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## **THE NEED FOR ORAL HISTORY IN A CHANGING SOUTH AFRICA**

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"... The more that any writer of history has himself been ... in contact with the makers, the more does he come to see that a history based solely on formal documents is essentially superficial" - B.H. Liddell Hart.

### **1. Introduction**

The Minister of Education, Prof. Kader Asmal, launched the South African History Project in August 2001. One of the objectives of this Project is "to encourage the recording of oral histories". The Project is playing an important role in curriculum change with an emphasis on the acquisition of related wider skills.<sup>1</sup>

In 2002 a report was compiled on behalf of the South African Historical Association on the outcome of the South African History Project's conference held at Rondebosch from 2-5 October 2002. According to the author, Prof. Elize Van Eeden, one of the shortcomings that became evident from the discussions at the conference was the lack of in-depth knowledge on Oral History and questions were asked like: "How do we approach the use of oral history?"<sup>2</sup>

Against this background it is necessary to look at the status of Oral History specifically in South Africa. This is to inform the historian, the researcher and the educator of the value, the need and the successes with regard to the acquiring of a variety of skills experienced in this field to make it even more workable and sensitive when using it in a South African environment.

Oral History makes no claim to exclusivity. Although, if the Oral History method is used carefully and skilfully it can be a valuable tool in supplementing and

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education, *The South African History Project Progress Report 2001 – 2003*, pp. 4, 54.

<sup>2</sup> Van Eeden, E.S. "Know the past, anticipate the future: Observations on the National Department of Education and the South African History Project's conference, Rondebosch, 2–5 October 2002" in *Historia*, Vol. 47, Nr. 2, November 2002, pp. 767, 769.

enriching the written record. It remains a useful and unique way of gaining access to information using the human memory as a historical source.

There are a variety of aspects to Oral History and this paper did not attempt to explore all of it. The focus will be on a deeper understanding of the concept and place of Oral History; how it transforms the content and shifts the focus of History as well as the role it plays in a changing socio-political environment. The need for Oral History to change outdated teaching methods will also be highlighted. Finally, a case study involving the University of the Free State, Department of History, will be discussed.

## 2. Understanding the concept and place of Oral History

Oral History is nothing more than a branch of historical research. In this context Oral History is the offspring of History's most ancient technique and its most modern technology. In its technique of collecting eyewitness accounts to History; the ancient Greek historians did this more than two thousand years ago and in its technology, the tape recorder is part of the modern age. Its mode is as elementary as human conversation but also as complex as the fields of electronics. It is an activity that draws upon the most sophisticated skills of professional historians but also can be undertaken productively by weekend amateurs.<sup>3</sup>

The use of Oral History is not new. It is as old as History itself. Oral History already existed when Academic History was developing among the educated strata of society. It was a community-based tradition, where most societies have always recognised the worth of preserving and passing on some kind of knowledge of the past, protecting an accumulating heritage.<sup>4</sup>

A number of organisations have for some time been engaged in the systematic collection of oral testimony. Oral History associations and societies and Oral History journals and circulars have been able to debate and discuss ideas and problems in Oral History. Also, many academic historians have used oral sources in their work. The need for the collection of Oral History in Southern Africa has been widely recognised since the mid-1970's.<sup>5</sup> Especially since the 1980's in South Africa, Oral History has been used as an important method of documenting the experiences and oppressions of living under apartheid. In the process it is the 'discovery' of Oral History as one of many kinds of historical

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<sup>3</sup> Davis, C. *et al*, *Oral History. From Tape to Type*, pp. 1–4.

<sup>4</sup> Caunce, S., *Oral History and the Local Historian*, pp. 100–101; *The Sunday Independent*, 3.5.1998, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Sideris, T., "Recording living memory in South Africa. The need for Oral History in South Africa" in *Critical Arts*, Vol. 4, Nr. 2, 1986, p. 41, 50; Manson, A. *et al*, "Oral History speaks out", in *Social Dynamics*, Vol. 11, Nr. 2, 1985, p. 1.

sources again, but also a 'recovery' of giving historians back the oldest skill of their own craft.<sup>6</sup>

