

Teaching Ethnic Studies using Oral History

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Despite the constant use of the written word, oral history is still essential today because the twentieth century has become one of cold remote images and statistics which tend to downgrade individuals into anonymous victims of bureaucratic indifference. According to Richard M. Dorson, "Oral history has been shown to be an invaluable means by which to recover the past of the inarticulate — women, the working class, ethnic and racial minorities, and people in non-literate societies"(13). Alice Hoffman explains that "these groups rarely leave written records of their lives; the meager documentary evidence about them is usually biased against them ... and they have largely been ignored by historians who view history in terms of 'big men' and 'important events' "(3).

The most important people in the chain of oral tradition who have often been ignored and/or misunderstood are senior citizens. Their irreplaceable memories have given their descendants a true picture not only of family occurrences, but of their importance in the wider context of world events.

In the book *Reflections on Community Studies*, edited by Arthur J. Vidich, Joseph Bensman and Maurice R. Stein, it is clear from the collection of articles that oral history, when used in ethnographical field techniques, establishes an important connection between the community studied and the academic community and beyond that provides for strategies of social change.

Oral collection puts the emotion, even the passion, back into historical study, as demonstrated in recent oral histories.

An important aspect of the history of Canada is the displacement of indigenous peoples by immigrants — for the immigrants a story of conflict, survival and search for identity by immigrants, especially by the younger generations, who are torn between the two worlds of old and new. A sense of ethnicity forms the background and history of the majority of our citizens.

Two of the most obvious areas prohibiting successful integration are language and the persistence of the old cultural values, which lead to a reluctance to integrate. This ultimately creates a dual-world existence for immigrant children which, in adolescence, becomes a basis for conflict with parents, with peers, and with authority, as they search for their identity.

The immigrant's exposure to a new language and culture is often an overwhelming one of isolation, timidity, rejection and exclusion. These factors are sufficient to make the lot of the immigrant a doubly difficult experience. It is hard enough to scramble to earn money for food and shelter.

It is even more difficult to deal with psychological and emotional situations which have been created by the resettlement process.

Because most immigrant children must go through the educational system in Canada, it stands to reason that the schools themselves can have great influence on the young newcomers, as well as guiding them through the most painful periods of their lives. Immigrant parents often do not know how to advise their children on situations they will encounter outside the family circle. In many cases, parents unwittingly may inhibit a child's integration and progress in their determination to keep their offspring in the ways of the old country. Confrontation with peers at school will add more stress to youngsters caught between two worlds, and desperately trying to appease their parents, while yearning to be accepted by their Canadian friends.

In her book *Immigrant Children and Canadian Schools*, Mary Ashworth writes:

The process of immigration and integration is often harsher for children who are removed without their understanding or consent from their lands of origin and replanted within a short period of time in an alien environment which puzzles them and even baffles them. Not only is there cultural shock, but even more, there is total isolation, fear, low self-confidence, and ultimately low self-esteem, until the children reach some level of achievement and educational equality with their peers. Parents pushing and demanding grades almost impossible to attain, create high frustration and anger levels. And no wonder. Their Canadian counterparts rarely accept them, and the new little immigrants are often mistreated and bullied by other groups of immigrant children who are imitating the segregational tactics of established Canadian children, who themselves have probably been here for only a generation or two . . . It should come as no surprise, therefore, that language is paradoxically a separator, an acceptor, and a great unifier. The power of language is the ultimate integration."(viii)

In its many forms, from play behaviour, and speech, to writing, language can build bridges of understanding between diverse groups, as well as create a "tower of babel" among those unwilling or unable to learn the language of a new country.

Education and specific courses in ethnic studies may do much to alleviate antagonism and misunderstanding among groups of diverse ethnic backgrounds and among descendants of the two so-called founding nations. And what then defines the study of ethnicity? Sociological, linguistic, and historical research have laid the foundations. A common thread runs

through all –a common course – personal histories of individuals, groups and communities.

