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Telling Our Grandmothers' Stories

Teaching and Celebrating the History of the Women in Our Lives

“Telling Our Grandmothers’ Stories” (TOGS) is a celebratory, interdisciplinary event held annually since the spring of 2000 at Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi, as part of Women’s History Month. The event focuses on capturing and telling the history of the women in our lives so that their voices can be added to the history of tradition that has already been told. Because these women’s stories rarely fit the linear tradition of history and storytelling, they typically have not been formally preserved, and even when they have been recorded, they have not been valued in a way that adequately represents their richness and significance. This event and the learning opportunities that support it help to correct this situation by recovering, preserving, and celebrating these stories. This essay describes the goals of the program, explains its pedagogical foundations, and offers suggestions for incorporating TOGS into your own educational or civic setting.

Since 1929, when Virginia Woolf recognized that women’s stories were “all but absent from history,” much has changed (1987: 43). On the library shelves that Woolf once perused in vain, we now find more stories of real women, women such as Amelia Earhart, Eleanor Roosevelt, Margaret Mead, Sally Ride, and even Woolf herself. Women have gradually become more than a footnote in history books; however, the women’s lives that are recorded are still largely determined and measured by conventional (i.e., male) standards. The accomplishments and contributions of women who have shaped our world in more subtle and qualitative ways are still largely absent from history, and the stories of the lives of women from diverse cultures, such as the Hispanic culture in which we live and teach in South Texas, are still very much unrecorded. In recognition of the need to gather and preserve these stories, we developed an interdisciplinary program called “Telling Our Grandmothers’ Stories” (TOGS).

TOGS is a celebratory, interdisciplinary event held annually since the spring of 2000 at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (TAMU-CC) as part of Women's History Month. The event focuses on capturing and telling the history of the women in our lives so that their voices can be added to the history of tradition that has already been told. We interpret "grandmother" in the larger sense of the word to include those women who came before us and created the stories that form who we are. This broader concept of grandmother goes beyond biological connections. Many women shape our lives in meaningful ways, and even if we did not have a personal relationship with a grandmother, the stories of the women who have helped to shape who we are remain important.

Because these women's stories rarely fit the linear tradition of history and storytelling, they typically have not been formally preserved, and even when they have been recorded, they have not been valued in a way that adequately represents their richness and significance. This event and the learning opportunities that support it help to correct this situation by recovering, preserving, and celebrating these stories. We seek to expand our understanding of history and the role of women in creating that history by broadening our literary and historical canons to include these important voices.

This project focuses on history, specifically addressing the richness of our diverse heritage and traditions. In South Texas where we teach, the region is rich with the history of women of many backgrounds, many colors. From women who have made contributions as the head of a household or as the force behind why their children went on to be successful, to such women as Irma Rangel, first Hispanic woman elected to the Texas legislature. These untapped resources should be celebrated, and spaces should be allowed for telling these stories in ways that re-create their richness and realities. Especially important are the stories of those in the margin, those stories not included in the traditional recordings of history. Issues of language and cultural understanding affect the telling of the stories.¹ Because our grandmothers' stories are in those margins, there is a need to capture and share them so that history can be viewed through the contexts of these women's lives.

Goals of the program

The goals of the program are as follows:

- To celebrate the lives and times of grandmothers through memorabilia such as artifacts, letters, journals, poetry, prose, poster presentations, and oral stories.
- To paint pictures of folklore, heritage, and traditions.
- To remember the impact that these women have or have had on their families and communities.
- To allow voices to resurface in these tributes to remind us of their contributions and the important roles that they play in our lives.

- To develop multiple/nontraditional formats in order to truly represent the richness of each story.
- To create historical documents that add the history of these women to the history that has already been told.
- To expand the definition of literacy in order to create learning spaces that encompass the histories and traditions of our students.

Pedagogical foundations: expanded notions of literacy

Through our experiences over the past five years, we have come to recognize the unique teaching and learning opportunities that TOGS provides. A large percentage of the students in our area are from under-represented groups—Hispanic, African-American, International, ESL, low-income. TOGS opens up the meanings of literacy for these students. The stories that we choose to celebrate are defined by/created by the local lives, the local experiences of many women whose stories have not found a place in the conventional annals of history. When students can share their stories of these women, and those stories are in turn valued, these students begin to see that the traditional classroom setting can have meaning in their individual lives and their local histories.

In his text *Literacy Matters: Writing and Reading the Social Self*, Robert Yagelski (2000) tells us that literacy is defined by the local rather than the universal. With a growing emphasis on constructivist principles in education, focusing on the belief that learning begins at the point of each individual's literate stance, TOGS becomes one such means by which teachers can shift the focus in their classrooms from teacher-centered to student-centered. Carol Strumbo (1992), in writing about her experiences with oral histories of a black community, states, "the language of school, in too many cases, is not the language of the students who enter my classroom. Removed, academic words often separate young people from what they know, and in a real sense, inhibits their learning" (112). TOGS is a valuable resource in the classroom not only because it celebrates diversity, but also because it expands our notions as teachers and our students' notions of history and literacy.

