SRI LANKA

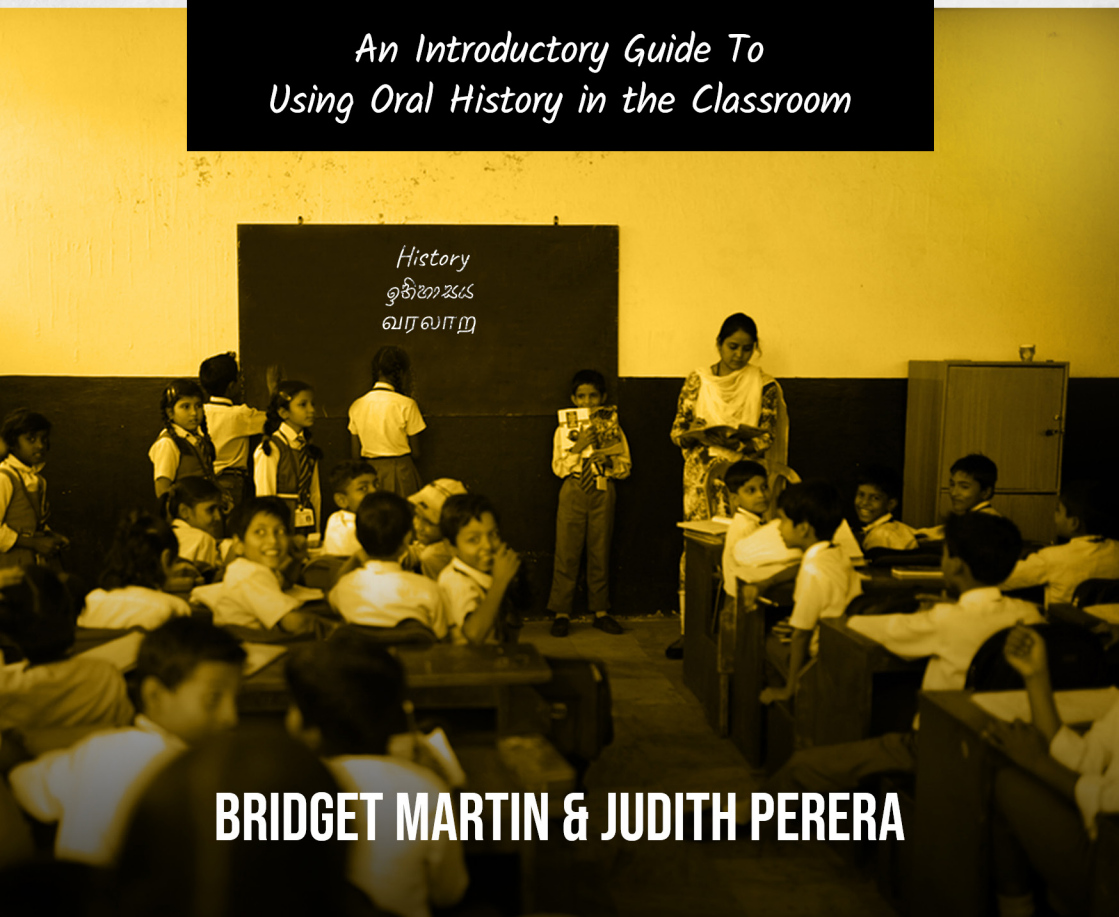
histories that connect

සබැඳි ඉතිහාසය

இணைந்த வரலாறுகள்

ORAL HISTORY TEACHING STRATEGY

An Introductory Guide To Using Oral History in the Classroom



BRIDGET MARTIN & JUDITH PERERA

Oral History Teaching Strategy

An Introductory Guide To Using Oral History in the Classroom

Bridget Martin & Judith Perera

Bridget Martin

Bridget has been a History teacher since 2012 and a teacher trainer with EuroClio since 2019. Bridget has a Master in Teaching (Secondary) and a Master of Arts in History. Bridget co-authored an article on oral history in education which was published in the Historical Encounters journal in November 2021.

Judith Perera

Judith has been teaching History since 2015. Judith has a PhD in History where her dissertation incorporated oral histories of detention survivors. Judith's secondary field of specialization is in public history and she has completed several oral history projects at university and secondary school levels.

Introduction

Our interest in creating this teaching strategy stems from our own experience with using oral history methodologies in our classrooms. Our students have greatly benefited from the use of oral history in the classroom, which has contributed to and enhanced their understanding of the History curriculum. Oral history teaches students important life skills and enables them to have a much broader and a more inclusive understanding of History that values and celebrates a diversity of perspectives and voices. In collaborating on this project, we hope to share our experiences with other History teachers by providing an initial introduction into how oral history can be used in the classroom.

