

Oral History as Inquiry: Using Digital Oral History Collections to Teach School Desegregation

I especially loved the first-hand interviews and panels with those people who had a personal connection to the events taking place in Virginia and how it changed the nation.

I truly believe that this seminar was the best experience of my teaching and academic career. Hearing from those who experienced these events and reading primary sources from this time period is invaluable.

—Teacher-Participants from “The Long Road from *Brown*,” 2017

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“THE LONG ROAD from *Brown*: School Desegregation in Virginia” is a Landmarks of American History and Culture Workshop funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Offered twice, in 2015 and 2017, it aims to provide middle and high school teachers across the country with an understanding of school desegregation in Virginia within the broader era of the Civil Rights Movement.¹ In this workshop, participating teachers listen to lectures from historians whose expertise are on the topic of school desegregation, and visit historic sites related to school desegregation in Virginia. These sites include Virginia State University, a home for African American teacher training before *Brown*; the Robert R. Moton Museum, a National Historic Landmark where a 1951 student strike led to a lawsuit that became part of *Brown v. Board of Education* (Farmville, VA); the Virginia Civil Rights Memorial



Figure 1: Teacher participants listen to Louis Abrams tell stories about his experiences during the school desegregation era in New Kent County, Virginia. Permissions to use the image were granted by workshop participants and Mr. Louis Abrams to the authors.

(Richmond, VA); and New Kent High School (New Kent, VA) and George W. Watkins High School (Quinton, VA), two sites essential to a 1968 Supreme Court ruling on school desegregation. Among all the activities during the workshop, however, our evaluation data revealed that the participants most valued their experience interacting with and listening to those who participated firsthand in school desegregation in Virginia. Participants oftentimes shared (in their evaluations of the workshop) that listening to these firsthand, personal accounts helped them see how sites and events are connected to real people, which provided them with a deeper understanding of the era.

Our participants' responses are not unusual. A body of literature in both history and history education indicates that when it comes to contemporary historical issues, oral history is one of the essential sources to investigate the past, particularly as a source for "history

from below,” experiences of those who were undocumented or ill-recorded. Most of all, with new digital technologies, oral histories are more accessible than ever to those who are interested in using them in their research and teaching. There are cautionary remarks in using oral history as historical evidence, however. Given that the nature of memory tends to fade, be selective, and potentially bias both interviewer and interviewee, experts in oral history suggest that interviewees should be carefully selected to represent the population who experienced the time period and be checked for reliability and internal coherency through comparison with other sources.² In other words, as lived experience, oral history offers rich firsthand accounts to both historians and history educators that provide tools to investigate and teach about the past. Furthermore, as historical evidence, it should be treated and used with caution for reliability and internal coherency like other types of primary sources, keeping with historical inquiry practices.

Building upon findings from our own evaluations and previous studies, this article uses the topic of school desegregation as a case study to highlight the value of oral histories as a historical methodology for studying the past and a pedagogical tool for teaching. In doing so, we explain the historical background of school desegregation and propose an instructional approach for teaching stories about *Brown* and school desegregation: using oral history interviews from digital archives. Lastly, we introduce historical topics that can be taught through oral histories and the oral history archives that are related to this topic. As we apply these approaches to the topic of school desegregation in the context of Virginia, it is our hope that teachers elsewhere will recognize the value of oral histories to research the history of school desegregation in their own districts and develop more effective curriculums.

After *Brown*: Stories of School Desegregation

Only recently have scholars in history begun to document and investigate stories of the implementation of the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) decision³—how each community responded to the decision, who was involved in bringing about school desegregation, and how those involved in the process remember the desegregation experience, including the triumphs

as well as the personal costs and struggles. Whereas historical scholarship recognizes the complexities in the implementation and consequences of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, *Brown* has been taught in K-12 schools in a simplistic way—as an easily won democratic achievement by the Supreme Court that led to the Civil Rights Movement.⁴ Textbooks and state standards offer a cursory glance on *Brown* within a context of the Civil Rights Movement, and when they do, they often fail to represent the political, economic, social, and cultural conditions surrounding the Supreme Court decision in *Brown* or note select African American leaders such as Thurgood Marshall, a leader of the NAACP legal defense team.⁵ This current portrayal of *Brown* and its consequences misrepresent the realities of the case, overlooking the agency of ordinary people, both African Americans and whites, in responding to and implementing *Brown* subsequently disregarding the complexities of the school desegregation process in their communities.

