

ORAL HISTORY: A TOOL FOR TEACHER TRAINING

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This essay might be titled "How to Start an Oral History Project on a Shoestring," and, thereby, be found appropriate for that increasingly large category of college people who nowadays are being encouraged to initiate any of those wonderfully innovative and creative projects that academic people supposedly can generate within inflation-ridden budgets. But before describing a project which has had minimum funding--two cassette recorders, four dozen tapes and postage money--and yet has generated useful and attractive materials, let me set the background. The setting is Winthrop College, the South Carolina College for Women. After a twenty year battle, the South Carolina legislature removed the last legal restrictions for the enrollment of men. Traditionally, this woman's college had a dual nature. It had been a combination of the small liberal arts college and a teacher training institution.

From 1886 to 1974 Winthrop sent out more than 30,000 alumnae. The Alumni Office has names and addresses of more than 27,000. Until the 1960's Winthrop graduated a majority of the women college graduates in South Carolina, and probably had produced a majority of the state's public school teachers. The influence of Winthrop on the public schools of South Carolina has been tremendous, but few attempts have been made to analyze the relationship and none to evaluate it. Perhaps Winthrop's plight of non-recognition is just one more example, in a larger context, of the lack of recognition for the achievements of women.

The undergraduates are still primarily women and are found to be terribly unaware of their college's former role and reputation. The College Archives has proved to be a treasure-trove and is well-administered, but its records could not possibly answer all the questions that are being raised by people interested in women's history. As we all know, the questions about women are not to be answered by reading the official records. The student publications such as the college newspaper, the yearbook, and the anthology provide some clues as to the nature of the undergraduate woman's college experience. Other sources are the Student Government and Judicial Board records, but these records in themselves often raise as many questions as they answer.

As a member of the faculty in the School of Education who teaches a course entitled "Methods of Teaching Social Studies in the Secondary Schools," I have long known that students teachers are too insecure to initiate new patterns of instruction. I can vouch for the old truism that student teachers teach as they were taught, and I find that the only way to counteract a previous poor example of teaching is to provide the student with new experiences directly tied into the teaching process. For example, it would not be enough to tell the undergraduate history majors about oral history and its uses in the classroom. It is not enough to have them read Foxfire, that delightful publication of Elliott Wigginton and his high school students in north Georgia, or to read Studs Terkel, or other splendid results of oral history techniques. Only if the undergraduate is taught how to interview and then practices the art with more success than not, is that undergraduate eventually likely to teach others the techniques. The

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questioning skill, with the knowledge that "why" and "how" type questions are most productive, would be another area in which the future teacher would become more practiced.

It is that background, then--the woman's college, scarcity of records, lack of recognition for the college, undergraduate need for experience to aid in teaching and in consciousness-raising in the area of women's studies, plus a felt need in the transition period between all-women and coeducation to let the old graduates know that their years and their contributions to the college are still appreciated--that made it possible to secure the necessary campus permission to initiate the Winthrop Oral History Project. The Project is still in its beginning stages but will be expanded soon with splendid prospects for the future.

Decisions had to be made. Which of our undergraduates would interview? Which graduates would be interviewed? What questions would be asked? What restrictions would we have? What amount of money was minimum to launch the project? The only question immediately answered was where the tapes would be stored. The College Archives became the repository for the tapes and transcriptions.

At first, the undergraduates who would do the interviewing were limited to history majors who elected an introductory field course entitled "Laboratory Experiences in the Public Schools." This course identified sophomore and junior history majors who would probably teach on the high school level. We have now found this to be too small a base from which to draw interviewers and contemplate using undergraduates enrolled in any course with a women's studies base. In our case, these courses are offered in the areas of sociology and English as well as by the history department.

Whom to interview? Which portion of those more than 27,000 names on the Alumni Office's official mailing list? For the benefit of the Archives and with a recognized need to reach the oldest alumnae first, we decided to concentrate initially on the pre-1920 graduates (there are nearly 1600 names and addresses available), but we would not exclude opportunities to interview younger-than-1920 graduates who might provide valuable information.

We considered having the students make the effort to locate the graduates in students' home towns or home counties, but rejected that idea because we were afraid that the task might prove either too difficult or frightening to the undergraduates. The solution of matching graduates and undergraduates proved to be much easier than first thought. We matched zip codes! The Alumni Office allowed us to have access to the computerized master mailing list. We submitted the undergraduates' home zip code numbers and the computer scanned the master list and gave us a list of graduates' names, addresses, degrees, and the years of graduation at a cost of one cent per name. That list was handchecked. If the list needed to be narrowed further, the microfilmed records in the Alumni House contained biographical sketches of the more prominent alumnae. Given this list the undergraduates made their own contacts and were quite willing to accept incomplete grades on the course they were enrolled in so that they could accomplish the interviews during the summer and other vacation periods. A word of caution must be given about relying completely on the zip code match: we found that some undergraduates lived in newly developed suburban areas and that the old graduates were most likely to live in old long-settled communities. For those cases, it would prove more useful to use the zip code numbers for the nearest long-settled community.

Before the undergraduates performed the first interview they were given instruction in questioning techniques, use of the tape recorder, and how to use the legal release form. They also received a brief printed outline of the college history and a list of those changes that the student needed to

know about in order to understand the graduate. For example, between 1920 and 1974, four prominent buildings on campus had changed names, or rather, in three cases the names had remained but had been shifted from one building to another. Traditions and customs of an earlier time had to be explained to the undergraduate. About two hours of instruction proved to be adequate, with one hour of the instruction preceding a trial use of the tape recorder and one hour coming after experimentation.

