

Engaging Communities and Classrooms: Lessons from the Fox Point Oral History Project

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Abstract: This article presents graduate students' reflections on two community oral history projects, focused on Fox Point, a Providence, Rhode Island, neighborhood. Through the Fox Point Oral History Project, graduate students in public humanities at Brown University work with community elders and with students, parents, and teachers at a neighborhood elementary school to document, preserve, and present local history. In the essay, graduate students describe how their work has changed their sense of connection to the local community and allowed them to apply social media and digital scholarship on behalf of community history projects. The authors also describe the impact of this work for elementary school students and community members who participate in oral history projects.

Keywords: graduate education, local history, new media, Providence, Rhode Island, public humanities

In 2008, the John Nicholas Brown Center (JNBC) for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage launched the Fox Point Oral History Project (FPOHP) (<http://www.brown.edu/Research/JNBC/exhibits/foxpoint.php>) to document memories of a neighborhood in Providence, Rhode Island. In the past three years, Brown students have conducted more than eighty interviews about Fox Point and have helped develop initiatives to collect, interpret, and present stories of the neighborhood's past. In essence, this place-based project functions as a public humanities laboratory, with students and Fox Pointers cooperating to build an archive of historical sources and incubate programs that keep the

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neighborhood's history alive and meaningful to past, current, and, hopefully, future residents of the city.

Written by students in, and alumnae of, Brown University's M.A. program in public humanities, this article looks at the FPOHP from their perspectives as interviewers, collaborators, and mediators between the neighborhood's residents, other stakeholders, and the university.¹ The authors contribute their personal reflections on the significance of this dynamic project and its value to their understanding of public projects and their roles as emerging professionals in arts and cultural fields. They also provide insights into the impact of the project on neighborhood collaborators, especially community elders and school-aged children who have worked on documentary and preservation projects. In 2008, 2009, and 2010, graduate students Amy Atticks, Rachael Binning, Elizabeth Manekin, Aliza Schiff, Reina Shibata, and Meghan Townes worked on the FPOHP in various capacities. Most significantly for this article, all spent time at a neighborhood elementary school where they coordinated documentary projects and helped implement I WAS THERE (IWT), an arts program based in the school that teaches grade school students about Fox Point and oral history. As the associate director for programs at the JNBC, Valk teaches oral history and heads up the FPOHP.

The essay that follows opens with a brief history of Fox Point. Then the authors describe their participation in the FPOHP and evaluate their accomplishments in working with community members and grade school students. Previous scholars have noted how community oral history projects, at their best, “teach history well”; they also expose students to important ethical and methodological challenges related to working with the public.² This article supports that conclusion, illuminating how much of the learning that occurs through a community oral history projects falls outside the discipline of history. In particular, the essay emphasizes two themes relevant to the changing expectations of students and the communities they engage through local projects: that such initiatives not only document community but also create a new sense of community between participants and the value of digital technology and new media.

For graduate students headed toward careers as arts administrators and cultural workers, devising responsive and responsible ways to bring together scholarly research and community interests forms an integral part of their public humanities curriculum. By connecting with local organizations and people through the FPOHP, graduate students gain insight into community interests. But because of the temporary nature of their participation and other realities of academic life that dictate their role in community projects, students are also challenged to balance their own interests with the sometimes conflicting priorities of the

community and the university. Grade school students experience similar benefits from participation in a neighborhood oral history project, enjoying the opportunity to feel part of a community and take on responsibility as memory keepers and story tellers. Since many students have only tenuous connections to their local community—a trait that characterizes both university students and an increasing number of younger children who leave their neighborhood to go to school—the formation of new ties offers participants a sense of rootedness and investment in a new community.

Student oral history work also demonstrates how technology alters classroom learning and documentary projects. The accessibility of digital technology and the innovation of new media platforms can not only facilitate but also complicate educational and community projects. Both graduate and grade school students gain expertise by using digital recording equipment and new media technologies to record oral history interviews, preserve photographs and other local history materials, and present these records to new audiences. Technology also provides powerful means for students to document their own work and for teachers and school administrators to save evidence of classroom activities. At the same time, the proliferation of digital files and the vast array of new media formats complicate the processes of preservation and access. By getting involved in the search for organizational solutions, students become engaged as collaborators in the process of data management and learn vital technical skills. By highlighting both complications and benefits, the article suggests ways that student oral history projects can fulfill some of the learning expectations of twenty-first century classrooms.

A proud heritage

Bounded by water on three sides (Narragansett Bay and the Providence and Seekonk Rivers), in the eighteenth century Fox Point had a thriving working waterfront and many stately houses occupied by families who made fortunes through the triangle trade and manufacturing. One of those families helped establish Brown University, built on Fox Point's northern border. By the Civil War, the neighborhood's homes filled with immigrants, crowded into cold-water flats. Irish immigrants who helped construct the Blackstone River canal and Providence-Worcester railroad were later joined by families from the Azores, Portugal, and the Cape Verde Islands who worked the waterfront as stevedores and longshoremen, or labored in warehouses, oyster factories, and scrap yards. Other residents were employed in nearby jewelry factories, ran small shops, or performed domestic service for private families and on the Brown University campus.³

Between the 1950s and 1970s, dramatic changes shook Fox Point. Docks and warehouses closed when the shipping industry relocated to deeper ports elsewhere. Developers leveled hundreds of homes, making way for office buildings, parking lots, and highway ramps. Houses considered historically and architecturally significant were moved, restored, and preserved, with tenements converted into single-family homes unaffordable to most working families. Members of the Brown family (including residents of the home where the JNBC is now located) played a prominent role in preservation efforts.⁴ Brown University also instigated this transformation, spreading new dorms and parking lots into Fox Point. In the 1960s, residents pressured Brown to alter some of its planned development and to limit the movement of students into Fox Point, but by the 1980s the University relaxed its stance.⁵ The market for apartments and condos subsequently exploded. Due to these combined forces, many families were displaced—especially Cape Verdeans who were most heavily concentrated in areas razed for construction projects.

