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Bridging the Generation Gap

Marcia L. Arend

Thanks to a summer vacation experience with Earthwatch, I tapped into one of our community's richest resources, its senior citizens. After a week of collecting oral tradition from two elderly residents of a small New Hampshire town, I was inspired to develop the following two composition assignments which I have successfully used with tenth grade students. Both are designed to promote intergenerational dialogue; both enhance the student's listening, questioning, organizing, and composing skills.

Historic Assignment

I begin by giving the students the overall objectives of the assignment. I ask them to think of people of their acquaintance who are over 55. These people may be family members, friends, or neighbors. They should be persons who can be contacted for face-to-face interviews. The purpose of the interview is to learn about the interviewee's life during his teens and twenties. Students are urged to have at least three available persons in mind. They are asked to take their lists of possibilities home to discuss with their parents. With this parental input, students are often directed to more available persons to contact. They are instructed to have the phone numbers and/or addresses of these potential interviewees when they come to class the next day.

The next day students are asked to share their lists, indicating their first, second, and third choices for the interview. For those students who claim to have no one available to interview, a field

trip to the local senior citizen center is arranged. There are always a few students in each class who require this and our local center has been very happy to accommodate them.

Class discussion this day centers on the approximate decade in which their potential interviewee would have been in his/her teens and twenties. I inform the students that their interview questions should be formulated to gain information concerning this time period. Generally most were in their teens and twenties in the decades of the '20s, '30s, or '40s. We briefly discuss events and personalities of those eras with which the students feel they have familiarity. I tell them that the next day we will be spending time in the library to gather more historic background that may be useful in formulating their interview questions. We briefly review note-taking skills.

On the day of the library period, I introduce students to two volumes which may be helpful to them in developing questions for their interviews: *Time Tables of History: A Horizontal Linkage of People and Events* and *Time Tables of American History*. I move around, helping students locate specific items or asking questions to lead them to more materials. Specific student interest areas frequently surface at this time. Clara, a would-be actress, evidences significant interest in the dress of the 20s. Zach, who has a consuming interest in baseball, pores over data concerning that sport during the Depression Years. Eric, whose grandfather was a pilot during WWII, seeks information

about German planes. At the end of the hour, students are instructed to bring the notes taken during this period to the classroom the next day.

In the classroom on the following day, I assign students to groups of four or five. The task in the groups is for each person to formulate ten or more open-ended questions to ask his/her interviewee concerning the decade of his/her teens and twenties. They are to write out individual questions, leaving adequate space in which to write the responses. Moving from group to group, I assist in formulating questions that are both specific and tactful. For example, they are instructed not to ask the person's age but rather to refer to an event which may have occurred when the person was fifteen or sixteen: What do you recall about the beginning of WW I?

They were fascinated at her recollections of a day-long trip by sleigh to a neighboring town for a family Thanksgiving celebration before WW I.

At the conclusion of this class period, I instruct students to make arrangements for their interviews. Arrangements are made with the senior citizens' center for those students who have indicated they have no one to interview. Generally a week has been adequate to allow for this part of the assignment.

To help overcome student nervousness about the interview, I usually stage a practice one. I enlist the services of one or two friends who are senior citizens and who enjoy being with young people. I have found that retired teachers are willing and enthusiastic participants in this activity. One year a student volunteered her great-grandmother, age 92, for the interview. This dignified gentlewoman appeared at our classroom door on the arm of our assistant principal, who had assisted her down the hall. She readily answered the students' questions that were within her experience. They learned her family was among the first settlers of our town. They were fascinated at her recollections of a day-long trip by sleigh to a neighboring town for a family

Thanksgiving celebration before WW I. For students who now make the same trip by car in slightly over a half-hour, this seemed incredible. This practice session does a great deal to quell fears students may have of conducting their own interviews and often helps them to generate more questions for their own interviewees.

During the next class period, students are asked to recall specifics they remember from the prior day's in-class interview. I list these on the board. I suggest that we write a thank-you note, utilizing the specifics mentioned. This is a total group effort which I write on the board as they dictate and revise it. Then I ask for a volunteer to copy the letter from the board onto school letterhead, have all the students sign it, and mail it to our guest interviewee.

I generally allow a week of out-of-class time for students to complete their interviews. I utilize the in-class time for study and discussion of selections from their literature text that deal with recalling the past. "The Sentimentality of William Tavener" by Willa Cather, "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" by Katherine Anne Porter, and "Julia" by Lillian Hellman are effective for this purpose.

Following the literature study, students are instructed to bring their interview materials to class. I simply check to see that they have been completed. Then I ask students to recall the setting of the interview, the place, time of day, etc. I instruct them to write a few sentences of description about it.

Next I ask them to recall the person interviewed, his/her appearance at the time of the interview, his/her manner, tone of voice, mood. They are asked to write a few sentences of description, focusing on these elements of characterization.

Students are asked to reflect on what they learned from their interviewee that they did not already know.

