**Microessay:** "Border-Crossings: Engaging and Connecting Across Differences through Oral History"

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Given the demographic diversity and complexity of the American population, there is a growing need for our students to engage across differences in ways that affirm the dignity and humanity of all individuals and their lived experiences. Part of this process requires students to learn how to step out of their own comfort zones and egos to become active listeners in everyday conversations.

At the same time, our digital natives seem to conflate communication with conversation. Technology has made communication easier and faster, as well as redefined what it means to be literate. Students are adept at expressing themselves within a limited number of characters and using images to tell a story. Their “follows” communicate their interests, while their hashtags reveal an effort to “dialogue” with other sources. At the same time, technological advances have supplanted physical, face-to-face contact with others--and more significantly--have allowed students to curate an existence that obscures their authentic selves. Technology affords a multitude of ways to tell our stories, but it also inhibits our ability to be fully present in another person’s life. Perhaps more troubling are the ways that technology allows individuals to anonymize themselves and to speak or behave with impunity. While technology plays an important role in our day-to-day lives, oral histories help students recognize the value of being fully and physically present and conversing face-to-face with another person. Ultimately, participation in an oral history project is an exercise in vulnerability--both for the interviewee and the interviewer who is challenged to listen without judgment--to ask questions, to listen-back to the interviewee’s responses, and then to reflect on how their stories add to the richness and texture of our common humanity. Indeed, our students often ask, “What does it mean to be human?”

Developmentally speaking, adolescents frequently question authority and structures around them. Their varying degrees of self-centeredness can also inhibit their ability to fully absorb what others say and feel. Cultivating empathy requires practice and can’t be learned in one hour or one lesson. The discipline of oral history seeks to humanize experiences that often feel distant or irrelevant to the lives of many of our students. We were drawn to oral history as a structured way to help students develop important listening skills that are integral to creating empathy and a greater sense of self-agency that will hopefully encourage to question systemic inequities or injustices that do, in fact, exist around them and in their own communities.

Our unit emerges from the fact that our students are constantly navigating multiple borders and border-stories as inquisitive individuals who are discovering more about themselves and how they relate to an ever-changing landscape around them. Ultimately, as teachers, we have a responsibility to guide them on their individual journeys.