

## Designing Popular Activities: Oral History, Heritage and the Curriculum

**E**veryone has a story to tell. We all have memories and experiences and, when our stories are collected and preserved, they can become part of the historical record.



Historical documents and books tend to dwell on major events and famous characters, frequently missing out what life was like for ordinary people. Very often they omit the stories of minority communities, resulting in these people's voices becoming 'hidden' from history. Oral history – the history that we all experience in our day-to-day lives – helps us to fill in these gaps and contribute voices that are usually missing from mainstream history.

Oral history projects are very popular with teachers and pupils. They can be adapted to any area of the curriculum, are an excellent way of making links with people in your local community, and the work pupils do is often highly original and motivational.

**Every old man that dies is a library that burns”**

**AMADOU HAMPÂTÉ BÂ**

### GETTING STARTED

#### 1. CHOOSE A TOPIC

The first thing you will need to do is to find a theme or purpose for your oral history project. If you would like the project to support pupils' curricular work, there are plenty of options open to you. For example, if you are teaching KS3 History, you could investigate the memories that community members have of healthcare in the 1930s and 1940s, and how things changed when the National Health Service was introduced in 1948. Oral history can, however, be a fresh and compelling way of studying almost any subject area, from RE to Geography, Citizenship to Design and Technology.

Oral testimony is also a very good way to learn more about your community's buildings and architecture. To give one example, you may want to work on an oral history project that explores the history of your own school, its buildings and people and make the work part of a whole-school open day (see section 5).

#### 2. FIND PEOPLE TO INTERVIEW

Finding the right people to interview will depend on the topic you have chosen to explore. However, you might want to consider approaching family members, old pupils, local groups such as the Women's Institute or the Rotary Club, members of different religious communities, school governors or ex-servicemen. Devonport High School for Boys had a very successful oral history project, for which pupils interviewed local veterans. This was an integral part of their plans to reconvert their school into a World War II military hospital (see section 3.33).

In addition, you could approach your local newspaper for help or put notices up in buildings such as libraries, museums, council offices or even veterinary surgeries. When you have decided who you would like to interview, help your students to draft letters of invitation.

#### 3. PREPARATION

It is important that your pupils are well prepared before they actually stage an interview. Depending on the theme of their project, they could read contemporary newspaper or magazine accounts, listen to music from the relevant period, examine old maps and photographs or explore other sources such as film. Pupils might also find it useful to construct a timeline on the classroom wall, to which they can add significant information they have discovered from their research.

As well as helping pupils learn about the background to their project, you will need to give them assistance when planning the questions they will ask their interviewee. Open-ended questions are generally best, as they do not make the interviewee feel that they are expected to answer in a particular way. For example, rather than asking "Did you have an unhappy time at school?" a question like "Can you describe what it was like to be at school in the 1950s?" will encourage the interviewee to give a fuller and less constrained response.

Nonetheless, pupils will need to realise that conducting an oral history interview is not the same as having a conversation. Even though they will be asking questions about specific topics, people will sometimes drift into talking about other areas that are of less relevance. If this happens, pupils will need to know how to ask questions that will bring the interview back to the desired topic.

## Designing Popular Activities: Oral History, Heritage and the Curriculum

Before the day arranged for the interviews, give pupils the opportunity to practice interviewing in pairs or in small groups. This way they will become more confident about asking questions and recording the interviews. They should also become thoroughly familiar with the recording equipment they will be using.

Another useful idea is to invite a guest into school who can then be interviewed in front of a class. These 'fish bowl' interviews are invaluable for gathering background information, as well as giving pupils an insight into good interview techniques.

### 4. EQUIPMENT

You don't need expensive or complicated equipment to conduct oral history interviews. Depending on the resources available in your school, you can use relatively simple cassette recorders, or machines that record straight to minidisk or in a digital format on a 'flashcard'. However, whatever recorder you decide to use, do make sure that you have an external microphone. Recorders with internal microphones have to be placed very near to the interviewee and the quality of the sound they capture is often poor. Sometimes internal microphones will also pick up the whirring of the cassette recorder's motor.

It is also worth recording on the most durable format possible. This way, recordings will last for a lot longer and you could deposit them in an archive or local studies centre. Generally speaking, if you are using tape, select 60 or 90 minute cassettes: longer ones are much more fragile, deteriorate more quickly and recordings tend to 'bleed' from one side of the tape to the other. You should also use 'metal' tape, which is much more durable than other varieties. If you record interviews in a digital format, note that archivists recommend recording at the internationally-recognised Philips 'red book' standard (16bit/44.1kHz) and storing the information on 'gold' CDs, which are a little more expensive but last much longer without deteriorating. For links to websites containing further information about recording equipment, see the resources section on page 3.14.

### HOLDING AN INTERVIEW

If the interviewees are coming into the school, be sure to give them a warm welcome. Ensure that you have a quiet place set aside for the interviews, preferably away from busy roads, noisy electrical equipment or other interference.

If pupils are using a hand-held microphone, place it as near to the interviewee as possible. They should not place it on a hard surface, or on the same platform as the tape recorder. Generally speaking, the nearer you can place the microphone, the better. Clip on microphones should be placed about 25cm from the interviewee's mouth.

Pupils, who will mostly interview in pairs, should begin each tape by recording their names, the name of the person they are talking to, where they are and the date. This should be repeated each time the tape is turned over, adding "part one", "part two" and so on to the introduction. Introducing the tape in this way gives pupils the chance to check the sound quality, and it can also break the ice and make the interviewee feel more comfortable when they come to respond to pupils' questions.

