

## THE IMPORTANCE OF ORAL HISTORY IN A TRANSFORMING SOUTH AFRICA

Marietjie Oelofse and Derek du Bruyn\*

"... The more that any writer of history has himself been ... in contact with the makers, the more does he come to see that a history based solely on formal documents is essentially superficial" - BH Liddell Hart.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Minister of Education, Prof. Kader Asmal, launched the South African History Project in August 2001. One of the objectives of this project is "to encourage the recording of oral histories". The project is playing an important role in curriculum change, with an emphasis on the acquisition of related wider skills.<sup>1</sup>

In 2002, a report was compiled on behalf of the South African Historical Association regarding the outcome of the South African History Project's conference, held at Rondebosch from 2-5 October 2002. According to the author, Prof. Elize van Eeden, one of the shortcomings that became evident from the discussions at the conference was the lack of in-depth knowledge of oral history, which gave rise to questions such as: "How do we approach the use of oral history?"<sup>2</sup>

Against this background, it is necessary to look at the status of oral history, specifically in South Africa. This will be done to inform the historian, the researcher and the educator of the value of and the need for oral history, as well as of the successes achieved with acquiring a variety of skills required in this field to make it even more workable and context-sensitive within the South African environment.

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\* Marietjie Oelofse is a lecturer in the History Department at the University of the Free State and Derek du Bruyn is an archivist at the Free State Provincial Archives.

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education, **The South African History Project Progress Report 2001-2003** (fourth edition, Pretoria, 2003), pp. 4, 54.

<sup>2</sup> ES Van Eeden, "Know the past, anticipate the future: Observations on the National Department of Education and the South African History Project's conference, Rondebosch, 2-5 October 2002", in **Historia**, 47(2), November 2002, pp. 767, 769.

Oral history makes no claim to exclusivity. However, if the oral history method is used carefully and skilfully, it can make a valuable contribution by supplementing and enriching the written record. It remains a useful and unique way of gaining access to information by using the human memory as a historical source.

The focus will be on a deeper understanding of the concept and place of oral history and how it transforms the content and shifts the focus of history, as well as the role it plays in a changing socio-political environment. The limitations of oral history in the South African context will be examined, while the need to employ oral history to change outdated teaching methods, will also be highlighted. Finally, a case study involving the Department of History at the University of the Free State will be discussed.

## 2. UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT AND PLACE OF ORAL HISTORY

Oral history is nothing more than a branch of historical research. In this context, oral history arises from history's most ancient technique, as well as its most modern technology. The technique of collecting eyewitness accounts of history was already used by the ancient Greek historians more than two thousand years ago, and the tape recorder, which is part of the modern age, is now used to record oral history. It is an activity that draws upon the most sophisticated skills of professional historians, but can also be undertaken productively by week-end amateurs, simply by using the basic skill of human conversation.<sup>3</sup>

The use of oral history is not new. It is as old as history itself. Oral history already existed when academic history was developing among the educated strata of society. It was a community-based tradition, since most societies have always recognised the worth of preserving and passing on some kind of knowledge of the past, protecting an accumulating heritage.<sup>4</sup>

A number of organisations have, for some time, been engaged in the systematic collection of oral testimony. Oral history associations and societies and oral history journals and circulars have been debating and discussing ideas and problems regarding oral history. In addition, many academic historians have used oral sources in their work. The need for the collection of oral history in Southern Africa

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<sup>3</sup> C Davis, et al., **Oral history. From tape to type** (American Library Association, Chicago, 1983), pp. 1-4.

<sup>4</sup> S Caunce, **Oral history and the local historian** (Longman, New York, 1994), pp. 100-1; **The Sunday Independent**, 3 May 1998, p. 22.

has been widely recognised since the mid-1970s.<sup>5</sup> Particularly since the 1980s in South Africa, oral history has been used as an important method for documenting the experiences and oppressions of those who lived under Apartheid. In the process it is the 'discovery' of oral history as one of many kinds of historical sources, but also a 'recovery' by restoring to historians the oldest skill of their own craft.<sup>6</sup>

A basic definition of oral history interviewing would be "a systematic collection, arrangement, preservation and publication (in the sense of making generally available) of recorded verbatim personal accounts, opinions and reminiscences of people who were witnesses to or participants in events or experiences they recount".<sup>7</sup> Beyond this functional definition, there are a number of differences in emphasis. However, the fact remains that it involves the tape-recording of what the narrator can recall from first-hand knowledge and through pre-planned interviews. The information is captured in question and answer form by the interviewers. Tapes of the interview are then transcribed, summarised or indexed, and placed in a library or archive. Availability for general research, reinterpretation and verification defines oral history.<sup>8</sup> Oral history makes use of the relatively painless medium of relaxed conversations based on well-planned questions to gather information regarding why, how and through what things came to pass. In the process, oral history becomes a link from the immediate present to the immediate past, in an understandable and very human way.<sup>9</sup>

