

## **A Texan Drama: Using Oral History and Drama to Teach Cultural Awareness**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the foundations for my classroom is the recognition that we are a community working together towards a common goal. As we pursue this cohesive organization, it is essential that we understand, appreciate and use the differences in our community. This idea is paramount to all others in that self-indulgence behavior, lack of positive role models, no identity beyond their immediate surroundings and a whole host of other self-destructive forces surround my students. While these forces increase in their lives, the forces to counteract them are disappearing or infrequently used. The students, when asked, know little of their family history or their community. Their scholastic career is increasingly focused on state testing mandates and their experiences are becoming ever shallower. With this knowledge, it is our classroom's intent to remove these influences from our environment and create one of celebration and exuberance for rich community experiences.

In fourth grade the social studies focus is Texas History. A part of this study is community, primarily focused on geographical distinctions. As I considered this component, I began to realize that this is an excellent outlet for culminating our community experience by examining what makes our community special. To guide this study, I decided that the students should use oral history techniques to record their family history. This experience should provide them with some insight into their family history and sense of place. However, the question remains of how to incorporate this into the larger context of the specific group experience. For this, drama would be used to provide a personal dialogue with the reader and provide a kinesthetic outlet as well. The synthesis of this information is to take the oral history and the dramatic experience and combine the two, creating a play of the oral histories represented in our classroom.

### **THE UNIT**

Since this unit will be presented at the end of the year, the students should be familiar with all the major themes from Texas history: the basic landforms of Texas and how they affect resource use and settlement, Native American influences, Spanish and Mexican influences, the impact of slavery and the Anglo culture. With a well-founded knowledge base of these themes, the student is ready to apply this information for more introspective consideration.

As is required for all project-based learning experiences, a central driving question must be presented. For this project the question is: "What makes you act the way you do? What makes Texans act the way they do? Is it where we live or is it the people around us that affect who we are?" From this question, the students will begin to study

oral history: methodology, questioning and recording techniques, cultural drama from Native American, Mexican, and African American, selected oral histories from the various cultures, drama writing and performance, and the creation of a class quilt (to be used later for the backdrop of our play).

It is important to note that the oral history and drama study will be occurring simultaneously. From this information, the student oral history and drama are created. The quilt should be introduced early due to the time required to complete such a project.

## **DRAMA AND ORAL HISTORY**

### **Overview and implementation**

Our social science book serves as a good resource for following the progress of Texas, but like many historical texts, it lacks a personal attachment that would bring the reader a deeper understanding of a certain place or time. What multicultural drama can provide is a personal narrative, an eyewitness account that can show an alternative perspective. With a more intimate experience, the student should have greater success empathizing with a particular culture or issue and eventually understanding their behavior as a result of their cultures' experience in Texas and America.

Choosing drama for elementary students is not an easy task. There has to be a balance between quality content and the student's ability to comprehend. Drama that deals with racism, slavery, cultural genocide, or a myriad of other issues can be too advanced for fourth graders on both an intellectual and maturity level. However, shielding them from such issues will provide an incomplete picture of their knowledge of history and deny them an opportunity to grow from such experiences. I have chosen to use one source for the plays in this unit. *Plays of the Wild West* by L.E. McCullough provides a diversity of plays from various cultures, many discussing the difficult times and triumphs the non-white cultures experienced. By choosing one source, I have limited the resources needed to implement this unit. Additional books with multicultural plays are listed in the back for supplemental or alternative texts.

