

Views of Omani Social Studies Teachers about Using Oral History in the Classroom

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the views of Omani social studies teachers about using oral history in the classroom. Data was collected using a questionnaire that was distributed to 315 randomly selected social studies teachers from urban and rural areas, with 135 male and 180 female teachers included in the study. The results showed that social studies teachers believe strongly in the importance of oral history in the classroom and think that it can be applied in several ways. Teachers also believe, however, that there are a number of obstacles to the use of oral history in Omani schools and they suggest, first, that teachers should be given training to overcome these, and second, that the social studies curriculum be developed so that it will be easier to include oral history in the courses. The survey also revealed that teachers' views are affected by their gender and experience, with female and older teachers believing more strongly in the importance of oral history than male and younger teachers.

Keywords: views, oral history, social studies teachers, Oman

1. Introduction

Social studies teachers in many countries face difficulties when trying to develop students' understanding of life and events in the past. These difficulties arise from a number of factors: the ambiguity of the past, the gap between the past and the present, the shortage of information about some aspects of the past, the subjectivity of history and students' difficulties in relating the past to their own lives or that of their country. These difficulties often lead students to see history as dull, lifeless, meaningless, backward and useless, a belief which has a negative effect on their attitudes towards studying the subject (Eric, Samson, & Mueni, 2013; Kiio, 1999). Indeed, this negativity can be seen in Oman in the fact that history is not a popular subject choice among school students (Al-Kharousi, 2014; Ministry of Education, 2014).

One way to change this negative attitude toward history is to bring it to life through using oral history, where students will participate in writing history and come to value it because of their interaction with those who actually inhabited past events. Definitions of oral history make this evident. Fogerty (2001, p. 102), for example, defines it as "a structured conversation between two people - an interviewer pursuing a carefully defined line of inquiry, and a narrator with information that interviewer seeks to acquire". Shopes (2005) gives a similar definition: oral history is a "self-conscious, disciplined conversation between two people about some aspect of the past considered by them to be of historical significance and intentionally recorded for the record".

The use of oral history methodology to preserve the past was first developed into an academic program by Allan Nevins at Columbia University (Nevins, 1966). The methodology is now widely used in the school classroom to develop students' knowledge, attitudes, values and beliefs about the past and also to train students to write history for themselves. Oral history also enables students to develop such skills as communication, interviewing, recording, analyzing and documenting.

According to a number of writers (Ross, 1998; Bass & Rosenzweig, 1999; Wineburg, 2001; Ellis & Bruckman, 2002), the use of oral history in the classroom helps students to engage in "doing history" because they themselves gather information and rewrite it, a process which helps them to understand the vast difference between the past and the present (Lowenthal, 1985). It also helps them to understand the interaction between people and their environments and also the effect of social and political issues on the development of life at a

local and global level (Yow, 1994; O'Hanlon & Brookover, 2000; Moody, 2002).

Oral history also focuses on the human and empathetic aspect of historical events, thus allowing students to understand these events from the point of view of the people who inhabited them. This broadens their understanding of the past by providing them with different interpretations (Bradley Commission on History in School, 1988; Moos, 1988; Ellis & Bruckman, 2002; Shopes, 2005). Oral history can also show hidden aspects of past events, as it reveals individual people talking about their feelings, emotions, perceptions and identity, and presents a point of view which may be somewhat different from that described in documents. Another effect is to dispel students' negative myths and stereotypes about ageing (Ligon, Ehlman, Moriello, & Wellford, 2009). Given all this, Wood, A., Laren, Lisa, & Leach, (2012) consider oral history as a technique that bridges the gap between past and present and preserves peoples' memories.

The value of these features of oral history in the field of education has been supported by a number of studies which have found that oral history increases students' sense of achievement and promotes a more positive attitude toward history and past events (Lanman, 1987). It also improves students' level of achievement, as well as their motivation and communication skills, and creates a more positive attitude towards learning (Zellers, 1989). Other researchers have found similar results, showing that oral history increases motivation and self-confidence (Hover, 1993) and also improves students' attitudes towards social studies and develops their communication skills (Bean, 1995). On another level, it also provides a way to incorporate local ecological knowledge into the management and rehabilitation of the ecosystem (Calheiros, Seidl, & Ferreira, 2000; Hamerlynck, 2003).

