

## **Refereed Articles**

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# ***Old Stories/New Voices: Using Oral History in Adult Education Research***

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### Abstract

Oral history is gaining increasing popularity as a research methodology. It is not only a means of uncovering stories not previously documented but an opportunity to retell history from a different perspective—the voices of the participants themselves. The oral history process demonstrated, through the case history of the training program of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II, reveals a unique form of adult education.

### **Introduction**

The history of adult education has many stories which have yet to be told. In addition, critics of the major annals of adult education history argue that the accounts suffer from race and gender bias. As Hugo (1990) points out, “Adult education history suffers from gender bias and historians have marginalized or written women out of the historical narrative” (p.1). Furthermore, since traditional historical methods rely on written documentation, the voices of adults who are illiterate, poor, disadvantaged, disabled, or marginalized may not be revealed. Standard historical methods may not adequately capture the implications of adult education on the lives of these individuals, and without their personal accounts, the historical lens becomes distorted.

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The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the use of oral history to uncover or retell a story of adult education. This paper begins with a discussion of oral history and the concept of “voice” as described by researchers such as Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986); Gilligan (1982); Gluck and Patai (1991); Offen, Pierson, and Rendall (1991); and Walsh (1991). The second part of the paper uses the research on the training program of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II to provide a practical application of the oral history process.

### **The Voices of Oral History**

Oral history is the recording of reminiscences from the perspective of first-hand knowledge. The information is captured through preplanned interviews by an interviewer who is already immersed in the subject area. Oblinger (1990) writes that, in the past, oral historians have “almost entirely worked with the well-known and famous, ignoring the recollections of more ordinary people” (p. 1). Today, however, there are more supporters of a grass-roots approach to oral history.

The need for qualified oral historians will continue to grow. As Baum (1971) notes:

Oral history is especially important because people no longer write the long letters, routine diaries, or careful memos that have always served as the bones of historical research, . . . and there are many classes of persons who will not set down in writing the description of their life although they may have a very rich oral tradition and may be able to talk with much color and accuracy about this life. (p. 8)

Oral history emphasizes the value of a “person’s story to the total context and provides interconnections of apparently unconnected phenomena” (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 97).

The use of oral and life history methodology is increasing in such popular literature as the work of Studs Terkel, in local communities, and across the social science disciplines (Baum, 1971; Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Anthropologists, sociologists, historians, feminists, and minority researchers are finding the methodology a means of uncovering stories which have not been documented (Offen, Pierson, & Rendall, 1991; Spradley, 1979; Walsh, 1991). Oral history can generate new insights by

uncovering an individual's perspective. In addition, it can enable researchers to understand and evaluate societal changes by giving people a voice (Spradley, 1980). Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) found that "voice" was more than an academic shorthand for a person's point of view. In their research they became aware that it applied to many aspects of women's experiences and that the "development of a sense of voice, mind, and self were intricately intertwined" (p. 18). Gilligan (1982) writes that "the way people talk about their lives is of significance, . . . and the connections they make reveal the world that they see and in which they act" (p. 2). Oral histories "create the possibility of going beyond the conventional stories . . . to reveal experience in a less culturally edited form" (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 24).

It is important in doing oral history to consider the verification of the data. Barzun and Graff (1985) write that the verification of data relies on "attention to detail, common sense reasoning, a developed feel for history and chronology, a familiarity with human behavior, and ever-enlarging stores of information" (p. 112) which will be found in both primary and secondary sources. Oblinger (1990) discusses a variety of techniques to assess accuracy: (a) continuing research into non-oral sources, (b) repeated interviewing, and (c) probing or cross-examination of initial interviews. He points out that these practices enable oral historians to "construct checks on reliability and validity. . . in a manner that is impossible for researchers of traditional sources" (p. 3). The review of official documentation, descriptive data, and the retrospective reports allows a triangulation of the data. This process also helps to alleviate the potential problem of the "filtering" and "scripting" of old memories (Campbell, 1990, p. 252). Triangulation of the data will occur throughout the research and analysis process. A major purpose in the triangulation process is to enhance the study's generalizability by using multiple sources of data. By bringing more than one source of data to "bear on a single point, . . . the sources will be used to corroborate, elaborate, and illuminate" the research (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). As new information becomes available, it will be analyzed against previous written and oral data.

