

A Patchwork of Our Lives: Oral History Quilts in Intercultural Education

by Cynthia Cohen

Memory is made as a quilt is made. From the whole cloth of time, frayed scraps of sensation are pulled apart and pieced together in a pattern that has a name: Grandmother's Garden, Drunkard's Path to Dublin, Double Wedding Ring.

—Kim Stafford, “The Story That Saved Life” in *Stories Lives Tell*

ORAL HISTORY is a way of learning about the present and the past by listening to the stories people tell. In recent years, educators and community workers have come to realize the tremendous potential of oral history methods for preserving the history and cultures of working people, ethnic groups, rural communities, women, children, older people—groups whose perspectives traditionally have been overlooked in historical sources. Oral history strengthens communities by validating people’s experiences and by engendering pride in culture and respect for diversity.

Oral history’s methodologies are powerful teaching tools. They impart skills; generate enthusiasm for the study of history; and motivate meaningful writing, reading, speaking, and listening. Well-crafted oral history projects create the shared understandings of the past necessary for collective visions of the future.

Life stories represent one approach to educating children about their own history and culture and about the lives of people different from themselves. Perhaps even more important than this multicultural agenda, oral history projects provide opportunities for children to acquire the skills and sensibilities they need for intercultural competence. They learn how to interact respectfully with others, how to learn from others, and how to listen. They come to appreciate the particularities of different cultures and to understand the ways that differences have been a source of pain, separation, and injustice.

To relate comfortably and respectfully with people who are different from themselves, students must first understand that they themselves have stories to tell. They must see that they belong to groups—families, communities, regions, religious groups, age cohorts—that offer them, in the words of author bell hooks, “aesthetic inheritances.” These legacies are cultural traditions and ways of doing things that bring beauty and meaning into their lives. Oral history quilt projects, like the one outlined below, provide powerful opportunities for young people to develop stronger intercultural competencies and multicultural awareness.

The Cambridge Women’s History Quilt Project

We designed the Cambridge Women’s History Quilt Project to engage women and girls in documenting local history in culture. In particular, we wanted young

people to explore the history of women in Cambridge, Massachusetts, including the transitions that have occurred in their lives, and the historical, social, and cultural factors that influenced those changes. As a sub-theme, we intended to reflect, in particular, on quilt-making: its function in women's lives and its relationship to oral tradition. Sixty women and girls from the diverse cultural and ethnic communities of Cambridge, Massachusetts, collaborated with artists and scholars to create "The Cambridge Women's History Quilt Project." The participants, who ranged in age from 7 to 87, portrayed scenes from their lives that they wished to document for history. They created two vibrant quilts, with a total of 52 patches. Each patch shows at least one woman at work or play.

Many women and girls found that their participation in the project was itself producing changes in their lives. As has been a part of the American quilting bee tradition, participants shared medical and political information, reflected on their relationships with boys and men, and gained perspective on decisions they were facing. They felt themselves becoming a community.

When writing the proposal for the quilt project, we envisioned that the fabric artists would design the quilt images based on project participants' stories and sketches, to be sure, but shaped by the artists' visions. The artists themselves rejected this plan, instead supporting each woman to create her own image of a story from her own life. The resulting images and stories revealed the daily particularities of girls' and women's experiences and aspirations: Braiding a daughter's hair, a great-grandmother quilting, lighting Sabbath candles, dressing up to go to church, riding a donkey in Haiti, making wine in Italy, making life rafts during World War II, giving birth at home, picking cotton in the South, and dreaming of becoming a ballerina. The quilts documented both the common threads and unique twists, the consistent themes as well as historical changes that inscribe women's lives, with a vibrancy that no single artist's expression could ever have approximated.

Quilts as Metaphors for a Healthy, Diverse Society

Stories can be expressed in many forms: words, music, dance, theater, visual images. Many cultures have extensive traditions of telling stories in cloth. New England women have sewn remnants of special fabrics into patchwork quilts they give their children to mark life's milestones and turning points. Chilean women create *arpilleras*, or small tapestries, to alert the world to the "disappearance" of their children under the military dictatorship of Pinochet. Hmong refugees create storycloths that celebrate their traditional culture and memorialize their harrowing escapes from Laos to Thailand. And African-American women have used cloth scraps to create quilts that tell Bible stories and document their lives.