Pedagogical foundations: affirming cultural diversity through storytelling

Because of its focus on local, personal narratives, TOGS is an effective means to explore the meaning of multiculturalism as "a lived-experience" (Fu & Stremmel, 1999). As Victoria R. Fu and Andrew J. Stremmel explain, when meanings are socially constructed through the sharing of lived stories, the contexts exist "for constructing knowledge of self and others" in ways that "promote understanding," "break down stereotypes and myths about the unknown," and "create caring connections among us" (1999: vii, vii-viii). Through this process, students move beyond a recognition of the surface

elements of culture (i.e., language, symbols, and artifacts) that the stories incorporate to an understanding and appreciation of the customs, practices, and interactional patterns that define the second layer of culture. And through the pluralistic framework that TOGS creates, with continued interaction and discussion with other students also sharing their own stories, they finally reach an understanding of some of the underlying social values, beliefs, norms, and expectations that shape and define cultures at their deepest level (Valle, 1997).

Using TOGS in the classroom to meet educational standards for learning

TOGS can be applied to current pedagogies of learning and literacy, including such concepts as writing as a process, writing to learn, learning to write, writing across the curriculum, second language acquisition, service learning, active learning concepts, integrated learning activities, and the use of a variety of print and non-print texts from different time periods and in many genres. Many of the teachers we have worked with have developed grade-appropriate strategies and model lesson plans to incorporate the program into their curricula in ways that are consistent with local, state, and national education standards that emphasize literacy, reading, writing, and speaking. TOGS meets many important educational standards, such as providing a variety of literary and historical genres, both written and oral; making students aware of the importance of family beliefs, customs, language, and traditions; and expanding students' knowledge of cultural diversity.

The experience of Piedad Ymbert and her kindergarten class at the Early Childhood Development Center on our campus is one example of the many interdisciplinary applications of TOGS in the classroom. In this class, the students play a vocabulary building game, "In My Grandmother's Attic" to introduce the word *an* when using words that begin with vowels. The teacher and students sit in a circle, and the teacher begins the game by saying, "Last night I looked in a trunk in my grandmother's attic and found *an* orange." The student to her immediate right or left then says, "Last night I looked in a trunk in my grandmother's attic and found an orange and an apple" The game continues around the circle, with each person repeating what has been said previously and then adding an object that begins with a vowel. At the same time during the semester, the students are also studying the Underground Railroad and learning that the quilt played an important role in the success of this resistance movement by serving as both a map and a signal in leading many slaves to freedom. They then contextualize this knowledge with their own study of quilts and the significance of these quilts to those who create them as well as to those who receive them. As a class project, they make their own "quilt." Each student brings something from their grandmother's attic (at least metaphorically) to add to the quilt. The object is then photographed, and the photo is applied to a quilt square. In a formal presentation to commemorate the quilt and its significance, each child explains what he or she has found in "grand-

mother's attic" and the importance of the object to the child's family.

As this example illustrates, the classroom applications of TOGS emphasize reading, writing, and speaking and employ multi-media genres while building bridges among many of the disciplines of the arts (i.e., drawing, painting, photography, ceramics, music, theatrical performance, and dance) and the humanities (i.e., history, languages, literature, composition and rhetoric, creative writing, ethnic studies, folklore, regional studies, social science, and women's studies). While many who hear about the program think the event is about writing down stories in the traditional narrative format, or sitting around listening to people share oral renditions of their memories of their grandmothers, multiple formats for presentation are encouraged. There are many format ideas that storytellers can draw from and adapt to fit their own situations, and this variety creates the interactive, innovative nature of the program. For example, if my grandmother's life is largely represented by the recipes she made, I might choose to tell her life in the format of a cookbook. Or if she traveled extensively, I might decorate an old suitcase with postcards of her travels, and inside the suitcase pack some of the clothes that she actually wore on some of her trips. As students search through memorabilia and artifacts, they begin to reflect upon and then find ways to represent the folklore, heritage, and traditions of the past, and they are reminded of these women's impact on their families and communities. Through this process, the student storytellers have the opportunities to rethink history by enabling these women's voices to resurface in the resulting tributes, joining with the storytellers' voices in reminding us of their contributions and the continuing role they play in our lives.

TOGS is especially helpful in increasing student awareness of and respect for racial and ethnic diversity. In this regard, we have found that literary texts are often effective vehicles for framing classroom discussion about different cultures, while affording much opportunity for interdisciplinary connections and activities to contextualize these texts. Provided below are some of the specific texts and sample prompts that have been used successfully with a range of grade levels:

- In his introduction to *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, N. Scott Momaday (1969) tells of his grandmother, Aho, through three different voices that converge on the page to create a multigenerational view of her life as it relates to Momaday's story. Tell your grandmother's story in relation to your own story and the history surrounding both stories in the same format that Momaday uses.

