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One Book; Five Views: A Collaborative Review of Planning a Community Oral History Project (Volume 2 of 5: Community Oral History Toolkit)

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Abstract

In *Planning a Community Oral History Project* (Barbara W. Summer, Nancy MacKay, and Mary Kay Quinlan), the second volume in the *Community Oral History Toolkit* series, readers are presented with the ethical, methodological, and legal frameworks which guide successful and respectful community oral history projects. The authors of this review present this review as an oral history of our reading, composed by readers representing different viewpoints and positionalities. We do so in an attempt to explore the book's potential audiences and consider the applicability of its advice to varied readers, as well as to embrace the ethical and methodological ideas put forth by Summer, MacKay and Quinlan. The collective knowledge of a community has more weight and value than that of any one person in the community.

Keywords

Oral History, Community Research, Goal Setting, Project Planning, Ethics

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One Book; Five Views: A Collaborative Review of *Planning a Community Oral History Project* (Volume 2 of 5: *Community Oral History Toolkit*)

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In Planning a Community Oral History Project (Summer, MacKay, & Quinlan, 2013) the second volume in the Community Oral History Toolkit series, readers are presented with the ethical, methodological, and legal frameworks which guide successful and respectful community oral history projects. The authors of this review present this review as an oral history of our reading, composed by readers representing different viewpoints and positionalities. We do so in an attempt to explore the book's potential audiences and consider the applicability of its advice to varied readers, as well as to embrace the ethical and methodological ideas put forth by Summer, MacKay, and Quinlan. The collective knowledge of a community has more weight and value than that of any one person in the community. Keywords: Oral History, Community Research, Goal Setting, Project Planning, Ethics

Dundee: Introduction

Planning a Community Oral History Project (Volume two of the five-volume series, *Community Oral History Toolkit* by Barbara W. Summer, Nancy MacKay, and Mary Kay Quinlan, 2013) is, as the series title states, part of a tool kit intended to help field researchers engage in ethical, thoughtful oral history research with various communities. Volume two focuses on the planning stage, but it includes information that will be useful throughout the project (so researchers who feel they have a handle on planning are encouraged not to skip this entry in the series).

The text begins with a foreword, providing a brief definition of oral history and an overview of the series and then carefully guides the reader through seven chapters. This series introduction also provides a list of ten best practices for community oral history projects. Each subsequent chapter begins with a callback to anywhere from two to four of these best practices, which operate as a sort of epigraph, providing an overview of the current chapter; however, these also function to help readers develop a clear and ethical framework for engaging in community oral history by reiterating the importance of these big, methodologically-oriented ideas, rather than just working their way through the planning steps treated in the text. The chapters are as follows:

- Chapter 1 (“Introduction”) provides information on the methodology shaping this series and helps readers become familiar with the Oral History Associations guideline’s and the processes guiding good oral history work.
- Chapter 2 (“Getting Started”) begins with a discussion of how ideas turn into guiding questions (and develop follow up questions as a way of refining the idea and beginning to plan the project). It then provides some basic information on roles that should be filled on the planning team and introduces basic ethical guidelines and legal standards.

- Chapter 3 (“Project Design”) builds on the idea generated in working through the previous chapter: helping would-be oral historians move from a curiosity to a plan.
- Chapter 4 (“Planning for People and Infrastructure”) provides “personnel guidelines, repository information, information about project forms, and project work space guidelines” (p. 57).
- Chapter 5 (“Equipment Planning”) provides a thoughtful overview of the audio and video technology required to facilitate projects.
- Chapter 6 (“All about Money”) will help readers begin to develop a budget and identify possible ways to cover project expenses.
- Chapter 7 (“Winding Up”) points out that the previous chapter have been about developing a plan: now the project team must also consider how to enact that plan. Accordingly, in this chapter, the authors encourage consideration of what happens after the interview and how one might go about training interviewers. The authors then ask readers to return to their project plan, helpfully providing a list of FAQs with notes pointing readers to review specific portions of earlier chapters as they work to finalize their plan, share it with supporters, and perform the research.

Some might see the short length of this volume as a weakness: this brevity requires that it introduce complex topics (e.g., legal and ethical considerations) that it cannot provide a full education on. To do so, though, might render it impenetrable to some segments of the wide audiences it now seems of use to, and that, we argue, is one of its major strengths. This text can be used by a variety of readers (and researchers), including students (of many ages and developmental levels) and community members.

