

Oral history project overview

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What is an oral history project?

“Oral history is the systematic collection of living people's testimony about their own experiences. Oral history is not folklore, gossip, hearsay, or rumor. Oral historians attempt to verify their findings, analyze them, and place them in an accurate historical context. Oral historians are also concerned with storage of their findings for use by later scholars.

In oral history projects, an interviewee recalls an event for an interviewer who records the recollections and creates a historical record.”¹

An oral history is not just someone recording his or her own thoughts and reflections into a recorder. It requires these steps:

1. Formulate a central question or issue.
2. Plan the project. Consider such things as end products, budget, publicity, evaluation, personnel, equipment, and time frames.
3. Conduct background research.
4. Interview.
5. Process interviews.
6. Organize and present results.
7. Store materials archivally.

Oral history projects use a set of established protocols, which are outlined by the Oral History Association. More information is available at <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/>²

“Oral history is distinguished from other forms of interviews by its content and extent. Oral history interviews seek an in-depth account of personal experience and reflections, with sufficient time allowed for the narrators to give their story the fullness they desire. The content of oral history interviews is grounded in reflections on the past as opposed to commentary on purely contemporary events.”³

There is also the StoryCorps model, which is essentially an oral history conversation that leaves the questions and topic of conversation open to the two participants. A relationship between the two people is at the core of the conversation. <http://storycorps.org/>

¹ DoHistory.org

² Oral History Association

³ ibid

Responsibilities of the Interviewer

The interviewer should be grounded in and operate using these principles:

- Basic oral history training
- Good preparation, especially having at least a basic understanding of the interviewee's story (ie, what is significant or important about this particular person's perspective)
- The ethics of respectful interviewing, to honor the interviewee's story
- Following of an established plan for archiving the interview and ensuring it is part of the public record, according to the terms the interviewee agrees upon in the legal release form

Proposed Central Question

The project team should determine the central research question of the project. It could be a specific question, such as the desegregation of schools or the impact of Hurricane Katrina. Or, it could take a broader, more general approach, such as the history of race relations in a neighborhood, which would allow inclusion of a number of topics, including the history of racial violence, desegregation of schools, shifting attitudes and boundaries over the years, and current perspectives.

Overview

An oral history project can bring these benefits:

- Trained interviewer participants will gain new skills in documentary field work
- Participants will have opportunities to listen and share stories with each other, further deepening relationships
- People whose stories might otherwise not have a platform will be able to share their experience and perspective for the historical-cultural record
- An intergenerational approach can serve to increase relationships and understanding between younger and older people.
- At times, the oral history interview provides the participant with a kind of cathartic healing process that has repercussions in other areas of their life
- The project provides opportunities for public programming by the host archive and other possible partnerships
- The project could provide opportunities for participants to engage in scholarship and present at conferences such as the Oral History Association annual meeting, which is a forum for academics, oral history professionals, and laypeople beginning the practice

Interviews can be recorded using digital audio and video equipment, with digital files rather than tape. This can range from professional video cameras to cellphone audio recorders.

Proposed steps

1. Secure an archival host partner

- Is there a local institution that can serve as the archive of the interviews?
- A consideration: can the archival host provide web access to interviews to make them accessible by scholars, teachers, students, and the public?
- Release forms for interviewers and interviewees are necessary

2. Host oral history training workshop/s

- A credentialed professional can provide training, or it can be done by a layperson experienced in oral history
- Initial workshops could be about 3 hours.

3. Invite participants to be interviewed

- Participants brainstorm good candidates to invite for the first phase of interviews
- Utilize local people who can be an effective liaison to the person you'd like to interview
- Ask interview participants and the wider public to recommend others who would be good candidates for interviews

5. Programming around oral history project

- This can be led by local entities or institutions
- Website for digital files to be accessible to teachers, students, researchers, the general public is ideal
- DVD transfers for use at the host archive

NOTE: It is recommended that there be a project coordinator responsible for logistical and legal issues such as the archiving host plan, the legal release forms (including archiving them in case any issue arises), securing/storing/maintaining any equipment (such as recording devices), publicity, etc.