

Oral-Based Learning, Literacy, and Life: The International Literacy Year Oral History Project

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In history, the oral record is as old as Herodotus, as established as Michelet, and as innovative as the contemporary concern for the history of the "people".¹ The social sciences have long embraced ethnography, participant observation, and the use of oral interaction to record and investigate societies.² Popular writers such as Anderson, Broadfoot, and Finnigan have entertained us with the seductive allure of well told stories that personalize and enliven the experience of others.³

Nevertheless, the academic reaction to these exercises has often been mixed and the salient criticism has been concerned with the nature of evidence. Oral history is suspect in terms of authenticity, veracity, and the credibility of its sources; it is unreliable and soft evidence. The rebuttal has been that oral testimony must always be scrutinized to determine the expertise, authority, reliability, and competence of the source. In other words, no more or less is expected of the oral source than is expected of the written record.

Furthermore, the champions of oral history have argued that it is the very subjectivity of the evidence that constitutes its particular strength. Apart from contributing to the collection of objective facts, it also allows insights into impressionistic details of emotions, attitudes, and perceptions; those crucially important aspects of the lived experience that are so often inaccessible through other sources. Thus stated, the greatest power of oral history has been its potential for being a sensitive and insightful method, source, and catalyst.

Increasingly, therefore, the uses of oral history have become quite diverse: discovering the past by recovering evidence; humanizing the past by relating abstract concepts to the human experience of them; interpreting the past by exploring nuances of meaning of partial evidence; reifying the past by transforming abstract concepts into the human experience of them;

democratizing the past by empowering people as the creators of their own histories; and preserving the past by recording the transient and ephemeral human record. Simply put, oral history has achieved credibility as a scholarly method for historical research.⁴

Other Applications

Ironically, however, while oral history is becoming respectable, it is itself looking askance at others who wish to apply some of its assumptions to purposes other than history. The fact that oral history is accessible and allows for a demystification of learning makes it attractive to various enterprises where the concern is as much with the therapeutic effects of the process itself as it is with the end result.

Activities in the area of oral-based learning have long been appreciated by even the most established authorities in main-stream oral history. Thus, noting that "oral evidence" is usually the domain of the "traditional independent scholar," Paul Thompson has expounded on the benefits to be derived from a method that "demands human and social skills":

This means that oral history projects of any kind start with unusual advantages. They demand a range of skills which will not be monopolized by those who are older, expert, or best at writing, so they allow co-operation on a much more equal basis. They can bring not only intellectual stimulation, but sometimes, through entering into the lives of others, a deep and moving human experience. (Thompson 138)

For Thompson, the principal contributions of oral history are the development of language skills, a sense of evidence, social awareness, and mechanical aptitudes. Commenting on the development of skills in writing and speaking, Thompson argues,

through interviewing, or through being

themselves interviewed [children] can gain confidence in expressing themselves in words. This can be transferred from the spoken to the written word, for example, by getting them to write down what they can hear from a tape; or, conversely, by using a duplicated version of a transcript as a starting point for discussions.... At a later stage in the project, they can go on to reading in library work, and to a presentation of the project, including transcript material, in written form. (Thompson 140)

Thompson was also aware of other equally important contributions such as the acquisition of "fundamental social skills":

Through interviewing itself, [children] may develop some of the tact and patience, the ability to communicate, to listen to others and to make them feel at ease.... They can thus be helped to understand and feel empathy with others, and to face conflicting values and attitudes to life. (Thompson 140)

Eliot Wigginton's *Foxfire* series is a fine example of the theory of oral-based learning put into practice. Indeed, in recent years, the methodology, and human resources of oral history have been appropriated for a broad variety of learning and personal development projects. Community projects, therapeutic techniques for institutionalized populations, class-awareness projects, and feminist studies have all placed emphasis upon the relevance of personal experience and the power of the anecdotal method in mobilizing individual and group awareness and developing skills.⁵ In a growing number of professional and informal settings, the process of life-review not only serves as personal therapy but also as a contribution to general theory.

