Organizing and Executing Meaningful and Manageable Community-Based Oral History Projects

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ABSTRACT: Student community-based projects are a natural tool for achieving diverse public history outcomes, yet these types of projects are challenging to organize and manage. Focusing on two undergraduate community-centered oral history projects, this article serves as a guide for those interested in developing manageable service-learning projects that facilitate meaningful community partnerships. It explores lessons learned during the projects' organization and execution including how to keep them manageable in terms of scope, scale, and structure and how to maximize available resources (both human and material). It also advances methods for developing student skills in new media technologies and platforms.

KEY WORDS: oral history, service learning, community-based project development, town/gown divide, social change

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to provide a guide for instructors and community members interested in developing service-learning projects to facilitate meaningful learning experiences, cultivate historical knowledge, and help students develop specific marketable skills. As a graduate student I worked at the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program (SPOHP) at the University of Florida, under the leadership of Paul Ortiz. SPOHP’s mission is to develop research projects that broaden the scope and scale of our historical knowledge and make the findings accessible and relevant.
to a wide audience. It seeks to increase social awareness and create meaningful relationships between the university and local communities and to train students in the practice of oral history. During my tenure at SPOHP, I co-managed the internship program and developed and instructed a summer Introduction to Oral History course for mainly non-history major undergraduates. I draw on these experiences to illustrate useful lessons for developing community-based projects so that others may borrow successful ideas and avoid potential pitfalls.

As greater numbers of practitioners look for ways to incorporate oral history in the classroom, the number of pedagogical books and articles has increased dramatically. These resources are extremely useful in encouraging thoughtful, responsible instruction and incorporation of oral history. Some articles focus on specific parts of the interview or interpretive process. Others examine the benefits, challenges, and opportunities surrounding community-based projects. Very few,  

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2 Read more about SPOHP here: http://oral.history.ufl.edu/welcome/mission/.  
3 In spring 2013 I worked as a co-graduate coordinator at SPOHP with Ross Larkin who helped manage the Holy Trinity Episcopal Church (HTEC) project. I was the sole instructor for the Introduction to Oral History course in summer 2013.  
6 Laura Benadiba’s “The Persistence of Silence after Dictatorships,” Oral History Review 39, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2012): 287–97 explores how students can engage with local and national history, thus
however, explain how to set up and manage community-based projects, a task that many practitioners—especially novices—can find daunting.  

This article provides concise, easy-to-follow recommendations for creating meaningful and manageable community-based projects, whether you are in an academic or a community setting. I learned the following lessons through trial and error:

1. Cultivate a clear vision of the project from start to finish. Establishing well-defined, obtainable goals enables you to craft an appropriate project and timeline.
2. Be open-minded about potential projects. Different projects offer different opportunities. Think about your goals and look for projects that will help you achieve those goals.
3. Maximize available resources. Ascertain the strengths and limitations of your proposed project by identifying what it will take to accomplish. Consider the time investment, necessary expertise, technology requirements, and accrued costs.
4. Identify at least one point person in the community who has strong credibility to help you establish trust and gain access. Cultivate a meaningful relationship with this person so you can help each other achieve your respective goals.
5. Be an efficient, effective, flexible manager. Outline a clear, detailed plan for the project but be adaptable, as things can often change at the last


Baylor University produced a user-friendly guide for project planning. It is available online at http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/43912.pdf. Left Coast Press also recently published a five-part guide entitled the Community Oral History Toolkit, which fleshes out different aspects of oral history and how to plan, manage, and execute a community-based project. Mary Kay Quinlan, Nancy MacKay, and Barbara W. Sommer, Community Oral History Toolkit (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013). The Oral History Association published Laurie Mercier’s Using Oral History in Community History Projects in 2010 as part of its Practices in Oral History series.

Later in this article I will discuss the benefits of cultivating multiple access points into a community. When you have only one point person, he or she can influence the interview sample group and project outcomes.
minute. Establish a clear timeline with benchmarks for monitoring progress but readjust those as necessary to accommodate project development.

For simplicity I limited the list to five basic concepts, though some of these elements have related recommendations that will be fleshed out in the article. To articulate and contextualize these lessons, I focus on two undergraduate community-centered oral history projects from 2013. In the appendices, I provide sample syllabi from both projects to demonstrate project organization and structure.

The first project was a partnership with Holy Trinity Episcopal Church (HTEC) of Gainesville, Florida. It is a local, affluent, service-minded congregation situated in the downtown area. In 2012, prior to my arrival at SPOHP, the church archivist, Carolyn Horter, contacted the program requesting guidance in developing an oral history archive. Holy Trinity, a longtime advocate for Gainesville’s homeless population, wanted not only to record the church’s history but also to focus on its conscious decision to remain an integral part of the community’s social justice efforts. By the spring of 2013 we sat down with Carolyn to see if we could transition SPOHP from being merely a resource for the archival project to becoming a partner in collecting, preserving, and presenting its history. Carolyn embraced this opportunity since a HTEC/SPOHP partnership would serve both organizations’ needs. HTEC developed the archival collection of audio and video testimony they desired and received additional labor to help the project proceed.\footnote{Prior to this time, Carolyn was the sole oral historian. A partnership with SPOHP helped HTEC collect a greater number of high-quality interviews more quickly.} Incorporating students also introduced new people to the church’s presence and mission in the local community. The partnership benefited SPOHP and our students in multiple ways. It strengthened SPOHP’s ties to the community and the project provided an opportunity for students to engage with the local population. Students also learned how to use oral history as a tool to document and preserve the history of local grassroots activism. They also had the opportunity to work with new technologies to further develop their digital skills portfolio.

The second project was part of a summer Introduction to Oral History course centered on a study of Florida’s farm labor history. I chose to develop the course around this topic because it aligned with my research interests and because few students were familiar with the state’s agricultural labor history. For this project, students interviewed residents of Apopka, Florida, many of whom were former farmworkers or came from farmworking families. Other interviewees were residents who were in some way affected by the area’s agricultural history. We worked with the Farmworker Association of Florida (FWAF), an advocacy group that works to improve the lives of farmworkers today. I wanted to introduce my students to farm labor history, which they had not previously studied in school, and this
aligned with the FWAF’s goals of exposing the public to the history of farmworkers and adding workers’ experiences to the official archival record. Operating through the University of Florida, the interviews we collected became part of the university’s archive. This aspect of the project was important to many of the African American participants who wanted their story acknowledged, documented, and preserved.10

My courses used oral history to access lesser-known histories, develop technical skills, and foster connections between students and the local community. Oral history projects can be extremely rewarding, but they can also be very challenging to organize and manage. As solo instructors, we have significant control over the classroom learning experience; but as members of service-learning projects we become partners in the learning process. This means we must be highly organized, but incredibly flexible.

Developing Community-Based Service-Learning Projects

One of the earliest lessons a good instructor learns is to identify what innovative activities other people are doing and then borrow the best practices, ideas, and skills and incorporate them into her own instruction. Throughout the article I use personal experiences to develop the lessons I outlined in the introduction.

In the fall of 2013, SPOHP technology coordinator Deborah Hendrix worked with University of Florida professor Kathryn V. Dwyer-Navajas and students in the Spanish and Portuguese Studies Department to produce a documentary about immigrants’ experiences in Florida.11 The process of producing the film achieved multiple goals. Students met immigrants and learned about their experiences first hand. They developed greater empathy and understanding about the opportunities and challenges facing immigrants living and working in the United States. Students also learned about filmmaking and how to work with new technologies, and they acquired more flexibility and ingenuity through the experience. Not all students would graduate and take jobs utilizing video production skills, but the experience of learning to master new technologies would help them succeed.

