

Museums, Libraries, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills

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BHS is a small historical society that functions as a museum a library and archive, and an educational center. Our mission is to connect the past the present and make history relevant and meaningful to diverse communities now and the future. We serve thousands of students and teachers each year with programs at our site, in the classroom, through school programs, curriculum resources and professional development workshops.

When Marsha asked me to serve of this task force I was not at all sure what to expect and how to understand the question posed about museums in aid of supporting and building 21st century skills. But as we moved through the discussion about what museums and libraries could and should be in the future, I began to see the ways that these were the essential struggles that our institution in some cases was grappling with, and in other cases had not yet fully identified as the issues of our future relevance.

I began to see that the process of clarifying our thinking about skill building, community centered learning and engagement were perfect planning tools that would help staff, trustees, and advisory groups think about setting priorities and goals.

Today I want to describe some of our work doing oral history, which is made possible through the use of marvelous new technologies, and is deeply tied to our commitment to community. I want to describe one of our many projects that revealed to us the richness of using oral history to reveal the needs and aspirations of a new generation, and the ways in which community has its own answers to the questions posed by the 21<sup>st</sup> century report. Think of this as a practical application of how our institutions are evolving into institutions of and about the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It is important to emphasize that skill building is somewhat like a river—a continuous flow, sometimes with swirls and arteries and damns; sometimes smooth and slow, and sometimes moving with remarkable speed and force.

So, our story begins in 1973 when BHS conducted oral histories that focused on immigrant communities, including Puerto Rican and Chinese communities. These oral histories were conducted and then featured briefly in a couple of small exhibitions in the 1970s, and after that languished in storage, some on 8-track cassettes, and some even on reel-to-reel tape. 2007: Enter a young, ambitious

radio producer, who joined the BHS staff to become our first full time oral historian, by the name of Sady Sullivan.

Sady was quick to see the urgency to shift these valuable historical records to digital formats, not only to preserve them but to make them available for our public—historians and community activists alike, some of whom were eager to reach back into their own community history to help guide their future. New technologies and free software (share ware) made this process of making these moribund collections accessible relatively painless. In particular it meant that an upcoming exhibition about the history of the Latin American Community in New York at the Museo del Barrio in 2010 will utilize this valuable material.

Sady and the rest of the BHS team worked together to activate an energetic oral history program, collecting stories from Vietnam Vets, World War II Vets who had worked in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, the employees of a local bank that was about to merge with another, the founders of the Bed Sty Restoration Corp, the first community development corporation in the United States, and on and on. We set up listening stations in our library where people can hear these interviews and use them for research, for personal interest, for genealogical projects, etc.

All of these projects are the early phases of BHS using technology to make our collections more available to communities, and to make the relationship between our institution and their communities more engaged and effective.

These are the transitional phases that focus on making collections accessible around collections, access, and use of technology.

A very particular new component of our oral history program personifies the goals described in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century task force report.

It is a collaboration between BHS and a new K-8 public school, called the Brooklyn School of Inquiry. The school, even before it had a public building, approached BHS to hold an open house for perspective parents because they literally did not yet have a building and wanted a community venue that would allow parents to get a sense of the school as an exciting culturally engaged place. Over 300 people came to a standing room only open house, and the school principal was deeply grateful for our generosity. And so began a serious conversation about a partnership when the school finally opened 6 months later.

Sady and our Education Staff sat down with the principal and began a conversation about how she might imagine using oral history to enrich the school community. We assumed the conversation would lead us to a series of interviews with teachers and parents. What came out was a year long project in which Sady began an oral history project for kindergarten and first graders. Co-created and developed by the teachers and the BHS teams together, we established a set of questions that we hoped would lead us to a base line for knowing the students, who they were, what they thought about their new school, the value of education,

how they spend their leisure time, the families they came from, their favorite toys, and who they imagine they will be when they are 11 years old.

Another set of questions that would probe further into who the children are and how they think included the following: What is something that you know now that you may forget and you want to remind your future self about it so you can remember it in the future?

