

Memory and History

Overview:

History, by collecting and interpreting various sources, seeks to establish and explain the events of the past. Each of us has our own personal history, and our communities define themselves within a context of communal history--the stories we tell about ourselves as communities and individuals. This lesson is designed help students explore the role that remembering plays, individually and collectively, in our understanding of the past. It explores the relationship between memory and history, the role of memory in shaping both individual and collective identity, the importance of rituals, and the impact on individuals and society when memories fade.

Students will engage in research, small-group discussions, whole class discussions, family interviews, and interaction with multimedia resource material. Assessments include class and group participation, individual journal reflections, family calendars or family history projects, and presentations.

Goal:

This lesson is designed to give students an understanding of the role of memory in the creation of individual and collective history.

Objectives:

Students will:

1. uncover patterns and processes in their own thinking and deepen their understanding about the role that remembering plays, both individually and collectively, in our knowledge of the past and our academic study of history;
2. think critically about the credibility of historical interpretations and explore the complex relationship between memory and history;
3. examine the importance of rituals in creating and maintaining memory and develop and their own rituals in order to appreciate their personal and communal histories, as well as the role of community and society in shaping identity.

Subjects Covered:

World History, Historical Understanding, Behavioral Studies, Language Arts

Suggested Time Frame:

This entire Lesson Plan can be completed in approximately six to seven 45-minute sessions.

Individual learning activities break down as follows:

Defining the Terms, Setting the Stage (1 session)

Possessing and Re-Possessing Life Stories (1- 2 sessions)

What Happens When A People's Way Of Life (Ways Of Marking Time And Events) Is Stripped Away? (2 sessions)

What Memories Do We Carry Forward And What Do We Leave Behind (1-2 sessions)
Learning Activity 1: Defining the Terms, Setting the Stage

Introductory Activity:

1. Explain to students that they will be learning about how history is written. Divide the class into groups of no more than four students and ask each group to select a scribe (a person responsible for taking notes) and a reporter (a person responsible for reporting the work of the group to the rest of the class).

2. Tell each group that they will be working together to come up with working definitions for some important terms in order to begin their exploration of the topic. Give each group the handout "Memory and History" which asks them to do the following:

- Define the terms "memory" and "history" and record the definitions.
- Discuss the relationship between the two terms.
- Write down at least three statements about the relationship between the two terms. For example: "History is recorded so that people will retain a memory of events that take place."
(Note: Students should be prepared to back up their statements with examples.)

Once each group has finished, tape the completed handouts to the wall in front of the class.

Regroup and ask each group's reporter to go to their posted handouts and present their group's statements to the class. Ask students what similarities and differences they see among the various groups' ideas. Extend the students' thinking by asking questions such as:

- Are there examples you can think of in which different historical records of the same event reflect differing perspectives on what occurred? How and why does this happen?
- How do we determine which version of "history" is factual or true? Does it matter? Why or why not?

Narrative, Memory, Identity

1. Explain to students that over the next several class sessions they will be looking at the role that individuals and their memories play in the recording and study of history. Students will examine such questions as:

- What is the difference between history and memory?
- How might history and memory reflect and reinforce each other?
- What happens to individuals and cultures when their memories fade?
- Why are rituals important in the role of memory and history?
- How are our individual and cultural identities shaped by our memories?
- How can memory, and history, reflect a wish to remember or a wish to forget?

2. Pass out copies of the excerpt from Oliver Sacks's *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. Explain to the class that this is a brief passage from an essay by a professor of clinical neurology at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. Tell students that the text they're reading concerns a patient who is unable to remember anything for more than a few seconds. Ask a student to read aloud and have the class follow along.

If we wish to know about a man, we ask "what is his story - his real, inmost story?" - for each of us is a biography, a story. Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us - through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and not least, our discourse, our spoken narrations. Biologically, physiologically, we are not so different from each other; historically, as narratives - we are each of us unique.

To be ourselves we must have ourselves - possess, if need be re-possess, our life stories. We must "recollect" ourselves; recollect the inner drama, the narrative, of ourselves. A man needs such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative, to maintain his identity, his self.

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3. After students have read the passage, ask them to write a one-page response to the following question: What is the role of memory according to Oliver Sacks? Ask them to turn this assignment in at the beginning of the next class session.