Deborah told me about this project, and we decided to do a similar one in order to teach our students at SPOHP how to effectively communicate with the public

10 Today we often associate Latinos with farmwork, but African Americans made up the vast majority of farm labor in the South throughout the early and mid-twentieth century. Latinos began moving to Florida in the 1950s, but did not dominate agriculture until the 1970s and 1980s. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 cemented the Latinization of the workforce. In particular the Special Agricultural Workers provision provided an opportunity for many farmworkers to gain legal status.

11 Professor Dwyer-Navajas’s film, The Immigrant Experience in Florida: 11 Stories of Work and Life, is available on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wk7kKnKajE) and in the SPOHP archives by Project ID Cat. No. VIDS 090. Additional films created and produced by Dwyer-Navajas, students, and SPOHP are available at http://oral.history.ufl.edu/projects/latinao-diaspora-in-the-americas-project/ldap-resources/spn-3948/.
through audio and video productions. While talking through our goals for the upcoming program, I realized a valuable **first lesson: cultivate a clear vision of the project from start to finish.** We already had an audio production piece planned for the semester, and so we carefully mapped out how to successfully add a video element to the course.

To create a cohesive film, I needed to develop a self-contained project in which students video-interviewed members of a particular community as they reflected on a shared experience. Students conducted their interviews and then edited them into short four-minute mini-documentaries. In the end we wove these segments together to tell a broader story about the community at large.

We began the process by meeting with archivist Carolyn Horter and the Reverend Louanne Lock to discuss their goals and ours. We fleshed out what aspects of the church’s history they wanted to highlight and how we could support their mission to share their history with a broader audience. They agreed to our suggestion of doing this together through a film. Once we had decided upon a theme central to the church’s history and mission—the church’s physical and metaphorical “rebuilding” following a catastrophic fire in 1991—we discussed logistics: the optimal number of interviewees required, how people would be selected, what types of questions we would ask, and how the final video project would be put together. We wanted to have enough interviewees for each of the eleven students enrolled in the course to conduct an interview; this also allowed the church to expand its archive substantially and include a broad spectrum of parishioners. We established a large pool of relevant interviewees (with a few back-ups in case people cancelled, which they did) and created a timeline for setting up and conducting interviews. HTEC developed about ten core questions based on the church’s rebuilding after the fire. This helped us bridge the church’s needs and SPOHP’s. HTEC gathered specific information about a particular aspect of the community

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12 Students at the University of Florida apply for a semester-long internship program with the SPOHP. The students working on the HTEC project were interns. The internship program introduces students to oral history methodology and practice, but focuses on giving them hands-on experiences, including interviewing, processing interviews, and interpreting oral history by developing digital projects utilizing testimony. In this particular semester students produced a podcast from an existing interview in SPOHP’s collection. They also edited their HTEC interview into the four-minute segment that would be used to create the documentary. Students also help coordinate SPOHP’s public history programs during the semester. The public programs feature scholars and activists who utilize oral history in their work, activism, or local communities.

13 We tailored the questions slightly for participants based on their relationship to the church or role within the organization. In general we asked variations of questions such as the following: Why did you choose Holy Trinity rather than one of the other Episcopalian churches in the area? In what capacity have you been involved with the church? Were you a member of Holy Trinity when the church caught fire and burned down in 1991? If so, what do you remember about that experience? Can you tell me about what the church’s programs were like before the church burned down? What about after it rebuilt? How has being located in an urban versus suburban area affected the church community? How would you describe the relationship between the church and the local community? What do you hope Holy Trinity’s lasting impact is on the Gainesville community?
that interested them and SPOHP used this shared experience to develop a coherent film.

This process taught me a second lesson: be open-minded. Having read several articles and chapters illustrating how oral history can be effectively used to address the experiences of marginalized people, many of the students were disappointed to learn they would be interviewing individuals who appeared to be a lot like them—predominantly white and mainly middle and upper class—about their church. Although I could appreciate this sentiment, as an instructor I had to be open-minded in identifying a community partner and working with them to meet our different goals.

To overcome the enthusiasm gap, students and I discussed the importance of understanding and preserving different types of histories, even those that appear to be more traditional or mainstream, in order to develop a richer social history of a community. As it turned out, the church had a compelling history that intrigued students and taught them about Gainsville’s local history, which enabled students to connect to the community beyond the university.

In 1991 an arsonist burned Holy Trinity to the ground. The church’s goal was to tell the story of how they rebuilt following this devastating loss and why they decided to continue their “downtown ministry” with the city’s underprivileged and homeless population even though most of the congregants no longer lived in the central city.\footnote{For more information about Holy Trinity’s mission visit http://www.holytrinitygnv.org/about/}. Preserving this history fit squarely within SPOHP’s goals of capturing unique local history and making it accessible to the public. This hands-on service-oriented project taught students how to collect, process, and utilize oral histories. We aimed not only to foster community awareness while introducing undergraduates to the field of oral history, but also to equip students with diverse academic backgrounds and interests with marketable, technical skills, including video-editing skills.

Accomplishing this goal highlighted a third lesson: maximize your available resources and recognize limitations. Resources include people, time, money, materials, and knowledge. Most of us have limited resources available, so it is important to set realistic goals about what you can and cannot do in a project. Establishing this up front also ensures participants are fully aware of the scope and scale of the project. As will be demonstrated, SPOHP’s technology coordinator, Deborah Hendrix, was an invaluable resource for this project since she possessed the expertise to make our vision become a reality. (She also put me in touch with Carolyn Horter, the HTEC archivist, another key resource.) With the exception of Deborah’s time and energy, the HTEC project was not overly resource-intensive for us because SPOHP already owned the technology, including audio and video recorders, tripods, computers, and…

\footnote{For more information about Holy Trinity’s mission visit http://www.holytrinitygnv.org/about/.}
software, we needed to complete the project.\textsuperscript{15} We used Marantz recorders and three Panasonic video cameras and tripods.\textsuperscript{16} SPOHP had about four personal computers students used in the office to edit their videos.\textsuperscript{17} We also had a group of eleven highly motivated university undergraduate students who came from different disciplinary backgrounds and chose to participate in the program. Additionally, it was a local project so we accrued no transportation costs.

From the outset we knew the final video editing would fall on Deborah’s shoulders. It was an ambitious project, we had only one semester to complete it, and we had to teach students technical video skills. Therefore, before the semester began we identified what tasks students would complete and how those should be spread out over the semester to guarantee enough time for each task to be executed well. We also agreed on what tasks Deborah would handle at the end of the semester and how much time she would need to finish those projects.\textsuperscript{18} If Deborah had not been interested in participating, the mini-documentaries would have been the final project, as I personally lacked the expertise to produce a quality full-length documentary. Even had we ended with the mini-documentaries, students would still have learned valuable interviewing, listening, and editing skills and Holy Trinity would have received useful materials, including the raw interview material and the mini-documentaries. If they were pleased with these, they could have used them on their website to highlight individual parishioners and their connection to the church and community. Fortunately, with Deborah’s help, we were able to focus on developing the full documentary.

I front-loaded the sixteen-week semester with readings, discussions, and practice interviews to introduce students to oral history and establish solid background knowledge. Students also transcribed an existing interview in SPOHP’s collection and “audit-edited” a second interview.\textsuperscript{19} These activities showed students the

\textsuperscript{15} SPOHP used Mixpad for audio editing and Adobe Premiere and Apple’s Final Cut Pro for video editing. Audacity is an open-source option for audio editing. Windows Movie Maker is a manageable video editing option if working on a PC.