Despite these positive features of oral history, an examination - based on social studies teacher workshops, MA students courses and fieldwork - shows that oral history methodology is rarely used by social studies teachers in Oman. Although social studies teachers do describe and discuss problems they face in teaching history, none of them appears to have tried or even thought of trying to use oral history as a solution. This concern led us to feel it important to conduct this study to understand more thoroughly the social studies teachers' views about using oral history in the classroom.

The other reason for conducting this study is the fact that the Omani context lends itself very well to the use of oral history in the classroom, due to the huge changes which have taken place since 1970 and the extent of the difference between that time and now. Although a great deal happened over that period, with events which have led to the current state of the nation, social studies textbooks cover them superficially or not at all, as various studies have shown (Al-Rabaani & Al-Salmi, 2010; Al-Rabaani, 2009; Salom & Al-Rabaani, 2010; Al-Rabaani, 2010).

Studies also reveal that social studies teachers themselves show little concern about or interest in the use of oral history in the classroom. Earlier researchers have looked at various aspects of this issue in Omani schools, but none has so far examined the views of the teachers themselves. Hover (1993) found that there were many challenges involved in using oral history in teaching; these need to be tackled if we are to make ensure the success of the process. Al-Aaja (2008) found that some social studies students' teachers use oral history, with some differences due to gender. It is thus vital that teacher views now be assessed, to improve our understanding of their beliefs about its importance, the practical obstacles they encounter in using it and their suggestions about how to expand its use.

2. Purpose of the Study

The aims of the study were to:

- Examine the views of Omani social studies teachers about using oral history in the classroom.
- Measure the effect of Omani social studies teachers' gender, experience and provinces in their views about using oral history in the classroom

3. Research Questions

- 1) What do social studies teachers think about the importance of using oral history in the classroom?
- 2) What are the methods used by social studies teachers to apply oral history in their classrooms?
- 3) What are the obstacles that social studies teachers encounter in using oral history in the classroom?
- 4) What suggestions do social studies teachers make about enhancing the spread of the use of oral history in Oman schools?

5) Do social studies teachers' views about using oral history in the classroom differ according to their gender, experience and provinces?

4. Methodology

4.1 Sample

Data was gathered from 315 social studies teachers. They were selected from urban and rural areas and from male and female schools, as the table shows.

Table 1. Study sample

Variable		N	%
Gender	Males	135	42.9
	Females	180	57.1
Total		315	100
Experience	1-5 years	62	19.7
	6-10	95	30.2
	Over 10	158	50.2
Total		315	100
Areas	Urban	218	69.2
	Rural	97	30.8
Total		315	100

4.2 Instrument

The data was gathered through a questionnaire developed based on the literature (Ellis & Bruckman, 2002; Shopes, 2005; Ligon, Ehlman, Moriello, & Wellford, 2009). It included 32 items divided into four domains: the importance of using oral history, methods of using oral history, obstacles encountered in using oral history in the classroom and suggestions for how to spread the use of oral history. The validity was checked through a jury panel while internal consistency reliability was calculated by piloting the questionnaire with 23 social studies teachers and using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which was found to be (.82).

5. Descriptive Results

1) What do social studies teachers think about the importance of using oral history in classroom?

Table 2. Social studies teachers' views about the importance of oral history

Items	M	Std
It links past with present and reduces the gap between them	4.64	.505
It provides additional information for social studies textbook content	4.56	.657
It makes students appreciate the contribution of past generations	4.55	.658
Understanding the lifestyle in the past and its associated customs and traditions	4.54	.673
Preserve undocumented history from extinction and develops students' concern about it	4.51	.620
Shows the emotional aspect of past events	4.45	.623
Presents points of view of those who lived in the period which may differ from the current views	4.36	.706
Recognizes the political, social, economic and cultural change across generations	4.29	.668
Helps to avoid mistakes of the past in current and future life	4.16	.783
Changes negative views/perceptions about the past	4.15	.807
Total	4.42	.414

The results revealed that the social studies teachers believe strongly in the importance of using oral history in the classroom, particularly to link past and present and to reduce the gap between them, as well as to provide additional information, and help students to appreciate the contribution of past generation and understand their customs.

