

# ORAL HISTORY SOURCES AS LEARNING MATERIALS: A CASE STUDY OF ZIMBABWE'S NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

**Gugulethu Nkala and Rodreck David**

National University of Science and Technology, Zimbabwe  
gugulethu.nkala@nust.ac.zw; rodreck.david@nust.ac.zw

## ABSTRACT

Knowledge presented by Oral History (OH) is unique in that it shares the tacit perspective, thoughts, opinions and understanding of the interviewee in its primary form. While teachers, lecturers and other education specialists have at their disposal a wide range of primary, secondary and tertiary sources upon which to relate and share or impart knowledge, OH presents a rich source of information that can improve the learning and knowledge impartation experience. The uniqueness of OH is presented in the following advantages of its use: it allows one to learn about the perspectives of individuals who might not otherwise appear in the historical record; it allows one to compensate for the digital age; one can learn different kinds of information; it provides historical actors with an opportunity to tell their own stories in their own words; and it offers a rich opportunity for human interaction. This article discusses the placement of oral history in the classroom set-up by investigating its use as a source of learning material presented by the National Archives of Zimbabwe to students in the Department of Records and Archives Management at the National University of

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Science and Technology (NUST). Interviews and a group discussion were used to gather data from an archivist at the National Archives of Zimbabwe, lecturers and students in the Department of Records and Archives Management at NUST, respectively. These groups were approached on the usability, uniqueness and other characteristics that support this type of knowledge about OH in a tertiary learning experience. The findings indicate several qualities that reflect the richness of OH as a teaching source material in a classroom set-up. It further points to weak areas that may be addressed where the source is considered a viable strategy for knowledge sharing and learning. The researchers present a possible model that can be used to champion the use of this rich knowledge source in classroom education at this university and in similar set-ups.

**Keywords:** oral history (OH), classroom experience, experiential learning, knowledge impartation

## INTRODUCTION

Education is host to a myriad learning resources which students, lecturers and researchers tap into during the learning process. While teachers, lecturers and other education specialists have, at their disposal a wide range of primary, secondary and tertiary sources upon which to relate and share or impart knowledge (OH), oral history presents a rich source of information that can improve the learning and knowledge impartation experience. Russell (2010: 1) indicates that because of their focus on the subjective, OH sources provide insights not normally found in more traditional reviews or summaries. Russell further points out that the interview process practised by oral historians affords participants in historical events an opportunity to address the historical record directly, to clarify what they see as misconceptions in third-person accounts, to discuss their own motives and those of other participants, and to provide their own personal assessment of the significance of the events in which they took part. As such sources from oral history are critical in complementing materials for the learning process. This article investigates the use and importance of OH sources as learning materials. We engaged lecturers, archivists and students to relate how they engage with these unique sources; what types of OH sources they mostly use; how useful they find these sources in complementing the traditional reading material; and we round up by suggesting possible ways of further exploiting OH sources to enrich the learning experience.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE ARTICLE

The objectives of this article are to

- i. assess the consultation of oral history sources as learning materials by researchers (particularly university students and academics)
- ii. determine the range and types of oral history sources used by researchers for learning purposes
- iii. find out the importance and usability of oral history sources as complementary learning materials.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature review is important in understanding any context in academic, learning and research inquiry. In this article we reviewed several literature resources for various reasons. We had to produce a conceptual definition of oral history and oral history sources as this was guiding our study. We also traced oral history use in Zimbabwe; investigate the placement of oral history in the classroom; and assessed the importance of oral history as learning material; the nature and uniqueness of oral history; as well as oral history versus traditional secondary sources such as text-books and research articles. By the end of this review, we expect to have set up the arena in which oral history exists within the learning environment and hence our stimuli to empirically inquire from an institution of higher learning.

