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INTEGRATING ORAL HISTORY INTO A SOCIAL STUDIES METHODS COURSE LESSONS LEARNED

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ΕΝΤΑΣΣΟΝΤΑΣ ΤΗΝ ΠΡΟΦΟΡΙΚΗ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑ ΣΕ ΜΑΘΗΜΑ ΜΕΘΟΔΟΛΟΓΙΑΣ ΤΩΝ ΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΚΩΝ ΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΩΝ ΣΥΜΠΕΡΑΣΜΑΤΑ

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an overview of the Desegregation of Virginia Education Project (DOVE), a nationally recognized oral history project in the United States, and discusses how the project was integrated into an elementary social studies methods course. The authors present an analysis of assignments that preservice teachers generated for this course, including final versions of the oral history projects and peer feedback. Our analysis of the final products and student feedback suggests that doing an oral history project allowed preservice teachers to gain new knowledge on the issue of school

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segregation and helped relate their learning to real-world problems. However, preservice teachers also experienced challenges in creating their own narratives of the time period, failing to weave together individual stories and other historical evidence.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Το κείμενο παρέχει μία γενική εικόνα του Προγράμματος Αντιμετώπισης του Φυλετικού Διαχωρισμού της Εκπαίδευσης στη Βιρτζίνια των ΗΠΑ / Desegregation of Virginia Education Project (DOVE), ενός προγράμματος προφορικής ιστορίας που έχει αναγνωρισθεί σε εθνικό επίπεδο στις ΗΠΑ, και συζητεί πώς το πρόγραμμα εντάχθηκε σε εισαγωγικό μάθημα μεθοδολογίας των κοινωνικών επιστημών. Οι συγγραφείς παρουσιάζουν ανάλυση των εργασιών που συνέθεσαν στο πλαίσιο αυτού του μαθήματος οι φοιτητές -εκπαιδευόμενοι μελλοντικοί εκπαιδευτικοί, τις τελικές εκδοχές των δραστηριοτήτων προφορικής ιστορίας και στοιχεία από την αντίστοιχη ανατροφοδότηση. Η ανάλυση των τελικών εκπαιδευτικών προϊόντων και η ανατροφοδότηση των φοιτητών υποδεικνύει ότι η διενέργεια αυτού του προγράμματος προφορικής ιστορίας διευκόλυνε τους μελλοντικούς εκπαιδευτικούς να αποκτήσουν νέες γνώσεις και να συνδέσουν αυτά που έμαθαν με πραγματικά προβλήματα του παρόντος. Ωστόσο, οι μελλοντικοί εκπαιδευτικοί αντιμετώπισαν δυσκολίες κατά τη σύνθεση των δικών τους ιστορικών αφηγημάτων για την αντίστοιχη ιστορική περίοδο, καθώς δεν κατόρθωσαν να διασυνδέσουν τις ατομικές προφορικές αφηγήσεις με άλλες ιστορικές πηγές.

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Introduction

This article investigates how oral history gathering, through a partnership with the Desegregation of Virginia Education (DOVE) Project, was integrated into an elementary social studies methods course at Old Dominion University in the United States. By documenting the ways in which the instructor implemented the oral history project and discussing lessons learned, it provides history researchers and teacher educators with theoretical and practical implications in guiding preservice teachers' learning and use of oral history.

Recent literature in education indicates that oral history is used in grades K-12 (students age 5 to 18) and college history classrooms as a pedagogical tool to: (1) promote civic engagement by listening to stories of people often invisible in the school curriculum (Davis, Ellis, & Ingen 2009); (2) cultivate multiple perspectives and historical thinking (Johnson 2007); (3) relate students to families and communities and aid in learning local histories (Stiff-Williams & Sturtz 2012); and (4) make history interesting and alive to students by presenting accounts generated by people who lived through events under investigation (Hirshfield 1991).

Grounded in the previous studies, we were presented with a number of questions in integrating oral history into methods courses: What do preservice teachers learn from interviewees' first-hand accounts about events under study? How do preservice teachers use stories from interviewees as historical evidence to make sense of events under study? What are their challenges in using first-hand accounts as historical evidence to make sense of the past? In answering these questions, two data sources were used: student final projects and peer review comments posted on a digital discussion board of these final projects. Data were analysed given three criteria of authentic intellectual work suggested by King, Newmann and Carmichael (2009: 44): "construction of new knowledge", "value beyond school" and "disciplinary inquiry".

