

Slow Memory and Oral History

A guide for schools and teachers

We are living in times of deep contradictions. While our world accelerates and grows smaller through superfast digital networks, it is also marked by widening socio-economic inequalities. We face viral pandemics, rapid species extinction, increased automation of work, quick fixes for mental health, political upheavals and displacements of old certainties.

This Slow Memory project addresses the need for understanding how societies confront their past to contend with environmental, economic and social changes brought on by sudden events and by slow and creeping transformations. It has identified oral history as a key theoretical approach to examine such changes.

Oral history is when we record someone's memories to find out about their past. Most of us aren't in history books and haven't had documentaries made about us, but we can remember both events and aspects of daily life that we may take for granted. We can all reflect on how things have changed during our lifetimes.

What is the relationship between oral history and slowness? Oral history is inherently slow – it takes time to locate people, build up relationship, carry out interviews, transcribe and work out what you are going to do with your data. It allows you to get away from 'high points', the dominant narratives and voices that are usually recorded. Oral history provides a space to capture narratives that aren't top down but bottom up – including aspects of everydayness and normality. It responds to the objectives of slow memory – it gives voice to the voiceless. Everyone can tell their story.

What do you want to find out and who can tell you?

You can ask about specific events in their life, or more general topics such as changes to their family life or how deindustrialisation changed working life over the years. You might want to think about climate change, so you could ask: *Have you experienced climate changes in your lifetime? What have those changes been for you?* or *Can you describe the winter from your childhood? Does it differ from the winter you experience today? If yes, how?*

Who can tell you about what you want to know? Draw up a list. Are you targeting specific people or do you want a mix of women, men, backgrounds and ages?

Give yourself time (it's a slow process) and think about how many people you would like to record. Things to think about from the start include:

- Have you got a quiet space that is accessible to everyone to make the recordings?
When are you all available to do this?
- How will you explain what you want to do to the people you want to record? Will

they know why you want to record them and what you are going to do with the recording?

- Make sure everyone is happy to sign a consent form at the end of the recording (see an example of the end of this guide).

You can put all of this onto an information sheet that you can send people when you contact them (see an example at the end of this guide).

Oral history allows you to slow down your approach to elicit forgotten narratives. How does it compare with other ways of investigating the past which uses documents, photographs or artefacts? What issues do you think there are with using oral history?

How do we remember the past?

Say we want to find out about longer processes, for example, how climate change has affected people over the past 50 years, or how the effects of discrimination have played out over generations, or how technology has changed over a lifetime. In all these cases we will be asking people to remember things from many years ago and over a long period of time – oral history allows you to do this.

Most of us are bad at remembering dates (unless they're important), but we all remember some things better than others.

- We tend to remember things that either made an impact at the time or are now seen to be important in retrospect.
- We tend to remember things that were unusual, extraordinary or that made an impact on us.
- We tend to remember things we have talked about over the years.
- We may also remember the small things which help us complete the full picture.

We can sometimes help to jog people's memories by asking to see photos, objects, documents, or anything that will help people to remember. These may also help put people at ease while telling their life stories.

When trying to navigate memories of the past, keep in mind key life moments such as childhood, leaving school, starting work, having a family, buying a house, children leaving home and retirement.

If you are interested in how people's thoughts and opinions have changed over long periods, you can ask people what they thought or felt at the time, and then what they feel about it now.

Preparation

Do some research on the subjects you want to ask people about so that you know broadly what they are talking about.

Think of the general topics you would like to ask them to talk about, and some specific questions you want to ask.

Ethics and legalities

While most people enjoy speaking about the past, it is possible to become upset when recalling certain people or events. If your topic is one that covers distressing memories, think about how to prepare students and interviewees for the recording. Be clear that no one has to talk about anything they don't want to and think about what is appropriate for the student's age group.

Although laws and procedures to do with consent differ across the world, you should aim to explain everything in advance to each interviewee (an information sheet is useful for this) and ask them to sign a consent form that gives you permission to store and use the recording. The idea of 'informed consent' is that people are fully aware of what you intend to do with their recording before they give you permission.