## DEFINING ORAL HISTORY

‘Oral history’ is a maddeningly imprecise term: it is used to refer to formal, rehearsed accounts of the past presented by culturally sanctioned tradition-bearers; to informal conversations about ‘the old days’ among family members, neighbours or co-workers, to printed compilations of stories told about past times and current experiences; to recorded interviews with individuals deemed to have an important story to tell (Shopes n.d.: 2). Unquestionably, many people have learned about the past through the spoken word, considering that the written record only came later. Oral history can be defined as the recording, preservation and interpretation of historical information, based on the personal experiences and opinions of the speaker. It usually takes the form of eye-witness evidence about the past, but can include stories passed down over the years by word of mouth. While it is an invaluable way of preserving the knowledge and understanding of older people, it can also involve interviewing younger generations (East Midlands Oral History Archive n.d.: 1).

Oral history can be a method of obtaining historical reminiscences by interviewing people who were participants in or witnesses of matters they describe, and by recording their recollections verbatim on magnetic tape (Lance 2010). It is defined by Thompson (1988) as the interviewing of eye-witness participants on the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction, and it is rooted in the earliest forms of transmitting information about the past, the oral tradition. Raleigh (2005: 11) states that oral history documentation is crucial to obtaining a picture of the total society. It complements and supplements the written record.

Archivists tend to define oral history as a sound recording of historical information, obtained through an interview that preserves a person's life history or eyewitness account of a past experience. Oral history recordings help listeners better understand how individuals from various view points and different stations in society encountered the full range of life in their day, from everyday routines to catastrophic events. Carefully preserved, the recordings carry the witness of the present into the future, where, through creative programmes and publications, they can inform, instruct and inspire future generations (Baylor University Institute of Oral History 2012).

Oral history interviews have been widely recognised by many historians as a unique and distinctive technique by which to document the history of a specific individual, family, organisation or group, community, time-period or event. Each new oral history interview is a new primary resource, a rare record of first-hand historical and anecdotal information in the storyteller's own voice (Filer 2008: 5). Listening and responding to first-hand stories can literally bring history to life for sometimes disinterested or special needs students. Teaching students to plan carefully for oral history-related activities, and guiding and encouraging positive communication and inter-personal skills will promote a rewarding sense of satisfaction and achievement for most participants.

## TYPES OF ORAL HISTORY SOURCES

Oral history sources are diverse, as they are recorded using various media. What is common among them is that they are primary sources based on given oral evidence by persons who narrate accounts of events that they experienced. These can come in the form of speeches, anecdotes, sagas, transcripts of accounts, music, audio and/or video recorded interviews, ballads and recorded telephone conversations. Sources found in archival institutions are normally transcribed manuscripts of recorded interview tapes.

## ORAL HISTORY IN ZIMBABWE

The National Archives of Zimbabwe's oral history has the prime responsibility of collecting and preserving oral interviews from a wide diversity of people whose contribution to Zimbabwean history and development has been considerable but undocumented or under-documented. Oral history was not included in the early years of National Archives activities. The focus and interest of the National Archives were the preservation of the early records and documents of the British South Africa Company (BSACo) and other personal records, manuscripts and photographs of the colonial pioneers (Manungo 2012: 64). Oral history work also involves the collection of oral traditions (information that has been passed from one generation to another) and the recording of traditional rituals in audio and video formats. Interviews are recorded in English, and all local vernaculars. The interviews in the Oral History Unit cover a wide variety of subjects: culture, chieftainship, early pioneer settlers, education, economics, the Zimbabwean First and Second *Chimurenga* (liberation struggle), politics and urban growth, to mention but a few.

The National Archives of Zimbabwe's Oral History Collection has proved very useful to researchers as it provides some missing links in the country's documented history. The project, *Capturing the Fading Memory and One Zimbabwe* that the Oral History Unit is currently running with partners in sister collecting institutions and institutions of higher learning, is a testimony to endeavours to document the totality of Zimbabwean history (National Archives of Zimbabwe 2012: 1).

