

ORAL HISTORY IN THE CLASSROOM: CLARIFYING THE CONTEXT THROUGH HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is on the use of oral history in the classroom and it aims to suggest a method in which oral history recordings and transcriptions may be used to enhance historical understanding among learners by making historical context clear. Firstly, the paper gives background information on the historical research which was largely based on the oral testimony of World War Two veterans and former prisoners-of-war. This theme serves as an example theme for history lessons in especially the Senior Phase classroom as preparation for the FET-phase classroom. Secondly the paper looks at ways in which these sources can be used in the classroom. By using oral sources it is hoped that learners and teachers may move beyond the so-called "hard" forms of historical knowledge, in other words the facts or content knowledge and gain insight into historical significance through the context which oral sources are able to uncover. The paper concludes with ideas and example questions on how students' interest in the past can be enhanced as they confront oral testimony, thereby increasing their appreciation for the past as well as their respect for those who experienced the historical events first hand.

The use of oral history in the classroom reveals students' misunderstandings of the past and may help educators to address the specific problems of comprehension. Several examples of such cases are mentioned in the paper, including instances where linguistic skills and critical thinking skills may be potentially improved. Apart from creating awareness of historical context, the use of oral testimony has the potential to broaden vocabulary and develop students' critical thinking skills when, through oral history, they investigate issues of historical accuracy, diverse perspectives and employ the research skills historians regularly use, including communication, analysis and evaluation.

Keywords: Senior Phase history; Further Education and Training (FET) phase history; Oral History; Historical Context; Historical Skills; Primary Sources; Prisoners-of-War.

Introduction

The debate surrounding history learners as “mini historians” and to what extent it is indeed possible to transform school learners into mini historians has been raging among history educators and historians for some time. Many academic historians believe that learners are incapable of successful and meaningful analysis of historical sources, and of making valid interpretations from the evidence. The complex nature of primary evidence and numerous aspects taken into consideration when evaluating evidence apparently places this skill beyond the scope of what is realistically possible in a history classroom.¹ On the other hand, the Department of Education clearly states that one of the specific aims of History is to develop “the ability to undertake a process of historical enquiry based on skills.”² These skills include the ability to “extract and interpret information from a number of sources [and] evaluate the usefulness of sources.”³ As these skills require a greater degree of hypothetical and deductive reasoning it is essential that the historical skills of learners are developed maximally during the Senior Phase. Without the acquisition of these basic skills during the Senior Phase, learners will fail to grasp the significance of history as they will not be able to think historically.⁴

Numerous studies in the past have shown that intellectual development take place at a slower rate in history education, resulting in the formal operational phase only developing at the mental age of 16.5, whereas the same formal operation phase develops in other disciplines at the mental age of 11 or 12.⁵ In South Africa, learners who are 16 or 17 would, in most cases, already have chosen their subjects for the Further Education and Training Phase (FET). If we accept the ideology described above, the implication is that Social Sciences (History) learners in the Senior Phase, are generally not yet at the formal operational phase of their intellectual development. This could be one of the reasons why History in the FET Phase is declining and why so many learners regard History as irrelevant when they make their subject selections. However, Husbands believes that this narrow and negative view on learners’ cognitive ability concerning historical skills has been disputed in more recent

1 C Husbands, *What is History teaching? Language, ideas and meaning in learning about the past* (Buckingham, Open University Press, 2003), p. 17.

2 National Curriculum Statement (NCS), Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), History, Further Education and Training Phase (FET), (Pretoria, Department of Basic Education, 2011), p. 8.

3 NCS, CAPS, History, FET. p. 9.

4 The CAPS document for Senior Phase Social Sciences include the development of skills such as the selection of relevant information and issues regarding bias and reliability of sources.

5 MB Booth, “Skills, concepts, and attitudes: The development of adolescent children’s historical thinking”, *History and Theory*, 22(4), December 1983, pp. 101-104.

studies.⁶ This paper hopes to suggest a teaching technique, with oral history as a resource, that will help teachers and learners gain the skills that will not only satisfy the requirements of the national curriculum, but which will also help them discover the value of history through the unlocking of historical skills such as analysis and evaluation.

Those learners, who select History as an option for the FET Phase, must be given opportunities to fully develop intellectually with regard to historical analysis and thinking. Regardless of whether one agrees or disagrees with the Piagetian framework of cognitive analysis, each learner must be able to develop their skills to hypothesise and make deductions, both of which are skills needed to analyse and evaluate historical sources. The degree to which learners are able to think historically, to comprehend historical context and to recognise the implications of the benefit of hindsight influence learners when they work with primary sources. For this reason, it is imperative that history educators find ways to create opportunities for learners in the FET Phase to investigate primary evidence but at the same time to structure learning in such a way that allows learners to recognise historical context. This article will suggest one way in which this may be achieved while at the same time merging academic historical research with history education.

