



A guideline to the conducting of interview projects



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Popular TV programs with historical topics often consist of interviews with contemporary witnesses to recent events. Biographies containing life stories of famous and unknown people often head the bestseller lists. In the news, interviews are the order of the day. Universities host seminars about oral history research; archives, libraries and museums conduct more and more interview projects. There is something that touches us, when other people tell their stories.

The broad field of professional education offers a great many possibilities to use the actual experience of people, so that lessons will be enriched. The article at hand will outline clearly how to plan, conduct and present such a project, such a teaching unit. These insights are gained from various projects, based on experiences spanning more than twenty years' time.

WHY CONDUCT AN INTERVIEW PROJECT?

Concerning the interaction between people, conducting interviews is a good method to show course participants, pupils and students, that they cannot find everything in books or on the Internet. Lots of information on practical things, manual skills or even on the general past, derives from life experience and is only to be found in people's minds and memories.

Course participants or trainees themselves gather knowledge actively, evaluate it, sum it up and present it.

It isn't easy, especially for trainees, to make contact with experienced professionals. With active questioning contact can be made on a personal level. People experienced in their chosen professions are not seen as "know-it-all" or as being "precocious" who quote sentences like "in our time we did everything differently". Rather they are people with whom interesting conversations can be conducted.

Often it isn't the topic alone, but also the method that is interesting. I recall a most impressive seminar with nurses. All of them worked in the geriatric care area and were extremely interested in how to conduct conversations with elderly people about their personal history. In their experience it calmed new-arrivals to relate their own life story, offered them safety and demonstrated interest in their person.

HOW TO BEGIN?

In the beginning there's an idea or a research question. It can be fascinating for potential mechanics, hairdressers or electricians to hear tales about the daily work routine 30, 40 or even 50 years ago. Participants can develop part of the subject matter within such a project: How was fabric dyed in the early days? What did sign painters do? Which rights and obligations did workers have? Important is that the initial idea, the project topic itself is clearly defined. This is helpful not only for the participants, for the respondents it is also easier to answer a comprehensible question satisfactorily.

Phrase the project topic as simple and as memorable, as if you were writing the headline of a newspaper article. That will help you with preparation, contact and interview as well as the presentation of the project.

After you've chosen a topic consider with whom collaboration would be advisable. For instance, help in finding suitable interviewees is important. Industrial unions, trade unions, pensioner's associations, etc. are possibilities here, but also local archives, libraries and museums. The last mentioned institutions can help in another way as well. If they already possess audio recordings of interviews interesting for the project, it will be a great help for the preparation. Objects of collections and books on the topic are also very helpful for preparation and presentation.

Other possibilities are offered in collaborating with newspapers, radio stations or regional TV stations. Old reportages can be useful for the preparation and can even include names of interesting interview partners. Such a partnership is certainly a priceless advantage for the presentation.

One group can even work with older interviews, already conducted by someone else. This creates possibilities of comparison and offers great possibilities for the preparation.

Concept, project outline, milestone plan, deadline list, script... there are many labels for the plan of procedures, assignment of tasks within the project. This also applies to interview projects. We enquired after old breeds of livestock and fruit variety within one project. An ideal project for an agricultural school, where trainee farmers are educated. But you already have to know during planning phase whether you want to present the interviews within an exhibition on open day at college or want to publish it in the local newspaper as a little series. Deliberately, it can also be no more than a presentation and discussion in class. Maybe even the college archive is interested in the interviews, to store them for posterity. But local academic institutions, archives, libraries and museums could also be interested in the results. The end results influence the approach!

On the other hand, the group influences the approach as well. What is it that the participants should learn? Are only facts and information important or should something be learnt – in passing – from other skills, something be reinforced, repeated: the skill to sum up a text, work within a team, pass information to the various media – for example presentation, exhibition and newspaper article? The list could be continued indefinitely.

The most important questions are: What is our aim? How do we want to achieve it? And who does what and when?

After the topic is chosen, the question of how to find suitable interview partners arises. Are family members desired, do we want to select only entirely unknown people – or perhaps a mixture? The smaller the target group, the more exotic the topic, the more difficult it becomes to find suitable interview partners. Don't hesitate to address the appropriate institutions regarding this challenge, as already mentioned above, or even take out a small ad. Often these institutions, employed with their particular topic, can provide suitable interviewees. Or you can enquire of the associations that are employed with the wanted group and offer recreational programs for them.

How old, how young are they? Are interview, topic, and method of conducting it, befitting the age, state of health or the particular religious or social group?

Try defining the target group beyond family members and circle of acquaintances. It's an important and interesting experience for many trainees and students to conduct a conversation with unknown persons.