\textsuperscript{16} Marantz recorders are expensive. In my current oral history program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania we use Olympus digital recorders (VN-722PC) for most projects, though we do have one Marantz recorder available. For some projects, low-budget technologies can work. When I do a family oral history project with non-major history students in my US survey course, I allow students to check out an Olympus recorder, use their smartphones, or record directly onto a laptop if they have one (usually using Audacity). We do not archive those interviews, so I am comfortable allowing them to use whatever technologies they prefer. A key part of project management is weighing your intended outcomes with available resources and striking the appropriate balance for your project.

\textsuperscript{17} Ross Larkin, my co-graduate coordinator, and I monitored student progress each week to assess work quality and make sure students stayed on schedule. We also implemented a peer reviewing system to make sure that the students helped each other to stay on track and develop quality projects.

\textsuperscript{18} In addition to crafting the students’ mini-documentaries into a final film, Deborah also added music and subtitles when necessary.

\textsuperscript{19} SPOHP also requires all interviews be “audit-edited,” meaning someone listens to an interview while reading the transcription and corrects errors. This practice allows SPOHP to make high-quality resources available to scholars and the interviewees themselves. SPOHP provides a manual,
difference between listening to an interview and reading a transcript. It illustrated the challenges involved in turning an oral history interview into a written text. Once students completed these tasks, they put together a short podcast based on an interview that interested them. Students worked individually or in pairs on the podcast project. They listened to the full interview, identified a theme, and crafted a podcast around that theme that included a mix of student narrations and interview clips. Often students set up the podcast with a brief introduction and then used their narrations to weave the interview clips together to tell a coherent story.\textsuperscript{20} The goals of these activities were two-fold. First, we wanted to introduce students to the theories and methodologies associated with oral history. Additionally, we wanted to provide them with hands-on experience using new digital technologies. Although students use many different technologies and media platforms, many are not comfortable learning new ones. They require guidance and practice to become proficient. The projects escalated in difficulty so that as the semester progressed students developed new skills and gained confidence in their ability to utilize new mediums to create digital content. The preliminary podcast also gave them practical experience with crafting a narrative using oral history as a primary source.

By midsemester, students had conducted their interviews and edited those interviews into four-minute mini-documentaries. We agreed on four-minute segments so that the final film would be just under an hour in length. We found one interviewee’s testimony, that of Kathy Dwyer-Navajas, particularly useful because her insights helped establish a framework for the piece.\textsuperscript{21} Kathy articulated many of the core values of the parish and its choice to pursue a ministry serving the local population of people in need. With the student’s permission, Deborah repurposed the four-minute segment, breaking it apart and using it to weave together the other parishioners’ testimonies. This created continuity between interview segments and provided a greater coherency to the narrative.

To create the mini-documentary students built on skills they developed during the podcast project. They reviewed their interview, identified a theme, and selected vignettes illustrating that theme. When students conducted their interviews they also had to collect “B-roll” footage and ask if the interviewees had any photographic images they wanted to potentially include in the film. B-roll footage mainly included film of the church or the neighborhood. Interviewees sometimes provided pictures

\textsuperscript{20} A “theme” could be almost any topic that resonated with the interviewee and interviewer. (Examples include overcoming hardship, wartime experiences, military service, and desegregation, among others.) Earlier in the semester we read about oral history ethics. This project provided an opportunity to practice ethically using an oral history interview in a way that respectfully and accurately reflected the interviewee’s experiences and attitudes. Sample projects are available via SPOHP’s iTunes page: http://oral.history.ufl.edu/collections/podcasts/.

\textsuperscript{21} Kathy Dwyer-Navajas, the University of Florida professor from the Spanish and Portuguese Department whom Deborah previously worked with on an oral history film project, was also a member of the HTEC congregation.

based on Baylor University’s Institute for Oral History, for transcribing and audit-editing interviews. It is available at http://oral.history.ufl.edu/files/SPOHP-Style-Guide-2016.pdf.
of themselves, the church (before and after the fire), and church-related events. Students used these images to create visual diversity for viewers so that they would not be simply watching a “talking head” for an hour.

Students found the project challenging but not overwhelming. The video editing software shared some basic features found in the audio editing software, so although video editing was new to most of the students the podcast project helped them develop familiarity with the basic technology. We held workshops to teach students each new piece of technology. Students then continued working with the software when they came into the office to work.

After students completed their mini-documentaries we met as a group to review each person’s segment, make editing recommendations, see how the segments fit together in a broader story, and discuss how we should structure the final film. Deborah joined us for this part of the project so she could hear students’ thoughts and provide them with technical and stylistic feedback on their segments. In the final phase of the project students submitted their mini-documentaries and Deborah took over compiling and cutting them into the full-length documentary. Ideally, students would have completed the final production; but under the circumstances, it was not feasible. We monitored student progress throughout the semester to make sure Deborah would have enough time to put together a high-quality film.

In addition to utilizing Deborah’s technological skill set, maximizing my resources meant tapping into Carolyn’s network of potential interviewees. This takes us to lesson four: identify a point person in the community who has strong credibility and is willing to help you establish trust and gain access. Ideally you want multiple access points into a community. This helps spread the burden of identifying potential interviewees and can lead to a more diverse pool of candidates. The reality, though, is that many graduate students, novice practitioners, or people new to a community simply may not have established networks of diverse people they can tap into when starting a project. That was our situation with Holy

22 There are YouTube video tutorials for many of these technologies. We encouraged students to check these out as well when they were working on their own and needed extra assistance or wanted to learn how to do something new. Some programs have a steeper learning curve than others. Students continued working with the software during their required office hours and we were generally on site during these sessions to assist them.

23 Students participating in the internship program had to complete eight hours of “office hours” each week. This included time spent on projects, class discussions, and public programs.

24 We could have cut out assignments such as the transcription, audit-edit, and podcast to free up time for more in-depth video editing. We chose not to do this because it would have undermined the overall goals, which is why we structured it with Deborah doing the final editing.

25 Using a single point person to access a community can raise “gatekeeper” issues since it relies heavily, if not solely, on that individual’s network. This can be problematic because it can influence the outcome of the interviews and the focus of the project. Oral historians are sometimes identified as “gatekeepers” because of their knowledge of local people and places. Jessica Taylor, “We’re on Fire: Oral History and the Preservation, Commemoration, and Rebirth of Mississippi’s Civil Rights Sites,” Oral History Review 42, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2015): 231–54.
Trinity. We knew the church archivist, Carolyn Horter, so she became our access point to the community. This partnership with a trusted community member got the project off the ground. She provided introductions and encouraged others to participate based on the merits of the project and our organization. Had the project continued beyond one semester, we could have used our new network of interviewees to develop a team of people to assist us with expanding and diversifying project participation. We did, however, encourage students to ask their interviewees for names of other parishioners who might have stories to contribute. With permission, we gave these lists to Carolyn so that as they continued to collect testimonies, they could include people beyond the list that they initially identified.

We began by discussing various aspects of the project with Carolyn and her team at the church in order to strive towards the ideal of “shared authority.” We talked about their goals for the project and the final film we planned to create. We acknowledged in our first meeting that there was a risk that the documentary we intended to put together would not reflect the exact desires of the parish, since we at SPOHP would be making the major editing decisions and there simply was not enough time in the semester to give it to the parish to review prior to completion. Meeting with the church committee before starting the project helped lessen this issue because we knew we would be focusing on the theme, chosen by the church, of rebuilding after the fire. Fortunately, the committee understood this was an educational project and we had to complete it during the semester. They also knew they would receive copies of the raw interview footage and could choose to do another project based on that material if they desired.