The plays I have chosen are for students' grades fourth through sixth. The first play, *Chief Sarah, The Indian Joan of Arc*, discusses the annihilation and redistribution of Native American tribes. The second play, *El Corrido De Gregorio Cortez*, relates an unfortunate situation of miscommunication between an American sheriff and a Mexican rancher. The third play, *Ninth Cavalry to the Rescue*, describes the adventures and trials of a unit of Buffalo Soldiers. My plan is to spend five to seven instructional days on each play. I will first read the play to them, dramatizing the parts and bringing the characters to life. After the initial reading, the students will partner read each play attempting to mimic the style and voice of each character. Having heard the play once and read it once themselves, we can attempt to perform a class rehearsal. This will not only serve as a wonderful kinesthetic outlet, but will also prepare the student for acting out their own

play at the conclusion of this unit. With the completion of three readings, the students are prepared to begin the process of taking the personal narrative from the play and combining it with their prior knowledge on the issue. Occurring simultaneously with the drama reading, several selected oral histories should be read to provide additional richness on the topic and eventually serve as a model for the students' oral history.

## **Native American Drama**

### ***Prior Knowledge***

The social science texts for fourth grade cover the various Native American tribes of Texas. However, beyond basic facts about habitat and culture, there is little discussion about the conquest and annihilation of the native tribes and their subsequent relocation. I supplement the text with native legends and stories, but I do not give enough attention to the post-Columbian invasion. During our discussions about the Spanish arrival in the new world, some students arrive at the epiphany that Columbus did not discover the Americas, but invaded it and go on to question the fairness of those actions. What I hope to accomplish by using the play *Chief Sarah, The Indian Joan of Arc* is a greater understanding and appreciation for the treatment of the native population, and the resulting struggles to defend and preserve their culture.

### ***Chief Sarah, The Indian Joan of Arc***

*Chief Sarah, The Indian Joan of Arc*, details the life of Sarah Minnemucca, chief of the Paiute tribe of Nevada. The play begins with Sarah's sister reminiscing with her granddaughter about her sister. As she begins, we are transported back in time to Sarah as a child listening to a discussion between several Paiutes. Their discussion centers on a recent killing of one of their tribe members by white men. As many shout for retribution, an elder speaks to Sarah about the need to learn the language and manners of the white people to bring peace. "You must learn to talk to the white man, Thocmetony [Chief Sarah]. You must learn the language of the white-rag friend [treaty]." (21)

Already at such a young age, Sarah is taught that her self-identity must be split between her native culture and the new dominant culture. It is through this new culture that any peace or salvation can be attained. As Sarah ages, she is sent to live with a white couple to learn basic etiquette. As she masters these skills, she is brought to a convent school to refine her western education.

She embraces her new lifestyle, enthralled with all her increasing knowledge. However, her education is discontinued due to complaints from other parents threatening to remove their children from the school. With the possibility of decreased school funding, Sarah is asked to leave. Confusion begins about the demands of white people. "They say we must become like them. And when we try to learn, they tell us we cannot" (22).

As Sarah returns to her village, she discovers that the persecution of her tribe has escalated due to the discovery of valuable minerals. To drive the tribe away, the white aggressors use violent force and destroy the tribe's food cache creating a tense situation resulting in war. The war ends in the near destruction of the tribe. To combat the latest battle, Sarah attempts to persuade the U.S. Army to aid her tribe. The Army, while sympathetic, cannot assist and convinces Sarah to take her grievance to the American government.

Sarah follows their advice, taking her tribe's suffering to the public and exposing the people responsible for warring with her tribe. She gains notoriety and fame, eventually publishing a book about the transgressions against the Paiute tribe. Even with success, as Sarah ages she appears to give up her fight to bring awareness to the American public and decides to create a school for Native American children that teaches the Anglo-culture while preserving their native heritage. Due to her health, the school closes after two years. The play concludes with Sarah's final message to her native people before her death.

As the students experience *Chief Sarah, The Indian Joan of Arc*, the harshness of the treatment of the Paiute people along with Sarah's frustration should become very palatable. Her conviction that education and intelligent discussion will serve as salvation eventually became exhausting. We can experience her transformation from accepting her double identity to creating a school to reinforce and preserve native culture. This play enhances the students' understanding of the destruction and assimilation of the native populations of America.

