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Teaching the Cold War through Oral History

Donald A. Ritchie

In the 1950s, students would “duck and cover” at the sound of air-raid sirens. Kneeling under our desks, one hand over the back of the neck, the other over the eyes, we practiced protecting ourselves from nuclear war. Having gone to school in the borough of Queens, New York, I can recall once studying the potential impact of an atomic weapon by examining a large map of the city, with a series of concentric circles emanating from the intersection of 42nd Street and Broadway (everyone took it for granted that the Soviets were targeting Times Square). It came as a startling revelation when the class pinpointed our school in the “firestorm zone” where every structure would be obliterated. Why were we bothering to duck and cover?

Students of the post-Cold War generation lack such sobering realizations of the dangers that existed in the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Able to purchase chunks of the Berlin Wall in department stores, they may soon begin to consider the Cold War era as distant as World Wars I and II, the Great Depression, and the Roaring Twenties. Yet for teaching purposes, the Cold War remains locked in the memories of those who lived through the era, which students can discover, share and understand through oral history interviewing.

Since the 1960s, teachers have successfully implemented oral history at every level of instruction from grade school

to graduate school. In high school, oral history has more often been used in honors, gifted and talented, and advance placement classes, but it can also motivate slow learners and otherwise indifferent students. The “historical detective work” of oral history helps students break loose from their textbooks and become active collectors of information—and students remember best what they researched themselves. Oral history varies the normal classroom

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activities, and gives students an opportunity to meet and speak with people associated with historical events (1).

The essential ingredient for any school project is a sponsor who is interested, concerned, and committed to using oral history. “It’s not all fun and games,” Gainesville, Florida, high school teacher Barbara Gallant reported. “It has to be part of the curriculum and not something extra. I don’t think you need the money to start, because I think that can be found. I do

think there has to be a person who cares and wants to do it; who feels that there is some real value in it” (2).

Some teachers have already developed some experience with oral history, having taken courses in graduate school, or used interviews in their classes or research. For those just beginning, there are oral history courses and workshops available at many universities, community colleges, and adult education programs.

Several summer institutes and oral history workshops are offered around the country each year. The Oral History Association and its state and regional affiliates regularly run workshops and offer sessions and publications aimed at teachers. Two extremely useful pamphlets aimed at high-school teachers are: George L. Mehaffy, Thad Sitton, and O.L. Davis, Jr. *Oral History in the Classroom* (Washington: National Council for the Social Studies, 1979), “How To Do It Series” 2, No. 8; and Barry A. Lanman and George L.

Mehaffy, *Oral History in the Secondary School Classroom* (Los Angeles: Oral History Association, 1988). The latter pamphlet outlines two-week, eight-week, and semester-long units which use oral history. It offers helpful advice on selecting topics, evaluating student interviews, and raising funds to support school projects, and includes a sample legal release form for interviews. The Oral History Association’s *Evaluation Guidelines* (Los Angeles: Oral History Association, 1992),



Lyndon B. Johnson addresses the Civil Rights issue after assuming the presidency following John F. Kennedy's assassination.

provides a handy checklist for all types of oral history projects and specifically addresses the responsibilities of educators and students doing oral history.

Sources

Before rushing out to conduct interviews, students must thoroughly research the subject—to know what questions to ask, to assist the interviewee's memory (since people often have trouble remembering specific names and dates), and to understand exactly what the interviewee is telling them. The starting point for the research can be a history textbook, some published volumes of oral history interviews, contemporary newsmagazines, or memoirs and historical studies of the era. Movies that can be rented on videocassette, spy novels and other works of fiction will further help set the scene. Worthwhile histories of the Cold War "homefront" that can be consulted for research include Fred Inglis, *The Cruel Peace: Everyday Life in the Cold War* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Nora Sayre, *Running Time: Films of the Cold War* (New York: Dial Press, 1982); and Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the*

Cold War (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991). For the diplomatic and military confrontations of the era, students can read William Hyland, *The Cold War: Fifty Years of Conflict* (New York: Times Books, 1991); Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia and the Cold War, 1945-1992* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993); and Thomas G. Paterson, *On Every Front: The Making and Unmaking of the Cold War* (New York: Norton, 1992).

Having lasted forty years and affected the lives of every American, the global Cold War offers an abundance of subjects and sources for doing oral history. Interviewees might include U.S. military personnel who served overseas—in Korea, Berlin, and Southeast Asia—or at home on the DEW-Line and at missile bases. Subjects for oral history projects may include national security, the "Red scare," atomic culture, and antinuclear demonstrations, as well as people's reminiscences of such famous Cold War events as the Berlin Crisis, the U-2 affair, the Cuban Missile Crisis, President Nixon's trip to China, and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Many emigrants from Communist nations now living in the U.S. can give

personal testimony of the influence of great events on the lives of average people. Local newspapers and locally-involved citizens, nearby colleges, nursing homes, Veterans Hospitals, and such national organizations such as the VFW and the American Legion can all help students locate potential interviewees. For the greatest benefit, teachers should involve students in the decision-making process. Have the class as a group discuss and choose the central topic for the oral history project, determine whom to interview, prepare basic questions, and eventually review the completed interviews.

