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**An Introduction to the Arkansas Delta Oral History Project:  
Looking Back Over the First Two Years, Looking Forward to Many More**

One of the key principles of the New Literacy Studies is that literacy is a social practice and that, in the words of the preeminent literacy scholar Shirley Brice Heath, “all normal individuals can learn to read and write, provided they have a setting or context in which there is a need to be literate, they are exposed to literacy, and they get some help from those who are already literate” (23). These propositions might be taken as foundational for a bold, innovative educational and community outreach project now entering its third year. The initiative is the Arkansas Delta Oral History Project, which we’ll abbreviate as ADOHP throughout this book. The ADOHP, created and sustained by the Office of the Brown Chair in English Literacy at the University of Arkansas, gives high school students from the Arkansas Delta the opportunity to collaborate with student mentors from the University of Arkansas on tasks designed to uncover and preserve legend and lore from that culturally rich part of the work and, equally important, to plan and complete *their own* extensive literacy projects—in the case of many participants, for the first time in their lives. The ADOHP, we believe, gives high school students a reason to improve their reading and writing abilities; the project offers literacy practices that fulfill both intellectual and personal goals. This book both describes and celebrates the ADOHP.

Mark Twain once said that the only person who was allowed to refer to himself as *we* was the King of England or a man with a tapeworm, so perhaps we should identify who *we* are, since you'll hear from us throughout this book. We are a team of five people who work together to lead ADOHP: David Jolliffe, a professor of English and curriculum and instruction who holds the Brown Chair in English Literacy at the University of Arkansas; Anne Pearson Raines, the director of tutoring services for the Enhanced Learning Center at the university; Krista Jones, a graduate student in southern U. S. history at the university; Catherine Roth-Baker, a fiction writer studying in the master of fine arts in creative writing program at the university; and Laine Gates, who started as a student (a junior majoring in anthropology) in year one of the project and then moved into a project assistant position in year two. We are not hierarchical—all of us lead the project together. Raines and Gates are both natives of southern Arkansas, the former having been born in McGehee and having lived, at various times in Helena, Forrest City, and Pine Bluff, and the latter having been born in El Dorado. Jones, a native of Colorado, is studying the history and culture of the Delta; Roth-Baker, a native of Selma, Alabama, has lived in Hope, Arkansas. Jolliffe, though born and raised in West Virginia, is a relative newcomer to Arkansas, having arrived in 2005. This team has been assisted mightily by ten teachers from the eight high schools in the Arkansas Delta that participated in the first two years of the project: Yogi Denton from McGehee High School, Brenda Doucey at Pine Bluff High School, Ima Fleming-Foster from Forrest City High School, Charles Foster from West Memphis High School, Ruth Greer from Lee County High School, Cindy Gutridge from Augusta High School, Lula Jones

from Helena Central High School, Steve Murray from Forrest City High School, Cheryl Scott from Marvell High School, and Delores Smith from Marvell High School.

In this introduction, we describe the logistics of the project, contextualize it in the historical and contemporary culture of the Delta, describe its genesis, and make a case for what we consider to be its most distinguishing feature—its *authenticity*, a term that is bandied about a great deal in educational circles but that we try to anchor with a solid definition. After the introduction, the book offers descriptions of 20 projects that have been completed by University of Arkansas students and by students from the participating high schools since the spring of 2007. Each description provides an overview of the topic, some contextual background information on the issues at hand, a summary of the interview questions asked and the verbatim responses of the interviewee, plus—and we think this is the best part—the students’ final projects. When the final projects exist in print form, we include them in the book. The final projects that were created in electronically mediated formats are included on a website ([www.samplewebsite.edu](http://www.samplewebsite.edu)) created especially to accompany this book. After all the project descriptions, we conclude by offering some advice on developing similar literacy/oral history/outreach projects in other settings.

### **Basic Logistics: How the ADOHP Works**

The ADOHP operates by invitation, but we are not hyper-selective: If a teacher or principal at a public high school in the Arkansas Delta wants the school to participate, we are happy to extend an invitation. Each participating high school agrees that in *one class*, (we can’t handle the entire school, or even an entire grade level), the teacher will

use oral history as a *teaching method*. The teacher need not alter *what* he or she was planning to teach for a semester. That is, no matter what the content of the course, the students

- identify a topic that in some way involves local history, legend, or lore;
- do some background research on the topic;
- identify someone with a unique perspective on the topic whom they can interview;
- plan, practice, conduct, and transcribe the interview verbatim; and then
- write a final project of their own design—an essay, a story, a series of poems, a play or video script, a brochure, and so on—that grows out of the interview.

