Ordinary Lives Illuminated: Writing Oral History

Oral history provides unusually rewarding opportunities for teaching writing. Perhaps even more important than enabling students to listen and to discover the rewards of listening, writing oral history enables students to develop a comprehensive understanding of the composition—the essential elements and structures—of a life. Just as formal history illuminates the contexts of well-known historical events and circumstances, students learn that oral history, with its emphasis on the personal statement, illuminates and lends integrity to ordinary lives.

It has been my experience that, when they write oral history, students feel as if they are participating in a lively intellectual and cultural process, one that travels beyond the limitations of the classroom. Many students who have written oral histories in my classes have told me that their obligations to the “assignment” have been surpassed by their feelings of gratification at having created endurable documents, living works with lasting vitality.

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In approaching the assignments of oral history in my writing classes, I have purposely constructed the assignments to be as open-ended as possible, with only one restriction: students must feel attracted to their subject’s potential story, to his or her relationship to the past or to the themes the story suggests, such as major changes in the person’s life or critical decisions that the person has made. While every person has a story to tell, regardless of the commonality of most experiences and the seemingly ordinary qualities that define most people’s lives, I have found that by insisting that students be acquainted with and interested in their selected subjects, the possibility of capricious choice is eliminated. When students feel that their subject is interesting, they tend to ask promising questions and to listen carefully to their subject’s replies. As careful auditors, they can also be detectives, a role that seems to excite many. Here is an example of material a student was able to discover through careful listening and astute, perceptive questioning:

Jessica used to drop acid in the 60s. She is now a third grade teacher and will only discuss the events of the past with close friends, ones that she knows she can trust to not reveal her secrets, in light of her new career. As she sat across the table in her button down collar shirt with the Izod label and polished, private-school poise, she started to retell how it was.

“I grew up as an only child with a mother and father that were alcoholics. I never felt much love or approval from my parents no matter how hard I tried. So I learned at an early age what it was like to feel isolated and afraid. My father used to turn the dinner table over while we were having dinner. In order to survive I escaped through reading and created a sort of fantasy world amidst my own private hell of watching my mother get beaten up and then eventually me. It was 1964. I was 17 and a senior in high school in Southern California.”

After a description of her early experiments with drugs, Jessica continues:

“We lived in this four bedroom, Colonial style house in a nondescript neighborhood with mostly families. A very normal looking house, except that there would be flashing lights all over the inside of the living room... It must have looked pretty weird on the outside but on the inside everything was electric and moving. The whole idea was to get as high as you could and be able to maintain which meant to act normal.”(1)
Jessica’s narrative of the sixties, although very much of a piece with the context of the times, provided the author with evidence of the continuous nature of our violent society, another sad illustration of the duplicity of respectability. Students tend to romanticize the sixties era, perhaps because of its powerful musical legacy and, to a lesser extent, its legacy of drugs. When they think of sixties violence, they usually think of the war in Vietnam. Family violence seems somehow more a concern of the 1980s. To be reminded that family disruptions were common in the sixties also—indeed, almost routine—is to be reminded of the profound nature of the problem, a little like reading Dickens for the first time and marveling at the immediacy of his voice and appeal. The writer’s careful listening, as well as a strong measure of clever detective work to uncover the details of the sixties experience, provide a durable image of an era, with the sad, but representative, voice of Jessica as its speaker.

Among the many delights of teaching oral history-writing, one that can’t be underestimated is the abundance of sources available to students as models. Although in my courses the students “write their own text”—I don’t use a regular textbook in my writing classes—I do place a variety of oral history sources on library reserve for students to become acquainted with the genre. I try to include a variety of histories, something I hope will interest each student. I have taken advantage of the many sources by using them as models that offer occasions for emulation as well as suggestions for departures. I never impose a set form or methodology, perhaps because I feel that one of the most exciting challenges of oral history lies in its flexibility, its very absence of a set format. For example, Studs Terkel employs a minimum of authorial devices and uses almost no summary; his introduction and textual asides are used reservedly and sparingly. Here is Terkel introducing his subject Peggy Terry (“Rosie: Peggy Terry”) in The Good War:

_The mountain woman, a native of Paducah, Kentucky, who has lived in Chicago for the past twenty years._

_She visits it as often as her meager purse allows._

(p. 108)

In rendering just the “facts” of his subject’s life, Terkel has also managed to convey a sense of her character—“meager purse” and “mountain woman” are the key terms here—so that the reader is, in a sense, already prepared for the subject to reveal herself through her narrative.