The processes of migration and displacement that shaped Fox Point historically have taken new forms today. Restaurants, bars, art galleries, and boutique shops now proliferate and a community boating center, Brown's boathouse, and a park occupy the waterfront where Fox Pointers used to work. A few Portuguese bakeries and corner stores survive, along with several churches and social clubs. But most signs of Fox Point's recent past are gone or disappearing rapidly.⁶ Walking tours organized by the city's preservation and historical societies largely focus on the founding families and nineteenth-century architecture, as do markers designating historic homes throughout the area. Similarly, realtors market Fox Point by accentuating the area's early settlement and recent revitalization, and glossing over its immigrant, working-class history.

Despite, or because of, the extensive changes in Fox Point, former residents have begun to reclaim the neighborhood's past, reconnect individuals who are scattered geographically, and pass on lessons to younger generations.⁷ "Everybody knew everybody," people nostalgically remember, and "there were no locked doors in Fox Point." Many remember how a walk through the Point brought opportunities to see many friends and acquaintances. "It'd take you almost an hour to go the one block,"⁸ several recalled. One man explained, "[I]t's a proud heritage and we want to keep it alive . . . We don't want to lose our history."⁹ Cultural heritage and documentary projects originating within the community reflect these sentiments. A recent film, "Some Kind of Funny Porto Rican,"¹⁰ documenting Fox Point's Cape Verdean community, written and produced by Claire Andrade-Watkins (herself a member of that community), for example, has helped revive positive memories and reconnect Cape Verdean Fox Pointers who have used it as the basis for cultural heritage initiatives.¹¹

IWT, a place-based curriculum to teach academic skills and build connections between the neighborhood elementary school and the community, represents another recent effort to teach and learn from the history of Fox Point. The only public school located in Fox Point, Vartan Gregorian Elementary School, represents many of the challenges brought by the neighborhood's rapid change. The school was constructed in the 1950s as part of an effort to consolidate and modernize neighborhood schools for the economic and social necessities of postwar America. By the end of the twentieth century, however, the school was threatened by rising costs, an aging physical plant, and the departure of students whose families could subsidize their education elsewhere. Despite those challenges, today the school is considered one of the city's highest performing grade schools; consequently, parents from throughout Providence vie to enroll their children at Vartan Gregorian, joining children from Fox Point's new professional families. Now students come from every city neighborhood, resulting in a notable socioeconomic, race, and ethnic diversity, and a corps of parents actively committed to fostering their children's success in the public schools.¹² Partnerships with outside organizations, including Brown University, have become one route to strengthening Vartan Gregorian's offerings. When parents from Vartan Gregorian began IWT in 2008, for example, they won the support of the Parent Teacher Organization, raised funds to bring artists-in-residence to implement the program, and welcomed individuals affiliated with the FPOHP to help advise and run it. But the alliance with Brown also has angered some older residents who see it as evidence of the neighborhood's continued rejection of its working-class and immigrant roots.¹³

The principal, teachers, and parents involved with IWT, however, celebrate its positive influence in opening the school to the neighborhood's older residents and collaborative partners and introducing young people to the community in which they attend school. The principal, Colin Grimsey, appreciates that IWT leads students to consider "what it means to develop a sense of place and your connection to it." More concretely, the project enables Vartan Gregorian students to meet former residents of Fox Point and, through interviewing them, to learn history in a dynamic way. "Our kids are not just learning about the history of the neighborhood, they're contributing to the documentation of the history of the neighborhood. So in that sense, they're all historians. They're not just reading about it passively, but they're participating in the endeavor of history . . . Those are the big key ideas: the community involvement, first-hand connection to what has gone on before, developing [for] each [student] a 'sense of place' about Fox Point and their connection to it." These learning outcomes closely resemble the motivations of Wendy Warlick, one of the parents who developed IWT. As Warlick told an interviewer, "in the past few years, the face of students and families being involved with the school was changing rapidly

because all of a sudden parents started hearing that, 'Oh, Vartan Gregorian is a very good school', and started sending their kids there instead of sending them to private school. We were kind of concerned, we didn't want the school to change its face and not remember and honor this rich vibrant history of Fox Point and the people of Fox Point . . . It's about getting kids to know about people involved in the history, but also seeing themselves as a part of this social change, like to have a voice in what happens next on the waterfront." ¹⁴

The collaboration between Vartan Gregorian Elementary School and Brown University's public humanities center is both advantageous and mutually beneficial. The FPOHP, like IWT, aims to connect university students with the Fox Point community and to assist local efforts to preserve and make visible the neighborhood's recent past. An oral history class anchors the FPOHP, functioning as the primary way materials are collected and a mechanism to build and sustain connections between the university, its students, and the community. The class offers students the opportunity to gain experience in oral history methodology, undertake project design and management, and forward their own analysis of neighborhood history and dynamics. Significantly, students have begun to conceptualize new public uses for the growing body of interviews, integrating their stories into exhibits, audio tours, and performances in the community. With their work, they also strengthen the relationships between Brown and its neighbors. Some of these projects are described in greater depth below.¹⁵

An experiment in shared authority (Binning, Manekin, and Schiff)

As students in the first oral history course offered by Anne Valk, we were involved in the FPOHP's first projects and the initial collaboration with Vartan Gregorian Elementary School. These beginning stages of FPOHP reflect an experiment in shared authority between a range of parties and stakeholders. With our focus in public humanities, we were interested in something different than an academic history of the neighborhood; we wanted to build relationships that encouraged the community's active participation as partners. Given the dynamic nature of the project, and the many forms it would ultimately take, the results of these shared endeavors met varying degrees of success. During the year we were involved in FPOHP, we conducted our own interviews and worked with community members to construct an annotated online archive using historic photographs and memories, curated an exhibit in the local elementary school, and conducted oral history and documentary photography workshops with the elementary school's sixth-grade class. We also helped parents and teachers at the school develop and implement the IWT project. Each project fed the others,

-serving as a platform for conversations as well as interdisciplinary teaching and learning. An awareness of our multiple roles as public humanities graduate students and teachers, oral historians, and exhibit curators constantly informed our work.

