

Social Interviews as a Mechanism to Involve Students in the Learning Process

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Research on effective teaching indicates that learning is best accomplished when the teacher can get students directly involved in the process of learning. The teaching of history is no different than any other subject matter in this regard. In spite of what we know about effective teaching today, the lecture continues to remain the main vehicle for history instruction.

Getting students directly involved in the process of learning history need not be as difficult as it seems and can often result in superior results in student comprehension. The following approaches have proved to be successful either directly in a history class or in a related subject area.

1. The Historical Library Search.

This activity develops library search skills in history. Each student is given a specific topic to research and follows a specific trail through the library. It begins with encyclopedias, proceeds through Indexes, abstracts, to specific periodicals and newspapers and ends up in the card catalog. The student gathers a reference in each section and is asked to cite correctly. The instructor then meets with each student and designs a term paper around the topic based on the preliminary information the student gathered. The student then backtracks his research steps going deeper into the literature for a more thorough search. This project could also result in an oral report on the topic at the appropriate time in the lecture.

2. Simulated Practice (Role Playing).

Role playing benefits the role player primarily but can be designed as well for the audience to be actively involved in the drama. Besides having the audience participate as passive learners (for example, being led by Dio Lewis in exercises), scripts can be written in which the audience takes an active role in the play by asking specific questions, or behaving in the manner of the period (a 19th. century woman fainting, rowdy behavior by male college students, questions or answers to questions which demonstrate prevalent attitudes of the period, etc.). Students are assigned parts to play and are evaluated on the authenticity of their research (This can easily be tied into #1 above).

3. Social interviews (Interview an elder)

Social interviews with a senior, especially one over 65 and preferably a family member, create hands on experience and motivation for the student to do more than just go through the motions of doing a paper on an unknown person. Expanding historical research into scrapbooks, yearbooks, old newspapers, and verification of the data by reading how other historians view the period and

interviewing others who lived and were there during the period unveils additional documentation which the student can use to paint a clearer and more accurate picture of both the period and the person's place in history.

Getting students actively involved in historical research does take more organization initially, however the rewards in student interest and comprehension far outweigh the initial organizational costs and give the instructor a far greater sense of satisfaction than any lecture.