When we involve students in creating oral history quilts—whether of cloth or paper—we build on this legacy. We teach students about the ways different cultures use fabrics to tell stories. We offer them interesting colors and textures to stimulate their imaginations. And we create opportunities for them to share stories with each other and with guests while they are making their quilts. A patchwork quilt embodies a powerful metaphor for a healthy multicultural com-

munity: Each patch tells a distinct story in its own way, yet its juxtaposition with the others enriches its meaning and beauty.

Ideas for Making an Oral History Quilt

You may wish to make an oral history quilt as a one-time activity or as part of a larger oral history project. This section suggests steps for a relatively limited activity that still incorporates basic interviewing skills and resources to help you get started on a larger oral history project.

1. Begin by making decisions about material and themes. Collaborate with your students, the art teacher, or volunteers at this stage.

Materials: Paper quilts are easier and faster to make than cloth quilts. Make them exciting by offering students an array of decorative materials: origami paper, pipe cleaners, glitter, fabric scraps, sequins, yarn, tissue paper, chalk, crayons, markers, seeds and beans. Supply uniformly sized multicolored squares to form the background for each patch (8"-9" origami paper works well). You'll need large paper or poster board on which to mount the patches.

Cloth quilts are more authentic, last longer, and provide opportunities for sharing stories while students stitch. They require sufficient manual dexterity and patience and are especially appropriate for older students and intergenerational projects. Creating patches of glued cloth collages, felt, or fabric marker drawings offer relatively simple ways to experience the textures of cloth while minimizing sewing.

Themes: Depending on your goals, you may wish students to create images based on their own lives or on a story of someone they interview. If students are creating images from their own lives, ask them to choose a scene from their life to document for history. Brainstorm possibilities: images from portfolio writing, rituals, people important to them, accomplishments, something new they have learned, special places, favorite animals, things they do for fun.

2. Help students generate a visual image that communicates an important idea or feeling from the story they want to tell. For instance, if they are depicting a person, ask them to think about a specific time when they were with the person: Were you indoors or outside? What were you both wearing? How were you moving? How were you feeling? What season was it? What makes this person special? What shapes, colors, and textures capture the feelings and the ideas you want to convey? Use your questions to help students to plan large, simple images and to fill their patches.

3. Allow students ample time. Some may need help to think of a story, find a simple enough way to represent their story, or find an artful variety of materials.

4. When students have completed their images, ask for a volunteer to be interviewed. This is your opportunity to teach basic interviewing and listening skills. Ask students to notice what you do that helps the volunteer tell the story behind his or her patch. Be sure that you demonstrate some or all of the following inter-

view techniques:

- Relax and help your interviewee feel at ease.
 - Use appropriate body language: eye contact, gestures, smiles, facial expressions that respond to the emotions of the story.
 - Refrain from interrupting.
 - Ask general questions at first; follow up with detailed questions.
 - Ask questions that help the student tell more about the people, place, plot, and meaning of the story.
5. After completing the model interview, ask your students
 - if they have any additional questions about the story
 - how you let the volunteer know you were listening
 - how an interview differs from a regular conversation
 - what kinds of questions you asked and why
 6. Ask your students to pair up and conduct oral history interviews with each other, practicing the techniques they just observed to help each other tell the stories behind their quilt patches. Structure this time allowing five to ten minutes for each interview, and ask your students not to let the interviews collapse into regular conversation.
 7. Once the interviews are completed, there are several options:
 - Students could place their patches on the background paper and tell their story to the class.
 - Students could write their own or each other's stories and read these to the class as the patches are mounted.
 - Students could write a part of their story on a piece of paper mount the story under the image.
 - Students could meet in groups of four or six, share their stories, and then create a visual juxtaposition that expresses common and different themes.
 8. Discuss the interviews as a class. Did students find it difficult to share their stories and ask questions? What did they learn that they would like to remember next time they do an interview? Do they have feedback for each other?
 9. Once the quilt is completed and students have shared their stories with each other, notice with them how the classroom "community" has changed now that each person's story has been honored. What did they learn about themselves, their commonalities and differences?
 10. Find ways to share your quilt with other classes, parents, and friends. Perhaps you can create an exhibit of quilts and stories and invite your students to serve as "storyteller/ tour guides" for children from other classes. Or your stu-