There are interviews composed of only three questions, there are guided interviews, interviews focussing on one topic, personal history interviews... The choice of method depends on the topic, on who is in the task group and the desired result. The more eloquent your interviewer is, the more open an interview style can be chosen. If your trainees, pupils or students need more support, then you should choose a predetermined list of questions. This lends more structure to the interview, and it also enables the interviewer to concentrate on the interviewee. Otherwise it is very likely that the interviewer is thinking about the next question rather than listening to the answer. But there are also other reasons to develop a list of questions. Comparability is top priority here. A predetermined structure is paramount to comparing interviews with different people and discussing the answers. The interview volume will be similar, which will make the processing easier.

Personal interviews are conducted very differently. Here the interviewee is asked to relate his life, his childhood or his professional life. The person who is interviewed can determine largely for himself how much he wants to tell and in what order. This interview style can reveal colourful descriptions, fascinating stories, but there are also people who think – very often wrongly – that they don't have anything to tell. The inquiry phase directly following the relating phase requires a skilled interviewer, who addresses life or time epochs that have been omitted.

A joint discussion about which questions should be asked is an introduction to the topic and the ideal preparation.

The question of recording technique is not easily answered. Some take notes during the interview to be able to complete the interview from memory afterwards. You can also send the questions and answers in written form if the interview partners live far from each other. But in most cases the best way to record an interview is to use a recording device.

Technological progress has been remarkable over the past years concerning recorders. Many of the digital devices that we use in everyday life – the mobile phone for example – come with a recording option. Some of them can even create small videos, so that it's possible to get a sound and vision recording of the interview.

It's important for the choice of technology to know how you want to process the recorded interviews afterwards. Is the person processing the interviews technically capable of listening to the recording repeatedly, capable of stopping the recording if required? Are the interviews, or excerpts of them, going to be shown publicly during the project presentation? If that is so, the recording quality has to be well enough, the digital recording compatible with the available devices. For the project to succeed it is essential that the technology used can be handled by the course participants, pupils or students. Even the best of recording devices will achieve a bad result if handled incorrectly.

Ask archives, libraries and museums. They often own recording devices and will be happy to rent or loan them out in exchange for a copy of the interviews.

IT'S JUST A FEW QUESTIONS, ISN'T IT?

To conduct an interview is more than just to collect information. You are faced with a living human being, it leads to an interaction between interviewers and interviewees. Without delving too much into theory there are three things especially important:

- Make sure successful communication is guaranteed. Explain purpose and procedure of the project, ask if anything is unclear and ascertain repeatedly that the recording device is working properly.
- Remember politeness, ethical and moral principles. People who volunteer for an interview have a right to expect good manners, an attentive listener, and help if a difficult situation occurs. An interview is not about letting people talk about something they would never speak about in public otherwise, but about a respectful interaction with others.
- The agreement to conduct an interview is a closed contract. Always remember that, with such a project, you come into contact with some important areas of your legal system. You're dealing with protection of a person, copyright, publication right etc. It's very important here to gather information about the project: What is going to happen with the interviews? Where will they be published? Who will have access to the audio files? Will the gathered results be passed on subsequently?

Get support regarding legal questions. Look up national oral-history associations on the Internet or ask institutions such as archives, libraries or museums, because they have experience with interview projects.

It is very important to be well prepared. As mentioned above, interviews already conducted by others are a great help. Listen to the interview, or parts of it, together. Which parts were well conducted, which parts weren't? If it were you being interviewed, would you have had confidence in the project, would you have been keen on doing the interview because of the way it was conducted? Role play is a good training for beginners. They can assume both roles and get feedback. Pay attention to the obvious, and to the seemingly small things. How was the greeting? Was the project introduced sufficiently? Was there any information about further use of the data?

Address difficult situations intentionally. Even harmless topics can be connected with dreadful and emotionally draining experiences. This also applies to the topic aggression. Sometimes, not very often, the slander of other people, groups or ideologies might occur during an interview. Discuss it within the group, how far this can be tolerated, and how to react if limits have been crossed.

No competition without training. Practise with your group by interviewing each other and exchanging experiences afterwards.

A separate chapter has to be devoted to technology. Just as interaction with others has to be practised, so the technical aspect has to be practised as well. If an interviewee has to watch you fiddle with the recorder for 15 minutes and still it isn't working, then you have lost much of your credibility. It is best to practise the technical situation together. Will the surroundings be unknown to me? Will I need a power source? Where will I position the microphone?