In reality, *Brown v. Board of Education* was the culmination of a decades-long legal effort led by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Moreover, resistance to school desegregation, and the fight for school desegregation after *Brown*, are relatively unknown. The decision itself did not lead to rapid school desegregation, which only came about as the result of additional lawsuits as well as substantial sacrifice on the part of African American parents and school children. Most of all, the history of school desegregation suggests that implementing *Brown* had multiple stages and involved not only the Supreme Court, government officials, or NAACP leaders, but also ordinary African American parents and students who stood up to improve African American education.⁶ For instance, in Virginia, one of the Southern states in which Massive Resistance (1956-1959) occurred, it was Barbara Johns, a 16-year old student, who led the student strike in R. R. Moton High School of Farmville, Virginia, which prompted *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County* in 1951, one of the five cases combined and collectively called *Brown v. Board of Education*.⁷ Another example can be found in Calvin Green, who sued New Kent County, Virginia in 1965 and put an end to the segregated schooling that had continued after *Brown* under the name of Freedom of Choice plans. It is not possible to tell a

full story of *Brown* and the post-*Brown* era without telling stories of these ordinary individuals who fought for equal educational opportunities in their communities. Fortunately, recordings of both of these civil rights leaders exist. We suggest that oral histories are ways in which history is presented through the lens of ordinary people, a history from the bottom up,⁸ and, therefore, can serve as an effective pedagogical approach that introduces the stories that arose after *Brown* to students in the classrooms.⁹

The Use of Oral History in Classrooms

Oral history refers both to a method of recording and preserving oral testimony, and to the product of that process.¹⁰ The method allows scholars to gain some firsthand experience with the research topic, while the in-depth interviews offer evidence that often cannot be found in other sources.¹¹ In terms of the Civil Rights Movement, this includes stories of school desegregation, but also those related to the desegregation of public businesses and facilities, voting rights, housing, and other aspects of this era. When used in social studies and history classrooms, oral history also sparks interest in history and helps students engage and realize their “participation and involvement in history.”¹² Using oral history, therefore, offers opportunities to promote civic engagement by listening to stories of people often invisible in the school curriculum, cultivates multiple perspectives and historical thinking, relates students to families and communities, and aids in learning local histories.¹³ Below, we discuss instructional approaches to use digital oral history collections in history and social studies classrooms to teach the topic of school desegregation.

Selected Oral History Digital Collections on School Desegregation

A number of repositories of oral history interviews related to the civil rights era, which students and teachers may find useful, are available online. Such repositories generally include interviews that have been conducted by trained interviewers, which allows students to both supplement their content knowledge and to further develop their oral history interviewing skills. A growing number of these

online repositories include filmed, in addition to audio-recorded, interviews. Most interviews are accompanied with transcripts, offering educators additional tools for teaching these topics.

Here, we list digital repositories of oral history interviews related to the civil rights era, which students and teachers may find beneficial. We encourage teachers to search for sites most relevant to their classes, and if needed, to contact a nearby library or university for assistance. Below are a few examples we have used and found most helpful in teaching the topic of school desegregation. We have chosen these collections because of their quality, focus on the civil rights era, and geographic diversity:

- Library of Congress, Civil Rights History Project

An extensive list of oral history interviews conducted by a partnership of scholars and staff at the Library of Congress, available online at: <<https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/>>.

- University of Southern Mississippi, Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage

A large collection of oral history interviews dealing with the Civil Rights Movement, available online at: <<https://www.cohch.org/civil-rights.html>>.

- Civil Rights Movement Veterans, Our Stories

A collection of oral history interviews and narratives with a variety of veterans of the movement, available online at: <<http://www.crmvet.org/nars/narshome.htm>>.

- The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Oral Histories of the American South

An extensive collection of high-quality oral history interviews documenting life in the South since the Civil War. Includes a large number of interviews dealing with the civil rights era, available online at: <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/>>.

- Old Dominion University, Desegregation of Virginia Education (DOVE) Project

A growing collection of oral histories from teachers, students, and parents who lived through the time of school desegregation, available online at: <<http://dc.lib.odu.edu/cdm/search/collection/dove>>.

- Virginia Commonwealth University, Voices of Freedom Collection

Eleven taped interviews with icons of the Civil Rights Movement in Virginia, available online at: <<https://digital.library.vcu.edu/digital/collection/voices>>.

- Washington State University, Civil Rights Oral History Collection

A collection of interviews related to the struggle for civil rights in Spokane, Washington, available online at: <<http://content.libraries.wsu.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/cvoralhist>>.

- University of Washington, The Afro-American Project

A collection of interviews conducted between 1968 and 1970 with residents of African American communities in Seattle, WA, available online at: <<https://content.lib.washington.edu/ohcweb/collections.html>>.