Methods

Regardless of the topic, certain fundamental considerations should be taken into account when using oral history in the classroom:

1. Although the Nintendo generation is quick to adapt to new technology, teachers will still need to familiarize students with the equipment they will be using, whether tape recorders, microphones, videocameras, or computers for transcribing. Students need to become comfortable with the equip-

- ment, and know how best to set it up to ensure good sound quality. They also need to be reminded that there is no third side to a tape (many a good interview has been accidentally recorded over by a nervous interviewer).
2. The class as a whole should discuss the types of questions that they should be asking, both in terms of the subjects they will want to cover, and how to ask questions, such as mixing open-ended and more focused questions.
 3. Although each interview will need to be tailored to the particular interviewee, the class should select a few general questions that all will ask, so they can compare the responses from different interviews (3).
 4. It is usually advisable to conduct a sample interview in the classroom, perhaps with another teacher, school administrator, parent, or staff member as the interviewee. Observing and analyzing this in-class interview helps the students recognize the role of the interviewer, and to plan strategies to put interviewees at ease and elicit meaningful information.
 5. Since students will be going into people's homes and offices, teachers must also remind them of the ethics and etiquette of interviewing. Explain the need for interviewers to schedule appointments in advance and then keep them; to appear on time; to act courteously; and to respect other's property. Interviewees should be told the purpose of the project, and should be asked to sign a release form, so that their interviews can be used in school publications, exhibits, and other public presentations, or deposited in the school library (4).

Processing Interviews

Transcribing oral histories increases their usefulness, but it is a time-consuming chore that will depend on the skill-levels of the students and on the equipment available for their use. At the least, students should prepare summaries of their interviews to report to the class, and to play portions of the tape, which the class

can analyze for content and for interviewing technique. When oral history projects are completed, students will have a deeper understanding of what happened in history, and how historical events affected the people who lived through them—whether the memories of a soldier on the Korean truce line, a civilian's reactions to the Cuban Missile Crisis, or a student's recollections of ducking and covering. By giving the tapes and transcripts or summaries to the school library, teachers and students will be creating a resource for future classes to use, as the Cold War grows dimmer in the collective memory.

The following is reprinted from the Oral History Association's *Evaluation Guidelines* (Los Angeles: Oral History Association, 1992).

Educator and Student Guidelines

Has the educator:

- a. become familiar with the "Oral History Evaluation Guidelines" and conveyed their substance to the student?
- b. ensured that each student is properly prepared before going into the community to conduct oral history interviews?
- c. become knowledgeable of the literature, techniques and processes of oral history, so that the best possible instruction can be presented to the student?
- d. worked with other professionals and organizations to provide the best oral history experience for the student?
- e. considered that the project may merit preservation and worked with other professionals and repositories to preserve and disseminate these collected materials?
- f. shown willingness to share her/his expertise with other educators, associations and organizations?

Has the student:

- a. become thoroughly familiar with the techniques and processes of oral history interviewing and the development of research using oral history interviews?

- b. explained to the interviewee the purpose of the interview and how it will be used?
- c. treated the interviewee with respect?
- d. signed a receipt for and returned any materials borrowed from the interviewee?
- e. obtained a signed legal release for the interview?
- f. kept her/his word about oral and written promises made to the interviewees?
- g. given proper credit (verbal or written) when using oral testimony, and used material in context?

Endnotes

1. Richard P. Onderdonk, "Piaget and Oral History: Cognitive Development in the Secondary Studies Class," *Oral History Review* 11 (1983): 77; Barry A. Lanman, "The Use of Oral History in the Classroom: A Comparative Analysis of the 1974 and 1987 Oral History Association Surveys," *Oral History Review* 17 (Spring 1989): 223-224; Joel R. Gardner, "Using Oral History and Folklore in the Classroom," *New Jersey Folklore Society* 11 (Spring/Fall 1990): 1-16.
2. William Cutler, et al., "Oral History as a Teaching Tool," *Oral History Review* 1 (1973): 38-43.
3. Eliot Wigginton, *Sometimes a Shining Moment: The Foxfire Experience* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), offers recommendations on setting up a class oral history project, based on the highly successful "Foxfire" program.
4. See, for example, George L. Mehaffy and Thad Sitton, "Oral History Tells Its Own Story: The Development of the Loblolly Project," *Social Studies* 68 (1977): 231-235.

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