Ontario's "Oral History Project"

An initiative that has achieved a degree of prominence in recent months has been the use of oral history as an approach to enhancing literacy skills.⁶ In 1987, the Literacy Branch of the then Ministry of Skills Development (MSD) initiated an Oral History and Literacy special interest group. The objective was both to promote local histories as relevant reading materials for new learners and also to develop learner participation in the research and production of such materials. Initially, the focus was upon personal "life histories" as devices for self-discovery, developing self-worth, and also producing topics of interest to the learners.

Following the suggestion of Glenna Carr, Deputy Minister at MSD, the Literacy Branch developed a project to include literacy learners in a more comprehensive oral history project as part of the province's contribution to International Literacy Year, 1990 (ILY). This was approved by the Minister in the summer of 1989. The cooperation and participation of the Archives of Ontario was also obtained, their contribution being directed to the training of participants in oral history methodology and the eventual collection and storage of some of the tapes and research materials.

Before embarking upon the ILY venture, the Ministry of Skills Development nailed its methodological and philosophical colours to the mast. First, a working definition of oral history was provided:

Oral [history] is a form of history which documents the experiences of people and communities through the medium of story telling. The power of oral history lies in its unique capacity to express the full depth of personal or communal experience as it is felt and recounted by individuals who have lived it. Oral history is history as it is lived and told by common people. (Ontario. Ministry of Skills Development, "Criteria.")

While highlighting some of the salient strengths of the method, this is not an omnibus definition that would meet with the approval of all practitioners of oral history. Indeed, issue could be taken with several of the implied emphases. Not all oral history is "storytelling", many analytical interviews being concerned with plumbing human recollections for facts, dates, terminology, and other undocumented evidence. Similarly, therefore, the emphasis upon experiential recollection alone might be too restrictive. And finally, even the most avid critic of former elitist histories would not subscribe to a definition of oral history that implies a restriction to "common people."

Nevertheless, the definition served to define the intent and context of the initiative. Clearly, the focus was on particular dimensions and capabilities of oral history that lent themselves to the objectives of ILY. This became clear in the associated mission-statement provided by the Ministry:

International Literacy Year is an opportunity not only to highlight the issue of literacy, but also to connect literacy and learning to the vital concerns, traditions, and experiences of communities and cultures right across Ontario. Oral history can link literacy and language learning to those experiences which are essential

to the learner's sense of self and community. These experiences can focus on a wide number of themes and issues. (Ontario. Ministry of Skills Development, "Criteria.")

The specific purposes of the projects were seen to be as follows:

1. to celebrate ILY with cultural activities involving literacy learners and reflecting the diverse cultures of Ontario communities;
2. to promote the use of oral history methodology in community literacy;
3. to involve adult learners in developing and writing learning materials reflecting the experience of their communities;
4. to document and collect new oral history material for the Archives of Ontario;
5. to publish learning materials for adult literacy and other programs;
6. to raise the profile of local literacy programs within their communities. (Ontario. Ministry of Skills Development, "Criteria.")

The intention, therefore, was to enhance literacy programs by using storytelling to mount new exciting initiatives in reading, writing, comprehension, and participation for their learners. Also, the projects would enrich communities by providing insights into the history and human experience of their societies. What was being advocated was a new way of doing literacy work; it was also a new way of approaching community studies.

While particular topics were not targeted, certain themes were considered to be conducive to motivating learners in various segments of Ontario society. Thus, the songs, stories, and life-experience of Ontario's Francophone communities were considered to be a priority and the twenty-three French community literacy programs of the "Regroupement" organization developed their own storytelling project. Similarly, the stories, oral traditions, traditional medicine and healing practices, and life-experiences of the province's native population were also considered to be vehicles for literacy initiatives and some 30 per cent of the ensuing projects were concerned with topics such as these. Finally, other ideas advanced as possible themes included women's issues, labour history, ethnic experiences, and community histories.

