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Using Primary Sources for the Teaching of Secondary Social Studies: Exploring the Potential and Problems of Oral History

Chee Min Fui

Abstract

This paper explores the potential for using oral history in teaching secondary Social Studies. The use of existing oral history recordings and oral history projects has the potential to engage students emotionally as well as build critical thinking and research skills. The Singapore National Archives' oral records remain one of the less explored avenues for teaching about Singapore's post-independence economic and social development. This paper argues for an active engagement with oral history to enhance the learning of Social Studies.

Introduction

Oral history interviews have increasingly gained acceptance as a valuable source of historical evidence. The history of groups who leave behind no documentation of their experiences can be captured through oral history. In schools, oral history projects have also been effectively implemented for different disciplines. This paper will first give an overview of the value of oral history and the problems associated with oral evidence. It will then describe, generally, the phases of an oral history project and examine the advantages of using oral history interviews for selected topics in upper secondary Social Studies.

Social Studies is closely bound with National Education. One of the goals of the subject is to instil a sense of national identity. Another is to develop the skills of independent inquiry and critical thinking. This paper argues that an active engagement with oral history can help meet the goals of Social Studies.

What is Oral History?

The *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines oral history as: "tape-recorded historical information drawn from the speaker's personal knowledge; the use or interpretation of this as an academic subject" (Thompson, 2000). Another definition from Donald Ritchie defines oral history thus: "... oral history collects spoken

memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews" (Ritchie, 1995). Ritchie further extends his definition by stating that oral history is not just any recorded interview. "An interview becomes an oral history only when it has been recorded, processed in some way, made available in an archive, library, or other repository, or reproduced in relatively verbatim form as a publication. Availability for general research, reinterpretation, and verification defines oral history" (Ritchie 1995). Over the years, institutions and scholars engaged in oral history have gradually established rules and procedures for conducting, processing and archiving oral history interviews.

For the purposes of this paper, the term oral history is used more loosely. School projects and interviews undertaken for use in the classroom and for purposes of instruction may differ somewhat from the established procedures of oral history projects undertaken to collect information for the use of future researchers and scholars. Procedures will necessarily be simplified to fit into busy school schedules and to align with instructional objectives.

Oral History — Problems and Potential

The element of personal memory is central to oral history. Much has been said about the selectivity and unreliability of human memory. People remember what they want to remember and what they consider to be important. Interviewees, naturally, wish to be presented in a positive manner. Hence there is always the consideration that interviewees will not be entirely truthful about their roles in certain events or that they may modify their personal views to align themselves with the accepted position of the day.

There is also the problem of the "contaminated interviewee". According to Hay, it is a "... sad case of someone who has supplemented and modified his or her oral memories from literary sources or from previous interviews" (Hay, 1986). He asserts that "contamination" is unavoidable as people are constantly "involved both in the reality of experience and in the interpretation of that experience by the media, historians and novelists" (Hay, 1986). Hence there is hardly any "pure experience". However, he argues that material from oral history is still valuable "for people live by what they believe to have happened rather than by what actually happened" (Hay, 1986).

Those who downplay the importance of oral evidence argue that unlike oral testimony, documents remain unchanged whether they are accessed now or 10 years later. An interviewee might give vastly different accounts depending on when the interview is conducted. Furthermore, personal accounts are usually subjective and biased.

Supporters of oral history argue that problems also exist in documentary evidence. Some documents are prepared with the full knowledge that they will one day be scrutinized by researchers and scholars. Information can be inserted or omitted to create a certain impression. More importantly, documents do not tell the whole

story. This is where oral history can come in and play an important role. Gaps in history can be plugged with the use of oral evidence. According to Morrison,

“... not to recognize these (oral history) as valid verifiable sources is to shut and bar the door on the vast majority of the world’s population — the undocumented and undifferentiated masses of people who are born, live, and die an unrecorded existence. The history of the colonized, of the powerless, of labour, of women, of ethnic minorities, and of children had rarely appeared in documents. With the growth of oral research and its use by historians, the inarticulate have been given a voice and therefore a say in their past” (Morrison, 1998).

Oral history is therefore invaluable in recording the everyday experiences of ordinary people. The problems associated with oral history can be alleviated to a certain extent through well-thought-through procedures for oral history projects, skilled interviewing and a collection of a wide range of views from diverse interviewees. Like documentary evidence, oral evidence needs to be critically examined and used judiciously. According to Morrison, “The key ... to utilizing oral research is not the kind of source it is classified under but what criteria has been used to measure the oral evidence” (Morrison, 1998).

