



Using Formal Interviews to Build Understanding in Social Studies

by Nate Grimm

The Personal Value of Interviewing

It wasn't until I decided to interview my grandparents that I started to understand the power of the interview. Grandpa had told stories before, but not for a formal interview recorded for preservation. I formally interviewed my grandparents right after I graduated from college, asking them about how they met, what their parents were like, Grandpa's experience as a Seabee in World War II, and their life on the farm after the war. I used that experience to guide my instruction for an oral history assignment with sophomore U.S. history students in my first few years of teaching at the high school in Slinger, Wisconsin. With History Center of Washington County help, we interviewed over 40 veterans of World War II.

After that teaching experience, I felt something was missing from my interview with my grandfather. I needed something more about how Grandpa connected to place, the farm that he lived on his whole life. I returned to talk to him again, this time changing the location from his living room to his pick-up truck. After explaining the goal of writing a family history book to my grandfather to help tell his story to future generations, he gave consent for me to use an audio recorder while he was driving his truck around the farm so that I could capture stories more directly about the farm.

About the photo: Slinger High School students interviewed several workers involved in a school renovation project before branching out to other local construction and trades projects, companies, and workers. Here, a sociology student, also the school store manager, interviews the project manager.

Photo by Nate Grimm.

I found that asking him questions while he was in his element, the farm fields, had value. He added stories because he saw an object, building, setting, or sensory cue that triggered memories. He was driving, so he had control over what places he was going to show me, but my questions helped give him ideas and my follow-up questions helped him add detail. I also used this technique with his son, my uncle, who worked on the farm with his father. We went to similar areas of the farm to get a second perspective for the family history book.

This two-pronged interview process helped me understand the life of the farmer and how the farm and family were constructed. It also deepened my bond with my grandparents. After transcribing and storing the video and audio interviews, my grandparents' voices were preserved in multiple formats long after they were gone. The experience gave me the confidence to treat others whom I've interviewed like family members. It also inspired me to continue to teach students about the value of interviewing and immersing interviewees in a location that might facilitate more detailed responses.

Interviews as a Teaching Strategy

“ I believe that interviewing gives the learner an extra perspective toward understanding the studied people or topic. The interviews I conducted with owners of Sauve Terre Farm and the Gundrum Insurance Building provided insider information and opinions that research on websites and books could not give me. They brought the topic to life and made my learning experience more valuable. ”

~ Bailey Donahue, a Slinger sociology and history student

History and sociology students at Slinger have interviewed over 100 people each year during the last 20 years. History students conduct oral history interviews rooted in local history and sociology students conduct interviews rooted in local culture. Students have interviewed adults at school, homes, or workplaces, and in the process I have observed them make a deeper connection with people from other generations, preserve community and family history, and create bonds with others in a society increasingly reliant on fewer face-to-face connections. Interviews also link students with place and deepen understanding of identity formation, shared roots, rituals, norms, values, roles, community development, and cause and effect— aspects of the social sciences that are not always easily learned through other curricula.

Collaborations are key for interviewing projects. After working closely with the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh Sociology Department on applied sociology projects, the Wisconsin Teachers of Local Culture with their [Bringing It Home](#) folklife education project, and the Wisconsin Humanities Council [Working Lives Project](#), we have begun to take a more thematic approach with history students interviewing people about the past and sociology students interviewing people about the present. We've also begun to reach out beyond the [social studies curriculum](#) to work with other high school departments and more community members in businesses, government organizations, historical societies, nonprofits, and civic organizations (See also NCSS 2013).

Curriculum constructed by students and teachers derived from local interviewees can engage future students and the community. Teaching students tips for conducting and archiving interviews relays communication strengths and weaknesses that will benefit them as citizens and in their careers. Students gain experience in empathy, the value of word choice, preparation and background research, how to stay in the moment, the importance of listening, and how to get to the heart of complex stories. Interviews often help students see the human hands and minds behind workplaces, organizations, communities, technology, and end products. In a world with more expectation of automation, students become aware of human actions and individual choices that lead to continuity and change.

