

## Oral History for Junior Certificate

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This article describes an oral history project conducted by the writer with Third Year Junior History Certificate students. It was intended to complement their textbook work on social change in 20th century Ireland as well as to fulfil several aims and objectives of the syllabus. All children were being offered the chance to do some original and worthwhile historical research, engage in what the syllabus calls "the job of the historian" (p.9). The writer hoped that through collecting and considering the memories of their parents and grandparents, the students might gain "an acceptance that people and events must be judged in the context of their values and time" and "develop an interest and enthusiasm for history" (p.3).

Five class periods of 40 minutes each were necessary for the planning and practice of the oral history project but the exercise also involved the children in a considerable amount of homework, actually interviewing people and collecting data. The designer felt that, by giving up two weeks of class time to the project, it would be possible to achieve most of the desired objectives of the part of the syllabus relating to Social Change in Ireland in the twentieth century. Only a minimum of the more traditional text- book work would be needed to supplement it.

The classroom teaching began with a double period. At the beginning of the first class period, the teacher introduced the project to the class, outlining the plan of work for the five class periods and the nature and extent of the home exercise involved. He played for them an edited version of a radio documentary, *Ballyfin, a boarding school memory*. This is a documentary written and presented by RTE radio broadcaster, John Quinn, about his days as a student in a boys boarding school run by the Patrician Brothers in Ballyfin, Co. Laois, during the period 1954-59.

This piece was chosen to introduce the students to the possibilities offered by an oral presentation of historical events. The spoken reminiscences of the presenter are narrated by him in the third person and these are interspersed with extracts from radio broadcasts and pop songs of the 1950s. For this reason it seemed to have sufficient variety, liveliness and peer-group appeal about it to hold the students' attention. In the programme, Quinn recreates his

teenager's view of the world and this was something the designer felt would particularly appeal to his audience o

15 year-olds. The students were asked to note, as they listened, any significant differences between Quinn's school- days and theirs almost fifty years later. This was an exercise in aural comprehension to help encourage consistent attention and closer listening, and understanding. The main purpose of this class listening to *Ballyfin* was to plant the idea of social change and to signal the direction of our work over the next two weeks. Ale edited version of the tape lasts thirty minutes.

In the documentary Quinn uses the school as his main topic but it is not all about the monotony of school routine and the subject diet the boys were fed. It is about his family, his school friends, his teachers, his heroes from the world of sport and entertainment and particular events which stand out in his memory. Quinn's piece enjoyed critical acclaim, including a Jacobs Award for Radio in 1993.

For the second half of this double period in which the children were studying examples of recorded presentations of history, the teacher played them a 14 minute extract from an interview he had conducted in June 1992. The teacher had felt it necessary, having decided to do an oral history project that he should have direct personal experience of interviewing a person of an older generation. It was important, the teacher felt, to gain some practical insights into the problems and opportunities presented by this medium of gathering historical evidence. A personal understanding of the process was considered desirable, perhaps essential before the teacher could begin to translate that into terms appropriate to the age and ability level of his students.

For his own interview he chose as his subject 66 year old Michael Galbraith, a local man with decades of experience in the music and entertainment business. The teacher hoped that this man's recollections might reveal some interesting aspects of social change in the area since the 1940s. It was expected that by playing the Michael Galbraith interview, the students would benefit from exposure to such a first-hand, authentic source.

The teacher's objective was to encourage criticism and empathy and to impress on the students a greater appreciation of the nature of history.

When Michael Galbraith agreed to be interviewed, the designer gave him a written outline of the purpose and plan of the project, including some headings which might be useful to prompt or prime him in advance of the recording. The interview was planned to try to review the decades from the 1940s to the 1960s in more or less chronological order and to achieve a

balance between establishing facts about the development of the subject's career in the changing social context of the period and eliciting his opinions and explanations of the changes.

Six headings were adopted as the framework for the 45- minute interview.

1. The person: family background of the subject and his early memories of learning and performing music.
2. The bands: outline history of the various bands with which the subject was involved.
3. The dances: social profile of the people who patronised the dances, how they travelled and the attitudes of parents and clergy towards dancing.
4. The venues: locations, sizes and facilities at venues and especially the advent of electricity.
5. The songs: changing taste and fashion in the music scene and how the subject responded to this.
6. The past: the subject's reaction to reviewing his own memories and his opinion of the value of such an exercise for school or other application.

After the recording, the designer transcribed the interview which amounted to eighteen pages of typescript. He then edited the tape to extract those sections which he thought might prove most instructive for classroom discussion. The edited version was fourteen minutes long and comprised five pages of script. Because the sound quality of the recording was poor, it was necessary to provide the students with a photocopy of the script.

The five page extract, part of which is reproduced below (Appendix 1) provided examples of closed and open questions. These were highlighted so that the students might be taught the difference and its importance in terms of the answers they would get in their own interviews. The first question in the extract is a good example of a closed question, a 45 word question which drew a curt two word answer This was followed immediately by an obviously open question which invited an opinion or explanation from the subject: "How did it happen that there were so many local bands?"

