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**CAPTURING STORIES:  
ORAL HISTORY IN WRITING CLASSES**

**Pamela Gates-Duffield**

My greatest challenge in establishing a community of learners has always been how to capture my students, all of my students, and draw them into a world of discovery that abounds with ideas and stories. It's not the eager students that give me the greatest cause for concern; rather, it's the marginal interest group that causes me to leave my classroom each day reflecting on what more I could have done to reach those who come to class, sit quietly, take notes, but who never seem to catch fire with the enthusiasm that touches the others. For that reason, I attempt to discover new ways of reaching my students through reading journals, constantly talking to other teachers about classroom successes and flops, and attending conferences. At one such conference, I discovered an idea that has blossomed into a teaching unit which has helped most of the writing students in my freshman composition courses (even the most reluctant) to become enthusiastic about their writing by discovering exciting stories that are waiting to be told.

Two years ago, I attended a session of the MSU/MCTE Bright Ideas Conference led by Dr. Jeff Charnley in which he explained how he required his students to research a particular historical period through interviews. I left his session fascinated but perplexed about how to use an oral history assignment in the composition courses I taught. My students did experiment with a variety of writing modes in assignments which encouraged outside research, and I did expect them to practice some research techniques in at least one formal paper, although I didn't require the extensive documentation that Dr. Charnley demanded within his oral history project. I had, therefore, frequently attempted to provide opportunities for them to research primary sources by suggesting that they interview fellow students, friends, or instructors as a means of gathering information about their specific topics. I had tried to move students out of their comfort zones and into the world of

personal interactions by encouraging them to use the interviews as a way to expand their knowledge about a particular topic.

Such experiences, however well-intended, often backfired, though, leaving my students with pieces of writing which seemed contrived or half-baked. They seemed to struggle with the questions and answers, finding it difficult to move from the interview process into developing an imaginative and informative piece of writing. Most papers were filled with paragraphs that merely restated the questions and answers given in the interview without providing any sense of the narrative context in which it was given. I was searching for a means to change a contrived interview/writing assignment into an experience that would allow my students to discover the values of research in a positive and natural way. Dr. Charnley's session provided me with the seeds for that change.

During the following summer, while I was reading a text on storytelling, it suddenly fell into place: I could use Dr. Charnley's oral history idea in my writing course by modifying the research requirements to meet the objectives I sought to achieve in my own mini-research paper. In thinking about this new assignment, I realized that I wanted many things for my students. First of all, I wanted them to engage in research in a natural and self-motivated way. Second, I wanted my students to use the data they collected to create an imaginative and creative piece of writing. Third, I wanted my students to think about researching as a personal act—one that involved people, not just libraries. Finally, I wanted my students to use their research to discover more about themselves, their families, their friends, and what their connections to history might be.

I realized that if I approached the writing project as an opportunity for my students to record an oral history/storytelling session instead of approaching it as a project in documentation, I could maintain the element of research for my students by having them use a natural means (the open-ended interview) to gather material. I have also found that this approach to researching offers them the opportunity to *listen* to someone's story, to *understand* his or her experiences, and to *record* that story by creating a gift of their writing. As a whole, the oral history/storytelling project provides a new way for my students to be successful researchers and writers.

I usually begin introducing the "Oral History-Storytelling" paper early in the semester, even though it is not due until the end of the term. I tell my

students that they will be given an opportunity to interview someone close to them who lived during an era or event which had historical significance. My students initially react with some level of apathy, questioning what anyone in their families could possibly say about an event that had historical significance. I acknowledge their concerns but assure them that they will be surprised at the kinds of stories they might hear from parents, grandparents, older friends, or teachers.

Throughout the semester, I remind them that they need to think about whom they might want to interview and to find time to meet with someone. (Generally these meetings take place over Thanksgiving weekend in the fall or Easter break in the spring.) As the time for actually doing the assignment grows closer, the students begin to have many questions about the upcoming assignment. "Who will I interview?" "What if they don't have anything to say?" "How should the paper be written?" At that time, I try to address their concerns by discussing the historical eras their family members might have experienced. For instance, most of my students were born in the early 1970's, which means their parents were products of the 1960's, with the Beatles, rock concerts, a variety of protests, and Vietnam. Their grandparents are usually of the World War II or post-war eras, with the cold war, McCarthy, and the big band sounds; some are possibly old enough to remember the Great Depression. I have also suggested to some of my students that they consider interviewing several people over the age of thirty-five and simply asking them, "What were you doing the day JFK was assassinated?" or some similar question.

