

# TIP SHEET

## Oral History in Museum Exhibitions (2014)

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# Oral History in Museum Exhibitions

Many museums and archives include oral history collections, but they are most often used mainly as a resource for researchers. Their use in exhibits is less common. This tip sheet will help familiarize you with the unique challenges – and the unique rewards – of using oral history materials in a museum exhibition.

### **Focus on Meaning, Not Just Facts**

When using oral history interviews as evidence in exhibitions, always return to the original recording. While transcripts, session logs, and other textual documents are valuable tools, the recorded interview is considered to be the primary source. Written documents cannot fully convey the nuances in the interview; intonation and rhythms of speech are lost and significance that pauses and silences can hold is obscured. Repetition, stuttering, and thinking noises may have been omitted. As a result, transcripts don't always read true to the way the interviewee spoke the words. Returning to the interview will help to insure that narrator's words have been interpreted the in line with their intention.<sup>i</sup>

Seeking out “the facts” within interviews can be disappointing. Narrators often misremember or get “the facts” wrong.<sup>ii</sup>

However, oral history interviews remain a very useful resource. First person narratives are more than the sum of their parts: errors, omissions, and exaggerations can lead the researcher beyond the facts of an event, time, or place to the meaning it holds for the narrator and within a community.<sup>iii</sup>

In order to use oral history in a way that speaks “beyond the facts”, you need to look at the bigger picture. Consider how and why the interview was collected, the role of each life story within its community, and each anecdote within interviewee's whole life story.<sup>iv</sup> A holistic approach, with an ear open to the intention of the interviewee, helps you use an individual's life story effectively and ethically.

### **Use Archived Interviews Ethically**

When you incorporate excerpts of oral history interviews into exhibitions, use tact and care. Never use an interview clip that risks bringing harm to the interviewee or their surviving family members by portraying them in a negative light, and never misrepresent their words. Personal stories of difficult subjects can be very effective teaching tools, but being respectful of the narrator's original intention means not using interviews in a way that sensationalizes violence or trauma by positioning these stories over, or isolating them from, the other significant and meaningful events of the narrator's life. Carefully considering the interviewee's life story helps difficult stories more effectively show how the past has led to the present.

Be sure to consult all the supporting documents as well as the interview to gain as clear of a picture as possible of the origins of the interview.

Supporting documents will help to ensure you are using interviews ethically, respectfully, and in line with the intentions of the interviewee. These documents often contain useful notes by the interviewer and state the conditions under which the interviewee has granted access to their life story.<sup>v</sup> The context and goals of the original project provide you with insight into why an interviewee chose to share a particular anecdote, and help you decide what additional information is needed in the exhibition in order to make use of it in line with their intentions.

### **Oral History as Public History**

In using oral history for public history, the curator takes on the responsibility of assembling accurate representations that will inform the public as well as the public record.<sup>vi</sup> If using archived oral histories in a public history exhibition, consult community members with insight into how to use these materials in an effective and respectful way. Remember that opinions and attitudes within a particular community are often diverse: you should consult with various individuals with multiple perspectives.

Oral history is enormously useful in public history because it offers many different perspectives. Interviews can offer the points of view of many narrators without arguing in favor of one interpretation or another. Recorded life stories can paint a picture of the time period(s) that the interviewee is remembering, and reveal some of the attitudes, politics, and ideologies from the time and place that the stories were recorded.<sup>vii</sup> Furthermore, the meaning people find in the past can change. Consider the meaning behind a particular event or place, what it means to people now, and how meaning might have changed over time.

While interviews offer many appealing sound bites, we should always think about what meaning might be lost if a short quotation is pulled out from its original context.

Consider the conditions in which the interview was conducted and how that shaped the stories told by the narrator. Think about how the interviewer's presence shaped the story, and how the interpersonal dynamics between the interviewer and interviewee affected the story told. Listen carefully for any silences that might have been influenced by this dynamic. How might other interviews, documents, objects, and photographs to illuminate such silences so that this gap might be filled?<sup>viii</sup> Think about how the interview might show more than simply what the narrator has said out loud.

### **Exhibition Context**

One of the first steps in designing a public history project is deciding on the story you would like it to tell through your exhibition. Oral history can be used effectively to “change the focus of history itself, and open up new areas of inquiry; it can break down barriers between teachers and students, between generations, between education institutions and the world outside.”<sup>ix</sup> However, this does not eliminate the need for research beyond the interviews.

