



Description: Students collect oral histories about the Rio Grande. The aim is to collect a wide range of experience and history that can then be used to shed light on the Rio Grande.

Objective: Students will learn:

- how to conduct oral history interviews; and
- about the importance of recording and learning about history through oral traditions, using the Rio Grande as a focus.

Materials: For each student:
 time line, list of possible interview questions, ideas and guidelines
 writing materials: paper and pencil
 Optional: tape recorder; videocamera; camera; digital camera; film; envelopes; postage; book-making materials

Background: Oral history is a method of gathering and preserving historical information through recorded interviews with participants of past events and ways of life. It is both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word, and one of the most modern, initiated with tape recorders in the 1940s.

38. *River Stories*



Grades: 4–12

Time: Material preparation: 30–60 minutes

Doing the activity: ongoing and flexible depending on the extent of the project:

one class period for oral history, “river story” teller;
 one class period for discussion and preparation of the interview;
 outside class time for students to do the interview;
 class time to share their stories and artwork and to compile the information;
 class time for gathering/recognition of those who participated in the project.

Subjects: social studies, language arts

Terms: *oral history, oral tradition*



The student armed with nothing more than paper, pencil and a genuine historical curiosity can practice oral history. At the personal level of family history, a cassette of our grandparents relating their lives will be far more fascinating to our grandchildren and great-grandchildren than a name on a genealogical tree. Oral history is something students can do for themselves: an activity which is intellectually, socially and politically democratic and collective.

Oral history is a method of historical research, as well as a human challenge, because it involves direct and personal contact with other people. It asks us to assess other people's lives as well as our own ability to deal sympathetically but honestly and imaginatively with their memories and ourselves. It is based on documents that are spoken, and folklore and legend are only one kind of spoken document. Songs, speeches, interviews, and formal and informal conversation are all oral documents, useful for history. "Oral tradition" is the usual name for these verbal stories passed on from one generation to the next.

These interviews can collect a certain amount of information such as folk songs, tales, myths and specific interpretations of the river's past history. The accounts that the parents and grandparents of the students give them about their own experience can be instructive tools for learning about the Rio Grande. Such activities will undoubtedly be of immense value to historians in the future.

Procedures:

1. Guest storyteller: Arrange to have someone visit the class who can share a "river story" that will inspire the students for the oral history project they will be creating. This guest could be a storyteller who can share his or her stories using different mediums: music, artwork, or food...this brings a real-life dimension to the activity. It illustrates the idea of "river stories" that they will be collecting. It shows students a different side of an adult and that adult becomes a priceless source of information about the river. It gives students a flesh-and-blood subject with whom to study and interact.

Prepare the students for the guest storyteller. Have the students prepare for this guest by thinking of questions they can ask the guest. Explain the usefulness of oral history.

2. Oral history project: Describe the project that the students will be doing: first-hand oral history research with people in their own communities and families.
3. Brainstorm, either as an entire class or in small groups, the possible sources of information, which could be used to find people in the community who have river stories. Examples



might include: their family members, friends, government offices, the telephone book, local newspapers and magazines, local television news directors, leaders of local groups or clubs. The class might place an advertisement in the paper, or enlist the aid of a reporter to write up a story on the class project.

4. Once a list of names has been compiled, students in groups of two or three will work together to prepare an oral history interview of the person they choose to interview.

Each team should develop a plan. This should include the outline of the interview they will conduct with the person they have chosen to interview. (See Introduction to Interviewing)

The basic format for the interview should include any personal history details of note but the major questions to be addressed should be memories about the Rio Grande. The list of questions could be modified to include personal interests of the students and to reflect particular circumstances. Each team's plan should be discussed with the class and suggestions for improvement considered. After the plans have been discussed and refined, the students should make contact with the people they want to interview.

5. Once the students have confirmed the willingness of the people to be interviewed, they should meet with them and conduct the interview.
6. After the interviews are complete, students should write up the oral history they have done. Ask each team to briefly tell the class about the story. Make copies of the oral history project with a letter of thanks to the people who were interviewed and others who assisted.
7. Optional: Create a book of all the completed stories, complete with photographs, pictures, stories, poems, or paintings. Invite the local people who were interviewed for a public recognition of their contribution. They could be given letters of thanks and copies of their oral histories at this time.
8. In the Native American culture, to interview an elder of a nation, the person conducting the interview must bring a gift in exchange for information. Permission should be asked before pictures are taken. When the oral history is complete, a copy should be given to the elder before it is released to the public.



