Teaching for Surprise: Oral History, Document Interpretation, and Historical Thinking in an International Context

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THE MORNING BUS to Colegio del Río (River School) sets out at first light.[1] In La Ceiba, a city of approximately 200,000 people on the northern Caribbean coast of Honduras, the bus picks up its first passengers—a half dozen students in yellow polo shirts and khaki skirts and pants, and most of the school's teachers—and begins the thirteen-mile climb into the cloud forest. The steep hillsides rising above the road may be thickly forested with majestic ceiba and copper-barked gumbo limbo trees, or newly planted with corn or beans after slashing and burning, or ragged with the uneven growth of grass and banana and palm. Chickens and malnourished dogs scurry in the verges, with occassional toucans in the trees and iguanas on the road. The road follows a river for most of the way, dwarfed by its riverbed, three or four times as wide and strewn with white, gray, and dusky purple stones, some the size of a small car. The road is unpaved. In the dry season, the bus moves in a cloud of dust and the river is small and clear. In the rainy season, the road often washes out and the river is a wide muddy torrent. The bus stops at three or four of the valley's eleven little towns, each connected by footpaths to smaller outlying communities, to pick up

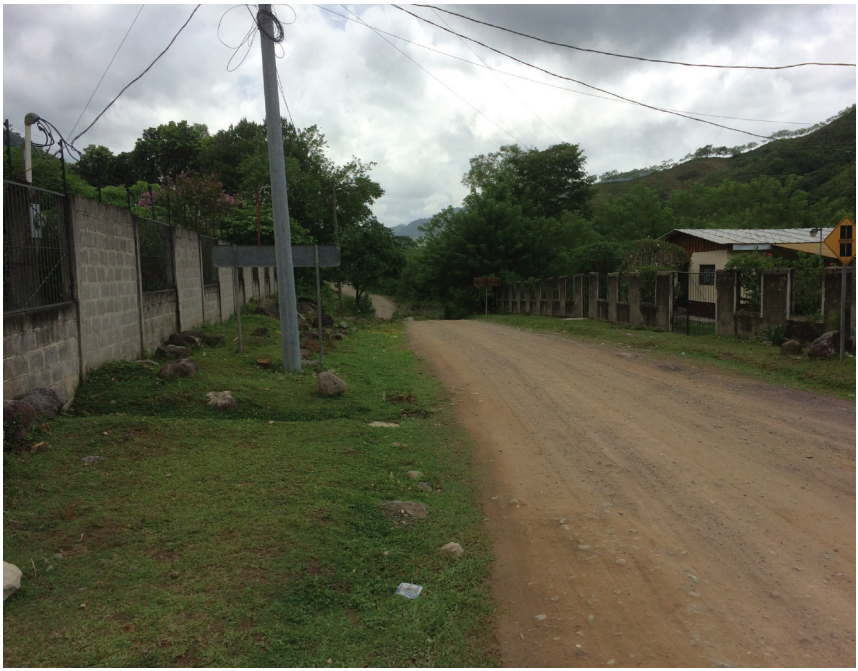

Figure 1: The river valley road, near Colegio del Río, 2017. Photograph by the author.

more students. After one to two hours on the road, the bus arrives full of passengers at the town at the center of the river valley and stops at the gate of Colegio del Río.

In 2017, I spent two weeks here teaching oral history to seventh, eighth, and ninth graders. My Honduran social studies counterpart assisted as the students planned and implemented an oral history project to document the local history of the valley and their communities. My three goals for the project were simple, if overly ambitious. First, I hoped that we could add to the documented history of the valley, especially the history of foreign involvement. Second, I hoped students would deepen their appreciation for and understanding of the generations that had preceded them in that place. Third, I hoped that students would grow in their understanding of history as an academic discipline and begin to grasp what scholars of teaching and learning have taken to calling the "disciplinary literacies" of social studies—the practices of

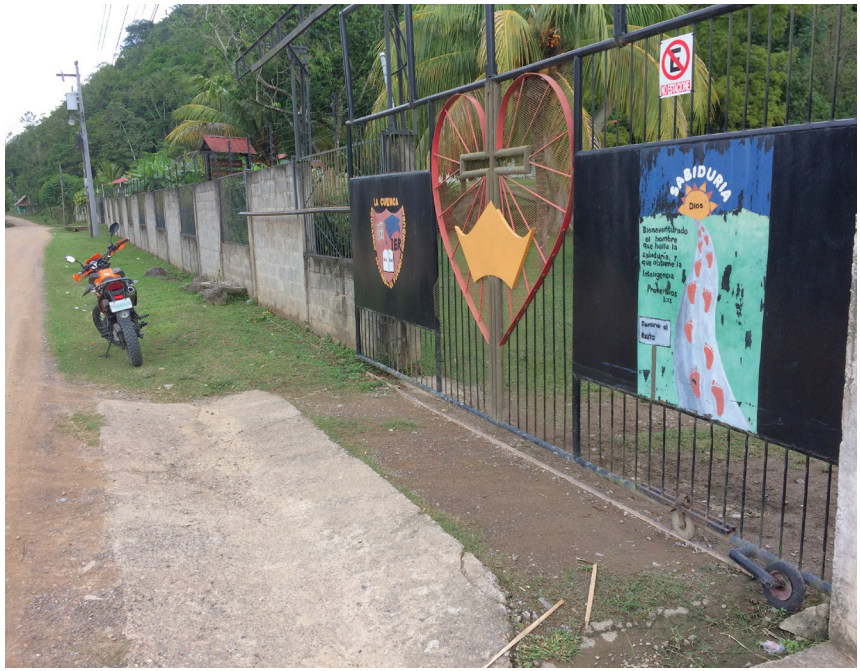

Figure 2: The front gate entrance of Colegio del Río, 2017. Photograph by the author.

knowledge creation that include inquiry, source interpretation, and evidence-based argumentation.[2]

In other words, I wanted to learn more of the local history of this region of Honduras by deputizing adolescents as historians-in-training, to strengthen generational connections, and to impart some North American wisdom about the best way to learn social studies. What I did not expect, but perhaps should have foreseen, is how the collision between my approach to history education and the lived experience of these secondary students would raise questions for me about the document-centric consensus in North American history education. In what follows, I lay out the main lines of that historical-thinking-as-document-interpretation consensus, explore the potential of oral history as a classroom tool, provide an account of the oral history project I implemented with Honduran students in 2017, and conclude with a reflection on the results of that project and its broader implications for history education.