What is captured by oral history is a segment of human experience in the context of a remembered past, a dynamic present and an unknown, open-ended future. It becomes a social challenge and adventure to search for historical evidence in such a source, with both opportunities and limitations.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. ORAL HISTORY TRANSFORMS THE CONTENT AND SHIFTS THE FOCUS OF HISTORY

The élitist, political focus of history, which divided up historical time according to reigns and dynasties, has shifted radically in recent years. Many historians are

<sup>5</sup> T Sideris, "Recording living memory in South Africa. The need for oral history in South Africa" in *Critical Arts*, 4 (2), 1986, pp. 41, 50; A Manson, et al., "Oral history speaks out", in *Social Dynamics*, 11 (2), 1985, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> P Thompson, *The voice of the past* (Oxford University Press, New York, 2000), pp. 78, 81.

<sup>7</sup> WW Moss, *Oral history program manual* (Praeger Publishers, New York, 1974), pp. 6-7; D Lance, *An archive approach to oral history* (Imperial War Museum in association with International Association of Sound Archives, London, 1978), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> WK Baum, *Oral history for the local historical society* (American Association for State and Local History, Nashville, 1977), p. 7; DA Ritchie, *Doing oral history* (Twayne Publishers, New York, 1995), pp. 1, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Baum, pp. 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> Moss, p. 9.

deliberately concentrating on the stories of ordinary people, and there is an ever-increasing interest in recording social history. Here, the historical focus is on 'ordinary people', and not on 'great men' such as heads of government, military leaders or politicians. A change in focus was necessitated by the general trend throughout the historical profession toward interviewing ordinary people and recording their history, together with a heightened interest in the lives of factory hands, migrant workers and ghetto dwellers.<sup>11</sup> The emphasis is thus on a more socially oriented history, purpose and consciousness.

The shift is not only from political to social history, but the focus of history has also moved to local history. In view of the grass-roots level at which oral history functions, it has a higher potential for influencing the more limited scope and subject matter of local history. This can lead to a better perspective on the events and forces that shaped local life and thinking, which, in turn, not only leads to a better understanding of the past of a particular community, but also of the past of a region or nation. Local history thus serves as a microcosm of a nation's history.<sup>12</sup>

There is a definite relationship between history and the community. Through oral history, historical information can be given to the community for interpretation and presentation. The shift of focus to an active community-oriented approach can bring history into and out of the community, broadening the knowledge of what constitutes a community's history. In view of its focus on the day-to-day reality of lived experience, oral history lends itself well to community-based activity and collective ways of producing history. Apart from its contribution to political and institutional structures, it also adds to the economic development and the occupational and ethnic composition of its population. Some community-based local history projects have made much progress in bridging the gap between the experts and ordinary people. Members of these community projects not only provide information, but are integrally involved in the writing, production and consumption of historical material.<sup>13</sup>

Though many established programmes will continue their emphasis on leaders and élites and oral history will, at best, only modestly supplement the extensive written record of most of these famous people and leaders, oral history has much more to offer to the subject fields of social and folk history, and it often represents all we can learn about the lives of ordinary persons. Social history has benefited immensely from the ability of oral history to throw light on certain topics.

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<sup>11</sup> Davis, et al., p. 2; **The Natal Witness**, 20 August 1998, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> B Allen and L Montell, **From memory to history. Using oral sources in local historical research** (American Association for State and Local History, Nashville, 1982), p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Sideris, p. 44; Ritchie, p. 186.

The shift in the focus of history was also necessary in South Africa, particularly after 1994. The country's official history focused chiefly on political history, which was often biased. Substantial groups of people, who had been ignored, needed recognition for their role. History as a subject in its educational form had to be freed from its institutional retreats and limitations so that it could move forward by opening up new skills for learners. There was a need for a more realistic reconstruction, a more balanced account of the past.

Paul Thompson, the well-known British oral historian, sees this shift in focus as "setting in motion a cumulative process of transformation. History becomes, to put it more simply, more democratic."<sup>14</sup>

#### **4. THE ROLE OF ORAL HISTORY IN A CHANGING SOCIO-POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT**

Oral history is capable of complementing and contributing to the many branches of formal academic history. It can increase the scope of historical writing, making it a valid and valuable source of historical information. Its value lies particularly in the following aspects, evaluated against the background of the changing socio-political environment in South Africa.

##### **4.1 Oral history records unwritten and/or lost history**

Oral history has performed an important service in providing access to the folk history of groups whose heritage might otherwise be lost. This is particularly true of groups and cultures that have a predominantly oral, rather than a written tradition. Among illiterate and semi-literate societies, oral traditions are still the chief form of historical awareness and cultural continuity from generation to generation. Even in literate, record-keeping societies, much information goes unrecorded. In such cases, oral history becomes a fundamental and sometimes the only tool, making a substantial contribution by providing information that historians would not otherwise be able to acquire. In this regard, oral history provides information that is original in character for distinct subject areas.<sup>15</sup>

If weighed carefully, the ability of oral history to provide information about the past that exists in no other form, is potentially its most valuable attribute and yet, until now, the one least exploited in local history research. Countless unrecorded topics of historical interest could be fruitfully pursued if people's memories were taped. Without the use of orally communicated material, the task of researching

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<sup>14</sup> Thompson (2000), pp. 7-8.