The springboard for this exchange—for collecting, annotating, and disseminating oral histories, memories, and historic photos—began in Valk's seminar, "Oral History and Community Memory." As the title suggests, the course focused on more than methodology and emphasized that we were studying a community of people and their perceptions of local and national events. We were drawn by the possibility of developing a relationship between the JNBC and the community of Fox Point. From the time that she began her work at Brown University the previous summer, Valk had sought out local contacts and become acquainted with members of the Fox Point neighborhood. This groundwork informed our understanding of the neighborhood's history and context and instilled in us the importance of developing honest and genuine relationships with individuals and the community. Valk had an eager ally in Lou Costa, a seventy-three-year-old former resident of Fox Point who served as a local historian, a collector of Fox Point-related photographs, and, for our class, a gateway into Fox Point. With Costa and Valk's help, each student in the seminar was connected with two Fox Pointers, a term used to describe both present and past Fox Point residents, to conduct oral history interviews. The experience of interviewing a person for the first time was significant for us. Through each session and through the words and experiences of Fox Pointers, we, too, were contributing to a collective memory about this community. Each interview added to or changed how the community was represented in the archive that future researchers could draw on.

Eager to continue working with Fox Point residents beyond the parameters of the class, we began discussions with Costa about ways to make accessible the massive collection of photographs that he had accumulated, mainly snapshots from Fox Point families. Costa had already scanned many images and was presenting popular slideshows to community groups. However, he and we recognized the need to both protect the photographs from damage and to make them more broadly available. He had donated some to the Rhode Island Historical Society, but was dissatisfied with their level of public access. We were also concerned that astonishing details in Costa's head—the names of people and places shown in the images, the stories that each image told—could easily be lost if not recorded in some way. Based on our conversations, we decided to use Flickr, a photo-sharing Web site designed to encourage people to share information online.¹⁶ Over several months, we met regularly to teach Costa how to use Flickr, uploaded photographs with him, and recorded the names of people

and locations depicted in the pictures, creating metadata for his collection. We also convened Flickr sessions that brought together small groups of Fox Pointers to view photographs and to share information related to the images.

Our time with Costa was invaluable for a variety of reasons: his passion for and knowledge of Fox Point were contagious, he became a conduit to other community members who also shared stories, and finally, he elucidated how differently each of us organizes knowledge and experiences. These lessons all came to the fore as we began using Flickr. We helped Costa create “sets”—groups of pictures with categories that we devised, including “Weddings,” “Fox Pointers in the Military,” “Fox Point Celebrations,” “Fox Point Schools and Students,” and “Fox Point Stoop Culture,” a listing for images of Fox Pointers enjoying life from the front steps of their homes. We thought these sets would provide entry points into the collection and help users of the site navigate the enormous number of photographs. We were trying to create meaning, much as an archivist or curator would in a library or museum. However, our effort at creating taxonomy for the site never took hold because the categories that made sense to us never resonated with Costa. A visit to the site today shows what categories do matter to him: the majority of the sets that he has created are grouped by family or street names.¹⁷ The way Costa has organized the site on his own perfectly reflects what Fox Point is to him—families and addresses, people and places.¹⁸

While our attempts at creating curated sets based on themes were not particularly successful, the project gave us a clear lesson in shared authority. The site makes sense to Costa and his community and has become more successful in that respect than we imagined. Fox Pointers across the U.S. have discovered the site and added comments and stories to photos that were relevant to them. Former residents sent Costa more photos and people previously unfamiliar with Flickr learned to use the site so that they could contribute to it. This was more than we had hoped for. We wanted to make the pictures accessible to the public, but we did not imagine that through Costa's photos and the Flickr site we would be able to contribute to the re-creation of a community that has been geographically dispersed. In this way, the project exemplified the power Web 2.0 technologies can have to connect people and create community.

What stands out most about this phase of the project is the sharing of stories. Costa and the friends he brought to our photo sessions could talk for hours about weddings, funerals, holidays, and growing up in homes with no plumbing. When the sessions started on a more formal note with us turning on the tape recorder, asking questions, typing metadata into Flickr, and taking notes, they typically ended with enthusiastic storytelling that included laughing and singing. After several months, our relationship changed from acquaintances to friends.

The impact of our relationship far exceeded our expectations. Not only did we learn more about the Fox Point community than we expected but also we gained new friends and a community to lean on. We know Costa greatly appreciated our dedication to working with him and his collection, and we greatly appreciated his genuine desire to introduce us to a community that was previously unknown to us.

As we worked on the FPOHP, we became increasingly aware that our task was two-fold: on the one hand, by conducting interviews we were collecting the raw material of history, creating a narrative as well as building an archive. Yet we also wanted to engage the neighborhood with that narrative—both its construction and its presentation. Additionally, we wanted to learn how to make something, acquiring some skills in the process. After a conversation with Colin Grimsey, the remarkably accommodating principal at Vartan Gregorian Elementary School, we decided to create an exhibit about Fox Point in the school's halls, using photographs from Costa's collection and captions and information from our oral history interviews. The exhibit opening would coincide with the launching of IWT, the oral history project developed by members of the school's Parent Teacher Organization.