Learning Activity 2: Possessing and Re-Possessing Life Stories

In this activity, students will consider Dr. Sacks's notion that each of us is influenced by the sum total of our experiences, and that without memory it would be almost impossible to function. We would be incapable of forming human relationships - an underlying rationale for recording history. Sacks also believes that individuals are capable of "recollecting," or retaking ownership of their life stories. This activity will explore some of the ways that cultures ritualize the passage of time and, through these rituals, contribute to the establishment of individual and collective memories.

Introductory Discussion

1. Have students share their ideas about the role of memory based on the passage by Sacks. Do they agree or disagree? Did Sacks's ideas bring up any questions or thoughts?
2. Set the stage for the activity by telling students that they are going to look at how people, societies, and cultures find meaningful ways to mark important moments in their life stories. Explain that people around the world historically have followed their own unique calendars,

reflecting different ways of marking time. Ask the class, "What do calendars reflect?" Student responses may include: years, months, dates, days, holidays, memorials, commemorations, etc. Introduce the Jewish calendar as an example of the Jewish people's marking of time. Have students view the multimedia presentation *The Jewish Calendar: The Yearly Cycles of Life*.

Look at the Time

1. Hand each student a copy of the handout "The Jewish Calendar" and have them consider the following questions:

- Why is it so important to have a formal way of marking time?
- What can we learn about the Jews of this time from their calendar?

If possible, have students explore the interactive graphic that follows the multimedia presentation in small groups. If your classroom does not have enough computers, view the graphic as a class. Make sure to spend ample time exploring the segment on Festivals. Then, have the class gather in small groups to respond to the questions on the handout.

Remember, this calendar was established in Babylon while the Jews were in exile from their homeland - it isn't an "all inclusive" current calendar. Encourage students to consider the Jews' rich religious life, their desire to forge a link from the past to the present, the meaning of their daily life, and how the cycle of their annual calendar reflects meaningful communal rituals.

2. To extend this concept, ask your students to compare the Jewish calendar to other cultural calendars, such as the Mayan, Islamic, Indian, Chinese, or Gregorian. The following Web resources may be helpful:

- Calendars Through the Ages
<http://webexhibits.org/calendars/index.html>
- Calendar Zone
<http://www.calendarzone.com>
- Mayan Calendar Links
<http://www.calendarhome.com/clink/mayan.html>

3. Ask students to share the answers they wrote down on their handouts, and use these answers to lead into a class discussion of how we mark time. Ask students: Aside from annual calendars, how do we chronicle the passage of time? Mark important events? Highlight milestones? Have students come up with their own ideas, but make sure that the following are articulated:

- Creation of meaningful rituals for life-cycle events
 - Religious
(bris, baptism, bar or bat mitzvah, communion)

- National
(Fourth of July fireworks, Thanksgiving feasts and football, Memorial Day picnics and visits to cemeteries, Labor Day parades)
- Family
(birthdays, anniversaries, academic achievement, weddings, funerals and memorial services)

- Seasonal passages
 - Harvests
 - Solstices
 - Plantings

- Recording of events
 - Photographs and videotapes
 - Journal entries or diaries
 - Articles written for formal press
 - Memory boxes

4. Next, distribute copies of the handout “Remembrance of Things Past” and ask students to read a passage from Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (available online at <http://www.kensmen.com/catholic/proust.html>). Explain that for Proust, the smell of a cookie he dipped in tea prompted him to relive a moment in his life. It's an extraordinary passage in literature. Once students have read the passage, ask them to respond to the questions in the handout:

- What can trigger a memory?
- How can an object reconstruct the past through memory?

As an alternative or additional assignment, ask students to read the Proust passage for homework and have them respond through journal writing to the above questions. Or give students an opportunity to give examples from popular culture - movies, songs, etc. - of memory triggers.

5. Distribute copies of the handout “Leone Modena” and ask students to read the historical document A Jewish Author Fears the Censor. Have students reflect on the handout's questions, either in small groups or in written journals:

- What are some of the challenges inherent in using written words as a way of recording information or events?
- What do you think was Modena's purpose in writing the book about Jewish practices?
- Why did he fear "the censor"?
- What is the danger of state-sponsored censorship to individuals? Communities? Cultures?

- Consider the impact of self-censorship as a way to avoid condemnation and retribution. What are some historical examples? Current examples?

