

*Oral History Projects: Practicing a Foreign Language and Exploring Culture
While Serving Local Immigrant Communities*

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Abstract

This paper offers a pedagogical framework for a community engagement project that can be used by instructors of any language. Over the past twelve years, students in Professor Maria Grazia De Angelis' Italian classes have interviewed Italian immigrants living in the San Francisco Bay Area. To develop their language skills, they conduct videotaped interviews in Italian and present the videos to their subjects. The videos are then deposited in an archive, where they become part of a historical record. The interviews are generally conducted in person but were held on Zoom during the COVID pandemic. While this project focuses specifically on Italian immigrants in California, it could be applied with immigrants in any language and region.

Keywords: Community Engagement, Second Language Acquisition, Oral History, Pedagogy, Service Learning, Classroom Planning

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Introduction

This paper describes a college-level community engagement project that can be used by language instructors at any level. The project largely depends upon verbal communication, which can be conducted in the target language, in English, or both. In this article, we will present the perspective of the professor, along with that of the student who co-authored it.

Professor's Observations

In 2007 I was teaching Italian language and culture classes at Saint Mary's College in Moraga, California. I had been teaching for several years, following relatively traditional pedagogical practices. We used a textbook for the courses, but also engaged in daily interactive activities like role playing, working in teams, watching and creating videos, and learning songs.

Overall, the courses were successful, but my view of what could be accomplished in the classroom was challenged that year when a visiting professor conducted an external review. During his visit, he asked whether the Modern Languages Department offered courses that included content other than language and literature, such as service-learning activities. At the time, I believed it would be difficult to integrate service learning into most European language courses, possibly excepting Spanish. The communities associated with those languages (in the case of my classes, Italian immigrants in the United States) were for the most part well established and not in need of what we traditionally think of as "service." When I made this point to the visiting professor, he replied, "Well, that means that you didn't explore this opportunity enough."

This memorable exchange led me to consider how I and the students in my Italian language classes could serve the broad population of Italian immigrants in the Bay Area. As an immigrant myself, I had some connection to this community, although it had never occurred to me to extend it in the context of my teaching. Once the idea took hold, however, I started reaching out to Italian Americans in the Bay Area to solicit their comments. I also contacted Marshall Welch, the director of CILSA (Catholic Institute for Lasallian Social Action), who helps faculty members develop Social Justice courses with a service-learning component. With the encouragement of Marshall and my contacts in the Italian American community, I actively began to pursue a project designed to document and preserve immigrants' stories and culture.

Since that time, this project has grown and developed into three main functions: 1) Recording *oral histories*; 2) creating an historical *archive* to preserve these histories for posterity; 3) creating a *Story Map*, designed to provide data for future historians.

Course Objectives and Components

Oral Histories: Interviews with Immigrants

I have been integrating oral history interviews into my language classes since 2009. As part of their coursework, students conduct interviews with members of the Italian community and create videos to record their memories. Subsequently, in class, they translate the interviews to English and reflect upon the personal histories they have gathered. As a service, they provide

a DVD or YouTube video to the people they have interviewed, helping them preserve their memories for future generations.

More details about this project are described in the following sections.

A Video Archive and a Story Map

At first, the service-learning goal of this project was simply to provide the interviewees and their families with a recorded oral history of their personal memories. Later we expanded the project to create a web-based archive of these interviews, designed to document the Bay Area chapter in the story of the Italian diaspora. Over the past twelve years we have collected more than 100 hours of interviews, mostly in Italian with English subtitles.

Currently we are working to take this project in a new direction. A map of Italy, created with ArcGIS software, will appear on the archive website we are building.¹ This map will include popup windows allowing users to see where the immigrants came from and to track the dates and locations of active migration in and around the Bay Area. With this information and a clearer knowledge of when and where immigrants have relocated, researchers will be able to better understand the socio-political and economic origins of the Italian diaspora.