<sup>15</sup> Lance, p. 3; Moss, p. 8; J Vansina, *Oral tradition as history* (Currey, London, 1985), pp. 198-9.

these topics can never be successfully undertaken. For instance, a large part of our history will be lost if the stories of old people are not recorded now. When these people die, the stories are lost forever. Old people may be seen as 'libraries' in their own right, and their unwritten stories need to be preserved for the future.<sup>16</sup>

There is another dimension to this when taking the situation in South Africa into consideration. Tina Sideris, who was a member of the Oral History Project of the South African Institute of Race Relations (1982-1984), argues that, for a number of reasons, the history of popular organisations has not been well documented. Illiteracy has militated against the systematic documentation of activities and organisations amongst certain groups. The informal nature of some popular organisations led to the non-existence of records and archival storage of the organisations' activities. If, for example, trade unions or political organisations did keep official records, these were often confiscated and destroyed by the State. Many sources of historical investigation were also removed and repressed in the form of censorship and banning. Academic writings about black people in general concentrated almost exclusively on their roles as fighters for or against the white authorities. Material on black social history is very scarce. In addition, almost no material is available on the day-to-day lives of black people, particularly those who lived in rural areas. It is these areas, inaccessible to conventional methods of investigation, that the method of oral history allows the historian to explore.<sup>17</sup>

With regard to the process of identifying significant sites in South Africa for which there is no recorded history, oral history is also playing a vital role in bringing together strands of South Africa's heritage. A specific place can have significance in people's memories and beliefs. If all the narratives concur, the researcher can find an interesting story to tell. The heritage of South Africa is bound to be enriched by this contribution.<sup>18</sup>

In the endeavour to construct a more comprehensive picture of the past, taking into account certain problems and the bias of official history and official records, oral testimony is very often the only alternative source for obtaining information to correct and augment an incomplete and inadequate official history. In South Africa, large sections of our history were distorted and hidden. A lot of information about the past can be salvaged only by tapping the memories of those who lived through

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<sup>16</sup> L Witz, **Write your own history** (Ravan Press, Cape Town, 1988), p. 14; Allen and Montell, p. 20; **The Sunday Independent**, 3 May 1998, p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> Sideris, p. 41; **The Sunday Independent**, 3 May 1998, p. 22; **Sunday Times**, 5 September 1993, p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> **Business Day**, 28 February 2001, p. 25.

it, or remember hearing older members of the family or community talk about it. Academic history can be enriched in the process.<sup>19</sup>

For example, one can refer to oral history interviews conducted with people involved in the events that took place in the Soweto uprising in 1976. The book, **Soweto, 16 June 1976: it all started with a dog**, is constructed from stories told by people who share the memories of their involvement in the events and time leading up to it and the days, months and years that followed the uprising in Soweto.<sup>20</sup>

The spoken reminiscences of ordinary people helped historians to rediscover folk history and use it more effectively. In the process, we came to appreciate the less fateful, but nevertheless important, role played by ordinary people in the shaping of our history.

#### 4.2 Oral history complements recorded sources

Oral history is a valuable source of historical information, since it complements other recorded sources of information. Historical gaps of interest and importance can be filled by using oral history methods to provide an intimate view of the events described, in order to create records which otherwise would not have been available. The personal and anecdotal characteristics of recorded interviews can provide flesh for the sometimes arid bones of history. Historical records are deliberately prepared in an objective and impersonal manner, which means that the tension and influences often underlying the historical data are not reflected in the official records.<sup>21</sup> This relationship between oral and written sources can be summed up as follows: "Alone, each one is incomplete, but together they form a harmonious union, with the one offering objective interpretation based upon sound evidence, and the other giving a personalized immediacy, a sense of being there and of participation."<sup>22</sup>

Written sources usually provide the who, what, when and where of history, while oral history can add better insights into the how and why, giving a fuller historical record. Written records relate the facts of *what happened*, while oral sources provide insights into *how people felt about what had happened*. Oral history often expresses how people felt about certain important events and movements, how they reacted to them, and how these events affected their lives. Details of what

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<sup>19</sup> Sideris, pp. 41-2; Allen and Montell, p. viii; **Volksblad**, 25 March 2000, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> E Brink, et al., **Soweto, 16 June 1976: it all started with a dog** (Kwela Books, Cape Town, 2001), p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Lance, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Allen and Montell, p. 3.

happened, as well as the emotional responses of individuals to the event itself, provide a human dimension to eyewitness accounts of historical occurrences.<sup>23</sup>