The DOVE Project

In 1954 the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Brown vs. Board of Education* that public schools could no longer maintain separate schools for African American and white students, and must integrate. However various states, including Virginia, enacted a policy known as *Massive Resistance*, which "prohibited public financing of any integrated school and created an apparatus that made it easier for local school districts to avoid desegregation by suspending compulsory education laws" (Yaco 2010: 683). In Virginia, the governor closed several school districts where integration was attempted. Other districts closed their schools. These closures ranged from a few days for most

districts to five years in Prince Edward County until Massive Resistance laws in Virginia were ruled unconstitutional by state and federal courts. Schools were reopened in 1964.

Despite the societal impact of Massive Resistance, little documentation concerning the school desegregation process remained. Perhaps for that reason, “few people outside the Commonwealth [the state of Virginia] seem to remember the Virginia school closings” (Yaco 2010: 639). In an attempt to find evidence of student and educator experiences during the desegregation period in Virginia, Yaco, a special collections librarian and university archivist, initiated DOVE in 2008.¹ The resulting project was initially met with resistance. However, by 2012 a traveling exhibit created by DOVE in partnership with the Virginia chapter of the American Association for Retired Persons (AARP) and other groups was widely acclaimed. In 2013, the project was brought to the attention of Dr. Butler and Dr. Suh, social studies education faculty at Old Dominion University (ODU). After initial discussions, an oral history project was incorporated into a social studies methods course to create links between preservice teacher preparation, oral history as pedagogy and civic engagement, and the understanding and use of archival data.

The DOVE project in the Social Studies Methods Course

The oral history project was incorporated into Butler’s spring 2013 elementary social studies methods course. The assignment has several goals, which ideally would:

- Allow preservice teachers to engage in the work of historians and archivists;
- provide insights into how to bridge social studies and language arts through the “process of gathering, analyzing, and reporting oral histories,” which would require listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (Zarrillo 2012: 127); and
- provide students with historical knowledge and real-world experiences related to an important event in the state’s history.

Students were first introduced to Yaco, who offered an overview of DOVE and university archives. This was followed by an assignment that required students to become familiar with the history of desegregation and Massive Resistance in Virginia and to source documents such as text, video and image primary sources, and secondary sources on the interviewees’ experiences during the desegregation in Virginia. Students then participated in mock oral history interviews to gain experience in the oral history process. Afterward, they conducted and transcribed interviews with individuals for the oral history project. Although a few students conducted oral histories on topics unrelated to DOVE such as World War II, a majority of students conducted DOVE-related oral histories. Over a dozen individuals were interviewed for the project at a local school. Students then constructed projects using digital video software that shared

interviewees' experiences. Finally, students were asked to assess and provide critical feedback on their peers' oral history projects.

Findings

Twenty four students created 13 video projects on the topic of school desegregation in Virginia. Two projects were created by individual students. The remaining projects were created by pairs of students. Students presented their final products using several Web 2.0 tools: iMovie, Prezi, Glogster, and Timetoast. Twenty four students posted their feedback on the final projects, a total of 74 responses, which amounted to 16,990 words. Each response falls in a range between 193 and 314 words.

Construction of knowledge

King, Newmann and Carmichael (2009: 44) argue that knowledge construction involves “organizing, interpreting, evaluating or synthesizing prior knowledge to solve new problems”. We found students “construct[ed] their knowledge” of school desegregation in the 1960s and 70s by comparing stories from interviewees to their prior knowledge of the topic. This time period, in conjunction with the Civil Rights Movement, the social movement to end discrimination and segregation against African Americans, is explicitly taught in U.S. social studies curriculum guided by many state standards –including Virginia– so preservice teachers with a public education background were exposed to the Civil Rights Movement or desegregation at some point in their educational experiences. However, given their existing and sometimes limited knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement and desegregation, they gained new knowledge by preparing for and conducting interviews, constructing oral histories, and viewing peers' final projects. One student commented:

I found it interesting how [the interviewee] explained the infrastructure of the black community had changed because of [white] flight² ... it never occurred to me that there used to be no class differences in the black communities because that seemed normal in the white communities.

Another student mentioned:

I couldn't imagine losing my chance to an education because of something I couldn't control. It takes brave people to make a change, and [the fact that] these people [took] risks and [staged] things like sit-ins³ in various public places just shows the determination people had to make things right.