Once again, the oral version is the first step toward understanding the complexity of the entire sequence in the transplantation process from the initial decision to pick up roots, undertake the perilous voyage, resettle, integrate, and achieve acceptance.

The oral tradition is as old as mankind. It has been in use for millennia throughout the world. With the emergence of written alphabets and the progression to literacy, many oral memories, including history, were collected and preserved. Too much, however, has been lost to succeeding generations. In our own century, we see children being raised in the oral traditions of nursery rhymes and chanted skip-rope games, many of which were handed down from generation to generation until someone had the foresight to collect them and preserve them in written form. In the games, as well as in songs and poems, often fascinating pieces of history are commemorated. Thanks to emigration, they have turned up in the New World, sometimes in transmuted shape, the melodies changing and the words often rewritten to record some new-world happening.

For many years there was a concentration on recording the memoirs and activities of the élite, the nobility, government personalities, and other figures of eminence. While the class system flourished in most European countries, the masses were regarded as unworthy of attention, unless some personality achieved a position of notoriety, as an outlaw or a popular criminal. Then he or she would become almost legendary in the oral tradition. Entire romances have been woven around Ned Kelly, the Australian bushranger, and his British counterpart, Dick Turpin. In the United States, there were Jesse James, Bonnie and Clyde, and the Sundance Kid. Where would succeeding generations have learned of these colourful, albeit criminal personalities, (particularly those who existed hundreds of years ago) if their legends had not survived, handed down mainly through oral tradition?

It was not until 1948 that our current concept of oral history emerged on an organized project level, when a Columbia University project, the Oral Research Office, was initiated by Allan Nevins. Continued and enlarged by Louis M. Starr, it started a movement in the United States which spread around the world.

Others, historians and sociologists, followed in Nevins's and Starr's footsteps to prove, over a period of years, the great value of oral history. The development of the wire recorder and, soon after, the tape recorder was to speed the process and facilitate the gathering of information which otherwise would have been lost. As a result, in the area of family relations, women, domestic servants, minorities, and the underprivileged, new sociological information has come to light. By changing the focus of attention, old

assumptions and accepted judgements have been challenged, and in some cases, changed. Oral history has brought recognition to many groups of people who had largely been ignored heretofore. Historical knowledge has been increased and enriched. The social message has changed and become more dramatic. The people who could not or would not put their life experiences into writing, have now acquired a voice. Oral history is now an accepted and valued research tool, used increasingly by anthropologists, sociologists, historians, novelists, journalists, political scientists, and others.

Today there is an even more crucial need to collect oral history, especially in countries which have massive immigration. With so many groups of different ethnic origin in a country like Canada, surely the emphasis traditionally placed on English and French origins must shift, in order to provide some understanding in the educational process. However, simply to collect and file away these life experiences would be foolish, for the very people these oral histories would benefit are the ones least likely to see or use them. The best way, perhaps, to ensure a maximum effect and benefit would be through the school curriculum, from primary up to junior college and on to university, where multicultural studies would become an integral part of the curriculum.

In the last thirty years or so, there have been many changes in our national fabric. Increasingly, a larger proportion of immigrants have arrived from third-world countries. The face of Canada has assumed many more new and variegated hues as people seek a new life on our shores. With this influx, bigotry and racism has increased proportionately. Not only are established Canadians spurning new arrivals, but immigrant minorities, who may have suffered catastrophic experiences in their lands of origin, tend to continue their rivalries once in Canada. The children of these immigrants, who must go through our educational systems, are in need of inter-cultural studies, as well as those children whose families have been here for many generations. An understanding of other races and cultures could help inhibit and perhaps eradicate prejudice and racism. A good method to avoid the development of internal conflict could be educational projects in school using oral history as a tool.

Beginning with primary school, certain projects could be introduced which would encourage interaction among children of differing ethnic and racial backgrounds. Students from the early grades up to college level can participate in oral history assignments. Familiarity does not necessarily breed contempt. It can breed respect for one another.

