

What's Your Story? Preserving Oral Histories in the Rio Grande Valley

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Maria C. Gritz

April 7, 2013

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Introduction

When the author moved to the Rio Grande Valley and was charged with the task of teaching Texas History to students in Saint Joseph Catholic School in Edinburg, Texas for two years, she immediately recognized a paradox between the richness of the state's history as a whole and the information available about the region's history. With much left to be discovered, the residents of the Rio Grande Valley—students at Saint Joseph, their families, and other community members—were largely untapped sources of information about the region's past. They lived on land that could contain precious artifacts, they had unheard stories that could shed light on relations between demographic groups in the region, and many had connections to the land where they were raised and to historical events that could give students a lens through which they could view Texas History. With many students struggling to comprehend the relevance of the past in an age of rapidly advancing technology and shortening attention spans, educators of history know that making the material tangible and relatable is key to unlocking a student's interest in the subject. This lesson, entitled "What's Your Story? Preserving Oral Histories in the Rio Grande Valley," serves to help students make personal connections to the region and its history while instilling a sense of active participation in the creation of knowledge as students interview citizens of the Rio Grande Valley and produce an oral history that will be shared with the public for educational purposes beyond the classroom.

Key Concepts and TEKS Covered

As the introduction to Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for Middle School Social Studies states, "to support the teaching of the essential knowledge and skills, the use of a variety of rich primary and secondary source material such as biographies, autobiographies,

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novels...and artwork is encouraged.” This multi-day lesson plan challenges students to utilize their communication skills to create their own primary source document, an oral history, while also touching upon other TEKS themes such as geography; culture; science, technology, and society; critical thinking skills; and writing skills.

- 4 (b) identify and explain the geographic factors responsible for patterns of population in places and regions; (c) explain ways in which human migration influences the character of places and regions;
- 15 (b) identify and describe common traits that define cultures, (d) analyze the experiences and evaluate the contributions of diverse groups to multicultural societies;
- 19 (a) explain the relationship among religious ideas, philosophical ideas, and cultures;
- 20 (a) give examples of scientific discoveries and technological innovations...that have transcended the boundaries of societies and have shaped the world;
- 21 (d) identify different points of view about an issue or current topic, (e) identify the elements of frame of reference that influenced participants in an event;
- 22 (c) express ideas orally based on research and experiences; (d) create written and visual material such as journal entries, reports, graphic organizers, etc.; (e) use standard grammar, spelling, sentence structure, and punctuation.

The standards above quote Grade 6 TEKS, but similar standards are also found in Grades 7 and 8 TEKS and in other states, making this lesson plan suitable for any Middle School Social Studies classroom. It is also important to note that due to the individualized nature of this lesson plan (i.e. different standards will be met depending on the content of the students' oral histories), students may master some standards more than others. The sharing of oral histories is essential to

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foster student understanding of each standard below, but including these standards in other lesson plans throughout the academic year to ensure mastery is also encouraged.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to...

- Compare and contrast students' and subjects' lives
- Show an increased understanding of the relationship between geography and society
- Describe technological innovations and their impact on daily life
- Improve their interviewing, writing, and presentation skills
- Conduct an interview and compose an oral history
- Reflect upon the experience of creating a primary source document

Activities and Assessment

This is a multi-day lesson plan during which there will likely be a break between lessons due to the fact that students are assigned to interview older family members or acquaintances. The process of asking for permission, setting a date, interviewing the subject, and typing the notes could take up to two weeks, depending on various factors including the availability of the interviewee. Therefore, after Day 2 of the lesson plan teachers are encouraged to hit pause and proceed with other lesson plans before resuming Day 3 of this lesson plan.

On Day 1, the teacher will review the concepts of primary and secondary source documents, citing examples from prior lessons. Then, he/she will introduce the guest speaker, a representative from the Community Historical Project with Schools (CHAPS), in this case, Dr. Russell Skowronek. As an alternative, teachers can request that the guest speaker call in or play a

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recording of the guest speaker. By the end of the presentation, students should have a deepened sense of the importance of archaeology, give examples of artifacts in the world around them, and realize that they have a role to play in the creation of history.

On Day 2, the teacher will review the guest speaker's presentation to activate prior knowledge before introducing the oral history assignment. The teacher will distribute the assignment handout and informed consent form, which gives the University of Texas – Pan-American Library permission to share their interviews with the general public for educational purposes. He or she will discuss the assignment with the students and answer any questions they may have about the assignment. (Please see the assignment handout for students in Appendix I.) Then, students will read two examples of oral histories and will write one paragraph explaining what they learned about the history of the Rio Grande Valley from one of the two examples. (Please see two examples of students' oral histories in Appendices II and III.) The teacher will set due dates for the consent form, draft oral history, and final, typed oral history. Meanwhile, the teacher may proceed to another lesson, with periodic checks that the consent forms and draft oral histories were completed.

