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THE VOICES OF HISTORY
REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY SCHOOL BASED ORAL HISTORY IN ENGLAND
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ΟΙ ΦΩΝΕΣ ΤΗΣ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑΣ
ΣΚΕΨΕΙΣ ΓΙΑ ΣΥΓΧΡΟΝΕΣ ΜΟΡΦΕΣ ΑΞΙΟΠΟΙΗΣΗΣ ΤΗΣ ΠΡΟΦΟΡΙΚΗΣ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑΣ
ΣΕ ΣΧΟΛΕΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΑΓΓΛΙΑΣ

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the transformative potential of school based oral history by examining claims that have been made for it and by examining three contemporary examples of the genre in English secondary schools reported in the journal *Teaching History*. The case studies show, it is argued, that school based oral history can be powerfully transformative in a number of senses. It is argued, however, that not all of the aims that school based oral history can serve are equally historical and that there may be risks, as well as opportunities, associated with oral history pedagogies. The paper concludes by arguing that the aim of cultivating critical historical enquiry must

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remain central for school based oral history projects if they are to remain history and avoid becoming exercises in ‘heritage’ or ‘collective memory’ curation.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Το άρθρο επεξεργάζεται τις μετασχηματίζουσες δυνατότητες που παρέχει η αξιοποίηση της προφορικής ιστορίας στα σχολεία, εξετάζοντας τις ήδη διατυπωμένες σχετικές απόψεις και τρεις σύγχρονες εφαρμογές σε σχολεία της Αγγλίας, που έχουν δημοσιευθεί στο περιοδικό *Teaching History*. Οι τρεις αυτές περιπτώσεις δείχνουν πως η αξιοποίηση της προφορικής ιστορίας στα σχολεία μπορεί να έχει έντονα μετασχηματίζοντα εκπαιδευτικά αποτελέσματα με διάφορους τρόπους. Παράλληλα, ωστόσο, υποστηρίζεται ότι δεν μπορούν όλοι οι εκπαιδευτικοί στόχοι της αξιοποίησης της προφορικής ιστορίας στα σχολεία να είναι και ιστορικοί, και ότι η εκπαιδευτική αξιοποίηση της προφορικής ιστορίας στα σχολεία δεν ενέχει μόνον ευκαιρίες αλλά και κινδύνους. Το άρθρο καταλήγει με τον ισχυρισμό ότι η καλλιέργεια δεξιοτήτων κριτικής ιστορικής διερεύνησης πρέπει να παραμένει κεντρικός στόχος για τα σχολικά προγράμματα προφορικής ιστορίας που επιλέγουν να διατηρούν ιστορικό προσανατολισμό και δεν μεταβάλλονται σε προγράμματα «κληρονομιάς» ή «συλλογικής μνήμης».

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Introduction: Voicing the past?

Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into history itself and widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders, but from the unknown majority of the people. It encourages teachers and students to become fellow-workers. It brings history in, and out of, the community. It helps the less privileged, and especially the old, towards dignity and self-confidence. It makes for contact - and thence understanding - between social classes, and between generations. And to individual historians and others, with shared meanings, it can give a sense of belonging to a place or in time. In short, it makes for fuller human beings. Equally, oral history offers a challenge to the accepted myths of history, to the authoritarian judgment inherent in its tradition. It provides a means for a radical transformation of the social meaning of history. (Thompson 1978: 15.)

The Voice of the Past, the classic campaigning oral history text to which our paper's title pays homage and from which our epigraph is taken, makes a very powerful case for oral history and, among other things, for school based oral history. Oral history, Thompson argues, is multiply transformative - it changes the record and the representation of the past, our relationships with the past and, not least, social relationships in the present, and it does all this through giving 'voice'.

There is very good reason to conclude, on the basis of recent examples of secondary school based oral history in England, that Thompson's claims can be fully borne out in practice, as we will show in the first section of our paper below. Our paper focuses on secondary school history (pupils aged 11-19) as this is our area of expertise.

