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Linda Cooper

University of Cape Town, South Africa

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The Use of Oral History Methodology as a Means of Researching the Shifting Meanings of Worker Education in South Africa

Linda Cooper
University of Cape Town, South Africa

This paper is grounded in a research project which has as its aim to trace changes and continuities in workers' education in the South African labour movement from the 1970s to the 1990s. The research takes place in a context which has seen a significant shift in the dominant discourse from one which sees education primarily as a support for a collective process of social transformation, to one which sees education and training as a means of gaining the 'competitive edge' in the global economy, and in the race for individual upward mobility.

The history of education is written predominantly from the perspective of educators, systems builders and policy makers. This research adopts a different perspective: it aims to document how ordinary workers – who acted as both learners and educators – experienced and contributed meaning to the concepts of learning, knowledge and education. I focus here on the methodological dimensions of this research, and in particular, on the usefulness of oral history as a means of tracking shifting meanings in relation to "learning" and "education."

The significance of oral sources cannot be underestimated in a country where a large proportion of the population is regarded as "illiterate," and where rich oral traditions still thrive. However, there are other reasons for turning to oral history in educational research. My work has been enriched by the work of the Italian oral historian, Portelli, who argues for the value of oral history in the 'construction of suppressed memories' of non-hegemonic groups. Oral history tells us less about events than about *meaning*: "...the unique and precious element which oral sources force upon the historian and which no other sources possess in equal measure is the speaker's subjectivity..."

Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did." (Portelli, 1991, p. 50) Oral history methods, I hope, will help me to capture not only the "actuality" of workers' experiences of learning, but also the "pos-

sibilities" of what they believed education could mean.

Thus far, I have worked with two main sources of data: tape-recorded interviews documenting the life histories, and the history of union activism of individual worker leaders, and a series of worker autobiographies (transcribed, and often translated) produced during the 1980s. Some common themes have immediately sprung to the fore. One is the deep tradition of collective learning, and the value placed on education for the "collective good" – particularly trade union education. There are also some notable contradictions in the meanings attributed to learning and knowledge: these worker leaders are acutely aware of "knowledge stratification" amongst workers, and of the importance of formal qualifications in a competitive and racially-divided labour market. In the same moment however, they are also dismissive of the value of formal education, and see learning from experience as "knowledge that you can really depend on," and as far more important in shaping leadership than formal schooling.

I am grappling with a number of issues relating to how to infer meaning from the narratives, and how to deal with the complexities of "memory." For example, "incorrect" memories of events can have important value in themselves: they can enable us to "recognise the interests of the tellers, and the dreams and desires beneath them" (Portelli, 1991, p. 26). But identifying meaningful discrepancies between "fact" and "memory" is complicated, more so because of the impact of the current context on memory. Grossman (1994, p. 2) has argued that: "... it is not the passage of time which is central in determining what will be remembered and what will be forgotten. It is the context of remembering which dims—or illuminates—memories of particular parts of history". He concludes that the current context is one which is essentially hostile to collective traditions, and which makes not only those traditions, but also the *memories* of those traditions, difficult to express.

The interpretation of the data also has to take account of the dynamics of power that are implicit in any interview, and that are augmented by issues of class, race and language—particularly in the South African context. Differences in language and culture also make it extremely difficult for a white, English-speaking researcher to fully appreciate the complex meanings embedded in oral versions rather than written transcripts (and often translations) of oral history. Tone, volume, and rhythm in oral rendition carry implicit meanings which cannot be captured in written transcripts. Furthermore a full appreciation of narrators' perceptions and attitudes can only be made within an understanding of the rich oral traditions which have played a crucial role in the cultural history of resistance in South Africa.

One of the most challenging questions is how to use oral history to capture the *collective* processes of learning and knowledge production that take place within vibrant social movements such as that which characterised our recent history in South Africa. Much biographical research in adult education focuses on the individual – albeit with an emphasis on the individual in social context. Collective experience is not merely the sum of many individual experiences, and there is important knowledge that has been produced within the workers' movement – for example, the importance of unity and solidarity – that can only be learnt and known collectively. Is it possible to create a “collective learning biography” of a social movement?

A final issue – and one which I grapple with intensely – is how to make the process of research useful for the workers who are the subject and object of the research. Portelli (1991, p. 32) has argued that it is possible to make a field interview an “experiment in equality”, and he adds: “Only equality makes the interview credible, but only difference makes it relevant” (p.43). I come into this research with a dual role: not only as an interviewer but also as a worker educator. As researcher, I am interested in my subjects' “difference”; and it is *my* difference (the expectation of what I – in my educator role – can help them do with their knowledge) that will be most significant for my respondents. If we accept that the presence of the observer always “interferes” with observed reality, how can we turn this possibility into an “opportunity to stimulate others, as well as ourselves, to a higher degree of self-scrutiny and self-awareness; to help them grow more aware of the relevance and meaning of their culture and knowledge.....”? (Portelli, 1991, p.44)

References

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