The steps in the first four bullet points are, of course, standard operating procedure in oral history projects. As we and our partnering high school teachers teach them to our students we rely on very clear descriptions of the steps in Glenn Whitman's *Dialogue with the Past: Engaging Students and Meeting Standards through Oral History*, published by the American Association for State and Local History Book Series, and in *Talking Gumbo: A Teacher's Guide to Using Oral History in the Classroom*, produced by the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History at Louisiana State University and available from the L.S.U. library's web site. We add the final step to convert the oral history enterprise into a full-fledged literacy experience, one that pulls together all the students' reading, interviewing, drafting, collaborating, rewriting (and so on) experiences in a substantial final project. Many oral historians simply produce transcripts. We want the transcripts *plus* the students' work growing out of them.

At the same time that the high school students have embarked on their oral history projects, the English and History departments at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville offer a cross-listed undergraduate colloquium in which students do three things:

- They read, write, and learn about the history of the Arkansas Delta, using Willard Gatewood and Jeannie Whayne's edited collection, *The Arkansas Delta: Land of Paradox* and Margaret Bolsterli's *Born in the Delta* as central sources.
- They plan and complete oral history projects of their own on some aspect of Delta life, building their own methodology from *Dialogue with the Past* and *Talking Gumbo*.
- They act as mentors and role models to the high school students participating in the project.

Early in the semester during which ADOHP operates, the project begins with day-long meeting in Helena, Arkansas, involving all the University of Arkansas students and all the high school students participating in the project, along with the instructors from both sets of institutions. At this meeting, four hour-long workshops introduce the participants to the defining characteristics of an oral history project, to best practices of planning and conducting an oral history interview, to options for converting an interview transcript into a creative final project, and to the logistics of participating in on-line discussions about one's on-going project.

At this initial meeting, all the participating students are organized into four- or five-person writing/working groups. Chairing each group is a University of Arkansas student; the other members are students from the different participating high schools.

Each group is given an agenda for the project, detailing when members should have selected a topic, finished their background research, selected an interviewee, drafted interview questions, practiced the interview, conducted it, transcribed it, and started working on their final projects. Here, for example, is the agenda we provided during the second year of ADOHP:

### Dates and Suggested Deadlines for the Project

January 28 <sup>th</sup>	Opening workshop at Phillips County Community College in Helena: Please have a topic for oral history project selected by this date.
February 4 <sup>th</sup>	Deadline to select an interviewee.
February 18 <sup>th</sup>	Deadline to have first draft of questions.
February 25 <sup>th</sup>	Deadline to have <b>practice</b> interview completed.
February 29 <sup>th</sup> -March 1 <sup>st</sup>	Working trip to University of Arkansas, Fayetteville.
March 17 <sup>th</sup>	Deadline to have <b>actual</b> interviews completed.
March 24 <sup>th</sup>	Deadline to have follow up activities (“What did I learn?” text and Thank-You letter to interviewee) completed.
April 7 <sup>th</sup>	Deadline to have transcription of interview completed.
April 21 <sup>st</sup>	Deadline to have first draft of final project completed.
April 28 <sup>th</sup>	Closing celebration and performance, University of Arkansas Community College at Phillips County.

At the end of the initial meeting the students go back to their respective institutions—the University of Arkansas students to Fayetteville and the high school students to their home schools—with the agreement that each student will, at least once a

week, log on to the University of Arkansas’ electronic discussion platform and share drafts, ask questions, participate in discussions—in general, work together on the project.

To motivate these discussions, we provide the following list of starter prompts.

WEEK OF

January 28 <sup>th</sup>	Introduction: Who are we? What are our first thoughts about the project?
February 4 <sup>th</sup>	What person are we thinking of interviewing and why?
February 11 <sup>th</sup>	Whom did we actually select to interview? What are our impressions and concerns about our interview questions?
February 18 <sup>th</sup>	What are we nervous/anxious/excited about concerning the interview?
February 25 <sup>th</sup>	How did the practice “mock” interview go? What will we need to do differently in the actual interview?
March 3 <sup>rd</sup>	UA students report on their interviews or progress. Delta students provide feedback. Potential topic: What ideas for the final project did the presentation by Bob Ford generate?
March 10 <sup>th</sup>	Delta students report on their interviews or progress. UA students provide feedback.
March 24 <sup>th</sup>	Open topic- Whatever need to be discussed. Remind students to send thank-you letters to interviewees.
March 31 <sup>st</sup>	What kinds of concerns do we have about our transcriptions?
April 7 <sup>th</sup> , 14 <sup>th</sup> 21 <sup>st</sup>	Conversations about developing drafts of final projects.