South African Prisoner-of-War oral testimony

During 2010, a number of interviews were conducted with former South African Prisoners-of-War (POW). Eleven of these men were captured when the Libyan port of Tobruk fell to Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps on 21 June 1942. The twelfth interviewee was captured the year before during the Battle of Sidi Rezegh, a few kilometres to the south of Tobruk. Following Rommel's victory at Tobruk and the capture of 33 000 Allied soldiers, of whom 10 722 were UDF soldiers, Rommel was promoted to Field Marshal while the South African commander of the Tobruk Garrison, Major General HB Klopper was sent to Italy along with the rest of the captured men.⁷ Not only was the fall of Tobruk a great setback for the Allied war effort, it also negatively affected relations between South Africa and Britain as Klopper was blamed for the surrender.⁸ The disputes among politicians and war generals also affected the ordinary rank and file soldiers who found

6 C Husbands, *What is history teaching?...*, p. 8.

7 J Pimlott (ed), *Rommel in his own words* (London, Greenhill Books, 1994), p. 113.

8 A Stewart, "The 'Atomic' despatch: Field Marshal Auchinleck, the fall of the Tobruk garrison and post-war Anglo-South African relations", *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies*, 36(1), 2008, p. 80.

themselves facing accusations of cowardice from other Allied prisoners in German and Italian prison camps. Many interviewees remembered how they were blamed for the fall of Tobruk, bearing accusations of cowardice and snide remarks from English and other Commonwealth prisoners.

Following their capture, the rank and file soldiers were marched to various temporary camps in the vicinity of Tobruk.⁹ Most POWs recall the initial period of captivity as a time of hardship, both physically and mentally. Not only were they subjected to hunger and thirst, they also had to find a way to cope with the shock and shame of becoming POWs, something most of them never considered a possibility.¹⁰ Shortly after their capture by German forces, the POWs were handed over to the Italians, and as the Italians were seen as a less worthy enemy, the potential for conflict between captor and captive was increased.¹¹ One way in which the POWs dealt with their situation was to mock their Italian guards. Fred van Alphen Stahl, for instance, ridiculed the Italians as ice-cream sellers, infuriating the guards to such an extent that they started shooting at the group of POWs.¹²

From North Africa, the POWs were transported to Italy, where the abiding memory among most POWs was one of a time of relaxation and a sense of freedom. As most POWs from the rank and file level were put to work on farms across Italy, they had access to more food and freedom than was the case in Africa. Bill Hindshaw, for instance, remembered how they played games with the Italians sentries and David Brokensha fondly recalled how his work detachment spent hours swimming in the Tiber River, a period of his captivity that he fondly recalled during the interview.¹³ Those POWs with rank and those who were ill or injured could not be placed in work camps and they remained in the larger Italian POW camps. However, for these men life also improved as most camps started to receive food parcels from the Red Cross, something that did not take place in North Africa.¹⁴

With the Italian peace agreement of September 1943, the POWs were subjected to more change and upheaval. This period was characterised

9 P Ogilvy & N Robinson, *In the bag* (Johannesburg, Macmillan, 1975), pp. 21-23.

10 Most interviewees recalled how unexpected and unforeseen their capture was, among them F van Alphen Stahl (Cape Town), interview, 25 May 2010; D Brokensha (Fish Hoek), interview, 10 September 2010.

11 W Oosthuizen (Hartenbos), interview, 4 December 2010. Incidentally, the Germans, including Rommel, looked down on the Italians' prowess as an ally.

12 F van Alphen Stahl (Cape Town), interview, 25 May 2010.

13 W Hindshaw (Johannesburg), interview, 19 March 2010; D Brokensha (Fish Hoek), interview, 10 September 2010.

14 J Beaumont, "Protecting prisoners of war, 1939-1995", K Fedorowich & B Moore, *Prisoners of war and their captors in World War Two* (Oxford, Berg, 1996), p. 279.

by mass escapes from Italian prison camps as many of the Italian camp guards simply threw down their weapons and returned to their homes. Of the thousands of Allied soldiers who escaped, many reached the safety of neutrality in Switzerland while others joined up with the Allied forces or with the Italian resistance army. Most, however, were recaptured by the Germans and transported to camps across German occupied territory, such as Poland.¹⁵ Here the captives were subjected to stricter discipline than was the case in Italy, but ironically many of the South African POWs preferred incarceration under Germans. One POW described the paradox as follows: “Germans were bastards, but they were just [fair] bastards.”¹⁶ With the defeat of the Axis powers in Europe the POWs returned to South Africa via Britain. In most cases, the now liberated POWs left the military life behind them and sought out a sense of normalcy in their day to day existence. Many continued with their education which was interrupted by the war, while others started on their careers.