I have them highlight the information in their interview materials which they found most interesting. Clara, who was so interested in the

clothing styles of the 20s, was urged to direct her paper's content toward this point. Eric's grandfather provided him with first-hand accounts of encounters with German aircraft. I suggested he focus his paper on those experiences.

Then I ask them to recall the person's manner of speaking. Perhaps they have an exact quote that is indicative of his/her character or style. If they have, I ask them to place quotation marks around these words. We may use them later in the formal paper.

We are now ready to tackle the most difficult part of the paper, the conclusion. Students are asked to reflect on what they learned from their interviewee that they did not already know. This can form one kind of conclusion. In what ways have they found their interviewee's teens/twenties experiences similar to their own? Dissimilar? This could be another type of conclusion. Or, they may also be asked to reflect on their feelings about the person since the interview. Did they gain a better understanding of him/her? Were there things about him/her they found they admired? Do they have any wishes for the person, i.e., would they like to visit him/her again *without* the motive of completing an assignment? These are also conclusion possibilities.

By now students have a rough draft of what they will develop into a 300-600 word narrative essay. If each step has been carefully monitored by the teacher, extended revisions and corrections will not be needed by most students. Generally two class periods are adequate for revising, correcting, and recopying to manuscript specifications. Once the final paper is completed and submitted for evaluation, the final part of the assignment is given.

Students are asked to write a thank you note to their interviewee, remembering the model we used to write to our staged interview guest. I frequently construct a "frame" on the board for them, such as the one included below. This is useful to students with difficulties in this area. The finished product is not graded, though care is taken that correctness and courtesy are maintained.

Thank-You Note Frame

Dear...,

Thank you for the opportunity to interview you (insert date here). I especially enjoyed hearing about (insert highlight of interview here).

I appreciate your time and interest in helping me with my English paper. (Perhaps you might include a sentence at this point that indicates a desire to visit with the interviewee again.)

Sincerely yours,

Career Education Assignment

Since the area of career education covered in our tenth grade classes deals with budgeting and sexual stereotyping, I guide the interview questions to include these areas. In developing their questions, students are encouraged to seek responses concerning educational preparation, opportunities for employment, methods of seeking employment, various positions held, and the most satisfactory and the most unsatisfactory elements of the major life career. Students are encouraged to use the library as needed, but no class hour is designated for this. Our in-class week of study for this paper includes the materials developed for the career unit by our intermediate school district.

Frequently I allow students to interview me for their practice career interviews. This is beneficial in two ways. First, I only answer what they ask. They soon learn how to ask more open-ended questions. Second, it gives me an opportunity to tell them how I feel about the various career choices I have made in my life.

The girls were aghast to learn that at one time it was thought that working women were taking jobs from men.

On one occasion, I asked a former teacher well into his 80s to help with the career interview. He

revealed two things of great interest to students. First of all, Zach was delighted to learn that this teacher once played in the minor baseball leagues prior to becoming an educator. Coincidentally, Zach is today playing in the minor leagues himself.

The same teacher also revealed that, following his brief minor league career, he secured a position as an instructor in a private school nearby. It was during the early Depression years. He met and fell in love with a young widow with a small child. She was employed in one of the local industries. In order to keep their respective jobs, they were forced to keep their marriage a secret for over three years. He had to be single to hold his position at the private school. She had to be the only breadwinner in the family to retain her job at the local industry. The girls were aghast to learn that at one time it was thought that working women were taking jobs from men. This led to many questions concerning discriminatory hiring practices in the current employment market.

At this point, I add an oral presentation to the assignment. Allowing three to five minutes for each presentation takes an additional three or four class periods, depending on the size of the class. The presentation is beneficial in several ways. First, it allows the students to hear about several careers. Second, it permits some time for questions and discussion of the various careers reported. Students maintain a high interest level during these presentations. Probably the most revelatory information they gleaned was in the field of sexual stereotyping evident in both the school and work experiences of the interviewees.

The response to both assignments has been enthusiastic on the part of the participants. For the students, the historic version of the assignment resulted in a certain amount of amazement that teenagers and twenty-somethings of earlier eras had so much fun without television and easy access to automobiles. One student became so excited about the fashions of the lady she interviewed that she developed a costume of that period to wear to class one day. Girls, in particular, were astonished to learn that the women they interviewed experienced such limited career

choices. Both salaries and expenditures of earlier times generated surprise. The deepening interest between generations was demonstrated by the many students who made copies of their completed papers to include with their thank-you notes. Another student who had been less than enthusiastic about the project initially, wrote to me much later, after she graduated from college. She confessed to resenting the tenth grade assignment due to her fears of dealing with older people. She wanted me to know that now she was pursuing a career in occupational therapy, specializing in the area of geriatric rehabilitation.

Senior citizens, particularly those at the senior center, have been delighted with these projects. Each year they look forward to greeting a new group of students for their interviews. Even the local newspaper has covered and reported on the assignment, excerpting some of the student papers for the community to read.

These assignments address many needs in providing basic skills in listening, reading, and writing. They enrich students' lives by building bridges between generations and by promoting deeper mutual understanding. Their end result, the 300-600 word narrative, is a pleasure to read.

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