

“I’LL REMEMBER THAT” ORAL HISTORY, SERVICE LEARNING, AND HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

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Assignments that pair students with seniors to record oral histories are nothing new nor is service learning.¹ Service learning in general seeks to inspire students to look beyond the walls of the classroom and move into the community so that they can connect and apply what they’ve learned in coursework with the reality of lived human experience.² Seeking to understand history is fundamentally about seeking to understand humanity (one’s own and others’), which is the thread that binds service with learning. Service learning is a more far-reaching and sustained experience than “volunteering” in that it requires continual reflection about the connections between coursework and service. It also involves reciprocity, the recognition that those serving and those being served each have something to offer the other through their interaction.

Since 2008 I have assigned a service-learning project in my university’s common core history course that partners my students with residents at Foulkeways, a nearby senior community. Each student visits and interviews a partner several times with the aim of producing some form of biographical presentation and a separate reflection paper that analyzes the experience from the student’s perspective. The particular value in this project is in how it emphasizes to students that the process is not just about learning details about the seniors and the past that they lived through; it is also about their relationship with their partner and what happens as they talk to each other about their lives in a way that links past, present, and future. This description of the project begins with thumbnail sketches of the university, its students, and the course to provide some

¹The literature exploring oral history as service learning is voluminous and continues to grow. Some examples that have contributed to my own reflections on this topic include Vicki L. Ruiz, “Situating Stories: The Surprising Consequences of Oral History,” *Oral History Review*, 25 (Summer/Fall 1998), 71–80; Marjorie L. McLellan, “Case Studies in Oral History and Community Learning,” *Oral History Review*, 25 (Summer/Fall 1998), 81–112; Elsa A. Nystrom, “Remembrance of Things Past: Service Learning Opportunities in U.S. History,” *Oral History Review*, 29 (Summer/Fall 2002), 61–68; Erin McCarthy, “Oral History in the Undergraduate Classroom: Getting Students into History,” in Barry A. Lanman, Laura M. Wendling, eds., *Preparing the Next Generation of Oral Historians: An Anthology of Oral History Education* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006), 313–326; George White, Jr., “Crafting History: Oral History Projects, Experiential Learning, and a Meditation on Teaching and Learning,” *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, 38 (Spring 2013), 23–38.

²Barbara Jacoby, ed., *Service Learning in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 1996); Ira Harkavy and Bill M. Donovan, eds., *Connecting Past and Present: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in History* (Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education, 2000).

context, and then discusses specific aspects of the project to illustrate how it has influenced the way that students understand history.

My university is a small institution in Pennsylvania with around 1300 full-time students, sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy, a Catholic order whose mission is rooted in social justice and service, especially through education and health care. Many students come from lower-middle and working-class backgrounds, and most live in the metropolitan area where the university is located. A large majority of students pursue degrees in pre-professional programs, such as nursing and other health-related fields, business, and criminal justice, and tend to regard their liberal arts and humanities courses as ancillary rather than central to their education. In its mission statement, the university emphasizes “professional competency with the Mercy tradition of service to society” and offers service opportunities for students through Campus Ministry, the Freshman Year Experience, and as part of their course work. These experiences are meant to inspire students to continue to be involved in civic engagement.³

The “signature” (or common core) course in history that I began to offer in 2008 incorporates the curriculum’s mission-centered objectives and seeks to make history more accessible and relevant to non-history majors who mostly fill my classrooms. Titled “Conflict & Consensus in History,” the course strives to get students to develop a critical understanding of the interpretive nature of history and the ways that historical perspectives influence how people understand the world around them and their place in it. Many of these students arrive in the classroom skeptical about the value and relevance of studying history, and their own past experiences in history courses have left quite a number of them with trepidation about taking one at the college level. My hope is that students discover more of what history as a field of study has to offer, but all too often “Conflict & Consensus” is a student’s only exposure to history at the university.

The course was designed specifically to align with the university’s core values, including community and collaboration, compassion, dignity of each person, service, social responsibility, a spirit of hospitality, and valuing diversity. These values derive from the university’s religious identity, but anyone can appreciate them as fundamentally good human values. Examining and understanding history can provide students with opportunities to develop these human values: If we can recognize the humanity of others across the divide of time, after all, we ought to be able to respond to the humanity of those living now in far away parts of the world or even close by. Each requires that we abandon the tendency to reduce people to abstractions and to exercise that part of our imagination that allows us to recognize a common humanity.