Table of Contents

Overview

1. Aims of the Strategy

History as a disciplinary study in schools remains disconnected from the everyday experiences of students in Sri Lanka. While at home they hear a myriad of folktales, legends, oral traditions, and familial stories passed down orally through generations, students are not given the tools within the current History curriculum to incorporate such ways of knowing into their classroom learning. Their stories remain disjointed from connections to broader historical narratives and metanarratives, which aim to provide overarching accounts, interpretations, and analytical frameworks of historical change. Metanarratives allow students to engage with larger historical processes that affect changes in people, ideas, and cultures over time leading to more in-depth understandings of History.

In Sri Lanka, the study of History remains a story "from above," highlighting kings and their accomplishments or evaluating topics such as colonisation and decolonization through the perspectives of states and state actors or agents. In this way, stories "from below," which can highlight a diversity of perspectives and voices of everyday people and their experiences, while often challenging dominant narratives, remain outside the scope of formal historical study in the classroom. This disconnect isolates the study of History into a context where students feel little to no personal connection to the past and therefore hardly have a reason to actively engage in their own learning.

This strategy aims to get students to see how the study of History is connected with their own lives through the use of an oral history approach in which they interview a member of their family or community. Oral history can bring to light "stories from below" and open the possibility of students seeing themselves and those in their communities in the study of History and thereby actively engaging in their own learning.

2. What is Oral History?

When we study the past, an important question to ask is how we know what we know, especially when we are studying things that happened a very long time ago. To answer this question, we can examine a range of primary sources, which can be thought of as different ways of knowing the past. Primary sources can be divided into three types: stories, archaeology, and writings. One specific type of story is oral traditions.

Oral traditions are stories and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events that are gathered, preserved, re-told, and passed down orally through generations; it is the oldest form of historical inquiry. Oral traditions can range from family traditions, ceremonies and rituals, to knowledge of the environment, to religious and spiritual experiences. Oral traditions typically preserve accurate historical information and knowledge as stories and memories are constantly verified by members of the community during retellings. Oral traditions are the precursor to oral history.

Oral history is a field of study as well as a method of collecting and preserving voices and memories of those with personal knowledge of past events. The oral historian Donald Ritchie writes, “Memory is the core of oral history, from which meaning can be extracted and preserved. Simply put, oral history collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews.” The recording of memories in formal interviews provides the crux of what constitutes the disciplinary study of oral history.

There are many different approaches to the discipline of oral history. Some oral histories take a life story approach, asking interviewees to reflect on their life as a whole from the beginning to the present. Other oral histories could involve the exploration of specific events, periods or memories. In these instances, interviewees may be asked to reflect on what they remember of a particular time or place in their lives. Oral histories could also serve as testimonials, which bear witness to the perpetration and aftermath of a range of injustices and crimes by individuals or state entities. Educators should bear in mind the myriad of possibilities of oral history approaches when thinking about their use in the classroom.

2. Curricular Links

Every oral history interview is different. It is difficult to predict how an interview will go or what information will come to light. Therefore, preparation is an important part of the oral history process. Because of this complexity and difficulty of prediction, conducting and practising oral history methodologies teach students important life skills far beyond what is generally required in a History curriculum. Oral history can teach students scholarly skills such as researching, writing, analysing, and critically evaluating sources. Oral history can also teach students other skills such as deep listening, engaging in difficult conversations, and showing kindness and empathy to others when faced with difficult moments. Such skills go beyond the rote memorisation that is usually emphasised for the singular purpose of passing exams.

Curricula links provide teachers with specific opportunities to incorporate oral history into their classroom. Within the local curricula in Sri Lanka, there are at least two main units of study where this strategy may be incorporated. Firstly, Year 6 students are introduced to the study of History and begin their study with Unit 1: Defining History. Within this unit, section *1.2 How to Study History* seems an ideal place to introduce students to different ways of knowing the past through an exploration of the three types of primary sources we discussed above. A particular emphasis could be placed on oral traditions where students could be asked to speak to an elder and learn about a particular family or cultural tradition practised at home or in the wider community. Such stories then open the door for more formal oral history projects.

Additionally, Year 10 students begin the study of History with *Unit 1: Sources of Studying History*. Within this unit, section *1.1 Classification of Sources: literary and archaeological attempts to categorise different types of sources*. Here, there is an opportunity to bring in oral history (and oral traditions) as a third type of important historical source to consider in the study of History.

3. Potential Obstacles

Time

A primary potential obstacle to the implementation of such a strategy in the classroom may be time. Teachers are often pressed to cover curricula over the course of a tightly packed term schedule. Therefore, there may not be enough time in a given year to implement and carry out such a strategy. Two possible solutions could be offered. First, teachers may think about creating an extracurricular activity or club that would be responsible for the implementation of the strategy. Such a club, like a History Club, may already exist at schools and teachers may be able to generate interest by reaching out to those existing extracurricular activities or they may be able to create a new extracurricular activity of their own. Second, teachers who are keen to implement such a strategy may think about focusing on non-exam year groups, such as Years 6 through to 9 (before students begin their O level studies). Focusing on those year groups may provide teachers with a bit more flexibility in the implementation of this strategy.