6. Distribute the culminating assignment handout to the students. Explain that they will have one week to work on it and that they will be required to present their completed work to the class. Students may choose from the following two options:

OPTION ONE: Family Calendar

Create a personal/family calendar that reflects important annual events for your family. Be as creative and thorough as you can be. You might want to interview your family members to make sure that each member's "important dates to honor" are indicated on your family calendar. Include an explanation of your dates and your reasons for choosing them. For example: "Thanksgiving is a time when our family comes together to share our good fortune and to determine a collective charity to support for the coming year." Consider using artwork or photographs to enhance your calendar. Excellent work will be characterized by creativity, attention to detail, organization, thoughtful explanations, thoroughness, and neatness.

OPTION TWO: Family History

Create a family history that reflects important events in your family's past (up to the present day). You can do this as a written document, a multimedia presentation, a timeline, etc. Be creative. Use a variety of resources to help make your project as thorough as possible. Interview family members and read diaries, journals, or letters left by family members. Consider asking older relatives these questions: What are the five most important events in our family's history? Will you tell me stories of our family's ancestors? Include an explanation of pivotal events and your reasons for selecting them. Excellent work will be characterized by creativity, attention to detail, organization, thoughtful explanations, thoroughness, and neatness.

Learning Activity 3: What Happens When A People's Way Of Life (Ways Of Marking Time And Events) Is Stripped Away?

Introduction: The Role of Memory Revisited

1. Begin by reminding students of the last activity's focus on calendars and rituals as ways of marking time and creating memory for individuals, families, communities, and cultures. Ask one of the students to read the Oliver Sacks excerpt aloud once more.

2. Next, ask the class to think about the Sacks article and the role that memory plays in individuals. Have them view the multimedia presentation on Forced Conversions.

3. Ask the class: What role do you think memory plays in the stories and histories of people? Cultures? Societies? Nations? Discuss.

Marranos: The Secret Jews

1. Play the multimedia presentation Marranos for the class and discuss with them several of the Inquisition records that appear at the end of the presentation. Have students consider the impact the expulsions and forced conversions had on the Jews of Spain. The critical message in this segment is that in the space of just a few generations, without the cultural tools - books, language, rituals, observances, etc. - to sustain them, the Jews of Spain lost much their cultural knowledge. The irony is that they reclaimed it through reading Inquisition records.

2. Distribute copies of the “Expulsion of the Jews” handout to the class. Play the multimedia presentation Jewish Communities and ask students to take notes as they watch, considering these questions:

- What became of the Jews who left Spain?
- How were they able to hold on to their centuries-old traditions?
- What did you learn from these presentations? What was most surprising to you?
- What conclusions can you draw about what is necessary for a people to maintain their identity? A culture? A nation?
- Can you draw any parallels between the Spanish Inquisition's expulsion of the Jews and any other events in the history of the world? Explain.

3. Have students divide into groups and discuss the presentation, using the above questions as a focus for the discussion. Ask students to write a reflective journal entry, either in class or at home, about these Heritage presentations, drawing on their responses to the questions on the handout.

Learning Activity 4: What Memories Do We Carry Forward and What Do We Leave Behind?

Introductory Activity:

Ask students to think about when their ancestors first came to America. What did they have to leave behind, literally and figuratively? Have students provide specific examples. If students do not know the circumstances of their ancestors' immigration, it might be interesting for them to ponder why their families didn't share these stories in great detail. What were their ancestors' lives like? What are the possible reasons they moved to America?

From Memory to History

1. Distribute the handout “From Memory to History” to the class. Remind students that they have talked about individuals carrying forward or leaving behind certain experiences and/or memories. Explain that the same can be said for the story of a people or of humanity as a whole. Ask students, as they listen to the Interview With Rabbi Irwin Kula, to reflect on the

first two questions on the handout about learning history (below). According to Rabbi Kula, we ultimately need to choose from the vast detail of history what we will carry with us and what we "say goodbye to."

- What is the source of your historical information?
- How is it decided what information is left in and what's omitted? Who decides?

2. Divide the class into small groups and ask them to share their answers with each other. Then, ask them to answer the third question, below, as a class.

If you were forced to leave this country tomorrow with one small suitcase, what would you bring with you and why?

3. Have students discuss and write responses to the handout's fourth and fifth questions:

- Think about your role as the transmitter of your memories, culture, and heritage to your future children. Do you think your choices would change? Why or why not?
- Your class has been charged with creating a time capsule that will convey your culture to the inhabitants of this area in 100 years. What would you include and why?

Extension Activity: Ask your students to create a time capsule.