

Learning Our Lessons: Oral History and the Women Teachers of Ontario

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As the new millennium dawned, a cross-disciplinary group of seven researchers in the Faculty of Education at The University of Western Ontario launched a large scale, multi-year project called “The Woman Teacher in Twentieth-Century Ontario.” Central to this project is the collection of the oral histories of two hundred retired women teachers who lived and worked in the various regions of the province. Planning and implementing the oral history component of the research has posed significant challenges and many lessons are being learned as we work with teachers to capture their lives on tape and transcript. Indeed, I am tempted to conclude that old teachers never die, they just turn to educating historians!

Oral history is a particularly useful method for learning about the lives of women teachers who have worked unremarked in the province’s classrooms for decades. Indeed, it is only through interviewing that we have been able to gather certain kinds of very valuable data about the daily realities of teaching work in Ontario’s classrooms. In this paper, however, I wish to shift attention away from the data *per se* and to speak here of the education we are acquiring through the research process itself. I begin by describing the project and then turn to a discussion of the on-going lessons we are learning and the questions we still have about selecting informants, interviewing participants, and dealing with transcripts. This discussion is very much a report on work in progress and invites response.

Description of Project

Although women have been numerically dominant in the teaching profession in Ontario throughout the twentieth-century, their history is largely untold. Gelman and Reynolds have explored the lives of teachers and school administrators in twentieth-century Toronto. Reynolds and Smaller and Arbus have examined teachers' lives during the Great Depression of the 1930s in Ontario. French, Staton and Light and Labatt have documented the history of female elementary teachers, particularly as it relates to their organized voice, the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario. But apart from these few works and a small number of other studies, the history of women teachers over the last century, and especially since 1920, has yet to be written. It is this task that "The Woman Teacher in Twentieth-Century Ontario" project takes up and it does so from Newton's understanding that history is "a story of power relations and struggle, a story that is contradictory, heterogeneous, fragmented" (qtd in Weiler 5).

The research project is designed to allow for seven separate, though highly interconnected and over-lapping sub-projects. Thus each individual researcher assumes responsibility for that part of the project where she has special knowledge and expertise while at the same time participating in the shared endeavour and benefiting from the wisdom and insights of the research team as a whole. The seven sub-projects examine:

1. the social and moral regulation of female teachers as exercised through the discourse of professionalism, the application of "community standards" and the imposition of the formal authority of regulations and inspections;
2. teacher-community relationships in rural settings over time with a particular emphasis on the links between women teachers and rural women's organizations;
3. the experiences of female French language teachers, many of whom were francophones and often visible minority women recruited from former French colonies during periods of teacher shortages, and who taught in the French language school system and/or who taught French as a second language in English language schools in often less than welcoming or ideal circumstances;

4. the lives of minority women teachers and the barriers, contradictions, tensions and dilemmas they have faced in teaching, particularly in circumstances where they have actively used emancipatory and anti-racist pedagogies in the classroom;
5. the experiences of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women teachers who have taught in First Nations communities in Ontario and their efforts to construct professional identities for themselves;
6. the ways in which the normative discourses of leadership have changed over time and how they intersect with women's understandings and experiences of school administration;
7. the efforts of women teachers, whether organizing through their unions or women's groups, to promote social reform, equity and social justice for themselves and for others.

While pursuing the specific sub-projects, the work of the researchers is guided by the common objectives of the project. Within each of the more specific contexts of the sub-projects, the researchers seek to explore how women understood and constructed their professional identities as educators; how female teachers' subjectivities and the material conditions of their work were shaped by the community, the state and professional associations; how women understood and negotiated their positions as teachers/workers; how teachers' personal and professional lives were integrated; and if and how teachers were politicized by their work and social location and what impact that had on their activities inside and outside the classroom. A growing body of literature dealing with the history of female teachers raises other important and troubling questions which we are pursuing (see, for example, Prentice & Theobald; Weiler and Middleton; Copelman; Weiler; Duling; Kinnear; Reynolds; Barman; Whitehead; Biklen). How are women teachers and school systems implicated in the reproduction of gender and other inequalities? Was the classroom a prison house for many women as Theobald suggests or a place of pleasure (Weiler)? How could women teachers take pride in their work and yet practice in a system that was hierarchical and reinforced systemic patterns of discrimination? How did women teachers "make meaning" in their lives when the conditions in which they laboured challenged the claim that their work was valued?