Contemporary English school-based oral history: Three case studies

Surprisingly, perhaps, in a context where much educational discourse and school funding is driven by instrumental concerns and anxieties occasioned by international comparisons in 'core' subjects such as science, the last ten years have been auspicious times for school-based oral history in England. Generous funds have been made available to support oral history projects involving young people.¹ A variety of support and advice is available for school-based oral history projects, for example, through the Oral History Society (<http://www.ohs.org.uk/>).²

We will focus, in this paper, on three examples of contemporary school-based oral history in England that are indicative of what is possible in this context - "Putting Life into History", a school-based project exploring authority and respect in the past,

organised by one of this paper's authors (Edwards 2006), the "Up the Manor!" Project (Johansen & Spafford 2009), and the "Hemel at War" Project (Abbott & Grayson 2011a, 2011b). All three projects were collaborative school-based oral history projects undertaken in non-selective state secondary schools in England and all three have been reported in the Historical Association's Journal *Teaching History*. The "Hemel at War" and "Up the Manor!" projects also have websites, enabling the projects to be explored in detail (Villiers Park Educational Trust n.d. and The Hemel Hempsted School n.d.). We do not presume to give comprehensive accounts of these projects here, since it is possible to read the projects' own accounts of their activity, but rather to ask what these projects reveal about the range of ways in which contemporary school based oral history can be transformative.

Putting life into history

The project reported as *Putting Life into History* (Edwards 2006) took place in a north London non-selective state school led by a history teacher working in the school and supported by an external agency (Creative Partnerships London East) that enabled and funded collaboration with a radio production company. The project was undertaken by a group of students working 'off-timetable'. The eighteen boys and girls, aged 12-14, who took part in the project were representative of students in the school. The project took five sessions over a period of three weeks and recorded the testimony of six local residents. The interviewees were aged between 55 and 81 years and were representative of the local community in ethnicity, gender and social class. Access to a radio production company enabled the interviews to be edited to produce a recording that interwove interview clips, reflecting interviewees' diverse and contradictory points of view, and students' responses to them (Edwards 2006: 25). The project employed oral history to illuminate contemporary debates around youth culture and an alleged decline in respect for authority among the young. It allowed pupils to interrogate these debates. The project was focused on the enquiry question "Were children in the past more respectful of authority than children today?" (Edwards 2006: 21).

The project had three aims: to demonstrate to students that history could elucidate contemporary debate; to enable students to experience history in practice and as a critical practice; and to challenge students' prior conceptions of the nature and purpose of history. Group discussions were used to probe the students' understanding of the disciplinary nature of history and to challenge their preconceptions, in particular the idea that only 'extraordinary' people merited a 'place' in history.

Students participated in formulating the project's enquiry question and conducted the interviews. They were encouraged to discuss whether their findings supported or

challenged the proposition that children in the past had respect for authority and to critically assess and compare their informants' testimony in relation to this question.



Students at Stoke Newington School conducting oral history interviews.

A number of benefits of the project are identified in its evaluation. First, the project is reported to have had positive impacts on students' thinking about the nature and content of history (Edwards 2006: 25) and also in the development of students' historical skills and understandings of evidence (Edwards 2006: 23) - a complex area of historical thinking that it is argued oral history can be particularly helpful in developing (Edwards 2006: 25). Social and personal benefits are also reported, including pupil experience and recognition of the value of collaborative working. In addition, the value of the interview encounter is foregrounded:

Both the students and the interviewees benefited from the experience. We were bringing the community into the school and the school into community (Edwards 2006: 24).

The project is reported as having had a positive pedagogic impact more generally by enabling "a departure from the conventional classroom practice of worksheet and textbook", by giving students insights into the practice of historical enquiry and knowledge construction (Edwards 2006: 25). One student is quoted as follows - "it was like looking at history from behind the scenes" and Edwards argues that whereas in 'more conventional' teaching and learning "the emphasis had been on the teacher leading the pupil along a learning path", in "this project teacher and student walked the path side by side" (Edwards 2006: 25).

Up the Manor!

The *Up the Manor!* (UTM) project was a collaboration between staff and pupils in an inner London non-selective state school and staff at an educational non-governmental organization, supported by Heritage Lottery Fund resources (Johansen & Spafford 2009). The project was delivered outside of history classes, and involved an ethnically diverse group of boys aged 14-15. The students conducted interviews with a group of elderly white men who had been members of the Eton Manor Boys' Club in the 1940s and 50s. The club was a sports and social club in East London (1909-67) and many of the interviewees, some of whom were now affluent, had lived in the area where the students interviewing them now lived and some had been schooled in the building now occupied by the students' school.