The students will have prepared a list of questions, but it's important that these are used as a guide rather than an inflexible structure. Sometimes the interviewee will introduce a new topic that is worth following up with other questions. The more interest that is taken in what they say, the more confidence interviewees will feel in developing their answers.

### SOME INTERVIEWING TIPS:

- 1) *Wait for a pause before asking another question.*
- 2) *Use positive body language: nod, smile and maintain eye contact.*
- 3) *Use questions like "Why?" and "How did that happen?" to encourage interviewees to explore a topic in more depth.*
- 4) *Don't be afraid of silence. Giving interviewees the chance to collect their thoughts gives them the opportunity to give a fuller answer.*
- 5) *If something that an interviewee says is not clear or is confusing, then don't be afraid to ask them to clarify what they mean.*

### AFTER THE INTERVIEW

When the interview is over, pupils should thank their guest and take time to talk to them informally. This is also a good time for you, the teacher, to discuss copyright and clearance issues with the interviewee. You can find in-depth information on this subject on the Oral History Society's website ([www.ohs.org.uk](http://www.ohs.org.uk)) but, essentially, if you have the interviewee's written permission, you will be able to use the recordings in many more ways.

**TIP** Before investing in recording equipment, seek up-to-date advice from a local group that has experience of carrying out oral history projects.

## Designing Popular Activities: Oral History, Heritage and the Curriculum

### TEN TOP TIPS FOR ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

1. Choose a quiet locale and properly position your microphones.
2. Ask one question at a time. State your questions as directly as possible.
3. Ask open-ended questions—questions that begin with “why, how, where, what kind of” etc. Avoid “yes or no” questions.
4. Start with non-controversial questions. One good place to begin, for instance, is with the interviewee’s childhood memories.
5. Understand that periods of silence will occur. These are useful periods of reflection and recollection for your interviewee.
6. Avoid interrupting the interviewee.
7. If the interviewee strays away from the topic in which you are interested, don’t panic. Sometimes the best parts of the interview come about this way. If you feel the digression has gone too far afield, gently steer the interviewee back to the topic with your next question.
8. Be respectful of the interviewee. Use body language to show you are interested in what he or she has to say. Remember, the interviewee is giving you the gift of his or her memories and experiences.
9. After the interview, thank the interviewee for sharing his or her experiences. Also send a written thank-you note.
10. Don’t use the interview to show off your knowledge, charm, or other attributes. Remember, “good interviewers never shine—only their interviews do.”

*Tips reproduced with the kind permission of the Southern Oral History Programme, University of North Carolina ([www.sohp.org](http://www.sohp.org)).*



### CASE STUDIES

#### THEATRE ROYAL, WINCHESTER

Oral history projects need not be complex – all you need is a good idea and some simple equipment.

In 2005, volunteers investigated the history of the Theatre Royal in Winchester. The recently refurbished theatre was built in 1850 and was, initially, an hotel that served the local livestock market. It later became a cine-variety theatre.

As part of their Heritage Lottery Fund/Local Heritage Initiative supported research, the volunteers investigated theatre programmes dating from 1976 and 1996 and used them, and other memorabilia, to mount an exhibition at the theatre on Heritage Open Days. As part of the exhibition, visitors were invited to record their thoughts at a special ‘memory table’. A tape recorder and microphone were provided, along with a sheet containing clear instructions and a consent form, allowing visitors to give permission for their recordings to be used.

The volunteers plan to use the oral histories they collected to produce a book and to add to Hampshire’s sound archive. They also intend to produce education packs, which will be distributed free of charge to all local schools.

## Designing Popular Activities: Oral History, Heritage and the Curriculum

### FAIRVIEW PRIMARY SCHOOL, RAINHAM, KENT

In 2002, Fairview Primary School in Kent was awarded sponsorship by the South East Grid for Learning (SEGfL) to produce oral history resources that schools could access online. Local people were interviewed about their lives and the questions they were asked all tied in to QCA History units at key stages 1 and 2. For example, interviewees were asked about how present day toys are different from those in the past, what life was like for children in World War II and what seaside holidays used to be like.

Year 6 pupils were involved in the project and had the chance to ask interviewees questions and video the answers. The results of the work, including online video clips and interview transcripts, were then published on the web at [www.fairviewprimary.medway.sch.uk/oral\\_history.htm](http://www.fairviewprimary.medway.sch.uk/oral_history.htm)

### RESOURCES

The Secretary  
Oral History Society  
c/o Department of History  
Essex University  
Colchester C04 3SQ  
**WEB:** [www.ohs.org.uk](http://www.ohs.org.uk)



### THE BRITISH LIBRARY SOUND ARCHIVE

The British Library Sound Archive is the national centre for oral history in Britain. It collects audio and videotaped interviews, carries out its own programme of life story recordings, provides advice and training in oral history methods and maintains close contact with oral history groups in Britain and overseas.

**WEB:** [www.bl.uk/collections/sound-archive/history.html](http://www.bl.uk/collections/sound-archive/history.html)

### INTERNET RESOURCES

East Midlands Oral History Archive

**WEB:** [www.le.ac.uk/emoha/](http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/)

Audio Field Recording Equipment Guide

Useful advice from the Vermont Folk Life Centre about equipment used in oral history.

**WEB:** [www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/res\\_audioequip.htm](http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/res_audioequip.htm)

Oral History Volunteer Handbook

A helpful handbook from the British Columbia Education History Project

**WEB:** [www.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/education/ed-volhandbk-oralhistory.html](http://www.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/education/ed-volhandbk-oralhistory.html)

Oral History Research Unit, Bournemouth University

**WEB:** <http://histru.bournemouth.ac.uk>