We worked with Carolyn to develop a core set of interview questions that the church hoped people would address. We invited them to help us develop the interview guide so interviews would address issues important to the parish’s history.

I found meeting with my community point person well ahead of the intended start date key to the overall success of the project. Meeting early and often allowed us to flesh out a shared vision, including the number of interviews we hoped to conduct (generally based on the number of students in a course), the focus of the interviews, and how we planned to use them. The planning process highlighted lesson five: be an efficient, effective, and flexible manager. Not only did I have to carefully coordinate the project and interviews, I also had to manage the broader academic experience. (I elaborate on this point much more in the second project I

26 Michael Frisch’s classic 1990 text, A Shared Authority, coined the term “shared authority” and introduced many of us to the concept. Since that time scholars have extensively debated the challenges, scope, and scale of sharing authority, with all agreeing it is an important, albeit challenging, part of the process.

27 Our consent form informed participants that both the University of Florida and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church would receive copies of the interview material and that those materials would be edited and used for public projects. Fortunately, Holy Trinity was satisfied with the film. For several months the church highlighted it on its website and linked visitors to the final film, which was available on SPOHP’s YouTube Channel (SPOHP)).
discuss, where I had to coordinate multiple fieldtrips for students to conduct their interviews.)

I identified key deadlines for the semester by working backwards. I thought about how long it would take for us to complete each step of the process from the interview to editing the final documentary. Students had to have adequate time to: learn about oral history best practices, ethics, methodology; work on digital storytelling by creating a podcast with existing interviews; engage in interview training; complete their interviews; and create their four-minute video segments that would be combined into a longer film. I mapped out the ideal schedule for the semester and then tried to anticipate potential problems (like cancelled interviews) and how we would accommodate complications. While I focused on organizing the structure of the course, Carolyn worked up a list of interviewees, and her committee put together the list of questions they specifically wanted us to ask.

Once we established the list of interviewees and the course was underway, the students and I discussed how to balance the life-history approach with a more focused interview. Since this project had a specific focus in mind—the rebuilding of the church in downtown Gainesville after the fire—we talked about how to flesh out questions that would move beyond simple recollections of the fire itself to thinking about what motivated people to support the church and engage in community service and outreach. As the film depicts, the story wasn’t just about the rebuilding of Holy Trinity’s physical structure. It was about a community rebuilding and consciously renewing its commitment to be a welcoming place of refuge for anyone who needed it. (To view the film, The Fire Within: Rebuilding a Downtown Community, visit the SPOHP YouTube page at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJQOh_zNGzg.)

Once the project began we coordinated interview scheduling and equipment checkout and established deadlines for the various parts of the project. I encouraged students to schedule their interviews earlier rather than later in the semester so that they had ample time to reschedule if their interviewee cancelled, which did happen. Since we only had three video cameras available at SPHOP, I needed to make sure students staggered their interviews with adequate time to check out the technology they needed and return it for the next person to use. We also established specific benchmarks, assigning due dates for specific components of the project (the interview, transcript, and the edited mini-documentary).

Whenever possible the students used the interviewee information provided by Carolyn to conduct additional research about their assigned person and craft an interview guide tailored specifically to him or her. On a few occasions participants cancelled and new interviewees were called up at the last minute. Although the students could not prepare as thoroughly as they might have liked when these sudden changes occurred, many realized this was a common reality in oral history. They found that the most important preparation involved developing sufficient background knowledge about the church’s history and learning to ask open-ended questions.

A Google Calendar works well for project organization. You can control the master calendar and allow students to enter information such as the dates of their scheduled interviews, when they submitted an assignment, etc. It allows for a quick visual progress check.
At the close of the semester, the students, interviewees, and SPOHP faculty and staff gathered together on an April evening in the church meeting hall for a potluck dinner and viewing party. After talking about our various experiences over dinner, we watched the final documentary together and distributed copies of it to each of the participants. The evening provided a good opportunity for students and participants to reconnect. The students and participants witnessed the fruits of their labor and we left satisfied that Carolyn and the others were pleased with the final project and felt it accurately captured the spirit of the church and its members. In addition to each participant receiving a copy of the film, HTEC posted a link to the film on its website so that current and future parishioners could learn more about the church’s history.

For the vast majority of students, the interview and project experience surpassed their expectations. They were proud of the new technology skills they acquired. Although some students were skeptical of the subject material at first, the experience showed them oral history’s usefulness in understanding different aspects of a community. They realized that investigating and recording these stories preserved the history of a local institutional landmark. The students also experienced how oral history connects people in the community. Watching them chat with their interviewees at the viewing-party dinner illustrated how sharing time and personal experiences can not only reveal a community’s history but also actively build community.

Applying Lessons: A New Course and Project

Following the HTEC project I had the opportunity to teach an Introduction to Oral History course in the summer of 2013. I sought to apply the lessons I had learned over the last semester in developing the project for the second course. The goals for the class, both in content and practice, were broader than those of the Holy Trinity project. I specifically developed the course to reflect my interests in Florida farm labor and oral history. Additionally, with increasing pressure to make a liberal arts education “relevant,” I consciously sought to cultivate and promote skills found in the humanities.30 The liberal arts teach us to challenge our previous assumptions, see the world in new ways, ask thoughtful, engaging, difficult questions, embrace diversity and difference, and apply our knowledge to the world around us. Oral history is a useful aspect of our intellectual and academic toolbox since it requires us to directly engage with people of all backgrounds and to actively listen and try to understand the experiences they share.

30 In 2011, Florida governor Rick Scott targeted anthropology as an irrelevant field of study undeserving of state funds because it was not a “job creating” major. Zac Anderson, “Rick Scott Wants to Shift University Funding away from Some Degrees,” Sarasota Herald Tribune, October 10, 2011. As Scott and other politicians today continue to debate the value of a liberal arts education, many instructors consciously seek to highlight how the humanities make students better people, citizens, and future employees.
With these broader goals in mind—in addition to the more tangible goals of teaching students multimedia skills and developing solid foundational knowledge of oral history theory, practice, and usage—I wanted to provide students with the opportunity to step outside their comfort zones to work with and learn from people whom they might not interact with otherwise in their daily lives. Many of the students in the class were from Florida, yet they knew little about the state’s agricultural economy or labor history. One nontraditional student, a US military veteran studying Middle East politics, pointed out that he could talk extensively about identities and conflicts in the Middle East, such as those between Sunni and Shiite communities, yet as a native Floridian he knew nothing about the local economy and the often deleterious labor conditions.31

Students prepared for the project by learning about food production and farm-workers’ historical and present-day experiences with harvesting crops. We also discussed Florida’s complicated racial history and its place in “the South” in order to develop broader contextual knowledge for understanding farmworkers’ experiences in Florida. After examining these concepts in the classroom, we turned to the city of Apopka, Florida, to learn how these theoretical issues played out in the lives of average Floridians associated with farm work. Roughly 50 percent of the course focused on historical and present-day content knowledge so that students would be well informed when conducting their interviews. The other half of the course was hands-on, using oral history as a tool for understanding how history is lived and created by people of all walks of life.