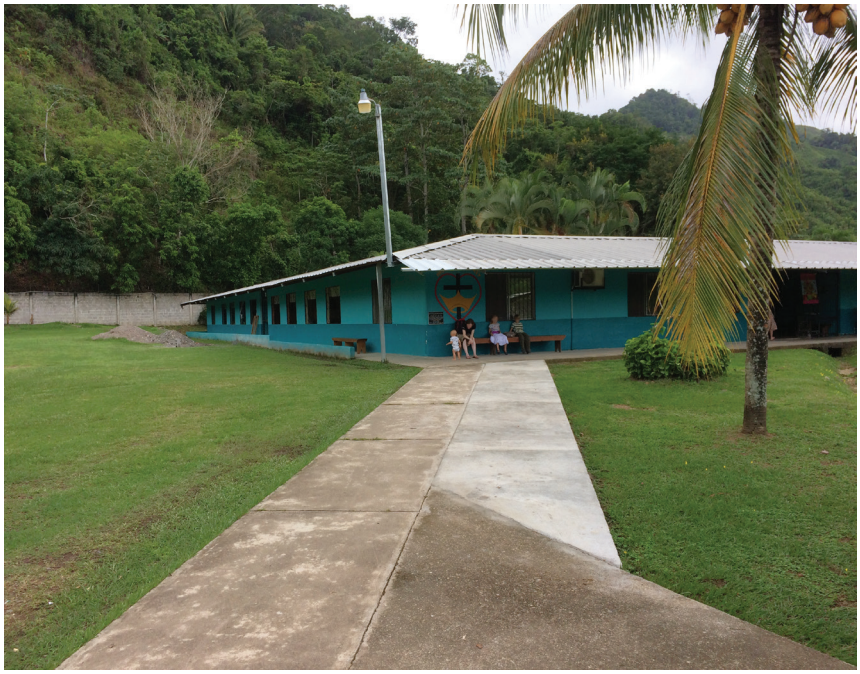

Figure 3: Colegio del Río, 2017. Photograph by the author.

Historical Thinking as Document Interpretation

For more than century now, experts on history education have agreed that its value lies in training students in "historical thinking"—that is, history as a set of cognitive skills rather than a litany of facts and dates. Indeed, the regularity with which historians and history educators have felt obliged to point out the value of such thinking skills borders on the tragicomic. It has been a mainstay of social studies education rhetoric at least since 1916, when the National Education Association's Committee on Social Studies recommended, among other things, a twelfth-grade capstone course called "Problems of Democracy."[3] In 1960, Shirley Engle famously argued that "quality decision making should be the central concern of social studies instruction."[4] In the 1990s, what Howard Gardner has called the "cognitive revolution" in educational research turned attention away from behavior and toward thinking and meaning-making.[5] In 2001, teacher educator Sam Wineburg maintained that

"History teaches us a way to make choices, to balance opinions, to tell stories, and to become uneasy—when necessary—about the stories we tell."[6] In 2006, Lendol Calder pointed out that history courses still relied primarily on the unexamined concept of "coverage"—lectures, textbooks, and content-oriented exams, and called for a new "signature pedagogy" that he felicitously labeled "uncoverage."[7] Still, many, if not most, secondary classrooms function as if history were primarily a set of chronologically ordered facts to be memorized.

And yet in one area at least, this idea that history students should adopt the cognitive habits of historians has caught on: document interpretation. The Document-Based Question, or DBQ, in part because of its prominence on the College Board's Advanced Placement History exams, has been widely adopted in secondary social studies classes. The centrality of documents has been reinforced by curricular interventions such as the Digital Inquiry Group's "Reading Like a Historian" Curriculum, the National Archives and Records Administration's DocsTeach, the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, the National Council for Social Studies College, Career, and Citizenship (C3) Framework, and the related effort by the so-called "C3 Teachers" known as the "Inquiry Design Model."[8] There seems to be widespread agreement not just that historical thinking skills are among the most important goals of history education, but also that *document* interpretation is one of the best ways to practice those skills.

Document interpretation, as it happens, also fits well with trends in literacy education. Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum campaigns such as the Common Core initiative seek to train a more literate workforce, able to read and obediently follow instructions. Scholars of disciplinary literacy likewise praise the value of reading and writing in this discipline-conscious manner, though for very different reasons: students who can read and interpret historical documents and artifacts, the thinking goes, are not only better readers generally, but are on their way toward understanding how disciplinary knowledge itself is created. They are beginning to grasp that history is not the same thing as the past, but is an *account* of the past based on *traces* of the past, and that history textbooks or documentaries do not just relay things "as they happened," but instead sift and interpret a range of often contradictory sources in order to construct

a narrative about what happened. The furor over fake news, election interference, social media misinformation, and public health expertise (to name a few) has lent additional urgency to this task. Advocates argue that students should graduate from high school with skills in "civic online reasoning," which Joel Breakstone and fellow researchers at Stanford described as an ability to effectively evaluate the reliability of Internet content, as well as practice in building arguments and supporting them with evidence.[9] Students who understand how knowledge is constructed in one discipline have the potential to become, as Elizabeth Birr Moje put it, "metadiscursive youth"—that is, able to switch between different disciplinary (and non-disciplinary) discursive communities and understand the rules, reasons, and power dynamics of such communities.[10]