As well as the two different types of question, the teacher drew attention to other instances of good and bad practice. In his first answer to the question as to why there were so many local bands in the 1950s, Michael Galbraith said "It's hard to understand" When the interviewer continued with "There's no obvious explanation for it?" he got a more definite answer: "The explanation is quite clear now..." This was pointed out to the students as an example of how to probe - without pestering - by rephrasing the question.

When the teacher re-examined the asking of the question about why there had been so many bands in the 1950s and why the rephrasing of it drew a definitive response, he noted that the original was essentially unhistorical. He had been asking, in effect, why the music scene had been different then to what it is today. The interviewee was possibly baffled by the illogicality of this line of questioning as many be seen from the answer: " This is the strange thing. It's hard to understand" The rephrasing of the question and a pause for reflection allowed Michael Galbraith to resequence his ideas so that a sensible answer became possible. He was now answering the question as to why the music scene is different now from what it was forty years earlier rather than why it was different then from what it is today. This was pointed out to the students as a warning that they, as interviewers, must take care that their questions should face chronologically in the right direction if they expect an historically valid answer. An example of a potentially damaging intervention occurred when Michael Galbraith was telling the story of a ballroom engagement in Dunkineely, south Donegal. The interviewer suddenly remembered that Albert Reynolds was a ballroom promoter around that time and he interrupted the flow of the story to ask about this, This intervention raised questions about the need for full attentiveness on the part of the interviewer because, as can be seen from his next response, Michael Galbraith was distracted from his original story and did well to resume it following the interruption.

Having pointed out what might be considered the good and bad points of his own efforts, the teacher then invited the class to compare and contrast his exemplar interview with the professional radio presentation done by John Quinn. 'Mere were several reasons for doing this. One was to encourage the critical faculties of the students. Comparing and contrasting is always a challenge to students in this age group as experienced examiners would no doubt testify. Traditional didactic attempts by teachers to achieve comparison and contrast have met with little success. It seems that the surest way that some advance may be made on this front is by giving the students the time and encouragement to discover these linkages for themselves. The more obvious points of comparison and contrast are not usually hard to find and they can form the basis for the teacher to encourage a closer examination of the sources. In this particular case the students noted quite easily the main differences between the radio documentary and the amateur recording. They had no difficulty in identifying the flaws in their teacher's efforts; the sound quality of his work was poor, the conversation was not enlivened by alternative voices or musical relief so that it did not command the spontaneous attention of the listener. Because of the use of archival material, narrative commentary, the

inter-cutting of various interviews and the professional sound recording, the radio programme was much livelier. The students found it less easy to suggest points of comparison other than the fact that both producers were trying to record and present certain aspects of the past. Following prolonged questioning and discussion, some more points were teased out. The students were invited to judge to what extent each presentation was successful. This soon brought them to the realisation that each one must be judged according to different criteria, so that it was finally agreed that what mattered most was the original aim or intention of the interviewer/presenter and to what extent he had remained faithful to that.

John Quinn conceived his programme himself, wrote it and edited it, conducted the interviews himself and narrated it and ultimately decided what to talk about, what to say and how to present it. It was a personal statement of an episode in his own life experience. Their teacher's efforts were an attempt to construct a recognisable picture of social change through enquiry into another person's life experience. Although it sounded duller, it was actually more spontaneous because Michael Galbraith's responses were unscripted. It certainly lacked the slickness and coherence of the professional production but it had the attraction of being unpredictable.

Following from this it was not hard to convince the students that one of the most important determinants of a successful interview was the choice of the right questions. John Quinn, it could be argued, instinctively knew the right questions because he was asking them of himself. The teacher had learned for himself that one must be clear what it is one wants to know in order to ask the right questions. Playing and discussing the exemplar tape gave him an excellent opportunity to impress this upon the students.

As a result of this type of introduction to oral history work, the students became aware that various presentations of history are possible and that each must be judged on its own terms and has its own particular merits. They also learned from this that presentation is a function of the presenter's aim and that the historian is not working at random but within a visibly logical context. It proved that there is a need for historical method. Therefore it was hoped that the students, in their turn, would feel obliged to clarify their aims before they set to planning their own interviews.

There is a further benefit to the production of an example by the class teacher. It is a learning exercise for both the teacher and the students. The critical examination of their teacher's efforts set against the professional radio production gave them a realistic sense of proportion about the possibilities that the project held. The amateur interview flawed as it was, still had

an obvious worthwhile historical value and offered an attainable target to which they might aspire.

Listening to the Michael Galbraith interview and comparing and contrasting it with John Quinn's radio documentary took place during the second part of that first double period. A double period is excellent for an exercise such as this because it allows ample time for listening to fairly lengthy taped sources and for follow-up discussion of these while they are still fresh in the students' minds.

Once the points of comparison and contrast had been established, five minutes remained at the end in which to address one important question: how could students learn from these two exemplars about the practise of oral history? The teacher asked them to list what they considered the dos and don'ts of this type of work.

