

Living History: Researching and Sharing Personal Stories

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History does not have to be a boring subject, and can, with a little preparation, be an engaging activity for language learners in Japan. This article outlines the experience of one teacher with a living history project with her Japanese university students that provides insights into how living histories can, as one movie suggests, make history “come alive.”

A Class Project . . .

Until my 3rd year of high school, the only history I studied was the kind you find in textbooks. There were names, there were places, and there were numbers, but there were never really any stories. However, my 3rd year high school history teacher was really into the value of stories, and he wanted his students to know stories from history. Thus, when we started the unit on World War Two, instead of relying solely on what the textbook said, he gave us the assignment to find someone who had actually lived through that war and interview that person to find out things we couldn't find in history books. As a busy high school student (that is, as a teenager not having much time for school work), I remember being very resistant to this task. After all, what teenage kid thinks it's cool to talk to an old person?

. . . that led to a connection with my father

But it didn't really happen that way. My dad, who had been a young teen when the United States entered into World War Two, was a good storyteller, but up until that point in my life, all his stories had been made-up stories. I had never really asked him about his life, nor had he offered much in the way of his childhood stories. But once I started asking about his life during World War Two he seemed happy to open up and tell me. Also, maybe more importantly pedagogically, it became a meaningful learning experience because the information I was able to gather (my research) was so very personal.

He was 13 when Pearl Harbor was attacked. On that day, he and his younger brother and his father were sitting around a radio in Wisconsin, listening to their home team, the Green Bay

Packers, play football. He recalls that, just at a moment when the game was getting exciting, it was interrupted by the announcement that Pearl Harbor had come under attack. His reaction, he said, was extreme disappointment. But he added that his disappointment wasn't related at all to the attack; he was disappointed that the football game had been interrupted, never to be broadcast again on that day or on any other day. I know of no history book that has a story about the start of the war that matches my dad's.

He also told me about something called War Stamps, which kids were encouraged to buy to support the war effort. He said it was really exciting to save his pocket change to buy these stamps, and he recited (as he can to this day) the jingle he and his classmates learned in their junior high school that was used to encourage them to put their spare change toward supporting the war. I can still hear him singing it (to the tune of "Scotland's Burning," which was a round I had learned in my Girl Scout days):

*"Save your nickels, dimes and quarters,
Pennies, too, old and new.
Buy more war stamps,
Monday morning here at school."*

These are just a few examples of the many personal stories from history that I learned that day and for many days after. Later in my life, after I became a teacher, I realized that what made the assignment memorable and meaningful – what made a difference – is that what I learned when I made an effort to ask was much more valuable and memorable than what I learned from any textbook chapter that covered the "facts" of World War Two.

Becoming Researchers of Living History

Fast forward to today. In the first month of the school year my university freshman speaking and listening courses, I teach students how to make basic presentations, and while my goal is actually to teach the format of a simple presentation without worrying too much about academic content, I try as much as possible to give them topics that they might find meaningful to research and that others in the class will, hopefully, find interesting to listen to.

One of the first presentations the students do is called Living History Presentation. For this presentation, borrowing from the idea my history teacher had, students are required to interview their grandparents or someone who is their grandparents' age and to give a presentation about what they learned. While many students, much like I did, initially assume that the interviewing process will be tedious and are thus resistant at first, most tell me after the presentation (and, for some, even years after) that what they learned from the interview was not only interesting and new, but, in some cases, it's the most meaningful research they have ever done as a university student.

For example, one student interviewed her grandmother who had lived in Okinawa during World War Two. She said that her grandmother had been so excited to be asked about her life that her interview had lasted days. One of the most memorable facts she learned about her grandmother was that a bomb had been dropped very near to her while she was out working in the garden as a small child. The bomb, however, failed to detonate. Hitomi, my student, told the class with tears in her eyes that when her grandmother told her this story, she realized that

if that bomb had exploded, she wouldn't be here today. She said that even her own mother had never heard that story. Maybe she had simply never asked, just like I'd never asked my dad about his life as a teenager until I was "made" to do so.

Another student told of her great-grandfather being separated from his family during the bombing of Hiroshima, and of how he spent days searching for his family and finally was able to locate them. Others told lighter stories of how their grandparents met or what kinds of punishments they got when they were in school back in the "old days". All of the stories were real, all were interesting, and all had much more meaning than any history textbook could ever have.

Learning from our Histories and Stories

When I did my interview with my dad and when my students did their interviews with their elderly relatives, we learned not only about our own histories and stories, but we also learned something else. We learned that people want to share these stories; they are just waiting for us to ask. And when we do ask, that can make all the difference.

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