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*The Oral History Project: Connecting Students to Their  
Community, Grades 4–8* (review)

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Oral History Review, Volume 35, Number 1, Winter/Spring 2008, pp.  
86–87 (Review)

Published by Oxford University Press



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THE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT: CONNECTING STUDENTS TO THEIR COMMUNITY, GRADES 4–8. By Diane Skiffington Dickson, Dick Heyler, Linda G. Reilly, and Stephanie Romano. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006. 150 pp. Softbound, \$19.50.

*The Oral History Project* describes a middle school project that began with a statewide effort to improve students' language arts achievement scores. Pennsylvania educators proposed an integrative instructional model that would involve adolescents in intergenerational interviews. Teachers implemented the model in a variety of settings. This book represents Pennsylvania educators' attempt to share the integrative intergenerational interview model with others.

Donald Graves, a nationally known expert in language arts education and author of the Foreword, asserts the instructional model represented in *The Oral History Project* "offers a way to connect classroom learning with the universe beyond school walls" (x). An Introduction by the authors provides readers with both a brief history of the project and an educational rationale. The remainder of the book is divided into seven chapters: Interview, Artifacts, Research, Feature Article, Memoir, Portrait, and Presentation. User-friendly appendices such as "Feature Article Rubric" or "Photographic Release Letter" follow each chapter. An accompanying CD-ROM purports to facilitate interactive exploration of the intergenerational interview model.

Upper elementary, middle grades, and secondary school teachers—as well as others who work with young students in instructional settings—will appreciate the authors' attention to detail and recipe-like descriptions. The Oral History Project, readers learn, is "a process ... an authentic experience" that enables students to learn about the past "while they listen, record, and explore another person's unique life story" (1). This process is well outlined and elaborated upon in chronologically oriented chapters. Authors' efforts to develop and adhere to an instructional framework backed by educational research are elucidated in the Introduction, which states students will be taught The Oral History Project using the "IMPACT learning cycle" including the following components: Instruct, Model, Practice, Assessment, Connect, and Transfer (5).

Oral historians will readily identify with the authors' advocacy for employing "fat questions" ("Tell me about/describe your dog") as opposed to "skinny questions" ("Do you have a big dog?") during the interview process (14). Classroom teachers and school administrators will immediately relate to the discussion on security concerns involved in requiring young students to complete interview assignments without adult supervision. Virtually all readers will benefit from the practical

information and helpful hints included in the Artifacts and Portraits chapters. The authors advocate, for example, the use of a “Me Museum” (38) to aid youngsters’ understanding of the relationship between artifact and memory, and they offer “Top Ten Photo Tips” (119–25) to help students produce the photographic portraits included in their eventual visual presentation.

The chapter on writing a feature article based on data gleaned from the interview and related research is perhaps the most detailed section of *The Oral History Project*. Readers who work with younger or less able students will find most of this chapter superfluous, but those whose charges are older and/or more intellectually sophisticated will delight in its step-by-step approach. The book presents, for instance, seven steps to “Assembling and Unscrambling a Feature Story” (69) in jargon-free language that many students will be able to follow without instructor intervention.

While *The Oral History Project* is a practical teaching aid, it is not without its weaknesses. First and, to the oral history scholar, most noticeable among these is the authors’ use of dated references and their failure to cite the more salient books on oral history intended for use by classroom teachers. Oral history citations range from 1979 (James Hoopes’ *Oral History: An Introduction for Students*) to 1995 (Donald Ritchie’s *Doing Oral History*), but Ritchie’s revised 2nd edition (2003) and Barry Lanman and Laura Wendling’s *Preparing the Next Generation of Oral Historians: An Anthology of Oral History Education* (2006) are not mentioned. Moreover, scholarly references to language arts books and journals abound, but references from social studies or history education sources are practically nonexistent.

A second weakness relates to the Appendices included for classroom use. For example, a lengthy list of questions intended to stimulate discussion (32–34) includes closed ended and “skinny” questions such as “Where were you born?” and “What were [your family members’] names?” The chapter on Presentation describes different presentation styles but fails to address educators’ concerns about improving young students’ oral presentation skills. Finally, assessment of student performance—which was touted as the primary rationale for development of The Oral History Project model—is dealt with by including the occasional suggestion that students assess themselves.

*The Oral History Project’s* authors, Donald Graves states in the Foreword, “show how long-thinking skills can be developed through interviews of older, experienced members of the community” (ix). I agree with Graves and would add that many teachers will welcome its ease of use in classroom settings. *The Oral History Project* offers today’s middle and high school educators a realistic instructional model for extending and improving students’ language arts skills and, at the same time, introducing young students to oral history methodology. Although The Oral History Project model described here is limited by its emphasis on language arts skills, its contribution to the practical literature on oral history use in classrooms is welcome.

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doi: 10.1093/ohr/ohn016

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