Oral History is too creative a field to be captured by a single definition, or to be defined exclusively. The subject matter of Oral History varies widely, making it difficult to pin down the boundaries between what is and what is not Oral History.<sup>7</sup> An uncontroversial definition of Oral History interviewing will be: "A systematic collection, arrangement, preservation and publication (in the sense of making generally available) of recorded verbatim personal accounts, opinions and reminiscences of people who were witnesses to or participants in events or experiences they recount."<sup>8</sup> Beyond this functional definition there are a number of differences of emphasis. The fact remains it includes the tape-recording of spoken reminiscences about what the narrator can speak from first-hand knowledge and through pre-planned interviews. The information is captured in question and answer form by the interviewers. Tapes of the interview are then transcribed, summarised, or indexed and then placed in a library or archive. The availability for general research, reinterpretation and verification defines Oral History.<sup>9</sup> Through Oral History a relatively painless medium of relaxed conversations based upon well-planned questions can be used to elicit information as to why, how and by what things came to pass. In the process Oral History became a link from the immediate present to the immediate past in an understandable and very human way.<sup>10</sup>

What is captured by Oral History is a segment of human experience, in the context of a remembered past, a dynamic present and an unknown, open-ended future. It becomes a social challenge and adventure to presume to search for historical evidence in such a source with both opportunities and limitations.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Oral History transforms the content and shifts the focus of History

In South Africa, as in other countries, the techniques of Oral History can open up many new areas for historical inquiry, which implies some shifts of focus.

The elitist, political focus of History where historical time was divided up by reigns and dynasties has shifted radically in recent years. Many historians are deliberately concentrating on the stories of common people and an ever-increasing interest in recording Social History. Here the historical focus is on 'ordinary people' and not on 'great men' such as heads of government, military leaders or politicians. A focal change was necessary when looking at the general

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<sup>6</sup> Thompson, P., *The Voice of the Past* (2000), pp. 78, 81.

<sup>7</sup> Moss, W.W., *Oral History Program Manual*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*; Lance, D., *An Archive approach to Oral History*, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Baum, W.K., *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*, p. 7; Ritchie, D.A., *Doing Oral History*, pp. 1, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Baum, pp. 7–8.

<sup>11</sup> Moss, p. 9.

trend throughout the historical profession toward interviewing common people and their history with a display of heightened interest in the lives of factory hands, migrant workers and ghetto dwellers.<sup>12</sup> The emphasis is thus on a more Social History, purpose and conscious.

The shift is not only from Political to Social History, but the focus of History has also moved to Local History. Apart from the grass roots movement of Oral History, it has a higher potential for influencing the more limited scope and subject matter of Local History. This can lead to a better perspective on the events and forces that shaped local life and thought, which in turn do not only lead to a better understanding of the past of a particular community, but also of a region's or nation's past. Local History serves then as a microcosm of a nation's history.<sup>13</sup>

There is a relationship between History and the community. Through Oral History historical information can be given to the community for interpretation and presentation. The shift of focus to an active community-orientated approach can bring History into and out of the community, broadening knowledge of what constitutes a community's history. With the focus on the day-to-day reality of lived experience, Oral History lends itself well to community-based activity and collective ways of producing History. Apart from the political and institutional structures it adds to the economic development and the occupational and ethnic composition of its population. Some community-based Local History projects have made much progress in breaking down the gap between the experts and ordinary people. Members of these community projects do not only yield information, but are integrally involved in writing, production and consumption of historical material.<sup>14</sup>

Though many established programs will continue their emphasis on leaders and elites, and Oral History will only at best modestly supplement the massive written record concerning most of these famous people and leaders, there is more. Oral History offers immensely more to the subject of Social and Folk History and it often represents all we can learn about the lives of ordinary persons. Social History has benefited immensely by the ability of Oral History to throw light on certain topics.

The shift in the focus of History was also necessary in South Africa, especially after 1994. The country's official history was mostly focussed on Political History, which was many times biased. Some of the assumptions and judgements made needed to be challenged. Substantial groups of people who had been ignored needed recognition for their role. History as subject in its educational form needed to be taken out of its institutional retreats and limitations to different ways

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<sup>12</sup> Davis, *et al* , p. 2; *The Natal Witness*, 20.8.1998, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Allen, B. and Montell, L., *From Memory to History. Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research*, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Sideris, p. 44; Ritchie, p. 186.

of opening up new skills to the learners. There was a need for a more realistic reconstruction of the past to create a more balanced version. Maybe a more 'truer' version. The new version and focus must also include multidisciplinary approaches, Social History, the community, and ordinary people from all walks of life.

This will allow evidence from a new direction and the recreation of the original multiplicity of views. Paul Thompson, the well-known British oral historian, sees this shift in focus as "setting in motion a cumulative process of transformation. The scope of historical writing itself is enlarged and enriched; and at the same time its social message/meaning change. History becomes, to put it more simply, more democratic".<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. The role of Oral History in a changing socio-political environment

Oral History is capable of complementing and contributing to the many types of formal Academic History. It can add to the scope of historical writing, making it a valid and valuable source of historical information. The value of it lies especially in the following aspects, evaluated against the specific changing socio-political environment in South Africa.