### **Native American Oral Histories**

As the students hear and discuss the story of Chief Sarah, time should be taken to listen to other personal stories. The intent of these stories is to add depth and reinforce their understanding of the trials, suffering and strengths of the native population. The book *Lasting Echoes* by Joseph Bruchac offers a multitude of narratives from Native Americans. The narratives are divided into sections with the author providing a historical background that precedes each native story.

Of interest are several narratives by Sarah Winnemucca. In one narrative she describes her parents attempt to protect her from encroaching white men.

So our mother buried me and my cousin, planted sage brushes over our faces to keep the sun from burning them, and there we were left all day. Oh, can anyone imagine my feelings buried alive, thinking every minute that I was to be unburied by the people that my grandfather loved so much. (84)

Her parents were so afraid of the potential harm by the white settlers they buried their children, hiding their identity. Furthermore, while being buried Sarah's confusion is heightened by the fact that these are people she has been told to mimic.

Going beyond the drama of Chief Sarah, stories abound about the remembrance of lost land and customs, the destructive power of assimilation, and the power of corruption and greed. Chiparopai, a Yuma, reflects, "In old times, we were strong. We used to hunt and fish. Now all is changed. We eat the white man's food and it makes us soft... we know that when you come, we die" (106-107).

From this experience, a sense of loss is felt. Due to a multitude of factors, the Americas have diminished the native population to near extinction. These are no longer facts from some past, appearing unreal or unimportant. These are people speaking directly to the student, providing a far greater depth than could be supplied through the social science text.

## **Mexican Drama**

### ***Prior Knowledge***

The Mexican culture in Texas is an amalgamation of two dominant cultures: Spanish and the native population. Earlier in the year, we explore the influence of the Spanish: the missions, the destruction of the Aztec empire, the exploration and search for wealth. Eventually, we see Mexico become an independent country, removing the Spanish by force. This is glossed over quickly in the social science text, which is unfortunate because of the implication it had on the Anglo settlement of Texas. There were eventually major conflicts between the Anglo settlers and the Mexican government that led to the Texas Revolution and the subsequent creation of the Texas nation-state, creating a permanent border between the two countries.

A majority of my students are from a Hispanic background, as is indicative of a growing minority of our state. Most of my students speak Spanish, but as they progress through school they adopt the dominant language of English. I have often been dismayed to see them lose their heritage and made to feel ashamed by adults, parents or other students who cannot communicate effectively in English. What a tragedy! There exists a multitude of data supporting the benefits of multiple language acquisition, but we choose to push them away from their native language toward English. It is difficult for them to understand the need to keep their language, understand and show compassion for others that do not have the opportunities that they have had, comprehend the sacrifice many have made to create a better life, and feel outrage at the lack of tolerance others have towards different languages.

### *El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez*

The play *El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez* tells the story of a Spanish-speaking farmer who is accused of stealing a horse by the local English-speaking sheriff. Abuelita Piedra and her English counterpart Granny Stone narrate the play. These two contradicting characters describe each situation from their vantagepoint. Where Granny Stone may announce the arrival of a character that did not speak English, Abuelita Stone would announce the character as speaking Spanish.

As the Sheriff questions Gregorio about the theft, the sheriff's deputy attempts to translate the conversation. Poor translation leads the sheriff to believe that Gregorio stole the horse and is also going to injure him. As the sheriff's temper flares, an innocent victim is killed and Gregorio defends himself by shooting the sheriff. Gregorio flees the scene. As Gregorio seeks refuge from friends, he is hunted by an ever-increasing posse. His friends are persecuted and innocent people are killed due to mistaken identity. As Gregorio eludes capture, his legend grows. Eventually, he surrenders and is sentenced to life in prison.

The play ends, Granny Stone reflects on his release from prison. "He was thirty-eight years old and had spent nearly one-third of his life in jail. All because he didn't speak good English" (39). To which Abuelita Piedra counters, "All because the translator spoke bad Spanish" (39).