Historical context and learner thinking

In the case of the research described above, the following “hard” facts are significant; the former POWs were all volunteers in the Union Defence Force (UDF); the military divisions to which they belonged all formed part of the British Eighth Army and fought in North Africa; the commander of the Tobruk garrison was General HB Klopper; Lieutenant-General Erwin Rommel was the commander of the German “Afrika Korps”; about 30 000 Allied soldiers were captured at Tobruk; of those captured, 10 722 were UDF volunteers; the Allied POWs were handed over to Italian control shortly after capture; POWs were moved to Italian POW camps and following the armistice in 1943, those who did not escape were moved to POW camps in German occupied zones; the majority of the POWs only returned to South Africa once the war came to an end in 1945.

It would not be difficult to set short answer questions based on the information above, for instance, learners may be required to answer questions starting with “who”, “what”, “where” and “when”. The answers to these questions will provide facts, and although these facts are relevant, the learners will merely have been confronted with the first and most basic step of Bloom’s

¹⁵ R Lamb, *War in Italy 1943 – 1945, A brutal story* (London, Murray, 1993), p.163.

¹⁶ F van Alphen Stahl (Cape Town), interview, 25 May 2010.

taxonomy, that of knowledge, or “the lowest level of the cognitive domain.”¹⁷ What is more, the short answer questions will contribute nothing towards the learners’ ability to analyse nor will it play a part in the development of their critical thinking skills. In terms of memorising facts, these questions would be sufficient, but these facts will disclose nothing of the context or historical significance. In other words, learners will not be able to answer questions starting with WHY. It is not contested that historical facts are important for an accurate analysis in terms of historical context, but facts are a starting point and should not be seen as sufficient evidence of learning as is often the case with assessments.

Memorising facts with no understanding of historical context will no doubt lead to learners seeing the past as a “pre-existing present [wherein] local, personalized and fragmentary” understandings on the past are the norm among learners.¹⁸ Additionally, without an understanding of historical context and the ability to think historically, learners will fail to acquire the skills that are specified in CAPS. Furthermore, learners will overlook historical significance and the influence historical events have on the present day. On the other hand, the over-emphasis on the “hard” understandings of history also holds threats to the subject itself, as learners cannot see how a list of names and dates can add value to their future careers or their personal growth. In other words, unless learners understand historical context, they will not be able to recognise the significance of history and neither will they understand the many uses of history – and the skills gained from the study of history – in their day to day lives.

In the following section, the use of oral history in the classroom is considered as a device that can aid in shifting the emphasis from the hard facts and to make the historical context and significance understandable for learners. The potential of oral history as a learning and teaching device that can both be utilised as an enrichment resource as an alternative to textbooks is also considered. The suggestions on the use of oral history in this case pertains to the specific POW interviews, but it is hoped that the strategy can be adapted to any historical theme were the teacher has access to oral history sources.

17 KM Price & KL Nelson, *Planning effective instruction diversity responsive methods and management* (Belmont, Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2014), p. 24.

18 C Husbands, *What is history teaching?...*, pp. 74-80.

Exposing context through oral history

The use of oral history in history education is not new, for example in an Illinois community college, students are required to conduct interviews with elderly relatives and link their findings with local history.¹⁹ Oral history is also used to positive effect in high schools, as is the case in New York where students are required to conduct interviews with immigrants.²⁰ In both these examples, students conduct interviews and then analyse the data before presenting their findings in writing. There is ample evidence that the use of oral history in the classroom holds benefits for learners in more than one aspect, including developing historical skills, content knowledge and understanding historical context as it relates to significance and meaning of historical events. With regard to skills development, oral history is an extremely useful method to demonstrate and make clear the issue of multiple-perspectives and in developing critical thinking skills among learners because they must employ the same techniques as historians when conducting their research. In both examples mentioned above, it was also found that oral history projects helped to foster interest in history and in the case of the New York school, the project was used as an “antidote to the textbook”.