## ORAL HISTORY IN THE 'CLASSROOM'

The 'classroom' is a somewhat contentious concept. Many would like to think of the classroom as a well-furnished building occupied by students doing school work. Of course this is not a picture divorced from the notion of a classroom. From a post-modern view, the current authors argue that the 'classroom' concept should be understood in this context, to mean the 'learning space' that includes the passive, active and reactive. (This is more so, considering that even the 'remote' is now also possible with the available technology.) In this sense, a homogeneous group of learners who engage learning materials in a learning space, where their unique reading and learning material is available, are in a classroom. This is even more so when considering oral history, which can be available passively as recorded sources that educators can use in the traditional classroom. It can also be available as an interactive and active alternative when the classroom as learning space concept is applied, considering that students can actually meet the oral history informants and get involved in the actual extraction of the knowledge value they need in order to interpret and understand history.

One of the most important lessons students can learn from oral history is to see that individuals are part of the greater society, that the individual is shaped by society

and, in turn, helps to shape society. They get a snapshot of another person's life as he or she interacts with events outside that life, and, in doing so, they learn how the individual reacts to the events, learns from them, and attempts to exert control over them. In every interview in every oral history project, the narrators explain what they saw, what they did, and what they thought about the things they were experiencing. Students listen and learn from these interviews. They learn that history is assembled from these human pieces, and that no one piece is any less important than any other piece, and that they have a role in making sure the pieces are not lost.

Oral history is an exciting and multifaceted learning experience with opportunities for the public recognition of student accomplishments. Below are several reasons why oral history sources are important in the classroom (Wood 2003):

- i. Active engagement of students/learners in a classroom practice that is very relevant and significant.
- ii. Students learn communication skills that are applicable to life situations.
- iii. Synchronisation of the classroom and the community into the learning space (becoming part of the educational process) with a high sense of interactivity, connectedness and relevance.
- iv. The final product of the classroom oral history becomes an important resource for the community and, in some cases, for the state, the country, and even the world.
- v. Students discover that the process of learning is as important as the content learned.

## Benefits of using oral histories in the classroom

- i. It brings the social studies curriculum alive and into practical, real-time context as children realise that they are surrounded by, and are a part of, the creation of history.
- ii. It engages active learning by involving children first hand in the gathering of historical data.
- iii. It builds higher-level (critical) thinking skills as children develop questioning and interviewing strategies, make judgements about the point of view of the person(s) being interviewed, and then analyse, synthesise and evaluate the information they receive.
- iv. It is particularly suited to include in history any interpretations from vulnerable and usually less educationally empowered members of communities and young children because it places emphasis on interviewing subjects rather than on letters, documents and other written records that these groups may not be able to produce.

- v. OH develops strong oral language skills, which are an essential prerequisite to developing good writing skills (Consortium of Oral History Educators n.d.: 2).

## Importance of oral history sources as learning materials

Oral history sources help researchers to fill the gap in ‘conventional’ historical documents. It can be a powerful tool to complement written documents. Oral history testimonials offer new perspectives on past events not otherwise accessible through written records. They consider individual life events and motivations that shape decision-making, the dynamics of personalities in relation to collective activities, as well as controversies and debates within the broader social context of past events. Like any historical source, however, oral history presents interpretive challenges. The testimonials are by their nature subjective and open-ended, and shaped by the particular setting and qualities of the encounter between interviewer and interviewee. As such they should be considered as primary source material.

Thus the oral history programme helps fulfill National Archives of Zimbabwe’s mandate of acquiring, preserving and giving access to documentary heritage in any form, as it augments archival sources. According to Thompson (1988: 74):

Oral history is used to introduce new evidence from the underside by shifting the focus and opening new areas of enquiry, by challenging some of the assumptions and accepted judgments of historians, by bringing recognition to substantial groups of people [ . . . ] a cumulative process of transformation is set in motion. The scope of historical writing itself is enlarged and enriched and at the same time the social message changes. History becomes democratic, the same as an archival source.

Oral history is critical to the building of an archival collection as it assumes a greater role in filling the gaps that exist in written materials, giving greater detail to events and societal developments of significance to Zimbabwean society.

It is important in the teaching of History to show learners that what they are doing has relevance to them today. History is also about now. A further consideration is how, through teaching and learning History, we can help learners to respect themselves, to learn to think and to learn to communicate. Effective communication is worth gold in today’s world. A good way to do this is through drama, role-play and verbal responses.

