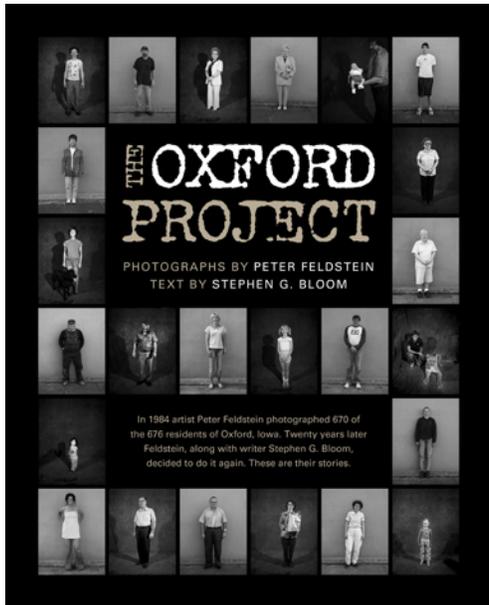


THE OXFORD PROJECT

A Teacher's Guide for High School Students

By Nancy Wak



Prompted by the publication of Peter Feldstein and Stephen G. Bloom's *The Oxford Project*, originally published in hardcover by Welcome Books in 2008 and the recipient of The American Library Association's Alex Award in 2009 (The Alex Awards are given to 10 adult books that are appealing to young adults)

ABOUT THE OXFORD PROJECT

The Oxford Project began in 1984 when artist Peter Feldstein set out to photograph every single resident of his town, Oxford, Iowa (pop. 676). He converted an abandoned storefront on Main Street into a makeshift studio and posted fliers inviting people to stop by. At first the residents trickled in slowly, but in the end nearly all of Oxford stood before his lens.

Twenty years later, Feldstein did it again, re-photographing as many of the original residents as he could locate—only this time, his neighbors didn't just pose, they talked. With astonishing honesty, the people of Oxford shared their memories, fantasies, failures, secrets, and fears with Feldstein and writer Stephen G. Bloom, who compiled their words into the poignant, short, first person narratives that accompany their portraits.

HOW TO USE THIS TEACHING GUIDE

This Teacher Guide provides ideas for incorporating *The Oxford Project* into classroom curriculum for grades 9 through 12. There are four lessons that focus on the following themes:

- The value of documenting the lives of ordinary people
- The meaning of community
- How people change over the course of their lives
- Depictions of small-town America

The lessons are aligned to McREL national standards (<http://www.mcrel.org>) in several curriculum areas—including Language Arts, Behavioral Studies, and Life Skills. Some of the lessons use digital media. It is recommended that you start with Lesson 1: Introducing *The Oxford Project*. You can then pick and choose from the remaining lessons.

In addition to the lessons, this Teaching Guide also offers ideas for school-wide activities—including a performance of *The Oxford Project*.

LESSON 1: INTRODUCING THE OXFORD PROJECT

Grade Level: 9-12

Objective: Students will become familiar with *The Oxford Project* and consider the notion of documenting the lives of ordinary people.

Materials:

- One or more copies of *The Oxford Project*, paperback edition
- Selected photocopied pages from *The Oxford Project* to distribute to each student (Include a variety of ages. You may wish to choose narratives about male residents for male students, and female narratives for female students. You may also want to include a few people who are related.)
- Downloaded background photos from *The Oxford Project* (available at [www.welcomebooks.com/oxfordproject])
- Computer with Internet access and connection to an overhead projector

