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ORAL HISTORY AS A METHODOLOGICAL TOOL TO ENABLE STUDENTS TO APPROPRIATE THEIR OWN RECENT PAST

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As teachers, we frequently find ourselves lamenting certain difficulties that arise while teaching different levels of History and Social Sciences in the classroom. Some of these difficulties are the lack of interest for History by teenagers, ignorance of events of the recent past, the need to comply with an extensive program which postpones for year's end topics which could arouse the youngsters' interest, the lack of information about research techniques and difficulties in analyzing the complexity of social processes by students who have been educated to repeat rather than think. In other words, and I believe all of us who are teachers know it, teaching Social Sciences and History is a very complex task, since, as Alicia Camilloni has declared "it is essential to solve specifically didactic issues such as the establishment and development of criteria for the selection of disciplinary or non-disciplinary content for their conversion or didactic transposition for class management and production of didactic materials."¹

Most of the difficulties mentioned above are inherent to the reality of the educational system, in which many teachers continue to be attached to traditional practices and are afraid to venture with their students into new methods. To this, we must add the resistance of administrators, parents or other teachers to other forms of "non-traditional" methods -especially if they are based on the analysis of recent History, the rigor of school calendars

("the program must be carried out") and the limited tools received by teachers themselves during their education to enable them to conduct a research method with their students.

Overcoming our own resistance and that of others would permit the introduction of much more attractive, dynamic and significant methods into our own school practice allowing us to bring students into closer contact with the recent past they are part of, whether they can see it or not.

However, in recent years contemporary history has had a greater presence in school programs whose goal is to have students understand their current reality through a larger dose of recent history. On the other hand, from the point of view of the learner, a topic that is closely related to the daily life of young people would supposedly foster a greater interest on their part to study History.

In Argentina in recent years, particularly since 2003, the support of memory policies was not only used to legitimize the democratic State, but also to encourage many people related to education to apply orality in its different expressions as a means for the reconstruction of a past that was expected to have been forgotten.

Therefore, we teachers find ourselves facing the challenge of transmitting to our students the characteristics and consequences of events having occurred in recent years² in a way that will

allow the young generations to understand the world in which they live and develop a commitment to the defense and expansion of human rights and democracy.

Thus, classrooms become a space where different generations meet and thus, suitable places for working with memory as part of the job of shaping the critical judgement and assessment capacity of our young people and the education of citizens.

What is expected of teachers? Teachers know that school, besides being a key space for the transmission of specific knowledge, is a place where youths develop part of their identity. We are expected to teach a series of subjects enumerated in official programs for every course, knowing that in parallel there is a hidden program³ which can also be transmitted to the youngsters. In this sense, the methodological use of Oral History is a useful resource to convey those “hidden contents” along with the others, thus enriching the latter and making them more significant for students.

How does the methodology of Oral History help our job to become more significant for kids and even for us?

Starting with the construction and use of oral sources, kids may recover and recognize their own history through the dialogue with adults, stimulating reflection about events in their own individual, family and collective past.

Fortunately, the existence of many instances for the exchange of experiences that use Oral History methodology proves that the construction and use of this type of sources acquires a fundamental relevance in achieving that History and Social Sciences will be appropriated by students in a more significant way. Additionally -and I believe this to be one of the most important advantages for our work- this type of proposal allows the kids to confront different sources and therefore analyze the historical context they are investigating.

One of the most significant characteristics of oral sources is that even though they have informational validity and allow us to obtain revealing testimony about events in the past, they also introduce the subjectivity of those who remember, evident in

their re-telling of the past.⁴ In other words, what the protagonists believe actually happened is in itself as historical an event as any which actually occurred. It is in this sense that we consider that Oral History can facilitate understanding of the concrete historical experience, since interviews allow for specific and collective remembering and may bring the students close to a history with words, projects, illusions, frustrations and successes.⁵ Mexican anthropologist Gerardo Necochea maintains that “A characteristic of Oral History is that it unveils with singular clarity the framework and nodes of social relationships which shape the quotidian and limit the horizon of possible options... Testimonies describe the universe of the social relationships in which every individual is immersed and the description is nuanced by the perception of differences and similarities.”⁶

What advantages are offered by the work with oral sources at various educational levels?