### 4.3 Oral history gives a "voice to the voiceless"

The value of oral history lies specifically in the broadening of sources of historical information to include the voices and perspectives of ordinary people, thus expanding the historian's database. This is particularly important in South Africa, where repression and discrimination muted the voice of the majority of people.<sup>24</sup> An attempt is made to 'give a voice' to the experiences and everyday stories of ordinary people, and these historical narratives, as communicated through oral testimony, are a means of overcoming the silence.<sup>25</sup> Oral history provides a voice to the voiceless, to the poor, the marginalised and the illiterate. A former resident of District Six, Cape Town, once remarked: "We have a voice. We want to be heard. They don't have to give us anything. We just want someone to listen to us."<sup>26</sup>

This could allow those who have limited access to formal channels of expression, to communicate their points of view to a public audience. At the very least, this oral evidence could then be presented in a form that is accessible to a wide range of people. For example, during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa it was also ordinary people who appeared before the Commission to tell their stories unhindered to all. Antjie Krog describes it as follows: "Many voices of this country were long silent, unheard, often unheeded before they spoke, in their own tongues, at the microphones of South Africa's Truth Commission. The voices of ordinary people have entered the public discourse and shaped the passage of history. They speak here to all who care to listen."<sup>27</sup>

In this sense oral history makes a social contribution, assisting the less privileged in their journey towards dignity and self-confidence. It gives ordinary people confidence in their own speech as a means of expressing themselves, in their own memories and interpretations of the past and their ability to contribute to the writing of history. Approaching a person to record his/her story conveys the message that his/her life is of value and of significance in itself. This process captures an alternative view of history and reveals a great deal about an individual and about a culture.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Ritchie, pp. 20-1; Allen and Montell, pp. 21, 58.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 58; Moss, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> G Minkley and C Rassool, "Orality, memory, and social history in South Africa", in S Nuttall and C Coetzee (eds), **Negotiating the past: The making of memory in South Africa** (Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1998), pp. 90-1; **Natal Witness**, 23 September 2003, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> **Democracy in Action**, 1 June 1995, p. 32.

<sup>27</sup> A Krog, **Country of my skull** (second edition, Random House, Johannesburg, 2002), p. viii.

<sup>28</sup> Thompson (2000), pp. 20-3; Caunce, p. 25; **Democracy in Action**, 1 June 1995, p. 32.



Tim Keegan argues that "in the narratives of ordinary people's lives we begin to see some of the major forces of history at work, large social forces that are arguably the real key to understanding the past".<sup>29</sup>

#### 4.4 Oral history, political reconciliation and nation-building

Oral history also has vital political importance. Understanding the past from the point of view of the oppressed people in South Africa, is a powerful way to uncover the 'past-present relationship' through memory. This can play an important role in restoring a sense of pride and confidence in these people. Reconstructing past struggles from the point of view of the ordinary people involved can help to obtain a more comprehensive picture of their role in the resistance period.<sup>30</sup> The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, for example, uncovered the past by using the politics of historical and personal memory for the purpose of reconciliation in the future. The TRC broke the silence imposed by apartheid through an official recording of memories.<sup>31</sup>

The history of political resistance and political organisation can be documented systematically through oral history, so that it can be used with greater political purpose. Communities who went through forced removals offer a good example. Under the threat and conditions of forced removal, communities develop a strong sense of their history and their right to landownership. Recording the history of these communities and making it widely available may help to justify their claims to the land.<sup>32</sup>

Here, oral history forms the connection between the past and the political struggle, between power and knowledge, between political and social history, and between memory and history.<sup>33</sup>

### 5. LIMITATIONS OF ORAL HISTORY IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Many academic historians still question the reliability of oral sources and the uses thereof. They argue that oral testimony is often too "subjective, inaccurate, contains distortions and that individual memory is unreliable and subject to subsequent

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<sup>29</sup> Nuttall and Coetzee (eds), p. 91.

<sup>30</sup> Sideris, p. 43.

<sup>31</sup> Nuttall and Coetzee (eds), pp. 89–90; **Rapport**, 23 March 2003, p. 24; **Democracy in Action**, 1 June 1995, p. 32.

<sup>32</sup> Sideris, pp. 51-2.

<sup>33</sup> Nuttall and Coetzee (eds), p. 93.

changes in people's perspectives".<sup>34</sup> The unreliability of the interviewee's memory for hard and specific facts and chronological sequence is undoubtedly the major criticism of oral evidence.<sup>35</sup>

Paul Thompson argues that the general rules for examining all evidence for reliability is also applicable to oral sources. According to him there are no absolute rules, but rather a number of factors to be taken into account. As with all sources the researcher must be aware of potential bias and sources must be checked for internal consistency as well as cross-checked with other sources. Evidence must be weighed against a wider context where oral evidence can in some cases be the best, or be supplementary or complementary to that of other sources.<sup>36</sup> Methods can also be implemented to question and assess eye-witnesses while the evidence is being given.

It is however important to understand the unique South African context and limitations when doing oral history. The South African teacher should also be aware of the pitfalls of using oral history as a teaching tool within the local context.

