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Author(s): Edmund Lim Wee Kiat
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The Power of Stories: Using Oral History and Technology to Enliven the Teaching of Social Studies

Edmund Lim Wee Kiat

Abstract
This paper explores the use of oral history and technology in the social studies classroom and beyond. It presents examples of actual oral history projects. The paper also provides suggestions on the integration of oral history and technology in the teaching of social studies, so as to make the learning process more enriching and engaging.

Introduction
Oral history is a powerful and meaningful tool that can be used by all Social Studies (SS) teachers. A significant portion of history was originally transmitted through oral means. Today, oral history remains highly relevant in the teaching of our young. Furthermore, with the developments in information technology (IT), the use of oral history can be made even more effective and accessible.

When I was a child, I was captivated by stories, both oral and written. When I was a teacher, I used stories and oral history to capture my pupils' attention and deepen their understanding and empathy. I found the use of stories, especially oral history accounts very valuable and pertinent in enlivening the teaching of SS.

Oral history has been defined as the recording of people's memories and recollections about their lives, past and history (Sitton, Mehaffy & David, 1983). The oral history recordings can be in the form of audio or video tapes or compact discs (CD). Today, oral history recordings can be found on the Internet as a video or audio file. Oral history can also be found in the pupils' own homes when they interview their elders about their life stories.

This paper will examine the use of oral history by pupils and teachers. It will refer closely to the SS syllabus and will suggest the use of various user-friendly, web-based resources related to oral history. It will also present two oral history projects and their findings. In the appendix, SS teachers of different levels can
find suggestions and ideas on how oral history and technology can be used in the classroom.

**Pupils as Listeners and Viewers**

When I was teaching the Japanese Occupation of Singapore to my primary four pupils, they were fascinated by that era and the experiences of the veterans and survivors. The textbook provided interesting information about the difficult years and incidents such as the *Sook Ching*. However, it was even more gripping when the pupils listened to first-hand accounts by survivors.

As a student, I had to travel to the Oral History Centre in Fort Canning to listen to the audio recordings of the oral history interviews. However, times have changed and technology has progressed. As a teacher, I could easily tap on IT to locate and use oral history resources right in the comfort of my office or classroom. One source that I used was “Oral History: True Life Accounts” found at [http://www.knowledgenet.com.sg](http://www.knowledgenet.com.sg). It is a reliable and informative website produced and managed by the National Archives. From that site, my pupils and I could listen to exciting oral history accounts by three remarkable survivors. The oral history clips can be found on: [http://www.knowledgenet.com.sg/singapore/index.asp?title=OH/0H.html&hdr=BI](http://www.knowledgenet.com.sg/singapore/index.asp?title=OH/0H.html&hdr=BI) (National Archives of Singapore, 2004).

From Soh Guan Bee’s personal oral history account, the pupils learnt about the Japanese *Sook Ching* screening exercise carried out at Jalan Besar. During the first month of the Japanese Occupation in 1942, Chinese youth and men in Singapore underwent the dreadful screening process. Soh Guan Bee lucidly retold his experiences and the details surrounding the screening. His account brought history to life. Listeners can tune into Guan Bee’s feelings and thoughts as he recalled that nerve-wracking screening, which led to the slaughter of more than 20,000 innocent civilians. The use of oral history in the teaching of SS can help to nurture a deeper sense of empathy and sympathy in our young.

At a click of the mouse on the website links, teachers and pupils can also listen to Yap Yan Hong retelling the *Sook Ching* massacre. Yap was one of the few survivors of the massacre. He provided details about the massacre on Changi Beach and his miraculous escape from death. His first-hand account is indeed gripping. From his vivid account, listeners can easily visualise this incident. History is no longer just words on the textbook but actual events in the lives of people who lived through those days.