Up the Manor took a thematic research focus. The project's interview questions were designed to gather data on sport and youth culture in the local area during the mid-twentieth century. In total forty audio and video interviews were conducted which captured the testimony of one-time members of Eton Manor. The students produced a first draft of the oral history questionnaire and conducted and filmed some of the project interviews. The project included out of school training sessions in which students were instructed in oral history interview techniques. The students' interviews were stored in a local archive, an illustrated booklet and a teachers' resource pack

were produced, a DVD diary of the project was kept, and exhibitions of the project were held (Villiers Park Educational Trust 2008a).

The stated aims of *Up the Manor* were primarily concerned with the social and personal welfare of the students participating in the project. Oral history was celebrated in the project as a mode of experience that would help students manage their feelings of social and personal dislocation. At the beginning of the project the participating students were thoroughly disengaged with school. Outside of school they were ‘cut off’ from the adult world. The project sought to address a ‘generation gap’ but also, and more so, “a geographical, cultural and ethnic distance separating then and now, or more accurately ‘them’ and ‘us’” (Johansen & Spafford 2009: 38). The project focused on boys -a group particularly disengaged from history in the school- and on ‘sport’, a focus deemed likely to engage them (Johansen & Spafford 2009: 39).

Johansen and Spafford demonstrate that their project had a transformative effect on student participants’ attitudes towards themselves and towards school. They see oral history as an enriching experience with potential to build students’ self-esteem and re-connect them to the process of education. It can serve, they suggest, as a means to bridge the generational, cultural and ethnic distance that characterise many students’ everyday experience. Student participants in the project greatly valued their participation and reported a wide range of benefits:

Every one of the group considered that taking part in *UTM* had had either a real or significant impact on his self-confidence, social skills, research skills, ability to work in a team, interviewing and questioning skills, filming and camera skills, enthusiasm for learning, passion for his subject, perception of older people, and knowledge about the area where he lived (Johansen & Spafford 2009: 42).

Hemel at War

The *Hemel at War* project was a collaboration between pupils and staff in a mixed gender non-selective state secondary school history department and an academic historian. The project was delivered outside of history classes, and was open to students aged 14-18 who were and who were not studying history. The students conducted interviews with “veterans and others” who experienced active service and the “home front” during the Second World War, the primary focus of the project, and with “veterans of more recent conflicts (including currently serving soldiers)” (Abbott & Grayson 2011b: 4) in order to “to draw in any experiences of conflict which local people... brought to” the project’s attention (Abbott & Grayson 2011b: 8). In addition to the oral history element of the project, the students engaged in primary archival research, for example, about ex-pupils of the school who had died in the Second World War and who are commemorated on the school’s war memorial. The interviews and

other materials are archived in transcript form on the project website (<http://www.hemelatwar.org/>).

The project had a number of aims: to “expand” the school’s “extra-curricular history work”; to enable the school “to engage more with the local community”; and to capture “local stories of the Second World War” that “were in danger of being lost” (Abbott & Grayson 2011b: 4). Although the project is described as having “positive side-effects” for students studying history (Abbott & Grayson 2011b: 4), developing historical learning was not its primary purpose: the core aim of the archive that the project constructed was to enable “local people to deposit their memories... and also for the students “to engage with the memories of others” (Abbott & Grayson 2011b: 9).

The project was conceived as a contribution that the school could make to ‘community cohesion’. The benefits of the project are identified as including the benefit of the archive itself, which is reported as representing an authentic case of archive construction and as having been consulted by scholars undertaking academic research (Abbott & Grayson 2011b: 12, Note 8), and social and cultural benefits, arising from intergenerational contact for both interviewers and interviewees - for example, in terms of recognition and the public presentation of individuals’ stories through an online archive and in terms of closing “the gap between ages”, as one student expressed it (Abbott & Grayson 2011b: 9-10). The project is also described as having had a number of positive impacts on historical learning. On the one hand, in enhancing students’ sense of connectedness to the past of their local area and to the past itself, through engagement with personal narratives and contact with people who experienced what were previously often perceived as abstract events (Abbott & Grayson 2011b:10). On the other hand, positive impacts arising from working with an academic historian on the project are described in terms, for example, of the opportunities that this provided for pupils to engage in a research process and in archival research (Abbott & Grayson 2011b: 10). Motivational benefits arising from historical learning with a “real”, rather than a simply academic, “purpose (the preservation of memory on a website) for a real audience (the local community)” are also identified for pupils (Abbott & Grayson 2011b: 11).