Professor Enrique Lamadrid's Insight Into Collecting River Stories

The most effective way of preparing for a river interview is taking time to develop a comprehensive “question” set, a list of topics, concerns, and questions that is thoroughly internalized by the interviewers. Since you know beforehand what ground you hope to cover, you do not even need to shuffle paper or notes. You can give your consultant your full appreciative attention, and conversation can emerge with its own rhythms and directions. Unlike formal questionnaires, which can actually discourage or even cut off conversation, the question set is flexible and adaptable to each situation. Before you develop a question set, find a focus for your project. Are you collecting plant and animal stories? Are you documenting traditional agriculture? Are you doing an oral history of the survivors of San Marcial and the 1929 flood? Perhaps you are conducting an attitude survey of city water users. Be ready to shift your focus as the stories emerge. Rivers flow around obstacles.

Before the interview, identify your consultant and the kind of knowledge that he or she might have. Make a list of all the people you would like your group to interview. Then see how many of them you can actually find. There is a relationship between cultural diversity and biological diversity. Which are the “cultures of habitat” in your area? People who have lived along the river the longest are probably those who have developed the most knowledge about it.

Will the conversation be about irrigation, agriculture, floods, medicinal plants, animals, or river crossing experiences? Since the Rio Grande is an international boundary south of New Mexico, it takes on powerful meaning for people there. Make sure to ask about family stories, fishing stories, animal tales, songs, and legends such as La Llorona. Did you know that she was always associated with water? How did people think about the river and utilize the river’s resources? Did they swim or play in it as children? Did they gather firewood or wild food there? Are there recipes for those foods? Make sure to leave the interview open-ended enough to gather information you were not expecting.

As you develop your own question set, it is useful to think about all the things you know and would like to know about the river.



Introduction to Interviewing

- Procedure:**
1. Discuss with the class the idea of interviewing.
 2. Talk about the different types of interviews, such as interviewing for information on a topic vs. interviewing for information about that person.
 3. Talk about possible questions that could be asked during an interview.
 4. Have students come up with possible interview questions.
 5. Discuss what is appropriate and what is not, as well as what kinds of information they should be looking for in the interview process.
 6. Give students class time to come up with questions.
 7. Divide the class into groups of two or three.
 8. Have each group combine lists of questions and discuss again what is appropriate and what is not.
 9. Discuss how the ordering of the questions facilitates the flow of the interview.
 10. Each group should list questions in the way that they would like to ask them during an interview.
 11. Have each group share its list of questions and get ideas and suggestions from other groups.
 12. Each student should have a list of questions from his or her group. Shuffle groups and have students interview each other using their questions to make sure that they flow.
 13. Once students have interviewed one another, have students reorganize questions as needed and discuss what worked and what did not work in their list of questions.

How to Conduct an Interview

- Procedure:**
1. Students will choose a person to interview. This may be a relative or family friend. If none is available, the teacher will need to help find someone.
 2. After choosing a person, students will set up an interview time.
 3. The students will begin the interview by explaining the project: We are compiling Rio Grande stories based on oral narratives about people's lives. "We are learning about interviewing and about writing narratives. A copy of the final project will be available to you after the project is finished."



4. Students will conduct the interviews based on the questions that they compiled during class.
5. Once the interview process is complete and the interviewer feels sufficient information has been gathered, he or she needs to thank the interviewee and then may leave.
6. After the interview, within three days, send thank-you notes.

Bringing the Stories Together to Be Shared

Find ways to share the stories that the students have gathered: Make a book of the collected stories and/or drawings. Have a sharing circle where the students retell the stories they have heard. The students could share the interview they conducted if they tape-recorded it or video-recorded it.

Extensions: Have the students write about their experience, what they've learned from the oral history.

Have students create a storybook, art book/collection, or a video/audio presentation of what they've gathered.