Starting with Oral History interviews students participate actively in the collective construction of a recent past, since they can recreate History with voices and protagonists that traditional sources ignore.

The methodology of Oral History brings teachers and students closer to the primary sources of their own regional history and to the heritage they have at their own home or that of their neighbors or relatives. It’s about the sources they have direct access to. They are therefore encouraged to build a local memory without losing sight of the links to the state or the nation, which implies carrying out, at the same time, a present-past-present recreation to guide them through a journey in which universality is reached starting from their own town, neighborhood or city.

In this way, “oral history at schools serves to breach the gap between the academia and the community: it brings history into the home because it relates the world of the classroom and the textbook to the direct and everyday social world of the community in which the student lives.”⁷, producing in this sense a reaffirmation of the student’s identity with a group or with

others.

Moreover, interviews unite generations and contribute to the shaping of the identity of young people starting from the open possibility of dialogue with the past. Very often, their parents, grandparents or uncles and aunts become important informers; Oral History in this case, contributes to a change in the communication with the kids' elders, which in itself acquires an important educational and social value. Additionally, this confrontation of different temporalities allows teenagers to prove the non-existence of linear or uniform time.

In an Oral History Project it is possible to recover -besides the voice of those who contributed with their testimony- objects such as photographs or pictures, letters, personal diaries, clothes and all those memories that have been kept away for decades by families. With all these "documents" complementing a testimony, it is possible to build theme collections which describe the evolution of streets and public buildings or which contribute to the construction of genealogical histories.

When students construct oral sources and then analyze them, they appropriate historical knowledge, which is in my view, one of the most important advantages and contribution of Oral History methodology. The current concept of historical investigation is that it is a task for scholars that can only be carried out in academic fields and which usually has little to do with the studied subject. This is why, in my own experience, it is essential to use Oral History methodology since the early years of the school system -developed within the framework of a coherent and consistent project- due to its significant contribution to the educational process of students throughout their schooling. Observing school projects that use oral sources and works published about the subject, it is evident that most experiences and proposals take place during high school and -to a lesser extent- in the last years of elementary school.

Just by organizing an interview questionnaire kids will focus on a study object and think of a work hypothesis which will bring them gradually closer to the work of the researcher.

Oral History, therefore, can help us to "break" with traditional teaching methods due to the fact that it is a participative methodology in which the activities, the teacher's as well as the student's, establish internal and external school relationships, with methodological resources that bring them close to an appropriation and creation of historical knowledge. However, reaching this goal is only possible if use is made of methodological resources that promote integration of knowledge and that bridge research and teaching on one hand, and school and community, on the other.

In an Oral History interview, the time of the interviewer and the interviewee coexist and unite in the present from which experiences are told and from which questions are asked, because when tellers remember and transmit part of their past, they re-appropriate it, and when students ask, they approach the investigation from an environment which is closer to them, like their family, their neighborhood or their town.

In summary, the same construction process for oral sources brings together two fields of knowledge construction "apparently" distant from each other such as the teaching-learning process and research. When students carry out an interview they generate a historical source which somehow situates them in the role of historians. They become familiar with the raw material a historian works with starting then to understand the nature of historical sources of any type.

When searching for such unofficial stories, students get close to history with the purpose of retrieving the unwritten account not found in any of their textbooks. It is precisely at this point that Oral History induces teachers and students to establish a relationship with the community in which they will carry out their field work and to face a living and acting history, a history closer to them, the "livinghistoryitself"; like that, together.