As you can discern from the agenda of deadlines and the list of discussion-starter prompts, after about six weeks of this kind of group activity on the project—everyone in his or her home school, ideally following the project agenda, logging on to the discussion forum regularly, and sharing ideas and drafts—we bring everyone participating in the

project to Fayetteville for a weekend of face-to-face group work, campus activities, and fun. The visiting students from the high schools tour campus facilities and meet with university admissions and academic officers. The writing groups convene to work on the emerging project. A local playwright, Bob Ford, artistic director of TheatreSquared, a professional theatre company in Fayetteville, runs an afternoon-long workshop called “From Page to Stage,” which involves the students in various activities designed to help them bring their interviews to life in their final projects. The whole group takes advantage of some aspect of the cultural scene in Fayetteville. In the first year, the students saw a superb university theatre production of Nzotake Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*; in the second year, they participated in a slam poetry and dance workshop.

At the end of this weekend, everyone returns to his or her home school invigorated and ready to bring the project to a stunning conclusion. Working in their on-line writing groups again, the students move from interview transcripts to creative stories, essays, poems, plays, and so on, and about four weeks later, the whole group reassembles in Helena for a day of celebration and performance of the final projects. To provide a sense of the breadth and richness of the students’ topics, we provide the following excerpt of the closing performance program from year one of ADOHP, held in three venues at the Delta Cultural Center.

**Miller Hotel—Cherry Street**

**The Tragedy of Forrest City: Tornado of 1974**

Jordan Burghart, Kayla Hastings, Lori Hastings  
Forrest City High School

**Cultural Turmoil at Pine Bluff High**

Jessica Davis, Daniel Johnson, Cierra Lee, Kye Meadows,

Alexis Millenbaugh, Aundraya Wynne--Pine Bluff High School

**The Voices of Integration: The Spoken Word**

Lawrence Caudle, Amber Gilbert, LeDora Stribling, Montre Thompson, ReSheda Terry, Brittany Williams--Pine Bluff High School

**Insight to History**

Camille Brunson, Jennifer Caldwell, Daniel Harris, Cedrick Williams, Keturah Payton, Andrea Walker --Pine Bluff High School

**Bear Hunting Stories**

Shelle House-- University of Arkansas

**African American Blues Singers from the Delta**

Michelyn Gant-- Central High School

**African American Veterans from WWII**

Melissa Obwocha, Chandria Scott, Carlisia Scott, Mary Triplett—Helena Central High School

**Delta Medical Practices: Past and Present**

Joselin Niemyer-- University of Arkansas

**Nuthin' But the Blues**

Kaely Kantaris-- University of Arkansas

**Conspiracy of the Ages: Private Schools in the Delta**

Dave Prater--University of Arkansas

**Delta Cultural Center –Cherry Street Stage**

**History of McGehee High School Marching Band**

Dylan Miles  
McGehee High School

**Growing Up in Blytheville, Arkansas**

Mary Ann Stewart-- University of Arkansas

**Delta Barbeque**

Marci Manley--University of Arkansas

**Masking and Debuting**

Jessica Riddle--University of Arkansas

**Helena's Hot Tamales: A True Delta Tradition**

Cale Nicholson--University of Arkansas

**A Story**

Jean Jones-- University of Arkansas

**Foodways and Health Politics in the Arkansas Delta**

Laine Gates --University of Arkansas

**A Delta Grocery Store**

Zach Wagner-- University of Arkansas

**Crossing the Color Line**

Katiedra Body, Xavier Davis, Jasmine Dukes, Bennieka Farris, Ryan Galvan, Adrianna Green, Giorgio McCall, Tyisha Nelson, Carnor Smith, Shanekwa Taylor, Abraya Walker-- Lee County High School

**Southern Cooking in the 1940s**

Nakisha Booth, Diesha Gamble, Avery Hall, Phylicia Martin, Robin Robinson, Quineisha Robinson, Diedra Speight, Jarvis Wilson, Kasheda Daniels, Klensha Boyd, Marquitta Truitt-- Marvell High School

**Delta Cultural Center – Delta Eagle Room**

**What We've Overcome**

Alexandria Boyd, Rose Celestin, Kenneth Cole, Kalisha Hall, Sean Prater, Chelsa Savage, Chelsa Thomas--Pine Bluff High School

**Flood of 1927 and World War II**

Jenna Lee-- McGehee High School

**Whistle Blowing**

Taylor Coburn, Bethany Connard, Trey Johnson, Crockett Hackett, Jonathan Sneed, Mallory Day, Taylor Smith, Bennie Cleveland, Stephanie Rose, Mahina Powell, Madeline Gill, Megan Tabor -- McGehee High School

