

Teaching Oral History to Post-Secondary Students

A. M. J. Hyatt

I began teaching oral history in September of 1979, the year after Paul Thompson's seminal work *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* was published. Since that time my undergraduate students have conducted several hundred formal interviews from which have resulted 135 transcripts. Graduate students working for my colleague, Jan Trimble, and for me, have produced a smaller though still significant number of transcripts. Throughout this time we have continued to argue about Thompson. (More of Thompson later.) Virtually all the undergraduate transcripts are accounts from survivors of the Second World War. For the most part the graduate students have worked on an ongoing local project dealing with institutional history. The concentration on war survivors results only in part from my own training in military history (in my generation of graduate students few were trained in oral history). In fact, the nature of any oral history project for teaching has to be dictated by three rules. Before I list these rules let me be clear that I am placing the emphasis here on the noun *history* and the verb *teach*. Emphasizing the history aspect of teaching is important because it is very easy in oral history to overlook old fundamentals among the many unfamiliar things which are presented to students—things like dealing with live people, and with ethical and legal issues, using technical equipment, and developing techniques of interviewing and editing, all of which are new for most students. In addition it is very important to make sure that some of the historical essentials don't get lost among these exciting encounters. Such essentials include background research on the particular individual to be interviewed and general research for the project. Also important is the process of weighing evidence and making judgements based upon evidence. The three principles I have followed in selecting a topic for students do not ensure all these things, but I think they help. The principles that a project is not possible without are:

- (1) A large number of survivors from which to choose interviewees or tellers;
- (2) A large body of documents and/or literature concerning the event or events in which the informants participated;
- (3) Close accessibility of survivors and documents so that students can reach both easily.

In fact, item 3 means either that one selects projects of a local nature (mainly the direction my graduate students have followed) or it means, if you are a military historian, that you deal with World War II, Korea, or a peacekeeping mission, and not the Falklands War, or Operation Desert Storm. The Falklands War would be an intriguing subject, but it is impossible on most Canadian university budgets.

There is, perhaps, little reason to say much more about factors 1 and 3. The need for large numbers of participants is obvious to anyone who has attempted to arrange interviews. In our projects we average approximately three subject contacts or preliminary preparations for every completed transcript, and I suspect we have been lucky that the number is not much higher. The real question is why one should emphasize condition 2, the existence of a substantial body of written evidence on the subject of the project. We cannot conduct interviews and do all kinds of socially beneficial and pedagogically positive projects without the presence of a body of written documents. And if we want to teach history we must have written records to prepare for our interviews and literature against which we can test our transcripts.

It is worth pointing out that without careful historical preparation we risk destroying important evidence. Oral history, in this sense, is much like archaeology. From both archaeology and oral history, artifacts may be derived that can be used and studied by later students. Also, archaeologists and oral historians destroy some kinds of evidence as they proceed. Post mould, once disturbed, can never be seen by subsequent researchers. Similarly, a first interview cannot be redone. Subsequent interviews may well be influenced by the questions of the first interviewer. Indeed, the process of interviewing may change the subject's pattern of thought and memory as irrevocably as a shovel disturbs post mould. The interview has to be done well the first time, for it is as professionally undesirable to turn an uninformed questioner loose among potentially important subjects as it is to excavate a burial mound with a back hoe. Here, I am referring to teaching and history. I do not preclude historians of any kind from using oral history techniques, but I would hope that all historians who do use them have what has been called "the seasoning of maturity." Without such seasoning, oral history undertaken by inexperienced and untrained practitioners risks destroying important historical evidence.

The subject of our study, however, needs a solid body of historical evidence for more reasons than the preparation for an interview. Whatever else goes on in teaching history, there must be a considerable effort made to have the students create individual interpretations of the past using all available records. And for this purpose I find oral history a wonderful pedagogical tool. In my experience, oral history demonstrates the inadequacy

of a single document as an accurate account of the past. Oral accounts of past events show beautifully that a single event produces many interpretations which may be equally valid. Documentary determinism, the almost universal sin of many academic historians, is much more difficult to pursue after exposure to oral history. When we produce a transcript we create a document, and every student who compares this document with other accounts begins to understand that we should not believe everything we read — at least not everything heard from parents. The brightest among the students have begun to have doubts about some of the things they read. However, what I have discovered through teaching oral history is that graduating students have difficulty in disregarding the testimony of people they come to like. The benign, grandfatherly old man, who actually participated in the D-Day landings, has been so persuasive with his story of hardship and suffering that they cannot ask obvious questions about military punishments, prisons, misdemeanours and entertainments. We have little information on these topics and often an interviewee may well be a genuine expert on some of them. I could provide many examples which suggest that students have to learn that testimony of all kinds has to be tested by comparison with other testimony and by asking logical questions, while applying common sense to the answers. Oral history, in combination with a documentary record, in my judgement, provides an incomparable opportunity for this fundamental discovery.

For my classes, I insist that each student write an introduction and critical analysis for every transcript produced. Three items must be included. First, a summary of the background reading they have done in preparation for the interview. Second, the students must provide a physical description of the setting of the interview, the subject, and the subject's behaviour (body language), as well as a description of anything not easily deciphered from the sounds recorded on tape. Finally, there must be some attempt to critically assess the importance of the information provided by the subject. This is difficult at the best of times and impossible without a body of literature close at hand.

To learn the techniques of the job, to prepare the background, and to carry out a couple of formal interviews as part of a group project in the 26 weeks of a university year is a tall order. It leaves little time for more than the analysis one is able to do in the introduction to an interview. Ideally, one should have at least another 13-week term devoted entirely to analysing and editing the transcripts for publication. I have never been able to solve the problem of working a third term into a two-term year, and I would be grateful for suggestions as to how this might be accomplished.

Before ending let me go back to the beginning and say something about Paul Thompson, whose book, *(The Voice of the Past)* as I have already indicated, is one that students use and argue about all year. This book

annoyed me enormously when I first read it. A quick example is the first sentence: "All history depends ultimately upon its social purpose." (p.1) I still find generalization like this difficult to swallow. But thirteen years of trying to teach oral history have demonstrated to me that Thompson is sometimes right even when he is most annoying. For teaching oral history, his book is the most indispensable tool which exists. The fact that I still can get annoyed with Thompson probably shows that the remark made by Lady Ottoline Morell at a Bloomsbury Garden Party is more perceptive than most historians would admit. Known for her penetrating voice, commanding presence and interesting parties, Lady Ottoline made a habit of seeking out those on the fringe of the Bloomsbury circle. One day she encountered a shy, rather shabby man at the edge of a large group and demanded to know what he did. When the visitor said, "I am an historian," her reply stopped conversation throughout the garden. "What a pity," she said, "I've always believed in letting bygones be bygones."

Work Cited

Thompson, Paul. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988.