2) What are the methods used by social studies teachers to apply oral history in the classroom?

Table 3. Social studies teachers' views about preferred methods for using oral history

<i>Items</i>	<i>Mea</i>	<i>Std</i>
Presenting films of recorded interviews with older people	4.48	.715
Encouraging students to conduct an interview with older people	4.38	.683
Arranging discussion circles in schools with older people	4.32	.758
Inviting older people to classroom to talk about past events	4.19	.927
The whole class visiting older people in their homes and interviewing them	4.08	.944
Total	4.27	.567

The results showed that social studies teachers are interested in using all possible oral history methods, particularly using films, encouraging students to conduct interviews with older people and arranging discussion circles with older people.

3) What are the obstacles that social studies teachers encounter in using oral history in the classroom?

Table 4. Social studies teachers' views about obstacles encountered in application of oral history

<i>Items</i>	<i>Mea</i>	<i>Std.</i>
Shortage of time to apply it.	4.07	1.079
Shortage of recorded interview films in the library	4.03	1.007
Difficulties in interviewing older people online or through the web	3.98	1.039
The content of social studies textbooks is not flexible	3.86	1.016
Visiting older people in their homes	3.83	1.000
Acceptance of older people to come to classroom to talk about past	3.80	1.129
Finding older people who really inhabited the events	3.79	1.037
Teacher ability and skills to use oral history	3.62	1.050
The accuracy of information provided by older people	3.55	1.009
Administration difficulties (no encouragement, administration facilities)	3.53	1.154
Availability of equipment for recording and arranging discussions	3.43	1.281
Total	3.77	.6350

The results revealed that there are several obstacles that teachers encounter in the application of oral history methods in Omani schools: the most important are shortage of time and of films, difficulties in interviewing older people online, and the inflexibility of social studies textbooks.

4) What are the suggestions of social studies teachers for spreading the use of oral history in Omani schools?

Table 5. Social studies teacher suggestions to spread the use of oral history

<i>Suggestions</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std.</i>
Training teachers about using oral history in pre-service training	4.50	.746
Introducing workshops for teachers about using oral history	4.32	.875
Encouraging teachers to use oral history	4.30	.746
Developing school textbooks and other facilities to make them suitable to apply oral history	4.29	.853
Total	4.35	.661

The results indicated that the social studies teacher were greatly concerned about getting training in ways to use oral history, either in pre-service or in-service training. They also wanted all the necessary facilities for applying oral history tools.

5) Do social studies teachers' views about using oral history in classroom differ according to their gender, experience or provinces?

Table 6. Means, standard deviation and t-test for the gender

<i>Domains</i>	<i>gender</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>sig</i>
Importance of oral history in learning	Males	4.33	.385	3.100	313	.002*
	Females	4.48	.424		301.712	
Methods of applying oral history	Males	4.25	.495	.498	313	.619
	Females	4.29	.617		311.591	
Obstacles encountered in applying oral history	Males	3.69	.638	1.867	311	.063
	Females	3.83	.627		286.021	
Suggestions for spreading the use of oral history in schools	Males	4.34	.572	.134	313	.893
	Females	4.35	.730		312.385	
Total	Males	4.16	.333	2.055	313	.041*
	Females	4.24	.397		307.687	

*: $p < 0.05$

The results showed that female social studies teacher believed more strongly than men in the importance of oral history, but both male and female teachers agreed about the type of methods to apply oral history, the obstacles encountered in applying oral history and suggestions for spreading the use of oral history in schools.

