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# Oral History and Storytelling – Reflection on an Alternative Approach of Teaching History

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## **Abstract**

In the paper, I will share and review a method I have been experimenting for teaching the history of Hong Kong. Hong Kong was a fishing village before it was ceded as a British Colony. However this part of Hong Kong's history is missed in our textbook, and water life is not part of the city's everyday knowledge. Oral history is the starting point of the process. The teacher and university students conducted oral history together to build up the primary pool of historical materials (audio records and transcripts), which however were not friendly to general learners. Next, another group of students studied the transcripts and picked out interesting transcript segments and slightly edited them into understandable fishermen's stories. Then, a larger group of students studied the transcript segments and organized the fragmented stories into a storyline to give shape for the fishermen's accounts. They visited local secondary schools and told the stories to the students in the classroom aided by visual images. The teacher, an experienced oral history researcher, facilitates the whole process by giving context, background information and basic knowledge to the student narrators. The students had many misunderstanding about the fishermen's oral history due to a lack of knowledge and experience of lives on the water. The method of storytelling requires the students to serve as a medium of knowledge transfer. When they try this unconventional method of teaching history, they have to make sense of the unfamiliar lived experiences as told in the oral history, by comparing different lifestyles between land and water, by raising land people's curiosity of the dangers on the rough sea, by inserting useful knowledge in order to appreciate the lifestyle of fishing on the water. To understand how this medium of storytelling (the student narrators) is important to make this method an effective means of teaching history.

**Key Words:** oral history, fishermen, community, learning history, Hong Kong.

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### **1. The Problem: In Search of an Effective Method of Teaching History**

In 2010, we started to promote a project called “School Memories” encouraging secondary school students to collect the history of their school by doing oral history. This projects hit a group of passionate history teachers as they found it a good way to motivate teenage students “to learn history by doing history”. At that time history was not a popular subject in secondary schools as many students simply did not find history interesting, nor did they find it important in their academic studies and relevant in their future careers.

The teachers insisted believe that history is important because it inspired us with the sense of reflexivity and humanity. What is lacking in formal history curriculum is the connection and relevance with the lives of ordinary people. They thought that history could be associated with everyday life and students could learn history from the people around them – their grandparents or an older neighbour. They thought that oral history would be a proper method of learning history.

At this stage the emphasis was on collecting history but the results were not always cheerful. A lot of effort had been spent on doing interviews and transcription but many other students could not find joy and motivation from the transcripts. This question of sharing was left unanswered because the funding for the school memories project had finished. Fortunately I started another project, though of different objectives, which allowed me to continue to explore the methodology.

### **2. The Project of Living On The Water**

The project was to set up a social platform for fishermen, university students and the public to get together and to share the history and culture of fishermen.

Hong Kong was known to have developed from a fishing village into a cosmopolitan city under the colonial rule but little was discussed in local history textbooks about the history of fisheries and fishermen in Hong Kong. We started the project by doing oral history with fishermen and over the past two years, we had recruited over 30 university students to join us in the oral history studies. I found that the students were not able to understand what the fishermen shared in the interviews, not only because of language problem, but also because they lacked the basic knowledge about fishing and the perspectives to listen to the fishermen’s stories.

For example. A fisherman aged 84 recalled his life as a young fisherman,

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We fished near Shek O, Chek Chu, Nam Wan, Chung Hum and Repulse Bay (spoke this name in English). Ha ha ha ha (laugh, probably he felt funny to speak English)..... I couldn't go to school because when I was off from school I couldn't find my family and I knew nobody onshore. I cried and refused to go to school any more. (Mr Lo)

Apparently this piece of memory didn't make much sense to the student. I stopped the interview for a little while and briefed the student with contexts in order for him to understand the fishermen. First, the places recalled by the fishermen were well known nowadays as beautiful beaches for sightseeing and swimming. The memory of fishing in the water outside the beaches pointed to the change of landscape and behind the changes was the decline of fisheries and the growth of tourism. Second, children of fishing families were not able to enjoy education because school hours did not match with fishing hours. Mr Lo couldn't find his family's fishing boat because by the time his school finished his father had already gone to catch the nocturnal fish. Fishing families had not a stable place onshore, which made it difficult for them to send their children to school at regular hours.

Obviously somebody had to do interpretation in order for the fishermen's oral history to be comprehensible. I therefore shifted the emphasis of the method: Instead of doing primary research with oral history, I organized the students to do storytelling. I trained a group of university students to be docents of an exhibition of fishermen's stories, displayed by brief descriptions, short stories from oral history extracts, photos and innovative visual design. Until now, we had used this method of teaching history to young children, teenage students and general public at 4 different programmes.

Instead of reviewing the impact on the visitors, in this paper, I focus on the process of story construction on the part of the docents. As docents, they performed the role of history "teacher", but in fact before they could teach, they had to learn the history themselves. The learning process happened at times when they prepared the docents' scripts.

