

Gathering Tacit Knowledge through Oral History

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Abstract

The University of Malaya is one of the earliest campus established in the country. Over the years, many of its scholars including professors and staff have retired; many who are distinguished and reputable experts in their fields. Hence, there is a need to gather tacit knowledge from these individuals rapidly before the information are gone forever, particularly non-quantifiable knowledge about social interactions that explained how decisions were made, how groups worked together and how communications flowed so that this crucial information can be passed on to future generations for reference and guidance. Such knowledge while unpublished, are commonly conveyed by narrative, although it is impossible to represent the total knowledge explicitly. This paper provides an insight on the oral history project conducted by the University of Malaya Library and how the 'tacit knowledge' was gathered. It examines the challenges in developing such spectrum of knowledge and discusses how the issues can be overcome. It is also hoped that through oral history, the depth of understanding from various perspectives and different situations could be further heightened. Furthermore, individuals are able to share their stories in their own words based on their own interpretations which are then recorded and preserved.

Keywords: oral history, tacit knowledge, interviews

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Introduction

This paper examines the oral history project undertaken by the librarians of the University of Malaya to gather and document tacit knowledge among retired Professors and other experts according to their subject expertise. Oral history here refers to a collaborative process of recorded interviews (audio and/or video) between a narrator with personal experience of significant events and an interviewer (librarians). Some organizations have an official process for recording *lessons learned* so that others can benefit from experiences in which they did not participate. These are real and relevant case studies which are conversational in nature in order to capture and transmit tacit knowledge. It is considered as an effective way to spread knowledge gained from experience (Malamed, 2017).

Tacit knowledge is rarely embedded in an organization's processes and procedures for continuous improvements. Without an awareness of it, tacit knowledge can be inconsequential, neglected and vanished. To avoid this, it is important to raise awareness of the organization's tacit knowledge store and make part of it if not all, explicit through knowledge management strategies.

Furthermore, when people with expertise leave a job, the organization often loses critical tacit knowledge because it was not passed on to others. This knowledge gap can be costly and time-consuming or impossible to replace (Leonard, 2014). Organizations need ways to glean and disseminate the tacit knowledge of experts for their own preservation. Tacit knowledge transmission is essential to an organization's future success.

Narration via the interview technique has been used for thousands of years but its fusion with technology, the tape-recorder, brought about oral history as it is known today. The origins of the modern oral history can be traced to a programme initiated by a North American journalist and oral historian Allen Nevins at Columbia University in 1948. His project, the tape recording of spoken memories of white male elites, became the first organized oral history project. Ever since, the movement has mushroomed, with hundreds of oral history programs underway around the world (Davis, 1977).

The oral history project in South East Asian began in the 1960s with each country individually initiating its own oral history programme. In Malaysia, a number of higher learning institutions had begun to introduce oral history in their respective course offerings. Among them are Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). The outcome of the project is the recording and transcription of interviews which are kept at relevant departments. Its objective is to increase students' theoretical and practical knowledge of oral history and to enable them to be involved in projects that document historical event. The oral history methodology was also introduced at USM through courses like The Socioeconomic History of Malaysia and the Japanese Occupation in Southeast Asia. In 2015, the Malaysian Oral History Association was set up in Shah Alam with the objective of collaborating with other agencies to carry out oral history studies in Malaysia. Mahani (2018) however commented that oral history projects merely exist within the confines of a particular institution and remain inaccessible to other researchers or the interested public.

In highly developed countries, oral history is highly applauded because of its ability to bring out and preserve the silences of traditional history. Singapore, for example, had executed its oral history program in a systematic manner with a comprehensive interview framework, selection of interviewees and respondents who are appropriate to the topic, high quality audio equipment and suitable place to store audio and visual testimonies. Since 2018, it has undertaken more than 4,000 interviews ranging from politicians to hawkers, medical personnel, war prisoners, artists and entrepreneurs.

Mahani (2018) also suggested that much of the problems faced by oral history in Malaysia are due to lack of manpower, leadership, finance and lack of strong interest from the top, be it the government, department, unit etc.