Service Learning: Benefits to Students and the Community

Service-learning is a pedagogical approach to a subject that helps students learn not only through classroom instruction but also through active engagement. Besides acquiring translation skills, students who participate in this project can use and improve their Italian in a real-world context. Through personal connection with their interviewees, they come to acknowledge the importance of the stories they hear and sometimes follow up by exploring topics connected to the immigrants' places of origin. Many complete the course wanting to learn more about their own heritage.

Immigrant communities are continuously confronted by pressure to “assimilate” to the dominant culture, which for later generations can be felt as a loss of connection to their heritage. Our oral history videos help preserve the immigrants' stories and offer their descendants a tangible connection to their culture, which they can share with their families and pass on to future generations in the oral tradition.

We know many popular narratives of immigration to the United States, but these personal stories provide a valuable insight into local culture, dialect, and history. It is important to Italian Americans to know where their forbears came from and why they settled where they did. Additionally, tracking the patterns of past Italian immigration within the United States can help researchers compare past and present migration patterns of other cultural groups.

Classroom Details: Syllabus Descriptions

The course syllabus that describes the interview objectives and process as follows:

¹ ArcGIS Online (<https://www.arcgis.com/index.html>) is cloud-based software that allows users to analyze geographic information by visualizing geographical statistics, like climate data or trade flows, through layer-building maps. Many academic institutions and departments, as well as governments and private and commercial institutions, use ArcGIS to create and share interactive web maps.

This project will motivate students to use and improve their Italian across the four major language skills: speaking, writing, listening, and reading. They will also explore Italian heritage and culture. At the same time, they will gain communication and technical skills by learning to conduct interviews, transfer these into digital format, and interpret and synthesize interview information in writing through journals, papers, and online reports.

The following section of the syllabus describes the service-learning component of the course:

Community service is part of the learning process. It is what students achieve and do for others outside the immediate academic environment. Members of the Italian American community who participate in this project will benefit from having their oral histories recorded for posterity, while students will gain a deeper understanding of the Italian immigrant experience while enhancing their Italian language skills.

Classroom Details: Activities and Assignments

The following section describes the activities and exercises used during the first and second parts of the semester, leading up to the presentation of the final project.

Preparation and Practice Interviews

Students prepare for the interview by participating in a series of activities designed to: 1) improve their language skills; 2) explore relevant cultural aspects of Italian and U.S. society at the time the interviewees immigrated; 3) Engage in a process of reflection about what they are learning and its real-world implications; and 4) become familiar with the technology required to record and edit the interviews.

Improving language skills

During this phase of the project, in addition to grammar, students need to learn how to converse with a native speaker. They develop strategies to apply when they don't understand what the person is telling them, how to follow up on questions, and how to master the "W's" (who, what, when, where, why), considered essential to the practice of reporting.

At the beginning of the semester, we work on oral comprehension. While listening to interviews originally broadcast on Italian TV and now available on YouTube, the students attempt to find the subject and the verb of each sentence and understand the discussion as it progresses.

Another group of exercises focus on the students themselves. Each one is required to post a brief personal history online, as well as a set of questions that they would like another person to ask them. Then, in class, they practice asking and answering each other's questions. For the midterm, they select a classmate to interview and record the conversation on video. We usually watch part of these interviews in class and comment on them.

It is important to make sure that the students can stop the conversation if they don't understand what an interviewee is saying. I encourage them to ask, "can you repeat, please? I don't understand. Can you make that point again?" Repetition is beneficial both to the interviewees, because they get to rephrase their answers, and to the interviewers, who get to refine their speaking and comprehension skills.

Exploring cultural aspects of Italy and the immigration process

To conduct successful interviews, we must be familiar not only with the subjects' background, but also with the places they came from and the time periods when they left. As a first step toward gaining this information, the students contact their subjects by phone or video conference. They may also visit their subjects a few times before the actual interview takes place.

The students then conduct research on the regions their subjects came from and the primary events that were likely to influence their lives. This information will help the students formulate questions to ask during the interview.