Working on the exhibit, we culled themes from the FPOHP interviews with Fox Point's older generation and considered which threads might carry through the lives of today's Fox Point students. We created six sections: "A Better Life," which addressed education and social mobility; "A Powerful Place," discussing the role of religion in the community; "Everybody Knew Everybody," about neighborhood life; "The Place to Go," on community gathering spaces; "The Pleasures We Had," addressing the idea—and spaces—of play; and finally "The Way We Talked," which considered language and growing up bilingual. Using compelling images and words from the neighborhood, we hoped students would observe changes that had occurred—in the built environment, cultural dynamics, and community of Fox Point—and find things in common with the faces of Fox Point from generations before them. The captions pointed to individual stories and common experiences, with each label posing a question for its reader (i.e., Do you speak another language at home? Where do you play?).

Just as our Flickr sessions fostered dialogue among participants, we hoped our exhibit, *Faces of Fox Point*, would inspire conversations between the old timers, the younger students, the teachers, and us. In our examination of one community, we forged a community of another sort. Oral history and its methodology were paramount in the exhibit's creation and in the framework of the programs that followed. That the stories of one generation could inspire stories from another and that the process of telling and listening could promote critical thought

about the past and our role in constructing it were all ideas worth exploring further.

Beyond installing the exhibit in the school's hallways, we valued the creation of participatory programming that would allow the students to be not just consumers of history, but producers of it as well. We wanted to test, practice, and solidify what we had been learning as public humanities students by creating programming that would help the elementary school students engage with the exhibit and understand one of the key lessons of oral history—that history is a collection of individual narratives—and to see that their own lives make up history. Inspired by Wendy Ewald's Literacy through Photography projects,¹⁹ we developed a series of oral history and photography workshops for Vartan Gregorian's sixth graders. Over six sessions, we introduced the students to photography and oral history as documentary practices and explored the question, "What does it mean to document?" Students learned to analyze historical photographs, thought about the use of voice, and wrote captions for photographs they took. Their photographs and captions were enlarged and mounted as a section of the exhibit called "Through Our Eyes." We also prepared the sixth graders to be exhibit docents; they later led tours for younger students, parents, and community members at school events including a public opening celebration.²⁰

In creating and teaching this curriculum, we worked through the value of oral history to communities and to ourselves as practitioners of public humanities. We wanted to empower the students with the realization that history is *created*, that someone out there *writes* history, that historians use sources we all create on a daily basis, and that we all can contribute to history through the sources we create. With oral history and photography, students learned this and actively took part in learning about a community, documenting its past and present, and working collaboratively to connect communities. Our sixth-grade students did the work of historians, photographers, curators, and docents and had the opportunity to truly engage with their community's history.

The public exhibit opening provided clear evidence of the success of this project. About 300 people attended and the sixth graders shined as docents stationed throughout the exhibit.²¹ One of our shyest, quietest students was the last to leave the building, asking to stay and continue giving tours after the designated time was up. It was particularly satisfying to see interactions between older generations of Fox Pointers, many of whom appeared in the photographs in the exhibit, and the student docents as they discussed their shared history. The sixth graders began to take ownership of Fox Point's stories as they presented what they had learned to their audiences with pride.

We continued to work in the school for most of the semester, assisting IWT by helping to teach oral history in the classrooms. From these experiences, we recognized that our methodological expertise and skills would be useful in many settings, an important lesson as we prepared to take our Masters in Public Humanities degrees on the job market. Similarly, by writing about and developing a Web site reflecting on our project, we learned how to document our work and create digital portfolios and began to see this work as a model for community collaborations. In many ways, this work became our thesis; it allowed us to test and practice the theories and models we studied in class and to begin to build our resumes as practitioners of public humanities, a field that is often best explained by projects like this one (fig. 1).²²

Learning to be a community member (Shibata)

Through enrolling in Valk's course, "Oral History and Community Memory" in 2009, I was introduced to the methodology of oral history and community-based programming. The course structure and assignments allowed me to learn how to engage with the Fox Point community, while formulating what my role was as a graduate student participant in FPOHP. Studying the methods of oral history, preparing for and conducting life-history interviews with Fox Pointers, and working on a digital storytelling piece as a final project, I came to understand what it means to be engaged in a program that values community building among its participants.

Following completion of the oral history course, I became interested in other ways to continue my involvement in the FPOHP. IWT attracted me because of

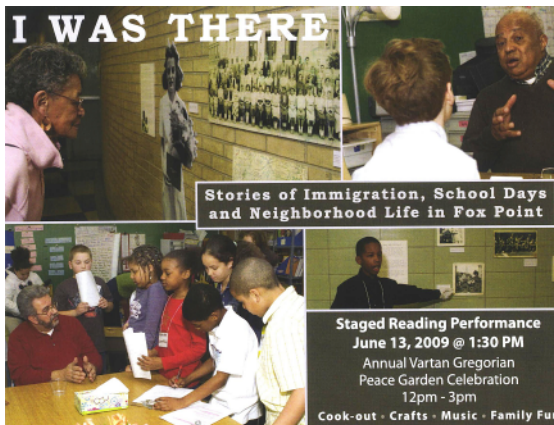


Fig. 1. Flyer for IWT concluding program, May 2009. Credit Line: Courtesy of the Parent Teachers Organization, Vartan Gregorian Elementary School at Fox Point. Photographer Deb Hickey; graphic design by Anisa Raof.

the expanded definitions of community it promised. A school-integrated, arts-based learning program for fourth and fifth graders, IWT has been integrally connected to FPOHP for the past two years. Based out of the Vartan Gregorian Elementary School in Fox Point, the on-going program's mission is to employ oral history techniques and the arts in elementary school classrooms as a means to connect students to the life history of their school and the Fox Point community. Through IWT, students explore local history while learning how to serve their community by preserving and commemorating their neighborhood's cultural heritage.²³ In addition to teaching local history, IWT tries to connect the older community of Fox Pointers with more recent residents, especially children and adults associated with the Vartan Gregorian Elementary School. By connecting newcomers with those who have been displaced by the processes of urban change, IWT firmly embeds the school in the community, and invests its students with an appreciation for the neighborhood and its history. IWT, interestingly, is similar to Valk's oral history course in many ways. Both Valk's seminar and IWT strive to engage students in the collection of local history through employing the methodologies of oral history. Whether you are a graduate student or a fourth grader, you are compelled to devise a personal relationship with the places and people with whom you are studying, working, and living.

