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Searching for Our Roots Through Oral History

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"I believe a nation is truly civilized only if it remembers its own history."

(Lynn Pan, *The Straits Times*, 1995).

Searching for Personal Histories

A nation's heritage is the the total of the personal heritages of its people. This heritage, national and individual, is what makes for uniqueness and richness that cannot be measured in material terms. Too often, however, young people have little or no access to their own heritages, to the life experiences of members of the older generation who "have been there," and to experiences that reach through time into the roots of their own personal history. Searching for our personal heritages offers a window to our past that enhances our understanding of who we are, where we came from, and how we should proceed.

In addition to knowing and understanding our own heritages, searching for our personal history offers scope for understanding the cultural diversity that often characterizes the society within which we live. Few societies can lay claim today to homogeneity in their cultures - diversity and multiculturalism are the order of the day. In a world marked by diversity, knowing the heritages of the various peoples with whom one interacts raises awareness of the uniqueness as well as the shared experiences of participants in that society.

The search for Singapore's heritage has been an active pursuit of the National Heritage Board, whose Oral History Center has spearheaded several projects and publications on multiple aspects of Singapore's history and communities through interviews and eye witness accounts. This endeavor can be extended to the personal level, where youths can search for their own history. This pursuit can appropriately begin in school and tertiary institutions. For a start, teachers can be the initiators and innovators. A teacher is in a vantage

position to offer opportunities for students to search for eyewitness accounts of events of the past, to guide them on how to do it effectively, and on how to record and report it.

At the heart of a search is the use of oral history. Oral history involves gaining access to a cooperating individual's history through direct contact with that person (usually an older member of the society), and questioning him/her about real-life experiences, specific and general, at particular points in time in that individual's life.

Why Oral History?

"A quotation from an insider can invigorate writing because it is so efficient: In one quotation, you can pack in physical details, concepts, feelings, and attitudes."

(Boone, 1987).

Oral history is one long quotation from an insider. It packs in eye-witness accounts, details, attitudes, feelings. Whether experiences are painful or joyful, the poignancy or pleasure is shared at first hand. The sense of immediacy and color of an event, of an experience as told by someone who has been there are absorbing narratives in themselves. The details and personal reactions, told from an individual point of view, is a viewpoint that is always unique.

In any community, the women and men of the older generation frequently possess a wealth of information of things past. These are the people whom a researcher of oral history will choose as cooperating individuals. The cooperating individual should be willing to share chunks of his/her personal history. Ideally, he/she is a loquacious person and is uninhibited about revealing chunks of his/her life. In this context, listening to and recording the individual's life history benefit both interviewer and interviewee. The interviewer gains knowledge and understanding of events vicariously. The interviewee gains an attentive ear and a chance to have aspects of his/her personal history made known and recorded, aspects that may otherwise, pass forever, unknown.

Doing oral history is, however, a two-edged sword. Delving into the past can be a painful or embarrassing process - both for the interviewer and the interviewee. The interviewer therefore needs to be sensitive to the feelings and reactions of the interviewee, to tune in to the emotions of the latter, and to be tactful when probing for answers. The interviewer also needs to be cognizant of the propensity for bias when events and experiences are seen from one person's point of view. This point of view, however, is a valuable one if it is seen against the backdrop of objective reports or documentations of an event. Oral histories provide an additional perspective to objective reports or documentations, thereby supplementing the generally drier versions with personal versions that are alive with memories, personal reactions, and details that are usually not found in objective reports.

Conducting Oral History

Searching for one's roots or the roots of people in one's community through oral history is a viable project for students of history, geography, social studies, and language. The skills that are required for successful completion of the project encompass the four skills of listening and speaking, reading and writing. This project therefore fits comfortably into integrative approaches and cross-curriculum endeavors in the humanities.

In helping students conduct, record, and report on oral history, close guidance is needed, especially in the initial stages. There are basically three steps to follow in conducting oral history:

- (1) Doing the interview;
- (2) Reading and/or researching related materials;
- (3) Recording and reporting oral history.

Modifications and adaptations can be made according to the proficiency, interest, and school level (secondary or tertiary) of the students.

(1) *Doing the Interview*

- A Prior to the interview, careful preparation is needed to maximize chances of conducting an interview that will yield a rich source of information.

The first step is to select the cooperating individual or individuals to interview. To select the cooperating individuals, identify people who are able and willing to give first-hand information, people such as older members of the family, friends and acquaintances of the family, people in the community such as church members, co-workers, and shop-keepers whom the interviewer patronizes.

In the Singapore and Malaysian contexts, for example, promising cooperating individuals include: People who were originally from China, India, Malaya, and other countries of origin; people who have lived through times such as the colonial days, the Japanese occupation, the Second World War, the early years of independence, and when Singapore and Malaysia were more rural.

- B Prepare basic questions in advance of the interview - all questions should help the interviewer gain a rich source of information that is relevant to the purpose of the study: Does the interviewer want to acquire information about his/her own roots in relation to those of the interviewees? And/or does he/she want to acquire information only about the interviewee in order to understand the latter's roots? These purposes will guide the order and type of questions asked. In addition to the basic questions, other questions will arise from the interview itself, for example, to request for more information, to prompt the interviewee, and to seek clarification. A rule of thumb is to avoid questions that require monosyllabic answers.

