

Unit: Face-to-Face with the Great Depression

Lesson Title: The Lives of the People: To Understand the People is to Understand the Times

Grade level: Middle school through high school

Estimated time: Five class periods

Specific topic: The Great Depression

Subtopics: Studs Terkel's *Hard Times* and oral history

Teacher background information:

This lesson focuses on the era of the Great Depression and requires students to do primary research using excerpts from some of the interviews Studs Terkel conducted for his book *Hard Times*. As the culmination of this lesson, students will experience the interview process firsthand by conducting interviews in front of the class.

This lesson is best used in conjunction with Terkel's website. Preview the website "Studs Terkel: Conversation with America" at www.studsterkel.org, before introducing it to your students. Although optional, it is also a good idea to have a copy of Terkel's *Hard Times* to use as an in-class resource.

Key concepts:

1. To understand the present, it is important to communicate with the collective past.
2. Primary and secondary sources can be used to understand historical events.
3. While collecting information, a good interviewer should not try to influence his or her interviewee.
4. History is not only about big events and figures but is also about the lives of common people.

Key questions:

What defines the "average person" of the Depression Era? Can we typify those most affected by the Depression and the challenges they confronted? What does the phrase "bottom-up history" mean and to whom does it refer? Who is at the top of this hierarchy? What qualities do good interviewers possess? How can one apply interviewing skills to other tasks and activities? What is the particular value of information obtained through an interview? Can the "little man" change things for himself or for others? If so, how?

Goals of this lesson:

This lesson will provide students with an increased understanding of the Depression era. Students will learn the causes and effects of the Depression through the reflections of those who experienced it. Emphasis is placed on synthesizing information from Studs Terkel's interviews and retrieving information through student interviews.

Objectives:

This lesson aims to help students:

1. Understand how "real" people lived and worked during the Great Depression.
2. Learn basic interviewing skills.
3. Enhance their listening, note-taking, and reporting skills.
4. Empathize with the people of the past and their conditions.
5. Reflect on the efficacy of historical information.

Materials:

Master copies of the biography and interview handout are provided.

1. "Biography of Studs Terkel" handout
2. "Guidelines for Conducting an Interview" handout
3. Access to the website, "Studs Terkel: Conversation with America," at www.studsterkel.org. Use the following audio files from the *Hard Times* section of the website: Dorothy Bernstein, Buddy Blankenship, Cesar Chavez, Kitty McCullough, Mary Owsley and Peggy Terry, Ed Paulsen, and Jose Yglesias.
4. Paper and pens

Procedures:

Day 1: Introduction

Introduce Studs Terkel to your class using the biography included in this lesson plan. As a class, discuss how to prepare for and carry out an interview. Either require students to take notes while the class discusses the topic or distribute the "Guidelines for Conducting an Interview" included in this lesson plan as a handout.

Group students into pairs. Ask each pair to listen to two audio clips of Studs Terkel's interviews from *Hard Times*. The preferred list of audio clips (or interviewees) is listed in the materials section. Try to assign a different combination of interviews to each pair of students.

For each pair, ask one student to be the interviewer and the other to be the interviewee. You may either assign roles or let students to choose them. Have students log on to Terkel's website and listen to their assigned audio clips. If you do not have computer lab access at school, assign this as homework.

Ask the "**interviewers**" to take notes on Terkel's interviewing style and the types of questions he asks. These students should refer to the notes they took during the class discussion on conducting interviews.

Ask the "**interviewees**" to take notes on the content of the audio clips. They will use their notes to construct a composite character of their own based on the real people Terkel interviewed.

Day 2: Preparation

Ask students to prepare a ten-minute interview to present to the class. It is very important that students do not consult with their partner during interview preparation.

Tasks of the Interviewer: Using the information gathered from listening to Terkel's audio clips, the interviewer should generate a list of questions to guide the interview. The interviewer's goal is to elicit information about both the interviewee's life during the Depression and their anecdote. Ask the interviewers to provide you with three sample questions prior to the interview.