##### 4.1 Oral History records unwritten and/or lost history

Oral History has performed an important service in providing access to the Folk History of groups whose heritage might otherwise be lost. This is particularly true of groups and cultures that for some reason have a predominantly oral rather than written tradition. Among illiterate and semi-literate societies oral traditions are still the chief form of historical awareness and cultural continuity from generation to generation. Even in literate record-keeping societies much information goes unrecorded. Here Oral History becomes a fundamental and sometimes the only tool, making a substantial contribution by providing information that historians would not otherwise be able to acquire. In this aspect Oral History provides information which is original in character for distinct subject areas.<sup>16</sup>

If weighed carefully this value of Oral History to provide information about the past that exists in no other form, is potentially the most valuable and yet, up to now, the least exploited in Local History research. Countless untold topics of historical interest could be fruitfully pursued if people's memories were taped. Without the use of orally communicated material, the task of researching these topics can never be successfully undertaken. For example a large part of our history will be lost if the stories of old people are not recorded now. When these

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<sup>15</sup> Thompson (2000), pp. 7–8.

<sup>16</sup> Lance, p. 3; Moss, p. 8; Vansina, J., *Oral Tradition as History*, pp. 198–199.

people die, the stories are lost forever. Old people may be seen as 'libraries' in their own right and their unwritten stories need to be preserved for the future.<sup>17</sup>

There is another dimension to this when taking the situation in South Africa into consideration. Tina Sideris, who was a member of the Oral History Project of The South African Institute of Race Relations, (1982 – 1984), argues that for a number of reasons the history of the popular classes has not been well documented. Illiteracy has militated against the systematic documentation of activities and organisation amongst certain groups. The informal nature of some popular organisations led to the non-existence of records and archival storage of the organisations' activities. When for example, trade unions or political organisations, have kept official records many of these have been confiscated and destroyed by the state. Many sources of historical investigations has also been removed and repressed in the form of censorship and banning. Academic writings about black people in general have concentrated almost exclusively on their roles as fighters for or against the white authorities. Material on black Social History is very scarce. Also on the day-to-day lives of black people, particularly those who lived in rural areas, there is almost nothing available. It is these areas, inaccessible to conventional methods of investigation, that the method of Oral History allows the historian to explore.<sup>18</sup>

Also through the process of identifying significant sites in South Africa, for which there is no recorded history, Oral History is vital in bringing together strands of South Africa's heritage. A specific place can have significance in people's memories and beliefs. If all the narratives stand together, the researcher can find an interesting story to tell. The heritage of South Africa is bound to be enriched by this.<sup>19</sup>

In an attempt for researchers to construct a more comprehensive picture of the past, taking into account certain problems and the bias of official history and official records, oral testimony is very often the only alternative source for wanting to correct and add to incomplete and inadequate official history. In South Africa large parts of our history have been distorted and hidden. Much information of the past can be salvaged only by tapping the memories of those who have lived through it or remember hearing older members of the family or community talk about it. In the process Academic History can be enriched.<sup>20</sup>

In this sense one can compensate for the paucity of accurate documents or other printed matter. The spoken reminiscences of common people have helped historians rediscover and more effectively use Folk History. In the process we

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<sup>17</sup> Witz, L., *Write your own history*, p. 14; Allen and Montell, p. 20; *The Sunday Independent*, 3.5.1998, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Sideris, p. 41; *The Sunday Independent*, 3.5.1998, p. 22; *Sunday Times*, 5.9.1993, p. 21.

<sup>19</sup> *Business Day*, 28.2.2001, p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> Sideris, pp. 41 – 42; Allen and Montell, p. viii; *Volksblad*, 25.3.2000, p. 9.

have come to appreciate the less fateful, but nevertheless important, role played by the objects of that action.