Oral History in Social Studies

Is oral history relevant for Social Studies? This paper will argue that oral history can enhance the learning of Social Studies in the Singapore context. One of the key features of Social Studies at the secondary level has been the introduction of source-based case studies in its assessment. Students are expected to interpret textual, pictorial and graphical sources to investigate issues. By carrying out oral history projects, students participate in documenting the past, and in the process will learn about the nature of primary sources. This helps to develop valuable insights for source analysis.

Oral history is also especially useful when covering the topics connected with the early years of Singapore’s independence. The development of health, education, housing and population policies come under the realm of recent history. An investigation of these areas can be conducted by embarking on oral history projects. Teachers can also tap on the existing oral history interviews in the National Archives. A connection with people who have lived through the first few years of nationhood can help achieve the outcomes of National Education. The subsequent discussion will first focus on oral history projects.

Oral History Projects

The process of an oral history project has within it great potential for teaching research, communication and critical thinking skills. Another one of its strengths also lies in its potential to achieve affective outcomes. Oral history can empower and motivate students tremendously. In conducting oral history interviews, students are pushed to the “front line” and “become the gatherers and interpreters of original

source materials" (Perks 1995, p. 41). Interviews obtained can also be used to teach about cause-and-effect relationships, historical concepts, as well as social issues (Ritchie 1995, p. 169).

Phases of a Project

There are various phases to an oral history project. They will be described very briefly below. The phases here are tailored for what the author feels is suitable for a secondary school. The potential for teaching content, skills and values will be discussed for each phase.

Pre-interview research

Teachers should begin with a pre-interview phase where necessary background research is to be done. At this stage, a hypothesis can be formulated or a research question defined. The research phase is important as students need background knowledge in order to decide on the questions which they will pose to interviewees. They need to know what they want to ask and why they want to ask those questions. A good command of facts and background knowledge would make it easier for them to detect inaccuracies or contradictions in the interviewee's account. Armed with sufficient research, students will be more confident and be better able to draw out useful information. They will also have the necessary resources to pursue new lines of questioning not covered in their original questionnaire. Hence, this phase presents an opportunity for teachers to emphasise and for students to learn the necessary content. It is also a time for students to learn to ask the right questions and to craft effective open-ended questions that can elicit response. The original questionnaire can be revisited at the end of the project for a critical review.

Artefacts, documents and pictures can also be collected in this phase. These can be used to jog an interviewee's memory during the actual interview session. This widens the scope of the research and gives teachers an opportunity to present additional materials in the classroom.

At this stage too, potential interviewees are identified. Education, health, housing and population policies have a direct impact on all Singaporeans. It will be fairly easy for students to find among older relatives, neighbours or family members, those who are willing to talk about their education and school experiences in the early years of Singapore's independence as well as the influences on their early choice of housing or the impact of health and population policies on their lives. Most older people are more than willing to share their life experiences with youngsters whom they feel do not appreciate the hardships of life and have little interest in the struggles of the post-independence years.

Determining an interview approach

The interview is central to oral history projects. According to Hay (1986) there are two approaches to interviewing. There is the “objective/comparative approach ... based on a questionnaire, or at least a very highly structured interview in which the interviewer keeps control and asks a series of common questions to all respondents”. The objective of the approach is “... to produce material which transcends the individual respondent and can be used for comparative purposes ...” The drawback of this is that students can keep too strictly to the questionnaire and hence fail to follow up on interesting or potentially useful information, leaving many issues unexplored.

Another approach “is the free flowing dialogue between interviewer and respondent, with no set pattern, in which conversation is followed wherever it leads” (Hay, 1986). While this will probably throw up interesting anecdotes and create an informal atmosphere, the conversation may become aimless and detract from the original purpose of the interview. For students, it will be desirable to adopt a more highly structured interview as their inexperience may prevent them from eliciting the necessary response without some form of structured guidance.

Conducting the interview

The interview can be conducted either by individual students or in pairs or in small groups. Decisions will depend on the amount of time available and the kinds of interview skills that teachers want students to develop. A teacher would also consider the confidence level, the personality of the students as well as the level of familiarity between students and interviewees. The interview process provides rich potential to achieve language- and communication-related objectives as well as to foster soft skills in relation to people.

Thompson, in *Voice of the Past*, has this to say about desirable qualities in an interviewer:

“To interview successfully requires skill.... There are some essential qualities which the successful interviewer must possess: an interest and respect for people as individuals, and flexibility in response to them; an ability to show understanding and sympathy for their point of view; and above all, a willingness to sit quietly and listen. People who cannot stop talking themselves, or resist the temptation to contradict or push an informant with their own ideas, will take away information which is either useless or positively misleading” (Thompson, 2000).