In gaining new knowledge, students also highlighted the importance of hearing voices of people who lived during the time period. It allowed their historical understanding to reach another level.

Value beyond school

King, Newmann and Carmichael (2009) argue that authentic intellectual work allows students to connect classroom learning to the real world. For some preservice teachers, talking with those who experienced the time period elicited connections between the Civil Rights Era and current racial and social issues. One student noted:

The interviewee stated that [racism] still exists in that community and the students could discuss the effects that it has on the community or things that could be done.

Another student commented that watching interviewees share stories of not being able to go to schools even if they wanted was an “eye-opening experience” and made her “realize how we take education for granted.” More importantly, preservice teachers began to visibly relate the issue of school desegregation to the larger issue of equality that was proclaimed in the United States’ founding documents. One video project began with quotes from the Declaration of Independence, arguing that school segregation was the antithesis of statements related to equality in the document. A student commented:

It’s definitely an ironic thing to think about when looking at how equality is defined [by the Declaration of Independence]. “All created equal,” yet there were separate entrances, bathrooms, sitting areas... It’s still crazy to think things didn’t even change up until fifty years ago, which in reality wasn’t that long ago.

We found that conducting this project offered preservice teachers a learning experience that allowed them to discuss, engage, and reflect upon the core values of democracy, such as equality of opportunity and social justice.

Disciplinary inquiry

The last criterion King, Newmann and Carmichael (2009: 44) use to describe authentic intellectual work is the “construction of knowledge” that is “guided by disciplined inquiry”. Given this definition, we further define the process of disciplinary inquiry, in regard to the oral history project, as one that involves students creating interview questions, listening to interviewees, and judging the reliability and validity of accounts as historical evidence to understand the bigger picture of 1960s and 70s Virginia (Winerburg 2001; Van Sledright 2004). Compared to the two previous categories, student learning in this category was limited. The majority of students failed to question the validity of interviewee stories as first-hand accounts and to weave individual stories and other evidence together to create narratives of the time period. We speculated the inherent structure of the assignment itself as well as the limited timeframe of the course might prohibit a fuller interrogation of the interviewee

accounts and the experiences of others who lived during the time period and the larger history of surrounding events.

The evidence of preservice teachers' learning in this category, however, was more visible when they commented on the final projects. In a few cases, preservice teachers suggested to peers that the inclusion of source identification would increase project validity. One in particular commented:

I'm not sure if the pictures you used were of the actual people [you] presented [on,] but if they were that is an amazing find for students to see and it acts as a primary source from that time period. It gives students a way to see what was happening from a historical viewpoint.

We also observed that students began to compare projects and recognized similarities and differences in stories. One student noticed that even if interviewees share the same racial background –white in this case– they did not necessarily share the same experiences during the time period:

It was interesting to note that your interviewee was [white] like our interviewee, and that their experiences were completely different. Since she was actually in the school system during the desegregation, her viewpoint offered more of a first-hand account versus the person that we got to interview.

Although the number of comments such as these was limited, we argue that these are the kinds of students' learning warranted by the criteria of disciplinary inquiry, which we expected to see as a learning outcome of the project.

Conclusion

This article comes from an interdisciplinary collaboration between faculty members in Social Studies Education and a professional archivist. Perhaps the most important lesson that we learned from this experience is that oral history is a powerful pedagogical tool to engage students with authentic intellectual work (King et al. 2009) by gaining new knowledge, and relating learning to real-world problems. Our findings also indicate that interviewee testimonies should be treated as historical evidence, like other primary and secondary sources, and, as such, preservice teachers must be instructed how to engage with these testimonies, to use them appropriately in their own teaching.

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Endnotes

¹ DOVE created a catalogue of relevant sources, available at: <http://lib.odu.edu/specialcollections/dove/catalog.htm>.

² The term "white flight" refers to the process of white families moving from racially mixed urban areas to more racially homogeneous suburban or exurban areas. In 1950s and 1960s, one significant push among others was the desegregation of public schools and facilities following the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* (Rich 2008).

³ "Sit-ins" are nonviolent, direct-action tactic used by civil rights protest movements, particularly during the early 1960s. Adopted from the struggle led by Mohandas Gandhi against British imperialism in India, it became the potent symbol of a new, more assertive era of civil rights activism (Moye 1998).