For example, in the UK, you will need to be aware of Data Protection and GDPR regulations [when translated, insert regulation for each country].

When using extracts from your recordings in public, be careful about revealing personal information about the interviewee or any other people.

Topic Guide

From the outset, think of slowing down the conversation, aim for something like this as a starter:

1. Give your own name, date and what the name of the project is.
2. Ask your interviewee to say their name, and any information that would be useful for you such as year of birth, place of birth etc.
3. Start with a predictable question, like family background, to warm people up. It often helps if people start at the beginning, like a story, and then move forward.

Then, list the topics you are interested in asking about and any specific questions and follow ups you don't want to forget to ask. You can't list every question, so use this as a guide and be prepared to think of questions as the recording progresses.

At the end, ask if there is anything else your interviewee would like to say.

Making a good recording

Aim for a recording where you can hear everything your interviewee says clearly.

Is everyone sitting comfortably? Don't sit too close or too far away from your interviewee. The width of a table is usually fine.

Have you positioned the microphone as close to your interviewee as practical without making them uncomfortable?

Is there any noise in the room that can be controlled? For example, close the window to lessen traffic noise.

Turn off any mobile phones in the room or set them to 'flight mode'. Be mindful of time – no

one wants to feel rushed.

Asking the questions

Have something to write with so you can make notes, although make sure you focus on your interviewee, you can listen to the recording again if needed. This is a conversation so don't spend all your time taking notes.

Try not to talk while the person you are recording is talking (write it down if you have a question).

Top tips— to show that you are listening and are interested, sit facing your interviewee, use eye contact, nod your head. Look interested!

Listen to what people are saying, don't just read the questions off your list. If it sounds interesting, ask for more information. Leave time after someone has finished a sentence, such breaks are often when interesting information might come out.

'Open' questions start with who, what, where, when, why and how? 'Tell me about...', 'describe that', 'give me some examples', are all excellent follow up questions and they also help slow down the process and allow for more detailed answers.

For example, ask open questions that invite descriptions, comments, opinions. Use open questions to:

Explore: can you tell me more about that? Why was that?

Evaluate: was that typical? What did you think about that at the time?

Elicit emotional responses: how did that make you feel? How do you feel about that now?

At the end ask if there is anything else your interviewee would like to add.

Something to think about—how do we usually show people that we are listening to them? Why does this need to be different in an oral history recording?

Equipment

Make the best recordings you can with the equipment you have. Practise recording with your equipment to make sure you know what you are doing.

Can you use your smartphone? Yes, but... it will work better if you use a sound recording app. like Voice Record Pro. Make sure you have plenty of spare memory and that the battery is fully charged. Switch the phone to flight mode.

Ideally, use the sort of dedicated sound recorder made by Zoom, Tascam, Olympus, Sony or others. Aim to record .wav files at 44.1Khz 16bit or higher, which is usually the default setting for any good sound recorder. A good summary of this is on the Oral History Society website (see the advice tab on <https://www.ohs.org.uk/>).

After the recording

Make sure you have got all your paperwork signed. Then, write a summary of the interview. Even a quick, basic summary of what has been talked about is better than nothing.

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EMOHA Collection

Interviewee: Anon

Born: 1926

Occupation: Retired architect

Interview date: 13/11/2007

Location on recording	Summary of interview section
Track 1	Quick outline of following – family, army, time in Palestine, School of Architecture, 1948. (Telephone goes)
Track 2	Education
2.15	Found job in Bristol, returned to Leicester City Architects' Dept. in 1951
4.45	Interest in buildings. Family history.
11.55	Parents didn't mind him staying on at school, they have moved up social ladder.

Figure 1: An example of a basic summary

Editing sound

Whatever you do, you'll probably have to edit your recordings. Audacity is a popular, free sound editor but others are available. There are plenty of tutorials on YouTube and on Audacity's website.

While your master file would ideally be a .wav file, these are too big for general use so create .mp3 files for the web or any other use. Clips should be tailored to your audience in terms of content and length.

Where are you going to keep everything?