During World War II, Apopka became one of the state’s leading agricultural communities. In an effort to boost wartime food production, federal and state government officials worked together to drain off large portions of northern Lake Apopka in order to make the rich “mucklands” of the former lake available for farming. This irrigation practice based on alternating flooding and draining continued for nearly fifty years. Decades of intense farming, however, wreaked havoc on the lake. The recurrent flooding and draining of the farm fields plus a massive DDT chemical spill turned the once vibrant ecosystem into a toxic environment. The lake could no longer provide safe sustenance for human and wildlife consumption.32 Eventually, the devastating environmental conditions led to a state reclamation of the region beginning in the mid-1980s.33 The government of Florida purchased and closed the area’s “muck farms” in an effort to rehabilitate the environment after

31 Student reflections and quotations in this article came from papers they submitted at the end of the course. I have not included their names to respect their privacy.
32 Lake Apopka lost twenty thousand acres of wetlands to the farms. Phosphorus discharge from these farms led to algae blooms that destroyed the habitat. Residue from organochlorine pesticides (OCPs) exacerbated the situation, leading to significant wildlife deaths and mutations. St. Johns River Water Management District website, http://www.sjrwmd.com/lakeapopka/history.html.
decades of toxic chemical exposure. Although a positive change for the area’s flora and fauna, this action displaced approximately 2,500 predominately African American farmworkers who had previously worked the muck farms. I developed the Introduction to Oral History course specifically around these themes. Like Carolyn Horter from Holy Trinity, Jeannie Economos and the Farmworker Association of Florida (FWAF, also referred to as “the Association”) proved invaluable in making this project possible (lesson #4). The Farmworker Association of Florida is dedicated to improving “housing, wages, and working conditions” for Florida farmworkers. One of its central goals is to promote pesticide awareness and protection for workers. A significant number of the people Jeannie works with through the FWAF are in poor health, which they attribute to pesticide and chemical exposure during their time in the fields.

As noted, the goal of the summer Introduction to Oral History course was to provide a truly rich liberal arts/history education experience, expand students’ knowledge and understanding about Florida history, and engage in a community project with the Farmworker Association of Florida to make this possible. Clearly establishing the course and project goals at the onset (lesson #1), made it possible to begin the planning process. I contacted Jeannie during the preceding semester and pitched my idea of developing an oral history course that examined the themes of race, labor, and migration in Florida. I asked if she or anyone at the Association would be interested in helping me develop a project around these themes. Jeannie expressed great interest at the opportunity. She suggested recording the life histories of Apopka’s black community, some of whom were farmworkers and some who never set foot in the fields but were affected by their presence both economically and in terms of negative health impacts.

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34 Between 1988 and 2001, the US Department of Agriculture and the St. Johns River Water Management District (the state organization tasked with managing the area’s ground and surface water resources) purchased nearly all of the muck farms on the lake’s north shore. Subsequent legislation further restricted the amount of phosphorous farms could release into the lake. St. Johns River Water Management District website, http://floridaswater.com/lakeapopka/restoration.html.

35 The exact number of workers left jobless by the farm closures is unknown. Estimates range from 2,500 to 3,000. In 2000 Christina Adkins of the Orlando Sentinel reported that the farm closures in 1998 resulted in 2,500 workers losing their jobs in her article “Help on Way for Workers Hurt by Lake Apopka Deal,” July 7, 2000. Although the article title seems to indicate the workers received assistance, in reality, few resources have reached the men and women who formerly labored on the muck farms of Lake Apopka. Florida governor Rick Scott vetoed a bill in 2011 aimed at helping the former farmworkers. Barry Estabrook, “The Sunshine State’s Pesticide Problem,” Atlantic, June 13, 2011. Most financial resources are aimed at environmental restoration.


37 A report sponsored by the Farmworker Association of Florida in 2006 is available at http://www.fachc.org/pdf/mig_Lake%20Apopka%20Report.pdf. Christopher Balogh, wrote about exposure in his Orlando Weekly piece, “Apopka Farmworkers Say Pesticide Exposure Caused Illnesses,” June 1, 2011. The oral testimonies students collected during the course provided countless personal anecdotes of family and community illnesses believed to be linked to pesticide exposure.
Many African American residents of Apopka were frustrated that their contributions to Florida’s agricultural history had been largely ignored. They saw their participation in the project as a way to remedy the situation. They wanted to partner with the University of Florida to record and archive their stories so they would become an official part of the historical record. They believed this would increase awareness and validate their contributions.

Apopka residents’ desire to become part of the formal University of Florida archive reinforced the importance of recognizing our role in the project. Just as the community point person holds real power in steering the direction of the interview collection by acting as a gatekeeper, as project organizers we too wield power over the gathering and management of a community’s history. This level of control raises important questions about sharing authority with the communities. Namely, how can our work help further the goals of the community? I find this to be one of the greatest challenges regarding oral history projects, and, speaking candidly, I think this is where semester-long projects tend to fall short. Ideally a project would span more than one semester so that students have time to develop rapport with the community and engage in thoughtful dialogues about interpretation and project outcomes. Recognizing these challenges, our job is to identify how we can work together under the existing constraints to best meet everyone’s needs.

As members of the university we had the power to preserve participants’ stories in the University of Florida Digital Collection archive. Some participants hoped that we would be even more vocal advocates for their cause. I knew we would fall short on the latter since summer school was only six weeks, but I hoped to do the former justice. We could introduce researchers and the general public to the collection by recording and transcribing the interviews and making podcasts highlighting people’s unique experiences. We provided the individual participants as well as the FWAF with the interview materials and podcasts so they could use them to share their experiences with family members and friends and promote public awareness.

Although we intended to focus almost exclusively on African Americans we ended up interviewing a more diverse group of people. This occurred for a few reasons. Tirso Moreno, a Mexican American, cofounded the Farmworker Association. As the director of the FWAF his testimony provided a rich context for understanding the role of the FWAF in Apopka and Florida at large. As a former farmworker and current advocate for farmworkers, Tirso also provided a deeper

38 Some participants, such as Ms. Linda Lee, have done multiple interviews, including some with students at Rollins College of Florida. Ms. Lee attributes the deteriorating health and eventual deaths of many of her family members to pesticide exposure. She participates in interviews as a tribute to her family members and friends.

historical analysis of the issues facing farmworkers both historically and today. A few other past and present staff members also agreed to participate. Further, highlighting problems arising from only having one entrance point into the community, we could not always locate enough African American participants on a given fieldtrip day (lesson #4). In response, we readjusted our expectations and utilized the available resources (an adaptation of lessons #2 and #3). In the end, students conducted roughly one-third of the interviews with non–African American participants. One interviewee identified as white, two as Haitian American, and five as Latino. As active members in the Apopka community, their testimony demonstrated how race, labor, and migration affected people’s daily lives. Their valuable contributions highlighted the diversity of experiences as well as shared challenges.

The Apopka project also required students and me to be open-minded, though in a different way than in the HTEC project (lesson #2). Over the course of three weeks, Jeannie introduced us to twenty-five individuals willing to share their stories with complete strangers. We conducted twenty-six interviews (two were with the same gentleman) and all of the students reported they learned something in their interview that led them to think about an issue in a new way. Whereas students in the HTEC project interviewed people with whom they appeared to have a lot in common, the FWAF project often exposed differences between interviewers and interviewees.

As we quickly discovered, it was one thing to talk about labor, poverty, health care issues, or social injustice in the classroom. It is another experience entirely to sit in someone’s living room, or at a shady picnic table in his or her yard on a ninety-two-degree day, and talk about these issues face-to-face with someone who has experienced or witnessed them in his or her daily life. A small number of the students remained at the headquarters of the Farmworker Association to conduct their interviews, but most did home visits. The latter proved to be particularly noteworthy. The majority of the students in the class came from white, middle-class families and generally had limited in-depth interactions with people of different racial or socioeconomic backgrounds than themselves. The home visits provided extremely intimate contact since we interviewed people sitting in their kitchens, living rooms, garages, or out in the yard. Often there were multiple people occupying a space, frequently coming and going. While these may not have been the “ideal” conditions for recording an interview, they were important for better understanding and appreciating an interviewee’s life and the stories he or she shared.

