

Vietnam War Oral Histories

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Summary

For this student-directed independent research assignment, students will have the opportunity to interview people in their community who were involved in, or affected by, the Vietnam War. Students will then write oral histories that record the interviewees' experiences. As a culminating activity, students may invite their interviewees to class in order to discuss how the Vietnam War affected their lives, and what its legacy is on the United States and the American people.

Objectives

As a result of this activity, students will:

- 1.) make inferences using oral histories;
- 2.) research and obtain primary sources of the various Vietnam War participants, and compare that information with their text;
- 3.) appreciate a variety of perspectives on the same historical event, and will make comparisons among the viewpoints of the interview subjects.

U.S. History Event

The Cold War/Vietnam War

Grade Level

This lesson is designed for high-school American History students.

Materials

Worksheets for each student ("Questions for Vietnam War Oral History" & "Guidelines for Writing a Vietnam War Oral History" are included with this lesson), a set of classroom computers or a SMARTBoard for which to show websites of Vietnam War-era oral histories (found in the "Resources" section of this lesson), and "After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection" by James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle (one copy per classroom).

Lesson Time

This activity is an independent project, so not much class time will be needed. A teacher should plan on no more than one class period to assign the project, establish expectations, discuss appropriate interview subjects, etc. At teacher discretion, a class period can be set aside at the end of the Vietnam War unit that would allow some of the interview subjects to visit the classroom and take part in a forum-type discussion about their experiences during the Vietnam War. [CAUTION: Emotions are still raw among many people that personally experienced the Vietnam War; be sure to read each student's finished project in order to find the best candidates for a classroom discussion. When you invite the interview subjects, be sure to have boxes of facial tissues handy).

Procedures

- 1.) Conduct a review, or provide a short summary, of the Vietnam War. This project will work best if your students are already familiar with the timeframe of the Vietnam War, and how the war affected different groups (American servicemen, high-school and college students, African-Americans involved in the ongoing struggle for civil rights, etc.).
- 2.) Introduce students to oral histories. There are many useful tools that students can use to better understand what oral histories are how they are important in conducting historical research. Two websites that can be used in class, or on your students' own time, are:
 - “The Vietnam War: Oral Histories” (<http://fcit.usf.edu/vietnam/index.html>): Florida Center for Instructional Technology
 - “Experiencing War: Stories from the Veterans History Project” (<http://www.loc.gov/vets//stories/>): Library of Congress
- 3.) Create a T-chart on an overhead transparency with the headings “Characteristics of Good Listening” and “Characteristics of Poor Listening”. Ask students to think about a time when someone listened to them particularly well. Have them share specific behaviors that showed that person was listening well, and write down a few examples under the appropriate heading. Then ask students to think about a time when someone did not listen to them particularly well. Have them share specific behaviors that showed that person was not listening well, and write some examples down under the appropriate heading. Next, explain to students that this oral history assignment will require them to use good listening skills.
- 4.) Tell students that they will conduct an interview and write an oral history about a person in their community who was involved in, or was affected by, the Vietnam War. If possible, and if time allows, arrange to interview someone who lived through the Vietnam War (a fellow staff member at your school perhaps) in front of the class. Sit across from the interviewee, and ask him/her some of the questions from the attached worksheet “Questions for Vietnam War Oral History”. As you conduct the interview in front of the class, make sure you model these interviewing skills:
 - *Greet the interviewee warmly. Explain the reason for the interview, and the probable length of the interview.
 - *Face the interview subject as he or she talks. Use positive body language and facial expressions to show interest in what he/she says. Do not interrupt.
 - *Ask open-ended questions to encourage in-depth answers. Ask follow-up questions to allow the interviewee to go beyond the bounds of the initial question.
 - *Be patient; let the interviewee answer completely before you ask another question.
 - *Do not judge or argue with what the interviewee says. Just record what is expressed.
 - *If you cannot take notes as fast as the interviewee talks, ask him/her to repeat what you missed, or to pause so that you can catch up [Encourage students to individually record their interviews...you may want to offer extra-credit for students who turn in taped interviews with their oral history assignments].
 - *Thank the interviewee at the end of the interview.
- 5.) After modeling an interview for the class, pass out the worksheet titled “Questions for Vietnam War Oral History”. Tell students to use the questions on the handout to guide their interviews. Encourage them to brainstorm other pertinent questions for the interview as well. Explain that some interviewees may be uncomfortable talking about the war, particularly American servicemen who were actively involved in warfare throughout Vietnam and other parts of Southeast Asia towards the end of American involvement; members of families that moved to the United States as a result of the war may also be uncomfortable. Therefore, instruct students to first ask potential interviewees whether they would be comfortable talking about how the war affected them.
- 6.) If any students complain that they don't know anybody that was alive during the Vietnam War (believe me, it will happen), point them towards grandparents, aunts and uncles, people from church, or older neighbors. Explain to students that older people cherish the opportunities to share their life's experiences with the younger generations. If they can't think of an interview subject immediately, instruct the student(s) to ask their parents or another older person that they're close to.
- 7.) Once students have reviewed the interview questions, project Overhead Transparency #1 – “Guidelines for Writing a Vietnam War Oral History”, and review the guidelines with students. Answer any questions they have. You may want to provide a copy of Overhead Transparency #1 for each student.