#### 4.2 Oral History complements recorded sources

Oral History is a valuable source of historical information, as it complements other recorded sources of information. Historical gaps of interest and importance can be filled by using Oral History methods by providing an intimate view of the events described to create records which otherwise could not be made available. The personal and anecdotal characteristics of recorded interviews can provide flesh for the sometimes arid bones of History. Records are deliberately prepared objective and impersonal, but many times behind it lie tension and influences not reflected in the official records.<sup>21</sup> This relationship between oral and written sources can be summed up as follows: "Alone, each one is incomplete, but together they form a harmonious union, with the one offering objective interpretation based upon sound evidence, and the other giving a personalized immediacy, a sense of being there and of participation".<sup>22</sup>

Written sources usually provide the who, what, when, and where of history; while Oral History can add better insights into the how and why, giving a fuller historical record. Written records speak to the point of *what happened*, while oral sources provide insights into *how people felt about what happened*. Oral History often expresses how people felt about those important events and movements, how they reacted to them, and how the events affected their lives. Details of what happened as well as the emotional responses of individuals to the event itself provide a human dimension to the eyewitness accounts of historical occurrences.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4.3 Oral History gives a 'voice' to the 'voiceless'

The value of Oral History lies specifically in the broadening of sources of historical information to include the voices and perspectives of ordinary people. This can broaden the historian's data base. It is especially important in South Africa where repression and discrimination have muted the voice of the majority of people.<sup>24</sup> An attempt is made to 'give voice' to the experiences and everyday stories of the ordinary man and these historical narratives, as communicated through oral testimony, are a means of overcoming the silences.<sup>25</sup> Oral History provides a voice to the voiceless who normally include the poor, the marginalised, and the illiterate people. A former resident of District Six, Cape

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<sup>21</sup> Lance, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Allen and Montell, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Ritchie, pp. 20–21; Allen and Montell, pp. 21, 58.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*; Moss, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Nuttall, S. and Coetzee, C. (ed.), *Negotiating the past: The making of memory in South Africa*, pp. 90–91; *Natal Witness*, 23.9.2003, p. 4.

Town, remarked: "We have a voice. We want to be heard. They don't have to give us anything. We just want someone to listen to us".<sup>26</sup>

This could allow those who have limited access to formal channels of expression to communicate their points of view to a public audience and at the very least the oral evidence can be presented in a form which is accessible to a wide range of people.

In this sense Oral History makes a social contribution, helping the less privileged towards dignity and self-confidence. It gives ordinary people confidence in their own speech to express themselves, in their own memories and interpretation of the past and their ability to contribute to the writing of History. Approaching someone to record their stories shows that their life is of value and of significance in itself. This captures an alternative view of History and reveals a great deal about an individual and about a culture.<sup>27</sup>

Tim Keegan argues that "in the narratives of ordinary people's lives we begin to see some of the major forces of history at work, large social forces that are arguably the real key to understanding the past".<sup>28</sup>

#### 4.4 Oral History, political reconciliation and nation-building

Oral History also has vital political importance. The importance of Oral History to popular political organisations in South Africa is clear. Understanding the past from the point of view of the oppressed people in South Africa is a powerful way to uncover the 'past-present relation' through memory. It is important, because this can play a role in restoring a sense of pride and confidence in them. Reconstructing past struggles from the point of view of the ordinary people involved can help to get a more comprehensive picture of their role in the resistance period.<sup>29</sup> For example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa uncovered the past by using the politics of historical and personal memory for the purpose of reconciliation in the future. From the silence imposed by apartheid, the TRC reflected an official recording of memories.<sup>30</sup>

The history of political resistance and of political organisation can systematically be documented through Oral History and can be used with more political purpose. Communities who have gone through forced removals offer an example. Under the threat and conditions of forced removal, communities develop a strong sense of their history, and their right to land. Recording the

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<sup>26</sup> *Democracy in Action*, 1.6.1995, p. 32.

<sup>27</sup> Thompson (2000), pp. 20–23; Caunce, p. 25; *Democracy in Action*, 1.6.1995, p. 32.

<sup>28</sup> Nuttall and Coetzee (ed.), p. 91.

<sup>29</sup> Sideris, p. 43.

<sup>30</sup> Nuttall and Coetzee (ed.), p. 89–90; *Rapport*, 23.3.2003, p. 24; *Democracy in Action*, 1.6.1995, p. 32.



history of these communities and making it widely available may help to justify their claims to the land.<sup>31</sup>

Here Oral History forms the connection between the past and political struggle; between power and knowledge; between Political and Social History, and between memory and History.<sup>32</sup>

It should go without saying that oral historians have a primary obligation to truth. When carefully and critically gathered, processed and examined, it contributes to the quantity and quality of what we know of the past, giving value to Oral History.

