Using Family and Community History To Foster Historical Inquiry in the Elementary Grades

Kay A. Chick
Penn State Altoona

Abstract

This article highlights the use of family and community history in elementary social studies classrooms. Family history stories from early twentieth century Appalachia are shared. The value of historical inquiry is explored, and techniques for initiating an oral history project are discussed as well as interviewing strategies and examples of developmentally appropriate extension activities. Connections to the national social studies standards are emphasized along with recommendations for teachers who wish to provide students with an intimate view of past human experience.

Introduction

We were in the midst of the Great Depression in 1933. Herbert Hoover was no longer President of the United States and Franklin D. Roosevelt was in office. The Stock Market Crash of October 29, 1929 was long past, and the banks were getting ready to close. Mother and Dad and my sisters and I lived on a farm outside of town. I was nine years old. We couldn’t go into town much in the winter
because the roads were so muddy, so we would stock up with staples that would keep, like flour, meal, and beans. There was no refrigeration, so we had to be careful about what we purchased. My mother didn’t drive, so my dad drove her to town to get supplies. They traveled in their new Model A Ford, which cost $549. My mother debated whether to take the last money they had out of the bank in order to buy a 100 pound bag of navy beans. The beans would cost $4.00, and there was no sales tax at that time. She decided it was the thing to do with winter coming on. She bought the beans in the A & P Co. store, leaving 27 cents in the bank. After the banks closed, Mother and Dad never recovered the 27 cents.

This story was told to me by an 81 year-old storyteller born on that same farm on October 28, 1924. It tells much about family life and economic decline in Appalachia during the Great Depression. Family history stories such as this one give students insight into significant events in history, such as the Stock Market Crash and Roosevelt’s “bank holidays.” They also allow students to explore themes such as economy, transportation, and life in Appalachia during the Depression. Moreover, family history stories give students an intimate view of the human experience during a particular period in history, in a way that textbooks cannot.

In this paper, the author first discusses the teaching of social studies and history in the elementary grades. Second, the value of history and historical inquiry are explored. Family and community history are highlighted as well as techniques for beginning an oral history study. Third, a family history story from the early twentieth century is shared with a focus on small-group decision making, interviewing strategies, and extension activities. Finally, recommendations for teachers are offered.

Social Studies and History in the Elementary Classroom

Learning the history of the United States is critical to preparing students for involvement in democratic practices and the responsibilities of citizenship. However, many schools no longer devote adequate time to the teaching of social studies and history, especially in the elementary grades (Hinde, 2005; Zhao and Hoge, 2005). The Council for Basic Education has determined that decreases in social studies instruction have occurred in grades K-5 since 2000, especially in schools with a high percentage of minority students (2004). In its place, instructional priority is given to language arts and mathematics with the argument that students cannot take part in civic responsibilities unless they have learned basic skills (Turner, 1999; VanFossen, 2003). In addition, The No Child Left Behind Act mandates the evaluation of students in grades three through eight in reading, math, and science (Toppo, 2004). Social studies and history are not included in these assessments, so teachers prioritize their school day according to those subjects for which they are held accountable. In fact, since NCLB initiatives began, forty-six states report teachers spending less time on social studies curriculum (Checkley, 2006). These dynamics result in students entering middle school without adequate knowledge of social studies concepts (Hinde, 2005).

When social studies is taught, teachers rely on textbooks 70 to 90 percent of the time (Cohen, 1995) for a concise, compact view of history and social studies concepts. This over-reliance on textbooks brings about negative attitudes with many students viewing social studies as boring and without relevance (Governale, 1997; Zhao and Hoge, 2005, among others). One
educator describes social studies textbooks as “deadly dull” and suggests that “history is a story, and textbooks eliminate the story” (Denenberg, 2000-2001, p. 1). Memorization of facts often becomes standard fare. The treatment of history as a series of names, dates, and places to be memorized will do little to spark the interest of elementary age children, and if students have already decided this is what history is all about, it is imperative that they unlearn it. When traditional approaches to teaching history are utilized, students acquire a descriptive accounting of historical events, but few skills in historical thinking, problem solving, or interpreting the past (Fertig 2005).

