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Using Oral History as a Newsgathering and Storytelling Technique

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Oral history interviews help scholars to dig deep into studying the past and find information that deserves to be explored in greater detail. Journalists also can use this interdisciplinary approach as a way to interview subjects for in-depth story projects requiring a robust historical context, unlike what brief audio and video interviews could produce. The journalism classroom is the place where students can experiment with oral history to attain these skills on deeper learning levels. With this in mind, oral histories can serve as experiential learning opportunities desired in an undergraduate journalism classroom.

Introduction

Multimedia storytelling has transformed news organizations and journalism classrooms in recent years. While this approach is popular, alternative ways of telling and sharing stories with audiences are being explored and adopted. One approach that increasingly is gaining traction professionally as both a newsgathering and storytelling technique is oral history. In 2016, magazines such as *Rolling Stone* (oral history of the Allman Brothers), *Vanity Fair* (oral history of the Comedy Cellar), and *Outside* (oral history of “Hot Dog... The Movie”) published news accounts using first-person interviews (O’Brien, 2016).

Some organizations also have relied on oral histories in the digital media era to tell stories. One in particular is StoryCorps, a nonprofit organization that records, preserves, and shares the stories of Americans from all backgrounds and beliefs. This organization has helped make oral history mainstream by specializing in recording first-person voices. Since 2003, the organization has recorded some 65,000 conversations and archived them at the Library of Congress.

In 2015, StoryCorps launched a free mobile app that has since notched up more than 80,000 interviews, making it easier for people to preserve their stories. In addition, archival material—recorded long ago and stored away in academic libraries—is in greater demand by journalists and the public (O’Brien, 2016).

Among historians, oral history interviews help scholars to dig deep into studying the past and find information that deserves to be explored in greater detail. Journalists also must perform the same skills to do their work, and the journalism classroom is the place where students can experiment with oral history to attain these skills on deeper learning levels. With this in mind, oral histories can serve as experiential learning opportunities desired in an undergraduate journalism classroom.

Rich with classroom observations and student comments, this article explores oral history as a pedagogical approach for teaching newsgathering and storytelling techniques. Students in two separate semesters of an in-depth reporting class conducted oral history interviews as part of a project that stud-

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ied public education in Kentucky before standardized tests were emphasized. This article concludes with recommendations for journalism educators who might wish to incorporate oral history interviewing as part of their classroom instruction.

Background Information

Oral histories are beneficial not only for history classrooms, but they are vital primary sources that help enrich students' understanding of the historical period for any academic discipline. In addition, through oral histories, students are able to bring history alive by capturing personal stories and connecting with individuals to understand their experiences and perspectives better (Dutt-Doner, Allen & Campanaro, 2016). For the journalism classroom, oral history allows for a range of voices and insights within a chronological structure, with structure being a key element of narrative (Williams, 2013). With the right sources and focused reporting, students can make an oral history out of almost anything (Williams, 2013).

Two pedagogical approaches to using oral history in teaching are passive oral history and active oral history. Passive oral history uses audio or video recordings, transcripts, websites and other media to connect the student with content for the curricular area of study. Active oral history focuses on the instruction of methodology and prepares students to be researchers to collect their own oral histories (Lanman & Wendling, 2006). In other words, passive oral histories are interviews that were prepared previously and made available for use, whereas active oral histories are interviews in which students are conducting and recording the interviews. Therefore, oral histories can include anything from video sessions with veterans, talking about their experience in World War II, to grabbing any audio recorder and sitting with a grandparent, inquiring about growing up during the Great Depression. For oral historians, the thing that separates what they do from any other type of interview — including the journalistic interview — is going the extra step of obtaining permission for the raw recording to be archived in a location where it is accessible to the public.

The incorporation of oral history into any assignment or project is a high impact practice that promotes collaborative learning and structures opportunities to reflect on student-created, insightful experiences. The body of scholarship within the oral history literature is extensive on how to incorporate oral histories into

teaching and specific disciplines (Ritchie, 2003; Lanman & Wendling, 2006; Foster, 2013; Tobbell, 2016).