If an interviewer is having trouble creating his or her questions, you may prompt him or her with one or more of the following: How did you or your family earn your money during the Depression? How did you spend that money? What was your relationship with your family? How did you feel about your condition? What did you think about the government? Were you generally happy or unhappy? Why or why not? How did you survive both physically and mentally? What was your biggest concern or problem, and how did you address it? How did others treat you and how did you treat others? What kind of entertainment did you seek out? How has the Depression affected you today?

Tasks of the Interviewee: Using the information gathered from listening to the Terkel audio clips, the interviewees will each construct a composite character. Students should be prepared to role-play the characters they create and offer up general pieces of information about them, including their name, age,

marital status, occupation, where they live, etc. The interviewees should also create a short anecdote about their characters' situation that reveals something very important about their characters' personality or the time that they lived through. Ask the interviewees to provide you with a few sentences about their anecdotes prior to the interview.

Days 3 and 4: Student Interviews

Ask each pair to conduct their ten-minute interview in front of the class. The interviewers should use the list of questions they drafted to guide the interview. Interviewees should volunteer their anecdotes only if the interviewers ask questions relevant to it.

Ask members of the audience to respectfully listen to the interviews. You may choose to use an audience evaluation form to help students reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of each interview they witness. If you use an audience evaluation form, share the form with your students in advance. The evaluation should cover the following points: Interviewers should be prepared with thoughtful, objective questions and should be able to solicit descriptive answers including their interviewee's anecdote. Interviewees should be evaluated on the knowledge of character, the appropriateness of their anecdote, and their ability to respond to relevant questions. A scale of one to five may be used to evaluate these criteria.

Day 5: Discussion

Discuss the interviews conducted during Days 3 and 4. You may want to share your previously established discussion questions with your students in advance. The discussion should address the following questions: Which interviews revealed most about life during the Depression? Which interview techniques were best at eliciting important relevant information from the interviewer? What anecdotes were the best at reflecting Depression life? Which interviewees best assumed their roles?

Suggestions for student assessment:

Share any evaluation criteria with students on Day 1 of this activity. Evaluate interviewers based on their ability to obtain key information reflecting both the character and living conditions of their interviewee, including their interviewee's anecdote. Evaluate interviewees based on their use of the information from the audio clips, the depth of the characters they created, and the quality and appropriateness of the anecdote they prepared. If you choose to use an audience evaluation form, you may factor the observations of the class into each pair's final grade. You may also ask each pair to complete a self-evaluation.

Additional resources:

1. Additional background information about oral history activities for the classroom can be found on Studs Terkel's website at www.studsterkel.org.
2. Students may also access interviews from the "American Memory" files of the Federal Writers' Project on the Library of Congress website at www.loc.gov.

Extension activities:

1. After a pair of students have completed their interview, another student from the class may offer up a question that they believe will reveal the interviewee's anecdote (if it hasn't yet been given). In this situation, you can choose to offer extra credit.

2. Have students create a list of Depression-era artifacts from everyday life. They can collect this information from Terkel's interviews or from outside resources, such as books and websites.
3. Ask students to imagine that they are archaeologists in 2220 and have uncovered the items dating back to 2003 while on a "dig" in Chicago. What questions would they ask about the items? What are the possible answers? What resources would they use to get these answers?

This lesson fulfills the following Illinois Learning Standards:

English Language Arts:

- State Goal 1: Read with understanding and fluency.
- State Goal 3: Write to communicate for a variety of purposes.
- State Goal 4: Listen and speak effectively in a variety of situations.
- State Goal 5: Use the language arts to acquire, assess, and communicate information.

Social Science:

- State Goal 15: Understand economic systems, with an emphasis on the United States.
- State Goal 16: Understand events, trends, individuals, and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States, and other nations.
- State Goal 18: Understand social systems, with an emphasis on the United States.

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BIOGRAPHY OF STUDS TERKEL

Studs Terkel, radio broadcast personality and prize-winning author, was born Louis Terkel in New York, N.Y., on May 16, 1912. His father Samuel was a tailor and his mother Anna Finkel was a seamstress. He had three brothers. The family moved to Chicago in 1922 and opened a rooming house at Ashland Avenue and Flournoy Street on the near West Side.

