The Use of Oral History in the Classroom

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Abstract

Stories of various nature on the varied contribution and achievements or otherwise of various people exist in society. These stories could either be political, economic, social, cultural or even environmental in nature. But have not been harnessed through a systematic collection and documentation. These narrative accounts which are reflection of the peoples experience are collected by students for classroom using skills and training given them. This paper examines how students use classroom skills in collecting stories about the Bulk oil plant at Ikot Abasi, the impact of the plant on the society, and how the process and experience impacted on the students, in their attempt at reclaiming the past and do “real work”.

Introduction

The study of history has always been an interdisciplinary exercise (Jaja 2008), that borrows generously from the methods and insights provided by other disciplines, but the narrative method remain central and relevant to the discipline of history. Telling stories as a method of explaining how things have changed or why things are the way they are is at the heart of most historical endeavors. Despite the centrality of story-telling to the discipline of history, until relatively recently, historians have given little critical consideration to the narrative as a method of explanation, and non-historians, our students among them, even less so. Most of the students in my classroom enter with the understanding that history is merely a series of stories, and that stories are merely a collection of facts (Jaja and Brown, 2007). It is important, however, to make students of history aware that the narrative is a method of explanation, that story-telling is not merely the process of ordering a series of facts. One of the most valuable lessons students of history can learn, is that narratives can be constructed in ways that will lead different story-tellers (and their audiences) to quite different conclusions. And as Ikime (2006) pointed out, it deepens understanding not just for its own sake, but in the hope that such understanding would mould human attitude and human action. The use of oral history in the classroom can be an effective method to help students understand the power of the narrative.

Students and History

Inviting students to examine how we tell stories about transformations in the natural world can be a valuable learning tool in the culture history course. In “A place for Stories: Nature. History and Narrative”. Cronon (1992) argues that a plot in culture histories, can give unity that neither nature nor the past possesses so clearly”. Cronon’s observation can be demonstrated successfully in the cultural history classroom through the use of oral history to explore local or regional stores about social change. What follows is a description of one peculiarly local example, unique to the time and place. Alagoa (1990) successfully did that for Nembe and the Niger Delta in Nigeria. Nonetheless, it might inspire others teaching culture history, environmental history, local history, or even more broadly defined African history courses to consider employing oral history to examine their own local or regional stories.
The Bulk Oil Plant at Ikot-Abasi, Nigeria

This study centered on the demise of Bulk oil plant machine called “the Big plant”. The Big plant rested a few kilometers from the beach at Ikot Abasi abandoned in the 1950s. It was the largest oil plant in the South. Ikot Abasi is a sleepy town in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, it is now a Local Government Area. The Bulk oil plant became famous because of the role played by King Jaja and his kingdom in the palm oil trade. The Bulk oil plant was established because of this thriving oil trade between 1947 and 1950, when it was finally closed. The Big plant operated 24 hours a day, 364 days a year (with all-too-frequent interruptions for repair), producing oil for Southeastern Nigeria. After its closure in 1950, it rested and began to rust away. The news of the Big plants closure provoked a curious response in this community. It seems many locals had a great deal of affection for this factory and great efforts were made to “save the big plant” and turn it into a museum. But all of these failed. The Big plant was not only a source of local pride, but had been for many years a source of the paying jobs this region had to offer.

The demise of the big plant seemed to mark the end of an era—the era of palm produce in southeastern Nigeria. A few small plants remain, and have been given new hope of resurrection by successive administration, but in recent years they have had increasing trouble actualizing it. The dismantling of the plant seemed to present an ideal opportunity for a classroom-based oral history project. In 1997, I prepared students from that area to present a project by presenting two narratives based on oral history about the impact of palm produce on the region. The narrative presented could not have been more starkly differentiated. One compared palm oil production to harvesting and began its account with images of failed, impoverished farms; a land used up by improvident farming methods over many generations. The plant brought prosperity to an impoverished region; good wages and created a positive ripple effect throughout the community. There was actually an “improvement” from what had existed before, new uses were found for lands.

