

Lesson Plan – Documenting Immigration Through Oral History

“The essence of America lies not in the headlined heroes...but in the everyday folks who live and die unknown, yet leave their dreams as legacies.” – Alan Lomax, folklorist, 1940

Background:

History is not only the story of famous men and women, not merely what is recorded in textbooks. The story of the past is also told in the experiences of ordinary people. There are many ways to access these ordinary experiences; this lesson asks students to consider primary documents of participants in the migration northward from the Mississippi Delta to cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and New York City.

The final assessment for this lesson asks students to consider the use of oral history in documenting historical experience. Oral history involves the gathering, preserving and interpreting of the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events. Oral history is perhaps the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word. Students completing this assessment will act as *historians*, investigating the circumstances surrounding the immigration and migration of their own families to the United States and the New York City area (or wherever the lesson may be done). By comparing their own experiences with those of key migrant groups from the Mississippi Delta, students will analyze the causes and impact of different migrant movements in American history.

NB: This lesson and assessment is written for a high school US history class, but could easily be used in an elementary or junior high setting.

Objectives (adapted from New York State Learning Standards):

- To understand the causes and impact of immigration within the United States during the 19th and 20th centuries (esp. the Great Migrations of South to North)
- To understand how initial clashes between migrant and home populations ended in varying degrees of acculturation and assimilation
- To understand the “push-pull” theory of immigration

Materials needed:

[World map](#) for projection on screen/wall
[Handout](#): Letters to the *Chicago Defender*
[Assessment](#) description for students

I. Hook (10–15 minutes)

We're going to start with a few minutes of writing... actually, we're going to start with a pretty simple question: **Where do you come from?** How would you answer that question?

After a few minutes of silent writing, have students share out. (If time permits, you may want to have them first share with a partner or in small groups.) As students read, mark on the map the locations that students describe.

After a few students have shared, ask the class what they notice about the pattern of responses. (More than likely, students' answers will reveal that their families (if not they themselves) were born somewhere else from where they sit today.)

Choose one student to describe in further depth his/her journey to the present location. Explain that you are going to conduct a short interview, and you want to hear more about their story – this will serve as a model for what students should be doing for the final assessment. What do they know about their family histories and the reasons for their movement to their current home? As the student shares, have one student record the answers on the board.

Ask students to look at the list. What reasons would they describe as “push” factors for a family's motion? What reasons would they describe as “pull” factors?

II. Development/Lecture (15 min)

Transition to topic of Great Migration of Delta to the North, beginning in the 1930s. Though we often study immigration from overseas as a major theme in American history, *internal migration* has also played a major part in shaping American history as well.

The term “The Great Migration” refers to the mass population shift of African-Americans from the south to the north beginning with the onset of World War I around 1913 and continuing through the 1930s and 1940s. One major cause of this migration was the increasing mechanization of agriculture.

During this time, many major northern cities such Chicago, Detroit, and New York experienced exponential growth in their African-American populations. For example, between 1920 and 1930, the African American population of Chicago, doubled, increasing from 109,458 to 233,903.

For further background for a mini-lecture:

http://history.ulib.csuohio.edu/migration/lessons/Finucan_The%20Great%20Migration.pdf

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/flood/peoplevents/e_sharecroppers.html

<http://www.inmotionaame.org/migrations/topic.cfm?migration=9&topic=1>

III. Reading (20 min)

The challenge in our study of history is to imagine our way into the specific experiences of people during grand historical moments, such as the Great Migration. It is one thing to describe with statistics the shift in population from the South to the North, or to generalize about the reasons for why this shift occurred; it is quite another to understand this movement on a personal level, to understand the impact of this change on real people. One way to access this historical experience is through the study of primary documents such as letters.

Instructions for students:

Read the three letters below. As you read, think about those “push-pull” factors previously discussed in class. Underline any details in the letters that you would consider a push factor in these writers’ reasons for wanting to move; circle any details you would consider to be a pull factor.

IV. Assessment

Students should choose one family member, or member of their community, for an interview – the goal of the interview is to explore an individual story of immigration or migration, and to try to place that story within the larger context of American history.

Suggestions for questions:

- What country are you originally from?
- Why did you leave this country?
- When did you leave? How old were at that time?
- What were the conditions in the country when you left?
- How did you prepare for your trip here?
- Who came with you when you emigrated? Who did you leave behind? What did you leave behind?
- How did you get here? Did you stay somewhere else before arriving here?

source:

http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/newamericans/foreducators_lesson_plan_09.html#Interview

For the final product, students should complete:

- Pre-interview writing (explanation of interest in subject and draft questions)
- Transcript of subject’s words (2-3 pages)
- Written reflection: What similarities do you see between your interview subject’s immigration or migration experience and that of the oral history you read in class? What push or pull factors figured into your subject’s movement?