Connect to other activities, e.g. ask family members for help with activities.

Have students create their own "river story" to share, inspired by what they've learned from their bosque experiences.

Have students ask each other their own interview questions.

Make lists of local plants and animals using local names.

Take picture cards of animals and plants home to get identified by elders using local names.

Research recipes for local plants and animals, and medicinal uses.

Create a cookbook: gather recipes related to the river or traditional family recipes.

Make place name books in class.

Share stories of plants and animals as told by elders of the community.

Explore ways the ecosystem can be protected for future generations.

Have a sharing circle where each student shares his or her own river story.



Assessment: Evaluate the students' participation in the group process. Have them share stories they've heard.

References and Resources

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LISTSERV@H-NET.MSU.EDU oral history listserv

Resources in Albuquerque

Center for Southwest Research at University of New Mexico

Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District

The Albuquerque Museum

National Hispanic Cultural Center

Albuquerque Libraries: Special Collections Genealogy and Southwest History



River Stories

Time Line

Week 1: Guest storyteller comes to class and oral history is explained; develop questions

Week 2: Find someone to interview

Week 3: Complete the interview; send thank-you notes

Week 4: Collate the oral histories into a book

Week 5: Celebrate the oral history project with the contributors

Who You Can Interview

your mentor

grandparents

a Native elder, a Hispanic elder

a resident of Cochiti or Isleta Pueblo (a Rio Grande pueblo)

a flood survivor

a dam or bridge builder

a bosque fire fighter

a rancher or farmer

a duck hunter

someone who can see the river from where they live

an immigrant who crossed the river into the US

a fisherman

a ditch boss

a water engineer

a poet or artist

a gardener who uses the ditch

a river rafter

a swimmer



Developing Interview Questions

By Enrique Lamadrid

To Native people, the river is a living being. What is its shape and name?
Which Pueblo always puts this creature on its pottery?

How many indigenous names are there for the Rio Grande? How many tribes and languages live along its banks?

Who are the River Men from Cochiti Pueblo, and why are kids so fascinated with them?

Why has La Llorona been heard in every community along the river?

The river has five names in Spanish. Which two are used today, and by whom?

The water of the river is “holy water” on one day of the year, June 24, the Feast of San Juan Bautista (St. John the Baptist). Many people bathe in it then for special blessings.

When the Spanish Mexican settlers first arrived in the 16th century, the climate was colder and the river froze over every year. The ice made a good path for wheeled vehicles.

On which feast days is the river water blessed? The Matachines dancers in the Albuquerque area bless the acequias and water sources on two special days: San Isidro (the patron of agriculture) and San Antonio.

How is irrigation managed? What do the Pueblo prayers talk about before cleaning a ditch? What kind of music is sung while cleaning the ditches?

Each plant and each animal has its own stories to tell. People tell some of these stories. We can make up the other based on observation and science—this is called natural history.

Why are cranes (grullas) such good luck for people?

Why do daddy ducks have many wives and geese only one?

Which ducks have claws and why?

When did the grackles first arrive here?

Why do the seagulls follow the river? Why do they like the dump so much?

Why did the bears come to the bosque? Are they really lost?

Which fish used to be people in a previous world? Why don't Navajos eat fish?

What were the fishing reports like in the 1600s?

Where are the eels and shovel-nosed sturgeons?



Why are trout considered so intelligent?

Why is the cottonwood tree sacred to traditional peoples? Why are native katsina images and Hispano santos both made of cottonwood root? Why are drums made from cottonwood?

Who brought the tamarisks, Russian olives, and Siberian elms and why?

That Elephant Butte dam was the biggest dam in the world in its day.

What are the goals of the Army Corps of Engineers?

What happened to the town of San Marcial and where are its people?

What were the big flood years? Are there still flood stories around?

Why were female cottonwoods illegal in Albuquerque's city limits?

What happened to the Los Ranchos church when floodwater wouldn't drain?

How were all the wetlands in the North Valley drained?

Why are people building expensive houses south of Socorro where there is no levee? Who will pay if they are ever flooded out?

The questions are endless . . . See how many you can add to the list, both before and after your interviews.