Student Voices

"During my interview with my dad, I uncovered a lot about my late grandpa's work philosophy. My dad stressed to me how Grandpa was an artisan. He always knew what he was doing, what he was talking about, and what he needed to get done in a day. He never completed a project without putting everything he had into it. Grandpa stressed quality in his projects and that's how he was so successful. I was able to document some of these characteristics and stories for future generations."

~ Katie Kirsch, a history student

"Conducting interviews outside of school helped me become more comfortable with new environments and people in a variety of ways. I learned to ask effective questions and help the interviewee express their opinions and experiences. I believe teachers creating projects where it takes you outside of the classroom and into an environment that is unfamiliar are essential."

~ Megan Michaelchuck,
a sociology and history student

"Having the opportunity to interview family and community members helped me develop confidence and an appreciation for the value of verbal communication."

~ Jane Schaub, a sociology and history student who interviewed her grandfather and also a local worker



In my classroom, interviews are the foundation for community-centered projects, curriculum building, and invitations for content experts and the community to connect at a year-end event, which attracts a few hundred people each year. Interview projects are shown publicly through displays, papers, [websites](#), and audio and video.



Teacher Preparation for Interviewing, with Examples

Use community members to help identify participants

To prepare for thematic interviewing, during the summer I do some fieldwork and invite people who have ties to the chosen theme to participate. I've collaborated with veteran teachers and retired teachers to help build a list of categories and then brainstorm who should be interviewed within each category. Sometimes the teachers even join me when I visit people and places on the list to learn more and prepare for the school year. While students sometimes pick people they know to interview, there are students who want to stretch outside their comfort zone to meet new people—the list comes in handy for those students.

Here is a sample of themes and lists for local history and culture subjects in our area.

Theme Samples

Places and Job Titles

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| Music and Recreation | Ski Hill, Race Track, Sports, School Music, Music in Community, Ice Age Trail |
| Agriculture and Foodways | Restaurants, Chefs, Bakers, Farmers, Farmers' Markets, Food Plants, Milk Delivery, Farm Implements, Distributors, Grocery Stores, Community Gardens, Meat Markets |
| Manufacturing, Innovation, and Design | Manufacturers, Artists, Designers, Engineers, Patent Holders |
| Water, Transportation, and Working Lives | Truck drivers, Firefighters and First Responders, Railroad Workers, Snow Plow Drivers, Sanitation Workers, Weed Harvesters on Lakes, Invasive Species Experts, Water Engineers, Sailing Club members, Fuel Truck Drivers, Intermodal Station Project Managers, Water Business Leaders |
| Construction, Trades, and Working Lives | Land Changes, Building Changes and Renovations, Masons, Electricians, Architects, Project Managers, Carpenters, Welders |

Stay observant for good interviewees for specific students

Example 1: When we had a sophomore music artist in my class, I thought about a Slinger alum who was a lead singer in a band. I arranged for her to come to school on a weekend to be interviewed by this student. It was interesting to hear the questions the student artist had for someone who had experience in her career path. That sophomore ended up being on the TV talent show *The Voice* a few years later. Sometimes part of the success of an interview is just getting the right two people together. Alumni are often very eager to give back to their alma mater, especially when someone is taking an interest in their career field.

Example 2: While sitting in the lobby getting my brakes fixed at a local auto service shop, a man started a conversation about his armed forces experiences on Eniwetok Atoll testing hydrogen bombs as part of Operation Castle. I thought about my ultra-curious science student and asked if he'd like to be interviewed. The student conducted one of the better interviews because he asked questions about the hydrogen bomb that other less scientifically curious students may not have thought to ask. (Listen to an interview excerpt with [Richard Schmidt.](#))

Research interview candidates through fieldwork and practice conducting interviews yourself

There are times when I've done short interviews during my summer fieldwork to learn more about a subject, start building a strong interview list, and keep my interview skills fresh. I also learn what areas might be challenging for students in that theme and get to know the people before the students do. Occupational culture has become a consistent component of our yearly themes.