An examination of the paragraph above gives one a good idea of the personal qualities that can be inculcated through oral history projects — respect for people, understanding, sympathy and willingness to listen. More often than not, a successful interview requires that an interviewer be able to “read” the interviewee’s emotions and respond accordingly. The interviewer needs to encourage the reticent

to talk and try to bring those who digress back to the point. He or she needs to be able to put people at ease. All these should be done politely and diplomatically, without causing offence. These, we would all agree, are lifeskills that are invaluable for students in their personal relationships and when they eventually negotiate the world of work.

An interview means interaction. With the use of oral history projects, students are given opportunities and encouraged to go out and understand first-hand, the impact of policies as well as the individual's contribution to the community and nation. Quite often, they will encounter emotions expressed by the interviewee as he/she recounts the past. This is something that does not come through as effectively when research is done on the Internet and through most print materials. As teachers, in our inevitable concern with content and examinations, the affective part of education is usually neglected. This is where oral history projects or any engagement with oral history can plug the gaps in our instructional programme. Therefore, oral history projects have great potential to foster emotional attachment to the community and country.

Interaction with the older generation can help create bonds. When the interviewee is a family member or close relative, an emotional bonding takes place. Many students would otherwise not have a conversation of that depth with their family members. The interview process and the context of a school project create a certain distance for information, views and experiences to be shared comfortably. These opportunities to share at a deeper level do not usually turn up in casual conversations.

Oral history projects also offer potential for collaboration and co-operation. It can be done in groups, with individuals being made responsible for different tasks. For example, different students can be put in charge of the different stages of the project. A group can be designated to do the pre-interview research while other groups conduct the interviews. The whole class then comes together to critically review the process and analyse the oral history collected. In these ways, the benefits of a project can still be enjoyed while keeping the workload manageable.

All the advantages and strengths detailed here can motivate students to go out and do oral history or oral research. The human interaction and the potential for discovery can greatly motivate those who are less inclined to a didactic approach.

Post-interview — critical thinking

At the post-interview stage, there is great potential for inculcating thinking skills. The transcript now is a valuable primary source that can be utilized by teachers and students in a number of ways. Students can be set tasks which will require them to critically analyse the source. Teachers can also guide students in developing a

set of criteria to evaluate the oral evidence collected. The transcript can also be a springboard to further inquiry and research.

Assessment of Oral History Projects

The following section is a brief discussion of assessment considerations. Teachers could break up the project into the following components for assessment purposes:

1. Research and project plan

This covers research questions, the plan and approach for conducting the interview, interview questions as well as pre- and post-interview research.

2. Interview process

Assessing the interview process poses many challenges. The interviewee plays an important role in determining the success or failure of the interview. Some teachers may feel that it would be unfair to judge a component where many factors seem beyond students' control. However, teachers can spell out good interview techniques and assess if students have exhibited these in conducting their interviews.

Some areas to consider:

- Were there attempts to make the interviewee comfortable?
- Was flexibility in questioning shown?
- Was the interviewer able to probe for further details when required?
- Was the interviewer objective?

3. Analysis of the transcript

Teachers can assess if students are able to evaluate the oral evidence.

4. Reflection of the entire process.

Using Existing Interviews

In Singapore, oral history projects are mainly conducted by the Oral History Centre. Set up in 1979, it was called the Oral History Unit and was part of the National Archives until 1985. Its objective is to "record, document, preserve and disseminate information on the history of the country through oral history methodology" (*Oral History Manual*, 1992). Since then many oral history projects have been carried out. Among them are projects on the pioneers and communities of Singapore, the Economic Restructuring of Singapore, education, women as well as the civil service. There are also Special Projects that cover "a wide range of subjects on various social, cultural, educational and historical developments in Singapore" (*Oral History Manual*, 1992). The recordings and transcripts of the open access interviews are readily accessible in the reference room of the National Archives. These transcripts provide a rich source of primary materials for the teaching of

Social Studies. Extracts of transcripts or adaptations of the extracts can be presented to students as a stimulus for discussion or further research. They can also be used as sources for questions.

Conclusion

Oral history has the potential to deeply enrich our understanding of a particular time, event and place. In the context of classroom lessons, it serves to engage students not just intellectually but emotionally as well. In the specific context of Social Studies, it serves to inculcate both skills and values and can be used to teach content and concepts. It is also a good strategy for national education as students communicate and bond with the older generation and understand the process of nation building through the experiences of real people. They see the rationale and impact of policies and perhaps will better appreciate the difficulties of nation building. Interviews with people can be richly rewarding in the insights obtained and the opportunity to share the life experiences of others.

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