## 5. The need for Oral History to change outdated teaching methods, with special reference to the teaching of History

### 5.1 From Contents-based to Outcomes-based History

While the first part of the paper focussed on the need for Oral History in the South African society at large, the focus now shifts to the education field, with special reference to the teaching of History. Since 1994 education in South Africa has experienced dramatic and far-reaching changes. The advent of a new political dispensation demanded that the old apartheid-based Bantu education be abolished and a new curriculum be implemented for learners of all races. In 1997 Curriculum 2005 was heralded as the new system which will replace the old one. Although the future status of History as an independent subject was unsure even before 1994, Curriculum 2005 marginalised it even further by combining it with Geography as part of a vague social sciences programme. Since 1997 the teaching of History as well as the dramatic decline in the popularity of the subject was intensely debated. The two aspects that came under close scrutiny were the *content* of the textbooks and the *teaching* of the subject as such.<sup>33</sup>

An official task team, called the History and Archaeology Panel, was instructed by the Minister of Education, Prof. Kader Asmal, to investigate the matter. The task team's report, which was released in early 2001, cited the following reasons for the declining interest in History:

- The poor quality of History teaching and it's reduced status in schools;
- The use of outdated textbooks;
- A teacher training system which is still rooted in the apartheid history landscape;
- The failure of the History curriculum to integrate the South African past with the broader historical dynamics of the African continent and the rest of the world;

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<sup>31</sup> Sideris, pp. 51 – 52.

<sup>32</sup> Nuttall and Coetzee (ed.), p. 93.

<sup>33</sup> *The Cape Argus*, 28.8.2001, p. 10.

- The general perception among learners and the public that History is worthless and unimportant.<sup>34</sup>

During August 2001 Minister Asmal launched the South African History Project to officially investigate the state of the subject in South African schools and to suggest possible solutions. This project was born out of the recommendations of the above-mentioned report. The main aim of the project is to improve History teaching in schools, providing new textbooks and establishing Oral History and History writing projects. Especially noteworthy is the project's aim to investigate *new teaching methods for teachers as well as the fresh focus on ordinary people, Oral History and indigenous knowledge systems*. Until recently, History curricula gave little or no attention at all to these aspects of History.<sup>35</sup>

In the past most teachers simply saw History as the teaching of textbook content with very little emphasis on critical thinking and analysis. Learners had to memorise the facts and simply reproduce them for evaluation. This approach follows the so-called 'transmission model' in which the teacher and lecturer passes on knowledge to passive learners and students who then reproduce it during formal assessment. The main aim of Curriculum 2005 and the concept of outcomes-based education (OBE) is to replace the 'transmission model' with the so-called 'active-learning model' with its aim to make learners and students more responsible for their own learning. The role that Oral History can play in this shift of focus - specifically in changing outdated teaching methods as well as the content of History curricula - will now be investigated.<sup>36</sup>

## 5.2 Oral History as a teaching tool

Studies done in both Britain and the USA since the 1950's have indicated that learners and students of all ages respond more positively to Oral History as a teaching tool for subjects like History, Social Studies, Environmental Studies, English, Journalism and Drama than to more traditional methods. Although little research has been done to investigate Oral History's possibilities in the South African context, we believe that the principles on which Oral History teaching is based abroad can successfully be adapted to suit local circumstances.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*; *Mail and Guardian*, 6.9.2001, p. 13; *Business Day*, 27.8.2001, p. 3; *Die Burger*, 11.9.2001, p.10.

<sup>36</sup> Cubbin, T., *The opportunity of local history in rehabilitating the relevance of history in our emerging society*. Paper delivered at the Biennial Congress of the South African Historical Association, pp. 2-3; Porter, J., "Contextualising teaching and learning: the history curriculum for the future", <http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/history2000/skillsdevhistcurric.htm>, s.a.; Mbaye, S., "Oral records in Senegal" in *The American Archivist*, Vol. 53, Fall 1990, pp. 566-574; Dhlwayo, A.V., *Contending projections and traditions of Afro-centrism in the study of African past: problems and challenges with the advent of the new millennium*. Paper delivered at the Biennial Congress of the South African Historical Association, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> Ritchie, p. 170.

Oral History has been successfully used as a teaching tool for learners at all stages of social and intellectual development. It can be effectively used not only to teach History, but also a variety of other subjects at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education. Alistair Thomson of the University of Sussex, England, believes that the principles underlying Oral History teaching “embrace notions of learning being active, participatory and interactive; of theory being integrated with practice; of critical thought about the nature and use of knowledge; and of reflection by both teacher [and learner] and taught on the processes and outcomes of learning”.<sup>38</sup> Each level of education requires a specific teaching approach to Oral History, as will be discussed below.

