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Engaging Community Organizations in Digital Projects

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Partnering with community organizations on digital projects facilitates meaningful student learning and creates valuable outputs for the organization. The case study for this discussion is my graduate-level oral history course, housed in the School of

Library, Archival and Information Studies (SLAIS) at the University of British Columbia (UBC). In the course, students create an oral history collection with a community partner, including developing project goals, conducting interviews, and curating born-digital outputs.

Why Oral History?

Oral history is a bounded area of inquiry that allows the course to combine research and theory with practice. It addresses many areas of importance to library and archives students, such as:

- project planning and implementation;
- working with community members;
- working with institutional partners;
- exploring legal and ethical issues;



- planning for storage and the preservation of materials;
- providing access to and encouraging use of materials and resources.

Of equal importance, creating a collection of oral history recordings is a project that many potential community partners find valuable.

Project-based Learning

When I designed this course, I was not aware of project-based learning as a pedagogical approach. However, as a student, I often found it unsatisfying to complete a term's worth of disjointed assignments that did not work towards any unified whole or greater good. Instead, I preferred to spend my time and effort in a way that made a difference in the world beyond my own learning. I was lucky enough to be part of several courses, in a variety of domains, which facilitated a rich learning experience through a substantial real-world project. Therefore, when I was given the opportunity to develop my own course, I decided that these courses would serve as my models and that the majority of the assignments I developed would be part of a joint course project that all members of the class would contribute to.¹

¹ Because students sometimes become concerned about their performance if they do not have an opportunity to receive feedback throughout the semester, I assign a brief scholarly review of an oral history resource early on. This helps students think critically about the possible outputs of oral history work and gives me an opportunity to provide them with feedback before they undertake the more significant project-based assignments in the course.



Benefits of a Joint Course Project with a Community Partner

One oral history interview on its own is certainly worth doing, but a corpus of 10-16 interviews on a particular topic or community has much more value for future research and use. In addition, it can be difficult for students who are new to oral history to recruit an interviewee who is not a friend or relative.

I wanted these future librarians and archivists to experience interviewing an individual not already known to them, for a purpose beyond the student's own research interests or curiosity, because this is the type of project they are most likely to be involved in the future.

Although interviewing one's own contacts can be valuable and rewarding, I wanted these future librarians and archivists to experience interviewing an individual not already known to them, for a purpose beyond the student's own research interests or curiosity, because

this is the type of project they are most likely to be involved in the future. (For example, an archivist might be called on to interview retirees for an organization's anniversary.)

Furthermore, because the course takes place over a twelve-week term it would be difficult for students to identify a potential research topic and recruit an interviewee before being expected to conduct the interview. Therefore, by partnering with a community organization, the partner is responsible for identifying all of the potential interviewees for the project and ensuring there is up-to-date contact information for each, thus allowing the students to complete a complex project in a relatively short period of time.

Roles of Community Partner and Students

Along with being responsible for interviewee identification and recruitment, the project partner is also available



throughout the term to help students resolve any issues (such as not being able to make contact with their assigned interviewee). In return, each student is responsible for conducting one interview and preparing the resulting recording and associated materials for the partner's use.

The students work in pairs to conduct two interviews. (One student leads the interview and the other student takes responsibility for the recording equipment. They switch roles for the second interview.) I believe that experiencing two

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interviews greatly increases student learning as each interviewee and interview is (sometimes dramatically) different. However, having each student be primarily responsible for conducting and processing one particular interview keeps the workload to a manageable

level and helps to mitigate potential problems of unequal workload distribution that can happen in group projects.

The course project is integrated but broken into components that are due throughout the term. This structure helps to ensure that students are able to complete the entire project on time (because it is simply not possible to complete all of the required components in the last week of the term) and also allows me to provide feedback about the students' plans and progress when it can still make a difference to the project's final outputs and the students' and interviewees' experiences.

The project components are:

- background research and question list for interviewee;
- interview recording, written documentation about the interview, partial written transcription, photographs of the interviewee, and index of interview topics;



- biographical note about the interviewee and selected brief quotation from the interview to be used for an online description of the interview or for an oral history based exhibition;
- brief reflective essay on the student's participation in the project that uses relevant scholarship to make sense of their experience and document learning.

Case Studies of Community Partners

While teaching this course, I have partnered with three different organizations: a community-service nonprofit without a staffed archives; a community organization with a small archives, library, and museum as just one of its many services; and a community archives and museum that began as an oral history program. I will share my experiences working with each organization as well as tips to maximize benefits for the organization, students, and instructor.