Despite this momentum for historical pedagogy as document interpretation, some have expressed reservations. "The DBQ," as veteran educator Bruce Lesh complained in 2011, "does not ask students to consider a historical question with more than one answer, but instead teaches them to treat historical sources as repositories of information that, when organized in a particular manner, indicate an understanding of the given question."[11] Students preparing for AP History exams can learn the syntax of historical thinking without necessarily learning to think historically. A DBQ may measure little more than students' ability to read and fill in the blank—a worksheet by another name. And, of course, the selection of documents and crafting of questions by teachers and curriculum-builders necessarily simplify a messy past. As history educator David Salmanson pointed out, Sam Wineburg's "Reading Like a Historian" curriculum includes some significant omissions.[12] If historical thinking is a four-step process of (1) *finding* traces of the past, (2) *interpreting* them with contextualization and corroboration, (3) *narrating* accounts of the past, and (4) *engaging in arguments* with creators of other accounts, the current pedagogical consensus heavily emphasizes step two. Lesson plans that ask students to find relevant sources, or to create their own historical accounts, are relatively rare.

There are good reasons for the resilience of the DBQ as the lowest-common denominator of skills-based social studies. Teachers are charged with covering a great deal of chronological territory; students are amateur historians who lack the experience and training to sift through reams of irrelevant information in order

to find relevant details; access to archives—or to the computer and network resources necessary to effectively use digital archives—may be limited by geography, transportation, and broadband access. Why expect secondary students to do in a semester, much less a week, what takes historians years?

Oral History in the Classroom

This breach between classroom constraints and the rich uncertainty of actual historical research may be at least partly bridged by oral history. As Kristina R. Llewellyn and Nicholas Ng-A-Fook argued in a recent volume on oral history pedagogical practice, oral history pedagogy "enables teachers and students to do history with their communities, to introduce historical evidence from the underside, to shift the historical focus, to open new areas of inquiry…and to bring recognition to substantial groups of people who have been largely ignored or purposefully silenced."[13] Writing on oral history pedagogy in the social studies classroom has emphasized how it complements and balances the "the panoramic version of history contained" in textbooks, since oral histories tend to be microcosmic and personal.[14] Because oral history accounts tend to bring forward stories that have been omitted—either intentionally or unintentionally—from traditional accounts, they push participants to "learn anew." But as Brenda Trofanenko pointed out, it is not merely a form of *data gathering*, akin to web-scraping or census tabulation or text-reading. It is also an affective process for both listeners and tellers, powerfully engaging the emotions as well as the intellect.[15] The establishment of "shared authority" in knowledge creation—between teachers and students, between interviewees and interviewers, between subjects and experts—has therefore been central to rationales for oral history practice. Oral history challenges "traditional power relations inside and outside the classroom," and encourages "engaged listening of difficult historical knowledge."[16] Oral history can provide practice in what one scholar called the "pedgagogy of discomfort" because teachers and students alike are pushed out of their comfort zone in a way that can challenge their "dominant beliefs, social habits, and normatives."[17] In this way, oral history can form the basis of what Christine Rogers Stanton, Brad Hall, and Lucia Ricciardelli called "culturally sustaining/revitalizing storywork."[18]

It is important to highlight how radically these microcosmic, collaborative, and affective elements of oral history depart from traditional historical practice. As historian Steven High pointed out, historians "actively suppress the present by writing in the third person and in the past tense," and thereby create at least the illusion of distance and objectivity. Oral history, in contrast, "is fundamentally about the relationship *between* the past and the present, placing memory front and centre" and bringing "experiential authority (the 'I was there, and I am going to tell you how it really was' kind of authority) into conversation with expert authority (people who bring some questions, maybe some training and distance)."[19]

In summary, although oral history can be unwieldy to integrate in the secondary (and postsecondary) classroom, it is worthwhile for at least four reasons. First, in creating an oral history—in interviewing someone about their experience of the past—the interviewer uncovers a trace of the past. They find a source, in other words, by co-creating it with the interviewee. The fact that, in many cases, they are creating a never-before-encountered source may make oral history even more engaging for students. Second, a properly conducted oral history requires practice in the interpretive skills of corroboration and contextualization as well, some of which is done before the interview in developing questions, and some of which may be done afterward in curating or presenting the oral history. Third, an oral history is a historical account, containing in miniature all of the problems common to other kinds of historical accounts. Sometimes, evidence is limited or the way a story is told advantages the teller in some way. Sometimes, things are just made up. These difficulties are instructive for students learning the conventions of the discipline. Fourth, oral histories are explicitly relational. The presence of the interviewer, the wording of questions, the verbal and nonverbal reactions, the seating arrangements or food and drink or room temperature all affect the account given. And oral histories may also build a bridge between people. Many students will interview a grandparent, asking them questions that have never come up at family gatherings. Sometimes, these conversations can fundamentally reshape relationships.

In theory, then, oral history is an accessible and exciting way to get students engaged with the past in a way that moves beyond the prefabricated DBQ. In practice, however, it is unpredictable. In my

educational zeal, I almost forgot that oral history (and all of history, really) is fundamentally about *listening*—that is, adopting a posture of humility and expectancy toward your interlocutors, whether they be living elders or long-dead authors. Fortunately, my Honduran students were cheerfully willing to remind me of my ignorance.