Oral history is a very subjective and personal form of evidence, but this is also one of its great strengths. Oral history can give a voice to individuals and groups who are sometimes marginalised in ‘conventional’ histories – the working classes, women and ethnic minorities, for instance. It can provide new information, alternative explanations and different insights which are potentially of enormous value. The spoken word can convey feelings and emotions with an immediacy and an impact that the written word cannot match, while preserving a record of local dialects and

accents. It allows the historian to ask questions of his or her informant – to be present at the creation of a historical source, rather than relying solely on those created by others (East Midlands Oral History Archive n.d.: 2).

Oral history provides a fuller, more accurate picture of the past by augmenting the information provided by public records, statistical data, photographs, maps, letters, diaries and other historical materials. Eye-witnesses to events contribute various viewpoints and perspectives that fill in the gaps in documented history, sometimes correcting or even contradicting the written record. Interviewers are able to ask questions left out of other records and to interview people whose stories have been untold or forgotten. At times, an interview may serve as the only source of information available about a certain place, event or person (Baylor University Institute of Oral History 2012: 4).

Oral history helps us understand how individuals and communities experienced the forces of history. Traditional History courses in high school and college usually touch only on the major events of the past, covering the fundamentals of who, what, when, where, why, etc. Oral history brings depth to our understanding of the past by carrying us into experience at an individual level. Thoughtful, personal answers to questions such as ‘What did you do in the war?’ help to reveal the ways decisions made by the movers and shakers of the day changed the lives of ordinary people and their families and communities (Baylor University Institute of Oral History 2012).

Oral history teaches us what has changed and what has stayed the same over time. Change is obvious to the eye, but oral history allows people to express the personal consequences of change. During interviews, narrators may also reflect on ways their lives remained the same in spite of change, particularly in the area of values, traditions and beliefs.

Oral history preserves for future generations a sound portrait of who we are in the present and what we remember about the past. Inevitably, future generations will view and judge today’s generation through the lens of their own experiences in their own time. The story of the past is continually revised in the light of new interpretations. Oral history enables people to share their stories in their own words, with their own voices, through their own understanding of what happened and why. With careful attention to preserving our sound recordings, the voices of our narrators will endure to speak for them when they are gone. By complicating the story with individual experience, oral histories will help future historians avoid sweeping generalisations that stereotype people, engender prejudice, and overlook important variables in the historical context (Baylor University Institute of Oral History 2012: 4).

What makes oral history different from all other historical sources is the voice of the interviewee. Too often, however, educators who integrate oral history projects into their classrooms and programmes lack the time, resources, money and skills set to bring quality voice recordings to their projects (Whitman 2012).



## Oral history versus written/secondary sources

Just by doing a mere literature review, one can realise that oral history is a controversial issue within the learning environment, particularly in the discipline of History. The most common criticism is that the source material is one-sided, subjective and ‘coincidental’. For instance, Ibragimov *et al.* (2012: 1) are of the view that oral sources are *a priori* structured by language and tradition, by habits of speech, and to be merely reproducing common interpretations and familiar narratives. However, all these factors are also true of written sources. Oral history could actually be more informative and detailed considering that the interviewer is personally involved with the informant and the production of the source. The historian has to work the source critically while the source is being produced during the interview. Its subjectivity is, on the other hand, one of the greatest strengths of this method: oral history is used explicitly to bring to light the subjective dimensions of history – in one case, the individual experience of antireligious repressions (Ibragimov *et al.* 2012: 1). As such, we argue that instead of weighing the traditional classroom reading material and oral history sources, students and lecturers (among other learning and working researchers and academics), should take these sources as complementary materials that enrich the learning experience.