Partner 1: Social Service Nonprofit without a Staff Archivist/Librarian

My first partner organization was an opportunistic choice. A staff member from this community nonprofit had requested a student volunteer from SLAIS to organize their archives. I learned of their interest and wrote to ask if they would like to collaborate on an oral history project. The staff member agreed.

The staff member, interviewees, and students were very enthusiastic and helpful, and we recorded a corpus of fascinating interviews. Because this was a new project, the students developed the goals of the entire project in collaboration with the staff member. We also curated an



exhibit on the history of the organization (which started as a course assignment and then was completed on a volunteer basis by a few students, the staff member, and myself).

However, there were many unexpected and frustrating aspects of this partnership:

- The project exhibit, which was mounted in a space that was often rented for corporate events, and thus was an important revenue stream for the organization, was only up for a week. It was removed because it was physically mounted in a way that the organization's upper management didn't like (because we were provided with a very limited budget for creating it). (In addition, upper management may have been uncomfortable with some of the social justice topics that the exhibit explored.)
- As of a few years following completion of the project, the archives were still not organized and usable. This reality became apparent when a staff member contacted me for additional copies of the interview recordings because those I had deposited could not be located.

Upon reflection, I realized that the oral history project and its outputs had become caught up in internal organizational changes and staff conflicts that often exist in any organization that does many different things. Over time, this particular non-profit had transformed to become more business friendly in order to fund its social service programs in a highly competitive funding landscape. And, as is usual in this kind of situation, some of the organization's staff and volunteers were okay with that transformation and others were not. If I had been more aware of the situation and more adept at navigating this political landscape at the start of the project, I may have been able to make a more lasting contribution to the organization.



Project Benefits

- the students had a great learning experience and the interviewees were delighted to be able to share their memories. (All of the frustrations happened after the course was over);
- the organization has a fine set of oral history interviews that document their important community contributions (for which I continue to keep backup copies);
- we created an interview-based exhibit, exploring the rich history of the organization, which was viewable during an important and well-attended event.

I learned a great deal about working with community partners from this experience. When it again came time to teach the course (18 months later), working again with the first organization was not an option.

To prepare for the next iteration of the course, I developed a set of criteria that I would use to select my next community partner. Although this criteria has been developed specifically within the context of an oral history project, most would also apply to other kinds of partnership projects with some adaptations.

A partner organization needs:

1. *A paid staff member willing and able to take the lead.* This person is responsible for recruiting interviewees, providing interviewee contact information, and serving as a resource for students, interviewees and the instructor throughout the project. A volunteer, no matter how devoted, is not enough to depend on. If a dedicated volunteer leaves the organization, they are usually not easily replaceable. However, if a staff member leaves, there is probably money in the budget to hire a replacement. In addition, if a community organization has



paid staff members, this usually means the organization is at least somewhat stable.

2. *A supportive board and/or upper management.* Are the powers-that-be (i.e., board, management, and senior staff) clearly supportive of the project goals and have they approved the staff member(s) project time?

3. *Identified general project goals and potential outputs.* The organization should have a reasonably clear idea as to why they want an oral history collection and what the potential uses and outputs are for such a collection. Although “these people are going to die soon and we should talk to them” has formed the initial impulse for many fine oral history projects, the actual project goals need to be fleshed out more fully before beginning.

4. *Enough identified interviewees with current contact information.* The organization needs to have enough known individuals, with up-to-date contact information (or a reasonable chance of creating a contact list prior to the start of the project) so that each student has an interview to conduct. It is also necessary to have a few back-up interviewees, in case one of the original participants gets ill or needs to drop out for other reasons.

5. *Accessible location for the organization and interviewees.* Although telephone interviews certainly have their place, it is important for the learning goals of this course that the interview takes place face-to-face. In addition, it is customary in the discipline of oral history for the interview to be conducted in a place where the interviewee is most comfortable, such as their home. In my own context of teaching in a large city, I ensure that the organization’s offices and the interviewees’ homes are accessible by public transit (accommodating for students with disabilities).



6. *Identified repository for interview materials.* Does the organization have a plan to store and care for the born-digital audio and visual files that will be created during the project, either in an established and staffed internal archives or with an identified outside repository?

With the above criteria for selecting a partner organization in mind, I posted an online call for community partners to a provincial association for cultural organizations and received over a dozen brief project proposals within a day. After examining each proposal, I interviewed a few and selected my second partner.

Partner 2: A Community Organization with a Small Archive/Museum

This long-established community organization has a small (but staffed) library, museum and archives as just one of its many services and facilities. (Others include a restaurant and event space, a community garden, and educational programs for adults and children, etc.).