For homework they were also asked to make a list of three topics (other than school and dancing) with a set of three key questions they thought might help to tease out this topic in a real interview. They were also asked to seek out a suitable interviewee at home who might agree to answer their questions. Students with ready access to a grandparent were asked to interview him/her and students whose grandparents were dead, lived far away or were otherwise unavailable were expected to interview a parent.

The third class period followed two days after the introductory double period. The students were asked to divide themselves into five groups of six. They quickly sorted themselves into groups which seemed to compose themselves largely on the basis of friendship pairings. The teacher's knowledge of the class over almost two years told him that each group would be comfortable working together and that the members of each group were of a broadly similar ability level.

The first task on this occasion was to follow on immediately and purposefully from the work of the previous day. The teacher noted the suggested topics for home interview on an overhead transparency and the desired outcome of this class period was to shortlist the suggested topics to a total of five which would be suitable for interviewees of either sex.

The topics suggested by the students were as follows: television, domestic life, employment, sport and pastimes, family and special occasions, food and home fashion, industry, World War 1, women, trade, money and wealth, courting, home heating, transport. The more vocal members of each group made a case for including their pet topics in the shortlist of five and after up to ten minutes discussion each group was asked to announce its chosen topics and to indicate, if possible, a level of priorities for them.

The selections and priorities expressed by each group allowed the teacher to make the decision to allocate one topic to each of the five groups. Next the groups were asked to take fifteen minutes to agree upon a set of up to six questions on their particular topic, questions which they considered would best seek out what they wanted to find out from their human sources. They were reminded yet again that they had to be clear in their minds about what they wanted so that the answers they would get would be usable. They were told that would be the responsibility of each group to process the responses to the questions on their particular topics and to compile a report. Therefore any flaws in the questions would return to haunt them in the final stages. It remained to be seen whether or not the groups would be able to treat the information gathered as evidence, as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself. In the next class period the textbook work on social change was begun but ten minutes was set aside to distribute the interview forms to the students and to give them a few words of advice. For his homework the teacher had drawn up worksheets for the interviewers to use, one sheet for each of the topics. The intention was both to standardise and to formalise the interview process. The standard form for collecting the data was helpful when it came to collating the information gathered. It was also intended to maximise student participation in the project as the formality of the standard form, with the official school letter-head, was to give the impression of compulsion. A rough and ready approach with scraps of paper of all shapes and sizes would not; the teacher felt, attract the same level of participation.

Students were given brief guidelines about the necessity for tact and courtesy and they were asked to have their worksheets completed for the following week. The interviewees, the teacher warned them, were likely to be as helpful as possible but their co-operation should not be merely taken for granted and should be generously acknowledged by the student. They were asked to tape the interviews if possible, and later to transcribe them onto the form provided. Each student was given a set of five interview forms, one for each of the chosen topics: family and special occasions, employment, sports, games and pastimes, television and transport.

A week later only ten students had returned completed interview forms. Others offered a fairly typical range of excuses, the most common being that their interviewee had been unable to make time available to them during the week. Accordingly a new deadline was set for a fortnight later, the day the school resumed after the Easter holidays. By that day a total of twenty finished forms had been returned and the teacher decided to postpone the work of dealing with the data for yet another week. In the meantime, class work continued with the

study of their textbook chapters on social change and the teacher took the opportunity to read the returned interviews to help him prepare more carefully for the final double period.

For the final double period, the teacher tried to organise the time in the following way: ten minutes were allowed at the start of the first class period to rearrange the desks so that the students could work in groups as they had done on the day they first prepared questions.

While they were doing this, the teacher collected a few late submissions and divided the interview sheets into five different sets according to topic. He also took the rolls. In fact all of this took fifteen minutes.

Each group now had to deal with the twenty-five interview forms on its own allotted topic.

Their main task was to produce a written report on their topic using the evidence they had gathered. The synthesis produced by each group would be a valuable record of their work and a class resource for the study of social change. Each student retained his/her original interview forms as well as a copy of the five topic summaries. The students were encouraged to share these with their interviewees who were to be seen as co-owners of the finished work. The class plan was for the students to spend the first fifteen minutes or so working individually. Each student had three or four sheets on a particular subject and had to examine them in the light of the document discussed above. They were to make preliminary notes of the main points they had encountered and later feed these into the group discussion. The idea was to get the students "warmed" to their task so that their work would have gained a certain momentum by the time they began working as a group to produce a synthesis.

The transition from individual work to group work which the teacher had planned after fifteen minutes, did not always take place. Where it did, it was by no means smooth. Many students became so absorbed in their own individual work they seemed to lose track of the passing of time. They found it difficult to effect the mental "gear change" into group work.

Some students worked through the class with remarkable application. The level of noise in the room began to rise gradually during the last twenty minutes. It is interesting that not one student asked the teacher for help of any kind during the exercise. The overall impression which the morning's work left upon the teacher was that the students enjoyed "the job of the historian" and that there is great potential in this type of work to enliven and enrich history as a school subject.