The Value of History and Historical Inquiry

Educators and developmental theorists, such as Piaget, have long believed that preschool and primary grade children live in the moment and are able to understand no concept of time except the present. They suggest young children are unable to think and problem solve at a cognitive level necessary for historical understanding (Hallam, 1969). More recent studies contradict early theorists and indicate that young children are able to understand historical concepts; they in fact, have acquired a wide range of historical knowledge by the time they start school. Moreover, researchers have documented the necessity for teaching history before the fourth or fifth grade. If students have no history instruction in the primary grades, they will have no framework for the formal presentation of history when it begins in the intermediate grades (VanSledright and Brophy, 1992).

Teaching children history prepares them for life in a democracy. Since democratic societies are fraught with complexity and controversy, students need to learn history through problem solving and historical inquiry. Educators suggest that students become involved in disciplined inquiry, so they can begin to learn about the past by asking their own questions, and these questions are what will lead students to historical investigations and interpretations of the past. They begin to examine evidence and reach their own conclusions. Rather than seeking correct answers to their questions, they learn to interpret multiple perspectives (Levstik, 1997). Students develop the ability to reason chronologically, empathize with people throughout history, determine the multiple causes of historical events, and assess the significance of events and people from the past (Fertig, 2005).

The Value of Family and Community History

To further cultivate historical thinking, educators suggest teachers begin with historical narratives, stories that will provide students with context and background knowledge (VanSledright and Brophy, 1992). Students need to experience real-life aspects of historical people and events in order to gain understanding (Fertig, 2005). Teachers can incorporate life stories with minimal investment of time or money. Students eventually become the historians, integrating their own family and community history stories into the curriculum. Social studies instruction that previously emphasized reading textbooks and listening to lectures extends into an arena that develops oral language and receptive listening skills (Crocco, 1998). The study of history becomes an active, dynamic process in which students go beyond the classroom and into the community.
Techniques for Beginning an Oral History Project

Oral history studies typically focus on a particular theme or era in history. Using the opening story as an example, teachers can initiate a study of early twentieth century life. Teachers might begin by asking questions: What questions would you ask this storyteller? What else do you want to know about this story? This time period? These events in history? Students may respond with questions such as follows: What was the depression? What was the Stock Market Crash? Why did the banks close? Where did this family live? Why did everything cost so little? What did families do for fun during this time? Did these children go to school, and if so, what was it like? What types of transportation were used? Teachers may encourage any and all questions which are recorded on newsprint. Students then discuss resources for finding answers to their questions, many of which are also used by historians.

Family and community members are an excellent resource and imperative to the success of an oral history project. Before students embark on interviews of family or community members, they must determine the theme of their questions and conduct background research. Students often work in small groups with other students who are interested in the same themes. From the opening story, students might become interested in the Great Depression, transportation, economy, schooling, or family life. To develop background knowledge, they can explore newspaper articles, courthouse records, documents in the local historical society, and library and Internet resources. Students take notes on information they find interesting and relevant to their theme. They come together, share information in their small groups, and begin to determine who they would like to interview and what questions they would like to ask. In addition to family members, students may decide to interview retired teachers, members of the historical society, and retired political leaders or military officers. Personal care homes, churches, and senior citizen centers are excellent resources for locating individuals to interview. Elderly community members are often very willing to share their memories of life during wartime and the Great Depression, and they enjoy the interaction with young people.

Interview questions should be used only as a guide, as other questions and stories may emerge during the interview process. Students should also have an opportunity to practice interview techniques and note-taking or recording (Hickey, 1999). Students can make notes as storytellers are speaking, but this often leads to incomplete stories. Instead, storytellers often agree to be audio or videotaped, allowing for a class to hear an entire narrative in the storyteller’s voice. These techniques encourage students to become immersed in historical inquiry as they begin to gather multiple perspectives through individual life stories.