When we were focusing on recreation, I visited the Slinger Super Speedway race track and Little Switzerland Ski Hill to see how they operated, who was there, and what adults were taking the lead. The visits revealed mentors and workers, who were often hidden to students and the public, who helped make businesses and gathering places sustainable.



A history and science student interviewed former soldier Dick Schmidt.

Photo by Nate Grimm.

Calling a local conservation foundation to identify a terrestrial invasive species expert led me to a nature walk with him to observe his technique. I knew by listening to his teaching style that he'd be a good interviewee for students. I heard about a group of villagers who met every week to talk around a potbelly stove in a retired mechanic's old garage, so we set up a [Fox Valley Writer's Project](#) Summer Camp interview there. The interview centered on what the garage once was and what it is now. Many students were only familiar with today's service centers. My visit with the retired mechanic led to ideas for school-year interviews with other mechanics, gas station owners, and fuel transport workers.



Retired mechanic interview.

Photo by Robyn Bindrich.

Teaching Students Interviewing

The interview process and product need to be modeled and students must practice creating questions and interviewing. A good way to help students tie content to the curriculum is to share with them sample student interviews. In addition, students see examples of how professionals interview. Oral historian Studs Terkel's books are helpful for history students (1990; 2011a; 2011b). In sociology, we use University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh sociology professor Paul Van Auken's [*Hmong Voices: Fox River Heritage and Perspectives*](#) (2014) to show how researchers interviewed Hmong interviewees about how they interact with the Fox River. Van Auken, as well as a local Director of Communication for Cooperative Educational Service Association (CESA), Dean Leisgang, visit yearly to model and give tips to students about interview techniques. Having professionals demonstrate open-ended questions, patience, and empathy has helped teachers and students use similar style and techniques. (See also Van Auken et al. 2012; 2010; 2016.)

See [“Classroom Connection: A Step-by-Step Process for Student Interviewing in History Class”](#) here. It has tips, activities, and lessons based on these primary tasks:

- 1) Get students talking
- 2) Show and evaluate interview models
- 3) Teach students to identify good questions
- 4) Practice large group interviews
- 5) Practice individual interviews
- 6) Conduct a formal interview
- 7) Use the information and recordings collected

Students in both history and sociology practice class interviews when the teacher starts the interview and the students ask follow-ups. I use large group instruction, practice interviews, and conferences to customize questions to interview subjects before they conduct interviews on their own.

Beginning Interviews with the End in Mind

In teaching students interviewing, I start by reminding them to think about where their interview may go. The stories need to be preserved in ways that others can understand them. Some interviews might be preserved for family histories, others might be shared in a community night celebration, while others may only be seen by the instructor. Release forms are used and we teach students archival practices and ways to share with many audiences—their family, the teacher, or the public.

After audio or video recording the interview, I ask students to extract parts for a paper. For written text, students choose one of three options: 1) Write a short biography paragraph and add a transcribed section from the interview. 2) Write a narrative about the whole interview, isolating key categories as body paragraphs and using several direct quotes to share the interviewee's voice. 3) Create a poem as an introduction to a biography.

I have learned that lessons on the difference between paraphrasing and direct quoting are necessary and models are helpful before students begin the writing process. Students and the teacher will need to identify through editing and transcribing which excerpts may be unique or prove to be pathways to additional interviews or stories.

Sample of student work for history of the local race track with an example of a transcribed section



Slinger history students, also race car drivers, interview Miles Melius.