Many museums would provide scripts for their docents so that they could recite the correct information during tours. In this project, the scripts were prepared by the docents themselves as I defined the role of the docents as an agent or a medium of communication between the fishermen and the visitors. They had to join a training workshop of 4 sessions, where they were trained to prepare a script of their own through practice and discussion.

I started the first session by asking them (going in pairs) to study the exhibition carefully, and then to give a short talk of 10 minutes on a theme of the exhibition (4 themes in total). I invited one of the passionate history teachers to be an observer, so that we could discuss the methodology I was experimenting.

The students came from diverse disciplines – medicine, science, engineering, education, business, linguistics, literature and history. They had no prior knowledge of fishing, fisheries and fishermen. They joined the project voluntarily out of their own initiatives and personal interests.

It was obvious that in the 10-minute talks, the students had tried some way to talk about the theme in the exhibition, but with different kinds of shortcomings. The problem of lacking basic knowledge were well expected but I chose not to deliver these knowledges in the beginning because I thought it would not be an effective method to give talk one-sidedly. Instead I offered the related contextual information after each group gave the short talk. In the next sessions, the students had to continue the practice by preparing a better script based on the background information I had just offered and the longer version of the oral history extracts.

Before we closed the session, I asked the observer to give us some advice. The history teacher gave us three keywords to consider: context, theme and emotion, if we wanted to prepare a script that could engage the future listeners through oral presentation. Very quickly, the term “storytelling” jumped into my mind when I combined the three keywords with the objective of sharing and engagement through the act of oral presentation.

### **3. The Act of Storytelling**

This approach of storytelling was not planned prior the training. It emerged into a so-called method over a period of one year through our practice in several different occasions. In each occasion, I consolidated the method based on my observation and assessment of the performance of the students as docents. Let me elaborate on how the method of storytelling was evolved through the process.

My effort of training students to do storytelling put little emphasis on the skills of speaking. Rather we spent a large amount of time on constructing the stories. But, what is a story? We didn’t look for definitions from dictionaries or handbook-type manual. We just worked it out steps by steps.

In the project, the act of storytelling is a continuous, multi-layered activities. I had the first layer of stories, told by the fishermen during oral history interviews. The stories were embodied experiences of the fishermen and were recalled under the questions led by the interviewer. The transcripts of the oral history were the outcome of the foundational layer of the stories developed from the interviews.

There was the second layer of the stories – the extracts selected by the researcher (myself) from the long transcripts into shorter scripts of 250-350 words. These shorter scripts were selected because they reflected fishermen’s lives in certain way. Finally a pool of 262 short scripts were formed from the transcripts of 18 interviewed fishermen.

Then, there was another step to select the stories – a small group of two student docents selected from this large pool to form into a smaller pool of “interesting”

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stories, stories which they found interesting from the perspectives of the younger generations. Myself and the students used the method of “coding” for categorizing the discrete extracts into six shared themes. A larger group of six student docents were invited to make sense of these groups of these scripts and wrote a short line as the subtitles of the scripts.

There came the third layer of the stories – the theme and the subtitle gave the readers some sense of direction and context. One of the six student docents prepared a demo of telling fishermen’s story, in which she organized 18 pieces of the short scripts into a storyline.

This demo was recorded as a video and was shown to a group of newly recruited student docents. I asked the new recruits to listen to this video as an ordinary audience. After listening to the demo, the new docents asked questions about the specialized terminologies used (which were fishermen’s special way of naming things), areas that they couldn’t understand, and the missing links they found in the storyline. They began to talk about ways to re-organize the short scripts into other storylines, and asked whether they could do this when they told stories.

Their reactions have shown that every listener would attempt to make sense of the stories in their own way and see gaps and missing links in the scripts. Although we had done something to package each extract into comprehensible script, we need to find links and connection to make sense of these scripts into a larger story. In other words, the act of storytelling is continuing with new comers introducing their preferred way of seeing and telling.

This method of allowing student docents to create their own mode of storytelling based on their interests and perspectives had been applied in the subsequent exercises. After all, I notice that the students made sense of the stories in different ways, and therefore produced different approaches to understand the stories. In the following, I will summarize the different ways of making sense of the fishermen’ stories into several approaches.

#### **4. Different Approaches of Storytelling**

First, the students compared the unfamiliar with the familiar.

Example: Student A told the stories in a classroom for a class of Form 1 students.

What were you doing at 3-4 am last night? (responses from the class: sleeping, playing computer games) Of course you were sleeping. Playing computer games? Ha ha ha, that is not a good habit. For the fishermen who caught shrimps, at 3-4 am they were already working in the sea, they had a lifestyle different from ours. Their clock started at 5-6 pm everyday when they drove their boat to the fishing ground. They worked in the night and slept in the day.....