8.) Allow students adequate time to identify an interviewee, conduct the interview, write a rough draft, and revise the oral history.

Questions for Vietnam War Oral History

Directions: Ask your interviewee the following questions, and record answers in the space provided or on a separate sheet of paper. You will also need to ask other appropriate and follow-up questions to responses given.

Background: What is your name, age, and occupation?

Where do you currently live?

Where were you during the Vietnam War?

Personal experience with the war: Why do you think the United States fought a war in Vietnam?

How did you feel about the war at the time?

In what ways were you affected by the Vietnam War?

Larger impact of the war: In what ways did the Vietnam War affect the United States?

In what ways did the Vietnam War affect the world?

Do you think the United States should be praised or condemned for its involvement in the Vietnam War? Why?

Guidelines for Writing a Vietnam War Oral History

- 1.) Conduct an interview with a person in your community who was involved in, or affected by, the Vietnam War. Use the questions on “**Questions for Vietnam War Oral History**”, and other questions you create, as a guide for your interview. Tape-record or record written notes from the interview.
- 2.) Use your notes from the interview to write an oral history of the interviewee. Your oral history should include these elements:
 - a.) An appropriate title.
 - b.) A 3- or 4-sentence introduction that provides a brief biographical sketch of the interviewee. The introduction should include the interviewee’s name, age, occupation, and city of residence, and reveal where the interviewee was during the Vietnam War.
 - c.) A section that explains how the Vietnam War impacted the interviewee personally. This section should include direct quotes from the interviewee.
 - d.) A section that explains the interviewee’s perception of the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. This section should also include direct quotes from the interviewee.
 - e.) A conclusion that summarizes what you learned from the interview.
 - f.) Pictures of your interviewee, now and during the Vietnam War era, pasted in at appropriate parts of the oral history. These should include captions explaining the pictures. You should also attempt to find pictures of any memorabilia (helmets, medals, etc.), and/or other primary-sources (i.e., photographs) relevant to your interviewee’s experiences during the Vietnam War.

Your oral history should be over three typewritten pages in length (double-spaced). I will be pleased to look over any rough draft that you wish to submit.

Assessment

-After students have completed the final drafts of their oral histories, have them bring them to class to share with other students. Place students in mixed-ability groups of three, and tell each group that they will now read and discuss their oral histories.

- 1.) Have each student give his or her oral history to another student in the group. Instruct students to carefully read the oral history and note the ways in which the Vietnam War affected the individual featured in the oral history. Have students repeat this process with the other oral histories in the group.
- 2.) Once students have read the oral histories written by their group members, have them design a three-way Venn diagram in order to show how the three individuals featured in their oral histories were similarly affected by the Vietnam War, and how all three interview subjects were affected differently?
- 3.) Ask students to answer the following question: "How did completing your Vietnam War oral history and reading the oral histories written by two other students alter your view of the Vietnam War?"
- 4.) Finally, hold a class discussion centering on these questions:
 - a.) What did you like about completing the Vietnam War oral history?
 - b.) What was difficult about completing the oral history?
 - c.) In what ways were the three individuals your group interviewed similarly affected by the Vietnam War? In what ways were they affected differently?
 - d.) How did completing your Vietnam War oral history and reading the oral histories written by two other students alter your view of the Vietnam War?
 - e.) What are the most important things you learned from completing the Vietnam War oral histories?
 - f.) As compared to the secondary sources you usually use in history classes, how accurate do you think oral histories are in relating an actual historical event?
- 5.) After students have had time to think about question #5 above, introduce them to the chapter detailing slave narratives taken by the WPA in the 1930s in "After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection" by James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle. Davidson & Lytle found evidence that former slaves, in giving oral histories to government interviewers, would temper their remarks based on the individual interviewer. A former master may be recalled in more glowing terms to a white interviewer, but that same master would be remembered with much more hostile language several days later if the next interviewer was black. Ask students if they feel that the collection of oral histories is an important process for keeping accurate historical records. Follow with asking students if there are inherent problems with accuracy in asking people about events that happened many decades ago.

Resources

<http://www.oralhistory.org.uk/> - Oral History Society

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/stories/vietnam/curriculum.html> - How to Do an Oral History about the Impact of the Vietnam Era

<http://fcit.usf.edu/vietnam/index.html> - The Vietnam War: Oral Histories

<http://www.loc.gov/vets//stories/>

“After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection” by James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle (McGraw-Hill College)