From 1926 to 1936, the family ran the Wells-Grand Hotel, another rooming house at Wells Street and Grand Avenue. Terkel credits his knowledge of the world to the tenants who gathered in the lobby of the hotel, and the people who congregated in nearby Bughouse Square, a meeting place for workers, labor organizers, dissidents, the unemployed, and religious fanatics of many persuasions. In 1939, he married Ida Goldberg, and they had one son.

After graduating from University of Chicago's Law School in 1934, Terkel pursued acting and appeared on stage, in radio, and in the movies. He has been a playwright, a radio news commentator, a sportscaster, a film narrator, a jazz columnist, a disc jockey, and a music festival host. In 1944, he began hosting a radio show. Radio allowed him to express his own personality and to play the music he enjoyed including, folk, opera, jazz and blues. In 1945, he debuted his own television series, called "Stud's Place," in which he began asking people the types of questions that would mark his interview style in later years.

On "The Studs Terkel Program," which was heard on Chicago's fine arts radio station WFMT from 1952 to 1997, Terkel interviewed national and international figures who helped shape the past century. The program included guests who were politicians, writers, activists, labor organizers, performing artists, and architects, among others. Terkel's depth of personal knowledge of the diverse subjects he explored on his program is remarkable, as is his ability to get others to do what they do best—talk about themselves. Many of the interviews he conducted for his books and for his radio program are featured on his website at www.studsterkel.org.

Terkel's first book of oral history interviews was *Division Street: America*, published in 1966. In subsequent years, he wrote many oral history books covering topics such as the Great Depression, World War Two, race relations, working, and aging. Terkel continues to write, interview people, work on his books, and speak in public. He is currently Distinguished Scholar-in-Residence at the Chicago Historical Society.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING AN INTERVIEW

1. Research your topic in advance, and prepare a list of questions that will help you get the answers to your questions. Make sure that your questions do not require a simple “yes” or “no” response.
2. If you are unsure about your note-taking skills, record the interview.
3. Obtain general background information about the interviewee before asking specific questions related to your subject, including his or her age, occupation, interests, talents, and where he or she lives.
4. Let your interviewee answer a question completely before asking your next question. Follow-up your interviewee’s answers with related questions.
5. Do not impose your own feelings or opinions on the interviewee.
6. At the conclusion of your interview, give the interviewee an opportunity to add additional comments and thoughts. This portion of the interview may provide more in-depth answers to previous questions or it may stray from your topic, but regardless it can be very valuable.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Please take a few minutes to give us your *History Lab* feedback!

After reviewing and using this *History Lab* lesson, please send us your feedback. Your ideas and honest assessment will ensure that these lessons keep improving and provide us with useful insight for future teacher fellows.

First name:

Last name:

School:

Grade you teach:

E-mail:

Are you a CHS member? (circle one): yes no

Name of unit you are evaluating (check one):

☐ America's Documents of Freedom

☐ Chicago's World's Fairs

☐ African American Life in the Nineteenth Century

☐ Face to Face with the Great Depression

☐ The Civil War: Up Close and Personal

☐ America and Protest

Name of lesson you are evaluating:

Evaluation questions:

1. On a scale of one to five (with five being the best) rate this lesson in terms of the quality of the student learning experience it provides (circle one):

5

4

3

2

1

2. What were the strengths of this lesson?

3. What aspects of this lesson needed additional fine-tuning?

4. Would you use this lesson, or some variation of it, again? Why or why not?

5. What advice, tips, or suggestions would you give to future users of this lesson?

6. Where does this lesson fit in your course of study (scope, sequence, unit)?

7. If applicable, how did the use of primary sources impact student learning?

8. Additional comments? (Use other side if necessary.)

Thank you for your time. Please send the completed form via mail or fax to:

Chicago Historical Society, 1601 N. Clark Street, Chicago, Illinois, 60614-6071, Attn: History Programs

Fax: 312-799-2452