Another strength of the text are the copious resources it provides. It includes rich, though brief, overviews on the topics treated, which get readers started thinking on these important issues. It also provides many sample forms that will help jump start projects (like a project planning form, a sample legal release, letters of agreement for interviewers and transcribers, and receipts for photographs and other memorabilia that may be collected from participants) and others that will help organize projects and structure interviews (including forms for purposes like recommending an interview participant, collecting a biographical profile, summarizing an interview, and more). In addition to such items, shared when relevant in the body of the text, the work includes helpful appendices (“Planning Survey and Respondents,” “Equipment and Technology Terms,” “Recording Equipment Standards,” and “Budget and Funding Terms”), each of which will help readers use the information provided to both do the work, and engage with other text and processes they will encounter in doing so. Finally, it is important to remember that this text is one of a series of five: while we have not yet had the pleasure of engaging with other texts in the series, we certainly plan to do so. We can envision using this series not only for our own research, but also for teaching and/or working with community partners, choosing the relevant volumes as needed.

Because a primary strength of this book seems to be its usefulness to a broad variety of readers/researchers, we chose to review it as a community of (very different) readers. We began this project during a graduate level course (Research Methodologies in Rhetoric and Writing, taught by Dundee Lackey at Texas Woman’s University in Spring 2018). Dr. Lackey chose the text because she admired how it focused on the rights of the research participants and the importance of planning carefully to work with (rather than on, or for) the community, while doing so in such a brief, accessible form.

The reviewers include the professor (whose work focuses on digital and community literacies), and four graduate students enrolled in this course: Justin Cook, Kathleen Irwin, Aida

Mehanovic, and Jacqui Haynes. In what follows, each student considers an aspect of this work in light of their own varied purposes as students, teachers, researchers, and writers. We hope our review, which we see as a sort of oral history of our experiences reading this text, will help readers coming from varied subject positions and differing contexts begin to see how the book might serve their purposes.

Justin: Respecting Participants

Justin is an LGBTQIA+ researcher, instructor of First Year Composition college students, and student of oral history practices concerned with the ethical treatment of research participants.

I want to begin by applauding the authors on their Best Practices for Community Oral History Projects that they lay out through this and all their volumes in the toolkit. No fewer than five of these Best Practices associate themselves with ethical research collection and preservation as well as focus directly on ensuring the comfort and stability of the witnesses within the community.

The authors also provide, throughout, useful forms and templates. We can see this attention to ethical research collection and preservation through human witnesses even in the information asked for within these forms. For example, while the Interviewee Recommendation Form (p. 68) and the Interviewee Biographical Profile (p. 69) focus largely on relationship to the project, they do not discount the importance of often forgotten information such as family, education, professional experience, (p. 68) influences, life milestones, and interests (p. 69).

Another interesting set of features in this book are the “Guiding Questions” (p. 30) which ask the researcher to reflect on why this information is necessary to be collected. They advise the reader to list all possible reasons such as “not losing the history of *our* area, celebrating an event or a particular time period” (p. 30, emphasis mine). This, of course, places the emphasis for research collection and preservation on the community and serves as a reminder that researchers within these communities will often be the ones looking to preserve those stories. This is set down even more clearly when the first suggestion for the planning team is someone “from the community” (p. 32). Likewise, the authors emphasize engaging with the community from the very beginning by letting them know what the research is and the community’s perceived importance of it to which they can then add their own advice, feedback, and support (p. 32).

This engagement is also emphasized in chapter three as the authors remind us that “a community oral history project starts with an idea just like this. There is a gap in the historical record, perhaps, or *you* hear community stories *you* don’t want to lose” (p. 43, emphasis mine). This chapter goes on to remind us that the focus is almost always historical, the history of the community in fact (p. 46).

Kathleen: Accessibility

Kathleen is an instructor of First Year Composition college students, focused on reviewing the book for graduate students and researchers who were new to using qualitative research in their studies. Likewise, she kept in mind how accessible the text could be for those whose research is primarily mired in theory, and less field-based. Lastly, she wanted to focus on the text’s visual accessibility for those with learning or physical disabilities.

One of the great things about this text is that it makes it so accessible for students, like me and possibly even undergraduate students. It isn’t really mired in “academese,” language

that is full of overly fancy, long words that can confuse the reader. Nope. This text is fairly straightforward and easy to understand. Summer and her fellow authors tell you what no one else tells you, what you might need for collecting oral histories and going about interviewing people willing to contribute to your research. They talk about how you should budget or gather funding for your research, as well as have examples of forms that you'll most likely need to use when interviewing people. Not everyone who has done qualitative research that involves oral histories knows about these requirements, because most texts about oral histories don't talk about them. These forms were so useful for me, and I know that I will be able to create forms of my own based heavily on the examples the book gives the readers.