Many of the students in the course were non-history majors who signed up for the summer class because the title sounded interesting and they needed to earn humanities credits. I hoped to introduce these students to the concept of oral history and to illustrate its usefulness in unpacking complex issues surrounding historical inequity in our community. As first-time interviewers, the students may not have been the most sophisticated oral historians, but they were aware of the
power dynamics at play in the interview process. We spent about half of the course learning about historical issues surrounding race and labor in farm work and the other half of the course discussing the theory and practice of oral history.

Reflecting on his interview experience, one nineteen-year-old student noted that as his conversation with a sixty-eight-year-old former farmworker and crew leader progressed he found they were able to connect “on many levels and that at the end I felt as if we were no different at all. Society today tries to tell us that because he’s black and I’m white that we’re totally different, but I know for a fact that that’s not the case.” This is not to say that the student was oblivious to differences associated with race, class, or other differentiating factors. We discussed these issues in class regularly and he was well aware of privileges associated with being white and middle class. Rather, his reflection highlighted a very important point—oral history can provide an opportunity to engage in thoughtful dialogue and respectful understanding. Laura Benadiba notes oral history creates an opportunity to “recompose intergenerational ties,” and many of the students’ interview experiences supported that conclusion.40 Moving beyond intergenerational ties, the interviews also revealed how conversations created ties that bring people together regardless of age, race, or class. They allowed individuals to connect on a personal level.41 In an age of “colorblind” and “postracial” rhetoric it is important to note the student did not argue that he and the interviewee were “the same.” He recognized there were fundamental differences in their life experiences. The interview process did, however, provide an opportunity for the student and participant to engage in a meaningful conversation. They found common ground by talking about baseball and used that shared interest to begin building rapport so they could talk more comfortably about the participant’s life. The student experienced directly what Benadiba described—the opportunity to develop ties that foster appreciation and understanding.

Prior to this experience many students had never experienced a prolonged, meaningful conversation with an elder outside of their own racial or socioeconomic class. The interviews increased their awareness and appreciation of people who were different from themselves. The experience introduced students to the diversity of the human experience and demonstrated how understanding different people’s lives helps us better understand history and the world today. Some African

41 The Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at Berkeley University co-released a report with the Perception Institute and the Center for Policing Equity at UCLA and Harvard, highlighting how recent psychological studies have found that positive interactions between people of different races helps “alleviate intergroup anxiety, reduce bias, and promote more positive intergroup attitudes and expectations for future contact.” Rachel D. Godsil, Linda R. Tropp, Phillip Atiba Goff, and John A. Powell, “The Science of Equality, Volume 1: Addressing Implicit Bias, Racial Anxiety, and Stereotype Threat in Education and Health Care” (November 2014), 13, http://perception.org/app/uploads/2014/11/Science-of-Equality-v1124_web.pdf. Although the report focuses explicitly on education and health care based on research from over two hundred studies, it frames the analysis in a broader conversation about understanding and combating racial bias and stereotyping.
American students in the class reflected they appreciated the experience because they learned a part of black history about which they previously knew little, or nothing at all.

Renowned oral historian Alessandro Portelli explains that oral history brings together participants “with different types of knowledge” and provides the opportunity to engage in a meaningful dialogue that produces new understanding that allows both parties to change.  

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Participants used the interviews as an opportunity to educate outsiders and to draw further attention to their experiences.

From the start, I knew the project would be logistically challenging: twenty-seven students enrolled in the course, Apopka is about a two-hour drive from Gainesville, and a summer session is only six weeks long. Compared to the HTEC project, it meant more interviews, greater distance and expense, and less time to complete everything. Nevertheless, I looked forward to the opportunity to engage in a project that would uncover a “hidden” history, challenge my students to step outside their comfort zones, and enable them to create final projects that would highlight what they learned in an accessible way. As with the Holy Trinity project, I evaluated my resources to determine the project’s feasibility (lesson #3). I began with the most basic question—do I have the money to rent a van and pay for gas and tolls to get my students from Gainesville to Apopka and back again? Fortunately, SPOHP’s African American History Project—a project dedicated to recording the oral histories of African Americans in Alachua County and the American South—volunteered to help fund the project since the collection was focused on local black Floridians.  

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This was incredibly important because as Jeannie and I began discussing logistics, we identified new challenges. We both knew that networking would be one of the most difficult elements of the project. Some prominent community members and activists readily agreed to

42 Portelli, Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories, xii.  

43 This strategy clearly aligns with Karen Olson and Linda Shopes’s analysis of working-class people’s awareness and motivation for engaging in oral history as a means of “to reshape others’ views about working-class life.” Karen Olson and Linda Shopes, “Crossing Boundaries, Building Bridges: Doing Oral History among Working-Class Women & Men,” in Women’s Words, ed. Gluck and Patai, 198. Some of the most vocal advocates, such as former farmworkers Geraldene Matthew and Linda Lee, had traveled to the state capitol numerous times to lobby legislators. They even received recognition on the floor of the US Senate on May 31, 2012, when Senator Barbara Lee of California appealed to Congress to address poverty and health issues among farmworker communities. She highlighted their story and the plight of thousands of farmworkers in Apopka and elsewhere in the country; see http://www.c-span.org/video/?c4300241/apopka. To date, the Apopka farmworkers have garnered some attention but no real compensation. Through the Farmworker Association of Florida and the efforts of others, farmworkers have succeeded in securing improved pesticide exposure regulations. Bill Bergstrom, “Pesticides Disclosure Act Passed,” Ocala Star-Banner, March 2, 1994.

44 I want to thank the African American History Project, a project within SPOHP funded by the Office of the Provost, http://oral.history.ufl.edu/projects/aahp/, and the University of Florida Office of Research, http://research.ufl.edu/or.html, for funding the Apopka field trips during the summer course.
take part, but others understandably expressed some reticence at sitting down and sharing their life stories with complete strangers. To help alleviate people’s fears, and give us time to build a network of participants, we decided to do four field trips over three weeks so that potential participants could see their friends and family go through the experience and then decide if it was something they wanted to participate in or not. Logistically, this meant I had to have enough money to rent a vehicle and drive students to Apopka multiple times. It also meant I had to create a syllabus with rolling deadlines and alternative activities so that all students were actively engaged and learning even while I was out of class leading fieldwork.45

As an instructor, carefully applying lesson #5—being an efficient, effective, and flexible manager—became one of the most important, and challenging, parts of this project. Months before the class began, Jeannie and I selected the dates I would bring students down to do interviews and she began contacting potential interviewees. However, the day before class began I received an e-mail saying we had to change one of the fieldwork days due to a recently scheduled event for the Association. It took time to figure out a new fieldwork day, and once we did, I had to shift around major portions of the syllabus to make the course function smoothly. Needless to say, the syllabus was not completely ready for the first day of class. But, it was a great way to reinforce the class mantra: prepare diligently but be flexible.