THE WORLD



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WHERE ARE WE FROM?

NAME: _____

Letters to the Chicago Defender

Between 1916 and 1921 a half million African Americans left the South and journeyed to cities in the North and West in what was then the largest internal movement of a people in such a concentrated period of time in the history of the nation. Migrants' letters to northern newspapers were among the best sources for understanding the migration process and interpreting the migrants' motivations for leaving. Letters to the *Chicago Defender*— a black newspaper published in Chicago that strongly urged southern blacks to migrate North— attest to migrants' strong desire to “better their condition,” often risking their lives and possessions to make the trip north.

Instructions:

Read the three letters below. As you read, think about those “push-pull” factors previously discussed in class. Underline any details in the letters that you would consider a push factor in these writers' reasons for wanting to move; circle any details you would consider to be a pull factor. Be prepared to discuss your findings with the class.

Dear Sir: I have been reading the Chicago defender and seeing so many advertisements about the work in the north I thought to write you concerning my condition. I am working hard in the south and can hardly earn a living. I have a wife and one child and can hardly feed them. I thought to write and ask you for some information concerning how to get a pass for myself and family. I dont want to leave my family behind as I cant hardly make a living for them right here with them and I know they would fare hard if I would leave them. If there are any agents in the south there havent been any of them to Lutcher if they would come here they would get at least fifty men. Please sir let me hear from you as quick as possible. Now this is all. Please dont publish my letter, I was out in town today talking to some of the men and they say if they could get passes that 30 or 40 of them would come. But they havent got the money and they dont know how to come. But they are good strong and able working men. If you will instruct me I will instruct the other men how to come as they all want to work. Please dont publish this because we have to whisper this around among our selves because the white folks are angry now because the negroes are going north. * *

* NATCHEZ, MISS., Sept. 22-17

Dear Sir: I am a reader of the Chicago Defender I think it is one of the Most Wonderful Papers of our race printed. Sirs I am writeing to see if You all will please get me a job. And Sir I can wash dishes, wash iron nursing work in groceries and dry good stores. Just any of these I can do. Sir, who so ever you get the job from please tell them to send me a ticket and I will pay them. When I get their as I have not got enough money to pay my way. I am a girl of 17 years old and in the 8 grade at Knox Academy School. But on account of not having money enough I had to stop school. Sir I will thank you all with all my heart. May God Bless you all. Please answer in return mail. * * * PORT ARTHUR, TEXAS, 5/5th/17

under the head lines in the Chicago Defender of Saturday April 22-17 I red how some of us that goes up north are being treated. there is a few that have gone from this city north, and came back a few weeks. some say they came back on account of being to cold "The ohters Say they ware to pay so much to get work etc" I would like to go north. and would rather be in some place. other then Chicago or near Chicago. I am a union man" but dont exspect to work at union only" there is a few of us union men that are planning to go north and Kindly please write me" all so I mail you one of my union cards hoping to heare from you soon I am respectfully,
Yours. * * * MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE April 23, 1917

DOCUMENTING MIGRATION WITH ORAL HISTORY

The letters to the *Chicago Defender* are a window on to the motivations and circumstances of African-Americans living in the South in the early 20th century.

For this assignment, choose one family member, or member of your community, for an interview. The goal of the interview is to explore an individual story of immigration or migration, and to try to place that story within the larger context of American history.

Requirements:

- Pre-interview writing (explanation of interest in subject and draft questions)
- Transcript of subject's words (2-3 pages)
- Written reflection: What similarities do you see between your interview subject's immigration or migration experience and that of the oral history you read in class? What push or pull factors figured into your subject's movement? (1 page)

NAME:

INTERVIEW SUBJECT:

DATE AND LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:

ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS PRIOR TO YOUR INTERVIEW:

THIS PERSON'S EXPERIENCE IS IMPORTANT IN UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSES AND IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION BECAUSE:

IN INTERVIEWING HIM/HER, I HOPE TO GET INSIGHT ON...

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

TO PREPARE FOR YOUR INTERVIEW, WRITE BELOW A SET OF POTENTIAL QUESTIONS.

Remember: Do not be bound by the order of these questions. If your subject brings up a topic that deserves further exploration, do not hesitate to ask a follow-up question. You may not get to all of these questions in your interview.

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