Time: One class period

1. Pose this question to students: What if somebody took a photo of each person in your town or city?
2. Using a computer connected to an overhead projector, display the following YouTube clip about how *The Oxford Project* came to be: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPLZRUDhawE> (you may wish to bookmark the url in advance).
3. Explain that *The Oxford Project* consists of photos taken in 1984 and 2004 of nearly everyone who lives in Oxford, Iowa (pop. 676), and first-person narratives about each Oxford resident. Note that during this lesson they will become acquainted with some of the Oxford residents through their photos and narratives. (You may wish to put the book on reserve in the school library or make it available to students to explore on their own.)
4. Distribute the selected photos and narratives from *The Oxford Project*—one to each student. Give students a few minutes to examine the photos and read the narratives silently. Then encourage volunteers to read their narratives aloud. You may wish to display the photos for each narrative as it is read [USE BACKGROUND PHOTOS FROM OP PERFORMANCE?].
5. Engage students in a discussion about the kinds of information revealed in the narratives. What common issues and themes do the narratives contain? (You may wish to list these on the board.) Ask: What do the photos and narratives tell us about life in Oxford, Iowa? Do you find the narratives interesting? Why or why not?
6. Explain that as a stranger in town, journalist Stephen G. Bloom asked Oxford residents fairly personal questions—for example: *Were you ever in love with your husband? How did you know he was the guy for you? What happens after you die? What do you really think about this community?* To his surprise, people talked freely about their relationships and dreams, regrets and sorrows. Ask students to consider why the people of Oxford might have been willing to share their personal stories. Then ask students how they would feel about answering similar questions about their lives.

Standards

LANGUAGE ARTS

Standard 5. Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process

Standard 8. Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes

LESSON 2: DOCUMENTING A COMMUNITY

Grade Level: 9-12

Objective: Students will discuss the concept of community and create a collaborative version of *The Oxford Project*.

Materials:

- Selected photocopied pages from *The Oxford Project*
- Digital camera
- Computer with photo-downloading and word-processing software and Internet access
- *Personal Statement Guidelines* handout

Time: Two class periods (on separate days)

DAY 1

1. Explain that Peter Feldstein, the photographer of *The Oxford Project*, describes his work as “always being about community.” Guide students to discuss the meaning of community. The following questions may help to spur discussion:
 - What is community?
 - What are some characteristics of a community?
 - What are some examples of communities?
 - Why do people join communities?
 - What makes this classroom a community?
2. Note that we live in a digital age with 24/7 media—including reality TV, blogs, Twitter, chat and online message boards. How does *The Oxford Project* “fit” into this digital world? Contrast Oxford, Iowa with an online community. Ask: How do you think the relationships between Oxford residents compare to those between people who only communicate with each other online?
3. Tell students that they will be creating a project about their classroom community—with photos and personal statements. Encourage students to come up with a project name.
4. Using a digital camera, have students take full-length photos of each other (preferably against a classroom wall or similar plain backdrop). As a member of the classroom community, have your own photo taken as well. Have a student volunteer download the photos onto a computer.
5. Explain to students that they will be writing a personal statement to accompany their photos. Distribute the Personal Statement Guidelines handout and review it with the class.
6. Have student volunteers read aloud the opening sentences of several *Oxford Project* narratives. Point out how each narrative opening provides a “hook” that draws the reader in and makes them want to learn more. Emphasize that they should keep this in mind when writing their personal statements.
7. Have students use the remaining class time to brainstorm and jot down ideas for their personal statements. Students can then compose their personal statements for homework. Allow 1 to 3 days for students to complete their personal statements. Write your own personal statement for inclusion in the project.

DAY 2

1. Have student volunteers to read their personal statements aloud to the class. Read your own personal statement aloud as well. Students may learn surprising things about each other (and you!). Encourage students to share their reactions to each other’s personal statements, and guide them to discuss how the project affected their sense of classroom community.

2. Have students decide how they would like to publish their class project. Options include:
- Displaying an exhibit of the student photos and narratives
 - Creating a wiki where students can upload their work (see below)
 - Establishing a social network on Ning (www.ning.com)

Wiki Resources

<http://www.teachersfirst.com/content/wiki/wikiideas1.cfm>

<http://www.smartteaching.org/blog/2008/08/50-ways-to-use-wikis-for-a-more-collaborative-and-interactive-classroom/>

Follow-up/Extension

- Encourage students to consider how their personal statements might be different twenty years from now.
- At the end of the year, have students take new photos and write new personal statements. Students can compare their “then-and-now” photos and personal statements.

