I found it necessary to teach the background information before discussing the issues and concepts outlined in the syllabus. Though the background information I provided on each topic was useful, this process slowed the pace of the discussion, and prevented me from covering events and ideas I would have liked to have explored. Asking myself whether it was more important for students to be exposed to every significant detail concerning the historical experience of Blacks in America, or whether it was more helpful for them to concentrate on less detail and focus on critical thinking and involving them in the learning process, I decided that both of these concerns were legitimate, and needed to be addressed within the class. Consequently, I decided that students could learn details if I focused on selected, but significant, ideas, issues, and events: Reconstruction, Blacks' Depression, Blacks and government, development of the Black community, and the civil rights movement. Focusing on these events, students would eventually understand concepts such as liberalism and conservatism, integration and separation, action and reaction, and oppression and domination. Recognizing that many of the required readings (books and articles) would be difficult to understand for those who knew little, or had vague information, about the Black experience, I decided that practical exercises were needed to provide a fuller picture of the social impact of race, class, and caste. To accomplish this objective, I decided to integrate oral history into the curriculum as a means of helping students improve their writing, critical, analytical, and interpretative skills. It was my hope that through group discussions, mock in-class interviews, and interviews with people in the community, students would understand more fully both

extra-credit assignment, oral history became the occasion for all the enrolled students—those who participated only in discussions, mock-interview sessions, and the framing of interview questions, as well as those who engaged in each of these activities and also conducted interviews—to experience other people's emotions while reexamining their own beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes.[3]

Focusing on the African-American experience from Reconstruction through Reaganomics, students studied several themes to guide their thinking as they read required assignments. These included republicanism, individualism, nationalism, separatism, integrationism, liberalism, and conservatism. In addition, the students learned to view African Americans' social, political, economic, and cultural plight in the context of unity and diversity, crisis and conflict, action and reaction. Discussion of philosophical ideas of Black leaders and groups helped students understand how America responded to "Blackness," for a key social problem of the twentieth century was not only "the problem of the color line," but the "double consciousness" Blacks had to acknowledge:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels this twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two

---

the Black historical experience, and how to apply, conceptualize, and contextualize information about it.

[3] Since oral history was not a part of the original assignments, I decided to make it an extra-credit assignment as a means of helping students learn history by involving them in the process (as well as providing them with the opportunity to earn extra-credit points). Students could earn up to twenty-five points. Because oral history has proven to be a valuable research and learning tool to those who utilize this methodology, all students were required to participate. However, each could choose whether he or she wanted to conduct a final interview. In other words, each student had to read the reserved readings and handouts on oral history; each had to choose a topic or issue to explore; each had to write questions; each had to discuss their topics (issues) and questions; each had to be prepared to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of oral history, as well as the approach and attitude potential interviewers should adopt; each had to participate in in-class mock-interview sessions, taping sessions, and group activities. In the end, it was the student's choice whether he or she would conduct a formal interview with someone in the community. Students who participated in in-class activities and wrote a final essay analyzing the preparation, but who chose not to conduct a formal interview, could receive up to fifteen points, while those who participated in all the in-class activities, conducted formal interviews, wrote final papers, and did an oral presentation, could earn up to twenty-five points. The idea was to make oral history a class project, with emphasis on students' understanding the process, and on recognizing how this research and teaching tool made learning a participatory activity. Fifteen of the students chose to conduct formal interviews. Since both Afro-American history and oral-history research were new experiences for 90 percent of the class, an overwhelming majority of the students did not feel comfortable interviewing people regarding their attitude and perception of Blacks and race relations. These students were struggling with their own perceptions, notions, values, and attitudes about problems in our society.

> unreconciled striving; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[4]

Because of the oral-history activities, some students were finally able to grasp the concept of double consciousness and the impact of race and class on the Black community. Reacting to information obtained in an interview, one student admitted:

> nothing could have prepared me for the emotions I experienced as I listened and watched Mrs. Williams explain, with tears in her eyes, how she felt life had not changed and will not change for Black people. No in-class preparation can prepare an interviewer for this kind of reaction because it is unpredictable and demands that you react with your emotion and not your intellect. I learned a lot from her words, but it was her emotions that grasped me and helped me to understand in greater detail, even better than the books, not only her views as an African American, but how the majority society's attitude about Blacks imprisons us and them. . . . Because of the knowledge I received and the opportunity I had to interact with a person who lived history, I finally understood DuBois's double-consciousness concept, for Mrs. Williams's emotions and pain were those of a woman who was angry about her inability to advance, about having to fight for the simplest things in life, about having always to go through whites to get what she needed, about being Black and an American, a burden that weighed her down with despair, periodical hatred, and disdain for a society that looks on Blacks with amused contempt and pity. . . . I can say that oral history, in these kinds of instances, is as important to our understanding of past developments as written records are to the writing of history.

THEORIES ON ORAL HISTORY: ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Literature on oral history as a research methodology reveals valuable facts about its strengths and weaknesses. Scholars who believe oral history is an effective means of gathering data argue it is useful because it deals with individual perceptions, provides missing links that bring together various types of data, provides the opportunity (in the absence of written memoirs) to get a sense of people's inner thoughts, and helps answer the question of why.[5] In the course on Afro-American

---

[4] W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: The New American Library, 1969), 45.