Oral history as a school project can teach students about their peers and their neighbours, particularly neighbours of different racial origins, and their communities. Research into their way of life in their previous homelands can impart a knowledge of geography, history, and social conditions. What better way is there to understand human experiences than to hear them

recounted on a one-to-one basis, until they become accepted data in the interviewer's mind and emotions? As educators, we owe such an understanding to the future of our children, and that includes the children of immigrants from every nation, who seek a new life in our country.

The use of oral history in the classroom is nothing new, for what is it but a form of storytelling? However, it can be a very exciting form of instruction, especially when there are students of recent ethnic origin studying alongside children of established Canadians. Across our land, more and more teachers are instructing students in the techniques of gathering oral history as classroom projects. The oral history process has been and is being used in educational institutions at every level in ethnic studies courses, in family history programs and in sociological field work. However, as with any process or project, there are certain problems and restraints relating to classroom procedures, available equipment, and of course, the age of the students involved.

Rather than lectures and reading exercises which encourage a passive method of learning, gathering oral history can and should be an active and energetic pursuit of explanations, descriptions, and information, which involves meeting many types of interesting people. Field work encourages the use of investigative techniques. Huge dossiers of extremely useful documents can be collected, and these accumulated oral histories become an archives invaluable for use by future generations.

However, one of the flaws in the process is that some teachers send their pupils out to compile family histories, that is, histories limited to their own ethnic confines. While this is necessary in itself, it may keep students ignorant about other cultural groups. Such ignorance is often at the root of misunderstanding, suspicion, and even racism among people of different origins. The only way to combat prejudice is to learn about it, expose it, and deal with it on a one-to-one basis.

Tackle problems head on. If at all practical, encourage students from traditionally antagonistic groups to work together. The classroom atmosphere and the teacher's guidance could defuse what might appear to some as a potentially controversial assignment. Have the students research the history of the interviewee's country; the social conditions that created the desire to emigrate; the statistics of the particular group settlement in Canada, and their achievements in various fields of endeavour. Once this research has been completed, the student has sufficient knowledge to go out and conduct interviews, either with students in the same educational institution, and their families, or to go and actively seek out people of other backgrounds in the community.

Once the interviews have begun, the one-to-one level is established, and in a short period of time a rapport develops as the interviewer recognizes in the flow of oral history some of the information learned in the initial

research. Immediately a link is formed, and the first steps are taken towards recognition of the nature of history itself and the individual role played out within it. How many students can resist developing a rapport with and empathy for an individual after hearing the following?

By the spring of '44, the Russians were already on the eastern German front. We had pulled back from Arnhem to the Elbe River and put to work in factories producing tools and ammunition. We were taken from there, loaded on trucks and sent to Berlin to counter the Russian advance, but the Russians broke through over the Oder River.

To avoid them, we left Berlin, fled to Leipzig, east to Prague and down to Munich to get away from the enemy units. But it was no use. We were captured by the Americans and taken to Dachau. It was May, 1945. Thousands of us were dumped into a large open field and were kept there with no food or water for two weeks. Stationed at each corner of the field was a sea of mud. We shit and peed there. It smelled awful, and disease hit everyone. Men went crazy, nuts, and attacked others. They died like flies. A trailer truck went around every morning, picking up the dead. The men were dying for a cigarette. There was nothing, so they pulled up the grass, if they could find some, and smoked it. If a light was seen by the guards, they shot at it.

Finally they handed us over to the Russians at the border, and marched us out to cattle cars headed for Moscow and then to Siberia. It took me two-and-a-half years to escape, and when I got to Sweden and was hospitalized, I weighed 98 pounds. I was a big man, well over six feet, but I was a total physical and emotional wreck — . Many of those who escaped never made it; many that did went crazy or ended up losing hands and feet from the cold. Some got to China by going south and, I heard later, some made it to India by crossing Hindustan. (Charon, BTW, 85-6)

Dramatic? Yes! Oral history is not boring, and through it important information within the context of world events is passed on to posterity.