These oral history clips can be used as tuning-in activities or as development activities. The account by Soh Guan Been is a riveting way of introducing the topic to the pupils. I used Yap Yan Hong’s account to add “flesh” and realism to the lesson on *Sook Ching*. The use of oral history clips are particularly effective for learners who prefer to learn through the auditory mode. To supplement the audio effects, teachers can present pertinent pictures of specific scenes and people, along with apt captions and text, on the projection screen while the pupils are listening to the accounts.
In addition, oral history resources can be used to enrich and supplement our pupils’ historical knowledge. The primary SS textbook materials on the Japanese Occupation focus on male characters, heroes and historical figures such as Lim Bo Seng and Adnan Saidi. It will be beneficial to also introduce heroines and female role models to our young. This can be done through oral history. Pupils can listen to Elizabeth Choy’s touching oral history account. They can learn about Elizabeth Choy’s bravery and strength when they listen to her sharing about her altruistic acts in the face of personal danger during the Japanese Occupation. Despite the pain and torture that Elizabeth Choy underwent, her account shows an amazing strength of spirit. Unlike many text-based resources, audio clips of oral history are able to “convey the tones, accents and emotions of the spoken word” (Thompson, 1998, p. 178). Such oral history accounts have significant impact and educational value.

Though it is very convenient to use oral history clips in the classroom, adequate preparation has to be made. Teachers should ensure that the sound system is working well as it is vital that the sound projection is clear and sharp so that pupils can comfortably listen to the oral history accounts. It is also important for teachers to provide sufficient background information and guidelines so that the pupils can fully appreciate the first-hand oral history accounts. For instance, before listening to Elizabeth Choy’s account, the teachers can provide background information about the Kempeitai (Japanese Military Police) and Elizabeth Choy. In this way, pupils can better understand the historical context and the significance of the oral history accounts.

Another way of promoting active learning will be to pose a series of questions before the pupils actually listen to the oral history recordings. This can heighten the pupils’ attention and interest. The pupils can also raise related questions about the topic. While listening to the audio clip, the pupils can then identify the answers to the questions and examine the responses of the oral history interviewee. After listening to the clip, the pupils can discuss the responses and answers with each other and their teacher. Such an activity will make the oral history learning process more engaging and fruitful.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) has also produced useful video clips based on oral history accounts. One such clip is “Memories of War”. In this, three elderly gentlemen were interviewed and they shared their vivid memories as young children during the Japanese Occupation. To add greater visual appeal, some of their accounts were enacted by actors in various scenes.

Teachers should exercise care when oral and visual resources are used with young children. In one video clip, “Fall of Singapore”, for example, scenes of death and destruction were used to portray the “nightmare of Japanese rule” and invasion. The enacted scenes were integrated with authentic “black and white film excerpts” and historical accounts. This has resulted in a high level of realism. Teachers can provide pupils with appropriate advice and contextual information so that pupils will not have unnecessary fears or nightmares. There has been
anecdotal feedback from some primary four pupils that they were worried and fearful after learning about Japanese Occupation. It is important that teachers help the pupils respond positively to the natural feelings of concern in our young. For example, through the use of oral history accounts by Yap Yan Hong and Elizabeth Choy, teachers can highlight examples of people who overcame their fears and survived successfully. Teachers can also explain to the pupils that the acts of brutality occurred during the years of war and occupation. Hence, our nation emphasises Total Defence and National Service to protect Singapore and its people. Likewise, teachers can explain that the cruelty of certain Japanese soldiers happened during the war years and many Japanese were not as evil or mean. In this way, the realism evoked by the authentic oral history accounts can deepen the knowledge of our young and have a positive empowering effect on them.

**Pupils as Enquirers**

Pupils themselves can also engage in oral history research. There is an abundance of historical information around them. For one of the SS projects, I asked my pupils to interview their grandparents or relatives who lived through the Japanese Occupation. In Morrison’s (1998) opinion, interviewing is essential to all oral research. My pupils were excited by this oral history project. They were keen to learn more from their elderly relatives, who personally experienced the arduous years of the occupation. Furthermore, they could relate their textbook knowledge to the questions and answers from the oral history interviews.