Each year the IWT team, composed of artists and writers-in-residence, Vartan Gregorian classroom teachers, the PTO, and public humanities M.A. students, prepares fourth and fifth graders to conduct and record a series of oral history interviews. Vartan Gregorian students get the opportunity to meet and connect with members of the larger Fox Point community while learning, practicing, and applying oral history skills in their classrooms. Through working on complex projects that focus on the past, present, and future of their school's neighborhood and environment, students gain a greater understanding of their personal relevance, role, and impact on local history.

IWT 2010 focused on the cultural and environmental history of Narragansett Bay, which borders Fox Point. During their winter and spring semesters students conducted oral history interviews with past and present Fox Pointers who had personal or occupational connections to the waterfront. IWT facilitators then worked with the students to create a final event inspired by the interviews, a "live radio show," to present to the community. The elementary school component of FPOHP thus culminates in an annual public performance that serves as a celebration of the community's intergenerational collective memory and expresses the school's commitment to preserving local history.

The FPOHP and IWT projects created a means for me to support these already successful initiatives while developing my own public humanities practice. By

joining the IWT team from January to May 2010, I knew I could learn about classroom teaching in an elementary school, an area that connected to my broader interest in educational programming. I was particularly interested in evaluation and assessment as vital components that need to be incorporated into the life cycle of any program. Therefore, in addition to contributing the IWT as a classroom facilitator, I designed an evaluation process to gather qualitative data to record the fourth and fifth graders' understanding and experience of oral history in their classrooms.

This was my first attempt at program evaluation, an effort that taught me a lot about how thoughtful and sophisticated the students were regarding their own participation and learning. The evaluation and assessment, and my research process were inspired by the students' mature understanding of their involvement in the project. I chose to collect data through close observations recorded as field notes, designed a structured student-to-student interview activity, documented informal conversations, and interviewed select students after their final public performance. In addition to supporting the classroom staff throughout the program, my goal as an IWT participant was to capture varied and thoughtful student voices and opinions regarding their experiences of IWT 2010.

While the beginning of the program consisted of more traditional history lessons, the majority of IWT classes sought to coach and prepare students to conduct oral history interviews. Beginning with drafting questions for a mock interviewee, students learned to outline questions for an interview based on participant bio sheets and their existing knowledge of local history. Student-interviewers practiced asking follow-up questions and articulating their words, while others on the "tech team" learned how to work the recording equipment. In all of the classes, I observed how the fourth- and fifth-grade students approached their interviews with a great sense of responsibility, sincerity, and empathy. Students carefully drafted questions based on the information they were given about each interviewee and discussed with each other how to best prepare for the arrivals of the community members they had invited to their school. They were highly aware that the interviews were not simple question-and-answer sessions and approached each new meeting with great enthusiasm, gravity, and gratitude. Were the questions they outlined polite and relevant? Which students would greet the community member at the school's entrance? Were the batteries in the recording equipment charged? Might the interviewee like a tour of the school following the interview? Such questions commonly formed part of students' conversations in the classroom during the days leading up to each of their interviews.²⁴

Each class conducted two interviews, teaching students how different one oral history endeavor could be from another. Moreover, scheduling two interviews

per class provided students with the opportunity to incorporate what they discovered from their first interview experience into the second. This year's group of interviewees included retired longshoremen, an oyster factory worker, and many others who shared their memories of work and recreation on the Providence waterfront. They also questioned two panels of scientists, urban developers, and environmentalists, experts with a stake in the future of the Providence waterfront. Through these exercises, students heard a variety of perspectives about the past and future of Narragansett Bay and acquired oral history, interviewing, writing, and other valuable life skills. Combining their research and the information they culled from the interviews, students in the fourth- and fifth-grade classes then collaborated with each other to write a play about the life history of Narragansett Bay. They produced a live radio show that reflected their thoughts on the past, present, and future of their neighborhood's environment and performed the piece to an audience of interviewees, school and neighborhood community members, and the general public.

Throughout the project, I was impressed by the many ways in which the students exhibited their understanding of how they, even as elementary school students, belonged to the Fox Point community. In particular, the students assumed their roles as a new generation of stewards of their neighborhood's history. They were always respectful of each of the interviewees' personal narratives and valued the interviews as important historical documents that gave them insight into the history of their community.

What I found most striking, however, was how inspired the students were to share the stories they collected with others in their school and neighborhood community. As I observed their earnest work on the live radio-performance piece, I realized how important it was for the students to have a forum through which they could share what they had learned from the oral history interviews with each other, the student body, and more generally, the Fox Point community.

IWT's outreach to past and present Fox Pointers demonstrates the program's commitment to the preservation and appreciation of local history. The individual students' motivation to then communicate and disseminate their knowledge serves as evidence that program participants strongly identify as members of that same community. Through IWT, students see how their elementary school is a part of the Fox Point community and begin to learn what it means to be a member of a community. Students, upon realizing that they are a part of the living history of their community, strive to follow in the tradition of preserving and commemorating their local history.

