

Oral History Center

The AIDS Archive Lesson Plan: Oral History as Evidence

September 2020

For more information on curriculum, see the [Oral History Center website](#).

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Overview

This is a set of lesson plans for teachers of Grade 11 who want to explore a unit that satisfies the California State History standards, which specifically mention the AIDS epidemic as a suitable topic for students at this level (page 431). This will also cover some of the history of LGBTQ communities in California.

Framework to Present Individual Model Projects

What is oral history? Oral history is the practice of recording interviews with witnesses to history, but not necessarily of particular events in history. In fact, the basic idea is to interview people about their lives: their backgrounds, their experiences, and their views. If we interview people from a wide range of backgrounds, we can have a better understanding of the richness and complexity of history. Rather than a single, dominant story about what happened in the past, we instead have a more complex and complete picture of how people experienced and drew meaning from their own lives. This in turn can help us to learn more about complicated events and processes in history.

Key terms to be defined and learned: epidemic, pandemic, crowd diseases, public health, contact tracing, epidemiology, immunology, retrovirus, HIV vs. AIDS

Key institutions: Centers for Disease Control; Food and Drug Administration; World Health Organization; San Francisco Department of Health; US Public Health Service; San Francisco General Hospital, UCSF (University of California, San Francisco).

Lesson Plan

The introduction to epidemics in American history highlights the same themes as those found in the AIDS interviews.

What Is AIDS?

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome is a disease caused by a retrovirus named HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus), which colonizes the host's immune system in order to replicate. The patient usually has mild symptoms when they are first infected, but the virus usually takes a long time to settle in and cause symptoms, which means an individual can continue to infect other people without knowing they are sick. The symptoms themselves are indirect, the result of a deteriorating immune system.

Gradually at first, and then all of a sudden, patients came down with multiple infections—some of them very rare—and death usually followed after the body's organ systems shut down. During the period of the early 1980s covered in these interviews, no one knew what the disease was, how people caught it, or how long it took to incubate inside the body. What was known was that there was no cure, and so the search began to identify patients with rare patterns of symptoms and track how the disease moved through the infected population. However, the first product of the disease, for everyone involved, was fear.

Student Group Work

This group work introduces students to oral history and to the podcast, which will guide them through the archive. It also demonstrates the process of how to use the research tools of the Oral History Center collection.

Timeline

Explore with the [HIV-AIDS timeline](#) for just the year 1981.

Important questions: What kind of evidence is this? How is it useful?

Podcast discussion

Dive into one of the descriptions from one of the interviews in podcast episode 2, describing what it's like to face a deadly disease, or when Clifford Morrison describes what it was like for AIDS patients before the establishment of a specific ward for AIDS patients in episode 6.

Comparison

Compare the two types of information, the HIV/AIDS timeline and these stories, and the purposes of each.

Important questions: What kind of evidence is oral history? What do you learn from hearing the voice of a witness to history?