Often they will smile and nod, but it is not until I begin the oral history/ storytelling unit and begin to share the stories that students from previous semesters have written that they actually begin to understand their own possibilities. The stories I read are about Vietnam, Woodstock, World War II, the Great Depression, assassinations, and meeting people who have become important; they are varied in type and subject matter, but they are always personal pieces of someone's memory, pieces of the past that become narrative gifts, gifts of writing for the storyteller and the writer.

One student interviewed an older friend about his experiences in Vietnam, and with her permission, I often share some of the friend's story with the class:

. . . In Vietnam, when you hear yourself scream, the end is in sight. You can almost count on it being the last sound anyone will ever hear from you. If you're not dead, you might as well be, because your life, as you know it, is over.

There are many sounds I will never forget; the sound of bullets as they pierce through my buddies' flesh, and then the immediate cry of pain. Those cries enter my dreams and wake me up at night. My nights are filled with images of death, fire, and screams.

I became immune to death; at least to seeing it. . . . Killing and destruction was our "job". Serve our country; they really meant kill, and save yourself. Your country had nothing to do with it. What a joke, they didn't even want us there!

The one incident that still is as vivid in my memory as the day it happened is the day I got hit. The ground trembled, and so did I. The far end of the trench was shelled. We ran to help survivors. Another shell came in directly at us; people ran. I watched, frozen to the earth; the shell came towards me. It was fifty feet away, then closer, closer. Pain so intense that I saw myself from outside my own body. I was watching, crying, as the bomb hit my legs. I didn't scream.

The world grew dim. I didn't know if I would escape the darkness I had fallen into. It wasn't scary; it was serene and almost calming, nothing like the nightmare I woke up to. I was paralyzed from the waist down. I guess I should have been grateful that I had my legs, my life—I wasn't. It's not just being confined to a wheelchair for the rest of my life, it's the constant reminder of how I got here that is hard to live with.

This excerpt is just one of the several Vietnam stories that have been shared in class. Although many are not as graphic as this one, they each have their own sense of horror, of tragedy. Some stories seem almost technical in their reporting, eliciting an aura of routineness, as the following excerpt shows:

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Weeks later we were back in Ben Cat as part of a blocking force. We pushed the V. C. past the Bong Song river where the 101st airborne division was waiting for them. The V. C. were pinned between Cambodia and the 101st, while artillery and arc lites were used to destroy them. Arc lites are air strikes by B-52 bombers. When the B-52s were flying, we never saw them, but we could always feel them.

Finally, in another story, a young soldier tells about the chaos and confusion he felt about the jungle warfare both in Vietnam and when he arrived back in the States. His story ends with the following:

When my year term was finally over and I arrived back in the United States, people were waiting for us at the airport. I walked to the gate and a pregnant woman walked up to me. "You are not killing my baby!" she yelled, and threw a cup of blood on me. I ran to the barracks and cried, literally cried for hours. I had no idea what was going on at home or over there.

As I read the Vietnam stories in class, my students sit, silenced by the horror. Many have seen the Vietnam movies, but that is Hollywood; these stories are real, stories about the lives of men their fathers' ages. Usually, I will ask them to think about the stories they have just heard by writing a journal response. Often, I will ask if any of their fathers or uncles served in Vietnam. Sometimes they never thought about it or have never thought to ask. The honesty of their answers strikes a chord in many—illuminating just how little they may know about their own families and initiating a desire to know more.

After the initial sharing of stories, I discuss the actual assignment in more detail. The assignment centers on listening to and writing about stories, both in and out of the class. The guidelines for the assignment balance the student's time between hearing some of the stories created by former students with the project of creating their own stories from the interviews they will conduct. Since this is the last assignment of the semester, my students realize that I expect a well-developed, well-written piece that generally falls between five to seven pages. I usually allow about three weeks for the

completion of this unit, which provides time for the interview process, small group discussions, student/teacher conferences, peer editing, and, finally, whole class sharing of the final piece. The students are expected to make decisions about all aspects of the process, from whom and when they will interview to how they ultimately retell the story effectively and accurately. As examples of successful literacy experiences, the stories I read in class serve as models of successful researching and writing.

Also, the incentive to discover more about the history of the era and how it might have affected or influenced an interviewee is inherent in the writing process the students go through for this assignment. I never “require” them to do library research about the era; however, probably 90% of them choose to study the era simply because they have discovered an interest, a need to know more about the time period their interviewees discuss so freely and knowledgeably.