Below were the advantages and disadvantages of choosing this organization:

Advantages:

- interviews clearly were going to be stored and taken care of as part of the existing museum and archives programs;
- without the student volunteers and the instructor's experience in oral history, the community organization would have found it difficult to start an oral history program because they didn't have existing staff expertise and had limited staff time;
- the staff members (i.e., museum curator and librarian) and the volunteer community historian had a clear vision of who they wanted to interview and why;



- the organization had worked with SLAIS students many times before as interns and volunteers, and so were familiar with our students and their skills.

Disadvantages:

- there was no clear plan for how to obtain funding to complete any desired future interviews, as existing staff did not have the time to conduct and process interviews and were not familiar with potential oral history funding sources;
- there was no clear plan for how the interviews would be used, other than building a richer research collection. Although I personally find this to be an appropriate reason to create an oral history collection, this situation was a bit frustrating to the students, who would have preferred a clear plan to make the interviews available online or presented as part of an exhibit.

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Despite the above disadvantages, the project went smoothly. The organization gained a useful collection of oral history recordings from members of the community and the students learned and

practiced valuable professional skills. While I would certainly be open to working with this community organization in the future, at the time the course was due to again be taught, I chose to give another community organization the opportunity to participate. I contacted several potential partners from my previous call for proposals, and decided to partner with a community-focused museum and archives organization.



Partner 3: A Community Archives/Museum with Oral History at Its Core

This partner organization began in the 1970s as a volunteer-led oral history program that developed into a professionally staffed museum and archives. Over time, conducting new oral history interviews had slowed down as the long-term interviewers aged and the organization took on a broader mission that included an active schedule of programs, exhibitions, and publications, as well as collecting documents, objects, and visual materials.

Below were the advantages and disadvantages of choosing this organization:

Advantages:

- had a large number of identified and pre-screened interviewees;
- had high-quality recording equipment;
- was already curating and providing access to interviews through their website. Also, they had an established program of publications and exhibits;
- had an enthusiastic and experienced lead staff member who was a SLAIS alumnae.

Disadvantages:

- as this organization already had an ongoing oral history program, students were not able to make as many meaningful decisions about the project. For example, we talked about the goals for the oral history program rather than designing the goals in collaboration with the partner organization.

Given what I had learned in my previous experiences and the established nature of the oral history program in this



organization, this partnership went very smoothly, with good outcomes for both students and the partner organization.

Project Benefits

Considering the above three case studies, I've identified some overall benefits to the community partners and students who participate in these types of projects.

Community Partners

- community partners receive a corpus of 12-16 oral history interviews that are ready for use;
- fresh student volunteers may inspire other new volunteers to become more involved in the organization and also reinvigorate existing volunteers;
- community partners receive constructive feedback about their program from professionals-in-training and the instructor.
- for an organization new to oral history, having a completed pilot project might form the basis for successful future funding applications;
- for an organization with an existing oral history program, the project provides a way to make progress on the backlog of planned interviews;
- doing oral histories with members of your own community and other stakeholders is a good way to build strong community connections. Oral history projects are not just about documenting the past, but also about building the future.



Students

- students engage with theory and design. They implement a research methodology, practice collaboration skills with fellow students and a community partner, and learn and implement technical and project management skills;
- students experience implementing professional standards and using digital tools;
- students are part of a community-based project that is similar to the type of projects they may contribute to in the future as a librarian or archivist;
- students have the opportunity to create something of lasting value that provides clear benefits to the partner organization and the interviewees;
- students see first hand how the project fits (or doesn't) into the larger goals of the organization and its stakeholders;
- legal and ethical concerns surrounding intellectual property and privacy, which frequently arise in digital projects, become more salient when students work with real data created in collaboration with people they have actually met;
- the project outputs students create can become part of their professional portfolios;
- several students have gone on to do internships/volunteer hours with the community partner or with another institution undertaking similar projects.

Conclusion

In my experience, completing an oral history project with a community partner as part of the course provides students with the opportunity to gain valuable professional experience



while still having a safety net that is provided by the course structure and instructor's presence. Even if they never complete another oral history project, the generalizable skills students gain during the course will allow them to implement their own community-led digital projects in a variety of domains as they enter competitive job markets.

About the Author

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Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the potential risks and rewards for student learning when an instructor collaborates on a course project with a community partner? How might you turn potential risks into student learning opportunities?
2. Review the list of criteria for selecting a community partner on pages 7- 9. How would you adapt these criteria in selecting a community partner for your own course project?
3. Think about a recent project you have led or contributed to. How could you adapt the project to incorporate a community organization as a partner? What might be gained and/or lost in such a partnership?