**Juanita Gibson and Significant Turning Points in the Delta**

Kristen Gibson, Katherine Kozubski, Shelby McGaha

McGehee High School

**Memories of a Poet's Plantation: Harold Crisp Remembers  
Lily Peter**

Katie Lambert--University of Arkansas

**Vietnam: The War of Contradictions**

Kayla Ballard-- Forrest City High School

**Integration**

Rich Jayroe-- Forrest City High School

**Integration and its Effects**

Dexter Lyles-- Forrest City High School

**Harvesting the Future: Farming in the Delta since 1930**

Sara Hanson--University of Arkansas

**What is the Arkansas Delta and Why Does the ADOHP Focus Its Work There?**

Since the ADOHP is sponsored by an academic office at the University of Arkansas, the flagship, land grant university, the project could have been situated in any region of the state. So why the Delta? Two reasons: First, it's rich with untapped, unwritten history. Second, it's an area of the state that needs revitalizing. The tacit bet underling the ADOHP is that giving folks the opportunity to dig into in its past might give them some impetus to improve its future.

What is the Arkansas Delta? From a geographical standpoint, that's apparently not an easy question to answer. The United States Department of Transportation says the Delta comprises 42 counties, the watershed from which empties into the Mississippi River. To encompass this implausibly large definition of the region, one would essentially draw a line due south from the middle of the northern border of the state to the middle of the southern border, and everything east of that vertical line would be the

Delta. No Arkansan would buy this definition. In contrast, Arkansas historian Willard Gatewood suggests a slightly refined characterization. Gatewood refers to the Delta as “one-third of the state’s counties,” or 25 of the 75. Presumably, Gatewood has in mind a triangle, with Jefferson County (Pine Bluff is the county seat) being its western-most angle, the state’s most northeastern point as the second angle and its most southeastern point as the third. The view of the Delta is slightly more plausible—most Pine Bluffians would consider themselves residents of the Delta, and indeed the city is the home of the Delta Rivers Nature Center. Many Delta residents would argue, however, that the best definition of the Delta is the one promoted by the Delta Byways Commission: the 15 counties that either have a Mississippi River shoreline or sit between the river and an odd geological feature, Crowley’s Ridge. This crescent-moon-shaped bump, the geological origins of which are disputed, stretches from just south of Cape Girardeau, Missouri, to Helena, Arkansas, and is the only high ground in the otherwise flat alluvial plane of the region.

The most influential geological feature of the Delta is not so much the flat plane as it is the rivers: the Arkansas, the White, the Cache, the St. Francis, and, of course, the Mississippi. These rivers flood regularly, and receding flood waters always produce a superabundance of rich soil, so the Delta economy has always been agricultural. Cotton has consistently been a strong crop in the Delta, even though only two counties, Phillips and Chicot, had anything resembling the big plantation culture that one associates with the antebellum South. Beginning in the decades following the Civil War, when profit-minded lumber concerns deforested the region significantly, the newly-cleared lands proved a fertile home for rice, soybean, and sorghum grain (or milo) crops. An old

saying seems true about the Delta: The soil is so rich that you could toss out a pound of nails and harvest a bucket of crowbars.

There is nothing resembling a big city in the Delta. One might claim that Jonesboro, with a population of 53,515 represents something like a population center in the north end of the region, while Helena, with a current population of 6,333 in the recently-combined metropolises of Helena and West Helena, anchors the southern end. Most of the rest of the burghs are small farming, river, or railroad towns. There was a time, according to Gatewood, when many of these towns were bustling: They had main streets—often two of them, one for Whites and one for Blacks. They had shops and businesses. They had restaurants, movie theatres, even opera houses.

But a true triple whammy hit the Delta. First, as in many other sites in rural America, the Interstate came in the 60s and whizzed past the small towns, moving commerce either to larger cities or to malls on the bypass outside of town. Second, the agricultural economy that dominated the region was victimized by the twin forces of mechanization and globalization. The cotton plantation that used to take 100 people to operate now employed three or four people. The Delta cotton that once upon a time was sold directly to the textile mills in the Carolinas now had to compete with cotton grown in South America and Asia. Third, the economy essentially converted from family agriculture to big agribusiness.