[5] For discussion of the advantages of oral history, I gave the students a handout containing suggested readings: Susan D. Rose, "Conversations of Conversions: Interviewing American Evangelical women," *International Journal of Oral History*, 40 (February 1987), 28-40; Thomas H. O'Connor, "History From the Bottom to Top," *New England Social Studies*, 42 (Spring 1984-85), 15-22; Rickie Burman, "Participating in the Past: Oral History and Community History in the Work of Manchester Studies," *International Journal of Oral History*, 5 (January 1984), 114; Stone, "Using Oral History in Educational Studies;" William Durt Laudersale, "Future Teachers Recover the Past Through Oral History," *Journal of Teacher Education*, 37 (July-August 1986), 16-19; Margaret L. Giesbrecht, "Developing an Oral History Project to Help Students and Teachers Analyze and Understand Educational Change," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of Colleges

History, students became aware that oral history can play a major role in filling voids where information is lacking. Through assigned readings and discussions, they realized that humanistic analyses are useful in providing documentation on less prominent groups, such as African Americans, immigrants, and women.[6] In many instances, oral history provides a better understanding of these people's experiences. Talking directly to participants is the only way some data—such as biographical information, community development, and family and work experiences—can be elicited.[7]

Despite its ability to uncover unfamiliar information, oral history also has shortcomings. Scholars less inclined to use it argue that orally collected data are difficult to quantify, are subject to multiple interpretations, and reflect researchers' biases.[8] In addition, oral history, when used as a learning tool, is subject to disenfranchisement because the issues of students as researchers and teachers as coresearchers and project directors come into play. For example, oral history has not only the potential to empower students, but the tendency to act as a control-unit plan

---

for Teacher Education, New Orleans, 17-20 February 1988; David Thelen, "Memory and American History," *Journal of American History* 75, 4 (March 1989), 1117-29; and Clark Culpepper et al., "Developing Instruction in Oral History: A New Avenue for Speech Communication," *Communication Education*, 30 (July 1981), 238-244.

[6] For supporting evidence, I suggested the following readings: Ruth Edmond Hill, "The Black Women Oral History Project," *Behavioral and Social Sciences Librarian*, 4 (Summer 1985), 3-14; Henry H. Brownstein, "Using Intensive Interview Data: Teaching Concepts of Ethnicity and Ethnic Group Relations," *Teaching Sociology*, 9 (January 1982), 189-197; Ruth Martin, "Oral History in Social Work Education: Chronicling the Black Experience," *Journal of Social Work Education*, 23 (Fall 1987), 5-10; Alice Grellner, "Integrating Materials About Women into the Curriculum," *Currents: Issues in Education and Human Development*, 5 (Fall 1987), 67-72; "Scholars Reproached for Ignoring 'Women of Color' in U.S. History," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 32 (April 23, 1986), 7-10; Bruce Stave, "The Chinese Puzzle: In Search of Oral History in the People's Republic of China," *International Journal of Oral History*, 6 (November 1985), 147-162; Ursula Casanora and Alice Trujillo Budd, "Oral Histories of Latino Academics: Work in Progress," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, 27-31 March 1989; and Burman, "Participating in the Past," 114.

[7] Suggested readings on the significance of oral history to the study of biography, community development, and family history included Elizabeth A. Daniels, "The Intersection of Biography and History: The Vassar Class of 1935," *International Journal of Oral History*, 9 (June 1988), 125-130; Bette S. Wiedman, "Oral History in Biography: A Shaping Source," *International Journal of Oral History*, 8 (February 1987), 41-55; Carl Ryant, "Oral History and the Family: A Tool for the Documentation and Interpretation of Family History," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, 15 (Fall 1990), 51-56; Gretel, "The Study of Family History Research Projects in a Senior Seminar," 27-32; and Burman, Participating in the Past," 114.

[8] For a discussion of the advantages of oral history, each student was required to select two of the following reserved readings: Alan Wieder, "Oral History and History of Education: Interactive History," *Journal of Social Studies Research*, 12 (Winter 1988), 25-29; Daphne Patai, "Ethical Problems of Personal Narratives, or Who Should Eat the Last Piece of Cake?" *International Journal of Oral History*, 8 (February 1987), 5-27; and James R. King and Norman A. Stahl, "Oral History as a Critical Pedagogy: Some Cautionary Issues," paper presented at the eleventh annual meeting of the American Reading Forum, Sarasota, Florida, 12-15 December 1990.

for teachers. One is critical pedagogy; the other is not. Thus, as teachers and students conduct oral-history research, they must be aware of potential conflict.[9]

One of the tasks associated with integrating oral history into the curriculum involved helping students understand the application of the methodology.[10] To accomplish this objective, and to ensure that students would become thoroughly familiar with the task at hand, I assigned diverse readings.[11] I required students to select and prepare a discussion of three different texts. In classroom discussions, students addressed three questions: (1) why the authors chose to use oral history; (2) if oral history proved essential to the telling of the story; and (3) what problems can result from utilizing this methodology. This exercise helped students understand how scholars approached a subject, and how they successfully employed oral-history techniques.

