

An Oral History Exercise: Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement and Everyday Lives

Introduction

The purpose of this lesson and project is for students to learn about the impact of the Civil Rights Movement. Students will conduct an oral history interview on a member of their family or a neighbor who experienced Jim Crow segregation or lived through the Civil Rights Movement. Through a combination of in-class exercises and individual homework involving an oral history, students will gain an understanding of the impact of Civil Rights on the daily lives of people in their communities and the role their family members or neighbors played in affecting historical change.

There are many advantages to an oral history exercise for high school students. Talking to historical participants helps make history come alive for students. The exercise gives student the chance to act as practicing historians and potentially to preserve important primary sources. It also affords students an opportunity to give back to the communities in which they live.

Student Background Knowledge

Students should be familiar with the Civil Rights Movement's fight for equality. Based on the demographics of each particular classroom, this may be expanded to a wider understanding of Civil Rights, and is not restricted to only African-Americans, but also to Hispanic-Americans, Native-Americans, and women. Student should know the conditions that brought about the Civil Rights Movement such as Jim Crow laws and forms of segregation, the goals of Civil Rights activists, and the methods different activist groups used to accomplish those goals.

Teacher Background Knowledge

The teacher should be knowledgeable about legal, economic, and social conditions that did not give people of color or women the same rights as white males. Teachers should discuss **Jim Crow laws** and **segregation** as evidence of inequality in America. Teachers should also introduce and discuss the impact of these laws on peoples lives, including (but not necessarily limited to) restrictions on education, voting, and employment. Teachers should discuss the role of legislation in ensuring the protection of individual rights, including the **thirteenth** (emancipation of slaves), **fourteenth** (citizenship to naturalized or native-born individuals), **fifteenth** (voting rights for African-American males), **nineteenth** (voting rights for women), and **twenty-fourth** (abolition of poll-taxes) amendments. Teachers should also emphasize that many of these legislative changes occurred *because* of popular movements, protest, and civil disobedience at the grassroots level. Teachers can introduce forms of protest through the use of images. See addendum, "Additional Resources for Teachers" for a list of useful websites.

Vocabulary

Civil Rights Movement, segregation, civil disobedience

Objectives

Explain and evaluate the impact of the Civil Rights movement on people's daily lives. Recognize and analyze the central role average Americans played in affecting historical change.

Key Concept

Major historical events such as the Civil Rights Movement affected real people's lives. Equally important, students need to learn that historical change is the result of the ideas or and actions by average Americans, not simply by the famous leaders of a movement. Their family members or neighbors are important historical actors.

Alignment to TEKS

USH.7.History. Trace the development and identify the impact of the civil rights movement, including significant individuals and laws.

USH.18.a. Identify and analyze methods of expanding the rights to participate in the democratic process.

USH.21.a. Explain actions taken by racial, ethnic, and cultural groups to expand their economic and political rights in American society.

Materials

Recording devices (optional)

Images/Videos of Civil Rights Protests (see attached list of "Additional Resources for Teachers" for images and video clips)

List of teacher questions for practice interview

Rubric for evaluation of practice interview

Interview of family or community member

Written reports by students conducting interview

Oral presentation by student to class

Rubric for evaluation of written report

Rubric for evaluation of oral presentation

In-Class Introduction: 1 class session

1. Focus: Ask students to identify two family members or neighbors who lived during the Civil Rights era of the 1950s-1970s. Let students discuss their lists. Talk about direct action – what methods were used to bring about social change? (Teacher should compile list of activities) What was the rationale behind those ideas?

2. Then have students respond to the idea of direct action and non-violent activity. Using protest images and video clips, begin discussion of participation in civil rights. Could students have done what activists did?

2. Are the only people affected by civil rights those who participated in direct action? Are the only people who caused historical change those who participated in direct action?

3. Transition to discussion of changes felt by ordinary people as a result of civil rights. Ask students what changes they know of as a result of the civil rights movement that

changed people's daily lives. Ask students to contemplate how average Americans affected historical change.

4. Introduce outside assignment – students will each interview one person who lived through the civil rights movement to find out how his or her life was changed by civil rights movement and how that person, like other average Americans, affected historical change.

Overnight assignment for each student – prepare 15 questions they would like to ask that person.

Mock Interview Procedure and Practice: 2 class sessions

Class Session 1. Divide class into partner groups. Each student should identify his interview subject and discuss his 15 questions, suggesting additional ideas to his partner. Half-way through class, switch partners with another group and repeat the general points of the discussion.

Class Session 2. Ask for volunteers to conduct 15-minute mock interviews with a member of the school community (teacher/staff member/administrator) acting as respondent. Have class members take notes on the interview and offer feedback for ways to improve the interview. Discuss the benefits and limitations of oral history.

Overnight assignment: revise interview questions as appropriate and then conduct the interview with the family member or neighbor. If possible, record the interview on audiotape and videotape. However, most students will not have access to such equipment and should be prepared to take notes of their interviews.

Presentation of Results and Analysis

Each student must write up a 3-page essay of his or her experience doing oral history. What were the goals of the interview they conducted? Who was interviewed and why did the student choose that person? What did the responses from the interviewee tell the students about how civil rights changed people's lives? What about those responses were expected? What about those responses were unexpected?

Each student must make a 5-minute presentation of their oral history interview, summarizing his or her essay. At the end of the presentations, conduct a discussion about how major historical events have a real impact on people's lives and how oral history helps us understand those effects by capturing the stories of people often lost to the written historical record. Also discuss the limitations of this method of research compared to other methods, such as failures of memory, for example.

Home work:

Interview Draft

Revised Interview Draft

Oral History Interview

Essay

Class Presentation