The Digital Archive and the Italian American Classroom

I walk the night city, looking up at lit windows,
and there is no table set for me, nowhere

I can go to be filled. This is the city
of grandparents, immigrants, arrivals,

where I've come too late with my name,
an empty plate. This is the place.
Kim Addonizio "Generations"[1]

As I scan the roster before the first day of each semester in my Italian American culture course, I can usually tell how many students will have a personal stake in the material. Generally, the majority self-identify as Italian American. In this very first class I ask them to make a list of things that come to mind when they hear the term *Italian American*. Often their responses oscillate between examples from popular culture (organized crime and *guido* culture) and generalizations (family, food, church). When pressed for details about how they exhibit their own Italian Americanness, they often struggle to express it. I can sense a spreading unease when we finish this discussion as if the students feel, like Addonizio, that they too, have "come, too late" with only their names. Many of them feel distant from an Italian immigrant past as second or third generation Italian Americans.

Italian American Culture is a general education course that satisfies the American Cultures requirement at my university. As such, there are a set of core objectives focusing on the American experience. One of these charges serves as the keystone to my approach to the course: "Increase student knowledge of United States social identities not in isolation, but in relation to one another" ("General Education Requirement Descriptions"). Though meant to be taken broadly, the built-in personal motivation of the majority of the students in this course requires an understanding of their own ethnic identity in relation to the *past* as well. Thus, in addition to comparing the migration trajectories of Italians and other ethnic communities in America (German, Irish and African American for example), I give students a context within which to include their own personal narratives.[2] To achieve this, I ask my students to become the curators of a digital archive dedicated to Italian American oral history.

The oral history project is not new to Italian American curricula. There are a wide variety of Italian American culture courses that contain an oral history component aimed at collecting local narratives, including the exemplary model from Montclair State University. This place-specific archive "uncovers the stories that make up the collective experience of the Italian American community of Montclair, New Jersey, while also encouraging students to investigate and share their ethnic experiences" (Trubiano 169). Even at my own university, there exists a material archive of Italian American oral histories related to this course dating back to 2000 (Perry). These examples successfully address the paratactic aim of historical relevance and personal engagement, but neither explore the pedagogical value of using new technologies in the process.

In this course, I wanted to strike a balance between student agency and adequate depth of engagement, while at the same time tapping into student digital intelligence. I also endeavored to introduce a project that would, by design, extend beyond the classroom and guarantee an audience through involving participants in an evolving intellectual process. The oral history project works in this way most effectively as a digital entity widely accessible to students and their successors. Allowing students to be the architects of a project that is quickly made available for use in the classroom and beyond offers them a chance to "identify their own rhetorical power as critically literate users of and potential contributors to digital archives" as scholars Jessica Enoch and Pamela VanHaitsma suggest (235). Not only does the digital archive provide a timely exchange, it also makes student participation in the historiography visible.

Introducing Oral Histories in the Classroom

I designed the project with three objectives in mind: 1) To give students some autonomy in deciding the content and scope of the project, 2) To create a relationship between primary texts and authors, allowing students to become the researchers producing materials for future classes and 3) To use available technologies (i.e. Box and Omeka) to construct a historically relevant digital archive for a public beyond the course. These goals are enfolded into the student learning objectives, for which the creation of a digital oral history serves as the culminating assessment.[3]

Before implementing any of these goals, I make sure to introduce oral histories into the classroom during the second week.[4] This

give examples of how the project will be used in the future while also offering models from professional sources—in this case from the Senator John Heinz History Center in Pittsburgh—to help the class begin to think about how oral histories are created and what makes them digital artifacts. Focusing on the process is important as this is what ultimately allows the students to see themselves as participants and not just observers.

The first oral histories that I introduce typically deal with descriptions of Italian life at the beginning of the 20th century. This activity is paired with a discussion of the Italian *Risorgimento* and the cultural differences between Northern and Southern Italian societies that remained after unification. Focusing on reasons for which Italians might migrate, I assign two oral histories from the Heinz History Center followed by a short list of questions.