However comprehensive and practical this text is, I've definitely found some downsides. For someone like myself, who has vision impairments and learning disabilities, the formatting of the book can be distracting and hard to read. The text can now be purchased in Kindle format on Amazon, so the font size could be enlarged, but there is no dyslexic or ADHD-friendly options. The font may be traditional, but the layout isn't. There are text boxes and diagrams scattered throughout. This may be incredibly helpful for other readers, since it gives them insightful tidbits, but for someone who has ADHD, I found myself easily distracted by the layout. Every time a new text bubble or diagram showed up on the page, I had to look at it. However, once I had finished looking at it, I had to go back and reread the section before because I had forgotten what I had been reading.

Aida and Jacqui: Audiences, Transferability, and the Ethics of Representation

Aida, a secondary education teacher and graduate student interested in educational research and doing oral histories, approached the reading of this text with an eye towards how it might be used in her middle-school English classrooms, as well as how it might guide her own research on pedagogical practices.

This book lends itself to several audiences (like me) who can find this work useful in more than one way. Being aware of audience(s) is a primary feature of teaching good writing practices at any grade level, so this aspect of the text would serve my students in multiple, transferable ways (by encouraging them to think about audience, and ethics, when working with other sources, in other forms of writing).

The most appealing part of this text is that it captures the essence of a narrative in different forms and serves as a stepping stone into fusing and embedding narratives more to recognize a writer's voice. The text reinforces the concept that purpose, similar to audience, can be and is often interpreted in a variety of ways. It really loops back to aligning the "I" perspective with one's story/viewpoint being relevant which is the place where good ideas originate. It is the targeted area for any writer. Students, regardless of grade level, have developed their own understanding of how to approach a writing process. This is where narrative, purpose, and writer's voice meet, and students should be more aware of that. The rich details (i.e., the voice) we try to teach is often found here.

The material presented in the text can be used to make other meaningful connections. One of those broad, yet meaningful connections is goal-setting as an individual process. Whether this book is used to heighten the student role, teacher role, or researcher role, the piece really calls for combining goal setting, planning, and time management. All of these tie back to teaching writing in forms of diverse processes, consistency, and patience. The point of goal setting is to learn one's strengths and weakness. These return to the writers valuing their own thoughts and voice and really capture the oral history component that is, in one way or another, present in all writing because we are working with someone's story.

(And now we switch to Jacqui who was interested, as a secondary education teacher and budding researcher, in using this text as a guide to strengthen her own understanding of the research and writing process. She is also concerned with how researchers and transcribers may avoid interfering with the voice or the narrative of the participant during the move from conversation with community participant to transcript to write up.)

Chapter 7 provides pros and cons for the transcribing process which helps researchers through planning, cataloguing, and recording. This guide works well in assisting researchers and/or educators interested in focusing on the significance of authentication during the transcribing process. In my experience, once we are requesting information or evidence from a participant, there is a concern that I encounter which revolves around the principal investigator navigating the conversation by providing biased questioning or unintentionally prompting particular responses from the participant.

This chapter provides After-the-Interview options that assign processing actions to particular categories which focus on creating a project plan. Cataloging, for example, discusses techniques for organization of data, but it is not as clear as to how this method of transcribing might also play a part in interfering with the information collected or selected to be shared in the creation of the final product. This may prompt researchers to question how the selection process during transcribing should be investigated further to avoid interference with participant voice once certain pieces of audio or text (i.e., writing) are being pieced together. In order for the researcher to provide adequate feedback or share authenticity of/for the participant and community, it is important that transcribing allows for as little interference as possible.

Conclusion

In sum, we find this a very useful text, part of an intriguing and important series that is geared towards helping would-be researchers thoughtfully, methodically, and ethically plan and implement community-based oral history projects.

We leave our readers with a couple of final thoughts, summing up our experiences in reading the text (which each of us plans to use in our future teaching and research):

Justin: So who are we when we take part in community oral history projects? Well, we are the people who remember but we are also the people who preserve through research. We are one-in-the-same with the community we are researching (often times) and we are our own best measure for ethical treatment of the community in which we participate. We are not reducible to the best among us (our leaders) and we certainly are not the only expert about our community. This volume allows the reader to see not only that community stories hold a power much more potent than previously thought but also that community members should decide how that story is represented and shared with the world.

Dundee: This seems an especially important reminder when we are *not* members of the communities we are researching. The volume takes care to introduce such issues. My one concern is that researchers who do not read the works in this series alongside other texts may not gain a full sense of the importance seemingly small decisions (such as whether or to not to correct grammar in transcription) truly hold.

For these reasons, we caution readers that, although this text does provide what you need to know to get a project up and running, you should also engage with the other texts the authors take pains to point out. They should be considered part and parcel of this tool kit, for they are the theory that guides the use of the tools provided. In everyday terms: anyone can swing a hammer, but a master craftsman's technique differs from that of the layperson. Making use of the full set of resources introduced in this brief volume can help many types of readers

and researchers develop strong skills, as well as the theoretical grounding necessary to use these skills ethically and responsibly.

References

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Author Note

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