

Oral History

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WR teacher training 2003-2004/Lessons for CD-Jan. 2004/Lesson—Oral history

- **Grade level:**
Upper Elementary, Middle School, High School
- **Subject areas:**
English Language & Literature, Science, Social Studies
- **Instructional strategies** (from *Classroom Instruction That Works—Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement* by Robert J. Marzano, Debra J. Pickering, Jane E. Pollock)
Identifying similarities and differences
Summarizing and note taking
Homework and practice
Cooperative learning
Setting objectives and providing feedback
- **Estimated duration:**
Preparation time: 20 minutes
Session one: 20-25 minutes to introduce assignment, have students skim the handout, and set an objective of what they want to learn. Give students up to 7 days to complete assignment. Session two: 60 minutes for class discussion (varies depending upon depth of discussion)
- **Setting:**
Classroom for discussions; locations such as nursing homes, residences, and telephones for interviews.
- **Skills:**
Comparing similarities and differences, discussing, interviewing, interpreting, investigating, listening, recording, researching, writing
- **Vocabulary:**
consumption, trade-offs

Summary

By interviewing people at least 45 years older than themselves, students discover history of Americans' lifestyles and consumption patterns.

Objectives

Students will:

- Interview people who are at least 45 years older than themselves.
- Record their answers.
- Compare similarities and differences of lifestyles years ago versus today through class discussion.
- Draw conclusions about advantages and drawbacks of today's lifestyles compared to those years ago.

Materials

- Oral History Questionnaire (found at the end of this lesson plan)
- Notebooks and pens

Background

Life in America has changed dramatically in the last 100 years. The advent of the automobile, jet planes, computers, the Internet, antibiotics, genetic engineering and many other innovations has fundamentally transformed us from a primarily agrarian society into a post-industrial society. Such changes have in one sense improved Americans' quality of life. Yet, in another, the changes have saddled us with numerous stresses that were unknown to our ancestors. The balance between the good and the bad requires us to make often difficult **“trade-offs.”**

For example, author and economist Juliet Schor argues in her book, *The Overworked American*, that Americans enjoy less leisure today than at any time since the end of World War II.¹ Another drawback of our transformed society has been unprecedented pressures on the environment. Population increases²—combined with greater levels of per capita consumption—have caused these pressures. A sampling of environmental stressors include climate change, degradation of water supply and quality, soil erosion, the toxification of species as diverse as inch worms and polar bears, and depletion of natural resources as varied as fossil fuels and cod fish.³

Currently, the United States comprises about five percent of the world's population, but uses about 25 percent of the world's resources.⁴ Even with tremendous strides in technological advances—this level of consumption cannot last indefinitely,⁵ especially when Americans' lifestyles have become the international vision of progress.

This lesson helps students understand America's history and some of the changes in consumption patterns, leisure time, and entertainment that have occurred in the last 100 years.

¹ Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American* (BasicBooks, 1991), jacket cover.

² In 1920, the U.S. population was 106 million. In 1960, it was 179 million, and in 2000 it was 281 million. (U.S. Census Bureau, U.D. Department of Commerce, Table 16, Population: 1790 to 1990. [Retrieved November 17, 2003, at www.census.gov/population/censusdata/table-16.pdf]). (U.S. Census Bureau, U.D. Department of Commerce, Table 16, Population: 1790 to 1990. [Retrieved November 17, 2003, at www.census.gov/population/censusdata/table-16.pdf]). World population is expected to be nearly 8 billion by 2025 and 9.3 billion by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, U.D. Department of Commerce, “World population at a glance: 1998 and beyond.” IB/98-4, issued January 1999. [Retrieved November 17, 2003, at www.census.gov/ipc/prod/wp98/ib98-4.pdf]).

³ William Stigliani, Director, Center for Energy and Environmental Education, University of Northern Iowa. E-mail communication January 12, 2004.

⁴ John C. Ryan and Alan Thein Durning, *Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things* (Northwest Environment Watch, 1997), p. 68.

⁵ Ibid.

Procedure

The Activity

1. Distribute handout, “Oral History Questionnaire,” found at the end of this lesson. Discuss the project with the students. Ask them to skim the handout, and think about their goals relative to the assignment. They should complete the “I want to know more about...” statement before the class period is over. Encourage them to think about their interests before completing the statement. Then give students several days, and preferably a weekend, to do the assignment.
2. When the assignment is completed, break the students into small groups to discuss for 10-15 minutes what they found when conducting research. Possible questions to get them started might be: Whom did you interview, and how old were they? What surprised you about their lives? What, if anything, appealed to you about their lifestyles? What didn’t appeal to you?
3. Back in a large group, continue the discussion. *Note: If the discussion is extensive, periodically break the class into small groups again to share ideas about a specific question, and then bring their answers to the rest of the class. Or, break the class into 7-10 groups and ask each group to answer one or more of the following discussion questions. They then should share their thoughts with the remaining class members.*
 - How have lifestyles changed over the last 100 years? Encourage students to give examples and share stories about the people they interviewed.
 - Specifically, how have **consumption**⁶ patterns changed during that time? Why have the changes occurred? List factors. (To encourage more thoughtful answers, ask students to take a few minutes to write down their ideas before discussing as a large group.)
 - How do our current consumption habits affect the environment? Compare the affect now versus 50 years ago.
 - What impact will consumption have for children of the next generation (in 2025, for example)?
 - What consumption patterns do you think the next generation will have?
 - In what ways will your grandchildren be able to have a lifestyle similar to yours? How will it be different?
 - What responsibilities, if any, does each generation have to future generations related to protecting the environment? Use of natural resources? Material consumption? Explain. What would you need to give up by accepting this