It was a short account of fishermen's daily life round the clock. The tendency of the students who adopted this approach was to look for the relevance between people from two different worlds. They compared the lifestyle on the water, which is unfamiliar to the land people, to our lifestyle on the land. This approach had the advantage of easily getting the audience to stand into the shoes of the fishermen and imagined how lives would be if land people had to live on the water.

Second, there was a lesson to learn from the experiences of "the others". Example: Student B told the same story of shrimp fishermen's lifestyle.

The fishermen had to lead a life day and night reverse. Imagine, it was a hard life. Why do they keep on working as fishermen even life was so harsh. They must have found fun and happiness in it. And they have the perseverance over hardship and boredom. We should learn from them as many of us nowadays easily quit our work when we find it boring and harsh.

This approach was based on the same assumption that the experiences of the "others" were irrelevant to "us. The students found the link by introducing the lesson we should learn from the "others". These lessons were usually the virtues or positive values recognized and approved by the society. The students would say, "The fishermen could do things like this, why couldn't we?" This approach had the advantage of giving importance to the fishermen who were used to be considered inferior in social status in Hong Kong.

Third, some students engaged the audience by linking some stories with emotional components. The students usually applied this approach when they told the stories of fishermen facing hostilities on the waters.

Example: Student C described one dangerous incident on the sea.

There were unexpected dangers on the sea. A fisherman called Sin Wai Lun was almost killed in a trip to catch shrimps in Tonkin Bay, the sea at the boundary between Guangxi, China and Vietnam. When they were working in the dark, remember shrimp fishermen had to work in the night, suddenly they heard some noise, bang bang bang bang! There were bullets flying over their heads. They were so scared that they quickly rushed back into the cabin and wrapped themselves with cotton quilts. You know, it was so sudden and so scary. Although wrapping with wadded quilts could not help at all, that was what they could do under this emergent situation. ....

These students would give details of the events using a particular speaking tone and adjectives loaded with tense emotion to arouse the attention of the audience. At the end some would conclude the story by the approach of learning the lesson: the fishermen had risked their lives to catch fishes for us, we should be grateful when

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we enjoyed seafood on dining table; or they would say the fishermen were so adventurous and brave when they caught fish.

Last, some students used their own logical thinking to fill in gaps and missing parts by giving context to the short stories. For example, an engineering student explained why the fishermen spent several months in one fishing trip.

Fishermen returned to their home port only during Chinese New Year and periods of fishing moratorium. Otherwise, they would spend several months on the sea. Why do they spend so much time on the sea? Because making fewer trips back to the home port could help cutting costs on fuel. But how do they sell fish to the market and how do they find food and water if they don't return home? There is a kind of fishing boat called fish collector who come to buy fish from the fishermen and in return sell them food and drinking water. Why do they do this? This is the most immediate and effective means to collect fresh fish from the fishermen, to compete with the fish wholesalers from mainland China.....

The student explained terms like competition in economic sense and the competition from mainland China which had a big demand for fish consumption under a booming economy. This approach had the advantage of giving more informative context to understand the pattern of behaviour. Another student from Comparative Literature talked about the time frame of the happenings and explained the fishermen's behaviours with reference to the historical context of the larger Hong Kong.

## **5. Discussion: Storytelling in the Context of Teaching History**

I have shared why storytelling is used in teaching and learning history and how oral history materials are constructed into fishermen's stories. From these experimental attempts, I become more aware of what storytelling is in this context.

First, the stories of real life experiences are multi-layered construction.

Second, between oral history and the stories, we have engaged human agency (the student docents) to do storytelling. When the human agent serves as the medium, they do not function as a static medium. They will try to make sense of the original accounts, imagine how they can engage the audience, and so incorporate their interpretation in various ways into story construction.

Third, the act of storytelling is also a learning process for the story tellers. When they introduce the fourth layer into the stories, they were at the same time learning about the fishermen's lives, give meanings to their lives and find connections between themselves and the fishermen. This is what we called a sense of history.

Fourth, the different approaches used by the student docents are unconsciously associated with a sense of history – looking for connection and relevance,



understanding human lives in context, and sharing the emotions and values of people from different worlds and generations. In the future, I will encourage the students to use these different approaches more consciously in order to maximize the effectiveness of storytelling.

Finally, there is a question of authenticity if I involved student docents to tell fishermen's stories rather than allowing the fishermen to tell their own stories as a first-person account. This is a question that needs another paper to explore more thoroughly. My view is that both first person storytelling and third person storytelling are meaningful. The first person storytelling allowed the narrator to be heard by the listeners directly. In the situation of the fishermen in Hong Kong, a third-person storytelling would be more communicative for general citizens. The third person storytelling is meaningful in the sense that the third person narrators give mean meaning to the first person accounts. This would give life to cultural heritage as the history is not dead history, but a history composing of multi-layered meanings.

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