As already mentioned in the previous section, the interviews with former POWs were conducted in 2010 and formed the research basis toward a PhD thesis in history. Following the interviews, the recordings were transcribed, resulting in a substantial archive of primary sources on the Second World War which is unique in the sense that it provides the researcher with the thus far neglected point of view of the South African experience of the war. While the material served its purpose for the completion of the thesis, it is still useful with regard to use in history classrooms. As the interviews with the POWs were already complete, either the recordings or the transcriptions can be used in class. Admittedly, this method will rob students of the experience of conducting their own interviews, but oral history interviews are far more complex than they seem, as factors such as bias, the influence of memory and nostalgia, the interviewer’s influence or intervention must be considered. Furthermore, there are specific skills to be attained before one is left with interview material that is useful.²¹ Using the transcriptions or recordings in

19 JF Lyons, “Integrating the family and the community into the history classroom: An oral history project in Joliet, Illinois”, *The History Teacher*, 40(4), 2007, pp. 481-491.

20 MS Crocco, “Putting the actors back on stage: Oral history in the secondary school classroom”, *Social Studies*, 89(1), 1998, pp. 19-24.

21 DA Ritchie, *Doing oral history a practical guide using interviews to uncover the past and preserve it for the future*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 25-36.

the classroom also holds the advantage of allowing the researcher time to analyse the material following the interviews. The researcher is therefore able to effectively prepare questions on the material before making the material available to the learners.

Before these oral history sources can be used effectively in class, the learners must have completed a few lessons which will give them a basic understanding of the Second World War. Issues such as the rise of Hitler and the reasons for the war should have been discussed before introducing the oral sources. As an introduction to the oral sources, the students are given background information on South Africa's role in the war. This information includes the so-called "hard" facts mentioned above, i.e. the POWs were all volunteers in the UDF, etc. The fact that the men were all volunteers will also serve as the starting point and focus of the first lesson that involves the oral sources.

Before sharing extracts from the oral interviews with the students, an opening question is set in the present, in order to move from the known present to the less-known past, i.e. *Why do men go to war?* It is to be expected that many of the students' reactions may include answers that indicate that they regard those who actually volunteered for war as thoughtless or ill-advised. Answers such as these will reflect learners' mini-theories on history. Claxton's concept mini-theories include both gut and lay mini-theories. Gut mini-theories are usually the result of learners' first and unthinking response to the question. Lay mini-theories on the other hand are influenced by the media, which in this case could include war films or computer games. It goes without saying that the basis for lay mini-theories is fictional and therefore not historically accurate.²² Husbands believes that in order to restructure learners' mini-theories, they must encounter the past through "museum education", which will promote active participation between learners and historical artefacts.²³

As museum visits are often not encouraged by many South African schools, however, oral sources are suggested as it also provides a window in to the past thought which learners may catch a glimpse of the historical context. The structured engagement with and critical analysis of the POW oral testimony serves to restructure learners' mini-theories by making clear to learners the motivations of people in the past, showing learners that the past is more than "a pre-existing present"²⁴ and that different factors contributed towards

22 G Claxton, "Minitheories: A preliminary model for learning science", PJ Black & AM Lucas, *Children's informal ideas in Science* (London, Routledge, 1993), p. 58.

23 C Husbands, *What is history teaching?...*, pp. 82-84.

24 C Husbands, *What is history teaching?...*, p. 79.

decisions and events in the past.

Following a brief discussion on the reasons for war and possible reasons to volunteer for war, the extracts wherein former POWs explained their reasons for volunteering, are shared with the learners. The extracts reflect different reasons why young men volunteered, showing both the unique individual and the general nature of their decisions:²⁵

*... also why did I volunteer? Because I was 17, there was a war on and I didn't want to miss it, you know it was sort of a boys' adventure story...*²⁶

*Well at 19 years old we obviously had a pretty fair idea of right and wrong and we'd been recognising over the years that Hitler was a threat to peace and ruining the lives of [a] great many people and so I think we joined up out of principle...*²⁷

*when war started I thought I'll go and do my bit, and I volunteered when I was 17 telling them I was 18 as all kids did in those days...*²⁸

*I signed up when Germany came through Belgium and the war is now really on ... they started a big recruiting campaign in Cape Town, they said there is going to be a new regiment called anti-aircraft, I haven't heard of anti-aircraft but obviously you must have guns protecting towns or ammunition dumps, I'm sure, whatever...*²⁹

*and I volunteered for the war in accordance with what all my friends [did] ... we just thought we had to do it, so it was a voluntary thing and we joined in May 1940, the Transvaal Scottish, where I was a private soldier... not a conscript, a volunteer...*³⁰

As the learners are already familiar with the basic information of the theme, in other words they have already mastered the first or “knowledge” level of Bloom's cognitive stages,³¹ the students are asked questions in order to prompt critical analysis of the primary oral sources, the questions are:

What words did each man use to tell us about the reason why he volunteered?

