

Oral History and Experiential Science Learning: Women's Empowerment in Nittaya

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Many social science teachers worry about how to make social science fun for students. They feel slight envy at the enthusiasm of children when they step out of science labs. They feel that their subject is harder to teach, because it is harder to make experiential, and therefore relevant, than science.

However, social science experiential learning is everywhere. Social studies is found within every village and town, and is embedded within each market, panchayat and house. A child's familiar social environment is the perfect field for experiential learning in social studies. It is simply up to the students and teacher to utilize this rich resource for social studies.

Following is an account of my experience using oral history as a tool to learn about the history of women's empowerment. My approach was dynamic, evolving with every class session. The topic changed from the original, as did the approach. I have learned some main points that can be used for oral history or social science investigation in the future.

Oral history projects generally take one of two approaches. The first is to investigate an event, person or other historical development that is unique to a particular area. The second is to investigate how a historical development with a wide impact affected a local area. I took the latter approach for this event.

I had originally thought that the children could investigate the Green Revolution in Nittaya, because it seemed to be the recent event with the biggest economic and social effect. Many of the girls seemed disinterested in the topic. However, the girls seemed to be very interested whenever we talked about women's rights or the inequalities between girls and boys. They are of the age in which these inequalities are beginning to become more apparent. The girls had questions about women's issues, but were also able to offer their own insight. This combination, of interest, curiosity, and first-hand knowledge, provided a ripe base from which to work.

I started the process by imparting interviewing skills to the students. Interview is the method of gathering oral history, and I therefore thought this was the natural place to start. I thought that interviewing would come naturally for the children. Interviewing happens quite often in daily life. When we meet we ask each other who we are, and when we hear that someone has had an interesting experience, we continuously ask questions until our curiosity is satisfied.

However, I found that it did not. In daily life, interviewing is natural because we are interested in the subject. From the beginning, I tried to encourage my students with

interviewing topics that I thought they would find interesting. Interviewing did not come naturally for them. When interviewing based on prepared questions, they often answered the question directly and succinctly, without probing deeper for more interesting facts, asking further related questions, or encouraging the interviewee to go on.

I think this is for two reasons. First, they were not sufficiently interested in the subject matter. In the first few cases, I had given them interviewing assignments not based on previous experience or classroom discussions, but based on my own views of what they might like. The object of these first few assignments was for them to develop interviewing skills, and therefore I did not pay enough attention to the content.

Second, they were in school, and treated the assignments as if they were school assignments, to be graded and checked by the teacher. They did these assignments not for themselves, but for me. I realized that, to be good interviewers, they first had to genuinely be interested in the subject and interviewing as a way to learn more about the subject.

In order to circumvent these problems, I shifted focus to subject matter, rather than interviewing. During these first few lessons, I found that the girls were curious about women's roles and women's empowerment. Many of the interviews from the first sessions surrounded this topic.

To venture into the topic of women's empowerment, I engaged the girls to draw pictures detailing "girl's work" and "boy's work." They did this in groups. It was a good start for talking about an issue that could induce shyness, because the girls had the opportunity to express their thoughts through pictures, rather than speaking in front of every one else. The girls then discussed the differences they saw in the pictures. The biggest is that boys could play sports, while girls could stay at home to do work.

In the next session, in order to ascertain indicators of empowerment, the girls looked at pictures of women cut from newspapers. In a large group, we spoke of why or why not the women in the pictures were empowered. The photos were vast, including Sonia Gandhi, a group of girls laughing, a woman drinking beer, a woman using a computer, and many more. To my surprise, the girls found that every woman was empowered. They further thought that they exhibited every indicative trait of empowerment, except for the ability to speak openly and confidently with boys. Through this exercise, the girls learned basic ideas about empowerment by themselves, through their own thought process. Because the exercise was charged, the girls became interested in the subject matter.

In order to emphasize this activity, I then created a snakes and ladders game, with positive indicators of empowerment at the bottom of stairs (such as "Woman uses money she earns to send child to school.") and negative ones at the heads of snakes (such as "Teacher says girls are bad at maths."). After playing this game once, and discussing the cards, the girls created their own cards. One group did so quickly, and the other begged to be told what to write. However, both groups participated when we played again, questioning whether the positive or negative indicators were truly positive or negative.

For example, one group decided that “Girls are not allowed to go outside at night.” was a positive indicator. Some girls from the other group disagreed, saying that it was negative. We did not come to a conclusion, but it was important to qualify the statements.

It is important that I did not engage them to produce any work by themselves at this point- these activities were purely discussion-based. They were not worried about the outcome, and could speak freely. This was an attempt for them to truly internalize the points and relate them to their own lives, rather than memorize points to be regurgitated later. This way, when they did write and produce individual work, they did not do so to please me.

In the next sessions, I gave them two short writing assignments, which we discussed afterwards. These assignments were based on how the inequalities between men and women affected their own lives. The assignments were “Why do you like or not like being a girl?” and “How was your grandmother’s life different than yours?” Sharing our assignments was important, because girls were able to relate to each other and gain new insights into their own experience. They learned from each other. I was impressed that they shared so openly with each other. I did not look at the writing pieces, or comment negatively about them. I did this consciously—I wanted to create an environment in which there were no negative consequences to sharing work. They wrote fluidly and quickly, and mostly kept to the task.