dents would like to share their quilts with a local nursing home or hospital.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Oral history projects offer important opportunities to bridge the gap between students' home and school lives, to validate and celebrate home cultures. For a variety of reasons—family separations, illnesses, addictions, violence, adoption, poverty—not every student may wish to bring his or her home life into the classroom and certainly should never be required to do so. Teachers must design the assignment with enough flexibility so that every student can participate comfortably. Arrange for other adults to be interviewed in case students want alternatives or assign topics to include family, neighborhoods, and school. Rather than asking students to depict someone in their family, ask them to depict someone they feel close to at home, at school, in their neighborhood, or at church. Whatever topic you choose, think it through in relation to each student.

Students will get the most out of this project if they are not rushed. Of course, they won't finish each step in the same amount of time. Preparing supplementary activities for those who finish quickly will minimize disruptions. Your school librarian might be able to supply you with a collection of books on quilts, oral history, and folk traditions to engage students while others are finishing.

Possible Next Steps

*I'll hold the needle, you pull the thread
We'll cut the pieces of green and blue and red
Hands young and lively, hands old and wise
Stitching together a patchwork of our lives*

—chorus of ballad composed by Cambridge Women's Quilt Project participants

Oral history activities often take on a life of their own. If there is time and support, your students may want to build on the momentum. The following suggestions are based on activities undertaken by children and teachers in other New England schools:

- Explore fabric traditions in various cultures.
- Read oral histories of people from various cultures.
- Invite fabric artists to your class to talk about their lives, their art, their craft.
- Use the stories in your quilt as the basis for the lyrics of a ballad or poem.
- Take slides of each patch and plan an assembly program in which each student reads his or her story as the audience views the projected image. Or use the quilt as the backdrop for a storytelling play in which some stories are told, some acted, some sung.

Your students might wish to extend their developing listening and interviewing skills through a full-scale oral history project. They could interview older people who know the history of the town or students whose life experiences and cultural backgrounds differ from theirs. They might wish to gather stories about music or sports or the Vietnam War. They might wish to create a play, mural,

slide-show, or historical fiction. The following resources are available to help you design and conduct oral history projects that address a range of curricular goals:

Brown, Cynthia Stokes. *Like It Was: A Guide Writing Oral History*. Teachers and Writers Collaborative.

Booklinks, an American Library Association booklist publication. (March 1995) Features children's books on themes related to oral and family history.

Cohen, Cynthia (1987) *Designing an Oral History Project: A Workbook for Teachers and Community Workers* and (1988) *Studying Life Stories in the Classroom: An Introductory Curriculum Packet for Grades 5-8*. Available from Oral History Center, 403 Richards Hall, Northeastern University, Boston, MA. 02115. 617/373-4814.

Hoopes, J. (1979) *Oral History: An Introduction for Students*. University of North Carolina Press. Geared toward high school and undergraduate college students.

Pytowska, E. A. *Bibliography of Children's Literature with Themes of Personal, Social and Cultural Empowerment, and A Quest for Belonging: Empowering Adolescents Through Multicultural Literature*, available through Savannah Books, Cambridge, MA. 617/868-6423. Comprehensive, indispensable resources for age-appropriate literature, many citations relating to quilts, memory, folklore and oral history.

Silnutzer, R. and Watrous, B. (1990) *Drawing from the Well: Oral History and Folk Arts in the Classroom and Community*. Available from the Pioneer Valley Folklore Society. P.O. Box 710, Greenfield, MA 01302. 413/774-4141.

Wigginton, Eliot (1985) *Sometimes a Shining Moment—Twenty Years in a High School Classroom—The Foxfire Experience*. Doubleday.

Witherell, C. and Noddings, N. (1991) *Stories Lives Tell: Narrative and Dialogue in Education*. Teachers College Press.

Zeitlin, S., et al. (1982) *A Celebration of American Family Folklore: Tales and Traditions from the Smithsonian Collection*. Yellowmoon Press. Includes "Family Folklore Interviewing Guide and Questionnaire."

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