PREPARING STUDENTS TO CONDUCT ORAL HISTORY

Various in-class activities prepared students to conduct oral histories. These included mock-interviews and debates and probing-and-answer sessions. The latter focused on the attitude and approach students should adopt while conducting

---

[9] King and Stahl, "Oral History as a Critical Pedagogy: Some Cautionary Issues."

[10] To integrate oral history into the curriculum, discussions were organized and activities were arranged for each Friday of the week. The class met for 55 minutes on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Students were given instructions, and they were prepared to participate in the activities. They came to class with questions from the assigned readings. Friday activities alternated between discussions of the readings and group activity. Whenever students discussed a particular reading on a given Friday, the following Friday was used to encourage students to act out what they had learned from the previous reading. This exercise helped students put into practice what they had learned in theory. Initially, I thought students were participating simply because they could use the extra credit. But it soon became clear that they were involved and wanted to participate because they were teaching themselves, and were discovering things about themselves, their peers, and members of their families that they found interesting.

[11] For examples of how oral-history techniques had been applied, students read and discussed the following: Roy Rosenzweig and Barbara Melosh, "Government and the Arts: Voices From the New Deal Era," *Journal of American History*, 77 (September 1990), 596-608; John Bodnar, "Power and Memory in Oral History: Workers and Managers at Studebaker," *Journal of American History*, 75 (March 1989), 1201-21; Kim Lacy Rogers, "Oral History and the History of the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History*, 75 (September 1988), 567-576; Sam Totten, "Using Oral Histories and Interviews to Address the Nuclear Arms Race," *Georgia Social Science Journal*, 16 (September 1985), 47-53; Bette S. Wiedman, "Oral History in Biography: A Shaping Source," *International Journal of Oral History*, 8 (February 1987), 41-55; Ruth Edmond Hill, "The Black Women Oral History Project," *Behavior and Social Sciences Librarian*, 4 (Summer 1985), 3-14; Edmund J. Farrell, "Oral Histories as Living Literature," *English Journal*, 71 (April 1982), 87-92; Henry H. Brownstein, "Using Intensive Interview Data: Teaching Concepts of Ethnicity and Ethnic Group Relations," *Teaching Sociology*, 9 (January 1982), 189-197; and Alessandro Portelli, "The Time of My Life: Functions of Time in Oral History," *International Journal of Oral History*, 2 (November 1981), 162-180.

interviews. Additional discussions focused on recording and transcribing interview data.[12]

All classroom preparation consisted of group participation. Students participated in weekly group discussions and activities. I divided each discussion session into six groups. Within each group, the students discussed subjects that interested them, and they received questions and feedback from group members. Later, the entire class reassembled and engaged in dialogue, which led to additional suggestions and questions.[13]

With questions in hand, the next phase of these activities involved practice sessions where nonparticipants—those who read the oral history assignments and participated in each of the classroom activities, but did not feel comfortable conducting formal interviews—allowed themselves to be interviewed by those planning to conduct oral histories. In these sessions, students learned to make distinctions between personal and impersonal information. On the one hand, they recognized they could question public information: on marriages, divorces, deaths, taxes, property ownership, and other data that can be secured from written records. Students also perceived it would be appropriate to ask questions about participation in events, reaction to issues and developments, and view of life, people, and culture. On the other hand, they learned to avoid personal questions (like questions about sexual behavior) that make most respondents uncomfortable.[14]

---

[12] For a discussion on interviewing techniques, questioning skills, and the taping of interviews, see John Ahren, "Teaching Oral History Techniques," *Education Studies Review*, 26 (Spring 1988), 39-44; and Margaret L. Giesbrecht, "Developing an Oral History Project to Help Students and Teachers Analyze and Understand Educational Change," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, New Orleans, 17-20 February 1988.

[13] Though most of the students were not going to conduct the final interviews, it was important to involve all students in the exercises so they could become familiar with oral-history research and literature as well as the importance of this methodology to historical documentation. Oral history is a skill which I believe all students, at some point, can integrate into their learning experience. During the first two group activities, each student discussed his or her interview subject, and shared with the class the questions he or she wanted to explore. To ensure that nearly every dimension of the subject would be examined, group members were expected to suggest questions to each other. During the third group activity, students brought tape recorders and practiced interviewing each other. To see if potential interviewers were comfortable, cordial, and prepared, we listened for voice tone and approach. Since some people need to be made to feel comfortable before they answer questions, we also were defining techniques for beginning the interview. During the final two group activities (activities four and five), only those students who planned to conduct interviews continued to refine their interview skills. While the rest of the class or group members did not have to discuss their questions or subject interests, or conduct mock interviews, their participation continued: They asked questions, allowed themselves to be interviewed, and forced the potential interviewers to think more critically, not only about the questions they were planning to ask, but about the data they hoped to obtain.

[14] David M. Oshinsky, "Oral History: Playing By the Rules," *Journal of American History*, 77 (September 1990), 609-614. For additional information, see Cynthia Stokes Brown, *Like It Was: A Complete Guide to Writing Oral History* (New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1988); and Katherine R. Martin and Charles C. Martin, "Transcription Styles: Choices and Variables With the Appalachian Oral History Project," *International Journal of Oral History*, 6 (June 1985), 126.

