

Starting to Dig – Planning a oral history project



Dr Andrew Flinn, June 23 2012

Key to successful OH project – preparation, preparation, preparation

- **Produce detailed project plan (for project, for funders)**
- **Clear objectives and priorities from the start (what are you doing and why)**
- **Length of project and numbers of interviews intended**
- **Feasibility – a realistic assessment of equipment and resources needed**
- **Expected outcomes & publications**
- **Decide what are you going to do with the materials in future at the start**
- **Get advice / guidance from OHS etc – appoint Advisory Board**

Planning the project: objectives

- Type of project (creation of historical materials, social / health related, technical skills)
- Focus of project (local, community, occupational, life histories, thematic)
- Stand alone project – or part of / in addition to other activities or collections
- Benefits of project – what contribution does it make? How does it fit with existing projects?
- Clear identification of how project ties in with aims of funding body

It's not just an interview....laying the foundations

- Gaining community / subject group support
- Identifying & contacting key community figures / gatekeepers
- Identifying all skills and training required
- Recruiting and training staff / volunteers
- Estimating realistic number of interviews (hours) and resources to properly meet objectives - including timetable and milestones
- Drawing up plans for documentation and esp. transcription
- Designing appropriate programme of public events, publications and other disseminations
- Set out plans for future storage and access (in library, museum, archive, historical society)

Documentation and transcription

- Some level of documentation essential (for repositories, for control & for access)
- Metadata, summaries, and full transcriptions
- Summary description & indexing (ratio 1hr recording: 2 hours description)
- Transcription – professional & experienced (1hr : 4-6 hours) – longer if done in house or by non-professional (1:10?)
- To transcribe or not to transcribe?

Programming and dissemination

- Level of public engagement & outreach activity dependent on type of project and funding requirements
- But can include:
 - Publication of full or edited transcripts
 - Use of sound clips online or in exhibitions
 - Community or historical publications arising out of project
 - Full access to recordings online
 - Use in performance
 - Education materials

Possible budget headings

- Staff (project manager, interviewers, clerical, technology and publication support)
- Office space
- Recruitment & training budget
- Research & preparation
- Transcription and documentation
- Interview expenses (travel, per diems)
- Equipment (recorders, microphones, flash cards, playback, computer & drives for storage & back up, transcription and editing equipment, camera)
- Dissemination (publicity material, exhibition & web design, publications)
- Fixed costs & overheads
- Meetings
- Contingency (10% extra)

Costings & reducing budgets

- Interviewers – paid or volunteer?
- Equipment – borrow or rent existing equipment in institution / community. Buy 2nd hand
- Transcription – only do summaries or do transcription in-house
- Limited outputs – a historical resource?

Equipment

- Audio v Video
- Analogue or digital? Analogue important for preservation & repositories but all current OH is recorded and stored digitally
- Choice of recording media (generally solid state)
- Choice of format – uncompressed WAVE / WAV / AIFF (not proprietary or compressed)
- Recommended to use separate not built-in microphone
- Recording kit includes recorder (plus spare?), separate microphone, headphones & playback facility, power supply (plus spare batteries), usb cable, hard-drive storage and editing software
- Practice and test before each use!

Digital Audio Recorders

- Zoom, Tascam, Marantz, Sony etc
- Entry level £150 - £350 / Professional £500 plus
- Solid state, flash card or hard drive memory, USB
- Mains & (re-chargeable) battery power
- Stereo recording – via external microphones
- CD / broadcast quality recording – PCM WAV
44.1kHz 16 bit or 48 kHz 16bit
- Be careful of **memory / time** (eg 3 hours of WAV
44.1kHz 16 bit = 2GB Compared with 30 hours
plus with compressed mp3 files)

Microphones & other recording equipment

- External microphones highly recommended (£50-£200)
- Use more sensitive condenser rather than dynamic microphones
- Table mike or lapel mikes?
- Unidirectional or omni-directional?
- XLR sockets support higher quality, cleaner more balanced recording
- Decisions about back-up (computer, gold CD-Rs, separate hard drive) & transcription equipment
- Other recording devices – ipods/ipads, mobile phones, dictaphones, laptops
- Source second hand / ebay equipment

Project plan checklist

- Planning & management (objectives, resources, outcomes and milestones)
- Evidence of community & expert support
- Equipment & expertise (for recording, for cataloguing, for storing, for disseminating)
- Appropriate staffing / volunteer support
- Legal & ethical clearances / consent issues
- Identification of future preservation and access providers

Websites to visit / things to read

- Oral History Society,
<http://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/index.php>
- HLF Guide, 'Thinking About Oral History',
<http://www.hlf.org.uk/HowToApply/furtherresources/Pages/Thinkingaboutoralhistory.aspx>
- Doug Boyd's Guidance on Digital Technology & Oral History,
<http://digitalomnium.com/tag/doug-boyd/>
- Transcom reviews of equipment,
<http://transom.org/?cat=59>
- Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History*, 2005
- Doug Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 2003
- Perks and Thomson, *Oral History Reader* (2nd ed. 2006)