Since we had rolling interview dates, and only six weeks total to work, the labor-intensive interview processing and podcast portion of the project occurred in the last three weeks, and this was a bit stressful. I discussed this challenge with my students and tried to lighten their workload when necessary to accommodate their needs. This sometimes meant eliminating assignments and giving them out-of-class workdays to develop their projects, rather than meeting in class for reading discussions. Their final evaluations revealed that they appreciated this flexibility. Although some said that they were surprised by the amount of work they did in the class, most reported that if they had it to do over, they would still choose to take it because it was a great experience.46

I organized the early part of course thematically. Each week we had a methodological or practical oral history theme, as well as a content theme focused on an element of race, labor, or migration in the South. This format enabled me to teach the students about the discipline and practice of oral history, while also establishing the historical context for our interviews. The first real challenge arose when the students began to prepare their interview guides. Since we often did not know exactly whom we would be interviewing until the morning of the trip, and most participants were community members who had not spent time in the public spotlight, it was nearly impossible to tailor a guide to a particular interviewee or

45 Appendix B provides a two-week sample to illustrate the rolling deadlines and activities.
46 There were no exams or long writing assignments, so the workload was not necessarily more than an average class, but it was a different type of work. Some students preferred “easier” courses where they only had to memorize content for the exam, but many said they preferred the hands-on learning because it was more interesting and relevant.
do highly individualized background research. Again, I emphasized flexibility. I knew many of the people would be former farmworkers themselves, or have a familial connection to farm labor, so the students and I discussed questions that would focus on farm-related experiences. Since this was a community partnership project, I also requested that Jeannie e-mail a list of questions she would like us to ask during the interviews so that we would have a better sense of what topics the Association wanted to emphasize.47

After completing their interviews, students had to transcribe their interviews and create a podcast. I required the students to transcribe their interviews for a few reasons. First, I felt it was important that they fully understand the effort it takes to gather and process oral histories. Second, I knew that if we did not process the interviews, they would likely never be done, and that would not be fair to the participants. Many agreed to share their stories because they felt strongly about their experiences being archived at the university and becoming a part of Florida history. Transcribing interviews also makes them more accessible to the public and researchers.

For the podcast, students employed the same techniques as previously described. Each student had to identify a central theme and weave together his or her narration with clips from the interview. It was important that the students produce final projects that could be used to increase public awareness since the overall project was rooted in, and supported by, an organization engaged in social justice and community action. We discussed how to properly select a theme and utilize the interview clips in a way that was consistent with the interviewee’s intentions. We wanted to make sure we told a story true to the interviewee’s, not only the interviewer’s, perspective.48 Unfortunately, because of the compressed time frame, the students did not have the opportunity to reconnect with their interviewees after the class ended, as did those involved in the HTEC project. At the end of the course, though, we did provide both the FWAF and participants with copies of their interviews, transcripts, and podcasts. To learn more about the men

47 The issue of pesticide exposure is central to the Association’s mission to make workers more aware of chemical dangers and to assist those whose health has been negatively impacted by pesticide exposure. Therefore, students included explicit questions about pesticide exposure in their interview guides. To further help students generate useful guides, late the night before each of our fieldwork days Jeannie would e-mail me the list of interviewees and a brief one-to-two-sentence description of each person. The students could then use the two-hour drive in the morning to rework their interview guides and think about what kinds of questions they might ask, geared towards the specific people they would be interviewing.

48 Sloan, “On the Other Foot,” 299. Like the HTEC project, this project raised questions over authority. No doubt students selected themes that resonated with them, even though that may not have been the central theme of the interview or the most important topic to the interviewee. Under ideal circumstances I would have liked to see students work with participants throughout the podcast process to create a story both parties felt accurately represented the interviewee’s experiences. Unfortunately, time constraints did not allow for that joint activity. When we conducted the interviews, however, we carefully informed participants about the plans to create podcasts and how we planned to use interviews in public forums and online. We wanted to make sure participants understood how we would be editing and using the interview material.

Although it is evident that I have benefited professionally from participants’ willingness to share their experiences, I am committed to sharing their stories so that researchers and the public can learn about their experiences. We can try to avoid the pitfalls of “studying down” and commoditizing people’s personal experiences for our professional gains by engaging with the communities in which we live, where we have personal and social commitments.49 The most basic desire for some of the Apopka residents was to get their testimony into the formal University of Florida archive so that the sacrifices of their friends and families would not be forgotten. Our work supported that mission. Archiving their interview materials means researchers and activists interested in farmworker issues can utilize the testimonies for projects that increase public awareness and action.50 Some participants also experienced greater satisfaction from the experience than they anticipated. One woman recounted stories from her childhood that she had not shared with other people. She talked about being ashamed of her farmworking roots as a child, yet having the opportunity to discuss and reflect on them as an adult made her realize how proud she felt about her family and the work they did. She realized these were stories she needed to share with her children so they could better appreciate their history and grandparents’ role in the community.

Students too, benefited from the experience in ways that extend well beyond the classroom. The interview process enabled them to take what they had learned in the classroom and put it to use. They gained historical knowledge through this process and became more empathic citizens who understand how history can affect people’s lives in the present. One student stated his interview was “a truly humbling experience,” and he expressed great admiration for the individual he interviewed and an interest to learn more about the issues facing farmworkers today.

The willingness of the people of Apopka to welcome us into their homes and share their life stories profoundly affected many of us, helping us to grow as scholars and people. As one student candidly admitted, she initially “dreaded” the field trip. Although an adult in her mid-twenties returning to school while working full time, she was still nervous, intimidated, and a little afraid since it required her to step outside her comfort zone physically, emotionally, and mentally. On the way home, however, she said that it proved to be an amazing experience and that she was grateful for the opportunity; it made the course one of her favorites in her college career. The US military student-veteran mentioned earlier ended his reflection by noting, “the experience truly touched me and it is something that I will not

49 Olson and Shopes, “Crossing Boundaries, Building Bridges,” 198–99.
50 At the time of this article’s publication Matt Simmons, a graduate student at the University of Florida, was instructing a summer Introduction to Oral History course where students would once again partner with the Farmworker Association of Florida to collect interviews with current farmworkers. As part of the course a new group of students will learn about the history of Florida agriculture and its workers, something the Apopka residents strongly desired.
soon forget.” Many students shared similar sentiments. Service-learning projects enable students to engage the community on a personal level in ways classroom discussions cannot.

Conclusions

Many students feel disconnected from “history” because it seems to be set in stone and far from their personal lives. Oral history helps create real connections between the past and present and opens students’ eyes to the history all around them and their ability to engage with it. Glenn Whitman noted that oral history empowers students to become historians by providing them the responsibility of collecting and preserving an individual’s story. Reflecting on our summer course, another student concluded “to have an interview that I personally conducted be a part of the university archives is awesome because not a whole lot of people can say that.” He went on to note that had it not been for taking an oral history class, he would not have had the opportunity to help create a primary source.

The projects also helped students develop technological and interpersonal skills, important in an age when a liberal arts education is under attack. Interviewing—the ability to communicate clearly and effectively and listen carefully—will serve students well in all future professions. Likewise, digital projects increase student comfort and confidence, so they are more willing to engage with new technologies. Future employers can teach workers job-specific software, but they need to have adaptable employees willing and able to learn how to use that technology. Many employers also want innovative, self-motivated workers. As instructors, we can use oral history projects to foster these life skills. Digital projects give students the opportunity to craft unique projects. These projects also foster independence and teach time-management skills.

The Farmworker Association of Florida project demonstrated how university and community members could work together and benefit all involved. Participants tapped into university resources, which allowed them to record their stories and share them with a broader audience. As students, scholars, and historians we benefit from hearing about people’s experiences because they allow us to write more accurate and inclusive narratives.

Oral history is valuable not only because it enables us to create and explore public history, but also because it can make us confront our personal biases. It provides a way to create real, meaningful connections between people of different generations, races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses, and this is incredibly important given the contested world we live in today. Oral history will not solve our problems, but it does allow and encourage us to engage in thoughtful dialogues where we strive to understand the world from another person’s perspective.

