

Introduction – Making Educational Oral Histories in the 21st Century

The topic of this special issue, “Making Educational Oral Histories in the 21st Century,” explores new and creative ways in which oral history has been used within different social settings. Certainly, engaging oral history within the contexts of public schooling with young people is not novel.¹ What this special issue of *Oral History Forum* does demonstrate, however, are the ways in which oral historians and educators are utilizing both old and new technologies to interview audiences from far broader segments of society. Moreover, the articles put forth in this special issue provoke us to expand our imaginations with regards to the pedagogical possibilities of engaging oral history as university researchers, community organizers, educators, oral historians, public historians, teachers and students. The projects included in this special issue represent a robust discussion of the epistemological challenges and opportunities for those engaging oral history. Moreover, oral history, as this issue illustrates, enables both teachers and students of social history in relation to one’s community to introduce new evidence from the underside, shift the historical focus, open new areas of inquiry, challenge some of the assumptions and judgments of former researchers, and bring recognition to substantial groups of people, and their respective life histories, which have been largely ignored.²

Although the importance of oral history as a research and teaching praxis for understanding the world has existed for many indigenous communities since time immemorial,³ the application of oral history to the classroom first caught the educational community’s imagination with the Foxfire Project in 1966. That year, Eliot Wigginton decided to challenge his English class at Rabun Gap - Nacoochee School to carry out oral histories with the Southern Appalachian community’s elders as a way to engage them in the writing process. The oral histories were first collected in *The Foxfire Magazine*, which has published continuously since 1966, and

¹ See Cynthia Stokes Brown, *Like It Was: A Complete Guide to Writing Oral History* (New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1988); Petra Munro, *Subject to Fiction: Women Teachers’ Life History Narratives and the Cultural Politics of Resistance* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998); and more recently, Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

² Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, ed., *Women’s Words, The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991). Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001). Paul Thompson, *The Voices of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³ Vine Deloria Jr., *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact* (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 1997). Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, *An Indigenous Curriculum of Place: The United Houma Nation’s Contentious Relationship with Louisiana’s Educational Institutions* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), i-232.

thereafter, in a series of books to create an anthology of the community's stories and interviews.⁴ Further offshoots of this ambitious community-based program are a museum, funded by the students' work, which combines the oral accounts with artefacts and other products of Appalachia,⁵ and a particular pedagogy, which honours students' agency and a personally valued production of historical knowledge.⁶

This first well-publicized oral history school project focused on the student interviewers' capacity to use English effectively. At the same time, students expanded knowledge of their local history and geography, and integrated the life stories of community members in this productive educational partnership. In so doing, the Foxfire Project foretold the capacity of oral history to offer interdisciplinary and locally-based studies for students through their regular and often intensive interaction with community partners. It also provided an example of ways through which teachers and students could "give back" to those communities by validating the knowledge that only community elders possessed. This, and subsequent oral history projects, were early versions of Community Service Learning where all partners – students, teachers, community elders and others – needed to collaborate in the documentation and protection of local knowledge, and where the educational system validated that knowledge as legitimate, indeed highly valued.

Since the Foxfire Project, there have been countless oral history projects carried out within educational settings, most of which have never been documented for broad distribution. As classroom-based initiatives, they have remained within the boundaries of the school walls, but not beyond them, having brought pleasure and knowledge to the teachers, students and community partners working together to document some component of their community's history. Other innovative projects include the oral history partnership between Faculty of Education at Louisiana State University, the T. William Harrison Oral History and the Old South Baton Rouge community.⁷ Other institutions like the Centre for Oral History and Digital

⁴ See www.foxfire.org. Accessed on 12 February 2012.

⁵ The museum is found in the small northeast Georgia town of Mountain City.

⁶ www.foxfire.org.

⁷ The Old South Baton Rouge Oral History collection (with over 200 copies of taped interviews) has since been transferred from LSU to the Carver Branch Library in the East Baton Rouge Parish. The tapes represent a ten-year collaborative partnership between the Louisiana State University College of Education, T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History, School of Social Work, Service Learning Center, and the Old South Baton Rouge Community. These oral histories continue to highlight the important role the Old South Baton Rouge community played in local, state, and national civil rights movements. The tapes include narratives on the 1953 Baton Rouge bus boycott, the pioneering strides in education for African Americans, and some of the earliest documented organizing for voting rights in turn capturing the history of the churches, businesses, social clubs, and organizations in the Old South Baton Rouge area. For more information see Petra Munro Hendry and Jay D. Edwards, *Old*

Storytelling at Concordia University have developed free oral history software like Story Matters, affording pedagogical opportunities with students to record, produce and export video testimonials to a global audience through digital technologies like Smartphones.⁸ In theory this free open source software should enable researchers and teachers greater ease to produce digital oral histories for future audiences beyond the walls of a museum or social studies classrooms.