Some interviews are collective; for example, they may include members of an Italian club or a group of Italians living in a certain neighborhood or attending a particular school.

Reflecting on questions of Italian heritage

The exercises described above are integrated with a set of "reflections," which we express orally, in class; in writing, at home; and/or during a collective forum.

Engaging in reflection is key for the students to understand the service they are providing the community. I adopt two kinds of reflections in the classroom and online forums. The first is based on the questions, "What? So what? Now what?" The second kind is what I call "ABC" reflections.

Inspired by Kolb and Fry's learning cycle, the Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL) developed the "What? So What? Now What?" standard for defining and gauging reflection.² Students think about what they have done, seen, learned, and accomplished. They explore the implications of their experience, question how and why it matters, and draw connections between their experience and class content. Finally, they are encouraged to reflect on what can or should happen next and what can or should be done differently.

In our course they also read relevant texts like "Qualitative Case Study Methodology: Study Design and Implementation for Novice Researchers" (Baxter & Jack, 2008) and *The Oral History Manual* (Sommer & Quinlan, 2018).

An article by Marshall Welch (1999) outlines the basic approach to reflection as a learning mechanism. It emphasizes the pedagogical importance of focusing on what students feel; how they behave before, during, and after a learning experience; and what they learn in the process.³ These components are incorporated into the "ABC" rubric, in which students consider A) affect (What and how do you feel, and why?); B) behavior (What did you do? What have you done in the past? How will you behave in the future?); and C) cognitive connection to class content (How is your activity related to the class objectives and material?). My students present their reflections orally in class, and in written form at the end of the interviews.

² The cycle consists of the following steps: experience; observation and reflection; formulation of abstract concepts; and testing concepts under new situations. The most recent exposition is Kolb (2015).

³ Welch and Plaxton-Moore (2019) further refine the concept in a later study.

Acquiring and mastering technical skills

From the syllabus:

Technology: Students will learn how to use programs like iMovie 11, iDVD, and Windows Media Player.⁴ Gaining familiarity with such software is vital for producing the digital media package that the students will offer as a gift to their interviewees.

Through St. Mary's Instructional Technology (IT) Services Department, I invite a technician with expertise in video production to visit the class. The technician brings the equipment needed to record the interviews and explains how to set up the camera or phone on a tripod, frame an image, and apply optimal lighting. Students learn to work in teams, with one only operating the camera so that the other can concentrate on conducting the interview.

Once the interview is complete, it must be translated into English: A substantial aspect of the project. The technician shows students how to use the digital tools to edit the interview and add English subtitles.

Interview Process and Follow-up

After the students have met with the interviewees a few times and formulated their questions, they arrange a time and a place to conduct the interview. Interviewees are encouraged to bring photos and documents that they may wish to share. I remind the students not to be overly concerned if they make mistakes during the interview; they will be able to edit them before the final project is completed.

Most interviews take between thirty and sixty minutes. Once they are done, the students download them on a computer and start the editing process, which includes inserting photos and documents and adding English subtitles. Sometimes they will add a podcast they have produced, which expands on a cultural topic mentioned in the video, such as the history of a traditional dish or the subject's city of origin.

At the completion of the interview, the subjects indicate whether they wish to receive it as a YouTube post or, if they don't want it to appear on a public platform, as a DVD recording. Once we record and/or upload the interviews onto the selected platform, we are ready to show the interviews and invite the interviewees to join us on campus for a celebration and viewing.

The event starts with a social gathering, including food and informal conversation. Then each student introduces the people they have interviewed and shows a clip of their interview to the audience. This is a very emotional moment for both interviewers and interviewees: The subjects return home with their interviews ready to share with family and friends, and visibly happy to have made an impact on the students' lives.