Practice sessions helped students realize the importance of taping their interviews. While note taking helps interviewers recall statements made by the interviewees, a taped session can capture some of the nonverbal aspects of the interaction—speech-rhythms, intonations, emotions. Thus, students were advised to get permission to record their conversations so they could fully grasp the essence of their interview materials. They also had to get permission to quote their respondents. The decision to make transcripts available to the participants was optional.

Through these discussion sessions and practice exercises, students realized their success would depend on their approach and attitude. Aware of the need to be hospitable and convincing, students came to recognize that individuals become more informed communicators after being convinced their information is important and will make a useful contribution to academic knowledge. In the end, interviewers usually elicit invaluable information, and participants experience a sense of dignity for the insights they have provided.[15]

In the final phase of preparation, students received information and advice about the choice of interviewees. Students were encouraged to interview individuals who were not members of their racial or ethnic group. Four of the fifteen students interviewed such individuals.[16] The interviewees were residents of communities where many of the students lived, and they were women, men, African Americans, Asians, and Caucasians. They were young and old, and their ages ranged from 35 to 76. Most had acquired a high-school diploma, and a few held college degrees.

In the formal interviews, students explored many issues: daily life in the Great Depression; the roles of African Americans during World Wars I and II; the roles and reactions of Blacks and whites during the civil-rights movement; the importance of Black self-help and education; segregation and integration; and the political, economic, social, and cultural development of African American and white response.[17]

---

[15] Oshinsky, "Oral History: Playing By the Rules," 609-614.

[16] Students who planned to conduct the final interview passed in biographical sketches of the persons they planned to interview. Included in the descriptions was information pertaining to birth (date and place), education, marital status, race, and occupation. From this information I was able to form a clearer picture of the individuals each student planned to interview.

[17] For approval, each potential interviewer had to pass in a final set of questions. In trying to gain a better understanding of the impact of the Great Depression, the civil rights movement, integration, and world wars on people's lives, students usually asked questions like, "how did the Depression affect you and your family?"; "Could you find work during the Depression?"; "Did you or your family lose property, your home, land, or car?"; "Were Blacks treated different from whites during the Depression?"; "Do you think you were just as poor as any other poor person during the Depression?"; "Did you fight alongside any Blacks during World War I and II?"; "Do you know of any effort Blacks participated in to support the wars on the home front?"; "Why do you think Blacks fought in wars in behalf of a country that had not guaranteed them equal rights?"; "Where do you think the fear of Black people comes from?"; "Do you think more whites should have been involved in the civil rights movement?"; "Do you think the civil rights movement was necessary?"; "Do you think the civil rights movement made significant changes in the lives of Blacks, or other minorities, and the poor?"; "How did white people in your family and community react during the civil rights movement?"; "Was there division, with some family members supporting the movement, while others opposed it?"; "Did Blacks in your community support the movement?"; "Did older Blacks understand why the movement was

STUDENTS AND THEIR ORAL HISTORIES: APPLICATION

Oral and written presentations provided the opportunity for students not only to share what they had learned, but to show how well they understood the process of conducting oral history and the contents of the Afro-American history course. In the oral presentations, students discussed their approach and findings, and analyzed their respondents' reactions to questions.[18] In the written essay, they placed their research in the broader context by examining the relationship between ideas and events.[19]

Excerpts from students' essays show their ability to conceptualize information and their willingness to be empowered by it. One student said her interview

> did not reveal any radically new information. However, the emotions that Mrs. Smith demonstrated while talking about her experiences were an eye-opener. Although, like most Black people, she could tell stories of being mistreated, discriminated against, and just being disliked because of her race and sex, she did not harbor ill feelings, but seemed to have understood that she had to make a difference in her own life. . . . Though her position is admirable, I

---

happening?"; "Do you think the civil rights movement improved relations between Blacks and whites or created more hostility and discrimination?"; "What is your impression of the Black self-help philosophy?"; "Do you think Black people do enough to help themselves, or do you think they sit back and wait for other people to change things for them, or for the government to take care of them?"; "Should Blacks pay more tax dollars for their children's education?"; "How does the white community feel about integration?"; "Do you think integration helped or hindered the Black community?"; "Do you think it is time to return to segregation and a separatist movement?"; "Given the plight of Black people, how do you account for the cultural, economic, social, and political strides Blacks have made?" These were some of the questions the class developed for students planning to conduct the formal interviews.

[18] To receive final credit for participating in the oral-history assignment, students did oral and written presentations. Only those students who conducted the formal interviews were required to do both. They presented their findings to the class, and discussed the interview process and their reactions. In addition, they passed in a short paper (4-6 pages) where they elaborated on ideas, issues, and their reaction to comments made by interviewees. In the written essays, students were to show some critical analysis, and they had to place the information in historical context. Meanwhile, students who did not conduct formal interviews were required to pass in written essays in which they analyzed some of the data presented by those who conducted the interviews. Focusing on the ideas and issues presented by the interviewers, the noninterviewing students were to examine the historical accuracy of the information, while placing the information in historical context. In addition, the noninterviewers were responsible for challenging the research and findings of the interviewers. The oral presentations were given on the last Friday of class. Papers were turned in on the following Monday. Though this oral-history activity seemed busy, it was a simple process, because students were directed throughout the activity.