- *Spider Woman's Granddaughters*, edited by Paula Gunn Allen (1989), relates the story of the power women in Native American cultures gain from their female ancestors. Did your grandmother tell similar stories? How can you retell those stories and weave them into her story

as part of her (and your) traditions?

- In *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros (1988) tells about being named after her great-grandmother. Her stories are framed as little vignettes of the people, places, and events on Mango Street. Tell your grandmother's story framed around a specific location that was significant to her and to your family.

- In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs (1987/1861) describes the inspiration and support she received from her maternal grandmother, who was a baker. After buying her own freedom from slavery by selling the crackers that she baked at night, Jacobs's grandmother nurtured and supported her family through her cooking. Do you have any recipes that have been passed down from your grandmother? How can you share them with others in a way that will re-create her story and communicate their significance for you and your family?

“Publishing” the stories

Because TOGS is a celebration and recovery project, we believe it is important that storytellers have a forum in which to share their stories with others. The ways in which the stories can be organized and staged—or otherwise “published”—are almost as limitless as the formats of the stories themselves. The process of “telling” the stories should be an integral and culminating part of whatever learning experiences are being supported by the program. Exhibits can be intimate or large-scale, of short or long duration, attended only by the participants or open for a larger community to enjoy. For our annual TOGS program at TAMU-CC, we host a one-day event where storytellers gather to share their stories. Many of the storytellers are students in our classrooms, but we also have faculty, staff, and community members participate. The TOGS motto, “All of the stories are important to tell,” emphasizes the nature of our program. We do not give awards for first, second, third place, etc. Instead, we attempt to provide a space where storytellers can share their grandmothers' stories in whatever format best represents those experiences.

Some examples of storytellers and stories that have been shared at recent TOGS events at our university include:

- An international graduate student who shared oral stories of his grandmother in India, including how at the age of seventeen she found herself widowed and had to take on tasks usually reserved for males in order to care for her children.

- A student of German heritage who created a visual display that

featured mounted photographs and used both German and English to tell her grandmother's life story.

- A Hispanic student who wrote an essay entitled "*De Colores*" in which she reflected on the process through which family and cultural traditions helped her come to terms with the death of her grandmother Juanita.

- An Anglo student who created a tabletop display of meaningful artifacts from her grandmother's life, including a piece of embroidery that the grandmother was stitching and had not completed at the time of her death. In talking about her grandmother, the student emphasized the importance of this tangible remembrance and how she plans someday to extend this connection with her grandmother by completing the piece with the needle and thread that is still intact.

Every year, we see new formats and ideas in the exhibits, which is one very strong testament to the diversity of the heritage of these women. Students, faculty, staff, and community members who attend TOGS leave the events with a richer understanding of the lives of these women, and many plan to begin to gather their own grandmothers' stories so they can participate in the program the following year.

New directions and future plans for TOGS

Del Mar College, a community college in our area, began hosting its own event on the same day as our program in the spring of 2003. We are currently collaborating with public and private schools in our local area, as well as local youth and community organizations, to help them integrate the program into their curricula. As another way to preserve and disseminate the stories that have been told through TOGS, we are in the process of developing a website, a flexible medium that makes it possible to capture more of the true essence of the exhibits than a printed text allows. In taking these steps to expand the program, we have been encouraged by the response we have received from educators and community leaders who have recognized the program as a way to link the current interest in recovering women's history with innovative teaching strategies applicable for a full-range of age groups, interests, and backgrounds.

By writing about the program, we hope to communicate to others outside our immediate region about TOGS so that more stories can be told, valued and preserved for future generations as well as our own. TOGS can be used as a learning experience for a single classroom in a wide variety of disciplines. It can also be broadened into a collaborate program that involves an entire school, creating the opportunity to involve students in a variety of possibilities for outreach to the community. By adding these stories to our history, we will

broaden our understanding of literacy and learning as we share the wonderful richness of our grandmothers. All of the stories are important to tell. Please tell your stories.

For more information, go to our website at <http://www.tamucc.edu/wiki/TOGS/HomePage>, or contact Susan Garza (Susan.Garza@mail.tamucc.edu) or Sharon Talley (Sharon.Talley@mail.tamucc.edu).

¹ The mere nature of storytelling confined to the page (“told-to-the-page” as Paula Gunn Allen [1989] describes the history of the telling of Native American stories [6]) does not lend itself to providing the depth of variety of representations that can better illustrate the myriad richness of the experiences of our grandmothers. Much has been written about the bastardization of stories of those in the margin, including the anthropological accounts such as *Papago Woman* (Underhill, 1985/1936) dealing with translation issues.

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