Lesson: Collect Oral Histories About the Genocide in Guatemala

OVERVIEW
In this lesson, students will watch a video clip about a young woman whose father disappeared during the Guatemalan dictatorship in 1984 as part of a systematic genocide. They will then discuss the strengths and limitations of oral histories in telling the story of such a complicated tragedy. Students will also reach out to Guatemalans in their families or community whose lives have been affected by the genocide; document their memories from that time period; and submit these stories to a website that serves as a public record and memorial of the Guatemalan genocide. If students are unable to speak to Guatemalans in their families or community, they can shift the focus of the activity to create audio recordings of stories told by other members of the local community.

For more information on oral history and the Guatemalan genocide, please see the Resources section of this lesson.

The clip used in this lesson (in Spanish with English subtitles) is from the film Granito: How to Nail a Dictator, a documentary that addresses the extermination of an estimated 200,000 people in Guatemala and the lawyers and activists who seek to hold the murderers accountable. If you wish to use the full episode in the classroom, please note that significant portions of the film are in Spanish with English subtitles. Also, Granito contains emotionally-charged content and footage of a village massacre. Please preview before classroom use.

POV documentaries can be recorded off-the-air and used for educational purposes for up to one year from their initial broadcast. In addition, POV offers a lending library of DVDs and VHS tapes that you can borrow anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our Community Network.

OBJECTIVES
By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Discuss the loss and impact experienced by a young woman whose father disappeared in the Guatemalan genocide.
- Evaluate the strengths and limitations of oral histories.
- Use media to document a story related to the genocide in Guatemala or an important event in the life of a person in their families or community.
- Reflect in writing about their experiences conducting the interviews for their projects, their reactions to the stories they documented and what they think their interviews contribute to the historical record.

GRADE LEVELS
9-12
SUBJECT AREAS
World History, International Studies, Geography, Social Studies, Current Events

MATERIALS
- Internet access and equipment to show the class online video and display a website
- A map showing the location of Guatemala
- Technology to record an oral history

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED
One 50-minute class period, plus time outside of class to complete the project. The exact time needed will depend on how you customize the project for your unique circumstances.

FILM CLIP
"Families of the Disappeared" (length 8:54)  
The clip begins at 55:56 with a shot of someone holding a stuffed bear. It ends at 1:04:50 with a shot of hands joined across a table.

ACTIVITY
Note: To increase student background knowledge on the history of Guatemala and the genocide of more than 200,000 people that took place there, please see the Extensions and Adaptations section of this lesson plan for a recommended research activity.

1. Ask students to locate Guatemala on a map. Explain that during nearly 40 years of civil war and rule by dictators in the second half of the 20th century, more than 200,000 people were killed in Guatemala in a systematic genocide. Often, victims simply “disappeared,” never to be heard from again.

2. Tell students that you are going to show them a video clip (length 8:54) that shows Alejandra García, a young woman whose father disappeared during the genocide in Guatemala when she was barely two years old. Explain that the term “impunity” is used several times in the video. It means to be exempt or free from punishment. Focus student viewing by having them take notes on the impact that the disappearance of García’s father had on her.

3. After watching the clip, discuss:
   - In what specific ways did the disappearance of García’s father affect her life?
   - What role could the organization of documents in the Guatemalan National Police Archive play in the search for justice and healing by victims’ families?
   - What are the strengths and limitations of oral histories? How do oral histories like García’s supplement written records like those of the National Police Archive when telling the story of the Guatemalan genocide? How would the historical record of this tragedy be different without accounts like García’s? What other evidence should historians seek in order to understand what happened?
   - What did it mean to García finally to know what happened to her father?
Inform the class that documents from the National Police Archive revealed who was responsible for the disappearance of García’s father. She took that evidence to trial in October 2010 and two former police officers were convicted as a result. They were each sentenced to 40 years in prison.

4. Display the website for the film’s companion transmedia project Every Memory Matters (http://granitomem.com/). Explain to the class that in order to honor those killed in the genocide and to help educate people about what happened, this website has been set up to capture the memories of those who survived the armed conflict in Guatemala. In this activity, students will be able to contribute to this online public record by seeking out those who were affected by the genocide, documenting memories that they have of this time period and submitting these stories to the website. Stories may be told via short videos, audio, text and/or photos. Video is preferred. For filming tips, a sample consent form and interview and follow-up questions recommended by Every Memory Matters, please review the related Post Screening Activity Guide (http://granitomem.com/). For inspiration, students can watch some of the stories already posted to the site.

Note: Over time, war and poverty have driven an estimated 1.3 million Guatemalans from their homeland to the United States. A number of Guatemalan-born people may live in your community (http://www.city-data.com/top2/h145.html). You and your students may already have connections with these residents. If not, involve the class in brainstorming strategies for finding people to interview for this project and for troubleshooting potential language barriers (possibly in partnership with your school’s ESL students). It may make sense to invite those you wish to interview to your classroom for a special filming day. Feel free to adapt the activity to work in your circumstances.