Historical and Geographical Context

By U.S. standards, the river valley is quite remote—nearly two hours by car to the nearest city of any size. For such an out-of-the-way place, it has hosted a remarkable array of foreign influences, including U.S. agricultural corporations, Cold War armament, European ecotourism, and Christian community development. In this way, it is not unlike the development agencies congregating in Lesotho in the 1970s and 1980s, as chronicled by James Ferguson, in which a country with the approximate population of New Hampshire received roughly $49 per person in aid, from twenty-seven nations and seventy-three development groups. In the 1990s, Honduras was receiving around $67 per person in aid, and that number would only increase in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch in 1998.[20]

The northern coast of Honduras has long been a site for North American influence. In the 1880s, Standard Fruit (Dole) and United Fruit (Chiquita), among other U.S. agribusinesses, competed for control of the rich agricultural plains between San Pedro Sula and La Ceiba. They won concessions from the Honduran government, built railroads and hospitals, and in some ways ran the department (state/province) of Atlántida as a company town. It was in part because of this heritage that Honduras became a staging ground for U.S. anti-communist efforts in the region during the Cold War, when Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala were all rocked both by internal conflict and foreign interference. Bananas are no longer the dominant agricultural export in Honduras, mostly because of Panama disease, but oil palms have replaced bananas in the Honduran coastal plain and foreign agribusiness remains a powerful interest.[21] Small farmers in northern Honduras have long been relegated to steep hillside farming, where slash-and-burn techniques often yield strong harvests initially—but also deforestation and erosion, which in turn make the valley susceptible to catastrophic damage during regularly occurring weather events like hurricanes.

Most of the North Americans in the valley had some kind of connection to a Louisiana preacher and pilot whom I'll call John Dorian, who, like many, had been drawn to Honduras by the refugee crisis during the Nicaraguan civil war in the 1980s. At that time, the Reagan administration was funneling funds and supplies—at least some of them from unauthorized sales of weaponry to Iran during the Iran-Iraq war—to so-called "Contras," rebels against the communist Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. Many the Contras were based in Honduras, and some of the worst of this fighting took place in La Moskitia, a thick jungle along the Honduras-Nicaragua border. Trained as a pilot, Dorian flew relief and ambulance missions throughout La Moskitia, where the only other viable transportation was by canoe or other small boat. He and his wife Sharon joined a wave of volunteers and relief agencies seeking to address the worst of the refugee crisis along the border, including the eventual founders of the river valley *colegio*. The river valley was initially a kind of retreat for Dorian, far from the conflict-ridden border, and he bought land there. Gradually, Dorian began to focus his efforts there, establishing a dairy operation, a missionary training center, and, eventually, a clinic and the Colegio del Río.[22]

In October 1998, Hurricane Mitch struck Central America, with Honduras bearing the brunt of its fury. It hovered over Honduras for four days, depositing nearly three feet of rain, re-routing rivers, destroying roads and bridges, breaching dams, and flooding towns. Hurricane Mitch destroyed John Dorian's development projects in the river valley like it destroyed almost everything else. It was an epochal event for Hondurans; residents routinely use the phrases "before Mitch" and "after Mitch" to discuss change over time. Official government estimates of the damage include 5,657 dead, 12,272 injured, 8,058 missing, and 441,150 displaced; nearly 60% of the country's roads and bridges damaged or destroyed and 80% of aqueducts damaged; approximately $800 million in agricultural losses; and nearly 2,800 classrooms destroyed, leaving 25,500 primary school students and 30,000 secondary students unable to continue in school.[23] As scholars such as Anthony Oliver-Smith have pointed out, Mitch's destructiveness was not just because it was a Category 5 hurricane, or because of the weather patterns that caused it to stay in place for so long, but also because of the "historical development of vulnerability" in the country, fueled by

the imperatives of agribusiness and regional anti-communist foreign policy rather than by interest in the wellbeing of human beings, that in turn put pressure on the outlying areas.[24] Farmers with little arable land burnt forests and planted on steep hillsides, which washed away in heavy rains. Like Hurricane Katrina along the U.S. Gulf Coast in 2005, Hurricane Mitch exposed social vulnerabilities that had been developing for decades, if not longer.[25] Mitch also spawned a new round of international aid and investment and a revitalization of civil society and cooperative relief efforts, with a wide range of international agencies—from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and World Bank, to NGOs like Caritas Internationalis and Save the Children and World Vision, to ad hoc efforts like John Dorian's—all pitching in and seeking to shape the post-hurricane reconstruction.[26]

With this oral history project, I hoped to help river valley residents unpack a little more of this recent history. Did students recognize how much the Cold War or Hurricane Mitch had shaped the world they grew up in? Did they know why there were so many non-Hondurans in the river valley? Had they noticed ecological change taking place? Given that severe weather is likely to be a significant part of northern Honduras' climate change-inflected future, these questions are not just useful for historical understanding, but also urgent for the future.[27]

The River Valley Oral History Project

Colegio del Río is a metal-roofed, concrete block structure of ten classrooms, arranged around a central courtyard with a flagpole. Through a breezeway is the *comedor* (cafeteria), a multipurpose, open-walled structure used for assemblies, performances, dancing, and, of course, eating. Classes last for forty-five minutes and include Math, Social Studies, Science, Spanish, English, Practical Activities, and Computer Science. In 2017, the school enrolled roughly 150 students, divided into two distinct cohorts—the *secundaria* (7-9 grade) and the *bachillerato* (10-12 grade). I worked with the hundred or so seventh, eighth, and ninth graders.