This question is aimed at prompting learners to read the extract more carefully, to consider the meaning of specific words and to discuss possible reasons why the former POW may have used that specific word instead of

25 LW Anderson, DR Krathwohl & BS Bloom, *A taxonomy for learning, teaching and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives* (New York, Longman, 2001), p. 352.

26 D Brokensha (Fish Hoek), interview, 10 September 2010.

27 M de Lisle (Cape Town), interview, 4 June 2010.

28 G Tewkesbury (Cape Town), interview, 5 March 2010.

29 C Luyt (Cape Town), interview, 19 May 2010.

30 S Smollan (Johannesburg), interview, 15 March 2010.

31 GF Madaus, EM Woods & RL Nuttal, “A casual model analysis of Bloom's Taxonomy”, *American Educational Research Journal*, 10(4), 1973, p. 254.

another.

What do these words tell us about why each man decided to go to war?

Once learners have analysed the language more closely, this question should prompt them to find a link between the text and the person, in other words, they should realise that written words, i.e. text have a specific origin, and in the case of history, the origin is often a person. Through a guided discussion this question should make learners aware of the common humanity that so often play a role in the shaping of historical events and that is also relevant in both the past and the present, thereby showing learners that the past is different in certain aspects, but also similar to the present in other aspects.³² Additionally, a discussion on this question will also help learners understand that each of these men had his own individual point of view on the war, which will help learners grasp the concept of multiple perspectives.

What do these extracts reveal about each man's personality?

The answers to this question should indicate to learners the difference between the individual and the general experience. If learners fail to realise that historical events affected individuals in a person way, they will also fail to realise the human aspect of the past, making it even more irrelevant to them.

What does the extract reveal about each man's sense of responsibility, or his values and beliefs?

This question is aimed at creating an awareness of the extent to which values and beliefs have changed since these men decided to participate in the war, making learners aware of the fact that in some ways certain aspects of society remain the same, but in other aspects value systems change. This would also be a good opportunity to introduce the concept of benefit of hindsight to learners and sensitise them to the idea that present-day historians cannot judge decisions of historical characters as these people did not have the advantage of knowing the outcome of their decisions.

32 C Husbands, *What is history teaching?...*, p. 79.

Conclusion

By analysing the oral history extracts, learners gain a better understanding of the former POWs' decisions for volunteering, thereby making the context clearer and improving students' understanding of the past. Following their analysis of the extracts, it is envisaged that learners will no longer view the past as a pre-existing present, but understand the "historical frame of reference [and will be able] to locate individual actions and events in the range of possible actions, or beliefs...".³³

There is no doubt that the use of oral history has great potential not only for historical understanding through context, but also for the development of historical skills among learners. As learners read the extracts from the testimonies, they will start to analyse the meaning and new avenues of exploration will open up for them as they, with the guidance of their teacher, seek to understand how decisions were made in the past and how it is similar and yet different to the way people think today.

Possible further advantages of historical oral testimony in the classroom are the expansion of learners' vocabulary; the exposure of learners to the work of historians, i.e. creating "mini-historians". As learners investigate the past through oral testimony, they will also be more likely to identify with the role players of the past, which in turn should increase their interest in history. Both of these aspects (vocabulary and identity), however, are avenues of further research.

Access to oral testimony is possible through archives or libraries, and with the help of the internet there should be no need for teachers to conduct interviews, unless of course the school policy and the time frame allows for this.³⁴ What is important, however, is that the interviews must be transcribed as this will allow learners to read and re-read the text when they start their analysis. It goes without saying then that teachers must analyse the oral sources in preparation.

Through this technique it is hoped that learners will gain new perspectives on history which in turn will foster a greater appreciation for the past and

³³ C Husbands, *What is history teaching?...*, p. 79.

³⁴ For transcripts and recordings on the Holocaust, the British library can be consulted (available at: <http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/voices/holocaust.html>, as accessed on 29 April 2014). The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum also offers recordings and transcripts of survivor testimony (available at: <http://www.ushmm.org/remember/the-holocaust-survivors-and-victims-resource-center/survivors-and-victims/survivor-testimonies>, as accessed on 29 April 2014). Forty hours of oral testimony and transcripts on Apartheid may be found on the Michigan State University's website on *Overcoming Apartheid* (available at: <http://overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/multimedia.php?id=65-259-1>, as accessed on 29 April 2014).

an appreciation on the meaning and value of history for today. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, this technique may support the views of other researchers who have challenged the Piagetian framework which is cynical regarding learners' ability to fully understand the complexities of history and historical interpretations.³⁵

³⁵ C Husbands, *What is history teaching?...*, p. 8.