As we discuss the story, everyone should be able to draw upon personal experiences where misunderstanding led to some unpleasant end. Again, the main character is assumed to be ignorant and untrustworthy because of a language difference. The character's identity is diminished to one of deviant and criminal tendencies. Furthermore, the character is invisible to the outer community because of his race. The sheriff has difficulty choosing a culprit for the crime because he perceives all Mexicans as looking the same. A lack of tolerance and understanding led to fear, which in this case led to the loss of life.

### **Mexican Oral History**

During our reading of Mexican drama, I want to supplement our play with oral histories that not only communicate the fear, confusion and bravery of being in a foreign land with a foreign language, but also the sacrifice people will make to improve their lives or that of their family. The second part is especially important in guiding the student toward thinking of their own family and why they are Texans.

### *Foreign Land, Foreign Tongue*

Imagine Gregorio, living in a land that once belonged to Mexico, and in a short period completely changed. His language was no longer accepted or understood, his motives were questioned, and his confusion with new customs and language grew.

The student can empathize with misunderstandings. Everyone has had situations where their actions or language were incorrectly received and resulted in an undesired result. Many times these situations appear comical, but when examined they can reveal a great deal about the society.

In the oral history collection *Mexican Voices/American Dreams*, one example of the language barrier is the story of Pedro Medina Gavino. As Pedro tells his story about crossing the border and finding employment, he encounters an American woman.

Everyone says they want to marry a *gringa*, but I never really said that. I never really thought there was a chance. But she spoke to me first. And I spoke only Spanish, so I couldn't even answer her. I don't know how we managed to communicate; it's something like magic. (178)

Even with a language barrier, through some form of magic Pedro manages to meet and marry a "Gringa." Besides the obvious problems of language, the status that is given for a male Mexican to marry an American woman warrants attention. The marriage to an American is described as some form of almost unattainable prestige and acceptance into the dominant society. The conflict between myth and reality can create situations where expectations and assumptions about others can undermine understanding.

As the two decide to marry, Pedro wants to speak with her parents about the decision the couple has made, but he must ask her to translate the information due to the language barrier. It is never clear whether the parents agree, but the couple decides to have a marriage ceremony for the parents.

So we got married again in Portland. I said, "I do," in English. Of course here they get married in English. I would listen to the judge. He would talk, "Bla, bla bla." And when he stopped talking and looked at me with his chin down, I would say, "I do." (178)

With no comprehension of the language, Pedro is forced to use context clues to repeat a phrase that may have had no significance to him at the time. The marriage ceremony is incomprehensible but will provide him with an American bride and security from being deported.

## ***The Land of Opportunity***

We constantly hear stories of people who left their homeland to travel, legally or illegally, to the United States for greater opportunities. These stories can be used to question our place in Houston. People migrate for many reasons and in many cases sacrifice a great deal. As the students listen to the stories of immigration, an opportune time is presented to question why their parents, grandparents or relatives are in Houston, Texas.

The story of María Vasquez in *Mexican Voices/American Dreams* offers insight into a difficult situation for a mother with several children attempting to make a better life for her family after her husband dies. The story has familiar themes: the search for employment, multiple attempts to cross the border and the opportunity that awaits her in America.

After her first attempt to cross failed, she is left without any money or resources. However, she does not give up and attempts to find another alternative.

By then we had gone two days without eating, and my son wanted to return to San Juan. He didn't want to try again. But I intended to make the fight and get myself in. I found someone who would cross me at the line, but he charged a lot. It cost me \$600 to cross at the line, but this time I made it. (184)

She continues her story, describing the poor employment, the difficult living situation and the lack of financial resources. Even with such hardship, she never relinquishes her vision of the salvation America holds.

