

A Veteran Teacher's Lessons: Engaging Social Studies Projects

Nothing is better than a good social science project. Students get a chance to choose a topic of interest, providing motivation for in depth learning. They cooperate with classmates, often acquiring new technology tools. Project presentations showcase student talents, enhancing social science content for the entire class in the process.

Oral history projects are powerful ways for students become historians, learning about the past first hand. Students conduct interviews with family or community members. They document history close to home, the stories of parents who have fought in wars, relatives who escaped persecution, and senior citizens who survived the Great Depression.

One of my oral history assignments, [Union City's New Americans](#), focused on interviews with local immigrants. Our classes created a book and website containing interviews of immigrants from our community. Some students interviewed family members or friends. Others visited the nearby senior center, talking with immigrant senior citizens. For example, Brandon interviewed Tuan Nguyen, a Vietnamese immigrant who shared his harrowing escape from Vietnam. He told Mr. Nguyen's story in his interview entitled, [Journey by Sea](#),

In preparation for this project, I gave students [interview questions](#) and had them practice [interview techniques](#). Their final written interviews were graded on a [rubric](#). However, the real reward came when students returned to the senior center to celebrate with interviewees. Students performed powerful excerpts from their interviews and presented each interviewee a book. It was a special moment watching my teenagers honoring Union City's newest Americans.

Our [Journeys](#) website was inspired by Sonia's Nazario's book *Enrique's Journey*, the true story of a Honduran child's perilous journey to the United States. After we read this book, my students interviewed parents, aunties, uncles, grandparents, classmates, and community members, who shared their own journeys to the United States. Immigrants were asked about their home countries and their reasons for coming to the US. In addition, interviewees described their experiences in the US and their reflections on what it meant to be an American. Not all the interviewees wanted their stories to appear on the website. However, some immigrants not only agreed to share their stories, but even provided personal photos for the [Journeys](#) website.

Local history projects are fun for students, especially when they can use the web to publish for an audience beyond the classroom. For example, in our [Union City Turns 50](#) website, my Logan seniors researched local history, in celebration of Union City's 50th birthday. Their website included a variety of creative student entries including articles on Union City history, a movie and photo collage about the local area. In addition, in the summer my senior Government students proudly shared their website at the city's birthday festivities.

Social science projects are academically worthwhile for students with a variety of skill levels. English Learners from our sheltered US History and American Literature Core chose one event or theme from America's past, comparing it with a contemporary issue. In our [Then and Now](#) project, we

wanted our students to see the connection between the challenges faced by past generations with choices confronting their generation today. Pairs of students researched and wrote two paragraphs on a historical parallel and created projects to tell their story using different mediums: art, PowerPoint, and video. During the final week, each pair of students presented their work to classmates. The projects were posted on the [Then and Now](#) website.

You can read about more social studies project ideas, including student slideshows, videos and infographics, on my [A Veteran Teacher's Lessons](#) website.

As a busy social science teacher, with lots of content to cover, you'll have to pick your project spots thoughtfully. When you do decide to do an authentic assignment, plan it carefully and teach the specific skills necessary for student success. You'll be rewarded. A well-designed project is a joy for students and teacher, alike.