[19] Students were encouraged to read several articles that utilized oral history to provide a broader understanding of issues, developments, and experiences. These included: Brownstein, "Using Intensive Data: Teaching Concepts of Ethnicity and Ethnic Group Relations," 189-197; Paula Gunn Allen, *Studies in American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1983); Rogers, "Oral History and the History of the Civil Rights Movement," 567-576; Ruth Martin, "Oral History in Social Work Education: Chronicling the Black Experience," *Journal of Social Work Education*, 23 (Fall 1987), 5-10; and Melbourne S. Cummings, "Teaching the Black Rhetoric Course," *Opinion Papers*, 120 (District of Columbia, 1983).

> question how or whether Blacks, the poor, or any minority can make a difference by themselves since they have the least amount of resources and political clout. I think that it is going to take white people to help change America because they have not only the money and power, but the resources to execute what they think and feel about other people. . . . Though I wish there were more Mrs. Smiths in America, I also realize that America is not ready for her nor many people like her who believe that people, especially Black people, must make a difference for themselves. If Mrs. Smith was a nationally recognized political figure, it would not take long for her to join the Malcolms, Kings, and Kennedys, some of the best minds that lie beneath the soil. . . . Although her interview helped me to realize that the majority and minority populations are tired of struggling because each basically has the same needs, I could not help but feel somewhat hopeless and tired, since neither one of us could arrive at a decision regarding the direction that America must take. Perhaps America's future is in each person's hand, with each contributing in the best way that he or she knows how. If this is the case, maybe we can learn to treat each other the way we wish to be treated.

This student's reaction to her interview showed she understood the consequences of racial and class conflict in America. She believed racial hatred is the basic reason America struggles with social problems. By suggesting that Blacks cannot change racism by themselves, she showed understanding of how social, political, and economic deprivation affects the Black community; it makes Blacks powerless. Feeling the impact of social and political movements on the lives of those involved, especially Blacks, this student, through her interview with Mrs. Smith, finally saw the dangers agitators (those who protest or attack the status quo) encounter. Because radicals and liberals face relentless opposition, many people, like this student and her respondent, have grown tired and hopeless, and do not believe society will change, even if Blacks assume primary responsibility for their survival. Perhaps this student and her respondent were reacting to the crises (riots, crime, unemployment, disintegrated families, poverty) that develop as conflict between conservative and liberal ideologies manifests itself in what many concerned observers see as reverse discrimination, antiaffirmative-action protests, and antigovernment, antipoor, antisocial programs. The result, as she suggested, is an increased tension between whites and Blacks, because each minority is seeking equal opportunity within a society that distributes its resources unequally.

Students learned how intimidation and violence still play major roles in helping maintain white supremacy and the status quo. Through the oral histories, many students also came to see the role propaganda—portraying Blacks as rapists, "coons," "mammies," and irresponsible children—has played in creating separate, but unequal, societies. Reacting to his respondent's attitude toward integration, one student wrote:

> That Mr. Williams casually sat in his chair and talked about keeping Blacks out of his community was appalling, though not surprising. Though it angered me, I understood. History lessons and historical experiences since Blacks' arrival into this country have shown us that whites always have desired segregation in every form. . . . The most revealing aspect of this interview

> resulted from statements made concerning Blacks not wanting to work and how life deteriorates when they are around. Yes, it has become clear to me, though not to many, that when people cannot get jobs, or when jobs are not awarded based on ability, people cannot work or keep up their standard of living. When this happens, life deteriorates for everyone. Fear of Blacks has made so many people gullible to the point that they cannot see the relationship between how they view people and the advantages and opportunities they are willing to afford a group of people. Racial hatred is a powerful emotion, but when fear is added to it, it almost becomes impossible for people to see the good in anyone but themselves. . . . More importantly, fear and ignorance encourage exclusion rather than inclusion, separation rather than integration.

It is evident in the above statement that this student recognized the relationship between ideas and development in our society. He could see how the plight of the Black community reflected people's attitudes toward Blacks, not Blacks' supposed inability to manage their lives. In addition, this student understood how propaganda helped sustain notions of Blacks' presumed inferiority and subsequential poverty, so members of the majority society could benefit from America's economic, political, cultural, and social development.[20]

Through self-help initiatives and communal endeavors, the historical Black community fought racism, separatism, and discrimination. From Reconstruction through the civil rights movement, Blacks created cooperative programs to survive. They shared houses with friends and families, purchased joint property, raised communal gardens and livestock, and worked in each other's fields, mills, and gins.[21] Because their tax-dollars paid disproportionately for health, educational, and cultural institutions for whites, they pooled their resources to build their own churches, schools, and hospitals. Through bake-sales, rallies, and donations, they paid teachers, preachers, and health-care persons. This understanding of how the traditional Black community survived is prompting Black critics of contemporary America to reemphasize Black self-help. Writing about how Blacks must once again apply the self-help philosophy to solve the economic and social problems they face, one student, reacting to statements made by his interviewee, judged that

> neither America's past nor present is pretty. Its future is even less attractive. For Blacks and other minorities, the future looks even worse. "But they better get over it," says Mr. Johnson. "The time has come for Blacks to stop passing the buck and get on with it. We have the history and the experience, and we know that we can count only on ourselves. . . . So what, that America is sexist, racist, and biased at most things it attempts to do. What does that have to do with anything? That is just how it is, and Blacks better recognize it. There are

---

[20] John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1986). Each chapter in this text supports this concept.