The notion of a community-orientated history in a multicultural society, like South Africa, is fraught with dangers. The interviewer should be sensitive to the intra-/inter-community divisions and tensions along the lines of political and ideological affiliations, race and ethnic identity and class positions. Religion, language, culture, political loyalty, race and class are all factors that determine the way in which communities define themselves.<sup>37</sup>

Because of the socialist nature of the African community, it is crucial that the interview should be done with the co-operation of the respected community leaders. Without involving the leaders an oral history project focussed on the black community is doomed to failure. In most cases the community leaders should be briefed about the exact nature and purpose of the project. Once the project has the blessing of the community leaders, other members of the community will be more eager to participate.

The actual interviewing of candidates also asks for caution, because there is still mistrust between the different races in the South African society. Racial tension and apprehensiveness may make it difficult to arrange an interview in a candidate's

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<sup>34</sup> Sideris, p. 42.

<sup>35</sup> A Seldon and J Pappworth, **By word of mouth. 'Élite' oral history** (University Press, London, 1983), p. 17.

<sup>36</sup> Thompson (2000), p. 153.

<sup>37</sup> S Krige, et al., **History for the future: Taking another look at "What is history?"** (University of the Witwatersrand - Education Policy Unit, Johannesburg, 1992), p. 23.

own home. Language and communication barriers between the interviewer and interviewee can further hinder the process of collecting information.<sup>38</sup>

In the western understanding of the past it is more general to order the past according to a date, or time period, whereas for African people, places and events are important in their accounts of what took place in history and not the specific time. In their understanding the chronology of an historical event normally took place in relation to an even greater event in history.<sup>39</sup>

Although Thompson emphasised that it is not necessarily true that an interviewer of the same sex, class or race will obtain more accurate information,<sup>40</sup> the situation is different in an African context. It is crucial that the interviewer must be gender-sensitive while doing oral history. The interviewer must take into account that gender differences are culturally produced, where women are still in many cases made to behave subordinately to men. For example, in the presence of her husband, the wife will usually affirm her husband's opinion and speak through the permission of her husband.<sup>41</sup>

## 6. THE NEED FOR ORAL HISTORY TO CHANGE OUTDATED TEACHING METHODS, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE TEACHING OF HISTORY

### 6.1 From contents-based to outcomes-based history

While the first part of the paper focussed on the need for oral history in South African society at large, the focus now shifts to the education field, with special reference to the teaching of History. Since 1994, education in South Africa has experienced dramatic and far-reaching changes. The advent of a new political dispensation demanded that the old Apartheid-based Bantu education be abolished and a new curriculum be implemented for learners of all races. In 1997 Curriculum 2005 was heralded as the new system which would replace the old one. Although the future status of History as an independent subject was uncertain even before 1994, Curriculum 2005 marginalised it even further.

During August 2001, Minister Asmal launched the South African History Project to officially investigate the state of the subject in South African schools and suggest possible solutions. The main aim of the project is to improve History teaching in

<sup>38</sup> J Worthington and P Denis, **Working draft. Training manual. Oral history project** (School of Theology, University of Natal, Durban, s.a), p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 18; Thompson (2000), pp. 157, 167.

<sup>40</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 140.

<sup>41</sup> Worthington and Denis, p. 19.

schools, providing new textbooks and establishing oral history and history writing projects. Particularly noteworthy is the project's aim to investigate *new teaching methods for teachers, as well as the fresh focus on ordinary people, oral history and indigenous knowledge systems*. Until recently, History curricula gave little or no attention at all to these aspects of History.<sup>42</sup>

In the past, most teachers saw History purely as the teaching of textbook content, with very little emphasis on critical thinking and analysis. Learners had to memorise the facts and simply reproduce them for evaluation. This approach is based on the so-called 'transmission model', which implies that the teacher or lecturer conveys knowledge to passive learners and students, who then reproduce it during formal assessment. The main aim of Curriculum 2005 and the concept of outcomes-based education (OBE) is to replace the 'transmission model' by the so-called 'active-learning model', which aims to make learners and students more responsible for their own learning. The role oral history can play in this shift of focus - specifically with regard to changing outdated teaching methods, as well as the content of History curricula - will now be investigated.<sup>43</sup>

## 6.2 Oral history as a teaching tool

Studies conducted in both Britain and the USA since the 1950s have indicated that learners and students of all ages respond more positively to oral history as a teaching tool for subjects such as History, Social Studies, Environmental Studies, English, Journalism and Drama, than to more traditional methods. Although little research has been done to investigate oral history's possibilities in the South African context, we believe that the general principles of oral history teaching can be adapted successfully to suit local circumstances.<sup>44</sup>

Oral history has been used successfully as a teaching tool for learners at all stages of social and intellectual development. Alistair Thomson of the University of

<sup>42</sup> **The Cape Argus**, 28 August 2001, p. 10; **Mail and Guardian**, 6 September 2001, p. 13; **Business Day**, 27 August 2001, p. 3; **Die Burger**, 11 September 2001, p.10.