Description of Assignments and Project

Under the collaborative learning paradigm, two key goals are learning to work and solve problems with peers, and sharpening one's own understanding by listening seriously to the insights of others, especially those with different backgrounds and life experiences. Approaches range from study groups within a course, to team-based assignments and writing, to cooperative projects and research. With examples from a journalism course, the application of oral histories as a collaborative way for educators and students to meet various elements of high impact practices will be highlighted.

Oral histories were taught in an intermediate in-depth news reporting course at a Southeast university with a journalism program accredited by the Accrediting Council for the Education of Journalism and Mass Communication. Students ($N = 18$, fall 2017; $N = 7$, spring 2018) were required to complete a passive oral history assignment before conducting active oral history interviews for a class news project that focused on public education in Kentucky in the years before standardized testing became the norm. For the active oral history component, the students presented their work at the university's student scholars showcase in November. Students in the spring course were required to do the same at the university's scholar showcase in April.

Specific details of the passive and active oral history assignments and projects are explained next.

1. Passive oral history After weeklong instruction focusing on oral history as an information-gathering technique in journalism, students completed a writing assignment that focused on passive oral history. The objectives of the assignment were to critique an oral history interview based on the material covered (e.g., interviewer talked too much, background noise created distractions) in the lectures and to identify best practices in conducting oral history interviews. This exercise served as the foundation for students in the oral history news project.

Students accessed their choice of an oral history audio file in the Education and Desegregation collection on the university library's website. Each student listened to an oral history recording and completed a discussion thread in the Canvas learning management system. In their discussions, students provided a

synopsis of the topics discussed in the interview and a critical analysis. This assignment allowed students to reflect on how to prepare and conduct oral histories, which would become crucial for the active oral history project.

2. Active oral history Two weeks later, active oral histories served as the main information-gathering technique for the class news project that concentrated on public education in Kentucky in the years before the stronghold of standardized testing took effect. For the project, Kentucky was chosen as the focus state because of its early emphasis on standardized testing as part of a statewide overhaul of the public education system. The Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 set in motion the concept that all students have a right to receive an education that is based on equitable funding and resources.

Before conducting any active oral history interview, research of the historical timeframe in which the person being interviewed had lived or worked is crucial. To prepare for their upcoming interviews, students spent two class sessions at the university's archival library. On the first day, they toured the facility and learned about the resources available. On the second day, they examined artifacts and documents relating to public education in the community and surrounding area. These visits provided the students confidence in researching the resources leading up to the oral history interview.

Students were placed in four groups of four members and assigned an individual who was recruited by the instructor to serve as an oral history subject. Basic information, such as their years of schooling in a K-12 public education system, was provided to each group, whose members then used the information to research educational issues and topics relevant to the subject's class years and plan questions to ask in the interview. The instructor reviewed the questions and gave feedback on how the items could be strengthened.

Two interviews were conducted in class using Tascam audio recording equipment purchased with a grant. Any device, such as a smartphone app, would work effectively. However, because the files also serve as a public resource, quality recordings were necessary. Two of the subjects came to the classroom for the interviews. The oral history interview with a third individual, who lived in another city far from the author's university, was conducted during class time via Zoom web conferencing. Both video and audio recordings

were saved from this interview.

Each student in the group played a role. One served as the official interviewer, who could be heard on the audio recording. At the start of each interview, the interviewer used a script to document the interview's details, such as the names of the interviewer and interviewee, date of the interview, and location of the interview — the formality observed by historians using oral history. Another student in the group was designated to tweet during the oral history interview to provide immediate updates on specific comments made by the interviewee. The project hashtag was (will be included after review). Other students also tweeted, took photos or wrote follow-up questions for the interviewer to ask. Each interview lasted approximately 25 to 30 minutes, which was the desired length.