The point of these writing assignments was to learn from the girls’ own experience. They wrote about their lives and opinions, and we learned basic ideas about women’s empowerment and history, such that empowerment often surrounds schooling, control of money, and marriage, simply by looking at their own lives. The subject matter was immediately personal, and did not seem like a typical school exercise for them.

After these writing assignments, we brainstormed questions to ask their mothers. The girls created many questions, some of which were useless (such as, “Do you like to plant plants and flowers?”) and some more useful questions about education and marriage. I pushed them to talk about marriage with their mothers, but the girls refused—they were embarrassed to do so, and thought that it would be insulting.

Previously, the girls had created questions to ask a local teacher who came in for a day. They read their questions mechanically and seemed only interested in taking down enough of her response to answer the question. Based on that experience, and the quality of the questions that the girls created, I decided that it would be best to simply prod their mothers to talk about their lives, paying unique attention to schooling, work, and differences between girls’ and boys’ lives. With these instructions, I gave the girls a tape recorder and asked them to record their interviews.

We listened to the interviews the next day. I was dismayed—the girls asked many questions that had nothing to do with our aims, and that they knew the answers too, such as, “How many children does your chacha have?” I think that it was useful to let them do an initial interview with un-prepared questions because they were able to become

comfortable with the pace of interviewing, and put their interviewees (their mothers) at ease with interviewing. Some bits of the interviews were useful for our goal, and we gleaned these bits in order to create more questions for interviewing.

The girls then conducted a second round of interviews, using the questions we created together after the first round of interviews, with results vast improved. The mothers' answers were fairly candid, and the girls were proud of the results. Since each girl asked the same questions, we were able to compare, contrast, and create well-developed answers to each question. The weighed the answers to each question, and worked together to formulate the answers. The discussion over questions led easily to debate—the girls argued over points brought up in the interviews. For example, one question asked why before, girls only studied until eight standard at most, and now they study until 12th or college. One girl's mother said it was because families are now richer and can send girls to school. One said it was simply that there were more schools. The girls were very protective of the views of their own mothers, and debated the merits of their own mother's answers. They did not realize that all the answers were correct, and thought that only their mother's was. On this particular point, we came to the conclusion that all answers were correct reasons that girls now study more.

Then, girls wrote up stories about the past place of women based on the interviews with their own mothers. They wrote quickly, and the stories were basically summaries of what the mothers had said. The girls did not make judgments or analysis of their mother's arguments. However, they were able to write fluidly, and use many examples to support statements such as "Girls work in the field less than they did before."

There were three major accomplishments to this project that can come from any similar oral history project. The first is that girls became interviewers, asking their subjects "why" over and over, and became aware of the need to ask this question to get further answers. Second, unexpectedly, they easily debated. I think this is because they felt ownership of the evidence they collected, first because they themselves collected it, and second because it came from their mothers, whose words they trusted. Third, perhaps because they became familiar with the subject matter, they were able to write fluidly about the subject, without stopping or trying to stop at a certain word length.

Additionally, the girls learned about women's empowerment by themselves, through their own discussions, games, and informal interactions with their mothers. They learned the all-important lesson that they do not need a teacher to learn, they could take it into their own hands by questioning themselves and others. Their subject matter was small- the change in women's empowerment through the eyes of their own mothers- but these girls were world experts on these matters. Through oral history, they actually started the process of becoming historians.

Interviewing exercises: I conducted these sessions first, but I think that they would be better after exploring the subject matter of the oral history project. They were useful to assess the writing ability and interviewing skills.

Exercise One: Interview Each Other

Devise 4 topics from which children can choose to interview each other. I used: When my baby sister/brother was born, My favorite thing to do, What I would like to be when I grow up.

Goals:

1. Have the children become accustomed to converting spoken answers to written work.
2. Develop children's ability to think of questions surrounding a topic.
3. Ascertain social issues interesting to students.

Let students choose their interview topics. During the interviews, encourage children to think about who, what, where, when and why when answering the questions. If children cannot think of any more questions, offer suggestions.

Share each story at the end. Ask what they liked about the stories in order to ascertain what makes a story enjoyable. In my group, they liked funny anecdotes (such as one about burning kitchedee) and issues that are common to them (such as learning to cook because it is necessary after marriage). Ask for what they do not like, but they may not give answers as so not to offend their fellow students.

Interview someone else collectively:

Choose someone from outside the class, such as another teacher or principal, for the class to interview collectively about a topic. The topic should be specific to the interviewees experience (such as teaching experience) rather than about their thoughts about a particular subject.

Goals:

1. Making questions surrounding a topic.

Brainstorm questions and topic collectively. Encourage any questions, not just those pertinent to topic. When they interview, ask them to take notes afterwards, not during the interview, as so not to interrupt their concentration level. At the end, ask what they remembered from the interview, and which answers best pertained to the topics. Talk about the questions that got the best answers, and why. Go over questions and point out the ones that led to the best answers, and the ones that led to un-related answers.

Interviewing for specific project

1. Let students perform one set of interviews without much preparation. Give them basic points to attempt to answer (in my case, how has education and marriage changed for women?) but do not give them specific questions. This gives them the chance to become comfortable with interviewing. From these interviews, the class

may be able to glean specific points that are worth further investigation, since people talk about issues that are important and interesting to them.

2. On the second set of interviews, discuss, compare and contrast the viewpoints of the different interviewees in order for students to gain a comprehensive understanding of the matter. Encourage debate, but remind students that many answers can be correct, and may be interrelated. Try to ascertain why different interviewees gave different answers.