The value of school based oral history

The three cases that we have explored provide support for the conclusion that school based oral history can be powerfully *socially* transformative in many of the senses that Thompson identified. All three cases illustrate how bringing oral history into the classroom can widen school history’s “scope”, how it can encourage “teachers and students to become fellow-workers”, bring “history in, and out of, the community” and make “for contact - and thence understanding - between social classes, and between

generations” (Thompson 1978: 15). Indeed, we can add some further dimensions to Thompson’s assessment on the basis of our cases - all three projects demonstrate the value of collaborations between schools and other groups and institutions, the scope that oral history has for enhancing students’ practical skills and impacting their motivation, and, as *Up the Manor!* shows, school based oral history can make for contact between ethnicities as well as classes and generations. Our case studies - and, in particular, our first case study - also show that school based oral history can contribute to the *cognitively* transformative outcomes central to the discipline of history (Lee 2011).

Our case studies also suggest some negative conclusions. All three are case studies of abnormal practice - practice that takes place *outside* of timetabled history classes and, in two of our three cases, practice that depended upon *additional* financial resource. If our case studies can ground more general conclusions, then, it would seem that oral history is likely to be a marginal activity in English secondary schools. Pressures to focus on quantifiable educational outcomes and on school performance are likely to mean that there is limited scope within normal secondary school timetables for work of this nature, despite curricular encouragement given to local history (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 2007).

There are perhaps also conceptual as well as practical pedagogic challenges. Lexically, it is a short step -a matter of a few letters- from ‘transformation’ to ‘transmission’ and the notion of ‘voicing the past’, if taken literally, can perhaps lead us away from history as a discipline of enquiry and towards an emphasis on testimony rather than on putting sources ‘to the test’ (Collingwood 1994). It is a short step also, perhaps, from the notion of testimony to a conception of oral history that foregrounds the curation and preservation of memories rather than their critical interrogation. In other words, it is easy for oral history to morph into oral ‘heritage’ (Lowenthal 1998), or ‘collective memory’ (Wertsch 2002), and away from critical historical enquiry. Heritage and the cultivation of collective memory may well have a place in public education, however, the *discipline* of history has other purposes (Megill 2007) and so must *history* education (Wineburg 2007). Valuable as testimony is, it is not history, which crucially depends not just upon the collection and curation of reports but upon their interrogation in the context of an enquiry question that allows such sources to become sources *of evidence* for claims about the past (Ashby 2011).