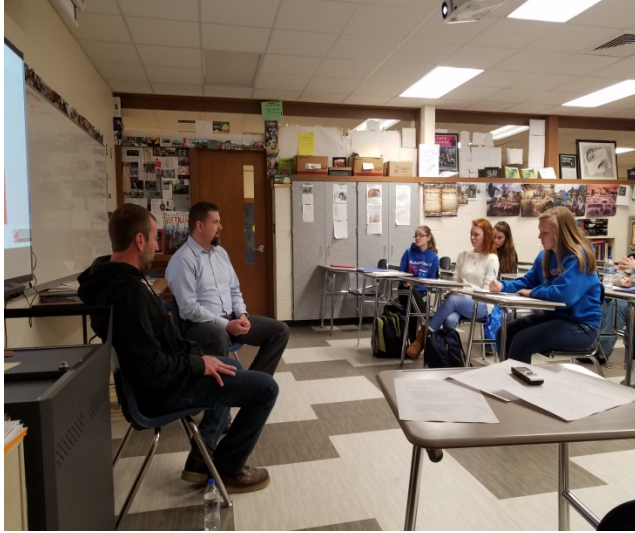
Photo by Nate Grimm.

We've had a race track in Slinger since the late 1940s. We've interviewed racers, race track owners, ticket sellers, racing mentors, pit crew workers, and more. Several student racers in my history class got to ask Slinger resident and short track legend Miles Melius about how he got the itch to race. By the time Melius retired from racing in 1969, he had won at 37 of the 39 tracks where he raced and people even put bounties on him. At the Slinger Speedway, he won the season championship seven times. Interviewers noticed he glossed over part of his origination in racing, so they went back to ask him to elaborate.

Q: Go back a little bit. So, did you get the racing bug from hanging out with others who raced? How did you know you wanted to race? Before you met Bill Johnson, there had to be something that showed you that racing might be something you were good at.

A: We had a 1941 Chevy and I'd haul my mother around when I was 9 years old. My dad had to work on the farm so I drove her around. I'd go to mill with a trailer behind and he'd load it. I was under 5 feet until I was 17 years old. Now, I was only 9 so I couldn't have been too tall. I couldn't even lift a 100 lb. bag of feed. Guys at the mill would take it off and grind it and then I'd haul it back home, my mother and I. Course, I drove that Chevy and spun the tires a few times. As I got older, the speed....what really set me off with speed is I just turned 16 and quit high school and had worked for about a year on the farm for about \$10 a month for a farmer and then I went back to West Bend. The *West Bend News* was hiring someone to drive and they bought a brand-new 1944 Ford panel truck that they used to run around West Bend to pick up ads for the paper and that was the job I took. When I went to West Bend to Barton, I would go a roundabout way so I could get it up to 100 miles an hour (*laughs*). Got to love the speed.

[Click here for more racing data and interviews](#)



Catalyst Construction workers talk to sociology students.

Photo by Nate Grimm.



Sociology and architecture students interview HGTV/DIY Network's Matt Muenster via Skype.

Photo by Jenny Boyd.

Classroom Focus: Working Lives

The worker is often at the forefront of many social and cultural changes and eager to discuss trends. Interviewing a worker can help students make connections and some students choose to focus on a cultural study of work after the teacher shares a few frameworks for how other sociologists have studied work. For students focusing on cultural study of work, they are shown examples from Douglas Harper's *Working Knowledge: Skill and Community in a Small Shop* (1987) and Douglas Harper and Helene M. Lawson's *Cultural Study of Work* (2003). The Wisconsin Humanities Council has excellent examples from the Working Lives Projects. Students create interview questions for the workers by building on sample standard questions such as: 1) Describe your typical work day. 2) Describe your training (role models?). 3) What do you most like about your work? 4) What do you most dislike? 5) What are trends that you've noticed since you've started? 6) Describe other individuals or groups who help you perform your job well. Photos are often collected with permission of the interviewee.

Students reflect about what they learned when they return. A senior sociology student involved in construction and trades worker interviews shared: "Going behind the scenes to talk to design and construction workers helps us to understand how the community functions and works together to stay functioning. We can see how different businesses come together and collaborate." Sociology student Joey Neumann after visiting several Keller Construction sites said, "The

biggest thing I took away from interviewing construction workers was the teamwork.... When you drive across construction sites, you usually don't typically put much thought into who is doing what on the site." The interview helped students put a name and a face to the work being done and understand process rather than just product. They reflected on all the work that goes on behind the scenes to construct a building.