The undergraduate was instructed to cover the area of student life. We chose "student life" because it is universal and the Archives had the fewest records on it from the viewpoint of the student. Students have always lived in dorms, griped about the food in the college dining hall, gone to classes, had favorite professors, and had occasional scrapes with rules and regulations. The usual admonition to interviewers, "Know your subject!," proved to be no real problem to the undergraduates precisely because the old graduates delighted in pointing out how different it was in the old days when they arrived by train, had to wear uniforms that were easily identifiable, and were not allowed to lounge in public, among other things. Since the interviewers were future teachers we wanted them to formulate and phrase their own questions. The oral history "purist" (if such exists) may not approve of the leeway we gave to the undergraduates, but the tapes we got back seem to support the idea that spontaneity has as many virtues as drawbacks.

All but one of the interviews took place in the home of the interviewee. Only one refused to be taped and she graciously submitted handwritten answers to the questions. All tapes were released by signing simple legal documents giving the college Archives the right to use them for scholarly purposes.

We found that most students have access to a cassette tape recorder. We purchased two recorders and four dozen cassette tapes that were two hours in length. This amounted to an initial investment of \$334. Either the students or the director of the project listened to each of the completed tapes and abstracted them, using the counter on the cassette as an index guide. The tapes and abstracts were then turned over to the Archives office for cataloging and storage. We recognize that it is most desirable to transcribe the tapes but thought it better to acquire the memories of graduates above the age of 70 years than to wait until we had funds for transcription. Some of the tapes are worth keeping in order to preserve speech patterns and dialects. We may place some on interlibrary loan.

After personally listening to several dozen of these tapes I concluded that the recorded interviews have the charm of fiction, or of gossip, and that the memories so indelible that they survive more than fifty years are emotion-laden. The elderly women reveal strong feelings, especially when injustices are recalled. It is rare to find an interviewee who is analytical in regard to student life--perhaps it is not to be expected after fifty years. The tapes are rather refreshing in that their content is frank, there is no embarrassment or apology. Several of the old graduates admit cheating in some form and others admit to slipping out at night to meet boyfriends when it was a "shipping" offense to do so. The undergraduates, in a few cases, were left nearly speechless at finding eighty year old graduates so surprisingly contemporary.

We plan for each undergraduate to experience participation in the making of at least six tapes (six interviews). At first I considered listening to the first and last tapes made by each student to see if I could detect improvement in questioning techniques. I have concluded that this procedure would probably be unfair to the student. The interviewee obviously controls the final quality of the tape.

Follow-up interviews with the undergraduate interviewers reveal that the chief benefits to the student are, as expected, an enthusiasm for oral history as a technique and eagerness to use it with their future high school students. The undergraduate does feel that she is meaningfully involved in creating historical material. One student compared the experience favorably with an archaeological dig she had participated in. We hope that the tapes will be available as data banks for history students practicing their craft, to sociology students studying the aged, to students studying linguistics, and that the historian who will eventually write the college history will value them. It is too soon to evaluate the worth of the tapes but it would appear that the undergraduates carrying out the assignment have brought back raw material that is probably best characterized as non-autobiographical and which should appeal to either a social historian or to an institutional historian.

Some high school teachers are having their students interview--either taped or stenographic--and enthusiastically endorse the results. There has been little, if any, proper research done on the method's teaching effectiveness. There is only "testimony." The teachers' enthusiasm undoubtedly stems from that of their students. With so much apathy and hostility toward history in the curriculum, the high school teacher who sees oral history as only a "motivator" cannot be faulted. However, I contend that the high school teachers may be on firmer ground than they articulate when they plan teaching strategies using oral history. Many of us feel that the social bonds of family, kinship, neighborhood, and community, are vitally important to the development of self-identity. "Localism," along with "provincialism," may have too long been down-graded. Love and concern for one's own environment, or habitat, may be essential for developing love and concern for peoples around the world. The roots of internationalism may be in the sense of community.

It seems to me that oral history provides many opportunities for teaching skills: oral communication skills, writing skills, data collecting skills, data interpretation skills, inductive thinking skills, and social, or group, process skills, to mention only the most obvious. How might teachers use oral history in the classroom? Teachers could have students compare the experiences of local veterans of World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. Only the most senior of high school students today can recall the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Students could interview on the topic and break their responses into categories such as attitudes of men/women, under 30/over 30, Blacks/whites. In this manner students should develop the skill of comparing and contrasting followed by reflection. The students might conduct small tests of historians' hypotheses. "Did the people of our town really see Dwight Eisenhower as a father-figure?" "Do people over 60 still blame Herbert Hoover for the Depression?" The questions should be so designed that they could be answered by any reasonably well-informed person. Every student should be able to locate family or neighbors who remember the Great Depression. "Did you have a job?" "What was it?" "Why did the factories close?" To prevent too much frustration keep most questions specific, but for instructional purposes provide some open-ended questions. Some "whys" and "how did theys" should produce a good classroom discussion base.

Hypothesize, gather data, generalize, compare with other generalizations, revise, refine, or confirm. Make new hypotheses. Make time lines. In our period of "accelerated history," the memories of fifty, sixty, seventy years may be adequate to display the twin themes of history--change and continuity. Whole classes can accomplish what one student could never do. Whole classes can interview, research newspaper morgues, comb library materials with thoroughness. Their compilations can be filed in the local library, waiting for a future historian, under such titles as "Wedding Customs in Our Town Before World War II," "Memories of the CCC Camp," "War Maneuver Games, 1941-42," or "Examples of Child Labor in the Textile Mills." Even if the students submit

only note cards or transcription summaries--raw history--and this is collected and filed, the trained historian would receive aid from the student that might prove invaluable. The student, and the student's teacher, could feel pride in his or her other contribution. And, that, I think, is the way you keep history in the curriculum!