Also inform students that Guatemalan high school and college students are themselves gathering and contributing to the Every Memory Matters public archive of memories. Since the Guatemalan genocide is not taught in high school or college in Guatemala, they are eager to interview their elders to find out the truth.

If your class is unable to speak with Guatemalans, shift the focus of the activity to creating audio recordings that document stories told by other members of your community. StoryCorps provides detailed instructions online for how to record your story (http://storycorps.org/record-your-story/). Consider how these stories could be shared online (with permission—see this Oral History Primer (http://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/oral-history-primer) for a sample release form and step-by-step instructions for conducting an oral history interview) to form a public record of experiences for your local area.

5. When students have gathered their stories for this assignment, have them turn them in with written reflections about their experiences conducting the interviews, their reactions to the stories they documented and statements about how the interviews contribute to the historical record.
EXTENSIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

1. Help students build a deeper knowledge base about Guatemala and the genocide that took place there. Use a KWL chart (http://www.eduplace.com/graphicorganizer/pdf/kwl.pdf) to find out what students already know (the K column) about Guatemala and the armed struggle there in the second half of the 20th century, as well as what they want (the W column) to find out. Once the first two columns of the chart are completed, assign topics in the W column for small student groups to research. A good starting point to begin their investigations is POV’s Timeline of Guatemala’s Violent History, but using a variety of resources is recommended. (The Resources section of this lesson provides a list of other helpful websites.) Ask each group to summarize what it learns in the L column of the chart and then explain its findings to the class, perhaps in a slideshow or with a class wiki. Have students also compare what they learned (column L) to their prior understanding of these topics (column K) and make corrections as needed.

2. Host a community event to showcase the stories documented by students about the Guatemalan genocide. Ask students to invite those featured in the stories, community leaders, the media, friends and family. Consider including an expert panel for a deeper discussion of genocide and the subsequent search for justice and healing.

3. Delve deeper into how the United States supported the Guatemalan military leaders who committed the genocide described in Granito. Students can learn more about Guatemala’s recent history from POV’s Discussion Guide, as well as from the Washington Post articles “Papers Show U.S. Role in Guatemalan Abuses” (http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/daily/march99/guatemala11.htm) and “Clinton: Support for Guatemala Was Wrong” (http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/daily/march99/clinton11.htm). Discuss the factors that motivated U.S. involvement in Guatemala, trace how the U.S. role changed at various points and identify the consequences of American intervention for both the United States and Guatemalans. What lessons can be learned from this history to inform current U.S. foreign policy? Ask students to capture their analysis and recommendations in a memo directed to the president of the United States.

4. Challenge students to do their part to bring about positive social change. The title of the film Granito means “tiny grain of sand” in Spanish. It reflects the Mayan philosophy that if everyone contributes his or her own small bit—or grain of sand—to the community, the collective effort will improve society. Discuss this concept as part of your school’s service learning activities, or give students an assignment to participate in meaningful volunteer work for a certain period of time and reflect in writing about the impact of their contributions.

5. Explore additional films that address Latin American history, genocide and related issues of justice and healing. Video, background information, and classroom activities are provided online for each film.

- When the Mountains Tremble (http://www.pbs.org/pov/granito/when-the-mountains-tremble.php), the 1982 film that preceded Granito: How to Nail a Dictator, tells the story of the Guatemalan internal conflict through the eyes of a then 22-year-old Mayan woman, Rigoberta Menchú.
• **Enemies of the People** ([http://www.pbs.org/pov/enemies/](http://www.pbs.org/pov/enemies/)) shows the investigation of a Cambodian journalist into the killing of nearly 2 million Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge during Pol Pot's regime in the late 1970s.

• **State of Fear** ([http://skylightpictures.com/films/state_of_fear](http://skylightpictures.com/films/state_of_fear)) takes place in Peru, yet serves as a cautionary tale for a world engaged in a “global war on terror.” It dramatizes the human and societal costs a democracy faces when it embarks on a “war” against terror, a “war” potentially without end, and all too easily exploited by unscrupulous leaders seeking personal political gain.

• **The Flute Player** ([http://www.pbs.org/pov/thefluteplayer/](http://www.pbs.org/pov/thefluteplayer/)) tells the story of a Cambodian musician who returns to his country to face the dark shadows of his worn-torn past and seek out surviving musicians.

• **Inheritance** ([http://www.pbs.org/pov/inheritance/](http://www.pbs.org/pov/inheritance/)) addresses the Holocaust from the perspective of a Jewish survivor and the daughter of a perpetrator.

• **The Judge and the General** ([http://www.pbs.org/pov/judgeandthegeneral/](http://www.pbs.org/pov/judgeandthegeneral/)) tells the story of the criminal investigation of Augusto Pinochet, a dictator who ran a military regime in Chile for 17 years.

• **Lost Boys of Sudan** ([http://www.pbs.org/pov/lostboysofsudan/](http://www.pbs.org/pov/lostboysofsudan/)) follows two young Sudanese refugees through their first year in the United States.