As part of their preparation for doing this assignment, I provide boundaries for my students. First of all, to help them make choices about whom they might interview and when they will conduct the interview, I insist that they allow a minimum of two hours for the interview, since these sessions are not structured interviews with questions and answers. Instead, I encourage my students to select a comfortable setting that will function as an atmosphere that will promote a lengthy talk. I suggest that, if possible, they tape record the session instead of taking notes; this allows them to become active listeners, not simply note takers. Since most students are conducting the interviews away from the school setting, their parents, grandparents, and friends generally allow the audio taping. I also firmly suggest that once they have written the story, they offer to return the audio tape along with a copy of the finished paper—the story gift.

While explaining the interview aspect of the assignment, I stress several points which I want them to remember as they interview their parents, grandparents, and older friends about the historical points in their lives.

- Allow enough time to interview the person you have chosen; don't rush.
- Be attentive, active listeners; don't distract the storytelling by interrupting the speaker or focusing on taking notes. Use a tape recorder if at all possible.
- Be respectful; don't push. Many of these memories are accompanied by pain and sorrow.

- When developing the written text, be accurate about the facts and sensitive to the issues.
- Write a note of thanks to your storyteller for his or her time and enclose a copy of your finished work.

Throughout the next several classes (we usually spend the last three weeks of the semester working formally on this project), I continue to share the story gifts written by former students. Again and again, they are surprised by the stories—stories about World War II, stories about the depression, stories about the assassinations of JFK and Martin Luther King, stories about the Titanic, the riots of the 1960's, Vietnam, the IRA, and even Woodstock. These stories are stories about people, about pain, about insight, and about honesty. The stories explode from the memories of their parents, their grandparents, and their older friends, and my students listen and respond through in-class writings and small group talks.

One student interested in the question "What were you doing the day JFK was assassinated?" was astounded that people could remember exactly what they were doing at the moment they heard the news, even a quarter of a century later. She explained to me that she felt compelled to read as much as she could about John Kennedy's assassination. Another student was surprised when she asked an older friend about the assassination and was shown the newspaper clippings, clippings which had been packed away twenty-seven years. Still another student asked several people about the event and received one detailed account after another. She was so interested in hearing the stories that she even managed to contact James Blanchard, then Governor of Michigan. He, like each of her other interviewees, remembered the day clearly:

James Blanchard, Governor of Michigan, was attending Michigan State University, where he was president of his senior class. He was walking to his political science class when he heard the news about Kennedy. His class was canceled, so he walked back to his fraternity house where he watched the news with his fraternity brothers.

As my students begin the process of creating their own stories, they finish their interviews, review their notes and tapes of those interviews, and



begin to write. I encourage them to frame the stories they have heard by explaining them in terms of the era in which they occurred. Many students preface their story by introducing the person interviewed and by providing enough historical information to ground the story in time. After the preface, most students choose to become a ghost writer by telling the story first-person—through the eyes of the storyteller. By doing this, they are able to escape the pitfalls normally associated with traditional question and answer type interviews. One student chose to tell his father's story about attending Woodstock in 1969:

The traffic was really getting bad and we were still several miles from the concert site. People were stopping, pulling over to the edge of the road, getting out and walking. I looked at my buddy and he shook his head, so I pull the bus (VW van) off as much as I could and we grabbed our gear. People were jamming the road, smiling, laughing, smoking. We all knew this was history in the making and we were part of it.

As my students develop their stories further, we share the work in progress. We discuss the problems that arise when one tries to tell someone else's story. We look at different voices and how they can affect the style and tone of the story. Within small groups, we share challenges, concerns, and successes, working together to create a piece that best reflects the experiences of the storyteller.

Most of my students find that listening to the stories people tell can create learning experiences that extend far beyond the initial assignment. Many of my students have created extraordinary pieces of writing through this particular assignment, while many more have discovered pieces of their own history. They have discovered that people do indeed have stories to tell and wish to share them if given the opportunity.

Storytelling provides a natural interview experience for my students, allowing them to develop their skills in gathering information by listening, understanding, and recording that information in ways that are both creative and informative. Students are able to focus their energies on retelling, creating a text that best represents the story they have heard. The Oral History/Storytelling paper always represents some of my students' best

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writing, and their reactions to this assignment are best captured in a comment used by one of my students as she introduced the story about her grandmother, a World War II navy nurse:

To me, K. S. was just "Grandma." She does things most grandmas do. I never expected her to have a past.

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