The first account is from an Italian immigrant who worked as a teenage *giornaliero* (day-worker) in Calabria. The interviewer asks questions about birthplace and daily life and a description of hardship emerges. From the age of twelve he worked as a farm hand eating only once a day, sleeping outside in the summer and with the animals in the winter. When things were particularly bad, he ate grass (Galati). I pair this account with one from an immigrant who migrated from Udine, in Northern Italy. In this narrative, the family had a farm and though they were not wealthy, they lacked for nothing. This story also includes multiple migrations across generations from Italy to Romania to South America to Canada and finally to the United States all in search of work (Dozzi).

Through comparing these excerpts from different oral histories my students are able to deduce the different motivations that lead to migration. On one hand, there is extreme poverty and starvation, while the other shows only some economic hardship and more opportunity. There are also clear disparities between access to education and language. This contrast also opens up a discussion about sources. For instance, is it better to have a first-hand account or second-hand family narrative? When I assign these oral histories, I do not include the typed transcripts at first. On a practical level asking students to *listen* underscores the importance of the audio quality, location and the role of the interviewer in repeating difficult phrases or synthesizing moments for later clarity. This also preserves the dignity of the personal experience being described.

After this initial exposure to oral narratives, I assign a series of them throughout the semester from various sources, including the final

projects from previous classes. For instance, one student interview I use highlights post-war immigration and the experience of living in an Irish Catholic diocese as one of the few Italian Catholic families in rural Pennsylvania. This interview invites comparisons to previous generations' stories of the Great Migration and introduces elements leading up to the ethnic revival of the 1960s and 1970s. Such discussions, rooted in personal narrative, serve as preparation for the final critical analysis where students will analyze the historical relevance of the oral history that they themselves have conducted. By mid-semester my students have seen about five of these activities and are comfortable with analyzing the content of the oral testimonies and the process by which they are created, archived, and digitized, giving them what Enoch and VanHaitsma call "an archival literacy" that encourages "a deep sense of what a site does and, crucially, what it asks users to do" (219).

Goal #1: Student Autonomy

While current pedagogical trends in higher education overwhelmingly reject the traditional lecture-based model for student-driven approaches relying on new technology, the successful implementation of these models is not a simple task. A learner-centered paradigm is meant to motivate students who, "are deeply disengaged from the academic life of their institution" (Mintz). Thus, many new models aim to hook into student interests to weave subjective experience into the process of learning (Cooke; Lang). Yet adopting this strategy risks diminishing content and rigor for fleeting student interest and changing technologies. This risk becomes even greater in a large general education course where individual attention is at a premium.[5]

One way that I have found to immediately implicate students in the success of the oral history project is to ask them to organize and design the guidelines.[6] This is not a ploy to appease the desire for later due dates, instead, I am asking them to use their budding "archival literacy" to think about what elements need to go into a digital archive to make it successful. The course is typically fifty-students and I break them into committees of around eight to ten members. Each committee has about two weeks to come up with guidelines for conducting oral histories that include the following elements: subject (who may or may not be interviewed), location (where an interview may take place, including acceptable digital formats for interviews), technology required, length, acceptable questions, due date, and grade breakdown (percentage for each element involved). Once I assign this to each

committee, they can access an electronic folder of valuable information from the university archives and other national oral history sites that include best practices information for collecting and sharing oral history.

At the end of a two-week period, each committee presents recommendations and we agree on the details for the final project together in class. Relinquishing control of the process is central in shifting student perception from one of absorbing information to actually participating in the collection and dissemination of knowledge. By stepping out of the way, I allow them to become historians and not simply students. Drafting what is essentially our archive's constitution, my students are forced into thinking about how their work will be showcased and in what ways it will be accessed by others. The committee also represents an important sub-group that will serve as the initial readers/proofers for all completed oral histories.

Adopting this democratic process does pose some problems. For instance, each semester will yield different criteria and so the final archive lacks cohesion in some respects. Some of the interviews are only thirty minutes, while others go beyond an hour. There have been semesters where committees preferred subjects within a certain age-range and others that requested specific technical requirements and applications. Even with these disparities, the central elements tend to remain the same, and thus such flexibility does not undermine the integrity of the archive itself.

Goal #2: The Relationship Between Primary Texts and Authors

Discussing the use of archives in the classroom, Wendy Hayden admits that, "teachers at all levels find that incorporating archival projects leads to a level of student engagement not often observed in traditional research projects," (406). The digital archive is not only a way to involve students in the past, but it also becomes a site of research and discovery. In the interviews themselves, students are retrieving lost narratives and thus re-contextualizing their understanding of the past while at the same time perceiving their own relationship to it.