As a result of these three sets of forces, despite some rare bright spots in the Delta economy, the region is clearly in a decline: businesses go under, industries shut down, populations dwindle, schools suffer. As Gatewood puts it, one clearly notices “the deterioration of the human condition in the Delta. Virtually all the usual indices, from

per capita income, unemployment, and housing to health, teenage pregnancies, and school dropouts, provide a statistical portrait of a people in distress” (23). Even a cursory look at census data confirms Gatewood’s view: From 2000 through 2004, the state of Arkansas gained 3 per cent of its population. The fifteen counties in the Arkansas Delta Byways Commission lost 3.1 per cent of theirs. In 2004, the percentage of Arkansas households living under the federal poverty levels was 15.8; in the Delta counties, that figure was 23.1 per cent. In 2004, the percentage of adults in Arkansas for whom the highest level of educational achievement was eighth grade was 9.4; in the Delta counties, that figure was 14.7%.

And yet the Delta keeps on trying. Communities institute civic improvement projects; school systems bring in new curricular programs; economic development commissions try to entice new businesses and industries to locate there. The Delta residents, and those who care about them, realize that here is a region with a storied past of legend and lore. They know the Delta as home to a rich ethnic mix of populations, both those who came to the region willingly to make a home and those who were brought there in servitude. They know the Delta as a place where the religious roots of southern American culture, particularly the Protestant ones, run deep and wide. They know the Delta as a region where the family traditions of cooking, putting up vegetables, sewing, hunting, and fishing get passed on from generation to generation. They know the Delta as the locale where, as Gatewood puts it, “people are likely to emphasize manners and exhibit ‘the small courtesies’” (25). In short, they know the Delta as a place ideally suited to an oral history project designed to sponsor literacy enrichment.

## **The Genesis of the ADOHP—An Initial Trip to the Delta, and a *Foxfire* Memory**

The voice you hear in this section changes from *we* to *I*. In it, David Jolliffe describes his first trip to the Arkansas Delta and explains how that visit prompted him to revive an oral history/literacy project he had worked on nearly three decades earlier.

I remember my first trip to the Arkansas Delta. I had arrived in Fayetteville on August 15, 2005, just in time for my wife to get settled into her new teaching position, starting one week later, and for me to begin thinking about the task the University of Arkansas had set before me: not to teach during my first year occupying the Brown Chair in English Literacy, but instead to travel around the state, discovering what I called the “literacy landscape”—how folks were defining the notoriously polysemous term, *literacy*, what populations they were focusing on, what actions they were taking, what programs they were putting in place, what I might do to understand and improve the terrain. Although I had been living in Chicago for the previous 21 years, I wasn’t a completely blank slate about Arkansas. Janice Kearney, who in *Cotton Field of Dreams* had chronicled her family’s history of raising 17 children while sharecropping in Desha County during the 50s and 60s, had been a scholar in residence at DePaul University before I left Chicago, and she was kind enough to give me a preview of my new surroundings—what the different regions of the state were all about, who the principal players supporting literacy research and outreach were. Marie Clinton Bruno, executive director of the Arkansas Literacy Councils, on discovering that I had accepted the Brown Chair, had actually tracked me down by telephone in Chicago to welcome me to the literacy-outreach community in Arkansas. Two members of the search committee that brought me to the University of Arkansas, Pat Slattery and Chuck Adams, had offered

their informed assessment: Arkansas was a state where improving literacy was not a top priority for a great many people. Literacy was an issue throughout the state, Pat and Chuck told me, “but the situation is really bad in the Delta.”

It was easy enough to develop some intuitive hunches about what exactly this “Delta” was. Having grown up along the Ohio River in West Virginia, I knew that rivers flood regularly, and that these floods bring rich soil downstream, and that this rich soil eventually forms alluvial deposits that have for centuries been called “deltas”—in part because they are often shaped like triangles. I knew the Mississippi River has a delta, as do the Nile, the Niger, and other major rivers throughout the world. I presumed that the Arkansas Delta was that region of state where the Arkansas River empties into the Mississippi.

When I traveled to the Delta during the first week of September, I learned that it was so much more than simply a geographical/geological locale in my new home state. I had a four-stop itinerary planned. I would begin in West Memphis, meeting with the literacy professionals at Mid-South Community College who were working diligently to prepare a workforce capable of filling high-quality, high-literacy jobs, just in case an influx of such jobs would actually materialize in the Delta. I would go from there to Blytheville (pronounced without the “th”—“Blahy-vul”), where an Advanced Placement English teacher I knew wanted me to come to her class, speak to her students—I learned when I got there that she actually wanted me to *teach* her students, which I happily did—and learn about the “literacy lab” she had developed in her classroom. While in that corner of the state, I would also visit “That Bookstore in Blytheville,” where Mary Gay Shipley runs one of the best small, independent bookstores in the U.S. As the *New*