At the *primary school level* Oral History is not used for teaching subject matter as such, but rather as a tool to help learners develop social skills as well as an environmental awareness. Oral History is particularly useful at a stage when learners have very limited reading skills. Even at this early stage it is possible to involve learners in Oral History projects, but the focus should be on group work rather than individual efforts. Such projects may be focussed on the learners’ immediate family members, like grandparents. By conducting the interviews themselves the learners are involved in a process of ‘learning through doing’. From a historical perspective, Oral History helps learners to build up a meaningful framework of historical chronology and they also start to grasp where they, as well as their relatives, fit into it.<sup>39</sup>

At the *secondary school level* Oral History becomes more sophisticated and more closely connected to the content of curricula. Apart from using it as a tool for teaching History, it is also advisable to employ it in a multi-disciplinary fashion. By combining History with other social sciences and languages, learners come to appreciate subjects in a broader context and develop an understanding of the inter-relatedness of disciplines. The extent to which Oral History may be used at the secondary level will depend to a great degree on the attitude of the teacher as well as the flexibility of the curriculum. An aspect that should receive attention at secondary level is the research part of an Oral History project. Learners should become aware of the sources of Oral History, including place names, myths, legends, poems and songs and how to use these sources. Although the focus should still be on group work, it is necessary to start developing individual skills regarding independent research and critical analysis.<sup>40</sup>

When learners reach the *tertiary level of education*, the focus of Oral History shifts from group work to individual work. Students should be able to conduct a complete Oral History project from start to finish. The role of individual research becomes crucial and students should be able to compare, verify and integrate the various oral sources. At this level Oral History may either be dealt with as a

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<sup>38</sup> Thomson, A., “Teaching Oral History to undergraduate researchers”, <http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/history2000/oralhist.htm>, S.a.

<sup>39</sup> Ritchie, p. 164; Brooks, R. *et al*, *The Effective Teaching of History*, p. 30.

<sup>40</sup> Ritchie, pp. 165-166; Brooks, *et al*, p. 102, 153; Thompson (1988), pp. 174-175.

separate course or as a module of a larger course in History and other social sciences like Sociology or Anthropology. Paul Thompson cautions that there should be a balance between the theory and practice of Oral History at this level. Oral History theory needs to be interwoven with practical experience and it should be directed towards specific issues, like HIV/Aids, or historical incidents, like the Soweto unrests of 1976.<sup>41</sup>

### 5.3 Oral History and skills development

The main focus of current curriculum strategies in South African as well as in most Western educational institutions is the promotion of so-called 'transferable skills'. Transferable skills, which include both subject-specific and generic skills, are basically skills which are seen as relevant to the needs of the contemporary world. Not only do the principles underlying Oral History teaching closely reflect current ideas about effective learning and teaching, but Oral History also lends itself to the development of a wide range of personal and transferable skills.<sup>42</sup>

The American historian, Donald A. Ritchie, argues that Oral History helps learners break loose from their textbooks and become their own collectors of information. Learners seem to learn best from what they have researched themselves. Oral History interviewing turns learners into historical investigators: they must be able to choose a topic, identify suitable interviewees, do the research, conduct the interview and transcribe the interview themselves. During this process they acquire numerous essential skills which are usually neglected in many schools.<sup>43</sup> The following skills may be developed:

- Research skills: Learners involved in Oral History develop the desire to find out more from other sources, leading into searches in libraries and archives. Learners are exposed to the value of primary sources, of which Oral History recordings and related archival material are examples. They develop research and questioning skills when they are confronted with contradictory evidence. Different people give different versions of the same event and the interviewee's story may differ from the textbook. Not only has the learner to verify the different sources, but in the process realises that historical events do not affect all people the same way.<sup>44</sup>
- Language skills: The development of language skills include both the written and spoken language. Learners develop these by formulating

<sup>41</sup> Thompson (1988), pp. 182-183.

<sup>42</sup> Hitchcock, T. & Shoemaker, B. "Skills and the development of the history curriculum", <http://batspa.ac.uk/history2000/histcurrfuture.htm>, s.a.; Thomson, s.a.

<sup>43</sup> Ritchie, pp. 159, 168.