The unit I designed, in collaboration with my Honduran counterpart, was an eight-day oral history unit similar in outline to the one presented by social studies educators Grace C. Huerta

Figure 4: Assembly in the *comedor* of Colegio del Río, 2017. Photograph by the author.

and Leslie A. Flemmer.[28] It addressed several key standards in the Honduran social sciences curriculum, including the following, taken from the seventh-grade standards:

- Compare and describe the development of tourism in Honduras and in the other countries of the world, analyzing its importance and the risks of exploitation.
- Explain and evaluate the social and environmental vulnerability of Honduras to natural disasters.
- Recognize the importance of historical knowledge as a source of explanation and understanding of the historical development of humanity.
- Propose ways of living with peace and justice in their family, their local community, and their country.[29]

The unit began on Day 1 by introducing the threshold concept of the history discipline: that what we call "history" is not just "what

happened" in the past, but is rather a collection of *accounts* or narratives of the past, written by historians, based on *traces* of the past—letters, photographs, diaries, memoranda, and other primary sources. I then introduced oral history as a way to "fill the silences" of history, to give voice to people who often do not have a voice, and to create traces of the past. Finally, I laid out the "River Valley Oral History Project," in which students would, in groups based on their local communities, craft a questionnaire, conduct an interview with an elder using a digital voice recorder, and then present their own research to the class. Their homework was a project proposal consisting of (a) the names of one or two possible interviewees and (b) a brief description of why they thought these folks would be good candidates for oral history interviews. Student proposals were mostly on target, with most groups selecting one of the oldest people they knew and justifying it as such. The following responses were typical:

- because he is the oldest one living in [this community] and he allowed us to interview him.
- because he has many years of living in La Ceiba.
- because he is old and very good.
- because she is one of the oldest people.
- because she is an exemplary lady and has been in the community for a long time.

In class on Day 2, students shared their choices for interviewees and reasons for choosing them, and we discussed the composition of the questionnaire. "What makes for a good interview question?" I asked, and then guided them toward an understanding of the value of open-ended questions that encouraged thoughtful responses, as well as concrete questions that get at historical specifics and spark memories. Working with their groups, students came up with a handful of questions, which they then shared with the class. We discussed the idea of adding in specific events such as the Central American wars of the 1980s, or Hurricane Mitch in 1998, or the advent of ecotourism, or migration to North America. Students then turned in their questions as part of their project proposals. In general, students did a good job of moving from very basic questions such as "How old are you?" and "What are your parents' names?" to more open-ended, historically concrete inquiries, such as the following:

Figure 5: Campus of Colegio del Río at dawn, circa 2003. Photograph by the author.

- Where were you when Hurricane Mitch happened, and how was this experience for you?
- How has migration affected families in the community?
- What was your work as a teenager?
- How were you affected during the wars against Honduras?
- What was education like during your childhood (how strict) compared to current education?
- What was the religion of your family? Has it changed and why?
- What was your most beautiful experience in the valley?

That night, I created an interview guide that built on the questions raised by students, combining some questions and adjusting others, along with basic data and some larger thematic questions (see **Appendix A**).

On Day 3, I brought out the *grabadors*, pocket-sized digital recorders. We focused on the practical logistics of interviews: finding a quiet place, explaining the purpose of the interview, the consent form, and "the declaration" or identification of the interview in the first seconds of the recording. Each group was to have a leader, who would introduce the project and pose questions; a secretary, who would take notes; and a recorder, who would manage the digital recorder. After discussing the basics of interviewing, students spent class time practicing the interview so as to troubleshoot recording issues and head off some of the shyness many of them felt. The class was full of surprised laughter, shaking hands, and cries of "*¡Que pena!*" ("How embarrassing!") as they listened to their own recorded voices.

Over the next several days, including the weekend, student groups took turns checking out digital recorders and conducting their interviews. In class, on Days 4 and 5 of the unit, students listened again to their interview, filled out the interview guide, and created their posters according to a list of questions designed to prompt summary, analysis, and interpretation. To give students space to collaborate, we spread out in the *comedor*, where the wind came off the river and blew their poster board around, but also provided some welcome relief from the heat.

The interviews themselves were a mixed bag. When I listen to them now, I am sometimes dismayed at the woodenness of the questions, the hollow, foreign sound, the sense that these were not questions that students would have asked. "*La otra*" ("the other" or "next one"), one student said to introduce each question. As in, *these are questions I have to ask to finish this assignment*. Some interviewees, for their part, seemed to take the same approach, giving terse, minimal answers. This unevenness and apparent apathy may be an unavoidable part of cramming the rich and sometimes painful complexity of a human relationship into a school assignment.

Yet many of the interlocutors seemed to be enjoying themselves, and some found a way to deliver powerful testimonials. Angel Pavón, a man in his late 80s and a father of ten children, reported that he had never attended school and recalled his early life as one where he was "dominated by his parents" ("*dominado por mis padres*") until he "became a boy who worked in the mountains." The young interviewer asked, "Did you have any formative experiences

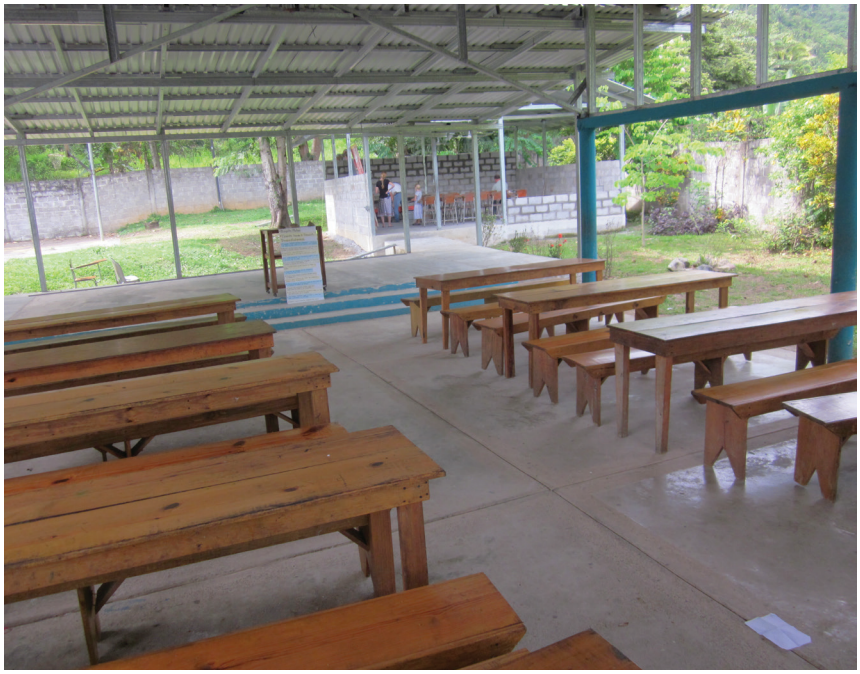

Figure 6: The empty *comedor*, 2017. Photograph by the author.