Participating in IWT thus provided me with the opportunity to become involved in classroom teaching at an elementary school level, while also learning how to

design and implement a small-scale participant evaluation study of an integral component of FPOHP. Reflecting on this project as a public humanities student, I am struck by how, in ways similar to Valk's oral history course, IWT successfully employs oral history as a community-building tool at Vartan Gregorian. Teaching and using oral history research methodologies in the classrooms, elementary school students are connected with past and present Fox Pointers, while the entire student body, families, and neighborhood community come together to celebrate their history at each year's IWT performance.

Maintaining community memories in digital form (Atticks and Townes)

As classroom facilitators for IWT 2010, Explorations of Narragansett Bay, we worked on two class workshops, assisted in administering lesson plans, and aided in the production and presentation of a radio play constructed from two panel discussions and a series of classroom-based oral histories. Our involvement with IWT coincided with our enrollment in a graduate-level course on digital scholarship. Through this intersection of coursework and community engagement (an essential part of our training in the public humanities), we saw an opportunity to develop a digital storage solution for the files produced by IWT.

While our initial motivation was to preserve project materials for the reference of team members, we soon realized that the IWT digital archives project had broad-reaching implications. Questions about the second life of these materials—where they would be stored, who could access them, and who owned them—highlighted the often-complicated mix of stakeholders involved in IWT. At the same time, the project had the potential to strengthen the bridge between university resources and the publics involved at Vartan Gregorian Elementary, helping to maintain community memory and facilitate future access of IWT files in accordance with the aims and ethos of the project.

Over the past two years, ongoing collaborations between community partners, Vartan Gregorian students and faculty, and IWT staff have produced dozens of electronic files—documents, photographs, video clips, and audio recordings. Most of these materials relate to oral history interviews with Fox Point community members conducted by students in Vartan Gregorian classrooms. In 2010, as part of their oral history preparation, some students were trained to use digital recording devices in order to create raw content for the culminating performance. Each recorded interview involved dynamic layers of history, including activities in the present (in-class interaction), future (the documentation of that interaction and its potential applications), and past (the content of the

interviewees' tales: remembrances of Narragansett Bay). However, the oral history interviews collected in 2010 make up only one component of the IWT files.

Between 2008 and 2010, IWT team members created materials in a variety of digital formats: MP3 audio and video recordings of interviews, expert panels, and classroom activities; Microsoft Word lesson plans, hand outs, and biographies; JPEG digital photographs; and a project Web site and blog. Without a storage destination, designated archivist, and/or preservation plan, files scattered to multiple homes and were sometimes damaged, discarded, or misplaced along the way. These circumstances created constant frustration when the IWT team wanted to revisit portions of previous work. "Where is Johnny's interview from 2009? What about that lesson plan from last week?" Simply being able to describe what IWT had accomplished was hampered by the dispersal of files. Lack of a central source for information made it difficult for new team members to learn about IWT in order to shape its future iterations.

We began to brainstorm a digital preservation plan as a service to the IWT team, and as the final project for our digital scholarship course. We hoped to use what we were learning as graduate students (and the resources to which we acquired access) to actively benefit the community. We planned to collect the files, inventory them, develop relevant and useful metadata about them, provide a long-term housing solution, enable remote team member access (in the short-term and in the future), and create a curated platform for public access.

After deciding what materials would be useful for the IWT archive (namely all relevant master and edited digital files), we began tracking them down. Files came from graduate students involved in both years of IWT as well as teaching artists and project administrators. Some digital objects were still accessible on classroom hardware, on the devices that recorded them, and on the school laptop allocated to the project. As we developed our archives plan, we needed to establish a central location for depositing the objects we collected. As a temporary solution, we placed files on a project-dedicated hard drive and organized them into folders. The hard drive could be taken off site (and therefore used during nonclassroom hours in other facilities—most school-owned computers are not allowed offsite), but like the laptop, it could only be accessed by one user at a time in one location, had restricted memory, and shared the fragility of all nonbacked up hardware. We needed a server.

Following initial meetings with our digital scholarship professor, Susan Smulyan, and various representatives from the Center for Digital Scholarship (developers and gatekeepers of Brown University's Digital Repository [BDR]), we chose to work with BDR to preserve digital materials from IWT. Fox Point interviews from

Valk's class already existed in the BDR, so it made sense that Vartan Gregorian's files, which included oral histories of many of the same individuals, might share that housing. In contemplating a second life for these materials, we imagined that they would be most useful when viewed against a broader collection of Fox Point materials. However, since IWT was funded by grants external to the University and managed by parents and teachers from the elementary school, we needed to find a way to work with the wishes of project members and within the limitations of the technology available.

The complications posed by the collaborative, multi-stakeholder nature of IWT became apparent when we met with one of the project managers and the project's blog and web administrator to discuss what digital preservation procedures would be most useful and appropriate. They expressed concerns about ownership and access, reiterating the necessity of honoring the original consent agreements created between IWT and narrators. More specifically, the IWT team wanted to retain ownership of the files, to express this ownership through the BDR, to access the files within BDR without being direct Brown University affiliates, and to manage file access. The team hoped to make a few selected files publicly accessible, but restrict others to use by researchers who received permission from an IWT team member gatekeeper. Thus, before the Center for Digital Scholarship could integrate IWT files into the BDR, the repository needed to be able to handle different levels of file privacy.²⁵

As we considered the potential for future use of BDR, we created a working archive model independent of the repository. We organized object metadata (using the Metadata Object Description Schema [MODS]) in preparation for BDR entry, made spreadsheets to organize file information, and constructed a common vocabulary to use in talking about IWT. To replicate how documents and audio could be hosted online, we created an IWT Archives blog and used free web services to host files. Free sites do not offer an ideal level of privacy or security; however, we used them to test out solutions for integrating project files into IWT's Web site.