Ultimately, twenty-three community literacy organizations developed twenty-five projects in a

year-long and province-wide program of community based oral-history of which the following are examples: Caribbean immigration experience in Toronto; growing up in Orillia; community life in Cornwall; pioneer women in Madawaska and Bonnechere; growing up in rural Ontario; institutional life at the Rideau Regional Centre; life on Waupoose Island, Prince Edward County; Kingston women in war-time industry; native ways of life, Manomin Keezis, Sharbot Lake; women's lives in northern communities; native elders' stories and personal histories, Kenora; ethnicity and women's experiences, North Bay; Christmases in Red Lake; native family life, Sault Ste. Marie; band family histories, Thunder Bay; the clan system of West Bay Indian families; multiculturalism in Dryden.

While these various projects reflected local interests, resources, and priorities, all were party to a degree of central co-ordination, especially in terms of training. Literacy practitioners were well versed in the complexities of their own learning environment, and several also had considerable experience with innovative interactive methodologies, but most needed a degree of basic instruction in the assumptions, procedures, and methodology of interviewing, reporting, and subsequent use of the materials. Accordingly, the Literacy Branch of MSD coordinated a series of events to better prepare practitioners for the ILY activities.

Firstly, all programmes were provided with basic training in oral history procedures. Oral history practitioners participated in an initial orientation and training event in Toronto to better prepare project coordinators to undertake their projects. Preliminary instruction was provided in the need for background research, interviewing procedures, preparation of tape summaries, transcription, and use of equipment. Particular stress was placed upon the legal and ethical dimensions of interviewing and research involving human subjects. Subsequently, site-visits were made by the resource people to provide further instruction for learners and project coordinators.

Secondly, project coordinators and their learners involved in the oral history projects were brought together in a learners' conference which was held in June, 1990. The purpose was to again address matters of procedure, to bring participants together to share their ideas and experiences, and to expose the projects to novel ways of developing instructional materials, communicating ideas, and increasing public awareness of literacy activities in the context of ILY. In particular, participants explored the use of different modes of communicating the results of their oral history work in terms of popular arts and various media. Workshops were run on theatre, songwriting, quilting, puppetry, mask making, storytelling, mural art, video production,

and desk-top publishing.

The climactic event for the Oral History Project occurred during the week of 29 October–3 November, 1990, with a display demonstrating the results of the ILY project at the community gallery at Harbourfront, Toronto. The exhibition displayed several of the oral history projects as well as instructional and other materials produced by the project. On 3 November, a program of readings of excerpts from the various projects was staged by prominent Canadian artists and literacy learners.

Subsequent activities will be directed to developing instructional materials and activities to further enhance literacy programmes. Thus, *Storylines: An Oral History Anthology* (McVaugh 1990) is a collection of stories selected from the project and is intended to be used as a resource in literacy programs. Also, a training videotape and accompanying guide is being produced for the use of literacy practitioners in training others in interviewing and recording life-experiences. Finally, several of the programmes are continuing to develop instructional materials appropriate for the needs of literacy programmes out of the material generated by the ILY projects.

Finally, the ILY initiative was not an ephemeral activity. The benefits derived from the ILY experience were such that an ongoing network of practitioners of oral based learning methods was funded by the Ministry's Literacy Branch and the Literacy Secretariat.



Sally Finn (now Saunders), C.I.L. nylon plant, Kingston

Originally called the Oral History Network of Ontario (OHNO), professional, philosophical, and political reasons have resulted in its being renamed as "Storylinks."



Catherine Varette, Aluminum Plant worker, Kingston

Case-Study: Kingston's Women at War

Perhaps the several experiential dimensions of these projects may be approached by considering one, "We Can Do It! Women of Kingston at War."

The experience of local Kingston women in war-time industry was thought to be an interesting question in local history, as well as being one accessible intellectually and physically to the local learners. Some fifteen women who worked in local shipyards, engineering works, textile plants, and aluminum plants, were interviewed and the exercise in oral history was related to the local literacy programme in several ways:

First, learners were introduced to newspaper research that required careful reading and note-taking. They were also involved in much of the interviewing and some of the subsequent transcription and collation of the report. Secondly, a short story, *The Shipbuilder*, was produced as a desk-top publication suitable for learners (G. Osborne 1990). This was conceived of as an exercise in "faction" by combining imaginative narrative and plot with actual experience and dialogue derived from several of the interview transcripts. Thirdly, a photograph and poster display was prepared for the