## **The African American Drama**

### ***Prior Knowledge***

What sets apart the black experience in Texas is that most were brought by the original Anglo settlers as slaves. Their life in Texas is not a result of a melding of cultures, as displaced aboriginal inhabitants, or opportunity-seeking easterners. As students examine the causes of the Texas revolution, they discover that a major disagreement between Mexico and the Anglo settlers was over the right to have slaves. As Texas became independent and eventually a part of the United States, the choice to side with the confederacy served to further aggravate the treatment of black people within the state. Even upon the completion of the Civil War, Texas' hesitation to free the slaves, the fear created by the Klu Klux Klan, atrocities continued to serve as a dark moment in Texas history.



Surprise and outrage characterize the students' initial reaction. They find it difficult to accept that people within Texas had slaves, but like most realizations they have with history, it lacks a certain tangible quality. To help guide them to a greater understanding, the Buffalo Soldiers serve as a great catalyst to visualize the issue.

### ***Ninth Cavalry to the Rescue!***

The play *Ninth Cavalry to the Rescue* begins at a monument dedication to the Buffalo Soldiers given by General Colin Powell. As General Powell begins the dedication, the soldiers in the monument come alive and begin to tell their story. The soldiers begin to detail the accounts that provide insight into their accomplishments. They discuss an encounter with the infamous Billy the Kid, and their attempt to end a cattle baron feud. Success follows them and their assistance is called upon more frequently.

A major priority for the soldiers was to pacify the west for settlement, which led to multiple battles with hostile tribes. This is an interesting development for the student. At this point we witness former slaves, forcefully brought to this country killing and clearing the land of the native inhabitants all for the progress of the white man. At one point a character in the play observes, "If I remember correctly, our Sunday-school book told us it is wrong to persecute the poor Indian. Weren't they here first?"

To this statement, another character observes, "Here we are – hired to hunt and kill red men, when black and brown men like ourselves are being killed all over the South by lynch mobs and the Ku Klux Klan."

The question is then raised, they enact wrongs against others as people enact wrongs against their race, why continue to serve? To this question, a final character states:

If you were in Dixie right now, you wouldn't be able to do much except swing in the breeze. Out here, you have the chance to prove yourself the best fighting cavalryman in the world. (120)

Here the student witnesses again another individual telling them that they must somehow prove themselves, gain acceptance from the dominant culture. The soldiers know their actions are wrong and are aware of the continued persecution against their culture, yet they still strive to create a new identity in hope of gaining white acceptance.

As the play continues, the Buffalo Soldiers establish the infrastructure for the west through building stockades, protecting cattle and railroad interests, and building the telegraph system. The play concludes with the Ninth Cavalry in a final heroic battle in which several soldiers earned the Congressional Medal of Honor.

## **African American Oral History**

### ***The Impact of Slavery***

The play begins during the reconstruction era. The students have read and heard of slavery, but the dramatic experience presented gives insight into this newly freed culture. There needs to be a personal understanding of the thoughts and emotions that accompany someone that was formerly a slave. It would be extremely beneficial for the students' understanding to explore narratives from freed slaves that talk directly about their slave experience.

It is difficult to think of another human as equivalent to a farm animal or a piece of machinery. The student can speculate how a person might react if all their life they were reinforced with the idea that they were unable to function like other people. The individual would no longer view themselves as having any worth. However, what happens when not just an individual but an entire culture is subjected to dehumanizing forces? In *Till Freedom Cried Out*, Mattie Hardman addresses this issue and shares with the reader the treatment of slaves.

He didn't allow the slaves to claim they forgot to do thus and so nor did he allow them to make the expression, "I thought so and so." He would say to them if they did, "Who told you, you could think!" (28)

Even if a race is subjected to inhumane situation, the student should question how a large group of people could be kept in such a condition. Bob Maynard explains the intricacies of keeping a slave population suppressed and submissive.