<sup>43</sup> T Cubbin, "The opportunity of local history in rehabilitating the relevance of history in our emerging society." Unpublished paper delivered at the Biennial Congress of the South African Historical Association on History: Its problems and its challenges with the advent of the new millennium, 28 June - 1 July 1998, University of the North, Pietersburg, pp. 2-3; J Porter, "Contextualising teaching and learning: the history curriculum for the future", <http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/history2000/skillsdevhistcurric.htm>, 1 April 2002, s.a.; S Mbaye, "Oral records in Senegal", **The American Archivist**, 53, Fall 1990, pp. 566-74; AV Dhliwayo, "Contending projections and traditions of Afro-centrism in the study of African past: problems and challenges with the advent of the new millennium." Unpublished paper delivered at the Biennial Congress of the South African Historical Association on History: Its problems and its challenges with the advent of the new millennium, 28 June - 1 July 1998, University of the North, Pietersburg, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> Ritchie, p. 170.

Sussex, England, believes that the principles underlying oral history teaching "embrace notions of learning being active, participatory and interactive; of theory being integrated with practice; of critical thought about the nature and use of knowledge; and of reflection by both teacher [and learner] and taught on the processes and outcomes of learning".<sup>45</sup> Each level of education requires a specific teaching approach to oral history, as will be discussed below.

At *primary school level*, oral history is not used for teaching subject matter as such, but rather as a tool to help learners develop social skills and an environmental awareness. Oral history is particularly useful at the stage when learners only have very limited reading skills. Even at this early stage it is possible to involve learners in oral history projects, but the focus should be on group work rather than individual efforts. Such projects may be focussed on the learners' immediate family members, such as grandparents. By conducting the interviews themselves, the learners are involved in a process of 'learning through doing'. From an historical perspective, oral history helps learners to build up a meaningful framework of historical chronology, and they also begin to grasp where they, as well as their relatives, fit into it.<sup>46</sup>

At *secondary school level*, oral history becomes more sophisticated and more closely connected to the content of curricula. Apart from using it as a tool for teaching History, it is also advisable to employ it in a multidisciplinary fashion. By combining History with other social sciences and languages, learners come to appreciate subjects within a broader context and develop an understanding of the interrelatedness of different disciplines. The extent to which oral history may be used at secondary level, will depend largely on the attitude of the teacher as well as the flexibility of the curriculum. An aspect that should receive attention at secondary level is the research aspect of an oral history project. Learners should become aware of the sources of oral history, including place names, myths, legends, poems and songs, and should know how to use these sources. Although the focus should still be on group work, it is now necessary to start developing individual skills regarding independent research and critical analysis.<sup>47</sup>

When learners reach the *tertiary level of education*, the focus of oral history shifts from group work to individual work. Students should be able to conduct a complete oral history project from start to finish. The role of individual research now becomes crucial, and students should be able to compare, verify and integrate the

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<sup>45</sup> A Thomson, "Teaching oral history to undergraduate researchers", <http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/history2000/oralhist.htm>, 1 April 2002, s.a.

<sup>46</sup> Ritchie, p. 164; R Brooks, et al., **The effective teaching of history** (Longman, London, 1993), p. 30.

<sup>47</sup> Ritchie, pp. 165-6; Brooks, et al., pp. 102, 153; Thompson (1988), pp. 174-5.

various oral sources. At this level, oral history may either be approached as a separate course, or as a module of a combined course in History and other social sciences such as Sociology and Anthropology. Paul Thompson cautions that there should be a balance between the theory and practice of oral history at this level. Oral history theory needs to be interwoven with practical experience, and it should be directed towards specific issues such as HIV/Aids, or historical incidents such as the Soweto unrest of 1976.<sup>48</sup>

### 6.3 Oral history and skills development

The main focus of current curriculum strategies in South African as well as in most Western educational institutions is the promotion of so-called 'transferable skills'. Transferable skills, which include both subject-specific and generic skills, are basically skills that are seen as relevant to the needs of the contemporary world. Not only do the principles underlying oral history teaching closely reflect current ideas about effective learning and teaching, but oral history also lends itself to the development of a wide range of personal and transferable skills.<sup>49</sup>

The American historian, Donald A Ritchie, argues that oral history helps learners to break loose from their textbooks and become their own collectors of information. Learners seem to learn best from what they have researched themselves. Oral history interviewing turns learners into historical investigators: they must be able to choose a topic, identify suitable interviewees, do the research, conduct the interviews and transcribe the interviews themselves. During this process, they acquire numerous essential skills that are usually neglected in many schools.<sup>50</sup> The following skills may be developed:

- **Research skills:** Learners involved in oral history develop the desire to find out more from other sources, leading to searches in libraries and archives. Learners are exposed to the value of primary sources, of which oral history recordings and related archival material are good examples. They develop research and questioning skills when they are confronted with contradictory evidence. Different people give different versions of the same event, and the interviewee's story may differ from the textbook account. Not only does the learner

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<sup>48</sup> **Ibid.**, pp. 182-3.