To prepare them for the oral interviews, I conducted a lesson on oral interviewing skills. I introduced them to the nature of oral history and shared with them ways in which they can gather oral history through interviews. They were taught the process involved in oral history interviews. Topics that were covered included preparation prior to the interview, interview procedures and questioning techniques. A helpful website that contains succinct advice and guidelines on oral history interviews is http://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/ produced by the Oral History Society of United Kingdom. Another useful site is http://www.indiana.edu/~cshm/techniques.html produced by Babara Truesdell of Indiana University in USA.

For the oral history interview project, pupils were also taught how to effectively use technology, such as tape recorders and video recorders. Pupils, who had access to digital recorders, could use them too. They could then upload their interview clips to the Internet.

My pupils enjoyed doing the oral history research. It provided an excellent opportunity for them to apply their prior knowledge of the topic. Before composing meaningful questions, the pupils had to have good background knowledge of the Japanese Occupation. They also deepened their understanding when they heard first-hand accounts from their sources. The interesting details provided by their interviewees broadened the pupils’ vicarious experiences too. History came alive when the pupils engaged in oral history. Through the interviews, pupils could
hear and visualise the unfolding of history. They were active learners in search of historical information and answers.

As part of an extended enquiry, I worked closely with one pupil who actively did oral history research. The pupil, Matthew, identified a topic of his interest. He researched on Bahau, an agricultural settlement in Malaya. During the Japanese Occupation, a group of Eurasians and some Catholics from Singapore were resettled in Bahau so as to alleviate the problem of food shortage in Singapore. There was a brief mention of Bahau in the textbook and Matthew was interested to learn more. There were only two published books that featured the lives of the local people in Bahau. Matthew wanted to expand his knowledge so he went to the National Archives and Oral History Centre. He read the *Syonan Shim bun* which is available on microfilm. *Syonan Shim bun* was the main English medium newspaper published in Singapore during the occupation era. A number of articles on Bahau in that newspaper revealed how the Japanese authorities actively promoted Bahau. They painted a rosy and attractive picture of the malaria-infested jungle and swampland so as to attract more resettlers. Matthew was amused and fascinated by the propaganda efforts to pull more settlers to Bahau.

At the Oral History Centre, Matthew listened to the tape recordings of oral history accounts told by various Bahau survivors. These original accounts gave differing perspectives of life in Bahau. They revealed the difficulties and life-threatening challenges of living in Bahau, which was certainly no Eden. Matthew took notes of the diverse opinions and thoughts regarding Bahau. He learnt about the various reasons that led the locals to shift to Bahau and the ways in which they coped with the tough life in the settlement. In the process of using technology and primary sources such as oral history, Matthew developed a stronger understanding of history. History was truly more than just facts and concepts in a book. The oral history interview can supplement and complement the text-based records by providing the “background and intention of the record” (Kwa, 1998).

Eventually, we located Mr C, a survivor from Bahau, whom Matthew could interview and gather more information from. Working on information that he had already acquired, Matthew crafted a series of questions to get more details from Mr C. During the interview, Matthew clarified his understanding of life in Bahau with Mr C. Matthew was also able to double-check his facts, get in-depth answers and gain elucidation from Mr C. In addition to Mr C’s interesting anecdotes, Matthew managed to get Mr C’s views and opinions regarding various incidents and people in Bahau as Mr C was an eyewitness who lived in Bahau and participated in the events that occurred there. In this respect, this oral history account yielded information that traditional historical documents were unable to provide (Hong, 1998).

Other than using a digital tape recorder, Matthew’s oral history interview with Mr C was captured on film with a home video camera. Subsequently, the technology proved to be very useful. After the interview, Matthew could review and transcribe the interview with the use of the tape recorder and video camera. The video camera
was particularly effective as the video clips could depict the animated expressions, fine nuances and body language of the interviewee. This oral history interview, with a strong visual element, can also be edited and shared with various interested listeners and viewers. With the interviewees’ permission, excerpts can be uploaded onto the Internet and made available to pupils and the public. The potent combination of oral interview and technology makes the learning of history and our past highly educational, enjoyable and engaging.