IWT is the result of creative collaboration between Providence-area groups that possess different goals and methods, and its archives record the challenges, negotiations, and triumphs of this multi-faceted effort. Vartan Gregorian Elementary School, past and present Fox Pointers, local artists, and Brown University interact through the nexus of IWT. While IWT supports and nurtures relationships for the length of each year's project, its files serve as tangible, permanent documentation of the fruits of these collaborations even as individual participants change and projects evolve. Building foundational archives into the project timeline will improve the quality of the final product and facilitate smoother collaborations. The relationship between IWT and Brown University

specifically can be enhanced by continued negotiations between project leaders and the Center for Digital Scholarship and the establishment of a system for creating MODS records and depositing IWT files with the BDR. A strengthened partnership with its university neighbor will help IWT make its oral histories, radio shows, and other materials easily available to the Fox Point community without having to expend resources the school system can ill-afford.

Perhaps the most important goal of our work as public humanists engaged in IWT has been to sustain a relationship between Fox Point and the JNBC. University attempts to become involved in local communities are generally stymied by the September to June, four-year (or, in the case of graduate students, two-year) cyclical nature of campus life. Developing a process for archiving digital materials from IWT is therefore not merely an exercise in organization. So much emphasis in these projects has been on the front end, on the creation of files, and the public presentation of work.

The cross-curricular, collaborative ethos of IWT relies on the ability of each year's project to build on the past to create increasingly complex portraits of a neighborhood. IWT archives lie at the heart of this endeavor. Project documentation should be seen as a means as well as an end: students learn about recording technologies and intellectual property issues, project team members become familiar with the Fox Point community and IWT, representatives from Brown's Center for Digital Scholarship, and IWT move towards a repository that will provide a model for town-gown collaboration. The IWT archives vision is still a work-in-progress. We hope that the preservation efforts we have made will help enable the IWT project to continue being useful and accessible to the community for and about whom it was made, as well as to researchers, team members, and the broader public.

Conclusions

The reflections in this article speak to the successes, challenges, and frustrations that students experience when joining an ongoing, multi-faceted oral history project such as the ones in Fox Point. IWT and FPOHP succeed as classroom-based projects partly because their interdisciplinary, cross-curricular nature meets the learning needs of students. Not only do students realize the fulfillment of mastering new skills and academic content—from history to exhibit design, preservation practices to good listening—but also they can apply that learning within real-world situations during their school day and beyond. Shibata's evaluation of the work of grade school students demonstrates that fourth and fifth graders appreciate the opportunity to learn from serving their community through oral history projects where they can collect and preserve historical

information and disseminate it to others. Similarly, the writers of this article express satisfaction with making a difference by contributing to projects for which there is a benefit beyond their own learning.

For classrooms striving to prepare students to become part of a high tech, creative workforce, oral history and new media projects offer singular opportunities to document learning, to create resources for future activities, and to empower students as creators and stewards of primary source material. But expanded opportunities to document past and present community and classroom activities also present the challenge of innovating and preserving the processes, resources, and products of learning. New media technologies, as well as digital formats, can quickly become obsolete. Digital objects can easily be lost, misnamed, or scattered. In order to capture the full spectrum of learning, classrooms will need to develop structures for tracking and consolidating file creation, use, and conservation. Townes and Atticks have tried to begin this process for the IWT project in order to enable current and future use of and access to digital files by students and the broader community. Similarly, Binning, Manekin and Schiff, in transferring historical photographs to an online archive at Flickr, and working with community members to make those photographs accessible, have attempted to engage the power of social networks and new media to create a virtual world of Fox Point memories and images that can remain vital and accessible.

Although the skills and expertise of graduate students and elementary students differ remarkably, they all come away from community documentary projects invested with a new sense of connection to a place and a community, an increased awareness of their roles in creating and presenting historic narratives, and a command of and appreciation for the potential of digital technology and new media formats that facilitate their work. By giving students the opportunity to test their ideas and apply their scholarship to real-world projects, the FPOHP and, especially, IWT, encourages students to foster their own learning and serve a broader public. With the merger of new technologies and community commitments, such projects illuminate some of the strategies and challenges facing students within contemporary educational settings. Admittedly, this work requires a substantial investment of time, knowledge, and other resources, resources that universities may possess that can be extended to other communities for mutual benefit. Whether at the level of grade school or graduate school, students, teachers, and schools will be challenged to adapt to, exploit, and address issues of preservation and access associated with America's increasingly global and technologically advanced society. Providing students the opportunity to record and preserve local history and then manage and make accessible vast amounts of information and materials, oral history projects can help young people become not solely passive consumers but also active

producers of historical knowledge, preservers of its legacy, and engaged members of their communities.