Oral history constitutes history that revolves around society itself. It provides an opportunity not only to leaders, but also to the public who are themselves part of a particular historical episode. This methodology does not only fill the void in official records but also challenges conclusions that are based on these documents. More importantly, it provides a “sense of belonging to a place or in time” to the entire community; not only for the experts but also for the students or the community. As intimated by Thompson (1978), they will not only learn about their history but in fact, they can write their own history. Oral history returns this history back to society using their own words. In retelling the past, this methodology indirectly helps society and the new generation to shape their future.

Background

Founded on 28 September 1905 in Singapore as the King Edward VII College of Medicine and on 8th October 1949, it became the University of Malaya with the merger of the King Edward VII College of Medicine and Raffles College in 1928.

The University of Malaya derives its name from the term 'Malaya' as the country was then known. The Carr-Saunders Commission on University Education in Malaya, which recommended the setting up of the university, noted in its Report in 1948: *"The University of Malaya would provide for the first time a common centre where varieties of race, religion and economic interest could mingle in joint endeavour ... For a University of Malaya must inevitably realise that it is a university for Malaya."*

The growth of the University was very rapid during the first decade of its establishment and this resulted in the setting up of two autonomous divisions on 15 January 1959, one located in Singapore and the other in Kuala Lumpur. In 1960, the government of the two territories indicated their desire to change the status of the Divisions into that of a national university. Legislation was passed in 1961 and the University of Malaya was established on 1st January 1962.

On June 16th 1962, University of Malaya celebrated the installation of its first Chancellor, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, who was also the country's first prime minister.

Since it is the earliest university in the nation, it has over a century of journeys with stories to be told. The Library's oral history initiative seeks to safeguard these voices and ensure that these narratives are not lost. In the University Management Committee Meeting on 5th March 2019, the Library was asked to initiate this project

and document *tacit knowledge* among retired Professor and other experts according to their subject expertise.

Statement of the problem

The higher learning institutions are changing rapidly. Strategic visions and goals have to be revisited and reevaluated so that these are aligned with the institutions' priorities . A generational shift can also be seen as the Baby Boomers move toward retirement, while a new group of academic and non-academics enter positions of leadership in the institution.

As the new generation creates the future, it is useful to remember that progress is rarely a smooth progression of guaranteed success, but rather a series of trials and errors, wrong turns, frustrations, insights, major hiccups and setbacks. Much can be learned from previous mistakes. The young generations particularly the Millennials can learn and value the sacrifices from the previous generations particularly the Baby Boomers and Gen-X.