⁴ Designed for the Macintosh iOS operating system, iMovie (<https://apple.com/imovie/>) is editing software for videos that can be used on mobile devices and computers. iDVD is an application for Mac OS that allows the user to record digital films, music, and photos to a DVD. Windows Media Player (<https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/windows/get-windows-mediaplayer-81718e0d-cfce-25b1-ae3-94596b658287>) is an application used for playing audio and video and for viewing images on personal computers running the Microsoft Windows operating system.

Assessment

In this class, students' performance is based on seven criteria. The course grade is determined on the following basis:

- 1) **Class Participation:** Demonstrated competency in translating English to Italian and vice-versa, both in spoken and written form.
- 2) **Quizzes:** The class covers one chapter of the grammar textbook every two weeks, with a quiz at the end of every chapter.
- 3) **Homework:** Students are expected to come to class having studied the vocabulary and prepared to discuss the assigned readings and exercises, most of which come from the textbook.
- 4) **Midterm (Interviewing Skills):** Students create a biographical portrait of one of their classmates by means of an interview, recorded on video, including pictures and documents of the subject's life.
- 5) **Technical Skills Acquisition:** Students will demonstrate mastery of recording equipment and editing software (iMovie, Windows Media Player, etc.), and produce a final video.
- 6) **Reflections (Italian Heritage):** Students will demonstrate an awareness and understanding of Italian language and heritage through class discussion and participation and online threaded discussions.
- 7) **Final Project:** The final consists of a presentation of the interviews, in both written and oral form, and the creation of videos and/or DVDs.

Professor's Observations: Summary

With this project I aspire to develop students on many levels, beyond that of language acquisition. Even if they forget much of the Italian they have learned, they will remember that they deeply connected with an immigrant, gained a more concrete understanding of their culture, and made a difference in someone's life.

Student's Observations

I have a more immediate connection to my linguistic and cultural roots than most Italian Americans of my generation. To begin with, I have dual citizenship.

My maternal grandparents are immigrants, both came to California during the 1950s from the same village in the Italian Alps. After my grandfather immigrated to the United States and married, he obtained American citizenship, but kept his Italian citizenship as well.

According to Italian law, a child born to at least one Italian parent, even outside the country, could also claim citizenship, provided that the child was reported to the local consulate. In 2010 my mother decided that she wanted to claim hers, and her children's as well. The four of us were granted citizenship in 2014.

As a child, I also visited my grandparents' birthplace in the far north of Italy, where their relatives—several generations related to my mother's family—had remained. It was a small village, and those who emigrated to the United States continued to use the dialect they spoke growing up. Despite this, my siblings and I never learned it.

With help from several members of my paternal family, including my late grandmother, I have conducted some research about our family's background. Unfortunately, we found only vague, general information. All those who once knew more details have passed on—leaving me with many questions and a realization that the connections to my past are becoming increasingly fragile.

From Language to Community Engagement

To start bridging this gap, I resolved to study Italian in college and was excited to learn that I would have an opportunity to conduct interviews with Italian immigrants during my fourth semester. When I first told peers that this course, Italian 004, was based on community engagement, they could not see the connection—and, in truth, I myself was somewhat skeptical. However, after gaining experience in the program and getting to know the subjects of our interviews, I realized that we were performing an authentic service.

As mass immigration declined and Italians assimilated to American society, they began to lose important aspects of their cultural identity—not only language, but also local customs, traditions, and celebrations. Recording these aspects of their culture helps future generations preserve some connection to their heritage.

Oral History as Service-Learning

Service-learning involves “meaningful community service and critical reflection that promotes learning beyond the disciplinary boundaries” (Pak, 2020). Through this course, some students gained deeper understanding of their family's heritage. Others learned about a culture that was new to them. All of us learned by engaging with our subjects on both an academic and a personal level.