*Yorker* profile in 1999 put it, people come from all over the country not so much to buy books, but to find out what Mary Gay thinks they ought to be reading. I would then head down to Forrest City, named for the Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest who, having been stationed there during the Civil War, returned to tap into (and enrich himself from) the abundant timberlands in St. Francis County. In Forrest City, I would be the guest of the superintendent of schools, the courtly Lee Vent, who was hosting a dinner meeting of the Arkansas Leadership Academy, a group of citizens who participated in bi-monthly seminars on agriculture, the economy, government, and civic affairs, and their counterparts from up north, the Wisconsin Rural Leadership Academy, the members of which were on an “exchange” visit in Arkansas. I would conclude my initial Delta excursion in Helena, where Terry Buckalew, a University of Arkansas history department alumnus now working for the Delta Cultural Center, would give me a tour of that facility, home of the King Biscuit Time, the longest running radio show in the U. S., where Sonny Boy Williamson, Robert Longwood Jr., Pinetop Perkins, and other luminaries of the blues got their start.

Every stop on the itinerary offered surprises. Mid-South Community College is a glistening, spanking-new institution, completely poised to pitch in and prepare workers for new businesses and industries, but, oh, if only such things would come to the Delta. In recent memory, the region came in second on two occasions, once when Toyota decided to build a huge assembly facility in San Antonio rather than Marion, Arkansas (just up the road from West Memphis), and later when the Japanese truck manufacturer Hino picked Tupelo, Mississippi, over Marion for its new plant. In both cases, the corporations offered an array of explanations for why they chose not to locate in the

Delta, but the same question was always at least tacit in the discussions: Can the Delta provide an educated, trainable workforce, ready for the challenges of high-quality, high-literacy jobs?

Blytheville, a town of about 16,000 about eight miles from a bend in the Mississippi, holds a dusty, nearly deserted Main Street that looks as though it has been lifted from *The Last Picture Show*. Smack in the middle of it, however, is That Bookstore. Mary Gay was tied up with book sellers all afternoon but her assistant spent an unfettered 90 minutes with me, talking about good books and the people who come from all over the Midwest (Blytheville feels much more like the boot heel of Missouri than it does like Arkansas) to hear readings and see the store's "guest register": the wooden chairs autographed by each visiting celebrity. (John Grisham is from nearby Jonesboro, and he makes a point to do a reading at That Bookstore every time he publishes a new book.)

The dinner meeting in Forrest City could not have been more revelatory. The forty or so Wisconsin visitors—farmers, small business operators, local government officials, and so on—joined an equal and similar number of their Arkansas counterparts over a dinner of fried catfish, hush puppies, and coleslaw, followed by a panel discussion that was supposed to last 90 minutes. It lasted three hours. The big, impassioned question the Delta residents kept posing, in one form or another, to their Northern guests was this: How do you stop the brain drain? That is, when your kids go off to college and get an education, how do you get them to move back to their hometowns? It was at this meeting that I first heard Superintendent Vent invoke a phrase he has used in other settings: the exodus from the Delta (sometimes re-cast as "the exodus to Northwest

Arkansas”). Shortly after this meeting, I uncovered the data behind Mr. Vent’s characterization: From 2000 through 2004, while the entire population of Arkansas was growing by three percent, the counties in the middle of the Delta were losing between four and nine percent of their citizens, and the two most northwestern counties of the state, Washington (home of the University of Arkansas) and Benton (home of Wal-Mart Home Headquarters) were growing by 18 and 22 percent respectively. Springdale, Arkansas, in Washington County, was building four new elementary schools; Mr. Vent was struggling to keep all his schools open.

The last stop on the itinerary provided a fitting finale. I was scheduled to meet Terry at 1 p.m. at the Delta Cultural Center. I left Forrest City early in the morning, intending to stop by the Lee County Economic Development Center office in Marianna, the county seat. I discovered that the office was closed—not for the day, it seemed, but, from all appearances, for some time—so I figured I’d arrive in Helena in time to grab some lunch before my meeting. I drove past the fast food franchises on the by-pass coming into downtown Helena, figuring I’d find some kind of eatery on Cherry Street, the main drag of downtown Helena where the museum is located. Boy, was I wrong. I found the Cultural Center, and I came upon a restaurant and lounge called Oliver’s that appeared to be open in the evenings, but there was no lunch to be found in downtown Helena. I slipped back out to one of the franchises for a burger and then went back to meet Terry and tour the Center—and to find out why there were no lunch spots there.

