



The Story of Belmont Hill: Creating an Oral History Archive with Grade 12 Boys

David Hegarty
Belmont Hill School, Belmont, Massachusetts, USA

Further Information

This poster and further information is available at
<http://www.theibsc.org/>

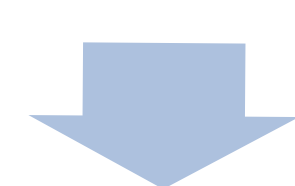
Researcher's Email: hegarty@belmonthill.org

Introduction

The boys of Belmont Hill have various opportunities to tell their story, be it in *The Bell*, our Middle School newspaper, or *The Panel*, our Upper School newspaper. During their senior year, our Grade 12 boys are required to contribute a page for *The Sundial*, our school yearbook. Additionally, the seniors are also required to make a panel carving from wood before graduation.

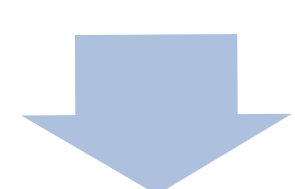
Besides my duties as the Library Director and a History teacher, I am also the faculty advisor for *The Panel* and *The Sundial*, and so I get to see their stories develop over time, and this oral history archive seemed like a logical next step for the boys to document their stories.

Whether it is the informal setting of a campfire, during a class, on a bus to an athletic contest, or during an oral history interview, Belmont Hill boys like to listen to and hear, stories about their peers, friends, teachers, and their day to day of life at school in the past, present, and beyond.



The Research Question

How might creating an oral history archive deepen Grade 12 boys' understanding of shared experiences on their school journey?

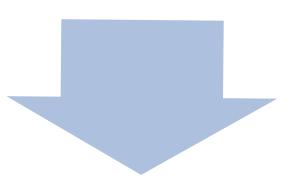


Research Context and Participants

Belmont Hill School is located just outside Boston, Massachusetts. The school has 450 students in Grades 7 to 12.

In his opening remarks to the school in August 2018, our new Headmaster, Greg Schneider, said "whether you are a returning student, a new Belmont Hill boy, or a member of our amazing faculty and staff, it is such an honour to welcome all of you to our next chapter in the Belmont Hill story."

Participants in this study were twelve Grade 12 students in the Non-Fiction writing class of Mr. Leonardis, the Chair of our English Department.



The Research Action

The boys wrote several essays, including one reflective essay with the prompt of "What is your Story of Belmont Hill"? Prior to this reflective essay, the boys read excerpts from the biographical writings of several writers including David Sedaris, Stephen King, and Frank McCourt. Upon completion of the essays, the boys read them out loud to the class.

Prior to the one on one interview with me, we listened as a class to examples of good oral history interviews from noted American Oral Historian Studs Terkel. We also listened to examples from *Storycorps*, whose mission is "preserve and share humanity's stories in order to build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world."

The boys were particularly moved by a Ted Talk from Dave Isay, founder of *Storycorps*, titled "Every one around you has a story the world needs to hear." Over the Thanksgiving holiday, a time when many American families gather together, the boys were tasked with creating their own *Storycorps* interview, with a family member or loved one. In early December, after the Thanksgiving holiday, the boys sat down with me for their one on one oral history interview.



The photo below is from the annual Seniors v. Faculty soccer game, a long time tradition; quotes from the seniors at the game included the following:
"The faculty doesn't stand a chance."
"Look at those old people; Mr. Hegarty has no knees."
Game finished as a 9-9 "tie"



Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected using models developed by Mertler (2017) and included the following:

- Observations from the classes I attended each day, listening to the formal, and informal discussions of the boys, including the "banter" before and after each class.
- A survey form, in which the boys both rated and answered in an open-ended narrative form their experiences with and perspectives on aspects of Belmont Hill life, including Academics, Athletics, Friendships, and Teachers.
- A formal one-on-one Interview with each of the students which lasted about 12 to 15 minutes.
- From the pre questionnaire to the four-page reflective essay to the oral history interview, I used the categories of opened ended questions, beginning each question with either "What, Why or Which?"
- After the transcribing of the interviews were completed, I used color coded highlighters to determine which factors, from Academics, Athletics, and Friendships, had most played a role in their Belmont Hill story.

Key Findings and Discussion

- Four major themes were identified and are represented here with quotes from the boys:

Appreciation for Peers:

"The brotherhood of friends at Belmont Hill is the strongest."

Relational Learning:

"Teachers have their student's back in and out of the classroom, which leads to more engaged students that want to do well not only for themselves, but for their teachers as well."

Importance of Teamwork:

"The biggest part of J.V. hockey for me is probably hanging out in the locker room before and after a game. The skating is enjoyable, but the hanging out on the bus for away games, it's just fun."

Traditions:

"Traditions like The Facultones, Milk & Cookies, The Loop, Chapel Talks, and the panel carving in my senior spring have become some of my favourite memories of Belmont Hill."

Conclusions

The success of this action research project was summed up best by Mr. Leonardis who noted that the boys "were given the time and opportunity to reflect on their years at our school, where they struggled, how they thrived, and how it will stay with them. I plan on making it a regular assignment in the class in the years to come."

As Belmont Hill approaches its centenary in 2023, I can see an oral history archive of both current and former students becoming an integral part of telling the story of the school.

Key Readings

Boyd, D. A., & Larson, M. (2014). *Oral history and digital humanities: Voice, access, and engagement*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Isay, D. (Presenter). (2015, March 17). *Everyone around you has a story the world needs to hear*. Speech presented at TED2015, Vancouver, Canada.

Mertler, C. A. (2017). *Action research: Improving schools and empowering educators* (5th ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE.

Sheftel, A. (2013). *Oral history off the record: Toward an ethnography of practice*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