[21] Ibid.

> some opportunities for Blacks, and we have to get busy taking advantage of those and turning the few opportunities we have into more for future generations." My interview with Mr. Johnson helped me realize that I, as an African American, must prepare to do battle, not against whites (though they can be a hindrance), but more importantly, against self-destruction, which stems from believing in laws that only haphazardly address my needs as an African American.

In addition to understanding the importance of self-help to the development of the Black community, this student's testimony demonstrates an understanding of America's policies of appeasement, passing laws that temporarily address its social problems, especially those designed to legislate racism, discrimination, and sexism. His statement, "I, as an African American must prepare to do battle, not against whites (though they can be a hindrance), but more importantly, against self-destruction, which stems from believing in laws that only haphazardly address my needs as an African American," shows he recognizes the role he must play in creating an environment and atmosphere conducive to Black progress. To this student, Mr. Johnson's remarks echoed those made by historical Black leaders such as Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, and Marcus Garvey. While acknowledging that America has a problem with skin-color, each of these leaders, like Mr. Johnson, encouraged Blacks to let their dual status as Blacks and Americans empower them, rather than allowing themselves to feel victimized by injustice.[22]

When people realize they have a role to play in helping change society, many do not feel desperate, victimized, or blamed for the problems we experienced as a nation. In fact, many individuals learn to sympathize with and appreciate others' struggles, while searching for ways they can help improve life for all. Recognizing that unity results from sharing and cooperation, and that change can only result from people acknowledging their faults and accepting responsibility for their actions, one student wrote:

> My interview helped me to see that too much energy is spent blaming the victim, a tactic that has not worked and that is never going to work. We are all victims. Victimization helped America to evolve and survive. Someone has always progressed at the expense of other people. The rich blame the poor, and vice versa. Blacks and whites blame each other. Political parties pass the blame. Blame, blame, blame. We have got to stop the blaming. You are right. Blacks, women, minorities, and the poor have not been treated fairly. Nevertheless, we have to move forward and start talking to each other. My interviewee, Mrs. Williams, made this point clearer than any book or reading-assignment. . . . Is the problem racism, sexism, or any other social ill? Or is it a need that all Americans have, that is to feel victimized? If this is what we want, then we certainly want progress, but if we recognize the need to

[22] Ibid.

> cooperate and to be held accountable for our actions, we can progress as a country.

This student's attitude recalls the thinking of early-twentieth-century Black leaders and writers. They spent much of their energy, not blaming whites, but encouraging—sometimes forcing—themselves to acknowledge the role they needed to play in improving race-relations and everyone's quality of life.

If historical experience taught that accountability is more important than blame, African Americans must allow the same experience to encourage them to continue advocating social, political, and economic justice. Recognizing that change and progress result primarily from protest and activism, one student realized

> how tired everyone is of fighting for causes. Since our arrival during the seventeenth century, Americans have been fighting one revolution or cause after another. At times, there have been battles with Indians, Europeans, and with Blacks. Fights over states' rights, property rights, civil rights, and women's rights have been exhausting to the point where it is easy for the minority to accept the status quo, rather than work to change it. Black people are tired and white people are tired. What do we do? Do we stay tired or continue to write laws that we know will not work? Do we continue to pretend that we care about equal rights? What do we do? I think we should rest. But no one can afford to, especially Black people. I suppose we will keep on debating the same old issues, and writing laws that do little to help America and all her citizens.

Though this student conceded that protest must continue, he has little faith that more laws will change people's behavior. Even with the major pieces of legislation that outlawed discrimination in the workplace, housing, and public facilities during the 1960s, we are still struggling with many of the same social problems. As this student suggested, neither improved race-relations nor an improvement in the quality of life in America will result from more laws. Significant change will come when Americans accept diversity, and use their collective energies to press for the enforcement of existing laws that protect and guarantee opportunities for every member of this society.

Each of the student's statements shows a deep concern about racism and inequality. Embodied in their comments are reflections of the centuries of pain and frustration Americans felt and continue to feel from disunity, a lack of trust and respect, and misplaced values and goals. Through these oral histories, students perceived that domination limits the freedom of both the oppressor and the oppressed, the enslaved and the enslaver, the victim and the victimizer.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATION FOR CLASSROOM USE

Oral history was integrated into the curriculum for several reasons: to involve students in the learning process, to teach them how to question ideas, to help them communicate and interact with each other, and to improve their analytical and critical-thinking skills.