The task of the students was to determine to what extent either of these narratives reflected the experiences of the people they interviewed. So they went out to interview people in their living rooms, market and at their kitchen tables. They were welcomed warmly and often left with full tapes. Not surprisingly, the stories they collected were quite varied. People told of endless hours of work and rotating shifts, working at dangerous but paying jobs, and, while they tended to accept the stereotypes of impoverished workers. Workers were often hesitant to voice open criticism of companies, but upset at the ways they had been stereotypically presented as impoverished. They eagerly shared pictures of neatly kept houses and confessed that leaving the land was difficult. People living in the towns closest to the plant witnessed a measure of prosperity. In fact, when traders who had filled their town disappeared, so did the local economy. What wealth the plant brought seemed to benefit communities on the periphery, as well as those near Ikot Abasi.

But people’s perspectives on the Big plant were complicated further by webs of personal and family relationships. Many were indeed “outsiders”, who moved to the region from other towns and these individuals were the most likely to present stories in line with company propaganda. But for long-time local residents, complex webs of relationships moderated their views.

What united families was a vigorous stereotypes associated with poverty. They were not rich in money, but were independent and self-sufficient, most contended, and many insisted their original status still might be able to sustain them today, had they not been forced to move. In order to get at the truth behind these disparate portrayals of the region’s oil potential, one student unearthed old copies of an account completed in the early 1940s. The report did not paint an entirely bleak picture.

After conducting the interviews, students were required to prepare a content index of each interview tape and to write up a personal narrative on each subject, connecting the life stories of the participants to the changes brought about by Bulk oil plant. Students shared these with the rest of the class, and the class discussed how these personal narratives supported and challenged the story. As part of
a take-home assignment, students had to construct their own narratives on palm produce in Southeastern Nigeria.

Students response to the project was highly favorable. Although some were nervous about leaving the classroom and venturing out to the homes of rural residents, nearly all returned from their interviews eager to share the stories they collected. Post-interview discussions included perhaps the broadest participation ever encountered in the classroom, because each student brought to them a unique authority—the knowledge of the stories they had collected. Comments on evaluations gave the study a near-universal approval, with many commenting that the project was “interesting” and “fun”, and that they appreciated the opportunity to encounter the perspectives of “real” people. The best measurement of its success, however, was in the quality of the assignment essays. Students approached materials written by both cultural historians and others with a more confidently critical eye as a result of their oral history experience.

This immersion in one local story also offered ample opportunities to reflect on other issues addressed in the course: How is this contest over land use (farming vs. mining) similar to and different from other such contests in African culture history and why do we privilege some land uses over others? What stereotypes (positive and negative) do we posses of the self-provisioning farmer, and of the person who earns a living as an oil producer, and how are our impressions of them fashioned by our understanding of their relationship with the natural world? Does the popular dichotomy in which so many cultural issues are presented-jobs vs. nature-make any sense in explaining the story of oil production in Southeastern Nigeria. Finally, by asking students to reconcile three or more narratives on the story of oil production in Southeastern Nigeria, the popular story, and the personal stories of those they interviewed-students gain an intimate understanding of how we employ narratives to make sense of our personal lives and communal experiences.

Although this study drew on specific recent developments in the historiography of culture history, studies might be developed with the same goal-to help students understand the power of the narrative as a form of explanation-in other history courses. In selecting a suitable topic, lecturers should consider stories that have significant local meaning (and thus can be revealed in the personal experiences of local residents), but they should also be stories that can be tied to one or more particular narratives constructed by external groups-historians, the media, or corporations, for example. A course on women’s history might examine the impact of Civil War on local women and measure local women’s personal experiences against the historiography on women and war. Students enrolled in a course on the conflict studies might interview locals about their concerns about the militants machine gun, and AK 14 fallout. And virtually every African community-rural, urban, or suburban-has been transformed by the construction of interstate highways in the last decade. An oral history project focusing on the specific local impacts of any part of our interstate highway system could be built into a course on modern Nigeria. The above suggestions, of course, might be used in any region of the country. I would encourage lecturers to search out stories that are peculiarly local, but can be given broader meaning by tying them to broader national narratives. The rewards of such studies might be measured in the classroom, but they also can have positive impacts on the wider community.