The Patrollers, Ku Kluxers or night riders come by sometimes at night to scare the niggers and make 'em behave. Sometimes the slaves would run off and the Patroller would catch 'em and have 'em whipped. I've seen that done lots of times. They was some wooden stocks and they'd put the darky in this and strap him down, take off his clothes and give him 25 to 50 licks, 'cording to what he had done. (61-62)

The students after listening to the slave's oral history, should be confronted with thinking about the long-term effects of such treatment. The end conclusion is that the past treatment of others affects their future actions. Students react and judge others based on their interactions, and those impressions do not disappear as time passes.

## **ORAL HISTORY: STUDENTS RECORDING THEIR HISTORY**

### **Planting the seed**

As the students listen and integrate the oral histories into their understanding of the cultures that shaped Texas, the question can be posed, “Can we interview someone and get their story? Would interviewing someone in our family be useful for understanding our original question?” As the students become excited about this new concept, they are ready to begin the process of conducting their own oral history.

The first step to begin creating an interview is to use the vast knowledge they already have attained. By rereading a popular oral history used earlier, the class can work backwards. Imagining themselves as interviewers, they can figure out what questions the interviewer asked to encourage the interviewee to tell their story. This process begins to build an outline needed to create their own interview questions.

It would be difficult for a fourth grader to completely fathom the intricacies of oral history and questioning methodology. Instead of inundating them with the specifics, it would be easier to begin their questioning as searching for an interesting family story. This is advantageous for several reasons. First, a family story would be easier to convert into a narrative story. Secondly, it is an easy question that can generate a wealth of information.

### **Preparing for the interview**

The interview sheet should begin by asking name, date and place of birth, parents’ names, and other familiar information. These routine questions prepare both the interviewer and the interviewee for the process of interviewing and create a more relaxed atmosphere. Beyond that the student can choose which story they are seeking. They can focus on embarrassing moments, why they came to Texas, interesting stories, or repeat a story the student is familiar with. The main point is to get the students communicating with a family member and sharing a memory. This process should be a class experience to allow everyone to share ideas.

With the completion of the interview sheet, the students must practice interviewing. Setting up a scenario with an unresponsive interviewee creates the awareness that people sometimes are unwilling to talk about issues when being recorded. What happens when someone does not answer your questions? The class can discuss persuasive techniques to entice a story from an interviewee, but above all they need to understand perseverance. To hone their skills, repetitive practices interviewing each other is the best way to not only remove unnecessary questions and improve others, but makes the student feel at ease with the interview.

With the interviewer ready, it is time to release them into the public. While typically oral history uses tape recorders or visual recorders, it is best for our purposes to have the student transcribe the interview. The end result to this process will be several pages of answers to their various questions.

### **Creating the narrative**

To create the narrative, the students first need to remove the questions. This can be accomplished by simply erasing their questions. The interview should be arranged in some sequential order, going from specific information to the broader stories. The second step is to rewrite the interview, separating the background information from the more substantive stories. The newly created narrative should be written in a first person format, resembling the oral histories read in class. If a student were to read the narrative, it should appear as if the person is speaking directly to the audience, uninterrupted. The students should read these aloud, proofreading and checking for coherence and flow. Finally, the interviewer should check their information with the interviewee for errors, omissions, or additions. The completed project should be a page or greater in length, providing background information on the interviewee and a unique story about their life.

### **CREATING A CLASS DRAMA**

With the narrative oral history complete, the stage is now set to create a play. To generate excitement and involvement, the question to pose is, “We have these wonderful oral histories. Could we use these to create our own play about our family experiences?” With the question presented, the class can begin to brainstorm ideas on how to make a class play.

Opting for the path of least resistance, I would encourage the students to simply choose the most exciting part or story from their oral history and pretend they are the characters, speaking to the audience sharing their experience. I envision all students on the stage, each stepping forward into a spotlight to tell their story and retreating as the new narrator approaches. The grouping, arrangement and final presentation of the stories can be left to the discretion of the students. The students should memorize and become familiar with dramatizing their story in front of audiences.