As I mentioned in the opening, most of my students come to this class with a personal investment in the material, even though they may be removed from the migration experience by a generation or more. The oral history project allows these students to research their own family trees in a way that pushes them to probe deeper than just ancestral lore. Even before conducting the interviews students need to amass a good bit of knowledge about Italian American culture in order to draft appropriate

questions. Some students are interviewing grandparents who remember family stories about early 20th century Italian American enclaves, while others are speaking to a younger generation whose parents came to the United States in the post-war period. Knowing the details of these moments of American history are essential in contextualizing and crafting the interview question set and understanding their subjects and the circumstances that surround the events being narrated.

Students are typically surprised at how much of this historical knowledge comes out during the interviews. When asked about how she felt about the project student Jamie Manecky said, "it opened up the opportunity for me to ask my grandma questions that I probably wouldn't have ever thought of. It was so insightful to hear about her past and that of my family as well." Jamie went on to say that, "the fact that her [grandmother's] stories aligned with what we learned in class throughout the semester really surprised me for some reason. I feel like everything we learned in class was just a fictional story, but it really came to life and a lot of value was added once I heard it first hand out of my grandma's mouth." Another student, Caroline Marino admits that the project was, "an amazing way to dig deeper into my own Italian American background." Like the previous student, she was surprised to see how the interview connected to the larger social and historical contexts that we discussed in class.

Before adopting this project into the curriculum, I would often struggle to find ways to allow students to share personal anecdote and family history within the structure of in-class discussions. While I generally welcomed personal stories, they often took students far afield of the topic. Channeling those stories into the oral history project now results in researched, contextualized narratives and invites students to be analytical about their own histories. Identifying these experiences as relevant historical artifacts also changes the way that students see and even *hear* them. Even for those who do not have a personal relation to the course content, creating primary texts instead of merely consulting them, forces them to think about how individual, lived experience comes to be represented within the larger historical record.

The culminating assignment for the semester asks students to re-examine their oral histories and evaluate them critically. In five pages, each student makes a case for why the oral history is significant to discussions of Italian American culture as a whole. Using both outside sources and knowledge learned throughout the semester, student-historians situate these personal narratives within a scholarly landscape, of which now they, too, are part. In general, these essays pull out a more

contemporary look at Italian American culture from the 1950s to today and require students to search for connections to and breaks from the past, while the at the same time recognizing elements that continue to define Italian American culture.

Goal #3: Using Available Technologies

The digital aspect of this project infuses it with an urgency that would otherwise not exist. The knowledge that their work (and their names) will be on the oral histories included in the digital archive allows my students to see how their efforts are part of a larger academic endeavor. The relative ease in working with course blogs and websites makes the dissemination and collection of an archive manageable. In this project, I used two key technologies to facilitate the collection and presentation of the oral histories: Box and Omeka.

In a class of fifty students, I needed to have the capacity to collect high-quality audio-files of interviews (some longer than an hour) as well as transcripts. In addition to collecting the files, I wanted a way to easily and quickly share them so that the oral histories could immediately be used for the analytical paper at the close of the semester. Box, a secure platform for storing and sharing data, is ideal for such an application. I created a shared folder for the oral histories so that students could upload their audio files and transcripts. Shared access also allowed them to read and listen to their peers' interviews. Box also gave me the opportunity to block access to those interviews not receiving permissions for academic or public dissemination without removing them from the rest of the archive's material.

For archival quality, audio files are ideally recorded in .wav format, but due to the large volume (at times up to 100 per semester) and the myriad devices used to record these interviews, I accepted the .mp3 format. Working with digital collections and non-professional oral historians necessitates some flexibility in collection. Most of my students used smartphones or tablets to record interviews. While I do spend some class time discussing settings, converting file formats and applications for recording, I end up receiving a wide variety in audio quality and file formats. This causes some headaches at the end, but the ease with which my students can go out and record stories is more important than these minor backend issues.