**Reflections of a Young Oral History Researcher**

After working with Matthew on an oral history research project, I asked him to share with me his thoughts on the use of oral history. Matthew recalled:

“Originally, I was not very interested in oral history. I just thought it would be quite dull, like textbooks read out loud. However, when Mr Lim asked me if I wanted to choose oral history as the topic for my project, I jumped at the chance. Not only would I be able to conduct my own interview, I would be able to work with Mr Lim again. Since then my perception of oral history has changed”.

The pupil’s role as an oral history researcher can be empowering as it gives the pupil a sense of ownership in the project. The pupil’s active participation leads to an active involvement in the documentation and creation of history. In the initial stage, Matthew noted:

“I originally wanted to interview my grandmother... However, my grandmother is slightly shy. In the end, she called the interview off”.

In life, changes and adaptations are necessary. Sometimes, research subjects do not materialise and work out well initially. In this case, Matthew learnt the lesson early and he displayed positive dedication as we searched for an appropriate interviewee.

Matthew’s commitment was rewarded when we had two fascinating interviews with Mr C. Matthew noted, “Mr C related interesting anecdotes such as snakes falling out of his jungle-palm roof in Bahau”. Matthew also realised that “oral history shows the facts of history from a different, more personal and sometimes somewhat entertaining view”.

Beyond the skeleton of facts and concepts, Matthew was able to appreciate the personal elements of the human experiences, which enliven history. Oral historian Thompson (1998) articulated that oral history interviews allow historians to uncover and examine specific areas of historical experience, such as relationships and domestic life, which are seldom documented in text-based sources. Matthew’s reflection corroborated with Thompson’s view. Matthew articulated that,

"Whereas textbook history presents just the dry facts and the big picture, like Singapore fell on 15 February 1942, and the first group of settlers left for Bahau on 31 December 1944, and Bishop Devals died on 12 January 1945, oral history relates the less reported and more micro facts"
Matthew expressed his view that oral history makes these past events “come very alive”. Besides gaining deeper insights into the historical content and perspectives, Matthew learnt more about the craft and nature of history. He pointed out, “Another way in which oral history has helped me is to make me more discerning when I read and listen to things. Some of the facts in the different interviews seemingly contradict each other. I needed to sieve out the sweeping statements that may not have been true and eliminate the sources that were less likely to have knowledge on that certain aspect”. The pupil’s growth as a learner and researcher is evident in this context. In the process of doing oral history research, Matthew exercised the thinking skills of “distinguishing facts from opinions and causes from effects”, “making judgements or decisions”, “drawing conclusions after considering relevant evidence” and “justifying with sound reasons” (MOE: CPDD, 1999).

Finally, Matthew shared his view that oral history is underused. He opined that it should be used more because new facts can be uncovered and incorporated into textbooks to make them easier to read or study.

This oral history project was an informative and interesting experience for the various parties involved. Mr C also had a memorable time sharing his memories of his past with Matthew and the future listeners or viewers of the oral history recording. One of the aims of the SS is to “inculcate a sense of involvement and participation in the community” (MOE: CPDD, 1999). Oral history is a valuable tool to achieve this goal. When our pupils participate in the oral history interviews with members of the community, they are actively engaged with historical content and at the same time involved in the community.

In the process of working as an oral history researcher, Matthew improved his information-gathering skills as well as his communication skills. Matthew located relevant information from diverse sources such as the newspapers, Internet, books, photos and transcripts to verify the authenticity and accuracy of the various historical reports, including the oral history accounts. Matthew also developed his communication skills as he had to listen attentively. He had to articulate his thoughts, views and questions thoughtfully and clearly too. In addition, Matthew had to take the initiative to clarify doubts and examine different perspectives.

