CONCRETE HOUSE CONSTRUCTION: AN ORAL HISTORY
CLASS ACTIVITY

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ACTION PLAN FOR INTERVIEWING (API)
October 2009 Teachers Oral history Workshop
California University of Pennsylvania
Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources
Instructors: Nik Roberts, M.S., David Lonich, Ph.D.
I. Pennsylvania State Education Standards:

History: 8.2.9B: Identify and analyze primary documents, material artifacts and historic sites important in Pennsylvania history from 1787 to 1914.

History: 8.2.12B: Identify and evaluate primary documents, material artifacts and historic sites important in Pennsylvania history from 1890 to Present.

Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening: 1.4.8B: Write multi-paragraph informational pieces (e.g., letters, descriptions, reports, instructions, essays, articles, interviews).

II. Learning Model:

The inquiry-based learning model (IBLM) in use will follow five steps: questioning, researching, discussing, creating, and reflecting. See the image below:

Each of these IBLM steps will be discussed throughout the procedure (i.e. Description of Activity). The graphic came from this webpage at the University of Vermont.

III. Description of Activity:

What follows is a description of a procedural walk-through for conducting an oral history class activity. The organization of the procedure is based on a step-by-step process identified in the IBLM above.

Questioning Section:
The student will study the rise and fall of the mass production of concrete housing in the United States using the specific example of “Cement City.” Cement City is an eighty-structure plan in Donora, Pennsylvania, that was built between 1916-1917. As an oral history project, the students will develop a plan for creating a primary resource by interviewing individuals connected with concrete housing in Cement City. (See the image of a sign for Cement City below. It was retrieved from the Waymark website.)

Researching section:

The student will research the topic by using a “prompt list” consisting of: people, construction companies, periodical articles, concrete construction locations and key phrases in a one day library computer internet activity. For this, students will be given a sheet of paper listing only the prompts above, with spaces for them to fill in what they know about each item. The students will attend a lecture on the history of Cement City in Donora, PA and concrete construction in the United States in general. The lecture will include primary resource material including: photographs, slides, blueprints, newspaper articles, magazines, and letters. This material will be covered to help students build background knowledge about the subject matter. It will also stimulate the development of
target interviewees for the oral history assignment and specific questions to ask in conducting the interview.

Discussing/Creating section:

The discussing and creating section of the IBLM are intertwined. The student will develop a list of potential interviewees by using the research previously completed. The student will identify the need and advantages of interviewing a Cement City resident or someone who has performed repair or renovation on a Cement City house.

With the assistance of the instructor, the student will identify a specific participant to be interviewed. The student will develop a set of interview questions to be asked of the interviewee focusing on their specific relationship with concrete housing. The student will present their questions to the class in a session of brainstorming and peer-learning. The students will focus questions on the strengths and weaknesses of building concrete houses. The students will also consider the problems or advantages of remodeling, renovating or repairing concrete houses.

The students, working with the instructor and interviewee, will select a location for conducting the interview. The student will familiarize themselves with the recording technology used to capture the interview. The student will present a finalized list of questions to the instructor to identify potential problems or to strengthen the effectiveness and focus of the questions. In preparation for the actual interview, the student will be presented a checklist by the instructor of necessary “tools” to take to the oral history interview. The student will conduct and capture the interview.
Reflecting Section:

The student will triangulate the data by using a template provided by the instructor. (Example: “what was unexpected?,” “What did you learn about concrete construction?,” “What are the problems in renovating or repairing Cement City homes in regard to: electrical, plumbing, and roofing issues.) The student will also be asked to research for accuracy what are considered to be factual statements in the interview. (Example: The cost of a yard of concrete in 1917 compared with cost in 2009.) The student will be required to present the data by developing a format to report to the instructor (i.e. written report, oral presentation, etc.) The outcome of this effort may become a class project that may include: videotape editing, writing copy, recording data, etc.

IV. Assessment Tool

In order to evaluate student work for this activity, I have created a student checklist, which follows:

- [ ] The student completed the secondary and primary research assignments.
- [ ] The students developed a list of target interviewees.
- [ ] The students completed background research on a specific interviewee.
- [ ] The student developed a list of questions to ask a specific interviewee.
- [ ] The student conducted and captured the interview.
- [ ] The student checked factual information in the interview.
- [ ] The student presented the data and was able to list and identify the strengths, weaknesses, or problems of building, renovating or repairing a concrete house.
- [ ] The instructor will assess the amount of detail in: cost, electrical, plumbing, additions, openings, roofing, patching.