Comments on students' evaluation-forms revealed the strengths and weaknesses of this assignment.[23] Students' responses showed how the assignment enhanced their education. Each believed his or her writing, critical, and analytical skills had improved.[24] As a result, each said oral history was useful, not only in improving his or her skills, but in fostering personal involvement in the learning process. One student thought "every student in this class matured intellectually by participating in the debates and mock-interviews; by forcing each other to think, and by asking critical questions, the entire class learned additional information about people's backgrounds, members of their families, and communities." More than half the students believed oral history was an effective way to elicit additional information about people's experiences and reactions to events. Said one: "I was pleased to discover from my interview with a neighbor in my community that a lot of poor semi-illiterate elderly Black people supported the civil rights movement, a contrast quite different from those images that

---

[23] At the conclusion of this assignment, students completed evaluation forms, on which they stated what they liked the most and least about this activity. Responding "yes," "no," or "undecided," students addressed additional questions: (1) "Do you think oral history is an effective method to employ to obtain additional information about people's experiences and reactions?"; (2) "Did you learn perspectives other than the ones given in the lectures or texts?"; (3) "Did this exercise help you place readings and lectures in a broader context?"; (4) "Did you like conducting this kind of research?"; (5) "Did the practice exercises prepare you to conduct interviews?"; (6) "Did the readings and discussions help you understand the types of questions—personal and impersonal—to ask?"; (7) "After conducting the oral histories and listening to excerpts from the interviews, do you think it is necessary to tape interviews?"; (8) "Did you feel prepared to conduct the interview?"; (9) "Did the readings and discussions help you understand the kind of attitude and approach you should adopt while conducting interviews?"; (10) "Did your interviewee enjoy participating in this exercise?"; (11) "Do you think oral history can play a role in helping document the experiences of less visible groups such as African Americans, women, and immigrants?"; (12) "Were you or your interviewee ever uncomfortable during the interview session?"; (13) "Do you think this class project should become a permanent feature of this course?"; (14) "If given the opportunity, would you apply this technique of collecting data in classes similar to this one?"; (15) "Through your questions, group activities, and interviews, did you develop greater respect or toleration for other people's experiences?"

[24] For an analysis of oral history as a teaching and learning source, see Sharon Luckett, "Informal Writing of Orally based Literature and Its Relationship to Formal Writing," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Conference in College Composition and Communication, "Boston, 21-23 March 1991; Gredel, "The Study of Family History: Research Projects in a Senior Seminar," 27-32; John Lofty, "From Sound to Sign: Oral History in the College Composition," *College Composition and Education*, 36 (October 1985), 349; Amy Hoffman, "Multicultural Literacy in the Composition Classroom: Report on a Pilot Project," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Boston, 21-23 March 1991; Jerry Phillips, "A Recipe for Reclaiming Ownership: The Oral History Narrative," paper presented at the 40th annual meeting of the National Reading Conference, Miami, 27 November to 1 December 1990; Lawerence W. McBride and Gary C. McKiddy, "The Oral Traditional and Arab Narrative History: An Exercise in Critical Thinking," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, 14 (Spring 1989), 3-17; James M. Deem and Sandra A. Engel, "Developing Literacy Through Transcription," *Journal of Basic Writing*, 7 (Fall 1988), 99-107; Rachel A. Bonney, "Teaching Anthropology Through Folklore," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 16 (Winter 1985), 265-270; Kathleen J. Turner, "Oral History: A Window on the Past for Communication Students," *Communication Education*, 34 (October 1985), 352-353; and O'Connor, "History From Bottom to Top," 15-22.

primarily depict the movement being led and supported by Black intellectuals and the middle class." Perhaps this discovery fascinated this student because the text emphasized the civil rights movement as a community-based movement, led and supported largely by high-powered Black leaders and the Black church, rather than by women and the poor. The lectures, however, stressed that the movement was a people's movement, led and supported by both wealthy and poor, both old and young, both educated and unlearned; but this student did not get this point until she discovered, in her interview, how some poor Blacks viewed the movement, and how society at large devalued the contributions poor people made to the cause. Because of revelations of this sort, eighty-six percent of the students indicated oral history can play a major role in helping document the experiences of less visible groups such as African Americans, immigrants, the poor, and women. Eighty percent recognized the role oral history plays in providing different perspectives.

All but four of the sixty students thought the interview data helped them contextualize reading and lecture materials. Students took an interest in how people of different races discuss and react to sensitive issues, like racism, sexism, and equal opportunity. They wanted to know, for instance, how an Asian woman felt being interviewed by a Black woman; how a Black man reacted to being interviewed by a white man; how a white man felt being interviewed by a Black woman; and how a white woman responded to questions asked by a Black man. Admitting they were initially nervous, not knowing exactly how their respondents would react, students explained the need for objectivity, to give people the opportunity to explain how they derived certain conclusions. Some stated that, when necessary, they challenged their interviewees' statements by presenting different information. Because learning involves the exchange of ideas and differences in opinions, one student, reacting to questions concerning her respondent's attitude toward Blacks, wrote: "In situations where people are from different backgrounds, each must be tolerant so that individual experiences and points of view can be understood, with the hope that the exchange is mutual and beneficial, because interacting with people different from you will teach you how to learn from each other."