As an indication of the popularity of oral history initiatives in Canadian classrooms, such projects have figured prominently in the winning submissions for the Governor-General's Awards for Excellence in Teaching Canadian History, and in other like contests across Canada and elsewhere where teachers have taken the trouble to document their classroom process for others. But it is common knowledge that these award-winning examples are merely the tip of the iceberg. We hope that by profiling some of the oral history projects that bear on education in "Making Educational Oral Histories in the 21st Century," more project-leaders will be encouraged to document their work for this and other journals, edited collections and the popular press.

The articles in this collection are another indication of the healthy state of oral history as part of the educational process at all levels. We have examples in this special issue of those who are active in the collection and analysis of oral histories: students at the elementary, middle and high school levels, undergraduates, new Canadians struggling to learn English as well as those whose expertise has been honed by years of interviewing. Those willing to tell their stories as the basis of these oral histories are even more varied: elderly survivors of the Holocaust living in Montreal and Toronto, Irish immigrants to Winnipeg, Circassian Muslims in Israel, relatives of students in Czechoslovakia who experienced the Velvet Revolution, German-Americans in Southwest Illinois, soldiers and translators in Bosnia-Herzegovina, scientists with the Chemical Heritage Foundation, and the founders of the Westgate Mennonite Collegiate in Winnipeg have all provided extensive life histories as the basis of these articles.

Oral histories are often type-cast as having occurred within the lifetime of a student's grandparents or parents, and indeed, we have examples of oral histories in "Making Educational Oral Histories in the 21st Century" having been gathered over the previous twenty-five or thirty years. But this conventional periodization is also challenged by many of these articles. For example, one set of oral histories, based on the community members' collective memories, extends back to the seventeenth century in what is now Israel, while another explores the late nineteenth-century experiences of German-Americans and a third, the interactional patterns of

South Baton Rouge: The Roots of Hope (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana University at Lafayette Press, 2009).

⁸ See <http://storytelling.concordia.ca/oralhistory/index.html>.

translators during the Balkan Wars in the early 1990s.

The usual pattern of one interviewee working with a single respondent in constructing an oral history is represented by some of the articles found here, but other methodological structures for writing up oral histories have also been explored. The Circassian Muslim oral-history respondents, for example, draw upon communal memories, exploring not only what has been remembered in the community, but also why some features of the schooling process are remembered better than others. Other articles utilize oral histories with an audience in conjunction with a dramatic production (e.g. *The Secret of Gabe's Dresser*) or by translating Holocaust survivors' testimonies into Young-Adults' literature. Still others explore individual memories of communal experiences, such as members of the Irish diaspora settling in Winnipeg or scientists working on various research initiatives throughout the twentieth century. Memories have been collected and analyzed about a diverse range of educational experiences, including those of Australian school children in the 1930s to 1950s, Czechoslovakian teenagers during the Velvet Revolution, or students attending or teaching at denominational schools, such as the Winnipeg Westgate Mennonite Collegiate.

All of the articles in this collection wrestle with questions of methodology and even epistemology as these bear on oral history.⁹ What is the appropriate relationship of historical artifacts to oral history, or of art to oral history? How does one mediate the “consoling narrative” of trauma, of “hope,” or the nostalgia of a “happy childhood” in the face of an historical record to the contrary, or should one contest such assessments? Is the “truth” or “falseness” of memory significant? How can oral histories be made more accessible to a wider audience? How do interview protocols influence the production of personal narratives? How does publishing a collection of oral histories on the Internet influence the process of data collection, analysis and storage? How does the use of qualitative data analysis software influence the final product of oral histories? What particular challenges exist for teachers wanting to use oral history in the classroom with relatively young, enthusiastic students to teach the knowledge and skills related to the different dimensions of what Lévesque calls elsewhere “historical thinking”?¹⁰ How do memoirs differ from oral histories, and does this distinction matter? What controls should or do interviewees have over their intellectual property? How do memories of the past influence current decision-making and assessments of contemporary society? How can experiences born of mass suffering be represented to others when language's capacity to represent this is inadequate? Should incoherence in narratives

⁹ Erin Jessee, “The Limits of Oral History: Ethics and Methodology Amid Highly Politicized Research Settings,” *Oral History Review* 38, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 287-307. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, ed., *The Oral History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁰ Stéphane Lévesque, *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the 21st Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

be a concern? Should/can oral histories be translated into other genres without committing epistemic violence to the original oral histories? How can social justice be furthered by oral history?