like sicknesses?"—"Few" ("*poca*"), he replied. "Disgraces or tragedies?"—"Not a one" ("*ninguna*"), he replied, with some emphasis. Then the interviewer came to a couple of questions we had crafted together as a class. "What purpose or motive do you have for living in the valley?" the student asked. Pavón replied, "The purpose I have, is that here I grew up, and came to have love for this place [and experienced] the gospel in abundance." The interviewer asked, "What was your most beautiful experience in the valley?" Pavón declared, "For me, it is the gospel of Jesus Christ!"

Isabel Velásquez was a woman of about 70, though she did not know her birthdate, and a mother of ten children, though she did not know how many grandchildren. She had never gone to school. The student interviewer delivered the questions rapidfire, and Velásquez answered with some amusement, with a repeated "*¡Claro que sí!*" (or "Obviously!"). How did she spend her time as a young person? "Working!" What purpose or motive did she have for living in the valley? "The purpose I have is"—she paused

and laughed—"to die!" The student summarized: "Here you were born, here you raised your children, here you will die." Velásquez replied emphatically, "*¡Claro que sí!*" What did she remember about Hurricane Mitch? "Mitch destroyed everything…It was terrible, because our house collapsed and we had to come down to [this community on the road]."

On Days 4 and 5, as students worked and chatted and laughed out in the *comedor*, they came up with summary statements for what they had learned about the history of their communities and their interviewee—a synthesis of knowledge that would then be presented to the class on a poster board. In these summary statements, some groups simply stated plain and isolated facts. "The first families to inhabit the community were the Bonilla and Vélez families," one group said. "Before there were pools in the river under the bridge [that were] famous for many drownings," another group maintained, adding that "a day laborer [*peón*] before earned 96 lempiras a day." One of the groups based in the nearby city noted that "In the national park there was a marimba concert." For many of the groups, the building materials used in housing was the most significant indicator of historical change. "Our community was different before but now it has changed a lot," one group summarized in a representative comment. "The houses were previously made of earth and manaca [palm thatch] and now they are made of concrete"—and tin, some groups added.

In addition to these anecdotal details, some groups recorded overall impressions. Like Sra. Velásquez, many interviewees had discussed the disastrous aftermath of Hurricane Mitch and Hurricane Fifi. Some mentioned how terrible the wars were, and there was a divided opinion on the effect of migration on the communities, with some lamenting the loss of young people and others grateful that it hadn't affected them too much. Several groups presented a less-violent past: "In the past there was not much crime; it was healthier," one group claimed. Another group put a similar summary in terms of personal character qualities of previous generations: "We learned that people were humble and caring in their labors," they explained. "They were very hard working." Finally, many groups reported pride and delight in the river valley, as in one group's summary that "the river valley is a very healthy and beautiful place."

On Days 6 and 7, students presented these findings to class—historical claims written in marker on colored poster board. There were again many fluttering hands and embarrassed giggles as they talked about what they had learned in front of their classmates. Finally, on Day 8, they wrote short reflections on their learning experiences, answering the following questions:

1. Have you had any experience with oral history or interviews? If yes, please describe.
2. What have you learned about recorded interviews?
3. How has your understanding changed of the community, the river valley, and/or of La Ceiba?
4. How has your understanding of history and of the work of historians changed ?

At the conclusion of the project, all students received "*Soy historiador(a)*" ("I am a historian") paper medallions to celebrate the completions of the projects. And as I discuss below, I think at least some students gained an inkling of what such a statement means.

Students as Deputized Historians

When I conceived of this project, I thought it would be an engaging way to introduce what U.S.-based educators call "historical thinking" in a context where history was typically taught as a matter of recall, where mastery meant recitation of a mental timeline. I hoped to learn more about the local history of the valley and about how residents saw themselves in the context of their own history. In retrospect, it was too ambitious to conceive of this oral history project as a way of adding much to the documented history of the river valley. As a teaching tool, however, the project was more successful. It opened a window for students onto the complex labor of historians in gathering, interpreting, and narrating diverse sources. It gave students more awareness of the history that had transpired in their immediate surroundings. And it served the affective goal of building connections between generations. Those students were newly conscious of the houses of mud and palm thatch that used to be ubiquitous, of the devastations wreaked by hurricanes, of the destructions of wars, and perhaps, too, of how precious their community is.

My first objective was to add materially to the documented history of the river valley. The project partially accomplished this goal, but served more as an initial survey of river valley residents' historical consciousness than as a full-blown historical investigation. With regular repetition or a longer duration, the documentary history of the valley might have been expanded with such an oral history project. As it was, the historical documentation produced was impressionistic and suggestive rather than exhaustive or definitive. Before I departed, I created a folder for their campus network with carefully labeled recorded interviews, scans of the questionnaires and poster presentations, and related project materials. I also left the school a collection of digital voice recorders to be used in future projects. These materials could be the germ of future oral history exercises. Students could systematically interview everyone in their community over age 60 over the course of several years, or refine and narrow the questions to focus on, for example, natural disasters in northern Honduras, the influence of Standard Fruit (Dole), or the creation of Pico Bonito National Park. They could create a public history exhibit for the community, hosted by the school. Given the curricular and time constraints, this seems likely to happen only if another volunteer—myself or another—takes it upon themselves to do so. But that does not mean the project failed, nor that only those with enviable tenacity or ample resources should attempt oral history. On the contrary, the project was successful in spite of its shortcomings, especially in achieving the following second and third objectives.