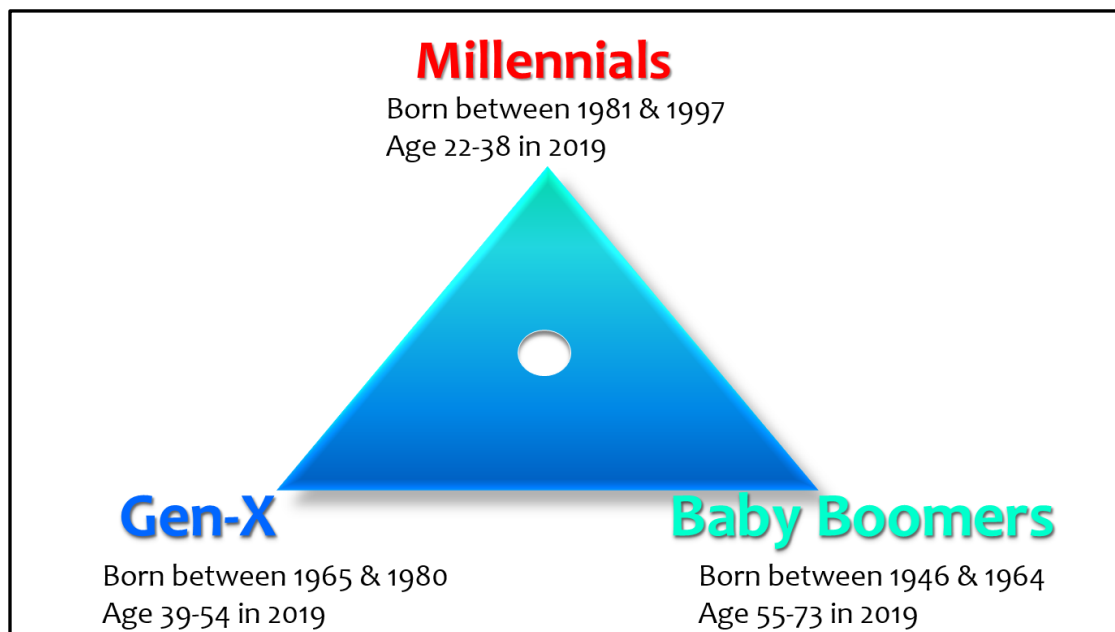


Figure 1 : The higher learning workforce

The higher learning industry is starting to experience a gap in knowledge and collective memory as those retiring are leaving the field with years of experience. There is a need to document the lives and experience of these groups in order to help prepare the next generation of leaders.

One approach to documenting this knowledge is through gathering life histories. Life history is an aspect of oral history, “that area where memory, myth, ideology, language, and historical cognition all interact in a dialectical transformation of the word into an historical artifact” (Harris and Grele, 1985). Through life history, informants relate not only their life experiences but also their reflections on what they have learned and how their actions and presence may have influenced the others. By gathering more than one life history, “the wider meaning of the life story, however, is conveyed not by the individual anecdotes, but by their weaving together” (Ashplant,

1998). Oral history has the potential to break down barriers between generations, between educators and students, between educational institutions and the world outside.

This paper will share the challenges and experiences of establishing an oral history project specifically in an academic library setting.

The approach

Upon request from the University Management Committee in March 2019 to gather tacit knowledge among the retired professors and other prominent non academicians, the library then held a two-day workshop to train a team of librarians and technicians. The workshop illustrates ways to conduct oral history according to the standards by skilled and qualified trainers from the Malaysian Oral History Associations. The training consisted a series of theories and practical sessions where participants had a chance to act as narrators and interviewers and the roles were then commented upon by the facilitators for improvements.



Figure 2 : Training session

Once the team are back in the office, preparations and planning for the first interview session began which was with the Protem Chairman (Retired Professors Committee), Prof Emeritus Dato Dr Isahak Haron. Dato Isahak, aged 79, is a renowned academicians in the education field in the country. This interview is currently available for viewing on the web site (https://youtu.be/_iL7ykO5agI).

Before the interview session, the team had meticulously did background researches, prepared the questions, set the date and ensured all the equipments are in working order. The interview was held in a private room with minimum noise and interference. Few members of the team came to support the session and also to make the narrator felt comfortable and welcome. Some of the subsequents sessions were held at the narrators' home to make them feel at ease in their own surroundings.



Figure 3 : Oral History equipments

The taped interviews are then edited, processed and archived to become aural record for future generation.

The most tedious and difficult part of the oral history project is editing and transcribing. Editing the taped interviews require special skills in software manipulation such as Adobe Premiere while the transcription is painstakingly done by listening and writing the conversation verbatim.

Some of the interview sessions lasted more than sixty minutes so the team had to look for suitable storage to keep them as well as provide backups.

Once everything is up and ready, the team then explored ways to promote the project. Snippets of the recordings were uploaded into Youtube while the audio recordings were blasted using a Podcast platform as shown below.