After each interview, the group collaborated to decide which news stories to write, so that various angles could be reported. Every student in the class had to write a news story based on the interview, but the group assigned to the individual subject was required to plan coverage on different aspects and angles of the interview. Audio recordings, stories, photos, and other elements to document the interviews were housed on the project's website, (link to be included after article review).

Feedback and Recommendations

Overall, the oral history-news reporting project on the state of public education before high-stakes testing was received well by student peers. Students voluntarily provided robust feedback ($N = 17$), much of which was used to improve and reimagine the project for students in the spring 2018 course. Feedback was 94% positive toward oral history in journalistic assignments; 82% commented positively on the way oral history was taught; and 35% offered suggestions that could be used to improve the oral history news project.

Here are some of the comments by students who were enrolled in the fall course. Again, some of their feedback contain recommendations that were incorporated into the spring 2018 course.

I really like oral history as a news-gathering technique, because it is more in-depth. The journalist has less of a voice, because they are letting their source share stories and accounts of history.

Oral history as a news-gathering technique is

one of my favorites now. This technique allows me to not only gather information but also real life experiences that are so interesting to hear about. This technique in a sense teaches you about life.

Oral history practices can be useful for investigative stories and I think an application for trauma victims can be made because the open-ended questions give the interviewee a sense of control over the conversation.

It is more genuine in asking the questions, versus the 'attacking' reputation journalists typically get as if we are trying to find trouble in their words.

I think oral history is an awesome news-gathering technique. I think it provides us with a lot of necessary information that we may not get from ordinary reporting.

The project is a real interesting way to see a specific way of reporting that you might not have ever seen before.

My thoughts on oral history as a news-gathering technique is that it is something that journalists should look more into. There is nothing better than an individual's first-hand experience about the topic that is being talked about. That is better than going to research a topic and just finding background information. You want first-hand experiences and details.

I think for future renditions of this project, it'd be interesting to let students pick someone of their choosing that fits within a certain criteria, have them formulate questions and then have them do an oral report on that person.

I think oral history as a news-gathering technique is an impeccable tool we should employ more. I believe it has an edge to it in the sense that with capturing the audio of the interview subject, you are also capturing the emotional inflection in their voice. This is something you could not convey purely through text.

Based on the student feedback — specifically requests to allow students to conduct interviews outside of the classroom — portions of the oral history-news reporting project were modified for the spring 2018 course. First, each student in the second course selected their own person, in contrast to the earlier course where the person was chosen by the instructor. Second, each student conducted separate oral history interviews outside of class, instead of group interviews

in class. To guide students on conducting active oral histories outside of the classroom, a script to document the details of the interview at the beginning of the oral history recording was given to each student. Each interview was required to last between 20-30 minutes, and students had to transcribe their interviews. A permission form signed by the interviewee also was required. The topic remained the same, but the focus expanded past Kentucky to Illinois and Tennessee, since three of the seven students enrolled in the spring course are from these states and more familiar with the educational systems in their home states. This allowed students to explore the topic on a regional, comprehensive level and write more effective in-depth news stories.

Conclusion

Journalists today are exploring new ways to tell stories to their audiences. Some of the approaches are based in digital technology. Others, such as oral history, are borrowed from other disciplines or fields and applied to enterprising or in-depth news stories. For journalism students, oral history interviews offer an opportunity for experiential learning of an alternative news-gathering and storytelling technique in the classroom.

By incorporating oral histories into class lessons and collaborative projects, students can study issues of today by placing people back into history. Through teaching with oral histories, students can understand not only what happened in the past but also how those narrating the past interpreted the events and issues. Plus, oral histories offer an opportunity for journalism educators and students to interview everyday individuals, who often are the ones to give a voice to those who have not been heard or regarded on issues or topics.

For this innovative and collaborative project, oral histories proved to be a structured, high impact practice because it afforded journalism students an opportunity to invest significant time and effort on a topic over an extended period of time and to interact with diverse individuals. Students also had visible outcomes — the website and scholarly presentations — to include in their portfolios, demonstrate competency and share with others. In essence, oral histories helped to bring learning to life for students.

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