### **A FAMILY QUILT**

It has been my experience that most 10 year olds’ brains shut down at 2 p.m. during the regular school day. Who can blame them? All the testing mandates and performance standards are exhausting. I try to save the final portion of our day for more hands-on activities. This provides a unique creative outlet, links classroom knowledge to practical experiences, and most importantly, keeps them preoccupied during a sluggish or hectic part of the day.

A family quilt can represent many things: family experience, births and deaths, marriages, triumphs or tragedies, ancestral heritage and so much more. I would introduce the concept of quilting early in the unit due to the time needed to complete such a project.

The book *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* provides a vehicle to introduce them to quilting as a record of history. The book describes the experience of a young slave girl who gathers information about escape and transcribes the information to a quilt. She memorizes the information and escapes to freedom. Sara leaves the quilt and others use the information to escape to freedom.

With the introduction of the concept of recording family memories on quilt, the idea can be presented to the students. I doubt any student would refuse an opportunity to play with string and thread. With the decision made to make a quilt, the question becomes how is the individual going to represent their family on their quilt square? With decisions made and an idea etched on scratch paper, the class is ready to proceed.

I do not profess to be a quilting expert, but I have made a class quilt in the past. The process can be as simple or as complex as your expertise allows. I found all the information to construct the quilt on the Internet. PBS ran a series on quilting and has many links with history and examples of class quilting projects. I have listed these resources in the bibliography. Quilting also offers a wonderful opportunity to invite parents, grandparents, seniors or anyone else in the community to help. This not only enriches the student's experience, but invites the community to celebrate in the culmination of the final project: the play.

## **COMMUNITY AND CULMINATION**

### **Celebrating**

All experiences must somehow enrich our community, whether that community is our class, the remainder of our grade, our entire school community or our external community. The additional benefit of sharing our experience is that it can reinforce our understanding. As the play is shared I feel the quilt should serve as a centerpiece, perhaps being given to each speaker to cover him or herself as they speak. This should be a time of celebration, ignoring mistakes and dismissing perfection.

### **Internalizing**

After the performance, the class should review our original question, "What makes you act the way you do? What makes Texans act the way they do? Is it where we live or is it the people around us that affect who we are?" The conclusion is that we are affected by not only our physical surroundings, but by our family's past and their identity within our greater society. The sacrifices, the search for identity, the separation from our homeland and relationship within the community make us who we are. The student's future self is

affected by this understanding, and through this understanding they can become a greater citizenry.

## **LESSON PLANS**

### **Creating an awareness for understanding our family history**

Before beginning the unit, it would help to have students begin talking with their families and building a framework to understand the various reasons their families have decided to move to a particular area.

#### ***Pre-Lesson***

Begin by asking the students how their parents came to live in Houston, recording the answers on the board as they are stated. As is most often the case, the students will not have a clear idea of why they live in Houston. Ask them to go home, speak with their parents and return with the information.

#### ***Lesson***

As the students retrieve their information, ask them to share with their group what they learned. After several minutes of sharing, bring the class back together and distribute a sheet of chart paper for every four to six people. Ask them to record their information on the chart paper.

After the groups have finished, have a member from each group come and tape their group's chart paper to the chalkboard. Read the information as a group, looking for any patterns in the parent responses. I envision that several patterns will appear. The students will notice that many people come for employment opportunity, change of lifestyle, or improving their children's futures. Have the class create and name the categories and place into each category the parent's statement. Leave this final poster in a prominent place. As similarities and new information are found within the literature they are reading, refer or add to the poster. As the class culminates the unit, the poster serves as a catalyst to discuss what has been learned.

### **Designing a format for collecting an oral history**

The heart and soul of the unit, the approach to completing the oral history interview, should be to give the student as much time for trial and error as the teacher can stand. By allowing the students to experiment and determine what fails and works, they gain a deeper insight into the process. The concept and terminology of oral history will most likely evade the student. To help the student understand the how to collect an oral history, the process should be presented as collecting a story from a family member.