The project's second objective was to help students gain an appreciation for the generational connections that had formed their lives, and student reflections suggest strongly that it did so. Some reflected on the interview process itself, and how history is relationally produced. "I learned that historians always have to be kind to the interviewees and to never yell at them," one student admitted. "It's not easy," wrote another student, "we have to speak loud, clear and be very presentable." Another summarized, "I learned more about the valley, I learned to interview without fear." Some students reflected on the sense of distance they now felt toward the past. "We have to value what we have now," one wrote. "They had to fight for a living—if they could study they did but if not then, they left school." "It was incredible," one student

exclaimed. "Imagine that a laborer earned 2 lempiras a day and 100 lempiras was like thousands of lempira was. Mega Incredible." Some expressed a sense of new respect for their interviewee: "I did not know that the person we interviewed was practically the founder of the community." Others expressed some new personal understanding: "I did not know that this lady liked sewing or that she was so old." And several commented on their newfound knowledge of post-hurricane reconstruction. "They said that before it was very sad, during Mitch but now it has come back to life and it is very beautiful," wrote one student. "[We learned] how the valley reappeared." As one student wrote succinctly, "It is important to know more and to know other people." There was, in other words, at least some deepening of connection between the generations, some greater appreciation for their communities.

The third objective was to help students learn to "think historically." A surprising number of students seemed to be newly conscious that historical knowledge was something that had to be made by people. In what could be interpreted as a subtle complaint, or as a pat on the back, one student wrote, "I thought historians did not have much work but I was wrong, they have a lot of work." Another student wrote that historians "have a good job" because they do more than simply record events, "they try to explain what happened in the past." Another student expressed what seems to be a new awareness of what historians are permitted to study. "It's okay for historians to investigate more about community," they wrote. Similarly, one student claimed to "have found out about things that historians knew and that I did not even hear the people I know talk about." Another commented bluntly that "history is good for you, so you know what it was like before." Several students communicated a new understanding of historians learning "beyond what they had studied" and that with history, "we learn beyond what we know"—comments that suggest at least some grasp of the iterative process of historical knowledge construction. "I have a more open mind about history," another student wrote. And in what could be a summary of the entire eight-day unit, one student concluded, "[I learned] that historians look for clues from the past so that we know it and that history is everything we do, like the interview." The student grasped, in other words, that historians are investigators, working from partial records in order to

reconstruct something resembling the past. Just as important, this student recognized that history is not just politicians and generals, but "everything we do"—that all of the quotidian details of human life matter, the rain and the wind, the manaca and mud, the cooking and sewing, and the chopping and threshing. It was a version of novelist Virginia Woolf's revelation almost a century ago as she reflected on what is left out of our stories:

> For all the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups washed; the children sent to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it. And the novels, without meaning to, inevitably lie. All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded.[30]

Although the seventh-grade Honduran social sciences textbook acknowledges that history occurs "wherever people live" and that we are all "protagonists" of historical study, the twentieth-century history presented there is mostly a chronicle of presidential administrations, wars, and economic development. In the context of the usual Honduran social studies class, oral history projects can bring forward the "infinitely obscure lives" and finer textures of local history.

Teaching for Surprise

As usual, students taught me as much if not more than I taught them. Handing out digital recorders to middle schoolers, as it turns out, is an excellent way to open yourself up to surprise, to discover the questions you had not known to ask. At first, this unpredictability of oral history interviews might seem like a disadvantage. One of our main goals as educators, after all, is to set out learning objectives that are observable and measurable. "The learner will be able to describe the environmental and social effects of Hurricane Mitch" or "The learner will be able to explain the causes of the 1984 war between Honduras and El Salvador." The idea that good teaching involves (a) having clear, measurable objectives and (b) gathering evidence in the form of assessments that students have met those objectives, is one of the unquestioned assumptions of modern educational practice, and with good reason. I agree that it is a "best practice" in the sense that it is the best we can do, as educators of large groups of age-separated young people

in an institutional setting. The alternative, in which learning is just a black box that you can only learn to facilitate by experience and artistic instinct, is no alternative at all.

But it is useful to remember that this kind of planning for observable outcomes is only a proxy for the deeply mysterious thing we call "learning." There is much that we cannot account for, that may not be observable at the time. And maybe some of the most important things are not observable at all. It only seems wise to build in space and opportunities for unpredictability, for surprise, and for unobservable learning and unmeasurable outcomes, alongside the predictable and observable structure of learning objective, learning experience, and assessment. In a DBQ, the sources have been pre-selected and often abridged and annotated toward a particular end. As with a model plane, one has only to follow instructions (and be careful with the glue) to produce a serviceable result. An oral history is more like cutting your own airplane parts from sheets of metal. You might still have instructions, but the process is more unpredictable, and the model at the end may bear little resemblance to the picture on the box.

One of the biggest surprises of this oral history project for me is how it also raised questions for me about the document-centric consensus in history education. These questions began with the basic logistical reality of teaching in Honduras: the lack of access to the document collections and printable or digitized sources that have become customary in U.S. classrooms. But as the project proceeded and as I have reflected on it in the last several years, I noticed that I had unconsciously adopted a kind of document-fundamentalism, a presumption that "real" historical thinking education involves handing out historical primary source excerpts. This is not an original observation, of course. Bruce Lesh worried about the "overemphasis on primary sources as the savior of history education" and the "base assumption" that "the presence of a primary source makes the study of history interesting."[31] In fact, sources are sometimes incredibly dull, tiny bits of data that are only "interesting" when aggregated into large-scale data sets. To see life and power and joy and sorrow in such sources is a feat of historical empathy that might only be possible for historians and social scientists who have been trained to find meaning there. What often passes for historical interpretation in DBQ assignments, moreover,

is at best simple reading comprehension, and is sometimes a kind of meaningless decoding of texts and filling in blanks that may be a necessary part of being a modern citizen (filing taxes, filling out job applications, participating in surveys), but does not have much to do with learning. And then the "interesting" sources have their own problems, for they are often unrepresentative, performing a similar function as the "human interest story" in journalism. "Relatable," as the kids say, but not necessarily useful for making sense of the past.