## METHODOLOGY

In this study, the current researchers employed a case study design in which qualitative interviews and a group discussion were employed to amass lengthy narratives about the use of oral history sources. The informants were three lecturers and an archivist who, at the time of conducting this research, were members of the Department of Records and Archives Management at NUST in Zimbabwe. Unstructured in-depth interviews, in which we gave room for the informants to give lengthy accounts of how they have interacted with oral history sources, were conducted. The group discussion was held with a class of 15 students from a final-year undergraduate cohort studying Records and Archives Management at NUST. We led the discussion in which we posed several questions to the students and discussed with them the usability of oral history sources in the classroom as complementary learning materials, considering that in this programme this group engages with archival sources from the National Archives of Zimbabwe. During the discussion we wrote notes, which we later analysed.

## RESULTS

In this study the current researchers carried out in-depth interviews with three lecturers who have experience with the use of oral history both at the National Archives of Zimbabwe and in the university classroom. The following accounts

retell the issues raised by these lecturers pertaining to the usability of oral history sources as learning materials.

### **What advantages are important in using OH sources as learning materials?**

Written sources available at the National Archives of Zimbabwe are mostly Eurocentric and do not adequately cover events in history which are critical for student learning. Oral history is critical because it expands the historical perspective of students as they attempt to interpret available sources and construct a fuller picture of past precedents and events. The collection at the National Archives of Zimbabwe, in conventional printed and written records, is largely on white settlers, the Pioneer Column and the colonial government. As such, oral history sources provide complementary material that History students, lecturers and related researchers tap into to fill the gap.

### **What type of OH sources do students and lecturers use in complementing their studies?**

Oral history sources are normally accessed by student researchers and their lecturers from the National Archives of Zimbabwe in Harare and Bulawayo. There are also cases in which these sources are actively collected with student engagement in the field. From the National Archives, these sources are accessed mostly as transcribed manuscripts of information collected from the Zimbabwean communities by expert oral history interviewers. Apart from the transcripts, audio and video tapes, CDs and other audio-visual formats are beginning to find their way into archival collections and are regularly accessed for use as learning materials by students in History, Archival Studies and Journalism.

### **Which particular institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe have utilised oral history sources to complement learning materials?**

Scholars and lecturers who engaged with the National Archives of Zimbabwe to access and utilise oral history sources came from the following institutions:

- i. History Department, University of Zimbabwe
- ii. History Department, Midlands State University
- iii. Records and Archives Management Department, National University of Science and Technology
- iv. History Department, Catholic University in Zimbabwe
- v. Archaeology, Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies, Midlands State University

Apart from these institutions, many foreign students and academics have also visited the National Archives to consult OH sources as part of their learning material.

## How have students reacted to the use of oral history as complementary learning materials?

Many students have expressed satisfaction. Importantly, they indicate that their interpretation of history has become complete and more balanced as they complement sources of learning history using oral history material.

Apart from the lecturers, the current researchers also carried out a group discussion with a final year undergraduate class studying Archives Management at NUST. This discussion sought to understand how students in a classroom engage with oral history sources as learning materials.

Students expressed their appreciation for oral history sources as important sources of learning material. They indicated that they engaged with such sources at the National Archives of Zimbabwe, but had not comprehensively utilised them in the classroom environment. However, the cohort we discussed with pointed out that they were not presented with an opportunity prompting the use such sources.

## CONCLUSION

The learning experience has the potential to be enhanced by priceless information which is harboured in oral history. It is important that we bring oral traditions and histories into classrooms or appreciate them as part of the learning space from which our students can derive educational value to complement the available traditional reading resources. This is even more so for public schools, where students may not come from cultures where this is the traditional means of passing on knowledge, as characterised in most of our African urban schools. One good reason for this is because there is so much valuable information in the world that is not written. And especially in the subject of History, written sources themselves have not significantly incorporated native/indigenous people's history due to the colonial nature of our past, whereas such information is abundantly available only for us to tap into and utilise from the witnesses to these times past. Not only is the information important to our students, it is also important that students understand that this information exists and is of value to them. By incorporating the ideas, methods and knowledge that exist in oral traditions and histories into the classroom, we can inform our students and possibly make them better learners who have practical acumen, are interactive and understand the contextual and related connection between historical and real-time communities. We can therefore engage them more fully in the subjects they are taught and in the immediate world around them.

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