Finding an Interviewee

Another potential obstacle to the implementation of such a strategy in the classroom may be the difficulty of finding an appropriate interviewee. For instance, sometimes students embarking on such oral history interview projects may face resistance in attaining consenting individuals. Family members may be hesitant to participate or may object to being interviewed and recorded. It may also be the case that the desired interviewee is not able to effectively express themselves when speaking, particularly when talking about the chosen topic.

One possible solution to difficulty finding an appropriate interviewee amongst close family members is to have students broaden the scope of their interviewee candidates to neighbours or friends who may not be directly related. They may even find willing and appropriate interviewees amongst the teachers at their school. In expanding their search parameters for possible interview candidates, students may be more likely to come across people who are willing to be interviewed and recorded.

Applying a Critical Lens

A third potential obstacle to the implementation of such a strategy in the classroom may be the reluctance or inability of students to critically evaluate interviews and sources when it directly relates to their own lives. It is often difficult to be objective in analysis when the sources are pertaining to people or information to which students have a direct, familiar relationship. Two possible solutions could be offered. First, students can engage in the art of corroboration, where they are tasked with examining the connections and relationships between different types of sources, to see whether they agree or disagree with each other. In this way, students are taught to think critically and objectively about the information they encounter through their research and writing. Second, teachers could use guiding questions pertaining to interviews and sources to prompt critical analysis and thinking. Teachers could find different sources and present them to students to discuss and analyse.

Complex Concepts and Terminology

Another challenge for students engaging with oral history is that they will be encountering complex concepts and terminology that they might not ordinarily engage with in their History lessons. Many of the concepts and some of the words contained in the step-by-step guide below could be challenging for students. The activities and ideas below should help students familiarise themselves with these ideas. It may also be helpful to provide a glossary of key terms suited to your students' level for them to refer back to throughout the process.

I.

Step-by-Step Guide to Using this Strategy in the Classroom

1. Teacher Preparation

Teachers may find it helpful to undertake some reading about the nature of oral history, how it evolved as a field of study and general ideas for its application in the classroom. Useful resources for this kind of background reading include the websites of the Oral History Society of the UK (https://www.ohs.org.uk/) and the Oral History Association of the USA (https://www.oralhistory.org/). Teachers might also listen to the Historical Dialogue podcast where oral historians from Sri Lanka discuss various aspects of their work (https://historicaldialogue.lk/podcast/ep-1/).

It would also be useful to collect some examples of oral history that could be used to familiarise the students with various aspects of oral history interviews. These examples could be in the form of video recordings, audio recordings and/or transcripts. Teachers should consider which examples are most relevant to the student age-group, interests and the topic being studied. A wealth of examples can be found through an online search. Some resources with a focus on Sri Lanka include:

- Portraits of Sri Lankan Elders in Sound and Image: http://iam.lk/
- HerStories (interviews with a focus on mothers): http://theherstoryarchive.org/
- Commonwealth Oral History Project (Sri Lanka section): https://commonwealthoralhistories.org/sri-lanka/
- UNESCO World Heritage Pioneers: http://www.slncu.lk/web/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=81:an-oral-history-interviews-with-the-pioneers-of-the-world-heritage-convention&catid=8&lang=en&Itemid=145

Equipment and Resources

Teachers should also consider what equipment and resources may be necessary for students to complete this work. Firstly, students will need recording devices that will be able to record for the full duration of the interview. It is vital that students understand interviews can vary in length and could go on for several hours. Oral history good practice maintains that

interviews should not be stopped and restarted other than for unforeseen or extraordinary circumstances. Students should be made aware of this when considering available equipment. Equipment could be a computer, a phone, a camera with video capability, a dictaphone, or so on. An external microphone is often recommended. It will be important to check the devices students use are fully charged and have sufficient memory space before the interview. It is recommended that students use two recording devices to avoid any issues. Secondly, students will need equipment to transcribe the interview. A simple computer or tablet will suffice, though teachers in certain contexts may wish to look into softwares that aids in transcription (see section below).

2. Whole Class/Group Preparation

Before students begin preparing to undertake their own oral history studies, it will be important to work with the whole group or class to establish foundational skills and understanding. The exact combination of preparatory activities you use with your class will differ depending on available time, student age and other factors. Below we have provided just a few ideas of the types of whole class activities you may include as you lay the groundwork for the student-led projects.

a. Discussion of Oral Histories as Historical Sources

It would be useful to discuss with students the nature of oral histories and their function as historical sources. Questions that might guide the discussion include:

- ***How are oral history sources different from other types of historical sources?***

  For this question, it would be helpful to draw attention to key features of oral histories such as:

  - the fact that we are able to see and hear the person speaking
  - the fact that these are not 'traces' left in the past but sources that are co-created by the oral historian and interviewee

- the fact that they are situated somewhere in between the past and present (and thus in between primary and secondary source status depending on the types of questions we are seeking to address)
- where oral history has filled in gaps in previous historical study and its contribution to new knowledge to shape memory and history

- ***What can we learn from oral histories that we might not be able to learn from other sources?***

  For this question, you may draw students' attention to ideas such as:
  - the representation of individuals and groups overlooked by other historical sources (e.g. minorities, illiterate or non-literate peoples, 'everyday' people)
  - the focus of oral history on individual experiences and memories
  - the ability for the oral historian to ask targeted and specific questions to uncover details not found elsewhere.