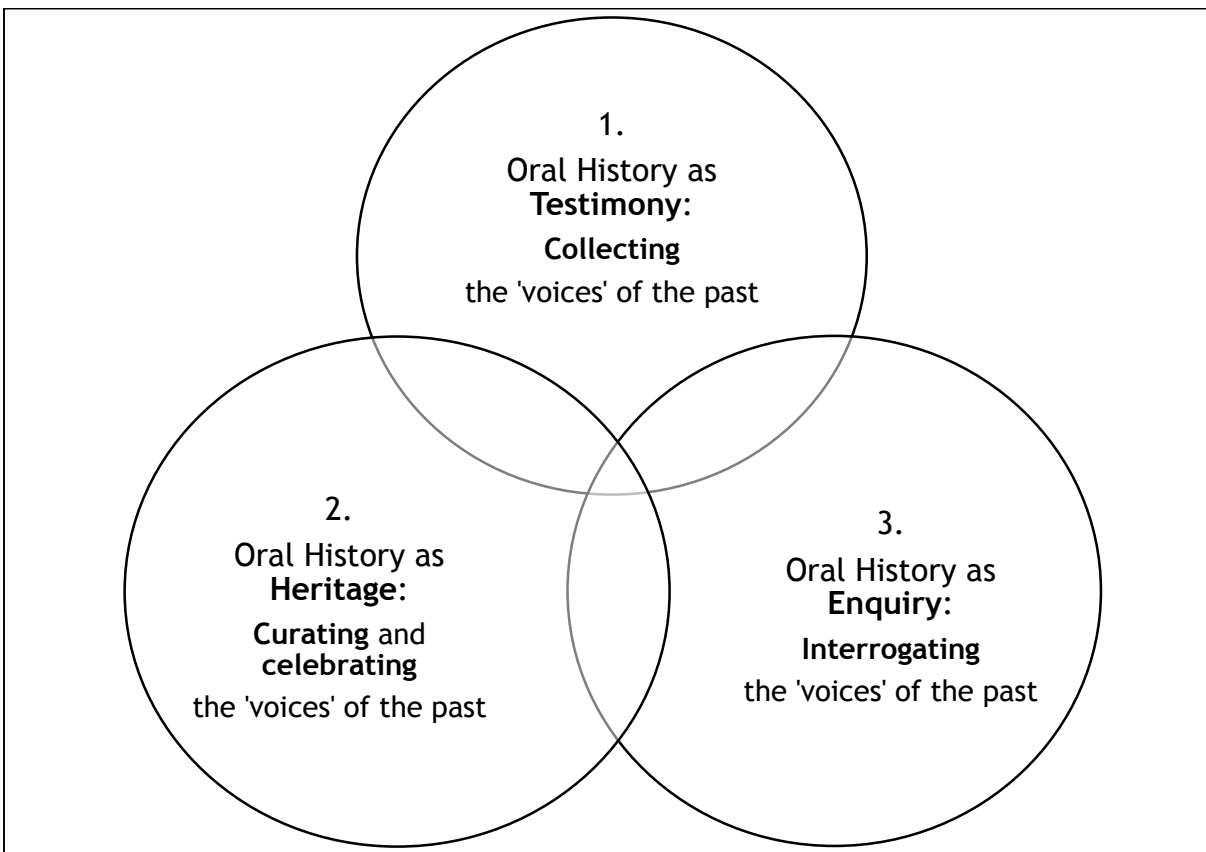
There is a danger, perhaps, that ‘depositional’ oral history may reinforce testimonial misconceptions about historical knowing, grounded in the notion that knowledge is best when grounded in “experience” (Megill 2007) or “direct observation” (Barca 2002). This danger is particularly likely to arise, perhaps, if oral history projects are presented as an opportunity to “talk to history face-to-face” (Villiers Park Educational Trust 2008b: 3). This is not to say, of course, that oral history cannot be organized in ways that can

challenge testimonial misconceptions about historical knowing, as our first case study shows, but there does seem to be at least some tension between the ‘recognition’ or ‘celebration’ of the ‘voices of the past’ and their interrogation and critical evaluation.

Conclusion

As with so much else, “the beginning is assuredly the end” (Williams 1995: 3), since aims have a powerful shaping influence on outcomes. It is clear, we think, that school based oral history can serve many valuable educational aims and have three analytically distinguishable ‘senses’, as is shown in the figure below. There is scope for conflict between aims, however, which we have a duty as history teachers to attend to.

Three senses of ‘oral history’.



As Wineburg notes, “we are supposed to safeguard family jewels, not footnote them” and there is a “tension” between an orientation to the past that “reverses the chain of transmission” and is “committed to passing” on testimonies “intact”, on the one hand, and an orientation to the past “that investigates, questions and, sometimes,

undermines this same transmission”, on the other (Wineburg 2007: 7). Although the first orientation is key to heritage and collective memory alike, the second is the principal preoccupation of history, understood as disciplined enquiry that aims to make warranted claims about the past.

It is only when it is put to the test that testimony can serve distinctly historical purposes and it is only thus that the ‘voices of the past’ can be transformed into ‘voices of history’.

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Endnotes

¹ For example, governmental funding through the organisations 'Creative Partnerships' in 2002 to 2011 (Creativity, Culture & Education 2012) and the Heritage Lottery Fund (Heritage Lottery Fund n.d.). The Heritage Lottery Fund receives significant funding from the UK National Lottery to invest in heritage projects. Creative Partnerships was an organisation funded by the British government up to 2011 to fund collaborative projects between artists and creative professionals and school children.

² Collections of oral history interviews for use in the classroom are also available - for example, through the British Library (<http://sounds.bl.uk/oral-history>) and the Imperial War Museum (<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections-research/about/sound>).