51 Glenn Whitman, “Section Editor’s Note,” Oral History Review 39, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2012): 286.
52 Quote from a student reflection paper at the end of the course.
We can begin these conversations on a local level, by helping our students connect to the community they live in. Engaging students in service-learning oral history projects can lessen “town/gown” divides by investing and integrating students in the local community and bringing the community into the university. As the students involved in the HTEC project found, they formed connections within the local community. This opened their eyes to see beyond the boundaries of the university and to recognize that community is formed through collaboration. Projects like this generate greater respect on both sides. Students are more aware and respectful of the broader community, and community members get to interact with individual thoughtful students. These interactions help shift attitudes away from focusing on divisions to highlighting shared experiences and mutual respect.

Community-based projects expanded students’ notions of “community” by showing how communities extend beyond the physical boundaries of place or the comfort of racial/social/economic familiarity. Through the interview experience, students stepped into someone else’s life for a few minutes and had the opportunity to see the world through a different lens. They may not always have agreed with the perspective of their interviewee, but their training taught them the importance of listening, reflecting, and asking thoughtful, probing questions to try to understand the other’s point-of-view. In doing so, many recognized that the experience broadened their perspective so that they better understood the diverse community and country in which we live. Developing this shared sense of community history enables us to better confront our assumptions and biases and become more aware participants in society.

Erin L. Conlin, assistant professor of history at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (PhD, University of Florida, 2014), specializes in public, oral, and twentieth-century US history. Her research examines race, labor, and migration in modern America through the evolution of Florida’s modern farm labor system, from the 1910s through the 1960s, through a study of the working lives of migrant and imported Bahamian farm laborers. She has also facilitated a collection of oral history interviews with former African American farmworkers in central Florida and is currently developing an oral history project of IUP examining its institutional history and relationship with the broader community of Indiana.

The “town/gown” divide refers to divisions, real or perceived, between local universities and communities. In places like Gainesville, this divide was quite real since Florida was a segregated institution for decades, even though the community had a large black population. SPOHP focuses intently on diminishing the town/gown divide by explicitly engaging projects designed to foster community connections. Recently SPOHP worked with the University of Florida Theater Department to help generate content for the theatrical production Gator Tales, which used oral histories to tell the story of the university’s contested integration. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6BU6Vfxw10.
Appendix A: Abbreviated Syllabus/Schedule for the HTEC Course

Samuel Proctor Oral History Program Internship**

Objective: To provide students with an introduction to the field of oral history, as well as hands-on experience in the areas of research, interviewing, processing, technology, and educational outreach.

Students will be evaluated on five criteria:

- Attendance/Discussion/Responses: 25%
- Interview Processing: 15%
- Conducted Interview: 15%
- Podcast Project (midterm project): 15%
- Video Project: 15%
- Final Project: 15%

Attendance/Discussion/Responses: (25%)
Interns are required to work six hours per week at SPOHP engaged in interview processing, project development, or public history programs.

Interview Processing: (15%)
Students will complete a transcript and audit-edit of previously conducted interview in the SPOHP collection in order to better understand how oral histories are created and processed.

Conducted Interviews: (15%)
Each intern will have the opportunity to conduct his/her own oral history interview. We will facilitate a research/interview training session to prepare each student for this task.

Podcast Projects: (15%)
One of SPOHP’s primary goals is to make oral histories accessible to the public. Podcasts and video documentaries are both extremely useful tools in fulfilling that goal. Students will create a podcast utilizing existing SPOHP content for their midterm project.

Video & Final Project: (15% each)
For the video project, students will use material from their interview to create a mini-documentary. At the conclusion of the course, students will write a reflection paper about their experiences and attend the community film screening.

** SPOHP runs both traditional oral history courses as well as an internship program. The HTEC project was part of the latter. Interns have fewer reading and discussion days than a traditional course and spend more time working directly on oral history projects and supporting SPOHP’s public history speaker series.
Schedule:

Week One:
Orientation and Training Session: Interview Processing
Start researching SPOHP’s interview collection looking for material to use in your podcast

Week Two:
Training Session: Interview Basics
Reading Discussion Day
Required Evening Public Program (Visiting Scholar)

Week Three:
Work on projects during office hours—transcribe existing interview in collection and audit-edit a classmate’s transcription (Students clocked in and out of the office so we could track attendance and work progress)

Week Four:
Training Session: Podcasting
Work on transcribing, audit-editing, and begin brainstorming podcast project during office hours

Week Five:
Work on transcribing, audit-editing, podcast

Week Six:
Reading Discussion Day
Required Evening Public Program
Work on transcribing, audit-editing, podcast

Week Seven:
Podcasts (midterm project) DUE—present a portion of your project to the class
Introduce HTEC project & start research on church/community

Week Eight:
Training Session: Video recording & Adobe Premiere (video editing software)
Work on ongoing projects & developing interview guide

Week Nine:
Spring Break (no office hours)

Week Ten:
Reading Discussion Day
Required Evening Public Program
Work on ongoing projects & schedule interview

Week Eleven:
Conduct interviews
Begin work on mini-documentary
Week Twelve:
Work on ongoing projects

Week Thirteen:
Work on ongoing projects

Week Fourteen:
Work on ongoing projects

Week Fifteen:
Video Project DUE (introduce project & present to group)
Revise mini-documentary based on class feedback

Week Sixteen:
Final Projects DUE
Deborah compile final documentary
Community Film Screening

Appendix B: Sample of a Two-Week Schedule with Rolling Deadlines and Activities from the FWAF Summer Course

Week 2:
Content Theme: Race & Labor in the American South
Oral History Activity: Ethics and Interviewing

Mon: Activities: Discuss assigned readings from last week on ethics
   Homework: Create a life history interview guide & bring a hard copy to class tomorrow

Tues: Activities: Discuss assigned readings on interviewing; peer review interview guides
   Homework: Research the Lake Apopka area and the Farmworker Association of Florida; tailor your interview guide to address farmworker issues based on your research

Wed: Activities: Discuss the history of Apopka, its people, and the FWAF
   Homework: For next week Monday, read assigned article on Sakai*

Thurs: Activities: Fieldwork Day Group #1; Rest of class watch assigned film (students later wrote an analytical essay about selected readings and films)
   Homework: Group #1—write a 1–2 page response paper about your interview experience. (See Sakai for details)

Fri: Due: Group #1 Interview response papers (upload to Sakai by 6:00 p.m.)
   Activities: Fieldwork Day Group #2; Rest of class watch assigned film
   Homework: Group #2—write a 1–2 page response paper about your interview experience.
Week 3:
Content Theme: (Continued) Race & Labor in the American South
OH Activity: (Continued) Designing an Oral History Project & Interviewing

Mon: Due: Group #2 Interview response papers (upload to Sakai by 6:00 p.m.)
Activities: Discuss race and labor articles and films from last week
Homework: Read assigned chapter and articles

Tues: Activities: Fieldwork Day Group #3; Rest of class watch assigned film
Homework: Group #3—write a 1–2 page response paper about your interview experience.

Wed: Due: Group #3 Interview response papers (upload to Sakai by 6:00 p.m.)
Activities: Discuss assigned readings from Monday and film from Tuesday
Homework: Read assigned articles

Thurs: Activities: Discuss assigned readings from Monday & Wednesday
Homework: Read the Style Guide & take the online quiz before Tuesday

Fri: Activities: Introduction to the Style Guide & audio logs. Play sample podcasts & identify themes, important elements, areas for improvement, etc.
Homework: Listen to your interview & brainstorm ideas for your podcast; start working on your film/reading essay

Group #4 Fieldwork Day was Monday of Week 4. The last two weeks were dedicated to interview processing and podcast development.
*Sakai was the e-learning platform used by UF at the time of the course.