- ***What might be some limitations of using oral histories as sources?***

  For this question, you may encourage students to consider:
  - issues associated with memory
  - subjectivity and the role of perspective in the interview
  - the influence of the interviewer on the outcome
  - the way in which oral history sources face many of the same limitations as other historical sources (bias, selectivity, errors of accuracy, etc.)

b. Analysis of an Example Oral History Audio Recording, Video or Transcript

Using one or more of the examples selected in the preparation phase, guide students to analyse different aspects of an oral history. You may choose to complete this activity as a whole class, in small groups or by assigning students to a task individually. Using the example, you might guide students to consider:

- What impact does the interviewer have on the testimony?
  - Do they speak too much? Too little?
  - What types of questions do they ask? What is good or not so good about these questions?
- What can we learn about the narrator and their experiences from the way they look and sound (voice, gestures, facial expressions, etc.)?
- What can we learn about the past from this oral history?
- How accurate does the testimony seem to be? How can we verify this?
- What can we learn about the way people remember and talk about the past from this oral history?

It can also be useful to find some examples of 'bad' interviews. These might not be conducted by professional oral historians but journalists or documentary-makers, for instance. Comparing and contrasting effective and ineffective interviews can be helpful to clarify the importance of the student's own role as an interviewer in their project.

c. Practice Interviews Between Students

It is important that the oral history interview that the students conduct is not their first experience of interviewing someone about their past. Teachers should provide opportunities for students to not only deconstruct the interviews of others but to gain experience putting the 'do's and 'don't's into practice.

It is useful to first start with such a list of ideas of what it is important to do, as well as avoid doing, when interviewing someone for an oral history project. You might provide this list yourself or ask students to create their own list based on the examples you have seen as a group.

You might ask students to **role-play interviewer mistakes.**

- Have one student act as the interviewee and the other student as the interviewer.
- Agree on a topic for the interview.

- Take the interviewer outside and give them a card with a particular 'mistake' written on it (for example: talking too much, asking leading questions, asking multiple questions at once). Give them some thinking time.
- Have the student role-play the interview and intentionally make the mistake.
- Afterwards have the class guess what the mistake was and discuss:
  - Why was this a problem? What impact did it have?
  - How could we avoid this?

You might ask students to **interview each other and provide peer feedback with a focus on deep listening (see below).**

- In pairs, students agree on a topic for their interviews.
- Student A interviews student B.
- Student B offers constructive feedback and they reflect on the interview together.
- Students swap and repeat the process.
- As a whole class, discuss:
  - What did we do well?
  - What do we need to work on?
  - What was challenging?
  - How can we improve?

d. Deep Listening Exercises

While students practice interviewing among themselves, they should be made aware of nonverbal responses and cues they may encounter during an interview. For these exercises, teachers can model hypothetical interview scenarios. Teachers can ask students in the class to come up with a list of questions about a specific topic. Students can be the interviewers and the teacher can play the role of the interviewee.

For each question posed by a student, the teacher should demonstrate a nonverbal response that challenges or directly contradicts the verbal response. For example, let's say a student is discussing a particular event in the life of the interviewee and what they remember feeling

during that event. The teacher could respond by saying "it was a very happy day," in a low, sombre voice perhaps even with downcast eyes. The teacher should pause and see if students notice the disconnect. Teachers could also tell one student ahead of time what is happening and have that student pick up on the disconnect to continue with the exercise demonstration.

"Deep listening" means students will be able to sense and understand that there is a disconnect between what the interviewee is saying and how they are saying it. Oftentimes in our everyday conversations, people can sometimes say one thing when they mean something completely different. Practising this will enable students to develop a range of life skills. Teachers should also be mindful that certain students, such as those with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), may not be able to engage with or respond to this activity, and therefore teachers should make sure to have alternative exercises in place to meet the needs of those students.

Once students have identified the disconnect, the interview can take a different direction. If the interviewee wishes to elaborate further, students should be prepared to stray from their list of questions and discuss the disconnect further.

Scenario 1

Student 1 (Interviewer): How did you feel when you heard the news?

Teacher (Interviewee): (*in a sombre tone*) It was a very happy day.

Teacher pauses and looks away to avoid eye contact.

Student 2 (Interviewer): I noticed you don't sound like you felt happy. Is there something more you would like to discuss about that day?

Teacher (Interviewee): Well, I'm not sure... I don't think it's relevant to this interview.

Student 2 (Interviewer): If you feel like discussing it, I am happy to listen. If not, we can move on.

Teacher (Interviewee): Well, it was quite a strange day for me because…

However, students should also be made aware that some interviewees may not want to discuss further and students should then move on to their next question.