The service-learning project I assign to students in “Conflict & Consensus” reflects this view of history as a way of knowing and connecting with the world and

³Jennifer Reed-Bouley and Ken Reed-Bouley, *Introducing Students to Social Analysis and Theological Reflection: Foundations for Facilitators of Service-Learning at Colleges and Universities Founded or Sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy* (Omaha, NE: Conference for Mercy Higher Education, 2007).

those in it. Outcomes of the service-learning project that I assign include a better understanding of historical methods, an appreciation of the human dimension of historical experience, and an awareness that history involves not only those grand moments highlighted in textbooks but even the everyday aspects of people’s lives. On their end, seniors benefit socially, cognitively, and otherwise from interaction with traditional-aged college students. Moreover, insofar as people have a fundamental need to share their stories, students provide their partners with opportunities and an audience as they give voice to their reflections about their lives.⁴ A Foulkeways resident who has been helping me to coordinate this project since the beginning explains to students when he addresses each of my course sections that he and his fellow residents simply want the opportunity to spend time with younger people, a desire that other participating seniors have reiterated to me.

The course begins with a consideration of various methods and sources that historians use to learn about the past. The course content features several examples that examine problems with oral histories as well as their value, and so students are prompted to consider some of the challenges associated with the validity, reliability, and integrity of historical sources and accounts. Before students begin the actual process of interviewing their partners, they review material in a “Suggested Readings and Resources” section that offers some guidance in the appropriate methods involved in recording oral histories.⁵ Students learn about the biographical tradition in history in

⁴Some of the literature that addresses the benefits of inter-generational relationships through service learning includes Barbara D. Ames and Jane P. Youatt, “Intergenerational Education and Service Programming: A Model for Selection and Evaluation of Activities,” *Educational Gerontology*, 20 (1994), 755–764; Sally Newman, Emin Karip, and Robert B. Faux, “Everyday Memory Function of Older Adults: The Impact of Intergenerational School Volunteer Programs,” *Educational Gerontology*, 21 (1995), 569–580; Sally Newman, “The United States,” in Allan Hattan-Yeo and Toshio Osako, eds., *Intergenerational Programmes: Public Policy and Research Implications, An International Perspective* (Hamburg: The Unesco Institute for Education and the Beth Johnson Foundation, 1999), <http://www.unesco.org/education/uie/pdf/intergen.pdf> (accessed January 6, 2014); James L. Knapp and Patricia Stubblefield, “Changing Students’ Perceptions of Aging: The Impact of an Intergenerational Service-Learning Course,” *Educational Gerontology*, 26 (2000), 611–621; Matthew S. Kaplan, *School-Based Intergenerational Programs* (Hamburg: Unesco Institute for Education, 2001), <http://www.unesco.org/education/uie/pdf/schoolbasedip.pdf> (accessed January 6, 2014); Shepherd Zeldin, Reed Larson, Linda Camino, and Cailin O’Connor, “Intergenerational Relationships and Partnerships in Community Programs: Purpose, Practice, and Directions for Research,” *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33 (2005), 1–10; Carmen Requena Hernandez and Marta Zubiaur Gonzalez, “Effects of Intergenerational Interaction on Aging,” *Educational Gerontology*, 34 (2008), 292–305.

⁵Through the Blackboard course companion site, students have access to two guides: Marjorie Hung, *The Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Guide* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, 2003), and Judith Moyer, “Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History,” http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html (accessed January 6, 2014). In the library, students are also directed to Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (Oxford: Oxford (continued...))

a unit examining how historical and cultural circumstances can influence biographical portrayals. They are also directed to do additional research about the times and places where their partners lived in order to contextualize and to corroborate the information they acquire.

Acknowledging that students come to the class with different skill sets and talents, I encourage them to choose a medium for producing their biographical account that makes the best use of their talents. It is also a way to reinforce to students that history can be told in a variety of formats, producing a variety of artifacts. While some students submit standard written narrative accounts, others have taken the opportunity to do something more creative, such as constructing scrapbooks, developing web pages, recording videos, and in one case even making a quilt.

