

# Research into Practice: Tuning in to the “Chorus of History” Through the Use of Oral History in the Classroom

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Using oral histories in history and social studies classrooms can highlight the fact that historical sources are authored and contain particular assumptions, biases, and perspectives about the world. They require critical evaluation to understand why people might have said what they said, why they might view particular events or issues in certain ways, the kinds of insights, emotions, and attitudes they have about what happened in the past, and the reasons they give for acting in the ways they did. Because oral histories have become more widely available and utilized due to electronic and digital means of preservation and access, they can be easily used with students of all ages. To learn more about the use of oral history in the classroom and consider how students can work with oral sources, I reviewed the work and ideas of Associate Professor Kevin Blackburn, a proponent of using oral histories in classrooms.

In Singapore, Kevin Blackburn is an Associate Professor of Humanities and Social Studies Education at the National Institute of Education (NIE). His ideas and experiences with the use of oral histories to teach history are of great use to teachers who are interested in having students work with oral history sources in their classrooms.

In sitting down and conducting an interview with Associate Professor Kevin Blackburn (a prime example of the process of recording and using oral history), he revealed that he first began working with oral histories with his education students at NIE during what he refers to as the “Big History Revamp” in 1999. This move by the Singapore Ministry of Education towards an inquiry-based approach

to teaching history and towards using source-based material in history education required pedagogical change and seemed like an appropriate time to introduce oral histories in his history courses.

Blackburn was drawn to oral histories because of the way they allowed for what he refers to as a “democratization of memory” (Blackburn, 2012). He asserts that throughout history, a large majority of the historical sources we have access to have been written and created by those privileged few with money, publishers, and an education. Many people throughout history were without access to publishers, but still possessed interesting stories, opinions, and points of view about the world around them. Their memories – the memories of the marginalized, minorities, and those with an outside perspective – can be brought to light and to the public through the recording of oral accounts and histories (Blackburn, 2012).

As Blackburn (2012) sees it, “ordinary people do extraordinary things.” Those whom we would typically refer to as nothing more than the “common people” are far from just passive eyewitnesses to the events that have unfolded in their lifetime; instead, as Blackburn declares, these people are the “chorus of history” and regularly chime in to supplement the song of the past.

Within the classroom, Blackburn has had aspirant teachers work on a family history project, in which they interviewed family members in order to look at the way people have lived their lives and to examine both the challenges they have faced and the defining

moments in their lives. With this project, Blackburn revealed how he thought that the interview process and recording of oral family history allowed his students to better understand cultural change within their families.

As students went through the process of creating an oral history account, they became thoughtfully aware of the limitations of history especially the impact of leading questions in an interview, problems with the corroboration of oral accounts with other accounts, and problems with translation and dictation. This was because students and teachers had, in the past, been given sources without really having to think about the creation of the source and the possible limitations of the source. The process of creating their own sources through interviews gave teachers and students a better understanding of the importance of corroboration with other primary sources and documents, contextualization, and how the setting, people involved, and questions asked can really influence the creation of the source.

In a *Straits Times* (2011) article about the use of oral histories, Blackburn speaks to the limitations of oral histories. He acknowledges that oral history is far from complete history:

It is just one source and perspective of what happened no matter how authoritative the speaker so the students [must] corroborate this account with historical sources, such as newspaper articles, published memoirs, history books and documents in archives. (p. D5)

While it is true that there are weaknesses that come with using oral histories in the classroom, Blackburn strongly speaks to the rewards that personal oral family history projects can bring about:

Learning about family history can encourage citizens to become more aware of the part that generations of loved ones played in the nation's history. Those discoveries can strengthen a sense of belonging and national identity

allowing you to see how your family's own history fits into the rich mosaic of the nation's past. (Blackburn, 2011, p. D5)

To Blackburn the largest rewards in using oral histories seem to lie not in the concrete facts about the past that the students gain in conducting an interview, but rather in the understanding of how certain individuals see the past, why certain stories hold value to certain individuals, and what it was like for one person to live during a certain time period. These personal accounts and the social contexts that shape them usually seem to get swallowed up among the many pages of textbooks that are filled with dates, important persons, and facts. Oral histories have the power and potential to open students' eyes to another side of history – one that is filled with rich detail and vivid explanations about personal experiences, and what it truly means to live in the past.

Teachers, according to Blackburn, should have the freedom to tweak and tailor oral history sources for use in the classroom. The *History Matters* website – especially the article on oral histories by the historian Linda Shopes – is an excellent starting point and place of reference for teachers. The *History Matters* website provides a range of suggestions, tips, and resources to help teachers and students think about working with many different sources as historical evidence.

Shopes' article on making sense of oral history published on the *History Matters* website provides many guiding questions, model interpretations, and suggestions that can provide scaffolding to assist students in conducting interviews and in evaluating oral accounts of the past. These questions and areas of focus can be used to help students and teachers address the five main source-based skills that are central to history and social studies education in Singapore schools. These source-based skills, which focus on: (1) making inferences; (2) comparing and contrasting; (3) evaluating reliability; (4) evaluating utility; and (5) evaluating claims, are challenging for students. Using oral histories as historical sources can therefore be

one interesting way of engaging students in source work. Students may be more motivated to hear the views of people, their stories, and the emotions and feelings they have about people, events, or issues in the past. They can help the past “come alive” in ways that other sources might not be able to convey.