Scenario 2

Student 1 (Interviewer): How did you feel when you heard the news?

Teacher (Interviewee): (*in a sombre tone*) It was a very happy day.

Teacher pauses and looks away to avoid eye contact.

Student 2 (Interviewer): I noticed you don't sound like you felt happy. Is there something more you would like to discuss about that day?

Teacher (Interviewee): No, I don't want to talk about it.

Student 2 (Interviewer): That's alright. Let's move on to the next question. Are you ok to proceed with the interview?

Teacher (Interviewee): Yes, I am. Let's move on to the next question.

d. Discuss How Students Might Deal with Difficult Moments in Interviews (e.g. Interviewees Becoming Emotional)

It is important to recognize that each interview is and will be different. It is difficult to predict how interviews will play out. Despite this, teachers can take certain actions to anticipate and

prepare students for potentially difficult moments that may arise in interviews.

First, teachers could lead class discussions where students exchange their lists of questions and highlight ones they think may be difficult to answer or may lead to interviewees becoming emotional. Teachers should plan for this by making sure students select appropriate topics and checking that their lists of questions do not start with sensitive questions. This could be a vital step in raising this issue and making students aware of the potential moments they may face during an interview. Students might also brainstorm topics that could arise during an interview that might cause an emotional response (e.g. the death of a family member). Additionally, teachers could begin an anonymous collection of what students found difficult during previous sessions to pass along to future students each year. It may also be helpful to discuss how students might recognise that a topic is sensitive or causing emotion in an interview; for instance, you might discuss which words, phrases, facial expressions or postures from their interviewee might tip the student off to the fact that they are approaching a sensitive area and may need to tread carefully.

Second, teachers could pair students together if a student does not feel confident approaching the interview on their own. Pairing students together can help build their confidence and develop teamwork. Students paired together can then share their experiences in the class during discussions.

Third, teachers should make sure students understand that interviewees have the discretion to stop an interview at any moment. It should be emphasised to students that the priority is not on completing the project but rather on building a respectful and inclusive relationship with the interviewee. This relationship means that interviewees always have the discretion to both stop an interview at any moment and/or refuse to answer any question posed to them. It is imperative that teachers highlight the goal of the project in building relationships and opening lines of communication rather than the completion of a school project.

Fourth, teachers could practice what to do if an interviewee becomes emotional but wishes to continue with the interview. Students could discuss different ways to comfort someone who has become emotional (e.g., a hand on the shoulder, a hug, waiting quietly, reassuring statements such as saying, “I can see this is difficult for you…”), and consider which of these

would be appropriate in terms of cultural norms and their relationship with the interviewee. Part of this preparation could involve class discussions modelling this practice as well as showing examples of uncomfortable situations in previously recorded interviews. Sometimes the best course of action in a difficult moment may be to remain silent and give the interviewee space and time to process their thoughts or emotions before they continue speaking. Such silences can be uncomfortable and this would therefore be a good strategy to practice with students in a role play or practice interview ahead of time.

Students should be shown enough examples to understand a range of possible interview moments they may encounter. Teachers should also emphasise that part of conducting oral history interviews is coming face-to-face with interactions that are difficult or unanticipated and can lead to the development of important life skills such as learning to listen, showing kindness, and responding to situations with empathy.

3. Select Interviewee and Gain Consent

The selection of an interviewee must revolve around the very crucial notion of gaining informed consent. Informed consent is a process of open communication that begins with a thorough explanation of the oral history project and its framework, involves an in-depth discussion about interviewer responsibilities and interviewee rights with any and all potential interviewee candidates, and culminates in the agreement by the interviewee to participate in the oral history project.

The informed consent process must involve a discussion of the purpose of the interview, the way(s) it may be shared, the way(s) the interviewee's data will be stored, and the rights of the interviewee. In particular, interviewees must be made aware of their right to refuse to participate in the project, their right to stop the interview at any time even after agreeing to participate, and their right to refuse to answer any particular questions posed to them. All the information regarding informed consent must be provided in writing. Students must gain written consent at the start of the project before collecting further information from potential interviewees.

Best practises of oral history interviewing involves transparency in the entire process.

Before starting the interview, interviewees must be made aware of what will be done with the interview, what procedures are in effect (such as their right to stop the interview at any time and their right to refuse to answer any question), and with whom the information will be shared. This information should ideally be laid out in the project handout and approved by the relevant school officials before the project is introduced to the students.

Teachers should be mindful that interviewees may not want to have their stories shared publicly or may curtail their consent to certain types of sharing (i.e. they may grant consent for interviews to be shared with the school community as part of the project but may not be comfortable sharing stories with the wider community, etc.). Therefore it is critical that every oral history project include the three following items:

- **Information sheet**

  This is the background material of the project. The information sheet should state the purpose of the oral history project and detail who is involved, why the project is significant, and why the interviewee may be in a position to make a unique contribution to the project. The information sheet should be given to all students before they begin the project so they understand the wider framework of the project's objectives.