- Kentucky Historical Society, Civil Rights Movement in Kentucky Oral History Project

Interviews dealing with the struggle to end segregation in Kentucky from roughly 1930-1975, available online at: <<https://history.ky.gov/portfolio/civil-rights-movement-in-kentucky-oral-history-project/>>.

There are significant merits of using digital oral history collections. Since interviews are already recorded and archived, they are easy to access anywhere Internet is available. In addition, the pre-existing collections offer teachers sources to teach students how school desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement unfolded beyond their local communities. The oral history collection from The Civil Rights History Project of the Library of Congress, for instance, is an excellent place to start to hear stories of school desegregation and broader perspectives of the Civil Rights Movement across the country, such as Deep South in Louisiana and North to Massachusetts, from Seattle in Washington to Detroit in Michigan. This digital collection currently holds approximately 130 interviews of those who actively involved with the major historical events during school desegregation and the civil rights era, including activities of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), *Brown v. Board of Education*, the March on Washington, the Civil Rights Act of

1964, the Selma-to-Montgomery March, and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., among others.

If teachers are interested in teaching the process of school desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement in the South, we recommend teachers look into the following digital archives: the Civil Rights Collection at University of Southern Mississippi, Documenting the American South at University of North Carolina, the Civil Rights Movement in Kentucky Oral History Project by the Kentucky Historical Society, the Desegregation of Virginia Education (DOVE) Collection at Old Dominion University, and the “Voices of Freedom” project at Virginia Commonwealth University. Teachers would also like to be mindful that the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision initially only applied in Southern states where racial segregation was allowed or enforced by law. In Northern, Midwestern, and Western states, officials argued that segregated schools existed primarily because of racially segregated residential patterns, and courts initially agreed.¹⁴ However, in the 1960s, federal courts extended the application of *Brown* into non-southern areas. Archives with digital collections of interviews of those who went to segregated and integrated schools as students and teachers outside of the South include the Civil Rights Oral History Collection at Washington State University and The Afro-American Project at University of Washington.

Using Oral History as Historical Evidence

Just like other primary source documents, oral history interviews should be treated as historical evidence that students are encouraged to source, contextualize, and corroborate.¹⁵ It is also important that teachers help students understand how these individual stories as evidence become historically significant when students connect them to a larger historical movement such as the Civil Rights Movement or to something that is important for us today.¹⁶ When presenting interviews, we suggest that teachers pay attention to who the interviewee was, where the interviewee lived during school desegregation, and how the process of school desegregation impacted his or her life. The following questions might help students develop a nuanced understanding of the stories from the interviews: Who is the storyteller? How old was s/he during the

era of school desegregation? Where did the storyteller live at the time? How was the storyteller related to school desegregation? How did the process of school desegregation occur in this storyteller's community? How did the process of school desegregation impact the storyteller's life?

It is also important that teachers help students contextualize the interview—most importantly, when and where the interview was conducted. Consider the oral history collections from Washington State University and the University of Washington. Although these interviews are located in the state of Washington, it does not necessarily mean that the interviewee experienced school desegregation while living in Washington. Teachers will easily notice that some interviewees, even if they moved to the state of Washington when the interview was conducted, lived as a child in the South during the school desegregation era and reflected on their experiences there.

When the interview was conducted is also another key element to bear in mind when teachers select and introduce interviews to students. It impacts ways in which the interviewees talk about their experiences (e.g., the tone). Each of the two archives from the state of Washington listed in this article, for instance, include interviews that were conducted at different times. Interviews of the Afro-American Project at University of Washington were collected between 1968 and 1970, whereas those of the Civil Rights Oral History Collection were recorded in 2001. Ask students to compare the interviews done in 1968 with those in 2001. The tone of the interviews is dramatically different, even when they talk about a similar time period. The interviews conducted in 1968 are more vivid, carrying more emotion, perhaps because interviewees share their experience about the immediate past, whereas those in 2001 are at times emotional yet overall much more subdued. These recollections also carry secondhand experiences, those that interviewees read in newspapers, media, and books later in their lives, as well as first-hand experiences.

Comparing and contrasting two different stories about the same event is another way teachers can help students engage the oral history interviews as historical evidence. Studies show that memory is often unreliable, since it fades due to the passage of time and, as a result, narrators can forget or misremember names, dates, and

chronology. We also acknowledge that, as Linda Shopes adequately explains, “the [interviewees] frequently skew their stories in ways that accommodate both emotional and aesthetic needs...oral histories as historical evidence also does not always speak for itself. For the reader to more appreciate the meaning—and value of oral history—it needs our interpretive voice.”¹⁷ It is, thus, important to teach students to not only honor the voices and perspectives of the interviewees, but also keep context in mind and triangulate each account with other sources.