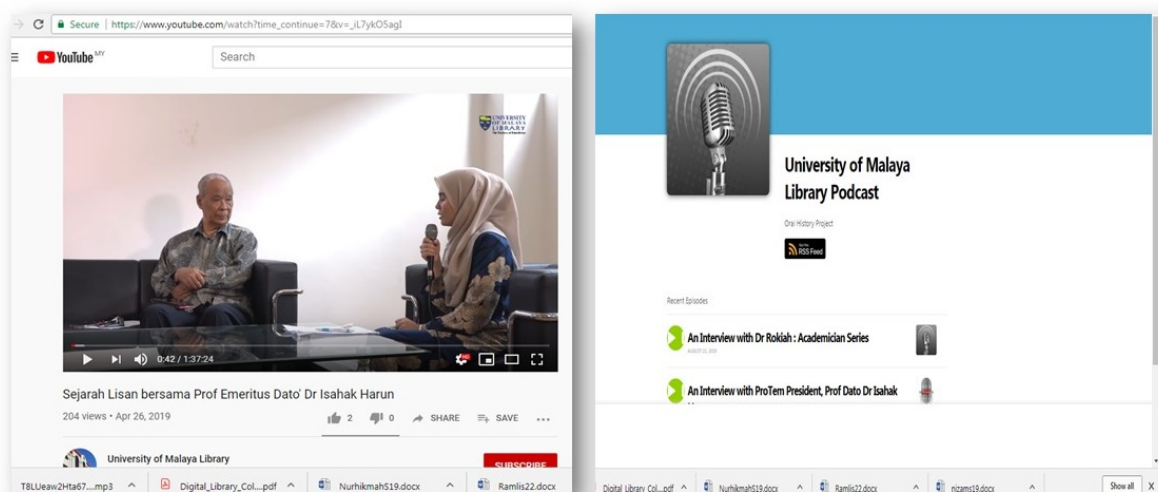


Figure 4 : Promotion

Findings and Discussion

The Oral History project revealed the following :

- Majority of the team members who conducted the interviews enjoyed the experience and learned the significance of many events and were able to relate with them. The sessions were engaging and they gained profound insights out of it.
- Some of the early ideas conceived by the retired Professors have become part of the nation's policy
- How the setting up of the country's first STD & HIV Centre came about amidst the taboo back then
- How policies on education system were formulated
- Figure 5 below summarised the entire process. The interviewers constantly reflected lessons learned during the sessions by deciding and evaluating the conversations which happened both ways. Basically, to a certain extent it has an impact on decision making process, judgement and evaluation.

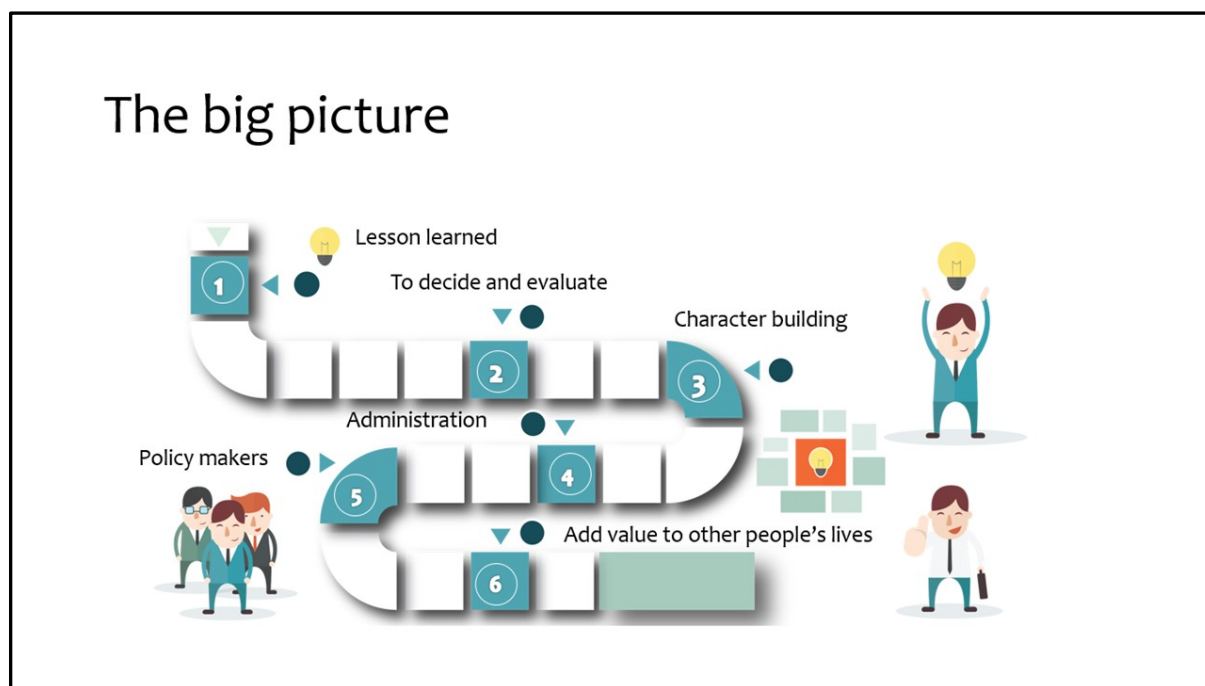


Figure 5 : The big picture

Challenges and Opportunities

Several institutions conducting oral history are facing similar challenges. Generally, the following factors pose challenges to the oral history initiative :