- **Written consent form**

  This is the informed consent form that will be signed by the potential interviewee. The written consent form will have information detailing the responsibilities of the interviewer (and the larger project) as well as the rights of the interviewee as the project begins. Students should be introduced to the idea of informed consent before they are given the written consent form.

- **Recording agreement form**

  This is the copyright information form. This will have local or regional regulations involving the storage and use of any recordings produced by the oral history project as well as which parties own the copyright to the recordings.

4. Student Research and Initial Meeting

Students should begin preparing for their interview by conducting desk research. This research should include a general investigation of the historical event, period or theme that will be their focus. They should seek as many different source types as possible as they gain an understanding of what existing primary and secondary sources suggest about the topic.

Students should also conduct some initial research on the interviewee. It is helpful for students to begin with an informal meeting with the interviewee. This will both ease them into the process and allow for some initial information gathering. Students can offer an overview of how the process will unfold and give the interviewee time to ask any questions they have. Students might then ask informal questions to establish essential background information (such as dates, places, etc.) or perhaps gather information about family traditions. They might also ask their interviewee if they are willing to share any artefacts and records such as pictures, birth certificates, letters, and so forth. Students and schools should be cautious about how any sensitive personal documents or information is stored.

It may be useful at this stage for students to share their initial informal interview experience and findings with one another and offer some peer feedback. This may help them identify areas to focus on when writing questions or areas that require more research before the fuller interview.

5. Question Writing

Students should now write a list of questions based on initial research and the themes they have selected to focus on. Some general tips on question-writing include:

- **Always include open not closed questions**
  Closed questions invite a very short response (“yes”, “no”, “1965”) and therefore don’t elicit much information. Open questions require the interviewee to go into depth in order to answer them.

Example of an open question: "*Why did you move away from your hometown?*"
Useful open question stems: "*How", "why", "could you describe...?*"

- **Avoid leading questions**

Leading questions are questions which direct the interviewee towards a certain answer.
Example of a leading question: "*Did you move away because of your parents?*"

- **Be cautious of questions on sensitive issues**

Unless it's essential to the topic of the research, students should try to avoid questions which may be overly sensitive. If the research is on a sensitive topic and the interviewee has expressed willingness to discuss this topic, students should be considerate in the types of questions they ask and how they phrase them.

Teachers should be sure to check students' questions before they conduct their interviews to highlight any sensitive areas that students might not have been aware of.

- **Be ready to remove, change and add questions**

The student should spend most of their time during the interview listening and will need to be ready to adapt their questions as the dialogue unfolds. While students might write many questions in preparation for the interview, it is important that they don't approach the interview with a long list of questions that they feel they must get through. It could be helpful to prioritise the most essential few questions to address. It is most important they avoid working robotically through their questions like a checklist.

Students may also need to change or remove a question if the interviewee has already addressed or partially addressed that issue whilst responding to another question.

Similarly, students should add follow-up questions to find out more about ideas, stories or issues raised by the interviewee that are of interest.

Examples of follow-up question stems: *"Could you tell me more about...?", "You mentioned X, could you explain a little more what/why/how...?"*

6. Interview

Every attempt should be made to conduct the interview in-person. Students should be encouraged to visit their interviewee at a location that is most comfortable for them.

Students could try and choose an interview location that also tells a story – for instance, interviews do not necessarily have to be at a table in a living room or office. If students choose an interviewee who likes to cook or play basketball or work on cars, they can have the interview in the kitchen, or a basketball court, or in a garage. If such a setting is used, however, students should make sure they account for background noise for the audio recording (and lighting if they are filming video).

Students should be encouraged to use at least two forms of recording devices. Devices should be plugged in for charging whenever possible. Students should also be ready to have a backup option in case of power cuts. The two forms of recording devices are to help avoid heartache in the case that students lose the recording for some reason.

Students should begin each interview recording by identifying the following into the recording:

- Their name, age/grade in school, and location
- The date and time (at the start of the recording)
- The interviewee's name
- The oral history project (if this is part of a class or group collective)
- Any other persons in the room with them during the interview

Interviews should generally be filmed all at once without stopping or pausing for the entire duration of the interview. If an interview is stopped for whatever reason, the introduction should be clearly stated again along with the reason why the recording was stopped.
At the end of the interview, students should state the following into the recording:

- "This has been an interview of (interviewee's name)"
- The date and time (at the end of the recording)
- Finally, students should say, "This is the end of the interview."

Once the recording device is switched off the student and interviewee can engage in a brief reflection. The student can ask the interviewee how they found the process, if anything was difficult for them, and so on. If there were aspects of the interview that were challenging, students should check if they need support and discuss this with their teacher to decide on the best way to proceed.

7. Transcription

Transcription is the process of transferring the spoken words of the oral history interview into written form. Transcription preserves the interview in case the original recording is lost or becomes damaged. Transcription also provides a broader degree of accessibility to promote inclusivity.

