

Project Design for Community Oral History Projects

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Purpose

The purpose of a project design, or blueprint, is to define the overarching as well as the specific goals of an oral history project. The primary purposes of a project design are to:

- 1) Define the mission and purpose of the project as a whole (why the project is important to do and the nature of the historical material that will be generated; the audience that will benefit from the oral histories).
- 2) Establish the general timeframe of the memories you want to capture, including sub-categories of periods and events of importance.
- 3) Break down the topics to be covered in relation to the historical timeframes and events that are central to the history being documented.
- 4) Establish how the general historical story—as well as individual life stories—change over time.

The project design is meant to be a flexible document, which can be amended over time. The assumption is that oral histories generate “new” research and historical understandings that, in turn, influence the research goals of the oral history project overall, as well as the research goals set for individual interviews. The purpose of the project design is to identify the historical questions that have not yet been answered by existing sources, probing for the “new” stories and perspectives that the project will yield.

The structure of the project emerges from the project design. The outline for a project design usually takes the form of a list of broad historical themes and topics. The goals for individual interviews follow from these topics, but also respect the specific life history experiences of the participants. As the list of interviewees is developed, individuals will be matched to the themes and events identified in the first part of the project design. The project team will in this way begin, working from the larger project design, to create outlines for the individual interviews, and to make sure that interviewees have been identified who can speak, from multiple perspectives, to all of the events, periods, and themes to be addressed by the project.

The goal of good oral history project design is to move the individual narrator back and forth from the individual or personal story to the collective or historical story. An ideal project design integrates the broad historical timeline of an institution, community, or social movement with individual life histories.

This ability on the part of the interviewer opens up the individual narrator to become both a historical subject in his or her own right, as well as to invite that narrator to bear witness to the larger events and the social, cultural, and political worlds to which they

belong. The resulting narrative, which is both specific and personal, and universal and historical, is what makes oral history unique.

Implementation

Implementing the goals of the project design involves the creation of a phased approach to doing interviews. We usually begin with the oldest history and the oldest narrators and then move forward in time.

What we want to recover in these stories is a sense of “how things were” and “how things changed over time.” Not everyone will remember the past in the same way, but we are less interested in facts than the meaning of personal and historical experiences. For this reason, oral history is often called “living history.”

It is important to remember that oral history doesn’t replace written history, documentaries, and other forms of remembering. It adds to the richness of the historical record and often includes more than the written record. We find that it is the “stories” that stand the test of time, and the goal of all oral history work is to create a welcoming environment for stories to be told and retold until they are part of an oral tradition that will be passed along for generations.

It is wise to stop and analyze the themes and topics that come up in interviews and stories at a midpoint in the project, to realize how you might modify your original project design to incorporate new things you are learning. Keeping close track of themes and topics as they come up in individual interviews will make the process of analyzing what you are finding as you go along more efficient and fruitful.

In the final phase of the project, you can return to some of those themes in a more concerted way, and perhaps return to some people you interviewed in the first phase of the project to ask them additional questions.

Evaluation

A good project design encourages regular evaluation, based on a deep analysis of what individual interviews yield against the evolving collective accounting of history (i.e. how the interviews read against each other).

The most successful community-based oral history projects structure regular evaluations throughout the project. Oral history is very process-based, and it is important to meet regularly with interviewers and other members of the team to get their input. In the large history we did of September 11, 2001 with 30 interviewers working over 3 years, we met weekly during the first year and monthly for the next two years. Our interviewers really directed the project, in the sense that they told us what was going on in very different community contexts around the city.

It is equally important to document your thinking throughout the project, and to assess progress through written reports that you can share with the group as a whole and with your funders.