<sup>49</sup> T Hitchcock and B Shoemaker, "Skills and the development of the history curriculum", <http://batspa.ac.uk/history2000/histcurrfuture.htm>, 1 April 2002, s.a.; A Thomson, "Teaching oral history to undergraduate researchers", <http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/history2000/oralhist.htm>, 1 April 2002, s.a.

<sup>50</sup> Ritchie, pp. 159, 168.

develop the ability to verify the different sources, but he/she also realises in the process that historical events do not affect all people the same way.<sup>51</sup>

- **Language skills:** The development of language skills includes both the written and spoken language. Learners develop language skills by formulating questions, conducting interviews and transcribing them. In addition, learners develop listening skills since they have to focus on the interviewee's speech during an interview. By interviewing others or being interviewed themselves, learners can also gain confidence with regard to expressing themselves in words.<sup>52</sup>
- **Technical skills:** These skills are acquired mainly through the handling of equipment used for recording and transcribing an interview. Learners learn how to handle the equipment properly, and how to use it in combination with other equipment such as video cameras. An oral history project may also lead to the collecting of related artefacts and photographs and, in the process, learners learn how to handle such items and take care of them, as well as, in the case of photographs, how to reproduce them.<sup>53</sup>
- **Social skills:** The interview process develops some important social skills during the learners' interaction with interviewees. They learn how to communicate with adults, they develop tact and patience, they experience feelings of empathy towards others and they are confronted with conflicting values and attitudes to life. Another important aspect that should be emphasised here is the opportunities that oral history offers for learners to work together in teams. In view of the increasing emphasis on co-operative learning and group activity, learners benefit from being involved as a group in an oral history project.<sup>54</sup>
- **Cognitive and other skills:** Some of the most important skills acquired through oral history are the cognitive skills. These include an understanding of historical concepts and timelines, genealogy, cause and effect relationships and problem-solving skills. Writing reports about individual oral history experiences also develops analytical and composition skills. The by-products

<sup>51</sup> G Timmins, "Progression and differentiation in history teaching", <http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/history2000/progressdiff.htm>, 1 April 2002, s.a.; Thompson, (1988), pp.167-8; Ritchie, pp.168-9; Krige, et al, p. 12.

<sup>52</sup> CR Siler, "Oral history in the teaching of U.S. history", <http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC-Digests/ed393781.htm>, 1 April 2002, s.a.; MH Trümpelman, (ed.), **Kreatiewe Geskiedenis-onderrig** (Butterworth, Durban, 1983), p.116; Thompson (1988), p. 168; Krige, et al., p. 12.

<sup>53</sup> D Weitzman, **My backyard history book** (Little, Brown and Company, New York, 1975), pp. 56-7; Thompson (1988), p. 168.

<sup>54</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 169; Ritchie, p. 171; Brooks, et al., p. 30; Weitzman, pp. 56-7.

of developing these skills are the opportunities for self-revelation and the development of self-worth.<sup>55</sup>

#### 6.4 Oral history, social history and outcomes-based education

Within the South African context, one can safely argue that oral history fits in with the modern teaching trend of moving away from an emphasis on political history, to a focus on social history. The history of everyday life, the role of the ordinary citizen in shaping events and the importance of social issues such as racism, reconciliation and women's rights, are undoubtedly gaining prominence in current curriculum developments. It is in this regard that oral history as a teaching tool is coming to the fore. As a teaching device, oral history allows learners to meet, listen to and engage in discussions with people who have played a personal role in certain social issues. In this way, oral history presents learners with different viewpoints and exposes the individual beliefs, opinions and experiences that underlie people's social concerns and opinions. Examples of oral history projects that explore social history issues, include the following: the living conditions of working-class communities in South Africa's urban areas, the history of labour resistance against racial segregation in the workplace in the 1970s and the living and working conditions of African mine workers on South Africa's gold mines during the 1980s. All of these possible projects will not only shed light on the social lives of the so-called underclasses, but will also provide important insights into the history of popular consciousness. Furthermore, projects of this nature emphasise the role that social experience plays in the making of history.<sup>56</sup>

As already mentioned, the other important mantra in current educational thinking in South Africa is outcomes-based education (OBE). It stands in stark contrast to the previous focus on contents-based education, where only the facts and the learner's reproduction of them were important. In order to bring History in line with outcomes-based education the focus of the subject should shift to a field related to social history, namely community history or micro-history, according to South African historian Tony Cubbin. Cubbin is of the opinion that local history is "a powerful means of restoring academic history to the realm of the active, relevant and real in our community lives".<sup>57</sup> The active community-oriented approach is of crucial importance in view of the lack of even the most basic recorded information regarding significant segments of South African society. Cubbin stresses that, in the light of this barren field of research, all communities – whether urban, rural, industrial or commercial - are potential subjects for oral history projects. It is within

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<sup>55</sup> Ritchie, pp. 160, 168-9.