It would be helpful for students to have some knowledge of shorthand as well as mastering the use of a tape recorder. Tape recorders malfunction and interviewees may not wish to be taped. However, accuracy of quotations can be verified if the interview is taped. In addition to the preliminary research, a list of questions should be prepared — questions the interviewers will ask their informants, as well as those they must ask of themselves. What is the purpose and focus of this interview? Is this person, who is about to be interviewed, a useful source of information, and how persistent or reliable

is his or her memory? How can this memory be tapped or triggered? Do this person's reminiscences fit into a significant national or international event?

How much effort should students put into transcribing material from tapes? How much material should be left untranscribed on the original tapes? In our mainly print-conscious culture, we have a tradition of publishing in the form of articles, essays, written histories, and so on. There are, however, many oral history programs in Britain, the United States, and Canada that may distribute oral history in its original taped form without transcription. Clearly, this difference has to be emphasized and clarified. Editing from tape to tape can be useful for removing extraneous material that blurs the focus of the project, while retaining the original tape. Interviewees have a tendency to ramble off on tangents and often have to be led back to the subject under discussion. However, there are technical difficulties in this process.

While family histories such as the *Roots* genealogy, which became a book and a film, are necessary and important, the main impetus in oral history projects should be placed on different backgrounds and on people outside the family.

Although political stories and other news events of some immediacy may invite oral histories in school projects, the ethnic communities should command attention, for it is the immigrants and their communities that have been and are still being ignored. Also, within many of these communities where the sexist or "macho" image is predominant, women and children are traditionally passed over. The social history of certain communities is another area that student oral historians could examine. In multi-cultural communities, the focus could be placed on such folklore themes as holidays and celebrations, folk medicine, courtship and marriage, superstitions, songs, and some legends. These projects are the link between textbook social studies and the face-to-face realities of community life, which students will experience during the process of gathering oral history.

And after the deluge of information, what then? School projects can be thought of in terms of publication. The material collected can be edited and presented in readable form, in school newspapers dedicated to the pluralistic community, in newsletters, in student magazines complete with photographs in journals, and of course, the original records can be stored.

Another aspect of collecting oral history is less exciting, but nonetheless equally important. A common ethical practice is to include the use of a legal release form to avoid problems at a later date should the subject of the interview become concerned about his or her remarks and the use to which they will be put. Some interviewees may simply want to glance over the material, while others may wish to alter the text. The release form must state clearly what can or cannot be used.

Record-keeping and storage of information are necessary as the material accumulates. Oral histories are useless if they are lost or are stored where heat or humidity will damage the tapes. All tapes and manuscripts should be clearly identified and filed appropriately.

The collection and use of oral history as regular school projects can bring out not only intellectual and emotional stimulation in students, but also expose them to deeply moving human experiences. Discussions and cooperation between students are important and children develop their language skills, social awareness, and a bent for investigation.

In cutting off our children from the histories of our immigrants and stressing only British and French history, we have failed them. We have relegated to oblivion the precious lives, histories, and social conditions of many of our citizens and given our youth selected histories and courses that hardly touch on the most important subjects — the people themselves. The result has been a loss of human dignity and a gathering sense of isolation in many communities.

Oral history is an essential tool in teaching multi-cultural studies and is an ideal way to bring back dignity to the people, to the disadvantaged, the poor, to the immigrants, to those of minority ethnic origins, to the handicapped, and in fact, to a good portion of the population of this country. We may consider ourselves fortunate to live in a country with such a high standard of living, but if we look below the surface, we have a long way to go in order to achieve harmony in a pluralistic society.

The process of understanding and enriching Canadian life should begin by reaching out and touching others through educational methods which use and preserve oral history. Education is a good way to speed the integration process. The time is now, for more and more immigrants are making Canada their new home. We cannot ignore the situation any longer.

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