As an example, students interested in family life in the early twentieth century might develop the following questions for interviewees: How big were the families in the early twentieth century? How did you cook and do laundry? Did you have a car? What did you do for fun? How did you make a living? Where did you live growing up? These questions help life stories to emerge such as the following account of a family living in rural West Virginia before the Depression. This family history story can be used as a springboard for discussion and extension activities such as the Early Twentieth Century Family Life Student Contract that follows. This story was told to me by my father, the eighty-one year old storyteller.
My Family History

We lived on a farm outside of Philippi, West Virginia, which was originally named Anglin’s Ford after my great, great, great grandfather. He operated a ferry to take people, wagons, and livestock across the river. He charged about 5 cents per cow and maybe 10 cents for a horse or a person. This ferry system was very popular until the Philippi Covered Bridge was built in 1852 at a cost of $12,500. My mother and dad both had eight brothers and sisters. My mother had numerous aunts and uncles, some with very interesting names. Some of the uncles’ names were Cicero Sylvester, Socrates Bascum (pronounced SO-crates, long o and long a), Alvin Demosthenes, and the twins, Moses Sheridan and George Sherman, who were named for two Civil War generals. My dad’s mother died in the flu epidemic of 1918, which took the lives of many people in the county.

My parents were married Nov. 24, 1918. My mother was 18, and my dad was 27. They had three children: Dorothy, Pauline, and me. Since my mother was of age, she got to vote in the first Presidential election open to women voters. My dad worked in a stone quarry and on construction sites, so he was often away from home. We also raised cattle on the farm and in 1935 had five 3 year olds. Dorothy was 15, and I was 11. We took the cattle out of our fields and through neighbor’s fields to the scales to get them weighed. A man was to meet us there to buy them. He came but had no money. We were to get $286.00 for all five. Dorothy and I took the cattle back home and put them in the field. After 3 or 4 days, the man...
showed up with the money. Our parents weren’t home, so we stuffed the money under a pile of quilts. That money carried us through an entire winter.

My parents were married 6 years before they bought their first car. Before that, they had a horse and wagon. The first car was a 1924 Model T Ford with self starter and demountable tires. It had a cloth top that you could open all summer and curtains for winter. There was no heater. Gasoline was 5 gallons for $1, so seldom was more than a dollar’s worth bought at one time. Next they bought a new Model A Ford for $549. In 1936, they bought another new Ford for $638. They traded again in 1937, and this new one cost $660. None of these cars had heaters. They bought a new Plymouth in 1940 with no heater for $839. They bought a second-hand heater for $6 and installed it themselves.

A car was a major expense for us, but we did have an oil and gas lease on the farm. It brought us $14.25 per quarter. One of those checks bought the car license which cost $11. In 1932, we bought a radio, and after that, one of the checks bought the radio batteries for the winter. That radio was a great source of entertainment. We listened to Lowell Thomas who gave the news. Dad listened to the weather in the mornings before going to work. We listened to the Grand Ole Oprey in the evening and the National Barn Dance on Saturday nights, out of Nashville, Tennessee. We also enjoyed prize fighting, and the neighbors would come from all around us to listen. In 1933, we listened to the Max Schmeling and Max Baer fight. Baer beat Schmeling in the tenth round.

There wasn’t much money for frivolous pursuits. My first trip to Clarksburg, a town of any size, was at age nine when my dad broke his leg. It was only twenty miles, but the roads were muddy. It took my Uncle Phillips two hours in his T-model Ford to get us there. I sat on the floor behind the seats. The fair came to Philippi every year, and I was lucky to go once. They had rides like the Ferris wheel and the merry-go-round. One year, locally famous mummies were exhibited. I was 12 years old, and it cost 10 cents to see them. There was a man outside the exhibit who called, “Have you seen the mummies? This fair will not be complete until you have seen the mummies!”

Such stories provide details of family life that would not be available to students if they simply read about the early twentieth century in a textbook. Many times a story such as this leads students to have further questions and a second interview. For example, they may want to know more about the mummies or the ability of the storyteller to remember the cost of so many items.