All of these pedagogical, methodological, and ethical questions, some of them already asked in the materials of the Foxfire Project almost fifty years ago, are still debated within different historical, geographical, social, and cultural contexts in the articles found within this collection. Our hope is that community partners and scholars will look to this special issue as a forum for extending our use of oral history and addressing some of these persistent questions, while raising others.

Indeed, “Making Educational Oral Histories in the 21st Century” addresses questions relating to historical memory, both by individuals and through the generations of members of ethnically- and religiously-diverse communities. The psychic value of memories for the “rememberers,” especially where these are at odds with the historical record, is explored in “Public Memories and Private Meanings: Representing the ‘Happy Childhood’ Narrative in Oral Histories of Adolescence and Schooling in Australia, 1930s-1950s.” Here, the authors draw from interviews with students and school personnel who attended or worked in the Australian school system during the 1920s to 1950s. Katie Wright and Julie McLeod analyze student oral histories to gain greater insight into educational experiences of the time, as well as into the role of memory and nostalgia in understanding the present. These narratives reveal a sense of school days being the “best of days”—a nostalgic theme that participants used as a springboard to reveal their anxieties and critiques of current social conditions. Wright and McLeod also offer detailed reflections on the methodological processes of doing oral history, including considerations about the interview process and subject selection, and on the potential of oral history for shedding light on lesser-explored aspects of the educational experience in both the past and present.

Maris Thompson considers the often-complicated experiences of families who immigrated to America: the pressures of assimilation and the resistance in the face of such forces, living through language restrictions, and experiencing government-initiated programs of Americanization. “‘It Always Kinda’ Frightened Them That They’d Be Sent Back’: German American Origin Stories from Southwestern Illinois” explores oral histories from elderly German Americans from southwestern Illinois. Thompson engages with “origin stories,” which involve collecting family stories of immigration, settlement and adaptation from descendants of those parents and grandparents who migrated to the United States. This study is not one of first person experience, but instead considers the multi-generational experiences that get passed down through complex ways of understanding. Thompson argues that through these origin stories, one can see how immigrant communities negotiate a sense of belonging, and how second and third-generations interpret this past. It is this complexity of the immigrant experience, Thompson

concludes, that must be conveyed in schools through oral history projects that will allow students to see the connection between past and present, and to gain a sense of empathy and historical perspective regarding citizenship and bilingualism in their communities.

Another study of ethnic integration and resistance is found in “Oral History in Understanding Ethnic Group Education.” Nirit Richel and Tali Tadmor Shimony use fifteen oral histories derived from Circassian men and women to explore the influence of education in the formation of identity. As an ethnic minority in Israel, the Circassians have historically followed a separate educational trajectory from government-sponsored schooling. Through the interviews of age-old community stories, Richel and Shimony reveal how, during the Ottoman Period (1878-1918) and the British Mandate Period (1918-1949), the Circassians solidified and upheld their ethnic identity through their separate schooling system. More specifically, the authors provide profiles of the ideal male, female, and teacher candidates from the schools to elucidate how Circassians conserved their identity and to reveal what characteristics were considered illustrative of this identity.

Some of the oral historians at work in this issue have a personal connection with the group or educational site being investigated. So it is with Janis Thiessen’s “Education for Identity: A Half Century History of Westgate Mennonite Collegiate.” In this article, Thiessen details the history of Westgate Mennonite Collegiate in Winnipeg, Manitoba by using a combination of oral history interviews and archival records. Until 2011, herself a teacher at the school, Thiessen explores how Westgate’s background can provide insight into ethno-religious private schooling in Canada and the processes by which those communities negotiated their collective identity, language, and religion within the wider social context. Thiessen employs the four-stage life history process developed by German oral historian Alexander von Plato to guide her interviews with past and current staff. Supplementing the oral histories with archival records, Thiessen determines that Westgate has played an important role in Mennonite history in their search for identity as an ethno-religious group in Canadian society.