- a. Lack of technical skills
Not many librarians possess video editing skills and have to rely on existing technical staff. This tend to delay the project because the same staff have to set

precedence according to a task's urgency. Since no deadline is set for the accomplishment of the project, it tends to be on the last in the list of priorities.

It is suggested that all team members be trained with basic video editing skills so that the oral history project of an individual can be concluded faster instead of depending on the technical staff indefinitely and causing much delay.

b. Lack of manpower

Again, limited number of manpower in the team which is conducted on a project basis rather than a set of annual key performance indicators (KPIs). With staff multitasking, the project is not given priorities that it should. Without adequate manpower, it is difficult for the project to be implemented in a systematic manner because those involved are burdened with other responsibilities.

Conducting oral history will indirectly improve research skills. If team members can be made to understand that it builds capabilities of recording oral history (asking questions, listening, empathising and otherwise responding appropriately, applying historical knowledge, awareness of self and others, including showing an ability to acknowledge difference, and producing a high quality recording). Another suggestion would be to collaborate with institutions that teach oral history as part of its academic programme. The end result can be archived in the library for collection development which could be used by the public for research purposes.

c. Difficulty in transcribing

Creating transcripts are extremely time consuming and tedious. It may require anywhere up to eight hours or more to transcribe a single hour of recording (roughly 10 to 15 minutes of transcription for each minute of audio). This has appeared to be a considerable time investment especially when there are a number of interviews held in the project.

Various literatures have shown that since the 1980s there has been a heavy emphasis on the *oral* nature of oral history. The recorded interview has therefore become the primary document of the discipline. Reasons for this centre on the difficulty of capturing the essence of spoken communication in a written format. It is difficult to accurately recreate all the nuances of a spoken conversation in writing; conversation and text are fundamentally different forms of communication. These difficulties have been the focus of much oral historical methodological consideration and there is a rich and varied literature on transcription.

As such, perhaps the initial emphasis would be to focus on the audio and video recording rather than to transcribe the interviews so as not to delve too much time into it that it renders the project stagnant.

d. Lack of awareness

The return on investment (ROI) of oral history is not immediate. An interview may only become worthy and invaluable after the narrator is no longer alive. Or, it could be useful and searched for by many, 5 or ten years down the line. In the

meantime, fighting for the meagre budget and team members who are committed can be a struggle if its value is not highlighted.

Promotion, intrinsically, plays a vital key. It is indeed worthwhile to publicize and market its significance at every possible opportunity there is. One recommended avenue would be to organize conferences or workshops which serve as venues for oral historians to narrate their experiences, share lessons they have learned and exchange ideas about the method. Through these forums, scholars may also analyze their activities to recognize basic principles that would “provide a broader conceptual framework with which to understand goal oriented, socially and culturally influenced” practices (Santiago, F, 2017).

e. Narratives on crippling setbacks

Since majority of the team members have just started conducting the interviews, most of the questions are considered ‘safe’, over the surface and did not dig deeper. Questions on crippling setbacks if any should also be asked and how they overcame the situations especially among the retired top managements so that it can be valuable “lessons learned” for future generation so as not to make the same mistake that could tarnish the institution’s name and image.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the oral history project conducted by the library and hoped that it contributes to the body of knowledge since very few has been written on the topic locally.

In conclusion, collaborative research through oral history has brought the academicians and librarians into a much closer, less hierarchical relationship and the dependence have become mutual in the process. The narrators brought with them special experience of the organisation culture at a particular time in its history and provided insight into significant events but relied on the support of librarians as organizers and field workers in the spirit of intellectual co-operation.

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