Assessment

When grading student work, consider the quality of the writing and how effectively students adhered to the Personal Statement Guidelines.

Standards

BEHAVIORAL STUDIES

Standard 2. Understands various meanings of social group, general implications of group membership, and different ways that groups function

LIFE SKILLS: SELF-REGULATION

Standard 2. Performs self-appraisal.

LANGUAGE ARTS

Standard 1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

Personal Statement Guidelines

1. Your personal statement should be approximately 400-600 words.
2. Use the first person when writing your personal statement.
3. Your personal statement should reflect who you are as an individual. Avoid mundane information (where you live, how many brothers and sisters you have, etc.).
4. Answer the following questions (in any order):
 - What's the most important thing people should know about you?
 - What do you see as your greatest achievement or accomplishment?
 - What do you believe in?
 - What makes you happy?
 - What are some of your goals and dreams?
 - How do you envision your life 20 years from now?
 - How would you like to be remembered?
5. If possible, input your personal statement into a word-processing program and digitally insert your photo into the document.

LESSON 3: CAPTURING PERSONAL STORIES

Grade Level: 9-12

Objective: Students will interview and write a profile of an adult family member or friend and consider how people change over the course of their lives.

Materials:

- Selected photocopied pages from *The Oxford Project*
- Personal Stories handout
- Downloaded background photos from *The Oxford Project* (available at www.welcomebooks.com/oxfordproject)
- Computer connected to an overhead projector

Time: Two class periods (on separate days)

DAY 1

1. Remind students that *The Oxford Project* includes photos of each resident of Oxford, Iowa taken 20 years apart (in 1984 and 2004).
2. Have the class compare several sets of then-and-now photos from *The Oxford Project*. (You can distribute photocopied pages from the book or display the photos using a computer connected to an overhead projector.) Ask: What do you notice about the photos? What's similar about the way the people appeared in 1984 and 2004? What's different?
3. Guide students to think of an important adult in their lives (a parent, grandparent, or friend). Ask whether they have ever seen a photograph of that person when he/she was a teenager. If so, what did they notice about the photo of the adult's younger self? Have students consider what they know about the adult's early life and how they came to be who they are today.
4. Explain to students that they will be interviewing a parent, grandparent, or other adult in their lives and creating an *Oxford Project*-like page about that person. The page will include then-and-now photographs of the person and a profile based on information they learn from the interview.
5. Distribute the Personal Stories handout and review it with the class. Give students 3 or 4 days to complete their profiles.

DAY 2

After students complete their profiles, encourage volunteers to share what they wrote with the class. Ask: What was it like to interview the adult you chose? Did you find out anything that surprised you? How did the adult react to being interviewed?

Assessment

When grading student work, consider the quality of the writing and how effectively students adhered to the instructions in the Personal Stories handout.

Standards

LANGUAGE ARTS

Standard 1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

Standard 8. Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes

Personal Stories

1. Choose a parent, grandparent, or other important adult in your life, and schedule a time to meet for an interview. Tell the person in advance that you would like to see a current photograph as well as one of him or her as a teenager. Explain that you will be writing a profile about them.
2. Examine the photos together at the beginning of the interview.
3. Then use the questions below to gather information for your profile. Feel free to ask other questions as well. You may take notes during the interview and/or record the conversation.
4. Write a brief profile (400-600 words) based on what you learned during the interview. It isn't necessary to include everything the person told you.
 - Write your personal statement from the individual's point of view (using the first person).
 - Use a word processor, if one is available.
 - Your introductory sentence should set the tone for the rest of the profile.
 - The profile should not be a verbatim transcript of the interview.
 - Include information from the interview that you think is most interesting.
 - Information can be presented in any order.
 - Edit your writing, as necessary, to make it clear and engaging.
 - If possible, include scanned images of the then-and-now photos of the person you interviewed.