Table 7. Results of ANOVA test for the teacher experience

<i>Domains</i>		<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Importance of oral history in learning	Between Groups	1.116	2	.558	3.299	.038*
	Within Groups	52.766	312	.169		
	Total	53.882	314			
Methods of applying oral history	Between Groups	1.384	2	.692	2.162	.117
	Within Groups	99.907	312	.320		
	Total	101.291	314			
Obstacles encountered in applying oral history	Between Groups	.772	2	.386	.957	.385
	Within Groups	125.064	310	.403		
	Total	125.837	312			
Suggestions for spreading the use of oral history in schools	Between Groups	1.270	2	.635	1.434	.240
	Within Groups	138.137	312	.443		
	Total	139.408	314			
Total	Between Groups	.250	2	.125	.897	.409
	Within Groups	43.179	310	.139		
	Total	43.429	312			

*: $p < 0.05$

Table 8. Results of ANOVA test for the teacher provinces

<i>Domains</i>		<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Importance oral history in learning	Between Groups	.585	1	.585	3.437	.065
	Within Groups	53.297	313	.170		
	Total	53.882	314			
Methods of applying oral history	Between Groups	.086	1	.086	.267	.605
	Within Groups	101.205	313	.323		
	Total	101.291	314			
Obstacles encountered in applying oral history	Between Groups	.771	1	.771	1.918	.167
	Within Groups	125.066	311	.402		
	Total	125.837	312			
Suggestions for spreading the use of oral history in schools	Between Groups	1.539	1	1.539	3.494	.063
	Within Groups	137.868	313	.440		
	Total	139.408	314			
total	Between Groups	.098	1	.098	.701	.403
	Within Groups	43.331	311	.139		
	Total	43.429	312			

*: $p < 0.05$

The results showed that years of teacher experience made a significant difference in views about the importance of using oral history. The Scheffe test was used and found that teachers with over 10 years' experience believed more strongly in the importance of oral history than teachers with less experience. It also showed that there was no difference in other domains.

The results showed that whether teachers were from an urban or rural area made no significant difference in their views on these topics.

6. Discussion

The results from the survey showed that Omani social studies teachers believe strongly in the importance of using oral history methodology in classroom, in order to develop students' understanding of the relationship between past and present and to reduce the gap between them. These beliefs are in line with those described in the literature, where studies in a variety of countries indicate the advantages of using oral history in the classroom (Yow, 1994; Lowenthal, 1995; Ross, 1998; Bass & Rosenzweig, 1999; O'Hanlon & Brookover, 2000; Wineburg, 2001; Ellis & Bruckman, 2002; Moody, 2002). Omani teachers' stress on the importance of oral history in the classroom may be based on a belief that it is an effective way to connect students with the past and to motivate them to be concerned about the preservation of past events, customs, habits and traditions. Their belief in its importance could also be influenced by the Omani way of life, where several generations frequently live together in the grandparents' home, and where children often learn customs, habits and stories of the past from their grandparents. It could also be due to the teachers' fear of the widening gap between the present generation of students and the life of the past. This gap results from globalization and from the social, economic and political changes in the country, and many people see it as threatening the preservation of Oman's heritage, customs and traditions.

The social studies teachers' stress on the importance of oral history could also be connected to their desire to change students' attitude towards history, which is one of the least popular subject options chosen by students (Al-Kharousi, 2014; Ministry of Education, 2014). Teachers thus want to develop in students a more positive attitude to the past; they want them to value it and believe in the need to preserve its history, customs and habits. These teachers see their history as threatened by extinction as a result of the encroachment of modern life, which tends to be at the expense of traditional customs and habits.

Another reason that may explain the teachers' stress on the importance of exploring oral history is their awareness of the shortage of information about the past in the social studies textbooks, a shortage found in several studies (Al-Rabaani & Al-Salmi, 2010; Al-Rabaani, 2009; Salom & Al-Rabaani, 2010; Al-Rabaani, 2010). In recent years, an integrated curriculum has been developed, combining history, geography and citizenship education in a single textbook, and leading to a sharp reduction in the amount of information given on each subject. Teachers may feel that the inclusion of an oral history component in the course can help to compensate for this information shortage.