Studying an oral account of the past is a great way for students to make inferences about the purposes narrators, interviewers, and subjects of interviews might have for giving and recording their accounts about the past. For example, Shopes poses questions to have students think about potential personal, cultural, and social influences that might shape the way the narrator expresses himself or herself in the interview. Students need to be able to consider the ways particular contexts might shape the ways people think and talk about the past. Another question that students can ask is, “What stake might the narrator have in presenting a particular version of events” (Shopes, 2002)? Questions like these allow students to make their own inferences based on evidence within the source or from their background knowledge.

Oral histories also can be used to strengthen students’ skills of comparing and contrasting different sources. To do this, students can examine the similarities and differences between oral accounts from two different people about the same era or event. Students can also look at the similarities and differences between oral accounts and written accounts of the same time period or occurrence. There are endless comparisons that students can make as events are retold based on distinctions like gender, social status, race, and ideology.

According to the *History Matters* website, students can also evaluate the reliability of an oral source by asking questions that pertain to the reliability of the narrator, the verifiability of the account, and the internal consistency of the source in question (Shopes, 2002). In other words, when examining oral accounts of the past, it is necessary for students to search for factual errors, inconsistencies, and possible discrepancies that do not match up with other

sources or that conflict with what the narrator has already discussed.

Another key target skill deals with valuating the utility or recognizing the strengths and limitations of a source. As with evaluating reliability, students can ask, “What does the narrator avoid or sidestep” (Shopes, 2002, page ref)? On top of this, students can also look at the topics that the narrator is especially enthusiastic about or open to. The strength of the oral source would then lie in how the narrator describes certain events and memories and the weaknesses would lie in the topics the narrator simply brushes off and does not acknowledge. Helping students recognize that sources can be useful yet have limitations is an important understanding that can be developed by having students work with oral history accounts.

The skill of evaluating claims and evidence can easily be honed by asking questions like, “What is said and what is not said?” Or, even simply, “What are they talking about” (Shopes, 2002)? Students can appraise the claims made during an interview based on what they know or have inferred about the narrator and his or her proximity to and knowledge of the event in discussion. Oral history accounts can help students ask *why* a person might make certain claims, why they have a particular perspective, or how they came to form certain views. They require students to get at the core of the claims that a person might make in their account of the past.

By examining oral accounts of history, students and teachers alike can practice important source-based skills. When asking questions about the narrator, interviewer, purpose, and outside factors in the interview, students and teachers will be utilizing important critical thinking skills: they will be asking questions about sources and, thereby, be practicing processes of inquiry and critical analysis. Students and teachers alike will be making inferences and interpreting the circumstances of interviews, questions asked, and general tone of the narrator and interviewer. By corroborating oral accounts with other written, spoken, or factual accounts

of history, learners will be evaluating the reliability and utility of the claims in the oral account, as well as comparing and contrasting information they may come across.

In order to examine the efficacy of oral history and, ultimately, why its inclusion in history and social studies curriculum is more than necessary, we can turn again to the words of Kevin Blackburn, whose years of work and success with oral histories in the classroom have allowed him to evaluate the benefits of using oral accounts as sources of evidence. Using oral histories in the classroom not only enhances historical and academic skills in students, but they also help enhance students' life skills (Blackburn, 2012). Oral histories – especially oral accounts from family members – allow students to take on an active role in history because “history becomes more like heritage” (Blackburn, 2012). Students focus more on identities and community in history, instead of focusing on what many refer to as “boring facts.” This active role in history can almost be viewed as citizenship training, as students learn how to become lifelong informed citizens – looking at different points of view, opinions, and accounts of the world and the past.

Perhaps one of the most important advantages of using oral sources in the classroom is the fact that, by using these sources, students are able to get a feel for the tone of the source. Evaluating the tone of a source (for example, whether the source is sarcastic, nostalgic, bitter, etc.) is a large part of evaluating the overall reliability of the source and is a skill that is often hard for students to master with just print sources. In fact, understanding and evaluating tone are skills that many teachers – in Singapore especially – are trying to implement in the classroom. Because it is relatively easier to pick up on the subtle tones and emotions of the voice when compared to written sources, oral history seems to have a comparative edge in this area.

Ultimately, oral history can help students connect with the past. The feelings and emotions present in oral accounts of history

draw students in and allow them to create personal connections with the history they are studying. Although there are certainly pitfalls in this, simply forcing students to commit trivial facts from textbooks to memory hinders their capacity to think critically about the past by fostering naïve notions that history is impersonal and set in stone (VanSledright, 2004, p. 232). Teachers must dig deeper to really get students engaged. Oral history sources can provide narratives that enable students to understand the past and help them consider questions about how the past is similar to and different from their own experiences. However, perhaps most importantly, they raise the problematic nature of all historical sources as evidence of the past and can help students develop a more critical view of the past as well as hone their ability to better understand what others' experiences were like in the past.

## References

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