⁶ Using up of goods or services; wasting away.

responsibility to future generations? What would you gain by accepting this responsibility?

- How well you think past generations have done related to protecting the environment for future generations? Explain. How might you do things differently?
- How does the stuff people own affect their quality of life?
- Is life better or worse now than 50 years ago? 100 years ago? Share examples of things that might be better now, and things that might not be as good. (These could be generated through Think, Pair and Share groups, then as a large group.)
- What are you grateful for, now that you have learned about the past (i.e., material goods, services that are available now that weren't in the past, non-material goods such as strong family relationships)?

Assessment

Students record answers to their interview(s). A rubric for this lesson plan is found on the Oral History Questionnaire handout.

Extensions

- 1) Think of a word or phrase that describes some aspect of the life of a person you interviewed. Then write the word in a way that says something about the word's meaning. Three examples of "Wacky Words" are below. Though samples of words that incorporate images are not shown, encourage students to add them if they wish. For example, the word Trumpet might have a horn coming out of the final "t".

sparse

party!

PROTECT

- 2) Write a compare and contrast paper about the life of the one or two people you interviewed, and compare it to your own life. How was it different? How was it the same? Conclude with your thoughts about the two lifestyles, what you think sounds good about the "olden days" and what you think is good about your lifestyle.
- 3) Create a scrapbook or journal of memories for the person you interviewed. Suggest that they give the scrapbook or journal to younger relatives or friends as a gift.
Optional: Create a book of each student's interviews and give it as a gift to the local library. Before taking on this project, be sure to ask the local library director if he or she would shelve such a book. Also be sure to secure written permission from interviewees for inclusion of their answers in this book.
- 4) Go TV-Free for a week, substituting the television with old-time entertainment (no Game Boy or other electronic games for a week, either!). Write a reaction paper or keep a daily journal of how much TV you think you would've watched, what you did instead of watching TV, how you felt about what you did, and whether you missed

TV. Conclude the paper or weekly journal with your thoughts about how much TV you will watch in the future (i.e., Will you return to watching it about the same as you did before the assignment? Will you watch a little, or a lot, less? Describe.)

- 5) Research and write about old-time ways, such as those described in the Laura Ingalls Wilder series, Forrest Carter's *The Education of Little Tree* and/or Eliot Wigginton's *The Foxfire Book: Hog Dressing, Log Cabin Building, Mountain Crafts and Foods, Planting by the Signs, Snake Lore, Hunting Tales, Faith Healing, Moonshining*.
- 6) Ask students to write answers to the Extension questions, found as a handout that follows the Oral History Questionnaire.
- 7) Conduct a service-learning project with a local long-term care facility.

Resources

Carter, Forrest and Rennard Strickland, *The Education of Little Tree*, University of New Mexico Press, 1976.

TV-Turnoff Network [www.tvturnoff.org].

U.S. Census Bureau, U.D. Department of Commerce, Table 16, Population: 1790 to 1990. [www.census.gov/population/censusdata/table-16.pdf].

U.S. Census Bureau, U.D. Department of Commerce, *World population at a glance: 1998 and beyond*. IB/98-4, issued January 1999. [www.census.gov/ipc/prod/wp98/ib98-4.pdf].

Wigginton, Eliot. *The Foxfire Book : Hog Dressing, Log Cabin Building, Mountain Crafts and Foods, Planting by the Signs, Snake Lore, Hunting Tales, Faith Healing, Moonshining*. Anchor, 1972.

Wilder, Laura Ingalls. *Little House* series, such as *Little House in the Big Woods*. HarperCollins, October 1953 (and on for subsequent books).

Oral History Questionnaire

I want to know more about _____

Directions:

- 1) Interview 1-2 people significantly older than you such as grandparents, great-grandparents, elderly neighbors, or family friends. Make sure you interview people who are **at least** 45 years older than you, and preferably 55 or more years older.
- 2) Include in your interview(s) all of the questions from Part I, and then ask the interviewee(s) 15 or more questions (see Part II for question ideas). You are encouraged to ask additional investigative questions not found below, and record those answers as well.
- 3) On a separate sheet of paper for each interview, write the questions asked and the interviewee's responses. Write the answers in complete sentences and/or paragraphs.
- 4) See rubric below for more information on expectations.