<sup>56</sup> Sideris, pp. 42-3; Ritchie, p. 170; Thompson (1988), p. 186; Trümpelman (ed.), pp. 110-6.

<sup>57</sup> Cubbin, p. 2.



this context that the strong relationship between oral history and community history should be emphasised. Therefore, the most effective way to utilise oral history as a teaching tool is to use it specifically for the teaching of community history.<sup>58</sup>

### 6.5 A South African case study

Most of what has been said about the role of oral history as a teaching tool at school level is applicable to the teaching of History and other social sciences at tertiary level. However, it is specifically at university level that oral history is slowly gaining ground as a teaching tool and as a discipline in its own right.<sup>59</sup>

Since 2001, the Free State Provincial Archives and the Department of History at the University of the Free State have joined forces for the training of post-graduate History students in oral history. Oral History constitutes a compulsory module of the GES 601 Honours Degree course, together with History Theory, History Methodology and South African Historiography. The course content focusses on the theoretical as well as the methodological aspects of oral history. The student is expected to complete a project that forms the core of the Oral History module. The student may choose any candidate as the focus of the project. The chosen candidate must be interviewed, and the interview must be fully transcribed. Part of the project is the writing of a four-page biography of the candidate, based on the information gained from the interview. After completion of the project, the following must be handed in: a typed questionnaire prepared for the interview, a typed transcription of the interview, the cassette with the recorded interview and a typed biography of the candidate.

The assistance of the Free State Provincial Archives was enlisted in order to offer the students an opportunity for the practical application of oral history methodology. It was then decided to include practical sessions at the Archives as a compulsory part of the course, and to involve the students in oral history projects undertaken by the Archives. The practical sessions consist of a training session, the conduction of at least one full-length interview and the transcription of the interview. The students are then evaluated on their practical work, and a mark that counts 20% towards their semester mark, is allocated.

Since 2003, the Archives have also assisted the Department of History with the practical training of third-year History students. At this level, the training consists of four lectures in oral history methodology, after which the students must also

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<sup>58</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 4; NJ Wilson, **History in crisis?** (Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, 1999), pp. 69-73; Trümpelman, (ed.), pp. 54-60; Krige, et al., p. 23.

<sup>59</sup> Thompson (1988), pp. 174-5.

conduct a short interview. This is usually a life-history type of interview conducted with a chosen candidate. The students must compile a suitable questionnaire, conduct the interview and also transcribe the full interview. The students are then evaluated on the questionnaire and the interview, as well as the transcription.

Combining practical hands-on training in oral history methodology with oral history theory has numerous advantages for both the post-graduate and third-year students. The students benefit from their exposure to the real-life working conditions at the Archives, as well as their involvement in its oral history projects. Using the recording equipment of the Archives, they can practise their oral history skills and also draw on the expertise of the Archives staff.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Oral history has gained considerable ground in the past few decades. It is no longer an activity pursued by only a few individuals, but is also utilised by historical societies, museums, schools, curricula, reminiscence therapists, archives and academic historians.

Oral history has an important part to play in the reconstruction of the South African past. It corrects other perspectives just as much as other perspectives correct it. It is therefore important not to make a distinction between 'real history' and 'oral history'.

Oral history concerns not only memories and narratives, but also a deeper insight into and greater analytical understanding of the world of the past. It becomes a part of the wider field of history across disciplinary barriers, contributing to a broader view of human experience.

It is therefore necessary for South African historians to come to a point where documentary evidence is accepted alongside oral history, as part of the available material for research. We can concur with Paul Thompson that "if the full potential of oral history is realized it will result in an underlying change in the way in which history is written and learnt, in its questions and judgements and its texture".<sup>60</sup>

The long-term future of oral history as an active subject depends on asking questions and utilising all appropriate methodologies, both within history and outside its traditional boundaries. Although opposition to oral history will not immediately cease and all doubts will never be removed, it is impossible to exclude

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<sup>60</sup> Thompson (2000), p. 82.

oral history from serious consideration, since all sources can be queried. And, most of all, there are numerous ordinary people out there with important stories and memories to add to the richness of South Africa's history.

A poem by Antonio Mussapi, called *Remembering*, grasps this idea:<sup>61</sup>

"I talk,  
 Talk with people,  
 The people who speak to me  
 Of time past  
 Which falls and does not germinate  
 If I don't talk.  
 I listen carefully.  
 I converse  
 With people.  
 I speak  
 To the little old woman,  
 to grandpapa, to brothers and sisters,  
 At dusk  
 Around the red light,  
 Bright and hot,  
 Which encourages us,  
 The light which brings back  
 Time past and the time before that,  
 Which falls without germinating  
 If, when we talk,  
 Nobody listens.  
 I, you and they,  
 We,  
 All gathered round,  
 Talking, asking, looking,  
 I with pencil and paper,  
 By the tiny lamps of the sky,  
 The dark sky,  
 Recording the conversation.  
 Time past  
 Which lights up today  
 And tomorrow,  
 Making it clear."

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<sup>61</sup> Witz, p. 15.