To address these questions, we are seeking out and using primary sources such as the archival records in central repositories and in personal,

local, institutional and regional collections; teachers' published and unpublished autobiographies, memoirs, diaries and letters; novels by teachers about teaching in Ontario; and relevant educational policy documents produced by government departments, school boards, teacher federations and other educational agencies. In the end, however, the two hundred oral histories of teachers we are collecting make up our largest and most important source because women teachers, like so many other historical actors who have been rendered silent in the records, have left few personal papers or other written documents about their work or their lives. The traces they have left most often illustrate their lives of service to students and to communities and take the form of school textbooks or local histories, meticulously and lovingly prepared. Oral history, which largely owes its existence to the desire of social historians to recover the voices of ordinary people, has proven to be the only method by which we can recover important elements of teachers' lives and their feelings about the work they did.

Selecting Informants

In planning the project, it was decided that we would create a common pool of interviews; that is, each of the seven researchers would interview 25 to 30 women and we would then all have 200 transcripts from which to draw evidence. Volunteer informants have been solicited in a number of ways including through retired teachers' organizations, through free advertising space provided by many weekly and daily newspapers, and by a word-of-mouth, snowball technique. As we identify informants, we try to do an initial screening either through a telephone or e-mail conversation. Once selected, informants are asked to complete a written questionnaire detailing descriptive information about their lives such as where they were born, what teacher education they received, how they got their first job, and in what schools and which grades they have taught. Having prepared by reviewing the information included in the questionnaire, one member of the research team interviews the informant, using a semi-structured format, and tape records her story, which is later transcribed.

Throughout this process, we try to match researchers' interests to informants' experiences. For example, if a retired school administrator volunteers for an interview, we try to match her with the researcher who is interested in women and leadership. There is a common core of research questions asked by all team members of their informants, as well as some

specific questions relevant to individual sub-projects. Because we are using a semi-structured interview format, each researcher, attuned to the interests of the others, can also follow-up on responses which seem to be yielding pertinent evidence for any of the sub-projects. If an informant provides a particularly rich source of data for a specific sub-project, a researcher recommends a second interview with the colleague most interested in that area.

Almost from the start, we began to recognize a pattern emerging. The women volunteering for interviews were those who were most self-confident, those who had been recognized in their careers, whether by being offered special professional opportunities or being elected to positions in the teachers' federations or the like, and those who were the leaders and the "movers and shakers" even in retirement. For the most part, these women represented Ontario's majority culture; they were white, Anglo-Saxon in origin and Protestant. They were also largely former elementary school teachers, an artifact of the historical occupational segregation in teaching. To increase the diversity of the informant pool, we realized that we would have to be more pro-active and practise the lessons about affirmative action we had learned from the women's movement. Because team members are involved in a range of community groups and social justice activities, we were able to ask, through those groups, for help in identifying immigrant and visible minority teachers as well as lesbian teachers who might be potential informants. Once we were able to locate a few informants, and establish credibility, the snowball effect took over, enabling us to expand our catchment. This also turned out to be the case in finding more secondary school, Roman Catholic and francophone teachers though here serendipity and coincidence also played a role. Chance conversations often lead to wonderful informants, in one case, for example, providing an entry to a rich pool of potential informants in north-western Ontario.

As a result of about 500 notices placed in the daily and weekly newspapers in the province, I have been inundated with responses via e-mail, phone messages and written letters. Many citizens of Ontario wished to draw attention to a family member or former teacher who would be an excellent informant and have often facilitated our ability to speak with potential participants in the research. Through this process we have discovered a great many retired teachers in their 90s who are able to discuss their teaching experiences in the late 1920s and 1930s, an important chronological expansion in our oral history data base. As an added benefit,

we have also learned about many written sources previously unknown, often because they are unpublished and in the care of a families only too happy to now share this material with someone who cares about it. In this way we now have access to teachers' journals, letters, photographs and yearbooks, a very rich set of primary materials, indeed.

Because one of our goals was to examine teaching in Ontario, and not just southwestern Ontario, we have been sensitive to geographic and regional representation among our informants. This has been less a problem than we imagined since teachers have turned out to be an amazingly peripatetic lot. Large numbers of our informants have worked in rural and urban areas, and in the north as well as in the south or east. Many have also worked elsewhere in Canada and several have taught in other countries. The mobility of teachers has, in fact, made it necessary for us to re-think location as an identifying category for teachers. When a teacher went to North Bay Teachers' College, taught in a northern lumber camp, Sault Ste. Marie, Orillia, Kingston and Chatham, what region is she from? And how does region within a province matter given that our understanding of terms such as "the north" is a fluid one. Indeed, "the north" in teachers' minds turns out to be everything from the Barrie area to the Yukon Territory.