After completing their interview, each student should be encouraged to transcribe it. Transcribing means listening to the interview and typing it out word-for-word including when there are pauses, breaks, etc. This means every word in the interview including the questions must be typed out. Transcribing is a very time-consuming process!

When transcribing the interview, students should be encouraged to break it up by themes and/or topic when the interviewee changes subjects discussed. Also, students should include time markers for reference later. Students should be encouraged to use a programme like Google Docs that saves instantly. Students should also be encouraged to write a short summary of the interview in 4-5 sentences once the transcription process is completed.

Here is an example of a transcribed interview:

Date: March 11, 2019
Interviewee: Charmaine Mendis
Interviewers: Tahaan Jayewardene and Shaza Sham
Location: Colombo, Sri Lanka

Transcription by Sajini Devmini:

0:20 min

Tahaan: So my name is Tahaan and I'm with my fellow student Shaza. It's 11th of March 2019 and we are in Colombo, Nawala. We're interviewing Charmaine Mendis. And we will now proceed to part one of the three-part interview.

0:36 min

Tahaan: So um... when and where were you born?

0:40 min

Charmaine: Born in Colombo, 1934

0:47 min

Tahaan: Um... Where did you live and go to school?

8. Review with Interviewee

Once the transcription is complete, students should share the transcript and/or the original recording with their interviewee. Interviewees then have the opportunity to raise any concerns they have about the interview itself or the next steps in terms of how the interview will be stored and shared. Together, students and the interviewee should review and, if necessary, amend the consent and release agreement.

9. Analysis

The next step is for students to analyse their interview as a historical source and its connection to historical narratives. Parts of this process may be done individually, though it would also be worthwhile to provide opportunities for students to share ideas and consider different aspects of the interview together. As they analyse their interviews, there are various elements and aspects they might consider. It may not be feasible to cover all of the following, but the list below provides some ideas of areas to investigate and questions that students might consider depending on their age and ability.

The influence of the interviewer

Students should consider how their choice of questions and approach to interviewing may have shaped the testimony. They should also consider how the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee affects the testimony.

Example questions:

- *How do the interviewer's questions shape the testimony of the narrator?*
- *How does the frequency and type of question appear to affect the interviewee?*
- *How might the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee affect the testimony? (e.g. Are there certain things your grandmother may not want to tell you as her grandchild? Are there certain things she might be more likely to discuss because you come from the same family?)*

Subjectivity & 'performance' of the interviewee

Students explore the subjective nature of interviews which are infused with the subjectivity of lived experience, personal perspective, and later reflection and interpretation by the narrator. Students should also consider how the interviewee chooses to portray themselves to their audience (the interviewer and anyone who might see or hear the recording).

Example questions:

- *How might the narrator's sense of identity affect their testimony?*
- *What opinions and perspectives do they express?*
- *How might the time and context of the interview affect their perspective?*
- *How might the narrator change what they say or how they say it because of the audience?*

Memory, forgetting and silences

Students should think carefully about what has been remembered, in what ways, and why this might have been remembered. Students should also consider what is not remembered or said in the interview and possible reasons.

Example questions:

- *What has the narrator remembered and why might they have remembered this?*
- *Is there anything they are unable to remember? Why might this be?*
- *How might the narrator's memory have been shaped by 'collective' memories of these events?*

- *How might the context (time, place, etc.) in which the interview is occurring affect the way the narrator remembers?*
- *Are there any topics not discussed in the interview? What may have caused this? Consider: what's considered important, private, taboo.*
- *What can we learn from what is not said in an interview?*

Non-verbal communication

Students should consider how the narrator's way of speaking and moving can aid interpretation of their testimony (linking back to deep listening).

Example questions:

- *What do you notice about the way the narrator speaks? (accent, tone, speed)*
- *What do you notice about the way the narrator moves? (gestures, facial expressions, posture)*
- *Does this change throughout the interview? Why might this happen?*
- *What can we learn about their story from these aspects?*

Narratives

Students should examine how narratives are structured and how these reflect or reject other narratives or narrative forms.

Example questions:

- *What narrative features are used by the narrator in this interview? (e.g. themes, motifs, genre, arc, protagonist/antagonist, etc.).*
- *How does this impact the way we understand their testimony?*
- *How does the interview align with or challenge other narratives?*

Accuracy & generalisability of the interview

To analyse accuracy and generalisability students will need to examine the interview for internal consistency but also, importantly, compare it with other sources. Students should understand that an oral testimony might contain inconsistencies and that oral histories face specific challenges in terms of accuracy. It is important that students appreciate that minor factual inaccuracies do not render an entire source useless.

Students should also consider the generalisability of a source. Generalisability focuses not necessarily on 'factual' aspects of the interview but the extent to which ideas, emotions, experiences, opinions, and so on, expressed in the interview are representative of others belonging to the same group.