In contrast to Terkel, Robert Coles (2) frequently relies on the kinds of devices Terkel appears to reject, such as interpretation and psychological analysis. The following passage, from Volume Two of his Children of Crisis series, represents Coles’s strategies as he records the histories of his subjects:

_She has never been locked up, nor does she believe in keeping her children locked up—watched over, carefully controlled, trained to do all sorts of things. “I let them be,” she says when asked how she spends her day with them. In point of fact, like all mothers, she constantly makes choices, or has no choice but to make a particular choice. For instance, I have watched her and other migrant mothers begin to breast-feed their children as a matter of course. For some months I assume they naturally had to do so, because bottled milk is expensive, and certainly there are no physicians around to prescribe this formula and that one, and all the rest of the things American mothers of the middle class come to take for granted._

Despite the obvious differences in their technique and convention, both historians are unquestionably similar in their thoughtful control, similarities that demonstrate to students that techniques operate according to the nature of the narrative—an essential lesson in illustrating the relationship of technique to function. (This lesson is critically valuable for all genres and modes of writing.)

Because the students consult those models of published oral histories that are available to them through library reserve, and because they spend a great deal of class time reading one another’s work-in-progress, they feel free to explore subjects as well as techniques. For subjects, many students select grandparents or relatives who belong to different generations and whose ethnic identities are not always easily understood by their descendants. Cultural, geographical, and social differences frequently separate those relatives to the extent that they are known remotely if they are known at all, and they often seem more like spectres than actual people with demonstrable personalities and characters.

Once the students start to write the oral histories of their ancestors, though, the process begins whereby the young are brought into touch with their elders, enabling both generations to better understand one another’s lives. Many of the narratives help to explain what had appeared to the students as aloofness or indifference (and occasionally inexplicable hostility): Behavior previously apprehended as withdrawal is understood within the wider context of the individual’s life.

Here is a little of one student’s personal discovery of his uncle, a relative whose history the adult members of the family had withheld from the children for reasons that his

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That the student chose to finish this account with his uncle’s concluding statement of affirmation suggests that the student himself participated in his uncle’s reconciliation through a kind of heightened awareness of historical judgments based on kinship within the black community.

Another student, brought up in one of the most sordid ghettos in Los Angeles, learned a great deal about the motives underlying her mother’s hostility toward higher education as she captured her mother’s account of her early life as the eldest of ten children in a family who spoke no English. After experiencing punishment for not speaking English at school, and after being held back several grades, the mother managed to acquire enough proficiency for high school acceptance, an extraordinary accomplishment for her since she was the only family member to go beyond the eighth grade. Here is how she talks of her school life:

I was so excited finally to be in high school. All four of my sisters were married by the time they were fourteen or fifteen. None of them even made it past the eighth grade. They worked in packing houses, packing oranges eight to ten hours a day. They would tell me about the long hours, bad wages, and miserable conditions, and on top of that I would see them when they got off work and they looked just miserable. People would always say that once you start there you stay there until you die. I guess that thought stuck in my head. I knew I wanted to become a secretary. Being a secretary was the job a woman could get. (Laughs) A few days before school started everybody enrolled in classes with their counselor. I was so nervous as I walked into his office. He didn’t even bother to look at me, he just told me to sit down, asked if I spoke English, and told me the classes I would take for the first year. “Let’s see,” he said, “sewing first period, cooking second, and we now have woodshop classes for girls.” Those were his exact words. . . . I’ll never forget the man. I knew I wanted typing and office skills but I didn’t argue with him. . . . After I walked out of the counselor’s office my best friend came up and showed me her schedule. We had gotten the exact same classes. What a coincidence! (Laughs)

I did learn a lot in those cooking and sewing classes. I think one year would’ve been enough but since I was in there for good I made the most of it. In my junior year I won the Silver Thimble Award. That award was just for seniors and I was the first junior ever to be given the award.

It wasn’t until the woman’s last semester in high school that she was permitted to take a typing class, and that privilege was granted only because the typing teacher wanted the awardee of the Silver Thimble to make her a dress:

She brought the pattern into my sewing class and I could hear the teacher complain about the pattern being too hard and time-consuming. I guess the teacher got her way because she eagerly gave me the bright yellow flower print material. It
was so bright it put a strain on my eyes. It was like looking into the sun. (Laughs)

This account, so good-humored and so completely without self-pity, nevertheless reveals a great deal of directly experienced pain. As a document of sexist and racist abuses and exploitations, its impact is immediate; as a document of personal discovery for the writer, it is inestimably precious.

