

Discovering History and Creating Community through Documentary Theatre

by Anna Royal, Georgetown Visitation Preparatory School

Overview:

The purpose of this project is to research, discover, and create stories from archival materials that are currently being preserved and documented at Georgetown Visitation Preparatory School in order to foreground its long history of tradition as well as to create an intentional community by linking the stories of the past to those of the present.

Georgetown Visitation was established in 1799 by “three pious ladies”, McDermott, Sharpe, and Lawlor, who were tasked with establishing a school for young women. The school is the oldest Catholic girls’ school in the original 13 colonies and is affiliated with the Catholic Order of the Visitation Monastery. The Sisters of the Visitation have supported, guided and led the school since its inception. Known as the Young Ladies Academy throughout the 19th c., students received an education in math and science as well as art, needlework, and music. During this time, the early Sisters ran a Saturday school, free to any young girl who wished to learn—including slaves, at a time when public schools were almost non-existent and teaching slaves to read was illegal.

Objective:

Students will be asked to apply theater technique as outlined by Ping Chong & Co. for *Undesirable Elements* in order to dramatize archival materials. They will be asked to document and edit the material to determine not only whose stories get told, but also which story they would like to tell or which story they feel must be told.

Rationale:

This project would be facilitated through the Georgetown Visitation Historical Society, a club that includes both students and Visitation’s residential archivist and senior historian. In attempt to preserve the history of the school and the Salesian tradition which it embodies, Visitation has worked actively to restore and preserve its archives. The students would be asked to work on this project throughout the course of the year with its culmination of the documentary theatre project occurring in the early spring.

Materials & Resources:

Access to Georgetown Visitation Preparatory School’s archival library
 Interview with Dr. Susan Nazelyty, Archival Associate, Georgetown Visitation
 Interview with Dr. Madeleine Vinton Dahlgren, professor, Georgetown University
 Interview with Sr. Mada-Anne Gell, Historian, Georgetown Visitation
Undesirable Elements Ping Chong
Undesirable Elements Workbook by Ping Chong
 Clips of UE performances on YouTube
Everyone Gets an American Flag (Kahn)
A Story Of Courage: Annals Of The Georgetown Convent Of The Visitation Of The Blessed Virgin Mary by George Parsons Lathrop, Rose Hawthorne Lathrop
Georgetown Visitation Since 1799 by Eleanore C. Sullivan

Essential Questions:

How do we construct narrative from historical documents?

What stories do we choose to tell when researching archival documents?

How are past events subject to contemporary perspectives?

Whose stories get told and why?

How does the past shape the present?

What attitudes, philosophies and practices have come to create the school you attend today?

How do you see yourself and your role in Visitation's living history?

Skills Learned:

Distinguish between oral and written narratives

Understand narrative as a primary source from which history is recorded and transmitted

Generate a list of questions that will enable students to learn about their institution's past and heritage to answer via documentary theatre

Research

Learn through the research process about Visitation history and what story they want to tell

Deconstruct, analyze and synthesize a narrative from materials discovered through archival research

Script a first person narration spoken in the voice of the selected historical figure

Work collaboratively to create a theatrical piece of four to five spoken voices over several historical periods

Block and orchestrate a theatrical thematic performance

Understand how history influences the contemporary culture and experience

Project Sequence:

1. **Overview.** Give an overview of the project, objective, and sequence of research and assignments.
2. **Teach adaptation strategies.** Read and analyze a chapter from Chong's *Undesirable Elements*. Discuss how similar techniques could be applied to developing narratives for alumnae and historical figures associated with GV over the course of several time periods. Focus on perspective, point of view, and specific details/facts of events within the piece. If applicable, discuss the thematic patterns between speakers.
3. **Introductory Assignment. River Story.** Have students in groups of 4-5 read through portions of Sullivan's *Georgetown Visitation Since 1799* and choose a time period on which to focus. Have groups outline 4-5 events in chronological order and add dates or approximate dates when applicable. If there are people's stories involved, have them choose a short one-sentence quotation that best represents that person's experience in their own voice. Have students script and perform their findings in the form of a "River Story."
4. **Research.** In groups of 3-4, have students utilize research methods to discover a historical figure of any era to focus on. They may find this historical figure through researching the archives or interviewing a historian. Once they have chosen the historical figure, have them develop a narrative for this figure, incorporating as much relevant primary source material as possible. Each group will be responsible for a single historical figure, with a total of 4-5 figures in all.
5. **Dramatize.** Students work together in groups to script and stage their figure. As they sift through research, students should determine this figure's character, persona, narrative, and how she or he should be portrayed on stage. They should write and recreate the character's story in first person point of view.
6. **Perform.** Groups come together as a whole class/club and together edit and collaborate the narrative of their historical figure either according to the rules and principle's as outlined by Ping Chong & Co.'s *Undesirable Elements* or according to the rules as outlined by documentary performance in Kahn's *Everyone Gets an American Flag*. The performance should include a range of historical figures over time. The club as a whole will determine what, if any, thematic patterns arise from their research. The club as a whole will perform the piece, which one member of each group representing their assigned historical figure.
7. **Reflect.** After the performance, discuss with the club what decisions the student-actors made to transform the archival documents into a narrative voice and then how to adapt the page to stage. Ask the club what they noticed about voice and narrative structure in these portrayals. Ask students to reflect on why they chose their historical figure, what it represents to them, and how through this process, they have participated creating a historical narrative not only for an individual but also for the larger community of the school.