The last step in the process of creating the digital archive, is placing them on the course archive page. I use Omeka to organize and display the archive. Built as a free template for use by historical societies,

archives, and other professional entities, Omeka streamlines and professionalizes this process immensely. Not all of the oral histories make it to this final phase, which is only currently available to students and members of the university community. Permissions, interview content, and other factors dictate which interviews make it to the shared digital archive. This is essentially my task to create narrative threads that organize the archive, although I do consult students at the end of each semester to ask which narratives emerged most prominently throughout the interviews. Example themes that the students identified were WWII narratives, post-WWII migration stories, labor (mines, railroad, lumber), the cities of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, and other key experiences.

Ultimately, I add about twenty to thirty oral histories to the digital archive each year. This archive is available to my students and I often use it as a source for in-class oral history activities, which allows student work to inform and inspire future participants. The most significant drawback of using these applications springs less from student use and more from instructor-based tasks such as editing and publishing. It can become a time-consuming process to filter through all of the interviews to identify those to include in the final Omeka version.[7] One solution to this that I have recently adopted is to offer a former course student a digital publishing internship to assist with this last step. In the future, this class digital archive will be transferred to the university archives where it will have a larger public beyond the course. In the meantime, using both Box and Omeka has allowed me to store a significant amount of source material to keep as a record.

Conclusions

Luisa Del Giudice, a scholar of Italian folklore, suggests that, "It is through personal and collective acts of cultural recovery—field collection, recollection, or actual reclamation of cultural practices, commonly initiated through explorations of family life—that many Italian Americans encounter oral history and oral culture for the first time" (163). For most of my students, particularly those who self-identify as Italian American, becoming agents of the academic apparatus that shapes the digital archive affords them an experience that they never expected. Most if not all of the interviews are rich in historical value, particularly for communities in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York, where many of the students have grown up. More recently, students have been including photographs and images of other material

artifacts to include with the audio file and transcript. I am continually impressed with the quality of these projects.

While the lasting benefits of this project are difficult to quantify, students significantly perform better on the final critical analysis of the semester when it is linked to the oral histories.[8] The oral history project also figures prominently in final semester evaluations. The most prevalent comments typically relate to the opportunity to "experience" history first hand and to "connect" what we learned in class to the community, and often to a student's own family.

On a practical level, Box and Omeka are user-friendly tools that enhance the learning environment by allowing instantaneous collaboration between students and serving as a robust repository for instructional material and primary sources. Beyond this, Omeka, as a platform and interface for digital archives, becomes the catalyst for discussions about history and how culture disseminates and maintains it over time. Last, as a final product the Omeka archive showcases the collective intellectual work of students across semesters, forcing them to think about how they, too, shape Italian American history.

Johanna Rossi Wagner   PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

ENDNOTES

[1] Kim Addonizio, "Generations," *Tell Me: Poems,* BOA Editions, 2000, p 37.

[2] This course covers early relationships between Italian culture and what will be the United States from the 15th century through the present day through an investigation of historical, literary, and cinematic sources. This article limits itself to the use and creation of archives in and outside of class as only one thread of discovery throughout the semester.

[3] Student learning objectives taken directly from the syllabus are as follows: 1) Increase student knowledge of Italian American cultural identities not in isolation, but in relation to personal and historical narratives. 2) Cultivate an archival literacy to identify key elements of successful oral history production, processing, publication, and dissemination. 3) Draw upon knowledge of Italian American cultural history, to situate an Italian American oral history within the larger cultural and social currents of American history. The oral history project is designed to measure each of these.

[4] The semester runs on a fifteen-week schedule.

[5] There is recent evidence that suggests that if an active-learning approach is not undertaken with a sound understanding of *how* and *why* it serves pedagogical goals, it makes little difference. See David Goodblar's discussion of the active learning

approach in "Learning More About Active Learning," *Vitae, the Online Career Hub for Higher Ed,* The Chronical of Higher Education, 29 June 2016.

[6] Committee questions taken directly from the syllabus: 1) What is the goal of the oral history project? 2) Who will be considered an Italian American subject? Will there be age, region, topic or other restrictions? 3) How long should the interview be? Will there be a minimum or maximum duration? 4) What formats should be acceptable (media, applications, technology, word processing applications, etc.) for the final draft? 5) When should the interview take place? Does it have to be in person? 6) What specifications should there be on the transcript? What would a general template look like? 7) What kinds of questions would be appropriate in this kind of interview? 8) When should the final version be due and how should it be handed in? In stages? All at once? 9) How should the project be graded? It is 30% of the final grade. Should it be divided between a few assignments (i.e. question sets, audio, transcript) or not? What will you earn/lose points for? What elements make an excellent, good, average and inadequate oral history?