Apart from dry practise a little check-up is most useful before leaving for the interview: is the recorder working, is there enough memory capacity/are enough cassettes to hand, are the batteries for the microphone charged... I had to repeat a whole interview once, because after 10 minutes the recorder stopped, and I didn't realise until 40 minutes later. Apart from the embarrassing situation a replay of the interview was difficult, because the interviewee was exhausted and it all took quite a different course. I throw a quick glance at the recorder's display every few minutes ever since: is there still power, is the recorder working, is the sound level right?

If you're doing audio recordings only, remember to bring a camera. A photograph of the interviewee, preferably in his familiar surroundings, is a valuable tool that can be used for future exhibitions, press releases or presentations. The same applies to asking after old photographs that could fit the interview's topic. You can make on-the-spot copies of interesting pictures with digital cameras in almost any light conditions.

Familiarise yourself with the technology, on-site it is too late!

During the interview it is your duty, to pay attention not only to conversational skills and functioning technologies. You should also observe your own person. Am I displaying any interest in the answers? After all it is you who wants something from the interviewee, and it is very impolite to leaf through your papers in search of the next question while he is speaking. Using eye contact and the occasional nod you can show the interviewee that you are interested in his information and that you have understood acoustically.

Make a habit of asking for project relevant data at the beginning of the interview, such as age, family relations, place of birth, etc. You will need this information to file the person and interview accordingly. Additionally, they are important background information for presentations. Above all it is extremely time consuming to obtain the data of all conducted interviews after the event. Remember to write down address, telephone number and/or e- mail address if you haven't already done so at the initial contact. This is important for any remaining questions, for invitations to the presentation, or for the filing of the interviews.

Imagine introducing the interviewee to others. If you can do that, then you've got enough information.

Pay attention to changes in the surroundings. Distracting ambient noise, that suddenly occurs and can be heard clearly on the recording, will complicate processing the interview and render a public performance near impossible. You should also be able to recognise changes in your interview partner. Is he in pain? Is he tired, unwell? Is he harried by any of the questions? If that is so, a break would seem advisable, so that you won't appear ignorant.

If you sense that your interviewee is uncomfortable, then address it!

Don't forget the professional world of today regarding such projects. Compare interviews of older people with interviews of younger ones, who are still working actively.

HOW WILL IT CONTINUE?

Many interview projects run into trouble, because the effort of processing the interviews has been underestimated. Turning off the recorder is not the end by any means. Most times an index of context has to be made, often the whole conversation or parts of it have to be typed out. It all takes time.

What you have now is only the rough material. Now the interviews have to be analysed regarding the project topic. Fitting passages have to be selected, compared with others, adjusted, and processed for the intended project.

It's better to use lesser interviews, so you have more time for processing and editing.

The last part is the best part: the presentation. But first a little advice. Make sure all promises you've made have been kept before the interviews are made publicly available. This especially concerns promises of anonymity and deletion of certain passages. Often the wish of anonymity or deletion of certain passages is expressed during or after the interview. Sometimes such promises are the only way to save the interview, so you can still work with it, if the interviewee, out of some reason, would have backed out otherwise. If the interviews are filed, such promises have to be documented and included in the transfer agreement.

Remember the possibility of ensuring the anonymity of a person, especially regarding delicate issues.

As I've already mentioned at the beginning interviews touch us personally. For a presentation of people's memories, specific conditions of the presentation still have to be considered. If it is an article for a newspaper you have to keep it short, in most cases only particular sentences can be printed. And that is your job! No editor will take the time to select the most striking quote from a three-page-interview. If you do it yourself, then you can decide which passage will be printed in the press. The same applies to radio and TV features, the more precise the material at their disposal, the higher the chance of publication.

Imagine an exhibition at a company, where you are training people. Imagine big presentation boards tightly filled with whole interviews. Who will take the time to read all this? Have courage and select within your group the most interesting passages. Provide information about the people behind the texts. Display a photo, that was taken for the interview and link it with the most essential biographical data.

Invite all participants to the presentation. This way you're not just exhibiting people but showing them your appreciation.

What remains of your project? Enquire of archives, libraries or museums if they are interested in your project. If this is done previously, collaboration is likely by all means. Perhaps the whole project starts with a visit to such an institution and a tour befitting your topic?

From the interviewee's point of view the prospect of having his memories becoming part of an academic collection is very often the crucial factor for agreeing to participation. And it is a special commendation for trainees, pupils and students to have their very own work included in index collections.

Collaboration with institutions can act as a calling card – just ask.

Benefit from the fascination found in stories, in the interaction with people. And use the potential found in professional training. Many a trainee only learns to appreciate the value of professional life for a person while talking to older or still professionally active people.

Credit to: Werner Matt, Stadsarchiv Dornbirn