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Personal History Meets Integrated Language Skills: War Veteran Interviews

Laurie C. Kuna

The daughter of a wonderful storyteller, who is a World War II veteran, I grew up with tales of boot camp, guard duty, and the occupation of postwar Germany. However, until recently, Dad rarely told the scary stories, the stories of personal bravery, or the stories of the horrors he and his unit saw in an obscure concentration camp in Austria. These have come out as he approaches his eighties, and I have shared many of these stories with my students, both as examples of what may be learned from veterans, and as an oral history to counterbalance those who would claim such atrocities never happened.

The students' interest in these stories and their curiosity about a war that involved people they knew inspired me and my colleague, Jill VanAntwerp, to develop a unit of study based on the war stories of local veterans. This amalgam of personal history, research, interviewing skills, and oral presentations meets several requirements of our English curriculum. Students were required to interview a war veteran—a relative, friend, or acquaintance—and research the war that the veteran participated in. The students were grouped to give a presentation on the wars: WWII, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and Desert Storm. A paper was to be the end product of this exercise, and must contain not only the veteran's personal history but information on the conflict he or she served in as well.

Background

This year, in preparation for this project, my students read Tim O'Brien's short story "The Things They Carried," from the book of the same title. A word of caution about using this selection, however: Although the story is a National Magazine Award winner, the language is often raw, one character carries dope, and the others discuss smoking it after the man is killed. Personally, I would never use this story in a class other than one of older, more mature students. That said, the story is an incredible piece of literature, and I feel it can help noncombatants understand superficially what veterans experienced. Excising certain words from the text might make nervous administrators feel better, but I think a frank discussion with students as to the reasons why such words and themes are included will go a long way toward eliminating the need for censorship.

Interviewing

Among my three sections of English 12, a dozen or more students personally knew no combat veterans. Fortunately, Lowell Area Schools employs several who were willing to be interviewed by those students. Also, my neighbor, a Marine veteran of World War II, agreed to an interview. One student's father, a barber in Grand Rapids, provided us with

the names of several of his customers, most of whom served in World War II, so with a little creative digging, interviews were found for all. Students were responsible for setting up these interviews at the veteran's convenience.

Required questions included the veteran's branch of service, unit, rank achieved, length and dates of service, theater of operation, and weapons used. I also encouraged students, depending on their comfort and ease with the interviewee, to lead into more complex questions such as the veteran's feeling on the need for the conflict (an especially sensitive question among many Vietnam veterans), and what experiences were most vivid from the veteran's time in the service.

Research

Once they had contacted a veteran, the students were grouped for their presentations according to the war they would be writing about. This was further divided into Theaters of Operations for World War II. Due to the large number of Vietnam veterans, it was necessary to assign groups to different aspects of that war in order to avoid complete duplication of information. Students spent two class blocks of 97 minutes each in the library researching. In order to maximize research time, I encouraged them to assign each group member a particular element of the conflict they were studying. Our media center has a wealth of primary historical sources that require only a few minutes to locate in the reference and nonfiction sections. In addition, students often had material given to them by the veterans they interviewed.

Papers

We asked the students to merge the interview information with the researched information as they wrote their papers. Students were also required to supply the written transcripts of their interviews. If the writer wished, s/he used first person for the interviewee's narration, and for himself or herself as narrator, i.e., "I learned that the Vietnam war. . .". Other students chose to use third person for the research and first person for the in-

terviews.

Many students remarked in the conclusions of their papers that they were glad they'd done them, as they had learned things they would otherwise never have known about their relatives' or friends' experiences. At parent-teacher conferences, parents kept mentioning this project and how glad they were their children had talked to grandparents, uncles, and friends about war experiences.

Group Presentations

The group presentations had several requirements: a length of 5 to 10 minutes, at least three visual aides, and equal contribution from every group member. To my delight, one group's visual aide of WWII military insignia included an accurate reproduction of my father's 71st Division patch. The girl responsible for the visual hadn't known that it was from my dad's unit; she'd merely liked the insignia and had thus chosen to reproduce it.

Other visual aides were far more moving. One girl brought in her grandfather's New Testament, complete with a bullet hole through both it and the letter it contained, stained with his blood. During the Korean War, he'd carried it in his pocket. It had slowed that particular bullet enough that it wounded rather than killed him. Another student displayed a military survival manual from Vietnam that included all the various booby traps used by the Viet Cong, and tips for treating snakebites.

Aftermath

At the end of the semester, I wrote a letter to our local paper publicly thanking those who'd been interviewed. Many people who learned about the project from that letter commented on the value they saw in such a project. Their reasons ranged from feeling gratitude at the show of respect to our country and its veterans to their belief that only in this way would the students learn the history well enough to understand the full implications of waging war. I received a phone call from the daughter of one veteran requesting a copy of the student's paper featuring her father. The reaction to the project was completely positive.

Mistakes to Avoid

Although I covered basic interviewing techniques (be professional, be brief, listen closely to the answers in order to adapt your questions if needed, etc.) we should have practiced interviews before conducting the real ones. That would possibly have produced more in-depth questioning. Many students didn't venture much beyond the basic required questions, and I feel they missed out on a great opportunity to record some wonderful oral history.

Also, worried about possible mechanical failures, I discouraged students from taping their interviews. I have since changed my mind. Tape recordings could supplement student notes, although they should never be the primary mode of recording the information received. Should the batteries fail, the tape break, or the interview be inadvertently taped over, a lack of backup notes would be disastrous. From now on, however, I'll allow tape recorders (with the permission of the interviewee, of course) as supplements to the students' interview transcripts.

By next fall, LHS will have the technology to videotape interviews and edit them into finished documentaries. This opens up a new vista for recording oral history, and will certainly figure into this project's future. In the meantime, I'll continue this unit in its current form and look for ways to make it more meaningful for students and veterans alike.

About the Author

Laurie C. Kuna, *LAJM* assistant editor and line editor for ImaJinn Books, Inc., teaches English at Lowell High School.