[7] The most common reason for not making it to this final phase are: poor audio quality, permissions denied for use beyond the assignment and inappropriate content.

[8] Since implementing the oral history project into the class, students have performed better on the final assessment where the average grade for the analytical essay tends to be an entire grade level higher than for similar assessments unlinked to the oral history. There is also a higher percentage (65-70%) of students earning above average (B and above) marks. Quality of the essays also span more varied topics including racial tension in the 1980s and 1990s, the role of mutual aid societies in immigrant communities, philosophical discussions of contemporary ethnic identity, and I even received a paper discussing the role of Italian American culture courses as a means to rediscover ethnicity. Anecdotally, I see many more students in my office before the final assessment since implementing the oral histories as many students are excited about the project and have multiple ideas for the final assessment. They are also clearly personally engaged with the material having conducted the interview.

WORKS CITED

Addonizio, Kim. *Tell Me: Poems*. BOA Editions, 2000.

Box. Directed by Aaron Levie, 2005. www.box.com. 20 June 2018.

Cooke, Joe. "Colleagues as Guinea Pigs." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1 June 2015. https://www.chronicle.com/article/Colleagues-as-Guinea-Pigs/230563. Accessed 5 May 2016.

Del Giudice, Luisa. "Spoken Memories: Oral History, Oral Culture, and Italian American Studies." *Teaching Italian American Literature, Film, and Popular Culture*. Edited by Edvige Giunta and Kathleen McCormick, Modern Language Association of America, 2010, pp. 160-67.

Dozzi, Angelo. Beneficial Society of North Italy Oral History
    Collection, 1928-1998, MSS 597, Italian American Collections,
    Detre Library and Archives, Senator John Heinz History Center.

Enoch, Jessica, and Pamela VanHaitsma. "Archival Literacy: Reading
    the Rhetoric of Digital Archives in the Undergraduate Classroom."
    College Composition and Communication, vol. 67, no. 2, 2015, pp.
    216-42.

Galati, Stefano. "Stefano Galati Oral History," 1999, acc.1999.0031,
    Italian American Collection, Detre Library and Archives, Senator
    John Heinz History Center.

"General Education Requirement Descriptions." *University Bulletin:
    Undergraduate Degree Programs: General Education in the
    Curriculum*, Pennsylvania State University, 2016-2017.
    https://gened.psu.edu/sites/default/files/docs/Archived%20Bulletin
    %20General%20Education%20Requirements.pdf. Accessed 20
    June 2018.

Gooblar, David. "Learning More about Active Learning." *Vitae, the
    Online Career Hub for Higher Ed*, The Chronical of Higher
    Education, 29 June 2016. https://chroniclevitae.com/news/1457-
    learning-more-about-active-learning. Accessed 29 June 2016.

Hayden, Wendy. "'Gifts' of the Archives: A Pedagogy for
    Undergraduate Research." *College Composition and
    Communication*, vol. 66, no. 3, 2015, pp. 402-26.

Lang, James M. "Stop Blaming Students for Your Listless Classroom."
    The Chronicle of Higher Education, 29 Sept. 2014.
    https://www.chronicle.com/article/Stop-Blaming-Students-for-
    Your/149067. 30 Oct. 2015.

Mintz, Steven. "A Gamified Approach to Teaching and Learning."
    Inside Higher Ed, 2 Dec. 2014.
    https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/higher-ed-gamma/gamified-
    approach-teaching-and-learning. 18 June 2015.

Omeka. Corporation for Digital Scholarship, Roy Rosenweig Center
    for History and New Media, George Mason University, 2008.
    https://omeka.org/. 20 June 2018.

Perry, Alan. Italian-American Oral History Project, 2000-2011. Special
    Collections Library, The Pennsylvania State University, University
    Park, Pennsylvania.

Trubiano, Marisa. "From the Classroom to the Community and Back Again: Oral Histories and the Italian American Experience Course." *Teaching Italian American Literature, Film, and Popular Culture*, Modern Language Association of America, 2010, pp. 168-74.