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What about oral history and your museum?

Some thoughts as an introduction

Kees Plaisier *

Oral history in your museum?

In your museum you are always looking for ways to bring the exhibits to life. That can be done by good guides, or by interesting texts or by presenting context. In your museum you are also always looking for authenticity. And often you are looking for ways to involve people. Using oral history can combine these wishes.

Oral history presents authentic material that brings new light on exhibits, tells new stories about exhibits and involves the interviewed people in a very direct and emotional way.

So you can try to know more about a group of exhibits, how they were used, where and when. Or you can try to know more about a tribe, a profession, a part of recent history.

Oral history then is a good method, combined with other sources, to get authentic information and to involve people in your museum work. It brings you new perspectives and exciting contacts as well.

It should be therefore a structural part of museum work in every museum.

What is oral history about?

In Western countries official history was always about written sources. Books, documents, prints. Historians were always relying on what was written. Oral history was considered to be unreliable, because one cannot trust the human memory.

And it's right, the human memory is not very reliable. When I tell you about my childhood, I cannot know whether these are my own memories or what is told to me by my parents, my sisters, cousins or other people. I can be convinced that something happened, but when I talk with my sisters, they tell a completely different story about the same event. So when you want to know what really happened, you have to look for historical documents and check the facts.

One problem is that many facts are not documented at all, because nobody thought it would be important. Another problem is that often only the formal point of view was valid. Informal things, daily life, emotions of ordinary people were not considered to be worthwhile documenting. Now and then poems and songs tell you more about what happened, but then again: what is true?

In the second half of the 20th century oral history came up. Historians meant that by interviewing eyewitnesses one could find out something that was not documented before, namely people's experiences and personal memories. This could add an authentic element. It was not about fact finding, but about memories of real people. These stories could be contradictory, but even that can be important for researchers. Aren't the written documents contradicting each other as well? This provokes questions and scientific curiosity and therefore leads to new insight.

So oral history is an excellent approach in combination with the traditional historical sources.

Oral history records and documents what is not written.

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Quality first

When we want to create an additional historical source we of course need to work with scientific criteria. It's not just like professional journalism, it's building a collection of personal memories that can be used for further or later research, for educational purposes, exhibitions, publications.

Therefore we must take all steps well prepared, in the right order, with scientific care and professional self respect.

So we have to make a plan beforehand in which we describe our project, the goal, the quality conditions, the ethical aspects, the use of the results, the time schedule, the legal aspects, the people involved, the estimated costs.

- what do we want to know?
- what is already known?
- what are the quality conditions?
- whom do we want to interview? how many of them do we need?
- how can we find them? how do we select them?
- what agreements do we need with the respondents for permission to use the results?
- how do we interview? with whom, where and with what equipment?
- what agreements do we need for working with the interviewers and camera people?
- do we want full-text transcriptions and why?
- how will the results be stored and taken care of in the future?
- how will the results made accessible for the public?
- what will be the estimated costs?
- what will be the time schedule?

In these notes I will briefly write about most of these questions.

What is the goal of our project?

Do we want to build a collection of personal memories that can be used for many years for research, for publications, for exhibitions, documentaries or

educational purposes? If so, this means a very thorough approach.

Do we want to make a documentary in order to make our exposition more lively, or a documentary for a festival? Do we want to publish a dvd for the public?

The goal of the project is essential for the thoroughness, the quality, the time and the costs.

What do we want to know?

This is our first and most important question. It can make or break the success of our project. If not thought through well enough, we could be forced to stop our project half way and start again formulating the question. Good preparation is therefore essential.

Let's say we want to document the life of small farmers in the second half of the 20th century in order to find out what changed in their social life. What do we mean with the term small? What kind of farmers? Where? What do we mean with social life? In the family? In the village? What economic factors and political factors influenced their life and work? Were the small farmers independent? Or were they part of a larger economic community? What were traditional influences? Were there relevant climate changes? Could they support their families well?

What is already known?

The questions, mentioned above about what we want to know are necessary to make ourselves aware of the problems. The next step however will make us think again about what we want to know.

When we try to find out what is already known about this subject we will re-think the answers on the first question.

We need to know: are there about our subject written surveys, statistical materials, documentaries, photographic documents, maybe novels, songs and poetry? Are there experts we want to meet? Are there other people who are preparing a project related to our subject?