It is gratifying to see oral histories being used today as primary sources in studies of the immigrant experience. (3) They have long become focal points in feminist studies. (4) Ethnic academic disciplines, such as Black, Chicano, and Asian Studies, tend to rely on oral histories as primary sources, for no longer is the genre considered specious or quasi-historical—too “personal” to be valid. As writing teachers, when we make use of oral history we can feel confident that we’re working with a respectable, accessible genre, one which has proved itself and bears its own authenticity. Also, there is something nicely democratic about oral history that students are quick to appreciate; each person’s story bears its own merits and meanings—a rare discovery, indeed, and one to be cherished.

It would be gratifying to conclude this look at the place of oral history in teaching by claiming that through the process of writing oral history students become humanists, or historians, or some comparable and honorable species of convert. Of course they don’t, and anything that produces instant conversion should be considered highly suspect. But I have found that students, through writing oral history, do learn to listen and to attend closely to the language and stories of others. They discover that ordinary lives are not so “ordinary” after all. And they develop an appreciation for and understanding of the contexts of their lives—a process of civilization, then, accomplished through writing.

Notes

1. Student selections I have used are taken verbatim from oral histories written for classes in advanced composition.

2. Robert Coles is not generally regarded as an oral historian, nor are his works classified as oral history in the libraries where I have worked. (Oral histories, themselves, tend to receive rather quixotic classifications, perhaps because they have to be officially recognized.) Coles does rely on many of the major techniques of oral history, and I’ve found that it’s instructive to point this out to students, especially to those who are just establishing their acquaintance with the genre and its functions.

3. Local historical societies and various kinds of governmental and private organizations often possess archives full of untold treasures. Many communities are now conducting their search for collective identities, perhaps as a response to the “Roots” fervor of several years back.

4. Perhaps the strongest and most politically persuasive document in feminist studies is the oral history—from captivity and slave narratives to contemporary accounts—of oppressed women in Third World Countries. See entries in “References” for a small sample.

References

Oral History Theory: Guides for Students


The Immigrant Experience


Ethnic Studies


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Of Political Interest


Feminist Studies


training in basic skills and academic literacies, a dialogue that
would ease the transition that students must make between
basic skills programs, vocational programs, and employment
or further academic training.

We hope to hear from others who are engaged in similar work
and invite inquiries and related papers. In this way, we hope
to begin a network of practitioners and researchers who are
involved in studies which explore the connections between
literacy training, vocational education, and the workplace.
Those interested in being part of our mailing list should write
to Jenny Cook-Gumperz or Glynda Hull at the School of
Education, Tolman Hall, University of California, Berkeley,
CA 94720.

RESEARCH AWARDS AT NCTE

Melanie Sperling Receives 1989
Promising Researcher Award

Melanie Sperling, editor of The Quarterly, was one of the two
1989 promising researchers recognized at the annual NCTE
convention in Baltimore. Sperling received the award for her
dissertation study, completed at the University of California
at Berkeley, on collaboration and learning in secondary
school teacher-student writing conferences.

Sarah Warshauer Freedman Receives
Richard Meade Award

Sarah Warshauer Freedman was a recipient of the Richard
Meade Award for Published Research in Teacher Education
for her monograph, Response to Student Writing, published
by the National Council of Teachers of English. The award
was presented at the meeting of the Conference on English
Education during the NCTE annual convention held inBal-
timore, November 1989.

David H. Russell Research Award
Goes to Mike Rose, UCLA

Mike Rose, associate director of writing programs at UCLA
and project director at the Center for the Study of Writing, has
received the David H. Russell Research Award for his book
Lives on the Boundary, an analysis of education for under-
privileged children and youth. Rose's book, in which he
combines personal narrative, autobiography, case study, and
ethnographic techniques, has been praised by Donald Murray
and others for its realistic portrayal of the "painful feelings of
dislocation and failure" that students from outside the main-
stream must contend with at all levels of education. The
NCTE award was given to Rose at the annual NCTE confer-
ence in November. (Donald McQuade's review of Rose's
book appeared in the Summer 1989 issue of The Quarterly.)

Studs Terkel


all day and how they feel about what they do. New York: Pantheon.

York: Pantheon.

War II. New York: Pantheon.

Miscellaneous

and fear (5 vols.). Boston: Little, Brown.

Periodicals


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