

Students will collect true family stories about the “old days” by interviewing older relatives. They will try to find out about the history of their families as far back as anyone can tell them. Students will create a family tree poster which will serve as a visual aid in tracing their history. Once they have collected the true stories and have a feel for what life was like long ago they will write a fictional tale from the point of view of their relative. The students will then have a choice of either writing and illustrating a picture book OR practicing storytelling and videotaping it for their relatives in time for the Christmas Holiday. We will integrate this activity into art with our illustrations, and math class by working with prices of the past. Throughout the unit I will intersperse mini-lessons on writing paragraphs, point of view and descriptive writing.

Rationale: This activity will incorporate interview (speaking), listening, and recording skills, as well as creative writing skills. The activity shows the value of oral tradition and storytelling because it is in essence storytelling about family history.

Activity 1: Preparing for the Interview

1. Choose a family member to interview, a grandparent if possible.
2. Create a list of 15 interview questions that are time specific. (i.e. When they were 12 years old.)
3. Edit your questions and bring them to me for approval.
4. Type your questions and leave space for detailed answers.
5. Set up an interview time with a formal request card. Some interviews may have to be done over the phone.

Activity 2: Family Tree

1. Show the class an example of a family tree. Explain that family trees are visuals that show many generations of a family beginning with you and branching out to your parents, your parents’ parents.
2. Include: Full names, date of birth (and death) and occupation.
3. Display the information on poster paper and make it visually appealing.

Activity 3: Fictional Tale- Picture Book/ Oral Storytelling

1. The relative that you interviewed is now the main character of the story you are about to create.
2. You will first describe the setting where the story will take place.
3. You will then write about each of the main characters giving them a physical description and a personality.
4. Finally you will tell a story about an event that happened to these characters in the setting you described from the point of view of your main character. ***Although the story is fictional, use the information gathered from your interview to make your story as realistic as possible.*** Give your story a climax or peak event where something happens. End your story with a solution or something learned by the main character.
5. Create a written rough draft.
6. Edit your story.
7. Type your story and set it up as a picture book with illustrations. **OR**
8. Do the exact same activity as above EXCEPT you will be telling the story out loud in front of a video camera.
9. Practice telling your story out loud without the aid of your rough draft several times.
10. Videotape yourself telling the story, preferably without using your notes.

Unit Analysis

I began the Collecting Family Stories unit by reading several stories involving grandparents. I then had them do some journaling about their own families and what family means to them. I then proposed the interview to them and explained all the things that would be involved in the unit. I did explain that they would be writing a fictional story about their character- their grandparent- during a specific time in their lives, for example when they were in grade 5. When students brought back their interviews, many had a large range of ages to which they had gathered information through their interviews. When the students began writing their rough drafts they realized that perhaps their questions were not time specific enough to write a story. Most students had to go back to their grandparents and ask more questions; therefore the next time I do this activity I would take this into consideration.

When I went through the editing process, I read many stories where character's came home from school and played video games, watched T.V., or any of the other things that children enjoy today in their spare time. I had to ask the questions such as: "Are you sure these things existed in 1945?" This led to a research activity where students chose the year when their story took place and did an information web with the year in the center. They would find out things that were popular in this year, like what kind of music was listened to, toys that were popular, inventions, types of cars, etc. We decided that along with the interview, the fictional story, and the family tree, we would add this web to our collection as well.

When we were finished putting together our collections, students would get into small groups and tell a story about their grandparent (without the aid of their papers).

Following the completion of our unit, I gave the students a questionnaire asking the following questions: A) Did you learn anything about your family that you didn't already know? B) Does your family tell stories? C) Did you like storytelling from someone else's point of view? D) What did you like about the unit? Dislike?

Overall the students really enjoyed the unit. They especially liked finding out how different life was when their grandparents grew up. For some it was a huge learning experience. Up to this point we had not done writing from different points of view so for some it was more difficult to step into that role than others. During the teaching of point of view I also played a game where in groups students had to each tell a story then tell their own story or someone else's story to the class. The class would then guess if it was their own or someone else's story. Many interesting stories came up during the unit about wars and deaths in the family. One boy in particular realized that the name his family goes by was just a chosen name and he found out the story behind the name change. Many students also reflected on how this was the most they had talked to their grandparents and felt more of a relationship following the assignment. Many students said this would be an assignment that their parents would save as a keepsake.

Overall, I believe the unit was a success and now having completed it, I have found many different ways to build on this activity. There are many things to research as well as some cross-curricular ideas. We happened to do this activity close to Remembrance Day which led to discussions about who has been to war (social studies), the cost of items and what family incomes were on average during certain time periods (story problems in math), or inventions (science). Hopefully this unit will encourage students to strengthen ties to their family and create stories that one day they may be able to tell to their children.

Sample Interview Questions

1. Tell me about when and where you were born.
2. Do you know why you were given the name you have?
3. What events happened the year you were born?
4. Tell me about your mother. What is her full name and when and where was she born? Where did she grow up? Do you have any interesting stories about her? Same for father, brothers, sisters, grandparents.
5. What was your house like? Do you remember your neighbors?
6. Did you share a room with anyone? What was your room like?
7. Did you ever fly a kite? Have a favorite toy? Who made it/where did you get it?
8. Did you ride a bike? If so where did you ride to? What kind of games did you play?
9. Did you have a rodeo, town fair, or talent show? Did you ever enter?
10. Did you go to church? What kind of traditions did you celebrate that we don't do now?
11. Did you have a favorite pet? Do you remember anything funny that they did?
12. What kind of chores did you do?
13. What kind of food did your mother make? What was your favorite? How has it changed from the way we eat today?
14. What was your school like? What was your favorite subject? Teacher? What did you do at recess? Did you ever go on a school field trip? What year did you graduate? How many people did you graduate with? Were there school sports? Who were your best friends in school? What was the best thing you did together?
15. Did you go trick or treating on Halloween?
16. How did you celebrate Christmas? Did Santa come?
17. What was the biggest winter storm you can remember? Did you play in the snow?
18. How did you meet grandpa/grandma? What did you do on your dates? How old were you when you got married? Where did you get married? Tell me about the day.
19. Did you know anyone in the military (war)?
20. Are there any inventions that you specifically remember?
21. Are there any events that you specifically remember?