The final phase of this research will be to give interpretation and coherence to the data through the written report. Barzun and Graff (1985) write, "The facts never speak for themselves. They must be marshaled, linked together and given voice" (p. viii). This is where the data takes on a human quality as the stories revealed through oral history are woven with the primary written data. The judgment and interpretation of the researcher are key to the end result, and the final report represents the "insight and

coherence of a set of facts that requires the skills and imagination of the researcher (Merriam & Simpson, 1984, p. 76). The value of the research ultimately rests on the ability of the researcher to explore, validate, imagine, and communicate.

Oral history comes in various forms, most being biographical in nature. However, some projects are episodic, examining a particular historical event, while others are sociological in which the social processes of a distinctive population group are studied for a specific period of time (Oblinger, 1990). Because the field of adult education is so broad, there are many opportunities for recording histories which have not been revealed through traditional sources as well as for re-examining stories which can be retold from a new perspective—that of the participants themselves. Oral history will not only fill in the gaps of written documentation, but it will enable the exploration, from a longitudinal perspective, of the impact of adult education experiences on individual lives. For example, literacy efforts could be recorded from the experience of the learner instead of the instructor or administrator; experiences of Native Americans, with their rich oral history tradition, could be included in the annals of adult education from their perspective; and women could be placed at the center stage of their own experiences instead of playing subordinate roles. As Gluck (1982) points out, “Women’s history cannot be understood if we rely on sources that only reflect public behavior or the presumed behavior suggested in prescriptive literature” (p. 92).

### **A Case History of the Women Airforce Service Pilots**

From 1942 to 1944 a controversial training program prepared women to “fly the Army way.” However, more than the development of cockpit skills is revealed through the voices of the women themselves who tell stories of personal development and a unique culture of women. The purpose of the research was to explore the process of adult education in preparing women to work in the nontraditional field of the armed services, the epitome of a male-dominated organization. Plans for the training of women pilots combined the curriculum of the male cadet pilot program and the rigors of Army discipline. However, planners soon realized that they should have begun by defining what it meant to be a woman pilot. One thousand seventy-four women graduated from the program and flew every type of aircraft the Army Air Force had. Despite their outstanding service, they were disbanded with little more than a “Thank-you” and no military

recognition.

This study combined archival research and oral histories. The standard historical methods did not adequately capture the implications of adult education on the lives of these women. While documented sources outlined the details of the training program, it was the oral histories that revealed the long range impact on the lives of these women. The documentation of training provided aspects of the curriculum, the format, the hours of instruction, the medical research, and the requirements of the program. Through the interviews, the factors which influenced the lives of these women began to emerge. The interviews placed the women at the center of the story. Through their voices the successes, joys, frustrations, and heartbreaks are revealed. It is essential that these women be heard now because, shortly, they will not be available to tell their stories. Their stories represent a chapter in adult education history that cannot be told in any other way.

The most challenging part of the process was locating the women. I contacted various veterans organizations thinking that their membership might include the women pilots. What I failed to realize was that since the women did not receive military status until 1977, they were not part of any established veteran's groups. After further inquiry, I found that the WASPs had their own organization which was not only tight-knit; it was also protective, allowing few outsiders to enter it. My initial contacts with the organization were discouraging. I was not permitted to have access to their membership list which included the addresses. I could not enclose a survey or announcement of my study in their newsletter. In addition, it was clear that I would have to prove myself as a serious researcher in order to gain their confidence. A critical turning point came when I visited the United States Air Force Museum. Quite by accident, I met a WASP who would become my liaison with other women pilots. She not only mailed my surveys to the locations I selected, she also included her own personal letter of support. In addition, she enabled me to locate women to interview. The impact of the personal contact was tremendous, and all the interviews were initially generated through this single contact which "snowballed" into further sources of information.