Over and above knowing and comprehending history, pupils who meaningfully use oral history will be required to apply their knowledge and analyse the information. As seen in the case of Matthew, the young oral history researcher will also need to evaluate and synthesise the knowledge gained. He had opportunities to exercise higher-order thinking skills. Matthew truly benefited from this oral history project. Similarly, these benefits are open to our other primary school pupils who are interested and committed to learning about oral history and using oral history as a valuable tool.
Conclusion

Oral history is perceived to be as ancient as human speech, yet it is a “new and innovative breakthrough in the process of researching and writing history” (Sitton Mehaffy & David, 1983, p. 11). The use of oral history as a teaching approach allows our pupils to be active learners who can learn from various fascinating primary sources. In addition, the use of oral history research enables our pupils to be immersed in the learning of our history. As interviewers, they also play a meaningful, functional role in the recording and production of history.

Technology has enabled us to use and record oral history relatively easily. The Internet, as one of the key communication modes, has allowed researchers, teachers and pupils to communicate and learn more about our history (Thompson, 1998). At a click of the mouse, we are able to listen to authentic, first-hand sources of our oral history, in the comfort of our classroom. Teachers and pupils are also able to conveniently record oral history interviews with audio and video recorders.

Through the use of life stories and technology, our pupils can become empowered learners and even, producers of history. From the above examples, it can be seen that the use of oral history makes the SS learning and teaching relevant and interesting. Let us optimise the accessible and available technology to reap the benefits of using oral history in the teaching of SS.

Edmund Lim is currently a Teaching Fellow with the Humanities and Social Studies Education Academic Group. He was a primary school teacher in a neighbourhood school before focusing on the teaching of Social Studies in the Gifted Education Programme. His research interests include oral history, Social Studies and the use of technology in teaching.

References


Appendix A

Some Ideas for Use of Oral History and Technology in the Primary Grades

Primary One: Class-Based Oral History Interviews

The use of oral history can begin as early as primary one. In primary one, pupils study about people and places in the school. Other than listening to pre-recorded oral history interviews, a feasible and practical activity is to conduct a simple class-based oral history interview of a teacher in the school. With the help of the SS teacher, the pupils can brainstorm a series of questions to ask. During the lesson, the pupils can then take turns to ask the teacher about his or her role as a teacher. In addition, pupils can ask the teacher about the teacher’s school life as a pupil years ago. This is a straightforward way for the pupils to learn more about the past and relate it to the present.

Alternatively, other appropriate individuals can be invited to serve as oral history interviewees. They can include the school principal (chapter 10) or even the canteen vendor (chapter 4). In relation to the primary one chapter 3 contents, a neighbourhood police officer or soldier can be the subject of an interesting oral history interview too. These individuals can share about their past and present experiences as part of the oral history session and SS lesson. This oral history interview can be recorded. It is a simple introduction to the interviewing process. As noted by oral historians, the interview is an art “that can be acquired through experience and observation” and the conscious practice of specific procedures can be even more advantageous (Seldon & Pappworth, 1983, p. 55). This initial exposure to primary one pupils is a gentle way of introducing to them oral history research. Pertinent excerpts of the recording can be reviewed by the class to further develop the teaching points.

Primary Two: Family-Based Oral History Interviews

There are many appropriate applications of oral history interviews in the primary two syllabus. For the primary two pupils, they can conduct oral history interviews, with the support of their family members. Oral historian Lim (2002) recalled that his early experiences of oral history as a pupil involved hearing the recollections of his grandmother and parents about the war years and post-War years. Likewise, our pupils can be formally introduced to the wealth of oral history.

In line with the primary two syllabus, a possible activity for chapter 4, “Happy Birthday, Grandpa!” is to get the pupils to interview one of their grandparents or elderly people in their families. As a class, the pupils can list down a number of suitable questions for the interview. The teacher can assist the pupils in this process. They can help the pupils to develop good questions that will elicit generous
and useful responses from the interviewees. Then, pupils can return home and interview their elderly family members to gather more information.