Rubric:

A— 2 interviews. Part I answered for both interviews. At least 20 total questions (above and beyond Part I) answered with details and examples, as appropriate (minimum of 10 questions/interview). At least one additional, investigative question asked, with response recorded. Note on assignment which question(s) you generated. All answers written in complete sentences and/or paragraphs. Answers written thoroughly and neatly.

B— 1 interview. Part I answered. At least 15 questions (above and beyond Part I) answered with sufficient detail and/or examples. All answers written in complete sentences and/or paragraphs. Answers written thoroughly and neatly.

C—1 interview. Part I answered. At least 10 questions (above and beyond Part I) answered. Answers could be more complete.

D— 1 interview. Parts of Part I answered and 5 questions (above and beyond Part I) answered. Answers could be more complete and neater.

F— Very little if any effort demonstrated.

Name _____ Period _____ Date _____ Due _____

Part I

Questions:

- 1) How old are you, or in what year or decade were you born?
- 2) How many people were in your family (include parents, sisters, brothers and any others living in the house)?

Part II

Question ideas:

Energy... How did you heat your home? Approximately what year did you get electricity and approximately how old were you? Do you recall if that was a significant event for your family? Why or why not? How many and what electric appliances did you own? How did you wash your clothes before you got electricity? What time did you go to bed and wake up before you got electricity? Did the advent of electric lights have an impact on how long you stayed up at night? How did you heat your home before electricity? How did you cool your home before electricity? What do you remember—good and bad—related to your use of energy and/or lack of appliances?

Water... Did you have a well? How much water do you think your family used compared to a similar-sized family of today? Did you buy or haul water? What do you remember about bathing in those years? Could you describe the process? How often did you do laundry? If you had no running water, what were the drawbacks? Do you remember approximately what year and how old you were when you got running water? Do you recall if that was a significant event for your family? Why or why not?

Transportation... Did you have a car? How many? How else did you travel—train? plane? horse/buggy? bicycle? How did you get to school? How far away was your school? If you lived in the country, how often did you go to town? Describe the roads. Who maintained the roads? Do you remember the longest trip you took as a child? Where did you go? Why did you go and/or what was the purpose of the trip? What were common places you traveled to, say, every week or month?

Entertainment... What did you do for fun? Did you have a TV and/or radio? What were your favorite programs? How much free time did you have? Do you think you had more or less free time than youth of today? What games did you play, and will you tell me about one or two of them? Did you have a favorite game and if so, what was it? Did you go to the movies; if so, how often and how much did it cost? How often did you go shopping and to shopping malls? Where did you “hang out”—where did you go, if anywhere, just to be with friends?

Clothing... How often did you get new clothes? Did you buy or make them? How many different outfits did you own? Did you wear hand-me-downs? How long did you wear your clothes (until you were tired of them, until they wore out, etc.)? Do you have any stories to share about how you got your clothes and/or how long you wore them? What did you do with worn out clothes? **Shoes**—How many pairs of shoes did you own? What types of shoes did you own (including work boots)? How long did they last? Did you repair them, and who repaired them? What did you do with worn out shoes?

Trash... What types of trash did you have—glass jars and bottles... Tin cans... Pop cans... Pop bottles... Plastic bags... Plastic wrap... Cardboard... Paper... Paper or plastic grocery bags... Batteries... Food waste? How much of these did you have, and how did you get rid of each kind? Which items were reused, and rarely if ever thrown out? How many lived in your home, and how much trash did you have for all of those people combined, say, in one week or one month? Do you recall the first plastics and what items did you first use that were plastic?

Food... How often did you eat out and what types of restaurants did you eat at? How often did you eat at fast-food restaurants? Do you remember when you first ate at a fast-food restaurant? How many and what kind of snacks did you eat? Did you eat meals alone or with family members, and did you sit, stand or drive while eating meals? How did the meals compare to the meals of today? Were they better or worse? What did you do during mealtime (visit, watch TV, read, listen to the radio, etc.)? How often did you shop for groceries? How were the purchases packaged? How much did you spend on groceries? Did you raise any of your own food? What was your favorite food and did you eat your favorite foods often? When did you first use paper plates and napkins?

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Oral History Questionnaire—

Extension questions

Answer two or more of the series of questions listed below.

- 1) How have consumption patterns changed over the last 60 or so years? Why has the change occurred? List at least three reasons.
- 2) What types of impact does our current consumption have on the environment compared to 60 years ago? What impact will it have for children of the next generation (in 2025, for example)?
- 3) What responsibilities, if any, does each generation have to future generations related to protecting the environment? Explain. What sacrifices and benefits, if any, do you feel come with this responsibility?
- 4) Is life better or worse now than 50 years ago? 100 years ago? Share examples of things that might be better now, and things that might not be as good.