On Day 3, the day when the final oral histories will be due, each student will present their interviews to small groups of three or four students. Students will respond to each of their peer's oral histories by citing a fact and explaining what they learned about the Rio Grande Valley because of it (e.g., "When your grandmother said that there were separate water foundations for Mexicans and white people, I learned that segregation existed in the Rio Grande Valley in the 1960s"). The teacher will circulate and take participation and communication grades. At the end of class, students will write an Exit Ticket reflecting upon their experience with this lesson. They may respond to one or more out of three questions, depending on time: Did the interview change

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the way you looked at your subject? Did this experience change the way you view yourself, and if so, how? Has this lesson affected your attitude toward Social Studies, Archaeology, and History? (Please see examples of Exit Ticket responses in Student Reflections, below.) Then, the students will be assessed on the basis of their having followed the instructions for the oral history presentation and their efforts to answer the Exit Ticket questions.

Student Reflections

Did the interview change the way you looked at your subject?

- “It made me realize that my grandparents worked hard all through their life and that hard work does pay off.”
- “When I look at my grandpa, I feel like I know him a lot better.”

Did this experience change the way you view yourself, and if so, how?

- “It made me realize I should be grateful for what my parents do for me because they didn't have the same opportunities I had.”
- “Now I know where I get some of my personality.”
- “I don't go outside unless I absolutely have to, but my grandma spent most of her time working outside.”

Has the oral history affected your attitude towards Social Studies/archaeology/history?

- “Now that I know more about my dad's life, I want to know more about my mom's.”
- “Now I want to go out and discover things about the past...and compare them to what we have today.”
- “It makes me want to go back in time and experience all of that myself.”

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Appendix I: Student Handout

What's Your Story?

Oral History Assignment

*The word "history" contains the words "story." You have a story. Every family has a story. Maybe your relatives have told you stories of their childhoods, ancestors, and properties. Now is your chance to take the stories that have been told and write them down – in other words, make **oral** history into **written** history. In doing so, you are saving your family's stories for generations... and letting them live forever.*

1st Step: Choose someone to interview, also known as a subject or interviewee. Try to think of a family member who seems to know a lot about your family history. If you are struggling, consider an older teacher or neighbor. Speak to the teacher and your parents before asking a non-family member.

2nd Step: Get your subject's permission to be interviewed. Have your subject sign the release form, or interview consent form, once they agree to be interviewed. This is due on [date].

3rd Step: Prepare. Make a date with your subject. Set aside thirty minutes to one hour for the interview. Have your list of questions to ask ready, as well as a notepad or computer with keyboard and a writing utensil. If you want to use a tape recorder or video camera, ask for your subject's permission before doing so.

4th Step: Interview. Don't be afraid to ask your own questions, too, as long as you ask the required questions (on back). Take lots of notes! Also, let the interview exceed the time limit if you are gaining interesting material. Be patient with your subject. Ask for explanations to "yes/no" questions. Your notes will be due on [date].

5th Step: Type out the interview. Be sure to include the questions you asked and the approximate responses you received. Turn in your finished product in class on [date]. Use the format provided on the back when typing your interview.

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Appendix, I, Continued

Twelve Questions You **MUST** Ask:

1. Where and when were you born?
2. Describe your family: How many brothers and sisters did you have? What were your parents like? How did you all get along?
3. What languages were spoken in your home? Are you bi/multilingual?
4. What stories did you hear about your parents, grandparents, and other ancestors?
5. Did your ancestors immigrate? If so, to/from where, and when?
6. Describe a typical day when you were my age (school, chores, hobbies).
7. If married: How old were you when you got married? How did you meet your spouse? Did you have children?
8. What historical events had a strong influence on your life (such as civil rights, wars, technological inventions, etc.)? How did they affect your life?
9. What types of food did you eat growing up? Did you grow food at home? Who did most of the cooking?
10. Have you moved throughout your life? How has the town you now live in changed over the years?
11. Describe the history of the property you now live on. Have you ever found fossils or arrow heads on it? (If so, provide a Google Earth image of the property and mark the location.) Did your relatives get a land grant from the King of Spain or the Republic Mexico?
12. What kind of technology did you have growing up (air conditioning, running water, electricity, cars, television, etc.)?

Feel free to add your own questions!

Ex.: "What stories about your life do you want to pass down?"

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Appendix II: First Example of Oral History

Student: where and when were you born?

Subject: I was born in 1955 in my grandmother's house in Abram, TX., which is near Mission, Texas.

Student: How many brothers or sisters did you have? What were your parents like? How did you all get along?

Subject: I have five sisters and two brothers, my mom was a housewife and my father worked on a farm, he worked the land for his employers, who had cattle and also grew wheat and cotton. I got along very well with my brothers and sisters it was seldom that we didn't get along. My parents were very strict and hardworking.

Student: What languages were spoken in your home? Are you bi/multilingual?

Subject: My parents spoke Spanish most of the time, but we spoke Spanish and English. Amongst ourselves we spoke English, but when our mom and dad spoke to us we always answered in Spanish.

Student: What stories did you hear about your parents, grandparents, and other ancestors?