The student who made the quilt explained that service learning “is much more than just reminiscing about the life of another, but connecting that life with your own sense of self... Uncovering my partner’s life quilt ... not only gave her the opportunity to reflect on her own life, but gave me the same experience as well. Her life quilt truly resembles the many memories and life lessons she has experienced over the past eighty-two years, each of which I am now extremely grateful to understand.”⁶ Quilts are a traditional medium for passing along historical information, so its choice by this student demonstrated a good understanding of the various ways that stories about the past get told.

Students generally produce biographical accounts and representations that do not go so far as the quilt in terms of creativity and sophistication, but in any case my evaluation of their participation in the project relies more on the reflection paper that they submit. This tells me about the student’s experience—what was learned about history as a mode of critical understanding and the process of learning through oral accounts—which is what I am truly after.⁷ In their reflections, students most often relate how their perceptions of seniors changed as a result of their interactions. Foulkeways is a community that promotes a lifestyle of autonomy and dignity for seniors, where residents are not only active but run the community themselves through dozens of

⁵(...continued)

University Press, 2003), and Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005). A helpful resource for instructors is Glenn Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past: Engaging Students and Meeting Standards through Oral History* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004).

⁶Cassie Lloyd, Reflection Paper, Spring 2009. This and other student papers are on file in the possession of the author.

⁷Julie A. Hatcher, Robert G. Bringle, and Richard Muthiah, “Designing Effective Reflection: What Matters to Service Learning?” *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 11 (Fall 2004), 38–46.

committees; yet, students reflexively think about Foulkeways as a nursing home when I first describe this service-learning activity to them. That image invariably changes when two Foulkeways residents come as guests to my classrooms to discuss the project with the students. They are charming, witty, and engaging in a way that reassures students so completely that the sense of relief is palpable in the classroom. Even then, students’ attitudes still can be condescending when they describe our two guests and other Foulkeways residents with words such as “cute,” “sweet,” and “adorable.”

As students get to know their partners for the substantial lives that they have led and learn about the dramatic experiences that some of their partners have had, recognition of the discrepancy between their expectations and what they learned can help to dispel stereotypes. Some surprises are mundane, as in the case of the student “shocked” that her partner was competent using today’s technology: “In his room, there was a Mac desktop computer with working Internet and all. I sat in a chair thinking to myself that this elderly man uses technology. I was utterly amazed. I wanted to ask him if he could teach my grandmother how to use a computer! When I realized that he could operate a computer with no problems, I began to wonder if he was able to text....”⁸ Another student described her response to hearing the stories of her partner (“the sweetest lady”) who had participated in Belgian resistance during World War II when she was at an age younger than the student herself:

She told me of one instance when she jumped out of a moving train because she did not want to get deported to Germany to work in the factories. I said the first thing that came to my mind which was just, “That’s so cool!” ... I was shocked when she responded with, “Yeah, isn’t it cool?!” She was just as impressed with herself as I was with her. That was something I was not expecting from a 90 year old former member of the Underground.⁹

A nursing major wrote about how her service-learning experience converged with what she had been learning in her other courses: “Through all of my nursing classes, we are taught not to stereotype against the elderly and as much as I try not to, I still do. This project helped suppress some of these stereotypes.”¹⁰

As personal realizations—and, in this last student’s case, a professional insight—these reflections have considerable value, but they are not necessarily evidence that a critical understanding of history is emerging. That evidence does appear in a few

⁸Jasmin Hall, Reflection Paper, Fall 2013.

⁹Kristen Godzieba, Reflection Paper, Fall 2013.