While oral histories are quite effective at speaking beyond the facts, research into the documented facts can reveal where the gaps are and what remains off the record. Whose voices are missing? Are there aspects that are prominent in the life stories of the narrators for which there is little supporting documentation? Why might that be? Are stories from within a particular community the same or are there significant differences in memory and opinions? Asking these questions creates opportunities to extend similar questions to the audience of the exhibition.

Setting personal narratives alongside familiar stories about the past can open opportunities to illustrate what is missing from the record. Consider what the interviews can show visitors that the other material in the exhibition cannot.

Integrating oral history interviews into an exhibition means finding creative and effective ways to present recorded materials.

Presenting an oral story on a large screen accompanied by images or a short video documentary will carry narrative significance simply because of its prominence and central place within the exhibition. Smaller listening stations may be less prominent in the space and overlooked, especially if other exhibition materials and artifacts overshadow them. However, visitors may be able to engage with oral narratives more effectively, particularly with difficult stories, if they are given their own space to do so. Combining objects, photographs, and texts with personal accounts is an effective way to add “emotional reality to an otherwise abstract history lesson.”<sup>x</sup>

Consider what kinds of narratives will work best in the exhibition. If there are several oral accounts to listen to, think about how much listening time visitors will have. Arranging the exhibition by themes and choosing interview excerpts that speak to these themes gives visitors a chance to connect with the stories. For example, building upon the themes of place, ethnicity, or age can allow the visitor to relate by drawing connections between the interviews, themselves, and the people in their own families and communities. Excerpts and assembled narratives should be long enough for the viewer to engage, but not so long that you risk losing the visitors attention.

Consider if visitors might find the source more engaging if it is presented as part of a short film, positioned alongside photographs, or a slide show.

How will these various formats work to underscore or obscure the meaning of that interview? Also consider the flow of visitors through the exhibition – will there be multiple listening or viewing stations or a selection of recordings from which viewers can choose?

### **Context is Key**

When using oral history as evidence within museum exhibitions, establishing the broader context is vitally important. Ethics and respect for the interviewee’s intention require researchers and curators to carefully consider the conditions in which the oral history collections they use were created. Selecting, editing, and integrating oral history into exhibitions requires you to think about how each aspect of the exhibition will work together to tell a particular story. Do this effectively, and the intended narrative of the exhibition; related historical narratives; objects, photographs and text; and the interview selections will all work together to create a unique experience for visitors.

## References

<sup>i</sup>For more on “The orality or oral sources” see: Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” in *The Oral History Reader* 2nd ed., ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2006), specifically pages 33–35.

<sup>ii</sup>Linda Shopes, “Making Sense of Oral History,” *Interpreting Oral History*: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/interpret.html>.  
For a more in depth discussion of the complexity of using oral history as evidence, and the complications that can arise, see Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for Humanities*, (Walnut Creek: Altamira, 2005), 229 – 36 and Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 131–134 for a more on oral history as evidence.

<sup>iii</sup>Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

<sup>iv</sup>For more on the value of a holistic approach, see Steven High and David Sworn, “After the Interview: The Interpretive Challenges of Oral History Video Indexing,” *Digital Studies* vol 1, no. 2 (2009). Available online at [http://www.digitalstudies.org/ojs/index.php/digital\\_studies/article/view/173/215](http://www.digitalstudies.org/ojs/index.php/digital_studies/article/view/173/215)

<sup>v</sup>See Museums Association of Saskatchewan’s *Collecting Oral Histories* tip sheet.

<sup>vi</sup>See Selma Thomas, “Private Memory in a Public Space: Oral History and Museums,” in *Oral History and Public Memories*, ed. Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008) 98–99.

<sup>vii</sup>Michael Frisch, “Oral History and Hard Times: A Review Essay,” *Oral History Review* 7 (1979): 70–79, and Popular Memory Group, “Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 51–52.

<sup>viii</sup>For an overview of interpersonal dynamics and further resources see the Museums Association of Saskatchewan’s *Collecting Oral History* Tip Sheet.

<sup>ix</sup>Paul Thompson, “The Voice of the Past,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 26.

<sup>x</sup>Selma Thomas, “Private Memory,” 91.

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