Oral history casts doubt on our love for the textual document in history education. Walter Ong, perhaps the most famous theorist of orality and literacy, reminded us that in an oral culture, words are events or occurrences that disappear once the recitation is over and persist only in the imperfect memories of hearers.[32] In contrast, literate cultures primarily conceive of words as components of texts, objects that can be consulted at will. The river valley was not a true oral culture, but with less access to contemporary technologies of literacy (books, papers, printers, computers), it was certainly more oral than many U.S. communities.

Oral history has its own limitations, and these are well-documented by practitioners and scholars. The first and most obvious is deceit, whether intentional concealment by the interviewee or the more subtle untruthfulness of self-justification or self-aggrandizement. More broadly, we know that memories can be unreliable, as participants misremember dates and events, conflate distinct conversations, or unconsciously reshape their memories by retelling them or by adopting external narratives from books or films. Moreover, the widespread celebration of "storytelling" as a kind of therapeutic expressive individualism, as oral historian Alexander Freund pointed out in his 2015 review of StoryCorps and similar projects, has valorized certain kinds of public autobiographies, especially the "overcoming hardship" narrative. This "new kind of storytelling," Freund continued, "tends to atomize society, proposing the narrator as a protagonist who overcomes seemingly personal challenges in a world of inexplicable circumstances such as poverty, discrimination, and oppression."[33] In some ways, oral historians are engaged in a debate analagous to the one among history teachers about documents—what Freund called the oral historian's "fixation" on the one-on-one interview,

which he traced to the practice of confession in the Catholic tradition and critiqued for its power dynamics.[34]

Document interpretation remains a valuable skill, of course. But if history is reduced to the gathering of "data," assembling documents in order, and writing about it—if it can only be consulted as an object—then something is lost. If history is, instead, an effort to sustain a conversation across generations, then oral history is a powerful tool in making actual face-to-face connections across generations—not just in the abstract sense, but in the specific, flesh-and-blood interactions between young people and their older interlocutors. Curiosity is a civic virtue. Surprise is a social good. And learning to listen across boundaries—whether generational, or political, or racial, or class, or geographical—equips us all for more productive citizenship. Carving out space for surprise is a worthy goal in the United States, in Honduras, and beyond.

Notes

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Section 1: Name and Family

1. Legal name
2. Names of Parents
3. Names of Wife or Husband
4. Number of Children and Grandchildren
5. Names of Children

Section 2: Life History

6. Date of birth (approximate)
7. Place of birth: town, city, province, country
8. Rare circumstances about the birth, if any
9. Childhood: How was life in your childhood? How many years were you at your school? What was the work of your parents? What did he/she do in his/her life as a young man/woman?
10. What was your job?
11. Formative experiences such as illness, personal misfortune, tragedy, visions or dreams, etc.
12. What is your religion (Catholic, Protestant/Evangelical, which denomination)? What was the religion of your family? Has it changed? Why?

Section 3: Community History

13. Who were the first inhabitants of this community? Can you describe them?
14. What were the houses like before? What was the community like before?
15. What is your purpose to live in the basin? What was the most beautiful experience in the basin?
16. What was the first tourist place here?
17. You have been living in this community for a long time. Can you tell us a little about how the community has grown? What changes have people caused in their place of birth and growth? What else do you know about the history of the community?
18. What memories do you have of Hurricane Mitch? From Hurricane Fifi? What changes were there after Mitch in agriculture, the economy, buildings, roads, the environment, etc.?
19. Was there any help? Whose? What organizations helped the inhabitants affected by this natural phenomenon?
20. How has the environment affected your community and what changes have occurred? Were there previously unknown animals now in the basin? Are there any no longer?
21. What experience did you have during the war between Honduras and El Salvador? And the civil wars of Nicaragua and El Salvador? What do you remember about the presence of the U.S. military?
22. How has migration been in your community and how has it affected families?

Appendix B

Research Study Assent Form

Study Title: Pedagogical Uses of Oral History in an International Context
Researcher: William Thomas Okie, +1-555-555-5555, wokie1@kennesaw.edu

My name is Tom Okie. I am from Kennesaw State University. I am inviting you to be in a research study about how oral history helps students learn history.

- If you decide to be in the study, we will ask you to allow me to make copies of your schoolwork and analyze it to understand better how students learn history.
- Your name may be on your schoolwork, but your name will not appear in any work that is published.
- *You are already doing this work for your class. If you take part in this study, you will help me and others understand better how to teach social studies classes.*
- *I don't think anything bad will happen as a result of participating in this study. I will be careful to keep the copies of the schoolwork in a secure digital repository at Kennesaw State University. Your institution may also keep a copy of your work.*
- You don't have to be in this study. It is up to you. You can say no now or you can change your mind later. No one will be upset if you change your mind.
- You can ask us questions at any time and you can talk to your parent any time you want. We will give you a copy of this form that you can keep. Here is the name and phone number of someone you can talk to if you have questions about the study:
  Name: *William Thomas Okie* Phone number: *+1-555-555-5555*
- **Do you have any questions now that I can answer for you?**

IF YOU WANT TO BE IN THE STUDY, SIGN OR PRINT YOUR NAME ON THE LINE BELOW:

_____ _____
Child name and signature Date

Check which of the following applies (completed by person administering the assent).

___ *Child is capable of reading and understanding the assent form and has signed above as documentation of assent to take part in this study.*

___ *Child is not capable of reading the assent form, but the information was verbally explained to him/her. The child signed above as documentation of assent to take part in this study.*

_____ _____
Signature of person obtaining assent *Date*