Oral History Paper as Real Work
We have seen how an oral history project can be a real work. A narrative work and a primary source paper, for the reconstruction of the culture history of society and the impact of the big oil plant. “Real work” has relevance to people’s lives, or the lives they imagine themselves leading. Some history majors envision themselves as professional historians upon graduation, so assignments that train them to do what historians do in those future jobs will be seen as “real work”. Yet many of our students, will not become professional historians. When the skills acquired in “doing” history (Thompson 2000), that is finding information, weighing evidence, examining interpretations critically, and communicating effectively to
non-specialists can be made relevant to other jobs, then assignments that sharpen those skills will also be seen as “real work” (Jaja and Brown 2007). Still other students have no clear idea what they want to do. These individuals, feeling a bit lost and adrift, often respond well to activities that help them feel empowered (Jaja 1996). Primary source paper assignment provides one way to address each of these sets of students.

We all know well the usual “research paper” assignment: The student must review the secondary literature, analyze primary sources, and formulate an argument on a specific topic or question. Many quite justifiably call this “real work” because professional historians follow these steps.

The oral history paper constitutes “real work” not just because students do what historians do or because they can follow their individual tastes and select something from the full spectrum of primary sources that suits their interests (poems, photographs, music, paintings, letters, diaries, oral history interviews, architecture, and more) (Jaja 1995). Students get a different kind of experience. They become more sensitive writers when their audience includes someone from outside the class. Perhaps importantly, this assignment establishes a dialogue between the students and their source. Ideas first tried out in class among one’s peers are reworked and then placed before an expert in the field. We professional historians understand this process—we write a draft, show it to peers and colleagues for advice, then revise, and eventually send it to the referees who decide about publication or funding—but students often stumble in this unfamiliar territory. Engaging in this dialogue serves a larger purpose as well. Students have their doubts at first, but then are amazed that they have something substantive to say to the “Big Name Professor” who is their source or lecturer.

The success of this assignment depends upon finding the right professional who would be willing to comment on the students’ papers and, more importantly, temperamentally suited to the task. A dismissive or condescending comment to the students might quash any desires they might have to become professional historians or to engage in any other forms of dialogue. A superficial reply could make students believe they had wasted their efforts. Overly effusive or empty praise could mislead students about the rigor demanded by serious scholarship. I thank my stars that two model authors: E.J. Alagoa (1972) author of a History of the Niger Delta and S.J.S. Cookey, (1974) author of King Jaja of the Niger Delta: His life and times 1821 – 1891. Agreed to participate in this assignment primarily because, as committed teachers, they believed the students would benefit from such interaction. I also made the argument that, as authors, they would benefit as well. Wouldn’t they get a kick out of hearing from their readers and from knowing that a group of people took oral history and their work seriously? Few of us who write professionally ever get this opportunity. I also argued that the students’ papers could be of genuine help, and indeed SJS Cookey agreed not “grade” the papers, but simply respond to them. He read about thirty papers, grouped them into categories, and wrote two or three sentences of critical yet supportive commentary about each paper. E.J. Alagoa responded with grace and intelligence, and wrote anywhere from one-half to one full double-spaced page for each of the twenty or so essays he read.

Students responded enthusiastically to the oral history paper. One said the assignment was “especially useful because it allowed us to present our thoughts to another historian to see his viewpoint”. “I especially liked the oral history paper”, wrote an education major. “I am aspiring to be a teacher and this would be something I would like to integrate into my class”. Finally, I knew I reached my goals when another student wrote: it was really nice to know that even though we are students a professor can learn from us too”. The students became empowered; they realized “lowly” undergraduates can make suggestions to be taken seriously, and contribute to the historical thinking. Furthermore, they realized their efforts could have a lasting effect. Writing usually done simply for a grade in one class now had the chance to affect a textbook or monograph that would be read by untold numbers of students in classrooms around the country. Many students had never before realized the power of their pen to accomplish “real work”.
And once immersed in this way, students are able to grapple better with primary sources and accomplish the “real work” that historians do. In this version of the oral history paper, students investigate the accuracy regarding any element of the interviews historical context by researching primary sources and the relevant secondary literature. E.J. Alagoa (1964) and Jones Jaja’s (2003) assertions about the powerlessness of women in the seventeenth century need to recognize that actual lives usually do not fit neatly into the generalizations”.