Example questions:

- *To what extent does the testimony align with facts from other sources?*
- *Does the testimony contain any internal inconsistencies or factual inaccuracies?*
- *To what extent do issues of accuracy affect the usefulness of the source?*
- *To what extent does the testimony align with ideas expressed in other interviews or sources?*
- *Are the feelings, opinions, and ideas expressed in this interview shared by others who were there or belong to the same group?*
- *How does this impact our interpretation of the interview?*

10. Presentation

The final step in the process is for students to develop a presentation of their findings. This can be left to student choice or may be decided by the teacher depending on the nature of the project. Some possible ways in which students might present their work include:

- Video or documentary
- Podcast
- Exhibition (this may include a combination of text, images, audiovisual material, and objects)
- Written essay: biographical or analytical

Students should think carefully about how to balance direct excerpts from the interview and their own analysis and commentary.

Cataloguing

When conducting an oral history project, students are taking on a serious responsibility towards the interviewee and the care of the historical and biographical information elicited. This responsibility should be made very clear to them. Students therefore play a critical role in preserving the oral histories they have co-created. As such, students should be careful and conscious about where they store and share presentations after they are completed. They may even explore options for cataloguing and preserving interviews and associated material within local archives, online repositories and so forth. It is, however, of the utmost importance that students gain appropriate consent and release documentation from their interviewee before sharing the materials with any outside institution.

II.

Strategies for Inclusion

Supporting Lower Attaining Students

Some students may find the scale of an oral history project too challenging, in which case it may be useful to reduce the project according to their needs. For instance, rather than having the student prepare for and conduct an interview of their own you could find them an existing recording to work with. There would still be significant learning value in having the student analyse the interview and present their findings in a suitable format.

Alternatively, you might pair students up to work together so that they can share the workload. Tasks could be divided between the two students, for instance, one might lead the interview process while the other is responsible for writing up the transcript.

Supporting Students with Particular Learning Needs

Students with particular learning needs may face challenges in completing an oral history project. While classroom teachers with a knowledge of individual students are best placed to decide on appropriate adjustments and accommodations, we have provided a few suggestions for certain learning needs below:

- Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder may face difficulty in interpreting aspects of the interview, particularly non-verbal cues. It may be useful to have students work in pairs to complete the interview and analysis collaboratively.
- Students facing difficulty with auditory processing may benefit from working directly with a pre-recorded and transcribed interview to complete just the later stages of the process so they may read and listen at the same time. Many online oral history archives provide written transcripts to accompany recorded interviews.
- Students with dyslexia or writing difficulties may find applications and online tools that automate parts of the transcription process useful. A search for 'transcription software' or similar will provide a range of results.

Supporting Higher Attaining Students

There are a variety of ways in which higher attaining students might be challenged during the oral history project. Two possibilities include:

- Ask the student to conduct multiple interviews with different family members focused on the same theme(s) in order to allow for comparison and deeper analysis.
- Ask the student to conduct additional research using a range of historical sources relating to their chosen theme(s) to promote the application of a deeper critical lens.

III.

Strategy in Action

Sri Lanka (Ceylon at the time) was involved in World War Two on the side of the Allies as a colony of the British Empire. Army posts and airfields were set up to assist in the war effort. Volunteer forces were trained by the British. Petrol rationings were imposed on the population. In April 1942, the Japanese conducted air raids on Colombo and Trincomalee, two key ports in the country. Those with financial resources evacuated the cities. Most stayed behind and continued working.

Year 10 students begin the study of History through an analysis of sources in Unit 1. This Unit does not include oral history as a historical source. This strategy will be ideal to introduce students to oral history as a historical source. Students can be tasked with seeking relatives or neighbours in their communities who remember those air raids and/or what life was like during World War Two. They will then follow the steps of the strategy over the course of two years. In Year 11, students study World War in Unit 8. Therefore, introducing students to such an oral history project in Year 10 and conducting it for two years will culminate in direct curricula applications by the time they reach the topic in Year 11. With a range of historical sources to consider in their study of World War, students will have a broader, more diverse perspective on the impact of the war in Sri Lanka.

For an example of such a project, see “The Lankan Lens: World War II Locally.”

IV.

Selected Bibliography

Abrams, Linda. Oral history theory. London: Routledge, 2016.

"Best Practices," Oral History Association, available at: https://www.oralhistory.org/best-practices/. Accessed December 23, 2021.

Clark, Ella E. *Indian Legends of the Pacific Northwest*. Berkeley: UC Press, 1952.

Clark, Ella E. *Indian Legends of the Northern Rockies*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966.

Deloria Jr., Vine. *The World We Used to Live In*. Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 2006.

"Equipment and Recording Tips," UCLA Library, Center for Oral History Research, available at: https://oralhistory.library.ucla.edu/pages/interview_guidelines. Accessed December 23, 2021.

Portelli, Alessandro. "What makes oral history different," in *The Oral History Reader*, edited by R. Perks & A. Thomson, 48-58. London: Routledge, 2016.

Ritchie, Donald. *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Thompson, Paul. *Voice of the past: Oral history*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.