

FAMILIES FOUND: COLLECTING ORAL HISTORY

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INTENDED AGE/SUBJECT AREA

All Grades Language Arts, Social Studies, History

"I learned my family wasn't boring after all!" - B.D.

"My mother, the way I know her, you wouldn't expect a story like this out of a 40-year old! I think of my mom as boring, she just does normal things, so this story was totally unexpected!" -J.B.

"I had no idea my family was so connected to Canada. I wasn't interested in Canada before. Now I have a feeling for it, because it meant something to my family." - K.S.

DESCRIPTION

Collecting Oral History is a research and writing project that regards the stories families tell each other as a source of valuable information. Students interview family members, or listen at family gatherings and collect and record stories. The interviewers are encouraged to probe for a range of stories, including; the oft-told personal and family anecdote; life-changing events such as meeting the milestones of education, employment, courtship, marriage, birth, and death; immigration experiences; response to world events like war, environmental or economic disasters; and the description of everyday life known as social history.

In-class exercises and conferences help students to develop and expand both the literary quality and historical effectiveness of their pieces. This turns their 'stories' into 'storytelling.' Using the stages of the writing process, these stories are then published in a book, complete with a reflective introduction, dedication, table of contents, illustrations, maps, photographs and historian's note. Students with multiple languages are encouraged to earn Bilingual Bonus Points, by publishing a few stories, or the whole book in any language additional to English.

Step 1: Introducing Oral History

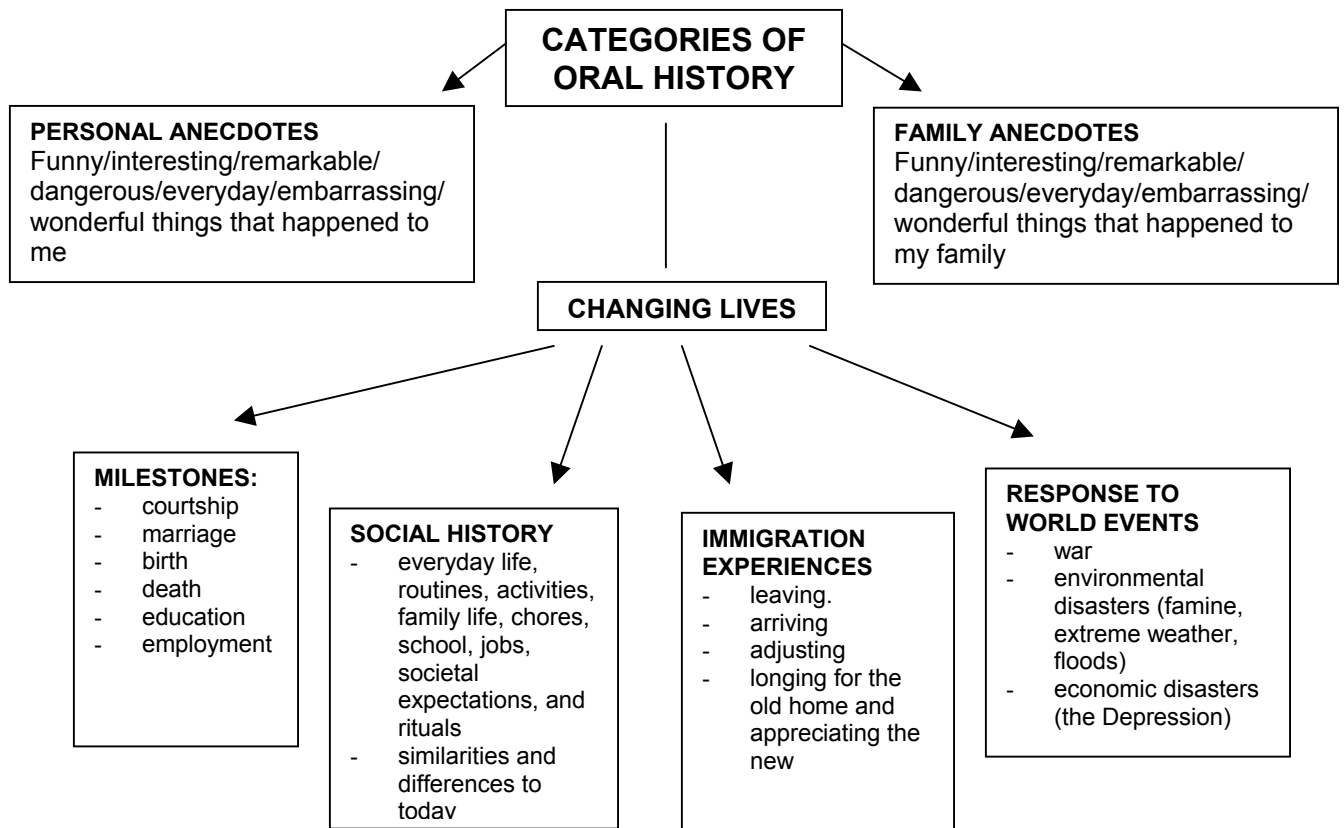
- Introduce the unit by telling a few of your favourite family stories.
- Ask the students to reflect and discuss:
 - Do you like to hear stories about your friends? Your family?
 - Who tells the stories in your family? When and where (usually)?
 - How is history passed on?
- Introduce the project just before a holiday break when families are more likely to be visiting each other. Besides taking advantage of family visits to talk and collect information, students who have previously completed this project have emailed grandparents across the country and as far away as Brazil, phoned parents in the