Is there any university thesis hidden in the files?

So we need to study, to research the internet, to meet people, to ask around, to make our plans known.

This survey of the existing information will make us reformulate our question, make it broader or more specific. Maybe we have to choose another subject or just one aspect of it.

What are the quality conditions?

In every project we need a good plan, well thought about before we start.

We need well qualified interviewers, who know about the subject and who know how to interview people for the purpose of our project.

We need experienced camera people, who know how to make themselves and their equipment almost invisible during the interviews.

We need experienced transcribers.

We need experts in storage and care for digital collections.

We need excellent equipment.

We need to be aware of the importance of communication with all involved people and especially with the respondents and the authorities.

We need good legal advice in order to make the right contracts with respondents, interviewers and other involved people.

Whom do we want to interview?

Depending on what is already known and on our specific questions we can define the people we would like to interview. We want to document changes, so then we need people who experienced these changes themselves.

Do we want just the farmers or also their wives? Do we want people of different age? Do we want to interview religious or other leaders from the villages? And what do we expect to get from our respondents?

Again: good preparation is a must.

How can we find them?

When we have chosen a certain area, we must find out how people can be approached. Are they organised and is there a person who is acting as their spokesperson? What are the consequences of the family traditions? Can we interview men and women alike? Do we need female interviewers and camera people to work with the women-respondents? Do our respondents need permission from an authority to talk with us? Did some of our potential respondents leave the area and can we find them?

What agreements do we need with the respondents for permission to use the results?

It's not always obvious that we can use the interviews for all purposes. Often the respondents wish to make certain restrictions. Sometimes the interview may be only made available for certain purposes or after a certain time, or even after their death.

It's a matter of thoroughness and of taking the respondents seriously to make a contract with the respondent. In the oral history literature there are good examples to be found.

How do we interview? With whom, where and with what equipment?

First: do we want just audio or audiovisual. The latter needs more people and equipment, but it makes the interview much more lively and authentic.

Then we ask ourselves do we use a questionnaire or just a check list? We want people to tell their story, so it's always better to use the so-called non-directive-technique. Not a detailed list of questions, but a short list of things we want to deal with in the interview. With a good starting question the respondent starts to tell. The interviewer just guides the respondent and keeps her or him on the right track. The interviewer can ask for more information when there is a

reason. The interviewer should be able to keep silent when the respondent is thinking. The interviewer is the one who stimulates and make the respondents tell those things that normally are not told. So it's not just a technique, it's empathy.

When we work with a camera, a camera person is good, so that the interviewer can concentrate on the interview itself.

The best place to interview people is in their own environment. There's where they feel safe and at ease. The conditions for making a video are not always ideal then. It's good to prepare the interview by a visit to the respondents' home. Then the best place for camera and respondent can be decided, unwelcome noise can be avoided (clocks, birds, TV).

The preparation visit can also be used to ask the respondent to look for some materials, photos or documents that can be filmed and used during the interview. These things often stimulate people's memory.

The equipment for recording the voice of the respondent and the interviewer should be small and of very good quality. Respondents often are old people. Their voices and their speech is often soft. The recorder or camera should of course also be of excellent quality, because sound and light conditions are never ideal.

What agreements do we need for working with the interviewers and camera people?

We must make clear that we, the museum, own the results and can use it for our purposes. So we have to make contracts with interviewers and camera people about that.

Do we want full-text transcriptions and why?

Yes, we do. Because we want the whole interview to be accessible. Not for our questions today, but for future research and future use as well.

Only with full-text transcription we can search the whole interview. It costs time and money, but it's worthwhile.

Of course we want the interviewers to make a summary of the interview, but that's not enough.

How will the results be stored and taken care of in the future?

Digital material will not live eternally. We often do not know how long a dvd will keep in good shape. So we need to take care for the storage and work together with experts.

This is something we should deal with in the early stages of our project, because the experts may have specific criteria that we need to follow during the recording or by choosing the equipment.

How will the results made accessible for the public?

We must ask ourselves what we will do: just use the result in an exhibition, or publicise on the Internet, in a book, or on a dvd.

The respondents need to know and so do the financiers.

Costs and time

To make an estimate of the costs and to make a time schedule is of course necessary.

When you want to get sponsors you need this, as part of a clever and convincing plan.

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