Harbourfront event and one of the project's learners participated in the Harbourfront programme of readings. Fourthly, a play, *We Can Do It! Voices on Stage*, dramatized the transcripts and was staged in Kingston as part of the ILY presentation (Chamberlain 1990). It was introduced by one of the learners, acted by women in a local back-to-work program, and followed by an audience-participation event involving the women who had been interviewed and featured in the play. Finally, an article entitled "We Can Do It!: Women of Kingston at War" attempted to contextualize the experience of the local women war-workers in that of the nationwide experience and to publicize the local program's part in ILY (Osborne and Osborne 1990).

Conclusion

It would appear that the use of basic interview procedures normally associated with oral history has considerable utility in several areas. And while there are several pedagogic, scholarly, and ideological implications to this approach, it is clear that oral-based-learning projects, or human experience projects, can make an important contribution to the literacy field in particular.

First, the adoption of topics of immediate interest and relevance and the use of skills and procedures that were familiar and accessible often overcomes a

reluctance to learn by demystifying process and context. Secondly, the approach allows the creation of a learning environment that nurtures self-esteem and confidence. Thus, those involved with native groups argued that oral history allowed the recording and inter-generational transmission of traditional values, the development of an awareness of cultural identity, and self-determination. This was echoed by others who claimed that the assumptions and methodology of oral history allowed them to interest learners in themselves and their community. Thirdly, the standard requirements of oral history projects require the development and application of skills that reinforce the objectives of literacy programmes. Fourthly, by establishing a learning environment that places emphasis on learning how to learn and self-discovery, learners have the opportunity to create new knowledge and discover a zest for personal understanding of themselves, others, and their worlds. Fifthly, the approach produces anecdotal materials conducive to popular education, cultural literacy, and more relevant and informal learning situations. In this way, materials are produced that lend themselves to a variety of instructional uses with reluctant readers, with particular emphasis upon low-vocabulary and high-interest texts.

And finally, there is an additional bonus. After all of this, there is always the opportunity to produce refreshingly new approaches to good oral history.

Notes

1. This point has been well stated by Thompson: *The Voice of Past Oral History* (1978), and demonstrated by MacDonald: *Bibliography of Oral History Sources* (1991).
2. For recent discussion of the "new ethnography" see Clifford and Marcus: *Writing Culture* (1986), Marcus and Fischer: *Anthropology and Cultural Critique* (1986), and Clifford: *The Predicament of Culture* (1988). For recent developments in my own discipline, geography, see Eyles and Smith: *Qualitative Methods in Human Geography* (1988), and Gregory and Walford: *Horizons in Human Geography* (1989).
3. See, for example, Anderson: *Remembering the Farm* (1977), *Salt Water, Fresh Water* (1979), *Roughnecks and Wildcatters* (1981); Broadfoot: *Ten Lost Years, 1929-1939* (1973), *Six War Years, 1939-1945* (1974), *The Pioneer Years, 1895-1914* (1976), *Years of Sorrow, Years of Shame* (1977), *Next Year Country* (1988); and Finnigan: *Legacies, Legends & Lies* (1987).
4. My own work has appeared to have proceeded through several stages in these developments of the oral interactive method from "salvage" and "conservation" through to interpretation and primary research. See Osborne: *An Oral History of Pukaskwa National Park* (1980), *The Human Presence on Main Duck Island* (1981), *Sault Ste Marie and the Canadian Lock* (1984), and *Assessment of Public Opinion Regarding CPC's Rural Conversion Program* (1990-91).
5. Wigginton has commented on his initiatives in education via the *Foxfire* books in *Moments: The Foxfire Experience* (1975), and *Sometimes a Shining Moment: The Foxfire Experience* (1985). For other applications of "oral-based learning" see Vick: *The Cama-i Book* (1983), and Wood: *The Salt Book* (1977). A recent approach that transcends genealogy alone and embarks on personal therapy is Rosenbluth: *Keeping Stories Alive* (1990).

6. The following summary is derived from an MSD background document: "International Literacy Year Oral History Project" (1990).

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