Several articles explore different pedagogical and innovative ways for disseminating oral history accounts. In “Teaching and Learning Oral History/Theory/Performance: A Case Study of the Scholarship of Discovery, Integration, Application, and Teaching,” Jennifer Clary-Lemon and Lynne Williams detail the ways in which oral history projects can both fulfill and integrate Ernest Boyer’s four-part model of scholarship, discovery, integration, application and teaching, through a case study of the Irish Association of Manitoba (IAM) oral history project. At its inception, the project was intended to provide the club with a historical record of its original members. However, as Clary-Lemon and Williams began to discover, it became a remarkable learning experience for both student and mentor as they embarked on the creation of a play script based on the interviews. It

was through this collaborative playwriting that the authors unearthed the scholarly value of oral history. They recognize the potential for such projects to create new knowledge while bridging multiple disciplines. Beyond the classroom, the authors recognize the possibility of reaching a broader non-academic audience through such projects. Moreover, these authors ask us to reconsider the pedagogical ways in which oral history projects can provide dynamic and reciprocal learning experiences for both teachers and students. This case study reveals the opportunity to reconceptualize the notion of “scholarship” through the use of oral histories to create a more profound learning experience within the university, as well as for the wider surrounding communities.

“Between Art and Testimony: Transforming Oral Histories of Holocaust Survivors into Young Adult Fiction and Creative Non-Fiction” considers the challenges and possibilities of using oral history testimony in the creation of young adult (YA) historical fiction and creative non-fiction about the Holocaust. Author Karen Krasny offers an insightful look at how YA literature can help students to “bear literary witness” to the Holocaust through references to work by YA author Kathy Kacer and to *The Diary of Anne Frank*. She considers the often problematic interaction between art and testimony, and more specifically, between literature and the Holocaust. Krasny argues against the notion that YA literature must involve consolation and hope, pointing instead to Spargo’s concept of “vigilant memory” that asks the reader to acknowledge death and atrocity in order to incite a renewed sense of moral responsibility and human connection, turning students away from relying on more culturally accepted forms of commemoration and consolation for such difficult events in history.

Indeed, oral histories then, have pedagogical uses. “Exploring Oral History Methodology as a Culturally Responsive Way to Support the Writing Development of Secondary English Language Learners” examines the pedagogical potentials of oral history to improve English language learners’ (ELLs) writing abilities. The authors describe a case study conducted in a level four ESL classroom in Ontario, Canada, in which students participated in an oral history project that involved recording and writing their own history and experiences for publication in a class book. The authors note that not only did the project help ELLs to recognize the distinction between oral communication and the written word, it also allowed them to strengthen their ability to edit their written work, as they considered both form and content to produce more effective writing. Beyond the academic benefits of the project, the authors advocate for the educational opportunities such projects contribute towards a culturally responsive pedagogy that in turn validates student experiences, fosters community understanding, and challenges teachers’ preconceptions.

“The Velvet Revolution: Oral History Projects in Czech Classrooms” details two oral history projects carried out in Czech classrooms. Born out of a desire to

spark students' interest in Czech history, M. Gail Hickey and Lucie Bohmova discuss how since 1989, Czech teachers have gained more freedom to explore new teaching strategies including oral history projects. These particular projects involved student interviews with relatives, neighbours and school personnel who experienced life prior to the Velvet Revolution and the events of November 1989. Supplemented with secondary research, students gathered their findings into a Living History Museum that was then shared with the entire school. The authors offer valuable reflections on what concepts the students took away from the projects, as well as what teaching strategies worked best. Ultimately, the projects afforded students invaluable opportunities to gain a greater appreciation of democracy and freedom. They were also able to develop a more nuanced understanding, the necessary historical thinking skills, to assess the relationships between the past and present, and how students can play a role in making history.

In "Stories of Holocaust Survivors as an Educational Tool – Uses and Challenges," Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre employees Sabrina Moisan, Eszter Andor, and Cornelia Strickler discuss their project *Witness to History*. Since its inception in 1994, the project has collected 472 oral history testimonies from Holocaust survivors. The authors provide invaluable pedagogical insights into the process of creating an oral testimony video databases. In turn, they outline important considerations that researchers must take account of when collecting oral histories, such as point of view, memory, interviewer/interviewee interactions, and authenticity. More specifically, Moisan, Andor and Strickler argue for the educational value of utilizing oral history testimonies in the classroom. They maintain that videos such as those contained in the *Witness to History* collection can help educators convey to students the complexity of an historical event like the Holocaust and foster an empathetic sense of human understanding and connection. On this note, the authors offer detailed strategies for using Holocaust oral testimonies in the classroom, including questions to pose and guidelines for interpreting witness testimony with students.