The Delta Cultural Center is an impressive, three-structure facility: a broad storefront that holds a museum of Delta music and the studio from which Sunshine Sonny Payne has been hosting the King Biscuit Time since 1951, ten years after its initial

broadcast in 1941; a converted train station, which houses displays about Civil War battles in the Delta and about famous floods; and an open-air bandstand that looks onto the levee and the Big Muddy behind it. The Cultural Center that day was nearly empty, a situation that Terry said is all too common. The facility draws a huge crowd every October for its annual blues festival, but during the rest of the year, it has trouble attracting patrons. Part of that problem, Terry explained, results from the no-lunch-in-downtown-Helena phenomenon that I observed: There is not much else in the downtown area except the Cultural Center. The town of 6000 or so has some lovely old neighborhoods, and the bucolic campus of the University of Arkansas Community College at Phillips County sits atop Crowley's Ridge about three miles from the river. But as the demographics of the town have changed over the past quarter century, circumstances have militated against their being a lunch spot—or any thriving businesses, for that matter, in downtown Helena. The Delta, with Helena at its center, was once upon a time the breadbasket of the state, but the triple whammy of economic forces, described in the previous section, changed all that. The result, Terry explained, is a disappearance of the middle class. Most folks with marketable skills have left the Delta, moving in large measure to Northwest Arkansas or the Memphis area for better jobs. That leaves behind two chunks of the population: an older, “propertied-up” group, folks who own land and homes and might like to sell them, but there's nobody buying; and a population who lack the kind of marketable skills that would enable them to move. Prosperous downtowns, including potential lunch spots, depend on that middle group, and they're the ones who have been “exodusing” from the Delta.

Driving the five hours back to Fayetteville after this trip, I thought long and hard about what an initial project in the Delta for the Brown Chair in English Literacy might be. What could I do to help instill folks in the Delta a sense, a gut feeling, about their home region that wasn't related to its economic and social decline? What could I do to sponsor reading and writing in the Delta that would raise its profile among the young people living there and, potentially, among folks who might choose to move there? I recalled, during this reverie, a project I had undertaken in the spring of 1976, my first year of teaching high school, in Wheeling, West Virginia. During that year, I taught half time at Triadelphia High School and worked the other half time as the public information officer for the Ohio County Schools—Wheeling being the county seat of Ohio County. My colleague Lynn Exley and I led an effort that year to produce *Wheeling Rediscovered*, a volume of essays in which high school sophomores wrote about Wheeling's past, present, and future. The "past" essays were generated through an oral history methodology: The students found someone—a parent, a grandparent, an older neighbor—who had a rich, evocative story to tell about the region's past, interviewed that person, and then wrote a story or essay based on the interview. The students loved the project and did great work; the community loved the project and bought up the entire print run of the published volume. People were proud of Wheeling—its past, present, and future. Why not do something similar in the Arkansas Delta, I thought? That's when and how the ADOHP was born.

### **The ADOHP and Authentic Student Work**

The ADOHP has elicited strong, positive reviews so far from students and teachers alike. Mallory Day, who participated as a high school senior at McGehee High School in year one of the project, wrote, “When I started this project, I thought it was just another assignment that I would get a grade for, but I was completely wrong. I did get a grade and do all of the work, but I was very surprised when I actually made the project a part of my daily life at school and at home.” Jean Jones, who was a senior English major and African-American studies minor at the University of Arkansas when she participated, offered this perspective:

Throughout school, we are often called on to research and make arguments about issues and ideas with which we have no direct experience. Participation in the ADOHP made our work directly relevant to our lives. The best thing about the project was that it was student-centered—we were able to choose topics of concern to us and therefore had an immediate sense of motivation.

The student-centered nature of the project was also cited as a major benefit by one of the teachers, Brenda Doucey from Pine Bluff High School: “My first step in the project was to allow the students to brainstorm and come up with ideas that they wanted to work on, not what I wanted, because I felt that if it was their choice, they could be more interested in completing the project.” And while the ADOHP gave students the opportunity to find a mirror reflecting their own lives and interests, it also gave them a window to the world beyond their own. As Yogi Denton, the teacher from McGehee High School put it, the collaborative work with the University of Arkansas students provided

more than just a working relationship. It allowed students to share more than their writing and research. It gave them the opportunity to share ideas and culture with people they might never have known otherwise. The Fayetteville students, usually a much more culturally diverse group than my high school students, have been a constant reminder to my students that there is a world outside of the Delta. The Fayetteville students' interest in the stories and culture of the Delta has made my students realize that there is a rich heritage in their hometowns that must not go untold.

While we have yet to assess formally the impact on students and teachers of the ADOHP, we feel as though we're doing something right.