Interview Questions

Here are suggested interview questions to ask. Feel free to ask other questions as well.

1. How old were you in this photo?
2. What was happening when the photo was taken?
3. Describe a vivid memory from your teenage years.
4. What were your hopes and dreams when you were my age?
5. What accomplishment(s) are you most proud of?
6. Did your life turn out the way you expected? Please explain.
7. What was the happiest moment in your life?
8. What regrets (if any) do you have?
9. How would you like to be remembered?

LESSON 4: PORTRAITS OF SMALL-TOWN AMERICA

Grade Level: 9-12

Objective: Students will examine and analyze depictions of small-town America in *The Oxford Project* and one or more literary works.

Materials:

- Selected photocopied pages from *The Oxford Project*
- One or more of the following literary works: *Spoon River Anthology*, by Edgar Lee Masters; *Our Town*, by Thornton Wilder; or *Winesburg, Ohio*, by Sherwood Anderson

Time: One class period

Preparation: Before beginning this lesson, you may wish to have students read portions of *Spoon River Anthology*, *Our Town*, or *Winesburg, Ohio*.

1. Provide an overview of the literary work under discussion.
 - *Spoon River Anthology*, by Edgar Lee Masters, was published in 1915 and consists of dramatic monologues about a fictional town called Spoon River. The “speakers” are buried in the village cemetery.
 - The play *Our Town*, by Thornton Wilder, was published in 1938 and depicts life in a small New Hampshire town at the turn of the 20th century.
 - *Winesburg, Ohio*, by Sherwood Anderson, was published in 1919 and is a collection of short stories about fictional residents of a small Ohio town.
2. Engage students in a discussion about how small-town life is depicted in *The Oxford Project* and the other work(s). Discuss common themes that are portrayed in the books—for example, family, the interconnectedness of a small-town community, and the importance of appreciating ordinary events in daily life. (You may wish to list these on the board.)
3. Discuss the styles of writing in *The Oxford Project* and the other work(s). How do they reflect the era in which they were written?
4. Have each student choose a resident of Oxford, Iowa and a character from one of the other works and write an analysis of the two individuals. How are they similar and different? Students may wish to choose passages in each work that depict people in similar occupations (laborers, teachers, ministers, newspaper editors, business owners, etc.).

Assessment

When grading student work, consider the quality of the writing and how effectively each student presents their analysis of the characters.

Standards

LANGUAGE ARTS

Standard 5. Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process

Standard 6. Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts

THINKING AND REASONING

Standard 3. Effectively uses mental processes that are based on identifying similarities and differences

School-wide Activities

Following are suggestions for school-wide activities related to *The Oxford Project*.

The Oxford Project as Theater

Live performances of selected portions of *The Oxford Project* have been staged in Iowa City; Berkeley, California; Milwaukee; and New York City. You can organize a student performance of *The Oxford Project* at your school. A script from the New York City performance is available for this purpose at [URL TK].

Reflecting on Personal Change

In addition to serving as a catalyst for building community in your school, *The Oxford Project* can also encourage students to reflect on their personal growth and how their high school experiences has affected them. At the beginning of freshman year, each student can take a photo of him/herself and write a personal statement. Then, at the end of senior year, students can take new photos and write another personal statement to compare with what they wrote as freshmen.

The Oxford Project. Photographs by Peter Feldstein, Text by Stephen G. Bloom, 256 pages, 9 x 11 ¼ with more than 200 black and white photographs, in trade paperback with flaps, retailing for \$29.95 (\$34.00 CAN) ISBN: 978-1-59962-087-9 is on sale as of September 2010 and can be purchased from all fine bookstores, either physical and from www.theoxfordproject.com where more information about *The Oxford Project* is also available.