That being said, we find that helping students to compare and contrast oral histories—preferably from a different geographic, racial, and/or ethnic community and background—as well as other primary sources such as photos, newspaper articles, and letters, is a critical step to take once students listen to an interview. A student who listens to an interview conducted in Virginia will likely hear a different story from another that was collected from an interviewee who attended school in rural Wisconsin or urban Delaware. Teachers can facilitate a discussion about this by organizing a gallery walk where students share and discuss their stories, either face-to-face or online, guided by the following questions:

- What did you learn from the oral history you and your classmates listened to about school desegregation?
- Who are the interviewees and where are they from? How are these stories similar and different?
- What do you think makes the stories similar or different?

These opportunities will allow students to contemplate the significance of the context and the identity of interviewees in recalling stories about the event and to further reflect on the value and limitations of oral histories as historical evidence.

More Topics to Be Taught through Oral Histories

In addition to helping students better understand the history of school desegregation, oral history interviews can shed light on a variety of other important civil rights topics. While studying existing oral histories, students will likely learn about the impact of race on life outside of the educational system. Examples may include segregation’s impact on other aspects of life, voter

disenfranchisement, prejudice within the criminal justice system, and access to housing and financial opportunities. This knowledge will provide students with a better understanding of the recent past. Rather than viewing school desegregation as an isolated topic, students can recognize that the implementation of *Brown v. Board of Education* was part of a larger struggle for equal opportunity. In fact, some interviewees may discount the importance of school desegregation and place more emphasis on the importance of the right to vote or the struggle against racism in the criminal justice system, as well as access to housing and financial opportunities. Thus, students can learn about the Civil Rights Movement as a whole by conducting oral history interviews focused primarily on school desegregation.

This knowledge also opens up new avenues for discussing the legacies of the civil rights era in the classroom. Many students assume the struggle for equal opportunity occurred in the past, and that the Civil Rights Movement has been over for decades. This viewpoint is tied to the traditional timeline of the movement, as presented in books, films, and classrooms. However, recent and present-day events in the nation have shown that the disparities fought against during the Civil Rights Movement continue to challenge the American dream. Learning about the civil rights struggles of the past will often shed light on current challenges in race relations facing many American communities today. In the classroom, this offers the opportunity to address questions of how much the Civil Rights Movement accomplished, versus challenges that remain in the present day.

Notes

1. "The Long Road from *Brown*: School Desegregation in Virginia" has been funded through a Landmarks of American History and Culture Workshops for School Teachers grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Outcomes from previous workshops and information about the upcoming workshops are available at: <<https://thelongroadfrombrownneh.weebly.com/>>.
2. Alistair Thomson, "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History," *Oral History Review* 34, no. 1 (January 2006): 49-70; Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, eds., *The Oral History Reader*, third ed. (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Taylor and Francis, 2016).
3. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954). Full text of the decision is available at the Legal Information Institute at Cornell Law School, <<https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/347/483>>.
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13. Roger Davis, Mark R. Ellis, and Linda van Ingen, "Civic Engagement and Task Force Teaching: Integrating the Veterans History Project into the University Classroom," *The History Teacher* 42, no. 3 (May 2009): 341-349.

14. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Use of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233-1263.

15. Chauncey Monte-Santo and Abby Reisman, "Studying Historical Understanding," in *Handbook of Educational Psychology*, ed. Lyn Corno and Eric M. Anderman (New York: Routledge, 2016), 281-294; Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001).

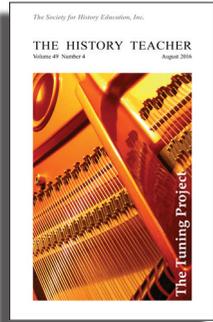
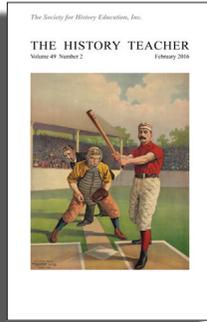
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17. Linda Shopes, "After the Interview Ends: Moving Oral History out of Archives and into Publication," *The Oral History Review* 42, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2015): 300-310. Also, for a thoughtful discussion about the nature of oral history as a research tool, see Derrick P. Alridge, "The Dilemmas, Challenges, and Duality of an African-American Educational Historian." *Educational Researcher* 32, no. 9 (2003), 25-34.



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