What do you want to say to your future self?

What do you think the world will be like when you are in 8<sup>th</sup> grade?

Initially skeptical about their ability to articulate thoughts about any of this, we quickly discovered that 5 to 7 year olds are remarkably articulate, thoroughly at ease using recording equipment, and that technology plays a huge role already in their lives, and that for them learning and playing, happens just as easily in the playground as it does on the computer. Even their ability to imagine themselves five years older, was evidence that they have some clue about what history is. Many of the children even understood the idea that what they told us today would be very interesting to look at again in 5 or 6 years.

For the teachers in the school and the educators at BHS, Sady's work with the students would be an invaluable assessment tool in the life of these young students, for future teachers, and for reflection about how the school evolves, how student expectation is set, and how it will change as the school gets its sea legs. For us, the opportunity to track students for 5 years, to track the development of a school and its place in the community becomes a partnership formed out of mutual interest, the sharing of skills and resources, and smart use of technology.

To give you just a glimpse of the project, here are a few clips from the kids:

Hugo Smith, age 6, talks about skyping with his father, who travels a lot for work. Sometimes Hugo likes to twitter and go on his g-mail account.

Sady asked Hugo to explain (to a person of the future) what skype is. Hugo explains, "its a way to talk to people who are far away—sometimes skype goes through the phone or by the computer. You can actually see someone on the computer. Twitter, Hugo patiently explains, is short sentences that you are doing. Sometimes, Hugo continues, he writes to NASA.

Hugo has 2 blogs—he puts up pictures and writes about them. He put up a picture of his room and writes about it; the other blog has too many pictures on it, some pictures of fireworks. (Hugo is critical of his second blog—he knows it has too many images on it, and that it is difficult for others to look at.)

On Mondays, Hugo explains, there is a technology class in school, but it is boring, and his teacher, Ms. Nichole, tries to teach him how to use the mouse,

but he already knows how to do this—she never lets him go on his blogs or his twitter account. This is very annoying.

Another student, Arinola Soyemi talks about the earthquake in Haiti and wants to be a doctor who takes care of kids when she grows up. Arinola is not as interested in technology, but has a clear sense of herself in the world, connected, and powerful, and able, she hopes some day to help others through knowledge and education.

And finally, Donald, age 7 says “I’m really active at all times, and I really love legos. School is really important to me. Science is my favorite subject, and I love art too. And I’m really good at Math. I’m pretty much liking math. I didn’t like Math before. School made me like Math, It made think it was the right thing for me.”

When asked about his most exciting field trip, Donald did not hesitate: “to the Skyscraper Museum. My most favorite thing was when we built skyscrapers. He named his the Chrys Rice. He built it out of blocks. The building was 1 foot, 3 inches and one centimeter.”

This project is about partnership, museums and schools working together, real-time feedback, hands on support of what the school wanted to do, improving skills and empowering community—all of these are services that bring us as a museum closer to our goals supporting communities in their needs in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Sady with her skills in conducting oral history uses some of her energy to ensure that these interviews with children will be available digitally, in written form, to the teachers, the parents, and the administrators of the school. She is also teaching teachers how to conduct the interviews so that our contribution to the project might expand far beyond Sady’s limited time and energy, and that the school is less dependent upon us, and more self-reliant. This process of empowerment is an essential characteristic of 21<sup>st</sup> century museum.

Today I have deliberately shared one small project that took very modest resources as an example of how the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills report is practical, and that the implementation of its findings are imminently achievable when broken down into smaller bites, and used to assess where we are as evolving institutions.

While a Strategic Plan will help us make sure that our mission and vision of museums and libraries is moving forward, this report also supplies us with assessment tools that will allow us to look at everything we do with fresh eyes, and judge whether we as an institution are actually providing the tools, the content and the collaborations that our community constituents need to thrive in the challenging decades ahead.

This project represents is a template for other programs. As BHS launches a new strategic planning process for the next five years, we will look to a project like this

one as a test case of how we are serving the needs of the community through shared authority, born out of careful listening and the spirit of collaboration.