The biggest challenge in identifying informants lies with the difficulty in finding women who left the classroom after a short period of time either because they disliked the work or because they experienced problems with colleagues, administrators, trustees or the community. Women who loved teaching, who found a great deal of personal satisfaction in the work, who were supported and honoured, are happy to discuss their careers. Woman who were harassed, who did not fit it, experienced classroom disasters, or were driven from communities are reluctant to identify themselves as potential informants, and even more reluctant to talk about events about which they still feel shame, guilt, anger or resentment. It has proven impossible, so far, to find retired teachers who hated teaching but stayed with it because they needed the job and were unwilling or unable to try other possibilities.

Interviewing Participants

The assumption that seven researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds and with very different life experiences would all conduct interviews in relatively the same way through a semi-structured format guided by a set of common questions, has proven remarkably naïve. For

some members of the team who have experiences similar to those of the teacher informants, the interviews become intimate, shared conversations about events through which they both have lived. Other team members conduct more formal or business-like interviews, asking the question, getting the answer, probing where necessary, and then moving on. Understandably, too, each team member tends to emphasize those questions about which she is most interested. Of course, this is partly because we are matching team members to informants who are likely to have information most relevant to that member's sub-project. But individual interest skews the weight assigned to different sets of questions. This is not to suggest that somehow this renders any or all of the interviews unusable. It simply acknowledges the way in which interviews, like all historical documents, are constructed.

Sangster also reminds us that interviews are historical documents "created by the agency of *both* the interviewer and interviewee" (92). Nonetheless, significant power inequities can exist between the two parties and no doubt there is some disparity in many of our interviews. However, in our project this relationship is also shaped by the fact that professional women (i.e., university professors/teacher educators) are interviewing other professional women (i.e., teachers), at least some of whom have, themselves, taught at teachers' colleges or in faculties of education. Thus the power relationship in the interview dyad is more equal than might normally be the case and the teacher informants often exercise considerable control over the interview. At least one has made it clear that she wishes only to tell her stories and has no interest in an interview with "serious academic purpose." On the other hand, those teachers who held senior administrative positions or leadership positions in teacher federations have a strong sense of their own historical position and recount their lives in well-rehearsed fashion. While a few teachers have wondered if they "had anything to add to the project," for the most part teachers have been anxious to volunteer for interviews and have a fairly clear sense of what it is they want to share.

Initially the vast majority of teachers offers an uncritical narrative, speaking in a way Di Leonardo has termed "rhetorical nostalgia" (233) about the pleasure of teaching and the joys of working with the young. Concomitantly, there is a denial of gender discrimination, despite the fact that most interviews are replete with examples of the disadvantages that fell to women because they were women. How to disrupt romantic recall

without denying the pleasures of teaching has been a challenging aspect of the interview process. Respect for the age and experience of informants initially encouraged us to be too careful, to avoid reference to matters which we thought would trouble our interviewees. In hindsight, it is clear that this was maternalistic and that we stereotyped retired women teachers, making assumptions that explicit questions about sexual harassment or homosexuality, for example, would upset them. As Portelli has argued, it is clear that we respect our informants best when we are honest, straightforward and open with them, while at the same time remaining responsive to their sensitivities. Now, for example, we have shifted our vaguer questioning about “getting into trouble with school boards and communities” to more explicit questions about sexuality and lifestyle, about abortion and pregnancy outside of marriage, and so on. Rather than ask only about classroom management, we ask the more specific questions about forms of discipline and corporal punishment.

As a team we also have debated how to respond to biased comments from informants. How, for example, should we respond to a racist observation from an informant about Aboriginal or black students? Some members of the team feel that the appropriate response is no response; as interviewers our task is simply to collect the views of informants. Other researchers feel that as human beings we must challenge racist observations wherever they occur or we are complicit with them. This does not mean accusing the informant of being racist but rather of asking a follow-up question such as “How would you respond if someone suggested that comment was racist?” and probing the comment in ways that allow the informant to become self-reflexive. The different positions on this matter reflect an on-going debate in the methodology of oral history and certainly has not been resolved within our team.

Dealing with Transcripts

The practicalities of managing the sheer volume of transcripts has been an enormous challenge. Because of the demands of our own work, we do not have the time to transcribe our own tapes but we have found it difficult to hire transcribers who can provide a consistent and competent service. Getting tapes transcribed in a timely manner has been a constant source of worry. We are now exploring the option of digital recording, although admittedly we are sceptical about the technology meeting all the claims that are being made for it, especially with respect to the transcription process.