Examples of basic questions to ask:

(These questions can be adapted when searching for the interviewer's own origins by substituting "your" with "my" where appropriate.)

What is your (or my) country of origin? What were some memorable places in that country? What were some unforgettable/memorable events and incidents? What were your personal experiences and reactions to those events and incidents? (Encourage detailed narration of these experiences.)

Why did you and/or your ancestors come to Singapore? What were your/their early experiences in Malaya and Singapore? What were some unforgettable/memorable events? What were your personal experiences and reactions to those events?

Do you remember any "stories" connected with the events or "stories" that were popular? Please tell me the stories. ("Stories" are narratives based on hearsay, gossips, real-life happenings, beliefs.)

Can you tell me some folklore or folktales of the past?

What were some popular beliefs (e.g. superstitions) of the past? What were some customary practices in those days? (e.g. those connected with birth, marriage, and death.)

What type of food was popular then? How were they prepared? How do they compare with the food today?

How did people spend their leisure time?

How did young people behave in those days - to one another, to adults?

What festivals were celebrated in those days? How were they celebrated? How are they different from, or similar to, the ones that we have today?

What were the institutions (buildings, educational, social and religious organizations, etc) that existed in those days that no longer exist today? Or conversely, which institutions of the past still exist. What memories do you have of those institutions?

What is your last name? Do you know the origins of your first name and your last name? Is there a story associated with your name? (Ask for more information if the answer is yes. Otherwise, skip this question because not all people know the origins of their names. Those who do, however, often have interesting narratives to tell about their names.)

Do you know the names of your ancestors and how they are related (family tree)? (Pursue this question only if the answer is "yes"). What are their occupations? What are some stories associated with specific members of the family?

C Conducting the Interview

Make an appointment and be there on time.

Be polite and encouraging. You need to assure interviewees that they are free to answer or not answer any questions that you ask.

Record the answers with a tape recorder. In addition, make notes on environmental factors and other observations that may help in understanding the interviewee and his/her life and times.

If you do not use the tape recorder or the interviewee prefers that it is not used, jot down the main points. However, record verbatim any memorable statements that may be quoted later in your report.

(2) *Reading and Researching*

Reading pertinent materials on a nation or an individual's heritage provides scaffolding for oral history, as well as extends the language learner's knowledge and understanding of the subject. Reading can occur at any stage - in the introductory phase prior to the interview, concurrently while the search for information is proceeding, and in the concluding phase after the oral history is completed and recorded.

Any reading materials - poems, short stories, novels, essays, history books - that are associated with the theme and content of an individual's oral history are appropriate. They can be effectively used

to set the mood for the search, to motivate learners, and to extend and consolidate their understanding of their interviewees and the content of their search.

In higher level classes and with proficient students, the teacher may further extend learning experiences by encouraging research, so that learners will read independently, identify materials that are pertinent to their search, and incorporate them into their oral history reports.

(3) Recording and Reporting Oral History

Once the raw materials for the oral history have been gathered through interviews, the learner needs to organize and compile the materials into a coherent form for reporting purposes. Reporting oral history can take various forms, such as dramatization, narrative and poetry writing, journal writing, oral reports, and written records.

An effective way of reporting is to write a paper that carefully documents and reports the results of the search. Writing a paper allows learners scope for thinking through every stage of the writing. Involved in this process is the critical and judicious selection of information gathered through the interviews, the reading, and the research, and the organization of the selected materials clearly and coherently. From initiation to conclusion, therefore, the learner is involved in a process of thinking, organizing, expressing, and revising. Writing a paper is a demanding task that can reap satisfying results for the well-prepared learner.

For learners who are not used to writing papers, it is advisable to provide guidelines for writing the paper, stipulating requirements such as format, expectations, date due, conventions for citations and references, etc. For inexperienced writers, it is helpful to provide suggestions for organizing the paper. The following is an example of suggestions for organization:

Organize your paper by reference to these sections:

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the search and its significance.

Details of the interview/interviews, including dates of the interview, location, person/persons interviewed, recording methods, and other comments about the interview and the interviewee that will add to the effectiveness of the report.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Ancestral information such as place and time they lived, family trees, names, stories associated with names.

Why and how they came to Singapore or Malaya, and their early experiences.

BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Describe customs, norms, beliefs, religious and secular practices, superstitions.

Festivals and important events celebrated and how they are celebrated

Food - types and how they are prepared, significance/beliefs associated with specific types of food.

MEMORABLE EXPERIENCES

Details of memorable/unforgettable events and incidents, the role and reactions of the interviewee to these experiences.

FOLKLORE

Details, told vividly, of folktales and popular stories of the time.

CONCLUSION

Sum up the most cogent points of the oral history.

Your overall comments about the search (e.g. what you learned, how the knowledge gained will be of use to you).

After the papers have been completed, it is a good idea to give the writers an opportunity to share their writings orally. Sharing enables other learners to gain access to information that is otherwise not accessible to them. It also allows the presenter to practise speaking and listening skills.

For the sharing sessions, encourage students to bring relevant objects of cultural value to show and tell during their presentation. These objects can include artifacts, clothes, scrapbooks, photographs, copies of documents and newspapers, recipes, and utensils. During oral presentation sessions, an added bonus is to videotape the presentations: Oral history is thereby recorded on paper and on screen.

References

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