Two articles discuss the use of oral histories with adult respondents and in settings far from conventional classrooms. "Education as the Organizing Principle Behind the Oral History Program at the Chemical Heritage Foundation" outlines the work at the Chemical Heritage Foundation (CHF). The authors, Hilary Domush and Sarah Hunter-Lascoskie, are deeply involved in the foundation's Oral History Program (OHP) that has actively collected oral histories from scientists since the late 1970s. The program's collection boasts more than 400 oral history testimonies, and is continuously growing. The authors describe how the OHP began to harness the educational potential of the collection by targeting audiences of various levels, from high school students to university researchers as well as the general public. Domush and Hunter-Lascoskie note the waning interest among students in science today, and therefore argue that oral history projects such as this one can help to revitalize the

American science program by opening alternative pedagogical apertures to the dynamism of science and scientists in the “real world”. Among the new education projects, the OHP strives to include more perspectives from women and other minorities in science, and to utilize virtual exhibits to reach wide audiences through the Internet. The authors provide useful reflections on organizing large collections into searchable databases, and indicate the potential for expanding the OHP’s organizational capacity to facilitate educational programs in the future.

Adult education and the role of interpreters in peace-keeping operations are discussed in “Opening the Black Box: Oral Histories of How Soldiers and Civilians Learned to Translate and Interpret During Peace Support Operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina.” Catherine Baker uses 51 oral history interviews with former soldiers, language trainers and local interpreters to illustrate the significance education and training as language intermediaries played during their peace operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Baker shows how varying levels of education informed the norms by which interpreters, translators and linguists operated in the field, and how all of these language intermediaries, regardless of prior education, believed their role to be difficult, requiring great tact to appropriately convey meaning. Through tracing the educative experiences of language intermediaries during the Bosnia-Herzegovina peace support mission, Baker argues that oral histories such as these can reveal important insights regarding adult education and the social factors that influence learning past the standard sites of high school and university.

These articles therefore continue to attest to the achievement of oral history beyond the schoolteachers’ classroom or oral historian’s library. Instead, as Thompson made clear more than thirty years ago, oral history as a research methodology and pedagogy continues to change the ways in which history is written and learned, in its questions and its judgments, and in its aesthetic textures for engaging historical thinking within a variety of educational and community settings.¹¹ These authors continue to advance substantial interdisciplinary contributions to the theory, methodology, and ethical dilemmas taken up within the broader field of qualitative research.

We would like to conclude this special issue of the *Oral History Forum* by thanking the editors, Alexander Freund, Kristina Rae Llewellyn, and Nolan Reilly, for their encouragement, openness and commitment to give this special issue a digital archival home for future scholars, teachers, and students to read and build upon. Moreover, this issue would not have been possible without the generous contributions of our peer reviewers. We would like to thank the Educational Research Unit (ERU) at the University of Ottawa *Making History: Narratives and Collective Memory in Education / Faire de l’histoire: Récits et mémoires collectives*

¹¹ Thompson, *The Voices of the Past*.

en education.¹² Over the course of the last year, our research unit has supported this project, and we wish to thank our colleagues for their generosity. The Research Unit has established research partnerships with community educators and education projects, recognizing that such links will ultimately enhance our capacity to innovate and contribute to the quality of historical research and the teaching of historical literacies at all levels. To this end, our Research Unit continues to make modest yet significant contributions to the overall mandate of partner organizations like THEN/HIER and the Oral History Centre at Concordia University as well as support the publication of special issues like this one. Finally, we would like to thank the authors who shared their research with the readers of this journal and have inspired us to rethink our oral history research activities, to understand how various technologies can both enhance and transcend traditional history pedagogies and, in turn, provide future qualitative researchers, teachers, students, and communities alternative possibilities for making educational histories in the 21st Century.

Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, Sharon Anne Cook, and Marie Ainsworth
University of Ottawa

¹² For more information about the Educational Research Unit see www.makinghistory-fairehistoire.ca.