NOTES

- 1 The authors express their gratitude to Vartan Gregorian teachers Eileen Afonso, Jackie Fish, Maureen Kenner, Christine Mendonca, Holly Polhemus and Fritzi Robinson; principal Colin Grimsey; writers-in-residence Susan Hradil and Virginia Laffey; IWT project directors Cathy Carr-Kelly and Wendy Warlick; local historians Lou Costa and John Costa; and the many students, parents, and other participants who contribute to the success of IWT. The format of this article was inspired by Jennifer Braithwait Darrow, Ronald Simon, and John D. Willard V, "Learning Oral History: Reflections on a Graduate School Education," in *Preparing the Next Generation of Oral Historians: An Anthology of Oral History Education*, ed. Barry A. Lanman and Laura M. Wendling, 409–415 (Lanham, MD: Alta Mira Press, 2006).
- 2 Marjorie L. McLellan, "Case Studies in Oral History and Community Learning," *Oral History Review* 25 (Summer/Fall 1998): 81–112.
- 3 "Old Timers Tell of Days When River Was Fit to Swim In," *Providence Evening Bulletin*, January 11, 1928, 3, 7; William McKenzie Woodward and Edward F. Sanderson, *Providence: A Citywide Survey of Historic Resources* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, 1986); Caroline Frank, "John Brown's India Point," *Rhode Island History* 61 (Fall 2003): 51–69.
- 4 On the historic preservation movement on Providence's East Side, see Briann Greenfield, "Marketing the Past: Historic Preservation in Providence, Rhode Island," in *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States*, ed. Max Page and Randall Mason (New York: Routledge, 2003); Merrill R. Bailey, "Fox Point in Painful Change," *The Evening Bulletin*, November 10, 1969, 1, 19; Ted Slafsky, "Fox Point: Ten Thousand Points of Change," *Providence Phoenix*, August 10–16, 1989, 1, 4.
- 5 "Influx of Students at Fox Point Scored," *Providence Journal*, September 25, 1969; Charles Simon, interviewed by Paige van Atwerp, March 14, 2009, FPOHP archive. All interviews are from the FPOHP and available at <http://dl.lib.brown.edu/foxpoint/>.
- 6 This transformation has received much press, most of it praising the area's revitalization. For example, Gail Ciampa, "New Identity for Ives," *Providence Journal*, September 24, 2008; Steven Triedman, "The Ives Have It," *East Side Monthly*, February 2008; Linda Borg, "Park Patrons Know the Ropes," *Providence Journal*, September 20, 2004.
- 7 Currently, the neighborhood faces another massive change with the rerouting of a major interstate that has bisected the neighborhood since the early 1960s. The I-195 relocation will reconnect Fox Point to the waterfront and open acres of land. After several years of advocacy by former and current residents, seeking to exert pressure over the direction of the development, a 2010 bond measure authorized Rhode Island to purchase some of this land for public use. Daniel Barbarisi, "Advocates Lobby for Keeping Former Shooters Site Public," *Providence Journal*, May 8, 2008; and "Cape Verdeans Enter Fray Over Waterfront Plan," *Providence*

- Journal*, June 11, 2008; Barbara Polichetti, "R.I. Bond Issue Would Buy Land at Rocky Point, India Point, Pay for Fort Adams Repairs," *Providence Journal*, October 31, 2010.
- 8 Charles Simon interview; Lou Costa, interviewed by Josh Tobias, March 6, 2008.
 - 9 Winston Lima, interviewed by Scott Middleton, April 9, 2009.
 - 10 "'Some Kind of Funny Porto Rican?' A Cape Verdean American Story," distributed by Spia Media.
 - 11 Other projects include "By the Sweat of Our Brow," documenting the experiences of retired longshoreman, conducted by Sylvia Ann Soares. Paul Davis, "New Efforts to Preserve Stories of Cape Verdean Longshoremen," *Providence Journal*, March 21, 2010.
 - 12 <http://www.providenceschools.org/schools/elementary-schools/gregorian> (accessed January 2, 2011).
 - 13 In 1997, the PTO renamed the school after a former president of Brown; however, many long time Fox Pointers continue to refer to the Fox Point Elementary School. Rosa Lima, interviewed by Amy Karowski, November 8, 2010; Al Augusta, interviewed by Emily Bryant, November 23, 2010.
 - 14 Colin Grimsey, interviewed by Rachael Jeffers, November 19, 2010; Wendy Warlick, interviewed by Brent Fujioka, October 13, 2010.
 - 15 Other public humanities student projects include new media presentations, an audio tour, and an exhibition. See <http://www.brown.edu/jnbc/exhibits/foxpoint.php> (accessed September 25, 2010).
 - 16 For the Fox Point photo collection, see <http://www.flickr.com/photos/foxpoint> (accessed January 7, 2011).
 - 17 <http://www.flickr.com/photos/foxpoint/collections/>.
 - 18 Other students have worked with Costa to label photos, correct misspellings, and add information about photos, including Leah Nahmias, Rose Phipps, Kaia Simmons, Raini Stout, and Rachael Jeffers.
 - 19 See <http://literacythroughphotography.wordpress.com/wendy-ewald/> (accessed September 25, 2010) and Ewald's many publications, including *I Dreamed I Had a Girl in My Pocket: The Story of an Indian Village* (New York: Center for Documentary Studies and W. W. Norton, 1996).
 - 20 Thanks to Principal Grimsey and teacher Fritzi Robinson who graciously allowed us to teach the curriculum we developed and provided valuable support in the classroom.
 - 21 Linda Borg, "Bringing Fox Point's Rich History to Life," *Providence Journal*, March 2, 2009.
 - 22 For curriculum materials and further description of these workshops, see http://www.facesoffoxpoint.com/Faces_of_Fox_Point/Welcome.html (accessed August 25, 2010). Binning, Manekin and Schiff won the 2010 Student Project Award from the National Council on Public History for this project.
 - 23 IWT was conceived and is run by Cathy Carr-Kelly and Wendy Warlick whose children attend the school. The project is supported by the school's PTO and has received funding from the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities, the Rhode Island State Council for the Arts, VSA Arts of Rhode Island, and other local sources. In its first

year, IWT worked with fourth- to sixth-grade classes; it now teaches students in fourth to fifth grade (Vartan's sixth grade class was moved to a nearby middle school) and an integrated third- to fifth-grade grade special education class. The project is taught by the school's classroom teachers and two writers-in-residence, Susan Hradil and Virginia Laffey.

- 24 Students recorded reflections on IWT on a project blog, <http://www.iwasthereproject.org> (accessed September 2, 2010).
- 25 With the full implementation of the MACE Grouper tool, which will allow the Center to manage file groups in the BDR, many of these issues might be resolved in the coming months. As Andrew Ashton of CDS notes, the BDR should eventually be able to host MP3 versions of IWT audio files and make them available via link for download and/or streaming. However, given our time constraints, we had to develop an ad hoc approach for archiving IWT files.