¹⁰Page Bain, Reflection Paper, Spring 2008.

reflections, though. In terms of method, students discuss some of the challenges associated with oral history, such as their partners' faulty memories, keeping the interview focused, recognizing and accounting for bias, knowing what questions to ask and *if* to ask certain questions, etc. Others reveal insights about the nature of history itself. One student, for instance, came to the realization that the history told in textbooks is not the only history that there is to know:

People who are much older than us have experienced so many things. It doesn't matter if they lived a normal life and weren't related to someone famous, their lives are just as important and informative.... All of the people in history textbooks are the ones that people feel are worth noting about. What about all of the normal people? The people who weren't heroes or inventors, but the people that pretty much kept this country going. By interviewing Nancy I feel I have a better understanding about how the past was in real life and not just about the wars and the Depression.¹¹

One of my favorite reflections came from a student whose partner was a woman who graduated from college with advanced degrees and embarked on a career. This defied the student's image of women in the 1950s, showing her that not everyone lived as popular culture depicts and the popular imagination expects.¹²

Some students related how they discussed the conversations they had with their partners with their own family members, bringing them indirectly into the project. As one student described it, "It was basically like I was interviewing four people because I had so much input. It was interesting to talk to Trudy and take notes and then retell the information to my family and see if they could relate. When they gave their input, I would schedule another meeting with Trudy, and I would go back with a new set of questions and the process would repeat itself."¹³

The reflection that best indicated to me how the assignment can lead to a more sophisticated understanding of history came from a student who engaged in this same kind of triangulated conversation by comparing what she learned from her grandparents, who had suffered during the Depression and sacrificed during the Second World War, with memories of her partner, whose socio-economic situation made her own experiences during that period different. "When I tried to pin [my partner] down on what life was like for her family during the depression, she danced around the questions.

¹¹Kate Desmond, Reflection Paper, Fall 2008.

¹²Fallon McAnany, Reflection Paper, Spring 2008.

¹³Nicole Dougherty, Reflection Paper, Fall 2013.

Finally she admitted that her father had had to fire his office staff, a task that he found difficult....,” the student reported. She went on to say how both of her grandparents “were proud to contribute to the war effort by scrimping and doing without things, while my partner spoke about being worried that other girls would think she was a snob while riding in a Cadillac to her summer factory job. She too was proud to contribute to the war effort, but it didn’t seem to cost her what it cost my family.”¹⁴ In her reflection, this student observed:

Now it occurs to me to wonder just how accurate any history can be.... Specific information about dates and places can be verified through checking, but the impact of events varies from person to person.... If I tried to talk about the impact of the Great Depression on one person without talking about its impact on others, I would most likely not be getting the whole story. I understand now how difficult it can be to present an accurate history of almost anything.... My grandparents and my partner lived at the same time and in pretty much the same place, but the information I got from each of them was remarkably different. I’ll remember that.¹⁵

Her use of the word “remember” in that context referred not to the kind of memorization of facts that are a means rather than the end of historical thinking but instead to a critical habit of mind that the course—not to mention my mission as an educator—aims at cultivating in students.¹⁶

Students have expressed the pleasant surprise of experiencing the nature of “reciprocity” so critical in the service-learning environment in sensing that their partners were actually doing service *for them*, too.¹⁷ They are often surprised when their partners express interest by asking them about themselves, for instance. As one student explained, “I felt that if I offered to answer any of her questions, it may help her to be more open and willing to answer some of the questions that I asked her. Although I

¹⁴Lauren Smith, Reflection Paper, Spring 2012.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Peter Stearns, *Meaning Over Memory: Recasting the Teaching of Culture and History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

¹⁷On reciprocity in service learning, see Lucia d’Arlach, Bernadette Sánchez, and Rachel Feuer, “Voices from the Community: A Case for Reciprocity in Service-Learning,” *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 16 (Fall 2009), 5–16; David M. Donahue, Jane Bowyer, and Dana Rosenberg, “Learning with and Learning From: Reciprocity in Service Learning in Teacher Education,” *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 36 (2003), 15–27.

meant this, I did not actually think she would take up my offer, but to my surprise, about halfway through our first interview, she began asking me questions as well.”¹⁸ This prompted the student to reflect more profoundly on the connection between “service” and “learning”:

After this point in our first interview, and in our subsequent interviews as well, I found that my learning from this experience was not limited to a wealth of important information about my partner’s life and the type of person she was, but also about who I am and my outlook on life... Hearing her stories really inspire me to search within myself and to find what my true motives and goals are in life. Although I had expected to come away with a new sense of understanding about my partner and the time period during which she grew up, I never expected to walk away from the experience with a better knowledge of myself.¹⁹