### *Pre-lesson*

Ask the students what type of story they think might be interesting. Offer ideas surrounding humor, tragedy, embarrassment, or countless other scenarios. Ask them to decide which family member they are interested in talking with, and discuss the idea of recording a story from them. As they go home, they should be thinking about the availability and willingness of their subject. They should return to class the next day prepared to discuss their information.

### *Lesson*

As they return with their stories, have them share with each other what they found. After sharing their information, ask the students to evaluate if their theme for a family story is going to provide good information. If they feel it does not, ask them to reconsider asking someone else or changing their theme.

With a topic and person in mind, the question becomes how do you gather all the information? Relate to them the importance of getting the interviewee comfortable about discussing their past. It is always fun and educational to role play several scenarios where an interviewer jumps right into personal questions without warming up the interviewee. While this situation is usually comical due to the startled responses of the students, it delivers the message that great tact must be used to gather personal information.

The easiest starting point to open an interview is to ask their name, place of birth and other routine questions. Write several sample questions on the board to get them started. After the students have brainstormed, discuss how to transition to the more personal questions. The most important idea to keep present is what you want to know about the interviewee. After they have composed their beginning interview questions, give them time to write down as many questions as they like, remembering that editing can take place later. To provide another home connection, it might be best for the student to take the questions home and discuss them with the interviewee. The point is to have as much interaction between the student and interviewee before the interview to build up a relaxed atmosphere and ensure a successful interview.

With a list of questions ready, the practice interview is ready to take place. The point of this activity is to allow the students to practice the interview and look for potentially bad questions. Have them work with a partner and take turns asking each other the interview questions. This simulation is to mimic the real interview, so the student must practice writing down the answers to their questions. The students will undoubtedly experience frustration, unwillingness in the other participant, questions that yield no response, and much more. From this experience they will understand the role of both parties and the need to refine the interview. A class discussion should follow this role-play to address all the issues and suggestions they will have.

Having completed the mock-interview, the student should take another day to refine their interview. After this is completed, they are ready to begin the authentic process and yield the fruits of their labor.

### **Converting an oral history into a play**

Once the students have recorded their interview information, it is now time to build and begin creating a first person narrative that can be used for dramatic purposes. While this may appear a daunting effort, the process is relatively simple and the student's familiarity with their topic aids in this easy transformation.

#### ***Pre-lesson***

The question to raise after the interview process is "How can we share our information with others?" Lead the students to reflect on the previous encounters with others through the dramatic plays read from the past several weeks. Either the instructor, or more often than not, a student will suggest creating a class play to perform. Most students I have met jump at the opportunity to act, and it can be assumed that this idea will be received eagerly.

#### ***Lesson***

After they have accepted the idea of a dramatic rendition, the next step is to reformat their oral histories into some structure that can be used in a drama. I would go ahead and introduce them to the concept of a narrative play, with each character narrating their story before the audience. The initial step to prepare their interview is to have everyone erase their questions. This eliminates the distraction of questions and just leaves the information from the interviewee. The next step is to create a template that the entire class can use. The template should help them organize their information. The main goal of the template is to have the character introduce himself or herself by stating his or her name and any other relevant background information that the student collected, and then proceed to describe the interesting story the student recorded. If the interview was setup correctly, this conversion process is very easy, often just requiring the student to rewrite the information they recorded. During this time, it is important to constantly model both in verbal and written examples how to construct the narrative.

Once they have finished rewriting their interview using the template, they can practice in groups reading their information. This serves as a great proofreading opportunity. The class can create a list of things to watch for that may create confusion. Specifically, look for areas where the narrative becomes repetitive, excessively long, or switches from first person to third person. Obviously, a final check by the instructor would be beneficial. Once the final copies have been written, the play is ready for practice and performance.



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