Such contribution of Oral History is retrieved by Sitton, Mehaffy and Davis when they declare that "the most important argument supporting the value of Oral History in a school class is that

such projects are indeed, real: they do something. They produce tangible personal and social value results, which, perhaps more than anything else, explain its particular potential for fostering the enthusiasm and motivation of students.”⁸

Regarding the possibilities for understanding school contents, a work project based on the construction and use of oral sources can contribute in several ways:

- The rich and varied accounts of the interviewees’ experiences are an effective learning tool for students. With their particular rhythm and generation of expectations, they allow students to set their imagination free and build their own mind representations of that which is not present or which cannot be experienced..
- Students also acquire a more complex notion of time and space through the acknowledgement that individual and social aspects interweave in the succession, the duration and temporary change, as well as in local and national space. On the other hand, they can expand their historical awareness due to the perception that the past is a component of the present, inscribed in the memory of the interviewees and their own life experiences.
- It is also worth mentioning that the construction of oral sources⁹ is an effective way to reflect, together with students, about some aspects of the

procedural contents essential to History and Social Sciences¹⁰.

- Moreover, in depth handling of the sources allows establishing a difference between “the source”, “History” and the “Memory”, which permits dealing with the explanatory and interpretative processes typical of the discipline.

Those of us who have worked for years with oral sources in the classroom can assert that interviews (Oral History) not only contribute cognitive significance to students but also an emotional significance which must be valued in a special way. Not only do logical and rational components provide a stimulus for dexterity of thought; the emotional responses of the students also have an important effect on the significance of their learning.



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*Translated from the original in Spanish
by Francisco Palafox*

- 1 Alicia Camilloni. "Epistemology of the didactics of Social Sciences", in: Beatriz Aisenberg and Silvia Alderoqui (comps.), *Didactics of Social Sciences. Contributions and Reflections*, Paidós Educador, Buenos Aires, 1995, chap.1, p. 25.
- 2 A current example, going on for 5 years now, ARCA PROJECT (Argentina - Catalunya), "The Persistence of Silence after the Dictatorships" developed by the ORT Technical School of Buenos Aires, Argentina and the Institute of Secondary Education (IES) of El Morell in Tarragona, Catalunya – Spain, aims to have Secondary Education students introduced to Oral History methodology. This project won the Third Accésit of the Leandro Colomer Awards, in October, 2007. This award is part of the XI Call for Submissions (2006 – 2007) launched by the Institute of Education Sciences of the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona. The goal of these awards is to support collective projects that involve teachers, students and the school where the contests take place. Evaluation by the jury considered, besides quality, originality and historical accuracy of the work submitted, innovative methodological proposals, specially focused on the work of students, degree of collective involvement, participation level of the school during development, social environment of the experience, external projection, publicizing of the project, among other considerations. This project is coordinated in Argentina by Laura Benadiba and in Tarragona by Tomás Biosca Esteve
- 3 Elizabeth Jelin and Federico Guillermo Lorenz (comp.). *Education and memory. The school makes the past*, Siglo XXI de España publisher. Siglo XXI de Argentina publisher, Madrid. 2004, p. 4.
- 4 The Oral History interview involves the active participation of the interviewer and the interviewee, therefore it is set up according to the historical perspectives and interests of both. This interview retrieves the experiences stored in the memory of people who lived them, and those memories –registered by the interviewer in a recording- become oral sources.
- 5 Laura Benadiba and Daniel Plotinsky, *Oral History. Construction of the school historical archive: a tool for teaching social sciences*, Buenos Aires, Novedades Educativas, 2001, p.17.
- 6 Gerardo Necochea Gracia, "After living a century". *Oral History Essays*, INAH Library. National Institute of Anthropology and History, México, 2005, p. 18.
- 7 T. Sitton, G. Mehaffy, and O. Davis, *Oral History. A Guide for teachers (and other people)*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1983, p. 20.
- 8 T. Sitton, G. Mehaffy, y O. Davis, *Oral History. A Guide*, p. 29.
- 9 About the construction of oral sources, see: Laura Benadiba, *Oral History, Accounts and Memories*, Editorial Maipue, Buenos Aires, 2007, cap. IV.
- 10 L. Benadiba y D. Plotinsky, *Oral History. Construction of the Archive*, pp. 122 y 123.