Top: Sociology students interview a race track worker.

Photo by Nate Grimm.

Bottom: Sociology students interview a Ski Hill worker.

Photo by Isabel Schoenherr.



connection between students, teachers, workers, and community members. Intergenerational relationships are cultivated. Innovators, patterns, interdependent webs, legacies, human hands, and voices are revealed. School walls become permeable. Visitors are encouraged. People are met where they are. Through the interview experience, students and teachers place themselves in a position to be constructive. They sit on the edge of perception, face to face with another human being, ready to learn and grow.

Site Visits

Site visits immerse student interviewers and interviewees in a place where students can often get to the core of the individual's work or identity. Students may observe the interconnectedness between the interviewees and local and regional groups or organizations. It is ideal for sociology students to see individual actions as well as the larger structural perspective. A senior sociology student reflected on the value of the site visit to Little Switzerland Ski Hill. "From listening to the group sales director, I have learned that it takes a lot of teamwork to coordinate events and just an average night at Little Switz. All the team members work together to set up the hills, the sales, and communication between the workers and guests. Their main objective is to keep guests satisfied and to make sure the hill is running smoothly."

[Click here to see a sociology student's Working Lives project](#)

Conclusion

Interviewing has been transformative at Slinger High School. It has encouraged students and teachers to use inquiry to learn, collaborate, practice staying in the moment, and actively find people and places that intersect. It has become a bridge to create meaningful relationships with local workers and other community stakeholders. The habitual, consistent pathway for a mutual flow of information about the history and culture of the Slinger area has expanded the



Students interview Paul Sebo.

Photo by Nate Grimm.

Here is an excerpt from the last question in the interview with the Washington County Conservationist, Paul Sebo, from the boat launch area near where a retention pond was put in. Students asked him what he'd like to add, resulting in a good story about the interview location.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

A: Let's talk about why we are standing right here. This was a retention pond project between 15 and 20 years ago. This used to be an old

dance hall and there was a large gravel parking lot. Any wedding place and dance hall usually has a large parking area. That dance hall was gradually going out of business. Above here, there's also about 140 acres of watershed that drains down through this area, and when it rains, when we got heavy rains, it would flow like a river through this gravel parking lot and take all the gravel and sediments, much less all the nutrients off the landscape above this. The landscape above this was a combination of what I call rural residential, but also farm fields. So like I mentioned before if we had excess rains and if there are extra nutrients from animal waste or fertilizer being spread on that landscape, that would all wash down, take the gravel right through, and go right down into the lake. You could actually see plumes of sediment and gravel and sand and it would go out on the lakeshore. In working with the Lake District and looking at this site and seeing that the tavern and restaurant was potentially going out of business, we thought it was an excellent opportunity to put a storm water retention pond.

[\(Click here for more Working Lives interviews\)](#)

Nate Grimm has helped facilitate thousands of interviews in his 20 years teaching U.S. history, sociology, and language arts at Slinger High School in Slinger, WI. He earned a BS at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse in secondary education, an MA from Viterbo University in education, and has been a sociology adjunct in the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh Sociology Department since 2013. He has been a recipient of a Herb Kohl Teachers Fellowship Award, an Edith B. Heidner Award for local history work from the Washington County Historical Society, and has been published in Wisconsin People and Ideas. He has worked with the Wisconsin Teachers of Local Culture, Wisconsin Humanities Council, Cooperative Educational Services Association 7, local historical societies, local businesses and civic groups, and Slinger area workers, teachers, and students to include interview results at an annual local history and culture community night held at Slinger High School.



Venice Williams of Alice's Garden (left) and Joe Mantoan, Jr. of Sauve Terre Farm (right).

Photos by Julia O'Neill.

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