• **Pol Pot's Shadow** ([http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/cambodia/thestory.html](http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/cambodia/thestory.html)), a 2002 film from FRONTLINE/World, includes an interview with Nuon Chea and illustrates how at that time Cambodia was not sure if it wanted to confront its violent past or bury it.

• **The Reckoning: The Battle for the International Criminal Court** ([http://www.pbs.org/pov/reckoning/](http://www.pbs.org/pov/reckoning/)) is the story of the first six tumultuous years of the International Criminal Court, the first international court to try individuals for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

6. Investigate the impact of documentaries used in criminal investigations and legal proceedings. POV provides an educator guide designed for use in colleges and universities: *Using Documentary Films to Spotlight and Redress Genocide, Corruption and Injustice around the Globe*. This guide includes classroom activities, discussion questions and research assignments based on the films *Granito: How to Nail a Dictator, Enemies of the People, Presumed Guilty and Give Up Tomorrow*.

7. Compare how different countries have sought justice and healing after experiencing genocide. Have student groups research the aftermath of a genocide that occurred in modern times, such as those that took place in the former Yugoslavia, Guatemala, Darfur, Iraq, Cambodia, Rwanda or during the Holocaust. Have the perpetrators in each situation been brought to justice? If so, how was that accomplished? If not, what have been the barriers to doing so? Also, what has been done to encourage healing among the victims of each genocide? Ask groups to share their findings with the rest of the class and then discuss similarities and differences. Next, put the genocides that students researched in chronological order. Has the process of seeking justice and healing improved over time? Why or why not? Have students explain their thinking in writing.

8. Learn more about “universal jurisdiction,” or the right of a country to prosecute the worst crimes, even if they take place in another country. Have students read Amnesty International’s summary of Universal Jurisdiction ([http://www.amnesty.org/en/international-justice/issues/universal-jurisdiction](http://www.amnesty.org/en/international-justice/issues/universal-jurisdiction)) and
conduct additional research as needed to identify the rationale for universal jurisdiction, as well as its benefits and potential drawbacks. What role has this principle played in the efforts to seek justice for human rights abuses in Chile and Guatemala? Do students believe that universal jurisdiction helps or hurts the justice process? Ask students to provide support for their responses.

RESOURCES

The Center for Justice and Accountability
http://www.cja.org/section.php?id=83
This resource summarizes the legal case begun in the Spanish national courts in the 1990s to bring Guatemalan dictator Efraín Ríos Montt to justice.

Efraín Ríos Montt
This site provides a biographical timeline that details the activities and atrocities of the Guatemalan dictator.

Guatemala: Eterna Primavera, Eterna Tirania
www.primavera-tirania.com
These photographs by Jean-Marie Simon of Guatemala during the war years (the subtitle translates as “Eternal Spring, Eternal Tyranny”) provide an excellent springboard for discussion. (Note: This site is in Spanish only.)

This article by Elisabeth Malkin includes details of the arrest of Ríos Montt in Guatemala in 2012 and his impending trial there.

POV Background: Guatemala’s Recent History
http://www.pbs.org/pov/granito/
This resource outlines Guatemala’s history from 1944 to 2012.

Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History
http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html
This resource discusses the strengths and limitations of oral history and provides guidance on how to conduct oral history interviews.

This American Life: “What Happened at Dos Erres”
This is an emblematic story of a survivor of a massacre in one Guatemalan village, and how the perpetrators were brought to justice after 30 years.

University of California Santa Cruz: Oral History Primer
http://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/oral-history-primer
This primer provides step-by-step instructions for conducting an oral history interview, and includes a sample release form.
Yale University: Violence and Genocide in Guatemala
http://www.yale.edu/gsp/guatemala/TextforDatabaseCharts.html
This site describes the Guatemalan genocide and provides charts that illustrate related statistics.

STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in
History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects
(http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

SL, 9-10, 11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative
discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on
[grade-appropriate] topics, text and issues, building on others’ ideas and
expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

W.9-12.4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development,
organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

W.9-10.6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish and update
individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology’s capacity
to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

W.11-12.6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish and
update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback,
including new arguments or information.

WHST. 9-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development,
organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

Content Knowledge: (http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/) a compilation of
ccontent standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent
Research for Education and Learning).

Behavioral Studies, Standard 1: Understands that group and cultural influences
contribute to human development, identity and behavior.

Geography, Standard 10: Understands the nature and complexity of Earth’s
cultural mosaics.

Geography, Standard 13: Understands the forces of cooperation and conflict that
shape the divisions of Earth’s surface.

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing
process.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and
interpret visual media.
World History, Standard 44: Understands the search for community, stability, and peace in an interdependent world.

World History, Standard 45: Understands major global trends since World War II.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Cari Ladd, M.Ed., is an educational writer with a background in secondary education and media development. Previously, she served as PBS Interactive’s director of education, overseeing the development of curricular resources tied to PBS programs, the PBS TeacherSource website (now PBS Teachers) and online teacher professional development services. She has also taught in Maryland and Northern Virginia.