<sup>44</sup> Timmins, G., "Progression and differentiation in history teaching", <http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/history2000/progressdiff.htm>, s.a.; Thompson (1988), pp.167-168; Ritchie, pp. 168-169; Krige, S. *et al*, *History for the Future: Taking Another Look at "What is history?"*, p. 12.

questions, conducting interviews and transcribing them. In addition, learners develop listening skills as they have to focus on the interviewee's speech during an interview. Through interviewing others, or through themselves being interviewed, learners can also gain confidence in expressing themselves in words.<sup>45</sup>

- Technical skills: These skills are mainly acquired through the handling of equipment used for recording and transcribing an interview. Learners learn how to handle the equipment properly and how to use it in combination with other equipment, like video cameras. An Oral History project may also lead to the collecting of related artifacts and photographs and in the process learners learn how to handle, care and, in the case of photographs, reproduce them.<sup>46</sup>
- Social skills: The interview process develops some important social skills during the learners' interaction with interviewees. They learn how to communicate with adults, they develop tact and patience, they feel empathy with others and they are confronted with conflicting values and attitudes to life. Another important aspect which should be emphasised here is the opportunities that Oral History offer for learners to work together in teams. With the increasing emphasis on co-operative learning and group activity learners benefit from being involved as a group in an Oral History project.<sup>47</sup>
- Cognitive and other skills: Some of the most important skills acquired through Oral History are the cognitive skills. These include an understanding of historical concepts and timelines, genealogy, cause-and-effect relationships and problem-solving skills. Writing reports about individual Oral History experiences also develops analytical and composition skills. The by-products of developing these skills are the opportunities being created for self-revelation and the development of self-worth.<sup>48</sup>

#### 5.4 Oral History, Social History and Outcomes-based Education

Within the South African context one can safely argue that Oral History fits the modern trend in teaching away from an emphasis on Political History to Social History. The history of the everyday life, the role of the ordinary citizen in shaping events and the importance of social issues like racism, reconciliation and women's rights is surely gaining prominence in current curricula developments. It

<sup>45</sup> Siler, C.R., "Oral History in the teaching of U.S. history", <http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC-Digests/ed393781.htm>, s.a.; Trümpelman, M.H. (ed.), *Kreatiewe Geskiedenisonderrig*, p.116; Thompson (1988), p. 168; Krige, *et al*, p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> Weitzman, D., *My Backyard History Book*, pp. 56-57; Thompson (1988), p. 168.

<sup>47</sup> Thompson (1988), p. 169; Ritchie, p. 171; Brooks *et al*, p. 30; Weitzman, pp. 56-57.

<sup>48</sup> Ritchie, pp. 160, 168-169.

is in this regard that Oral History as a teaching tool is coming to the fore. As a teaching device Oral History allows learners to meet, listen to and engage in discussions with people who have played a personal role in these social issues. In this way Oral History presents learners with different viewpoints and exposes the individual beliefs, opinions and experiences that underlie people's social concerns and viewpoints. Examples of Oral History projects that will explore social history issues include the following: the living conditions of working-class communities in South Africa's urban areas, the history of labour resistance against racial segregation in the workplace in the 1970's and the working conditions of African mineworkers on South Africa's gold mines during the 1980's. All of these possible projects will not only shed light on the social lives of the so-called under-classes, but will also provide important insights into the history of popular consciousness. Furthermore projects like these emphasise the role that social experience plays in the making of history.<sup>49</sup>

As already mentioned, the other important mantra in current educational thinking in South Africa is outcomes-based education (OBE). Outcomes-based education stands in contrast to the previous focus on contents-based education where the mere facts and the learner's reproduction of them were important. In order to bring History in line with outcomes-based education the focus of the subject should shift to a relative of Social History, namely Community History or Micro-history, according to South African historian Tony Cubbin. Cubbin is of the opinion that local history is "a powerful means of restoring academic history to the realm of the active, relevant and real in our community lives".<sup>50</sup> The active community-oriented approach seems to be of crucial importance, because of the lack of even basic recorded information regarding significant segments of the South African society. Cubbin stresses that in the light of this barren field every community – whether urban, rural, industrial or commercial – are potential subjects for Oral History projects. It is in this context that the strong relationship between Oral History and Community History should be emphasised. Therefore, the most effective way to utilise Oral History as a teaching tool is to use it specifically for the teaching of Community History.<sup>51</sup>

### 5.5 A South African case study

Most of what has been said about the role of Oral History as a teaching tool at school level is, as was indicated, applicable to the teaching of History and other social sciences at tertiary level. It is specifically at university level that Oral History is slowly gaining ground as either a teaching tool or as a discipline in its own right.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Sideris, pp. 42-43; Ritchie, p. 170; Thompson (1988), p. 186, Trümpelman, p. 110-116.