Some students recognized that they could do the same for their partners. As one student put it:

While interviewing Nancy she mentioned that her husband has unfortunately been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. She says that he forgets a lot of things and can’t do the day to day errands and housekeeping things that he once was able to do. I could tell while interviewing her that it was hard for her to deal with but she really had a way to hide it... I felt that while talking to Nancy about her life when she had her wedding and had her children was nice for her to talk about. It was a chance for her to tell someone stories about her past, and for most people that is enjoyable... Nancy and I both learned from one another and now I consider her to be one of my friends. She mentioned during our visits that it is important to have friends of different ages because then you can see the world from many different angles. I agree with that one hundred percent...²⁰

The most satisfying experience that I’ve had with the project illustrates how it can place meaningful human connections and relationships at the center of historical understanding. It involves a student named Ron who had enrolled after he had returned from serving in Iraq, where he had been wounded. After I described the project to the

¹⁸Brett Bishop, Reflection Paper, Fall 2008.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰Kate Desmond, Reflection Paper, Fall 2008.

class, Ron approached me about being paired with a veteran of World War II and making a video about it. As I thought about who might make a good partner for Ron, I recalled an encounter that I had a few months earlier. I had been invited over to Foulkeways with several students to attend a ceremony arranged through the French consulate, which was conferring the Legion of Honor on several residents who had fought in armies that had helped to liberate France during World War II. As I sat chatting with some of the family members of those who were honored and explained who I was, several of them virtually pleaded with me to convince their fathers and grandfathers to participate in the project because they believed that they had never shared their experiences fully with their families. It occurred to me that some of those veterans might talk to Ron about their experiences in a way that they had never talked with their own family members. Ron already had hit it off with one of the veterans at Foulkeways, Bill, who arranged for him to meet with three of the other veterans there.

All of the participants clearly understood the reciprocal dynamic at the heart of the process. Ron had experienced difficulties adjusting after his return from Iraq and understood the project as “a chance for me to share my story with someone, and have someone share their story with me, and then be able to share that story with others.”²¹ He described meeting Bill as “being in a room full of strangers and then finding one friend you can cling to.”²² He and Bill both affirmed that there was a connection between them as soldiers—even as soldiers who had fought in two different kinds of wars decades apart from each other. Bill explained that he did not share some of his experiences with his own family members because he did not want them to think about him in that way. “Nobody likes to relive the scene over there or to hold on to those memories,” according to Ron.²³ Still, he got Bill and his other partners to reveal more than they had revealed with nearly anyone else while also making a little more progress in coming to terms with his own experience in Iraq. After Ron produced the video based on his interviews, he gave copies not only to his partners but—with their consent—to their families, as well. This turned out to be very timely because one of Ron’s partners passed away soon afterwards.

²¹Quoted by Rosaleen Gilmore, “Veterans: The Heroes Who Live Among Us,” *Gwynmercian* (May 2010), 2. This publication is the university’s newspaper.

²²Quoted by Megan Gilmore, “Sharing History,” *Today* (Summer 2010), 19. This publication is the university’s alumni magazine.

²³*Ibid.*

This was an exceptional experience, and I don't want to make exaggerated pedagogical claims about the project.²⁴ Most student reflections are fairly mediocre and even minor epiphanies are infrequent, if not uncommon. However, the project strives not so much for epiphany as it does for understanding and meaning, the product of experience and reflection.²⁵ It is a way to frame historical thinking for that growing contingent of students who arrive at college with limited exposure to the knowledge and skills associated with understanding the complex nature of the past and who question the relevance of history to their own lives. It seeks to displace that dismissive posture towards the past by transforming it into a human being and a real conversation; by evoking students' historical imaginations with experiences that they have never had themselves but that become part of what they know about the world; and by getting them to realize that history is not only a lens their partners use to remember their own pasts but one that might provide students themselves with perspective about their present lives and the possibilities for their futures.

²⁴In July 2010, Ron and I traveled to Prague to discuss our respective experiences with this project in presentations made at the International Oral History Association's conference.

²⁵Robert G. Bringle and Julie A. Hatcher, "Reflection in Service Learning: Making Meaning of Experience," *Educational Horizons*, 77 (Summer 1999), 179–185.