As follow-up to an oral history project, students can become involved in a variety of performance-based extension activities. The purpose of these activities is to give students an opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned. Interest levels increase if students are given a choice of extension activities and a chance to work with other members of their small group. A contract is one way of providing students with a choice of extension activities related to the theme of their oral history project. For example, the contract in Appendix A would be appropriate for students who completed interviews on early twentieth century family life. The seventh option allows them to design an extension activity that reflects their interests and skills.
In addition to sharing with classmates, students may benefit from sharing their expertise with a larger audience. Giving students the opportunity to perform and demonstrate their knowledge and skills for parents, personal-care home residents, or historical society members elevates the status of their research and helps them internalize their knowledge and discoveries.

**Recommendations for Teachers**

When teachers begin history instruction with historical narratives, life stories provide students with context and background knowledge (VanSledright and Brophy, 1992). Students become involved in historical inquiry and begin to learn about the past by asking their own questions. They examine evidence and formulate their own conclusions and interpretations of history. Students develop the ability to reason chronologically, empathize with people throughout history, determine the multiple causes of historical events, and assess the significance of events and people from the past (Fertig, 2005). Thus, oral history projects provide students with an intimate view of the human experience during a particular period in history.

Teachers may supplement oral history projects by offering students primary sources to analyze such as historical documents, letters, diaries, and photographs. Images of people and places of the Depression can be found at [History of the 1900s](#) and [Great Depression Photo Essay](#). Photographs of the Philippi Covered Bridge, mentioned in the family history story, can be viewed at [Philippi Bridge](#) and [Philippi Pictures](#). Letters written by children to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, requesting items such as clothes, money, and bicycles, can be read at [Eleanor Roosevelt](#). In addition to primary sources, teachers can display artifacts to give students a better understanding of a particular period in history. Artifacts related to early twentieth century life might include a washboard, a school bell, and a miniature T-Model Ford. Local historical societies often have artifacts they are willing to lend for instructional purposes.

Primary grade teachers may choose to invite storytellers to the classroom rather than have children participate in independent research and interviews. Storytellers can then answer questions as they arise and exhibit artifacts related to their stories as they are speaking. Young children might also benefit from picture books which can enhance the historical understanding of a particular theme or historical period by communicating in developmentally appropriate ways any controversial, confusing or abstract historical concept or event. For example, students exploring the early twentieth century might benefit from hearing *Alice Ramsey’s Grand Adventure* (Brown, 1997), *Who was Eleanor Roosevelt?* (Thompson, 2004), and *Rose’s Journal: The Story of a Girl in the Great Depression* (Moss, 2001). In addition, primary grade children may benefit from field trips that would allow them to experience first-hand the history of their community.

These family history stories and extension activities are based on performance expectations for the social studies standard, Time, Continuity, and Change. Students learn how to use stories about people and places to understand the past and analyze sources for reconstructing the past, such as photographs, letters, and historical artifacts and documents (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994). Family and community stories bring life to history and develop skills in historical inquiry, so students are able to interpret the past in ways that transcend textbooks.

*This article is dedicated to my parents, Lois Jean and Monzell Anglin, Jr. I thank you ever so much for your vivid memories and family stories.*
References


Vanfossen, P. (2003). *Reading and math take so much of the time...An overview of social studies instruction in elementary classrooms in Indiana*. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies, Chicago, IL.


Appendix A

Early Twentieth Century Family Life Student Contract

Name ___________________________  Date ___________________

Directions: Choose one of the following activities to complete your study of early twentieth century family life. Place an X in the box of the activity you have chosen and list any students who will be working with you.

| Option #1: Learn to sing a song that might have been sung on the radio during the early twentieth century. Perform it for the class. | Option #2: Write a skit about early twentieth century family life. Design props and perform for the class. |
| Option #3: Construct a timeline of events in the development of transportation from the turn of the century through the Great Depression. Use both words and pictures. Share your work with the class. | Option #4: Construct a Venn diagram comparing early twentieth century family life to family life in the present day. Place the Venn diagram on poster board and share it with the class. |
| Option #5: Write an acrostic poem using the word “depression” while describing the impact of this period in history on families and the United States economy. | Option #6: Using Internet and library resources, create a photo essay collection comparing life in the city to life in the country during the Depression. Share your work. |

Option #7: I would like to: __________________________________________________.

I am working with the following class members: ________________________________.

Student(s) Signature(s) ________________________________

Teacher Signature ___________________________________