<sup>50</sup> Cubbin, p. 2.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4; Wilson, N.J., *History in Crisis?*, pp. 69-73; Trümpelman, pp. 54-60; Krige *et al*, p. 23.

<sup>52</sup> Thompson (1988), pp. 174-175.

Since 2001 the Free State Provincial Archives and the Department of History at the University of the Free State have joined forces for the training of post-graduate History students in Oral History. Oral History forms a compulsory module of the GES 601 Honours Degree course together with History Theory, History Methodology and South African Historiography. The course content focuses on the theoretical as well as the methodological aspects of Oral History. It is expected of the student to complete a project that forms the core of the Oral History module. The student may choose any candidate as the focus of the project. The chosen candidate must be interviewed and the interview must be fully transcribed. Part of the project is the writing of a 4-page biography of the candidate based on the information gained from the interview. After completion of the project, the following must be handed in: a typed questionnaire prepared for the interview, a typed transcription of the interview, the cassette with the recorded interview and a typed biography of the candidate.

In order to offer the students an opportunity for the practical application of the Oral History methodology, the Free State Provincial Archives was approached. It was then decided to include practical sessions at the Archives as a compulsory part of the course. In order for the Archives to also benefit from the training, it was agreed to involve the students in already existing Oral History projects of the Archives. The practical sessions consist of a training session, the conducting of at least one full-length interview and the transcribing of the conducted interview. The students are then evaluated on their practical work and a mark that counts 20% of their semester mark is allocated.

Since 2003 the Archives have also assisted to Department of History with the practical training of third-year History students. On this level the training consists of four lectures in Oral History Methodology, after which the students must also conduct a short interview. The interview is usually a life-history type of interview conducted with a chosen candidate. The students must compile a suitable questionnaire, conduct the interview and also transcribe the full interview. Afterwards the students are then evaluated on the questionnaire, the interview as well as the transcription.

Combining practical hands-on training in Oral History methodology with Oral History theory benefit both the post-graduate as well as the third-year students in many respects. The students benefit from their exposure to the real-life working conditions at the Archives as well as their involvement in its Oral History projects. Using the recording equipment of the Archives, they can practice their Oral History skills and also draw from the expertise of the Archives staff.

## 6. Conclusion

In the last few decades Oral History has gained considerable ground. It is no longer the activity of only a few individuals, but also of historical societies,

museums, schools, curricula, reminiscence therapists, archives and academic historians.

Oral History has an important part to play in the reconstruction of the South African past. It corrects other perspectives just as much as other perspectives correct it. It is therefore important not to make a distinction between 'real history' and 'oral history'. Oral History is not of more value than any other source, but it is as useful as any other source. Taking into account that since History is about people, it is complex and many-faceted. No one approach holds the key to everything.

In the case of Oral History it is not just about the memories and narratives, but about a deeper insight and widening of the analytical understanding of the world of the past. It becomes a part of the wider field of History, across disciplinary barriers adding to a wider view of human experience.

It is therefore necessary for South African historians to come to a point where documentary evidence is accepted alongside Oral History as part of the available material from which it is natural to do research. It can be agreed with Paul Thompson that "if the full potential of oral history is realized it will result in an underlying change in the way in which history is written and learnt, in its questions and judgements and its texture."<sup>53</sup>

The long-term future of Oral History as an active subject depends on asking questions and linking into all appropriate methodologies, within history and outside its traditional boundaries. Although opposition to Oral History will not immediately cease and all doubts will be overcome, it is impossible to exclude Oral History from serious consideration as all sources can be queried. And, most of all, there are many ordinary people out there with important stories and memories to add to the richness of South Africa's history.

A poem by Antonio Mucciopoli called *Remembering* grasp this idea:<sup>54</sup>

"I talk,  
Talk with people,  
The people who speak to me  
Of time past  
Which falls and does not germinate  
If I don't talk.  
I listen carefully.  
I converse  
With people.  
I speak

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<sup>53</sup> Thompson (2000), p. 82.

<sup>54</sup> Witz, p. 15.



To the little old woman,  
to grandpapa, to brothers and sisters,  
At dusk  
Around the red light,  
Bright and hot,  
Which encourages us,  
The light which brings back  
Time past and the time before that,  
Which falls without germinating  
If, when we talk,  
Nobody listens.  
I, you and they,  
We,  
All gathered round,  
Talking, asking, looking,  
I with pencil and paper,  
By the tiny lamps of the sky,  
The dark sky,  
Recording the conversation.  
Time past  
Which lights up today  
And tomorrow,  
Making it clear."

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