You need to make sure you can store your interviews securely where only you have access. If you don't have cloud storage or network storage that is backed up, use a PC, laptop or portable hard drive to store copies of the recordings. Download the audio from your sound recorder as soon as possible after the recording. Make at least one copy and add copies of photos or scans of any paperwork. You can consult institutional guidelines in your country on safe storage of data.

Using Oral History

As well as the obvious benefits for education, you can also use oral history recordings to help make talks, lectures, podcasts, blogs, books, websites, audio tours, family history, education for schools, exhibitions & interpretations, reminiscence work, theatre, radio, sound collages, drama, dance, poetry, digital story-telling, creative writing, photography and art work.

Further information and links

The Oral History Society website has detailed information on all aspects of running an oral history in schools and with young people. It covers equipment, costs, legalities, ethics, and has links to examples of lesson plans, projects, and illustrative audio clips.

Link to the main page: <https://www.ohs.org.uk/for-schools-main-page/>

Link to advice about ethics and legalities: <https://www.ohs.org.uk/ethics-and-legalities-for-schools/>

Tips on using oral history can be found on YouTube at:
https://youtu.be/fiyLiZb0Bm8?si=5HNBe9VBVgFuz_2d

This slow resource has been created by the East Midlands Oral History Archive at the University of Leicester, for the Slow Memory project (<https://www.slowmemory.eu/>) in collaboration with Professor Natalie Braber at Nottingham Trent University.

Ground-breaking language: The linguistic practices of mining communities as cultural heritage

Sample: Information Sheet

Although there is now some increased interest in language variation in the East Midlands, there has never been comparative research of pit talk around the UK. Coal mining (and other manufacturing industries) have always been important to the country's economy and there are records of coal digging going back centuries. Many pits closed in the 1980s and with the end of deep coal mining many regions have suffered economically as a result.

The language that a miner would use in the pit was usually confined to the pit, and he would use words there that he would not use at home. The use of a different language in the mines emphasized and strengthened the brotherhood which existed amongst miners. This project will bring together the words spoken by miners around the UK and examine how words can be similar and different in the different regions. It will bring together its words, jokes, stories and songs that are disappearing and help attest to the remarkable vitality of the region's dialect.

In order to achieve this aim, we are going to:

- Compile a collection of recordings from miners and ex-miners to examine language use by these speakers.
- Create a written record of the audio recordings which make up our sample, with accompanying linguistic notes, for dialect and sociolinguistic research purposes.

Each interview that we conduct as part of this project **WILL BE RECORDED** and stored safely and responsibly. We will ask each volunteer to sign a consent form before any recording is made, which states that they are happy for an audio and/or written recording of their interview to be held by the University, for research purposes, and for relevant parts to be reproduced within publications and/or presentations and on websites. Some participants may also be asked if they agree to being photographed as part of the project. Volunteers will be given the chance, once the recording has been completed, to listen to their interviews and make any requests for censorship. Any volunteer is free to withdraw from the study at any time, and without having to give a reason.

It is planned that this work will result in the publication of academic articles and the presentation of papers at national and international conferences and could form part of websites and other social media. Furthermore, the recordings of interviews conducted as part of this project may be added to the growing collection of resources held by the British Library, where it will be accessible to researchers and non-researchers alike.

If you have any questions at any time, please feel free to contact:

Professor Natalie Braber – natalie.braber@ntu.ac.uk

Sample Research Consent form

Ground-breaking language: The linguistic practices of mining communities as cultural heritage

I understand that this project will be carried out in accordance with the Research Ethics Codes of Practice of Nottingham Trent University, which can be viewed at: [give weblink]

Material gathered as part of this study will be stored securely, in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

I have read and I understand the information sheet given to me. Yes No

I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and they were answered to my satisfaction. Yes No

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason. Yes No

I agree that the specified recordings may be used for the purposes of this research. Yes No

I agree that short sections of the specified recordings may be transcribed and used in academic conferences and publications or on websites. Yes No

I agree that the specified recordings may be catalogued as part of the project and may appear on publications or the internet. Yes No

Name [PRINT]

Signature

Date