Philip Napoli, a professor at Brooklyn College, considers oral history to be an inherently radical methodology, which requires “interviewers [to] approach their research subjects, their interviewees, with empathy, honesty, and attunement” (Napoli et al., 2020). When the students in our class prepared for their interviews, the instructor emphasized that we were to approach our subjects first and foremost as individuals. Because of this intimate contact, our experience of service-learning was quite different from that of most other students. In scope, it represented four semesters' worth of discipline and learning; in depth, it challenged us to listen actively and persuade others to share their lives with us.

Preparing for the Interview

During the first part of the semester, we mainly concentrated on writing and answering questions, in Italian, to prepare for the midterm and final interviews. We watched and analyzed several professional interviews with native Italian speakers. Each of us interviewed another student, in Italian, and subtitled the first minute of the resulting video. A technician from the campus IT services office came to help us learn camera set-up and video editing software.

Later, as we came to understand, learning a language does not happen in a vacuum. Engaging with native speakers, especially those who want others to master the language, helps develop oral skills in a way that classwork cannot.

Gathering Oral Testimonies during a Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic changed our plans, which required us to interview our chosen subjects in person. Due to public health restrictions, our midterm practice interviews were mostly filmed on Zoom. Eventually it became clear that any interviews we conducted with our chosen subjects would have to take place virtually.

I chose to interview my maternal grandparents. Conducted via Skype, the conversation did not feel spontaneous: Their responses were either rehearsed or short. Unfortunately, the screen created a barrier between us. Further, the rural area where they live had poor internet connection, our exchange was limited to the device's battery life, and my grandparents were clearly uncomfortable with the technology.

Several other students reported having similar experiences. Not being able to speak to someone face-to-face changes the dynamic, and on a certain level our conversations seemed superficial. However, we still appreciated the stories that our interviewees had shared.

Immediately after the interview my mother gave me a collection of old family photos, including several showing my grandparents when they were younger and pictures of my great-grandparents that I hadn't seen before. I gathered all those images, and recorded stories I had been told outside of the interview and incorporated them into my edited video. It became a permanent, if incomplete, record of my family's history.

Moving Forward

During Fall 2020 and the following Spring, I joined several other Italian students in an internship project, guided by Professor De Angelis, designed to gather the interviews recorded in past years and compile them into an online archive. This project, still in the developmental stage, will result in a website to be held under the domain of Saint Mary's College of California. It will include an interactive map, designed through ArcGIS (see footnote 1), tracing immigrants' stories and movements through the years.

Collectively, these videos will document the chronological periods when large influxes of Italian Immigrants arrived in the Bay Area. Together with the ArcGIS map tracing geographical locations, they may cast light on the reasons why these immigrants left their country of origin during certain periods and allow scholars to conduct more extensive research into the socio-economic factors that led to their departure.

Student Reflections, one Year Later

Learning the stories of immigrants of past generations not only helps us understand an essential aspect of our country's history, but gives us a deeper, more empathic understanding of immigrant experience in our own time.

Unfortunately, this subject is often overlooked by our primary education system. Through mainstream media and class current events projects, students are taught about immigration as a "system," not about the individual choices people make and the challenges they must overcome when adjusting to life in a radically different environment. Engaging directly in the oral history process "gives students the opportunity . . . to connect. . . to history; to see

themselves as products of a particular society at a specific moment in time; to understand themselves in the world” (Napoli et al., 2020).

I have citizenship in a country that speaks a language I speak only haltingly. Many of my family members still live in the same region from which my grandparents emigrated. Although I barely know them, stories told by my grandparents did provide me with some knowledge of my family’s heritage. By filming my grandfather as he spoke, I created a record of an uncommon dialect; by including family pictures in my documentary, I created a central place where this history can live protected, not just in fading memories and pictures scattered across the country.

As generations pass, familial stories become watered down and changed. Immigrants, once removed from their native culture and history and brought into a larger, dominant one, are at risk of losing an important aspect of their collective identity. Gathering oral histories, applying the discipline to record them, and learning to use them as an important element of community service allows us to preserve their culture and heritage, as well as our own.

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Other Resources

Italian 004 syllabus

Italian student evaluations