Chapter 23. What Is She Doing Here?

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The first time I led oral history programming in high school history classrooms, I was terrified. I spent months learning to conduct oral histories under the direction of the historical director of a local nonprofit. I prepared teaching materials in collaboration with a history teacher and archivists. However, standing in front of a room full of students, I was suddenly hyper-conscious of everything I was not: I was not a seasoned oral historian. I was not a history teacher. I was not an expert on local histories.

As students filed into the class, some looked at me curiously, others with shrugged disinterest, with the occasional *"what is she doing here?"* muttered to a neighboring student. Once the bell rang, the teacher introduced me as an expert. He told the students I was a teacher from a well-known research institution, pursuing a PhD (highlighting that this is the highest degree one can obtain), and gestured to my affiliation with a local heritage nonprofit.

I understood this introduction as a way for the teacher to hand over the classroom space to me. However, this authority-evoking introduction gave me pause. As a novice oral historian and university writing teacher, I was very much a non-expert on the subject at hand. It was also immediately apparent that, as an academic, I came from a space of privilege, a position that positioned me as an outsider in the school and community.

What I did not recognize the first time I ran the programming is that the students did not need an expert. They needed a facilitator. When I taught students to conduct oral histories, I shared my own blunders: Asking only yes/no questions during my first interview, my hands shaking as I fumbled with a microphone that wouldn't pick up sound. When practicing mock interviews, students participated in a low-stakes activity where, as a class, they asked me questions about myself as a way to experiment with and reflect on what it means to be a responsible and responsive interviewer. Sometimes students got into a flow, built rapport, and asked open questions that led to detailed stories. Other times, they questioned me on topics that made me uncomfortable and asked questions that received one-word answers.

When tasked with conducting an oral history of their own, students chose their narrators, composed their own questions, and shaped the direction of their interviews. Students initially responded with anxiety: "I don't know anyone of historical significance." However, after interviewing parents, grandparents, teachers, and coaches, anxiety gave way to enthusiasm: "We need to talk to … !" This shift allowed for productive conversations about the value

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of local and community histories and the knowledge that arises from these spaces.

As a teacher, I entered the classroom as a learner, prepared to engage in a dialog through student-led discussions and activities that centered experiential knowledge. bell hooks calls this a "radical commitment to openness," in which teachers enter classrooms prepared to acknowledge what they do not know (2009), an orientation which aligns with oral history practices and pedagogies that views oral history as a dialog that hinges on relationships.

My status as an "expert" has not changed: I still am not a seasoned oral historian, I am still not a history teacher, and I am still not an expert in local histories. However, by entering classrooms with the mentality of an oral historian, I can seek spaces of deep listening and dialog where we co-create knowledge grounded in humility and respect for lived experience and everyday epistemologies.

Reference

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