The study also revealed that the preferred oral history technique among social studies teachers is the use of recorded oral history films. The results also showed teacher enthusiasm for the oral history method of asking students to conduct interviews with older people. This is because most of the students' grandfathers and grandmothers are still alive, have personally experienced many important past events, and still follow traditional customs and habits, so it is easy and natural for them to explain specific customs and give authentic information about them.

However, the social studies teachers indicate that they encounter some obstacles in using oral history in the Omani classroom. One of these obstacles is the non-availability of time in the curriculum for applying oral history lessons; another is the fact that the schedule of social studies lessons does not include any time for doing oral history, nor do the textbooks provide enough flexibility for teachers to introduce it. The school administration is another source of obstacles; they do little to encourage teachers to introduce oral history, they could also do more to provide them with facilities and facilitating its application. This is because oral history is not popular as a teaching method in the Omani education system; it is used by schools only when celebrating festivals and for other specific activities when older people are invited to talk about past events or customs.

Another obstacle noted by social studies teachers was their own insecurity about using oral history as a teaching tool, whether in the classroom or outside. This insecurity exists because they have received no training in any of their courses about how to use these tools; it is not a component of their pre-service teacher preparation program, nor found in any in-service training to date. They therefore recommended that training in the methodologies definitely be provided at some point.

Teachers also felt that old people themselves constituted an obstacle to using oral history techniques. For example, it might be difficult to find someone to talk about specific events or, if found, to get them to agree to come to the school to talk. Equally, older people were reluctant to be interviewed online. However, teachers felt that this challenge could be overcome as it was caused by the fact that older people are largely unaware of the existence and value of oral history, but if they were encouraged to take part, their deep natural helpfulness would be brought out. Indeed, they already contribute most effectively to many other programs run by government such as television programs, national festivals and the like.

When we looked at differences in the attitudes of teachers due to gender, length of service and area, the results showed that gender did affect teachers' views, with female teachers believing more strongly than males in the importance of oral history. There are several possible reasons for this. Firstly, female teachers in general tend to be more concerned with teaching well and using a variety of teaching methods; it is girls' schools which usually win the awards from the Ministry of Education for better methodology and other teaching achievements. Second, female teachers may be more affected than men by the rapid changes taking place in society, with globalization affecting their way of life more and causing a greater fear and dislike of the ever-widening gap between past and present. Also, because the responsibility of educating children about customs and habits falls more on women than men in Omani culture, women may be more concerned than men about the effect of social change on their children and more aware of the tensions between past and present generations.

Another factor which was shown to affect the views of social studies teachers was their length of teaching experience, which is usually a reflection of their age. The study showed that those who have more than ten years' experience believe more strongly in the importance of using oral history tools than those with less than ten years. Again, there are a number of possible reasons for this. Firstly, older teachers have lived in both past and present worlds and have first-hand experience in the way that change has led to extinction of some traditional customs and habits, while younger teachers in the current generation know little or nothing about their history or the way of life in the past. Also, the views of older teachers could be affected by the traditional method of education under which they themselves studied; the education of that time prioritized the understanding of the country's history and stressed the need to preserve past customs and habits. In contrast, the current generation of teachers, who studied more recently, received an education which was less concerned with history, and more with development and change. It is therefore understandable that older teachers will fear the breadth of the gap between past and present and will believe that the use of oral history will help to reduce it, as students interact with older people and come to understand more vividly their history and their way of life.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of the study showed that Omani social studies teachers believe strongly in the importance of using oral history in schools and think that there are several methods by which it can be effectively used in classroom teaching. However, at the moment they face a number of difficulties in using oral history tools, and suggest that they be provided with in-service training on these methodologies.

The researcher recommends strongly that oral history methodologies be made much more widespread in Omani schools, and that the obstacles encountered by social studies teachers be investigated and overcome. The researcher also feels that it would be useful to conduct further studies about the reasons for the absence of oral history in Omani schools.

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