Subject: My mom told us stories about our grandparent's, that they were from Mexico, a small town in the mountains near Monterrey, Nuevo Leon. My father told us that his parents were also from Mexico near San Luis and that they came to the United States to work, and that they would return to Reynosa, Tamaulipas Mexico where they farmed.

Student: Did your ancestors immigrate? If so, to/ from where, and when?

Subject: Yes, my mom's parents came to Mission, Texas in 1920. They would go north every year for a few months to do migrant work and return to Mission where they lived until they passed away. My father's parents came to the U.S.A. in 1910. They lived in a small town called Liberty Hill, Texas near Austin. They lived there for a while and then returned to Reynosa where they bought land and farmed until they passed away. The land is still in the family and one of my uncle's farms on it.

Student: Describe a typical day when you were my age.

Subject: By the time I was 11 years old we moved to the city, Lubbock, TX, and it wasn't the same. We couldn't ride our bikes because of traffic. It was not the same as country life for us. We had a small backyard in Lubbock and we had to walk to school which was five blocks away. We had house duties on weekends when we were home.

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Student: How old were you when you got married? How did you meet your spouse? Did you have children?

Subject: I was 24 years old when I married and I met my husband at a dance. We have four children, three daughters and one son.

Student: What historical events had a strong influence on your life? (Such as civil rights, wars, technological inventions, etc.) How did they affect your life?

Subject: When I was young there was segregation and no African American children were allowed at my school. I wondered why they were not allowed in my school. Also the Vietnam War happened, and all I ever heard was more U.S. soldiers got killed. My teachers always told us that the soldiers were fighting against bad people.

Student: What types of food did you eat growing up? Did you grow food at home? Who did most of the cooking?

Subject: My parents were not wealthy and it was hard for my father to make enough money to feed ten mouths, so we mostly ate potatoes, eggs, beans and tortillas, it was seldom that we had meat. We grew our vegetables in our garden in the backyard. My mom always did the cooking.

Student: Have you moved throughout your life? How has the town you now live in changed over the years?

Subject: We did move a couple of times, we lived in Madison, Wisconsin, Casa Grande, Arizona, and then moved to McAllen, TX. McAllen has grown a lot, when I moved here we had El Centro Mall in Pharr, TX. and downtown McAllen stores were quite popular. There were no homes or residential areas past Nolana St. and nothing east of McColl St., it was a rural area.

Student: Describe the history of the property you now live on. Have you ever found a fossil or arrow heads on it? Did your relatives get a land grant from the King of Spain or the Republic of Mexico? (If so, provide a Google Earth image of the and mark the location)

Subject: When we moved here the home we moved into was already there, it was a residential area. We never found any artifacts, the whole house is surrounded by cement so we didn't have space to dig in.

Student: What kind of technology did you have growing up?

Subject: We had a window unit for air conditioning only in the living room area, running water, electricity, a car, and a television.

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Appendix III: Second Example of Oral History

Student: Where and when were you born?

Subject: I was born on March 3, 1947 in San Juan, TX.

Student: Describe your family: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

What were parents like? How did you all get along?

Subject: Yes, I have 2 brothers and 6 sisters. My father was very affectionate, loving, and always telling us stories. My mother was an orphan, and was very strict, but she loved us so much.

Student: What languages were spoken in your home? Are you bi/multilingual?

Subject: Spanish, I didn't learn to speak English until I went to school.

Student: What stories did you hear about your parents, grandparents, and other ancestors?

Subject: My dad told me stories about his parents, and about their families.

Student: Did your ancestors immigrate? If so, to/from where, and when?

Subject: No, they did not immigrate.

Student: Describe a typical day when you were my age.

Subject: Around 12 years old, I had to get my clothes on and walk near the canal to the bus stop to get to school. My chores were helping my mother cook, clean, and help with the animals around my house. My hobbies were basically always feeding the animals (chickens, goats, cows).

Student: If married: How old were you when you got married? How did you meet your spouse?

Did you have children?

Subject: I was 20 years old when I got married. I met him in high school. I had 4 children, 3 girls and 1 boy.

Student: What historical events had a strong influence on your life (such as civil rights, wars, technological invention, etc.)? How did they affect your life?

Subject: I experienced civil rights growing up. Because we were Mexican Americans we were not allowed to do certain things. For example, there were separate drinking fountains for Mexican Americans and Whites. I also experienced war, my brother was in the army in Vietnam.

Student: What types of food did you eat growing up? Did you grow food at home? Who did most of the cooking?

Subject: I ate rice, beans, tortillas and fideo. My mother did most of the cooking.

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Student: Have you moved throughout your life? How has the town you now live in changed over the years?

Subject: There are a lot more people, tall buildings, and expressways.

Student: Describe the history of the property you now live on. Did your relatives get a land grant from the King of Spain or the Republic of Mexico?

Subject: Yes, we had a land grant from the Republic of Mexico.

Student: What kind of technology did you have growing up (air conditioning, running water, electricity, cars, television, etc.)?

Subject: Yes, I had all those things including, a phone, typewriter, and a refrigerator.

Student: Was it hard raising your kids?

Subject: Yes, it was very hard, but worth it because I now have grandchildren.