

Review

Alexander Freund, University of Winnipeg

Angela Zusman. *Story Bridges: A Guide to Conducting Intergenerational Oral History Projects*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2010. 165 pp. ISBN: 978-159874425-5.

Story Bridges is a concise and useful guide for everyone who plans an oral history project, be it a family history, a community project, or as an assignment in a school curriculum. Much of the advice offered in this manual comes from experience with projects conducted in five different institutional settings in the United States: a semester-long oral history and film program at a private high school; an ongoing youth project at a community centre that seeks to document local history and bring together different generations; the creation of an archives of oral histories at a local library that uses cross-interviewing (see below); young people collecting life stories at a senior residence; and a full-year after-school program that has twelve- to seventeen-year-olds interview their parents.

The chapters guide the reader through the roughly chronological development of a project from its development of project goals and the building of a team that includes young people to an extensive discussion of the interview process and the importance of archiving the collected oral histories. Zusman concludes with a discussion of the importance of reflecting on the project and suggests different forms of presenting the results of a project.

The chapters are interspersed with useful additional information. Text boxes discuss questions such as whether to record and, if so, in what format, video or audio (WAV or mp3); how to develop project goals; how to work with a small budget. There are also a good number of insightful quotes from project managers and youth participants about their experiences. "Lessons Learned" boxes list experiences in point form: "Wish we had ... bought better recorders," etc. and "So glad we... carefully selected the interviewees" etc. All of the quotes provide valuable insights and make this guide stand out from other manuals.

Chapter 3 provides useful information on how to plan a project. However, the description of how to design project goals would benefit from greater detail. The discussion of the budget similarly could be more elaborate and include some suggestions for writing grant proposals (an issue that is not at all discussed). The discussion of equipment is useful. The chapter is particularly strong in describing how to assemble a team of volunteers.

Chapter 4, "Bring On the Youth," is the greatest strength of this book. It describes in detail how to recruit and work with youth in oral history projects. There is much good advice on recruiting youth and involving them in the

recruitment process, on setting expectations for volunteers, on training them and familiarizing them with potentially difficult interview experiences. Zusman observes that project leaders should keep in mind that young people will become more interested in conducting preliminary research if it involves field trips. The author provides also concise, practical advice on asking questions.

Chapter 5 describes the interviewing process in greater detail. Its premise is straight-forward: “What constitutes a successful intergenerational interview? One that is a positive learning experience for the interviewer. One that allows the interviewee to feel comfortable enough to speak their truth. One that is successfully recorded! One that addresses the topics central to your project goals” (72). Zusman notes that different projects use different interview techniques. In one project, young people simply listened and recorded but did not ask questions (72); in another, a young person interviewed a senior one week and returned the next week to be interviewed by him (cross-interviewing, 73). This chapter also includes several “to do” and checklists that are handy for almost all oral history projects. Zusman also in this chapter addresses a number of “conundrums”: “How do you address your narrator? How do you deal with the ‘stale story’ that the subject has told a thousand times before?” (93). Chapter 6 emphasizes the importance of archiving oral histories and describes the necessary steps in detail.

Chapter 7, “Assimilation,” makes a very important point, missing from other guides: at the end of a project, participants should look back at and think about the development of the project and reflect on its meaning. Such reflection can be expressed in an essay or art project (118). The chapter finishes with a description of various forms of presenting the research results, for example exhibitions and oral history events.

The appendices provide sample mission statements, budgets, consent forms, schedules, worksheets and other handy material. Only the bibliography would have benefited from a more careful selection and annotations.

The book has some weaknesses. The author, especially in the first two chapters, glorifies storytelling as a panacea that will heal an apparently broken American society (49-50). Some readers may find Zusman’s words about the creative power of stories inspiring; yet, a guide to oral history must also acknowledge that stories do not only have the power to heal, but also to wound. There is also much unwarranted bashing of “traditional” history. Reading history books, the author insinuates, is only done “for the sake of passing a test. [Oral] stories inspire curiosity instead of sating the mind with facts that become irrelevant once the book is put down or the test completed” (21). A discussion of truth in oral history is unfortunately rather distorted (18). Similarly, storytelling is used as a synonym for oral history, and oral history is at times described in fast and loose terms: “Some oral history interviews are very simple: you think of a question, which you ask of any passersby” (32). Well, no, oral history is a specific

form of communication and a specific kind of storytelling. Indeed, as the rest of the book demonstrates, the author agrees with the traditional understanding of oral history as the recording and preservation of a life story.

More problematic than the over-the-top excitement about storytelling is the book's lack of an overarching and in-depth discussion of the ethical challenges involved in working with minors as interviewers. Advice is only cursory: parents or legal guardians must co-sign legal forms; special auto insurance may be needed to transport youth; and thought should be given to preparing youth for potentially traumatized interviewees. Not all of the sparse advice is good advice; for example, the suggestion that young people should offer to mow the lawn of seniors in order to convince them to be interviewed (48). Under the heading "What to look for in a [youth] volunteer," Zusman writes: "Unshockable. Depending on the interview topic and personality of the interviewee, volunteers may hear stories or witness emotions that can be surprising and powerful. While it's important to be sensitive, you want a team of volunteers who can stay in the moment and get the job done" (58). Such advice ignores the fact that this is not really practicable; how would one find out that a volunteer is "unshockable"? (Are there "unshockable" people?) More importantly, this advice shirks a discussion about the ethical responsibilities of project leaders vis-à-vis minors involved in conducting research with victims *and* perpetrators of violence. Such advice would be particularly important in non-academic settings. While universities have specific guidelines for research with humans, schools and community groups seldom have access to such guidelines.

Despite these weaknesses, this is a handy book that will serve every school and community oral history project well. At the university level, the book may be a useful resource in Education faculties, but those teaching oral history courses in higher education will stick with Valerie Yow's *Recording Oral History* and Donald Ritchie's *Doing Oral History*.