Even without hard, empirical evidence, we'd like to offer two related claims about the benefits of the Arkansas Delta Oral History Project. First, it leads to much more strongly *authentic* and *engaged* learning than students generally experience in most high schools, colleges and universities. Second, in large measure because of the level of authentic engagement that students experience, they ultimately understand, at least subconsciously but often explicitly, a dual-edged definition of literacy that can serve them well as students and citizens: (a) the ability to see the problems they face and the potentialities that lie before them as deeply connected to—or *imbricated* with, as the late James Berlin put it—reading and writing; and (b) the ability to use reading and writing in their own lives to address problems and capitalize on potentialities.

Authenticity, of course, is an often-quoted buzz word in education these days, and teachers are regularly being urged to set students to work on “authentic” projects. Most

scholars who call for authenticity (see, for example, Wiggins and Jerald) argue that, for an assignment, project, or task to count as authentic, it must meet at least the first if not both of two sequentially related criteria. First, they maintain that the assignment must at least mimic, if not represent, the kind of task that a “real person” in the “real world” would do. The second criterion actually “tops” the first: the task must require the student to interact with the “real world” in some way, generally by submitting his or her work to some audience beyond the teacher-as-examiner and his or her classmates. We don’t want to downplay the importance of “real-world” relevance and activity, but the concept of authenticity that we incorporate with the Arkansas Delta Oral History Project goes beyond these two criteria. Our notion of authenticity derives from the ideas of Fred Newmann and his associates that my colleagues Carmen Manning, Kendra Sisserson, and Annie Knepler and I have been working to extend for the past decade. Newmann and his co-authors from the Wisconsin Center for Educational Research held that a project, task, or assignment is authentic when it accomplishes three things: (a) it predominantly calls for *construction of knowledge*—interpretation, analysis, synthesis, and/or interpretation of the material students read, observe, or experience—in contrast to *reproduction of knowledge*—merely parroting back and reporting directly whatever they read, observe, or experience; (b) it engages students in *disciplined inquiry*, a way of knowing and representing knowledge that is employed and respected by an academic discipline; and (c) it is connected to students’ lives in some way and is not simply a rote routine valued only within the classroom walls.

Manning, Sisserson, Knepler, and I have extended this conceptualization of authenticity in two substantial ways. First, we have tried to unpack the notion of

disciplined inquiry as it is manifest in different academic fields. We have tried for formulate, for example, what deep knowledge of important concepts in a discipline looks like—how assignments call for it and how student work demonstrates that the students “gets it”—and we have tried to explain the intimate connection between disciplined inquiry and communication, maintaining that one really cannot claim to have internalized a discipline’s concepts without communicating something about them in an elaborated, effective way. Second, we have tried to unpack the notion of connection to students’ lives by examining how the assignments, projects, and tasks teachers assign explicitly invite students to see both the task’s relevance beyond the walls of the school and the assignment’s relevance other content areas besides the one in which the assignment was given.

We believe the work that teachers assign and students do in the Arkansas Delta Oral History Project exemplifies our concept of authentic intellectual achievement at its best. First of all, to complete their projects, the students are required to do some reproduction of knowledge—they must report back, verbatim, exactly what their interview subjects said in the interviews—but in order to produce their final product, they must interpret, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate the information they discovered. In other words, the dominant expectation for each student’s project is that he or she *does something* with what he or she has learned from the interview. Second, because they are working at the boundaries of two academic content areas—English/language arts and history—students are earning solid exposure to the disciplinary ways of knowing in both of those fields. They are learning about how oral historians carry out their projects and acquire extensive knowledge about their research topics; they are learning about how

good writers create prose that makes solid points and then support those points with specific details, illustrations, anecdotes, and reasons. Third, they are engaging in projects that are relevant in their own lives—they must interview people who know something about their topic, and they ultimately perform their projects in a public venue—as well as relevant in more than one academic content area.

We like to think that the level of engagement we see in the students who participate in the Arkansas Delta Oral History project results, at least in part, from the authentic intellectual work the project asks them to do. But we also believe that the engagement stems from the fact that, for the first time in many of these students' lives, they are experiencing a transformative power of literacy. They devote a substantial chunk of their time, as sophomores, juniors, or seniors in high school, to developing and putting into their own words a story that captures, enhances, and makes permanent an ephemeral tale from their family's or their town's past. They realize that their work is part of a larger project to save a region that many people see as being in unstoppable decline. They know their work will be archived in both the University of Arkansas library and in their school library. They hope—and their teachers encourage this hope—that future generations of residents of their town and students in their school will consult their projects as evidence of the will to thrive, to honor the past, and to face a promising future of their region.