Caribbean, and written to relatives all over the country.

- Develop a list of possible questions under each of the categories.

For example:

- Tell me about a time when...
- What was.....like?
- What were some funny/ interesting/ remarkable/ dangerous/ embarrassing/ wonderful things that happened to...?
- What were some difficult times in the world that our family lived through? How did our family cope with these times?
- Can you tell me about the everyday life, activities, routines, chores, school, expectations and rituals of your life when you were my age?



Step 2: Collecting the Stories

- Students prepare their parents (or other relatives) by telling them about the project in advance. This gives them time to think of some stories. Plan a quiet time to talk together. Also, take advantage of family gatherings to listen closely.
- Use a photograph or favourite family treasure to elicit memories.

Step 3: Writing the First Drafts

- Students write their first drafts. (Try to collect approximately six different stories.)
- Take five to ten minutes at the beginning of each class to share new stories collected in pairs, small groups or with the whole class.

Step 4: Developing the Second Drafts—Turn the Story into Storytelling

- Do additional research where appropriate to set the historical context of the family experience. (i.e., story set in the 1930s—the Depression, 1920s—Prohibition)
- Observe common tendencies and areas of need in the students' work. Address these areas of need in whole class lessons, using student samples at the overhead in order to develop the historical and literate aspects of the stories.
 - Use full names. Not just “my mom,” but “my mother, Erika Schlotmann.”
 - Identify dates, seasons or eras. Not just “One day...” but “On a day in autumn in the mid-1950s.”
 - Situate places. Not just “On a farm...” but “On a farm near St. Benedict, Saskatchewan.”
 - Add descriptive details and an interesting lead.

Step 5: Write an Introduction, Dedication and Historian's Note

- The introduction to the book is a reflection on the following questions
 - Is listening to and telling stories important to you and your family? Why?
 - Who usually tells the stories in your family? Where and when? What are they usually about?
 - What were some of the difficulties or challenges you encountered in collecting these stories? What were some of the surprises and delights?
 - What did you learn from this project?
- Write a dedication.
- Write a historians note, using a typical authors note as a model, with the additional feature that you include the techniques used to collect the information.

Step 6: Preparing for Publication

- Visually enhance your final product with the following details
 - illustrations or photographs (use photocopies instead of original prints)
 - book borders or illustrated corners on the first page of each new story
 - maps of where the event took place
 - photocopies of original documents or related newspaper articles
- Bind the papers together by sewing with a needle and thread. Make a hardcover out of cardboard and wallpaper. Attach the two by using white glue.

Step 7: Oral History Book Launch—Celebrate Your Learning

- Spend time in class reading each other's books.
- Put them on display in the school library, or a local museum.
- Arrange to have readings by authors to other classes.
- Share them with the family members whose stories are collected.

- Leave a white comments page at the back for readers to write their response in.
- Evaluate for three curriculum areas: Language Arts (Writing and use of the writing process), Visual Arts (the visual appeal of the finished book), and History (for historical content and research skills).

MATERIALS/RESOURCES

- Questions
- Family Photos
- Family Members

About the Educator

Barbara Brockmann sees Canadian history as a critical cornerstone that helps her inner-city, multicultural grade 8 students find a ‘place’ in their country. She integrates Canadian history with Language Arts and Drama. *Ebony Road: An African Canadian Journey*, is a play where time travellers witness significant events of the African Canadian story. In *Collecting Oral History* students interview family members and publish their findings. *Equity Gameboards* allows students to evaluate the experiences of ethnocultural groups and teach others in a gameboard format.