Comments on “exceptions” and “proving the rule” led to fruitful class discussions. How many exceptions can one have before the historian must rewrite “the rule”? These understanding helped students see how historians and novelists construct the past-an especially useful lesson for budding historians-and the mysteries provided the students a “feel” for colonial Nigeria that will probably remain with them long after they have forgotten the textbook and my lectures.

The Primary Source Paper has changed the way one think about work. I admit to being one of those teachers who dreaded reading all of those assignments. I disliked grading so much that I would put it off, which only made it worse when students legitimately asked, “So when are you returning the tests?” Now, I look forward to reading the oral history papers because they introduce me to sources I might not have seen otherwise, source useful in my own research and in my preparations for the next year’s class. The grading, rather than being a chore, has become more of a boon. Of course, I do not dive into these essays the way I eagerly reach for the latest History book, but I think I can refine the assignments so that they can become even more useful and engaging. To do so will require a lot of “real work”, but it will be worth it. But to do this successfully, some practical details must be considered. This we would briefly address.

Doing Oral History in the Classroom: Practical Details

Pre-Planning: While oral history studies can be immensely rewarding, they do require some pre-planning to be successful. A fair amount of time must be spent in class before preparing for the study. Networking in the local community to find subjects is critical and will require some advance planning. Contacting Chiefs, individuals, and other local institutions will yield some results. Getting invited to local ceremonies or for local activities connected me with a large group of interview subjects. Earning the trust and confidence of a few key people will open many doors. There is paperwork that should be prepared before the class begins. Contact information sheets providing critical information that students will need to know before conducting interviews (name, phone number, address, basic biographical details, relationship with other interview subjects); a letter of introduction to each participant, explaining the goals of the project; and release forms, which are essential if you expect to make the interviews available to others or to use them in your own research.

Equipment: A classroom oral history study can be done quite cheaply if the primary purpose is a learning exercise. We had pretty respectable results with portable tape recorders and lapel microphones available at Radio stores. If you are serious about creating “radio broadcast quality” tapes, or are concerned about preservation issues, more expensive professional equipment is recommended. Search for professional for extended discussions of the benefits and drawbacks of different professional quality recorders.

Training: It is important to devote a few class sessions to training students in the use of equipment and the art of interviewing. You should be able to accomplish this in two or three sessions (Ritchie 1994). A colleagues with extensive oral history experience provide students with a “crash course” on interviewing. It is also important that the students are educated interviewers. Test students on relevant course materials before sending them out to interview, and require them to submit lists of interview questions beforehand.

After the Interviews: Students were required to prepare a content index of each tape (indexed to the tape counter) and to write up a personal narrative on each subject, connecting the life stories of their subjects to the changes brought about by oil palm produce. Students shared these with the rest of the class, and the
class discussed how these personal narratives supported and challenged other stories. As part of a take-home final exam, students had to construct their own narratives on palm produce in Southeastern Nigeria.

**After the Class:** This study took on a life of its own after the end of the semester. “Reclaiming Our Heritage” combines images of the affected communities overtime with excerpts from the oral histories, many of which were transcribed and deposited for further use. While we attempt to cover all aspects of this study, as the title suggests, those who worked on it were most interested in “reclaiming” the history of communities affected by years of palm oil extraction and production. They gathered around pictures of churches, schools, and markets now long gone and pointed to spots to show the places once occupied by structures used by their forefathers.

**Conclusion**

Collecting stories about the past is oral history in practice. And its use in classroom assignment is to prepare students on the skill of fieldwork. Collecting stories of the Bulk oil plant at Ikot Abasi, Nigeria is one sure way of “reclaiming” the past and reconstructing the impact of the plant on the cultural life of the people. It points to the fact that the historian must be sensitive to the need of his age. In this case it is the need to precisely know what happened. How the historians vision of the past is illuminated by insights into the problem of the present. It shows how the problem of the present can inform our understanding and perhaps even more importantly, our presentation of the past without destroying the evidence. The use of oral history show the “real work” undertaken by students in their quest for knowledge and skills that would last them a lifetime. The detailed process of planning and training in collecting stories of our diverse culture and vast society is what is needed if we must contribute to the challenges of nation building.

**References**


