

## EVERY PERSON IS A PHILOSOPHER/ EVERY DAY IS ANOTHER STORY

*by William Ayers and Richard Ayers*

Oral history can be a truly revolutionary pedagogy. Because the work is propelled by questions instead of answers, it liberates students from the dull routines of passively receiving predigested information. Instead, they become actors in constructing history and contributing substantively to the trajectory of the curriculum. They invent and experience the method of science, proposing explanations of the world, and then investigate to test the truth or to modify their explanations.

Students can approach the work as artists, filled with creativity and inventiveness, generative mistakes and sparkling epiphanies. Teachers can learn to take an attentive and supportive backseat, after sufficient preparation, and watch democratic education emerge from projects that the students themselves have learned to own. Through these projects, the stories that have been hidden, suppressed, and ignored begin to take center stage, and the real dimensions of one's community and its struggles burst forth and grab the mic. This is why oral history, in form and content, can become a central project of social justice in our classrooms.

Oral history concerns itself with what happened, and with an essential overlap: that which is *said* to have happened. Oral historians do the work, then, of historians—sifting through the records for facts and artifacts—as well as the work of anthropologists—searching for the meanings that people attribute to particular events and specific experiences. By doing both, and then some, oral historians gather together the factual and the meaningful.

The focus of oral history, like the focus of great teaching, is always the *space between*: between history and anthropology, happening and narrative, fact and meaning, past and present, remembering and forgetting, student and teacher, interviewer and subject. Oral history is not an adjunct or a poor cousin to “real” history. Nor is it pure fiction, an imaginary tale spun out with no relationship to any external referent whatsoever. Rather, it is a necessary third *thing* with its own integrity, demands, traditions, and base: it is engaged in a history of moments, as well as interested in a history of memory.

For the oral historian, like the teacher, the task is to question, question, question—and after that, to question some more. The approach to teaching oral history found in this book and in the Voice of Witness series offers a break with the tendency in American culture toward narcissism and passivity.

It is outward looking. It seeks answers in the wisdom of others. It also inspires us to examine what makes people tick, what makes our complex world so exciting and confusing, who we are, where we have come from, and where we are headed.

The oral history interview is always a dialogue: someone is telling a story to someone else. Like any other dialogue, and like teaching at its best, it depends on relationship more than technique.

The interview is not an interrogation or an intrusion, or a designated therapeutic moment; it is rather the opening of a narrative space that people may choose to enter or not. It is an invitation, not a destination. The interviewer, like the engaged teacher, is the student, the learner, the one who brings a lack of knowledge and a certain ignorance into the conversation; the subject of the interview, or the narrator, is the teacher, the recognized authority, and an entire universe of meaning-making energy. For the interviewer, listening actively and attentively is the main idea; learning from the stories of a range of participants is the payoff. For the narrator, the conversation is another occasion to perform an account of events and experiences for an audience, a chance to reveal meanings, and in the process discover something valuable and possibly new.

When we think of oral narratives as performances, we allow a different order of response. Someone in the United States says, “I don’t remember those bad times,” and we note that forgetting can be psychologically understandable, even when politically unstable. Someone begins a commentary by noting, “I’m a black man,” or “I’m a woman,” or “I’m transgendered,” or “As a refugee.” In some settings this may invite critique or correction, but for oral historians it provokes a primary question: *Why begin from that standpoint? What is the meaning of this positioning to what is to follow? What can we learn that we do not know from the decision to utter that very sentence?*

Oral history is the poetry of the everyday, the literature of the streets, the subjective experiences and personal perspectives of the extraordinary ordinary people—not a substitute but an essential piece of any accurate record of human events. The creators of the Voice of Witness series, and the approaches offered in this guide, allow students as oral historians to reject the dispassionate stance of traditional social science, adopting instead a capacity for empathy and identification, for greater joy and immense indignation and, above all, a willingness to be changed in the process.

The stories people tell and share can become powerful tools against propaganda, political dogmas, and all manner of impositions and stereotypes. Seeking honesty and authenticity in stories means becoming attuned, as well, to contradiction, disagreements, silences, negation,

denials, inconsistencies, confusion, challenges, turmoil, puzzlement, commotion, ambiguities, paradoxes, disputes, uncertainty, and every kind of muddle. Oral historians, like teachers, dive headfirst into the wide, wild world of human experience.