The interviewee can also be an adult neighbour. An adult family member can accompany the pupil during the interview. For safety reasons, it is advisable that an adult member of the family accompanies the young child when he or she goes to the home or office of another adult for the interview. One of the aims of chapter 1 is to “identify the roles and contributions of people who live or work in the neighbourhood” (MOE: CPDD, 2000). The primary two pupils can interview a neighbour or person who works in the neighbourhood. Other than asking questions related to the interviewee’s role and contribution, the pupils can ask the interviewee about his or her early years growing up in post-War Singapore. Such viable oral interviews will increase the pupils’ knowledge about the neighbourhood and widen their understanding of Singapore and its history.

During the interview preparation and actual interview session, pupils also have the opportunity to use and enhance their communication skills. The family members of the pupils can assist in recording the interview with tape recorders, cameras or video cameras. Subsequently, pupils can be invited to share their interview findings with the class.

**Primary Three to Six: Harnessing Technology for Oral History Interviews with Guest Interviewees**

In primary three, pupils learn about “Our Society: The making of a multi-racial population”. A practical oral history activity would be to invite two elderly guests from two different ethnic groups for the oral history interview. The guests can be senior teachers, family members of the pupils or friends of the teacher. Pupils can be divided into groups to devise questions on various aspects of our heritage and history.

In chapter 5 of the primary three syllabus, the pupils study about our early settlers. If one of the interviewees is an immigrant to Singapore, the pupils can ask the interviewee about the push or pull factors that led him or her to Singapore. As a result of the interview, the pupils will know more about the past. They may also develop a stronger appreciation for Singapore as they learn about the factors that attracted their forefathers and other immigrants to Singapore.

If the guest interviewee is unable to come to the class for the interview, technology can be used to facilitate a “live” interview. The teacher can use the web-camera, together with the classroom computer and broadband Internet connection, to conduct a web-based oral history interview or web-conference. The pupils can take turns to interview the guest whose responses will be broadcast and projected onto the screen of the classroom or computer laboratory.

However, if the guest is not available for a real-time, “live” interview, the teacher and some selected pupils can assist in the oral history interviewing process by pre-recording the interview and presenting it to the class. Though a
video-recorded interview is not a “live” event, such an interview can be beneficial, in terms of acquiring knowledge and refining interviewing skills. Chosen video excerpts can be uploaded to the school webpage and shared with other classes too. Technology can be used to harness the potential of oral history.

Primary four pupils will be studying about the Japanese Occupation in semester two. Possible guest interviewees include elderly friends and relatives who lived through the war years. In semester one, when the pupils are learning about the environment, they can use their interviewing skills to do a class-based interview with professionals such as a meteorologist, land planner or a member of the Nature Society of Singapore. Conversely, they can interview a lay person on Singapore of the past and the geographical features of the island state.

Likewise, primary five pupils can conduct oral history interviews with their older family members who lived through the post-War and post-independence eras. There are numerous suitable topics that can be selected for oral history interviews. The possible subjects range from our early years as a young nation to housing and defence.

As part of the primary six syllabus that examines our progress as a nation, primary six pupils can interview people working in different industries to gain more information about our past and the growth that we achieved in the diverse sectors of our nation. For example, pupils can interview the older generation of Singaporeans about the changes in the transportation industry from the 1950s to the present decade.

Pupils can also interview foreign friends about their countries and their history to expand their knowledge of other countries. This will be in line with the primary six syllabus on our links other countries. Technology can be used to facilitate the interview process. For instance, pupils can hold a web-conference with their foreign friends. If technology allows, pupils can email the questions to their friends who can then record their replies using a digital video recorder or digital voice recorder. This can then be uploaded to the Internet for personal or public viewing.

With the advance in affordable and user-friendly technology, it is increasingly viable to use technology to maximise the learning opportunities provided by oral history. Indeed, through the effective use of technology and oral history, teachers and pupils can conveniently tap on the power of stories to enliven the learning of SS.