I interviewed 22 women pilots, including two trainees who were eliminated from the program. In addition, I interviewed the daughter of a WASP who had recently died. She provided a different, yet valuable, perspective. The overall impression of the participants was their enthusiasm and a strong belief that they had made history and wanted that history to be told. Despite their enthusiasm to tell their own stories, they seemed

to be as interested in me as I was in them. Each interview began by my giving them background about myself as a researcher, writer, and, more importantly to them, a member of the military. I consider this time critical to the tone of the rest of the interview. In addition to explaining my background, during the pre-interview session I informed the interviewee of the following: (1) the purpose and procedures of oral history in general and the anticipated uses of the research, (2) their rights in the oral history process, (3) the purpose of their signature regarding the restriction of data, and (4) the confidentiality of the interview.

I used an interview guide which served as a basic checklist of the issues I wanted to explore. The semi-structured interview format provided organization and consistency, yet it also allowed spontaneity. There were times which I struggled to keep them on track. That, and my own desire to provide input, proved the most difficult aspects of the interview process. No one objected to my use of a tape recorder; permission became critical since I was soon well-absorbed into the interview and would have been too distracted to take thorough notes. In addition, the recording provided a verbatim account. My detailed notes of the interview setting and a description of the women proved invaluable as I later matched names to the photographs I took at each interview. Some of the women did not want to be interviewed alone. Consequently, some were interviewed in groups of two or three. These group interviews provided an interesting comparison. The women interviewed individually provided more depth, but the group interviews resulted in more breadth as the women played off of each other. Their interaction appeared to enhance spontaneity and increase their involvement in the interview. I followed up each interview with a written note of thanks. I initially did this out of courtesy for their efforts. The result, however, was that it helped me maintain contact with the women, many of whom continue to write and call. They seem to be as grateful as I am to have someone truly interested in them.

I transcribed the recordings myself as soon as possible after the interviews. Although time consuming, I heard new information, inflections I had missed, and pauses that were more important than I first realized. In addition, I learned about myself as an interviewer. This insight helped me improve my skills with each interview. Individual transcriptions were placed in separate folders, each of which included the following: (1) a table of contents with page numbers of the transcription; (2) notation of the metered numbers corresponding to the subject matter of the tape; (3) a profile description of the interviewee; (4) a description of the interview setting, including time and place; and (5) my notes and observations as the

interviewer. Release forms with signatures were kept in a separate folder to protect interviewee anonymity.

A key aspect of this study was the management of the data. Prior to gathering data, I prepared a preliminary list of categories. This list was expanded to include additional categories as needed. The data was transferred to note cards in the appropriate categories. As I developed the note cards of data, the interviews and written documentation began to weave together with emerging themes and corroborated information. Additional information from the tape recordings of three instructors and townspeople provided new perspectives to round out the story. Newspapers written during training and personal letters to friends and family helped me create a context for the research. The review of both primary and secondary sources was on-going as I searched for missing information and pulled the pieces of the puzzle together.

I see the following as important factors in doing oral history. Based on my experience with this research, I learned the following lessons:

1. A personal contact is extremely important as a link with potential interviewees.

2. A sense of reciprocity is gained when interviewers share information about their own background which is applicable to the study.

3. Surveys are useful for gaining additional information and locating potential interviewees.

4. Reviewing and transcribing the tape recordings should be done as soon as possible after the interview.

5. Continual review of secondary sources provides new insights and helps to corroborate the data.

6. Follow-up with the interviewee is important in order to keep the communication open for future questions and assistance.

7. With the amount of data generated through transcriptions, as well as from documented sources, careful organization and management of the data is essential. Taking photos of the women and writing brief descriptions of the interview setting helped in keeping track of the interviews.

## Conclusion

Historical research is the most effective method for understanding practice according to adult education historian Robert Carlson (Merriam & Simpson, 1984). It gives the perspective that “lets us determine where we have come from, where we appear to be going, and how we might influence events in a humane direction” (p. 70). Oral history can provide

a more complete history and a more human one. For the field of adult education, oral history can lead to new discoveries, provide an opportunity for critical analysis, allow the retelling of old stories with new voices, and reveal the voices of adults who have been silent or silenced too long.

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