Students' questions and comments showed they experienced heightened empathy with strangers' struggles and experiences. Whether the interviewees were white or African American, old or young, educated or unlearned, female or male, students identified with their emotions. In an oral presentation, one student described how her interviewee had cried as she talked about sit-ins, boycotts, and the violence perpetrated against Blacks during the civil rights movement. The student cried too, as she witnessed the pain her respondent experienced while she talked about dedicating her life to a movement she felt had not made meaningful changes for Blacks. This type of experience allows students to step into their respondents' shoes, to go back in time, to relive a past others have lived.[25] It also broadens their knowledge about people

---

[25] For a discussion of oral history and the role it plays in providing the opportunity for students to identify with other people's emotions and experiences, see Totten, "Using Oral Histories and Interviews to Address the Nuclear Arms Race," 47-53; Jean Gandesberg, "Listening to See: The Place of Oral History in Composition Classes," *Journal of Teacher Education*, 37 (July-August 1986), 25-32; Jonathan Kozol, "Fight Illiteracy With Volunteer Youth," *Journal of Experiential Education*, 5 (Summer 1982),

around them. Each student felt comfortable viewing history through the eyes of neighbors, relatives, friends, and local politicians.

The favorable response to this experiment resulted form students' feelings of readiness to conduct the exercises. Eighty-six percent of the class believe the reading materials, in-class discussions, and mock-interviews had helped them understand how to approach and conduct oral-history projects. Only seventy-six percent, however, believed it was necessary to tape the interviews. Some students may have felt that tape-recording an interview needlessly formalized and inhibited the communicative process.

Because oral-history research provided the opportunity for students to acquire hands-on experience in writing critical questions, debating issues, and processing data, each student became empowered by the activities. Responding to the question "What did you like most about this assignment?" students replied: (1) "first-hand experience to do research;" (2) "get to hear and see the emotional part of history not always discussed in readings and lectures;" (3) "get different points of views about a lot of subjects;" (4) "a way of bringing the students and the people in the community together;" (5) "community people get to see what we know and we get to hear what they have learned from experience;" (6) "an opportunity to hear people relive history;" (7) "a chance to really talk with people you admire and whose opinions you respect on significant issues;" (8) "the opportunity to be creative and to express one's own reaction to people and what they believe and think;" and (9) "an opportunity to develop as a critical thinker because we were forced to think about history and events and the kinds of questions we needed to ask in order to collect significant data."

Students also found some parts of the assignment to be inadequate. Some believed two-and-a-half weeks were not enough time in which to schedule and conduct the formal interview.[26] Others thought more time should have gone into preparing them for the task of writing interview questions and conducting interviews.[27] Though each student reported having felt comfortable conducting the interviews, a few preferred more preparation.[28] Most students placed their research in a broader context, but

---

17-22; and Mildred Haipt, "Experiential Learning Techniques in Fieldwork," *Improving College and University Teaching*, 30 (Summer 1982), 130-132.

[26] After the questions had been written, the assignments read, and the practice sessions completed, only two-and-a-half weeks were left before the student-interviewers were scheduled to give oral presentations. (If students had been familiar with conducting oral history from the onset, less time would have been given to preparing them.) However, those who planned to conduct interviews received permission to initiate interviews before the completion of all questions and group activities. The initiation of interviews depended on students' confidence, and on whether they felt prepared to conduct interviews before the time I suggested interviews should take place.

[27] Some students suggested less time should have been spent discussing the oral-history readings, and more on hands-on training. Though the class did various exercises, students seemed to prefer the question-writing sessions the most. Many said this exercise allowed for more creativity and critical thinking.

[28] Again, students preferred hands-on training to the theoretical approach. Nevertheless, theoretical discussions were important because they outlined the strengths and weaknesses of oral history, and they suggested to students how subjects should be approached. One thing that should be remembered regarding these criticisms is that time did not allow for either a more detailed analysis of oral history

some felt this was an unrealistic expectation, since many were unfamiliar with the African-American experience.[29] Finally, several students thought each student-interviewer should be required to interview persons who are not members of their sex, race, or ethnic background; this requirement, they hoped, would encourage communication between the races.

Students' comments showed broad support for this kind of classroom activity. As one student pointed out, "Each of us was learning, and we recognized that we would be able to share with the class experiences and information that probably had not been discussed from our point of view." Because this assignment improved student's confidence in their ability to be creative and articulate, most advocated its inclusion in later offerings of the same course.

If these students' experiences are a fair example of what students can achieve by involving themselves in the learning process, it is safe to assume that oral history is a viable teaching-tool. It helps students gain a broader understanding of the subject. It provides an opportunity for students to express themselves as they work to improve their thinking, writing, and analytical skills. Their attitudes toward learning improve when they work with others to develop their understanding of social issues, and oral history can be a pedagogically worthwhile part of that academic adventure.

---

or more in-class preparation. Afro-American history was simultaneously being taught: Most of the available time and attention had to be given to the academic contents of the course.

[29] As stated earlier, each of the students had to pass in written papers (essays) that critically examined this process and the data obtained from the oral-history research. Most of the students understood the comments the interviewees made regarding certain issues and developments, but many felt they needed more coursework and background before they could provide an adequate historical context for many of the issues explored.