When each transcript is prepared, it is reviewed by the interviewer for egregious errors, and then sent to the informant who is asked to read the transcript and either do nothing or correct mistakes of fact, add further information she has remembered since the interview or delete anything she has now decided she does not wish to have included and return the transcript to us. We learned very quickly that former teachers are shocked to see the transcripts and cannot believe that their spoken English does not meet the rigorous standards of their written work. Many spent long hours correcting the transcripts and the project's research assistants spent long hours making the changes on the electronic copies. One teacher fully re-wrote her whole transcript, in effect re-doing the whole interview and giving different, more complete answers. Our assumption that teachers would understand that we would only be using selections from transcripts as we prepared articles was clearly wrong. That we would be protecting their anonymity also escaped their notice or, at least, could not overcome their concern for correct English usage. In order to prevent our informants from spending long hours of marking after retirement, we prepared another, more detailed covering letter that tried to avoid any assumptions and was more explicit about how the transcript material would be used. We also assured informants that we would fix the grammar and other problems before quoting from the transcripts. This, of course, pushes up against the consideration that quotes should be reproduced exactly as the words were spoken but it is a compromise we have had to make.

We also had to confront the implications of changes teachers wished to make in the content of their transcripts. Often they wanted to soften a judgment they had made or delete a critical comment or otherwise substantively edit the transcript, often to the point of changing meaning. While such changes are the prerogative of the informant, we also feel that valuable information is getting lost when words, sentences or sometimes even sections of the transcript are deleted. However, ethical considerations dictate that the wishes of the informant, expressed in the form of a revised transcript, must be honoured. While we have the original and the revised transcript and can read the former with the latter, it is the revised transcript that we must use as the source of our evidence, however frustrating that may sometimes be.

Managing the data in the transcripts is also a challenge and we have struggled with how each of us can work with 200 transcripts. None of us is experienced with the software programs designed for such tasks and so we

are cautiously experimenting with one. This is a very time-consuming task and leads to questions about how much time is really saved, at least on the first project where qualitative research software is being learned. All kinds of problems are also raised around coding issues, especially in the context of a seven-person team where understandings about what codes mean may vary from individual to individual. We have tried to stay with descriptive codes only, but one realizes quickly how even raw description is often theory based and interpretive. In an effort to avoid problems insofar as that is possible, four people were involved in developing the initial codes. Each started with an initial list of codes generated by the principal investigator and worked independently to code ten transcripts. This allowed us to check inter-coder reliability, identify gaps in the codes, and develop a shared understanding of what the codes meant. Once a refined list of codes was available, we moved to system that now has two researchers independently coding each transcript. This information is entered on the electronic version of the transcript and, although we are still in the midst of this process, it is possible to see how the software package we have chosen allows us to retrieve data relatively easily.

That something can be done, however, does not mean that it will really work for researchers. Many team members are uneasy about using computer technology to manage interview data and I count myself among them. Being able to call up and read large numbers of responses from our transcripts about any given topic is not the same as reading the full transcripts of interviews I have done myself. A transcript brings back memories of the moment of the interview, how the informant looked and spoke, how I felt, what body language and gestures she used when talking about this topic or that, where she responded with joy or anger, where she was leaving something out, where she reached out to touch me. The fullness of the interview, the meaning we take from the intellectual and emotional relationship of the shared exchange, is lost when our data are retrieved piecemeal through a computer program. What understanding can we get from an anecdote disconnected from the full narrative?

Conclusion

As I have already indicated, just managing the large quantities of evidence we have is a challenge of rather significant proportions. Because we are still in the process of completing our interviews, we have not yet devoted a great deal of time to interpreting the data and have just begun to

address many of the interpretive issues that will confront us. We are considering questions about personal and collective memory, agency and resistance, consciousness and hegemonic discourse, namely the ones that all oral historians face as they try to understand their informants as gendered, classed and racialized subjects situated in a specific socio-historical context.

As researchers we are cognizant of the fact that we exercise the power of interpretation and acknowledge that it must be exercised responsibly, with academic humility and in a self-conscious and self-critical manner (Perks & Thompson; Gluck & Patai). We are aware that many of our informants and others who have encouraged retired teachers to participate in our research expect us to produce work that is commemorative, rather than critical. While we will celebrate the lives and contributions of women teachers in Ontario as appropriate, our research is also organized to explore the multiple views of women teachers who will speak from their own social locations and identities and reveal that relations among women could sometimes be ones of conflict and pain. What teaching meant to women individually and collectively in a system based on male dominance of a hierarchical structure and how teachers both shaped and were shaped by their work and the political context of public education are the kinds of concerns we intend to confront. In doing this, we cannot avoid the very troubling questions about the role of women teachers in a school system implicated in the reproduction of gender and other inequalities. As Theobald has argued, "The grand romance of teaching will no longer do" (20).

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