Educational research has traditionally been dominated by positivist and behaviorist experimentation designed to explain, in essence, how students learn, how they should be taught, and how schools should be structured and re-structured to achieve the goal of an educated society. Quantitative research methods have, for generations, provided educators with data and analyses with which to implement, maintain, and curtail controversial policies relating to learning and schools. Such policies include standardized testing, multicultural education, vocational education, charter schools, and No Child Left Behind.

Recent educational scholarship has questioned traditional reliance on quantitative measurement and analysis indicated by surveys, questionnaires, and empirical, deductive approaches to inquiry. Irving Seidman (2006, p. 8) refutes the notion that educational research should be primarily scientific: “At the very heart of what it means to be human is the ability of people to symbolize their experience through language.”

Researchers’ growing skepticism of using mainly quantitative methods to address critical educational issues led to an increase in the development of methods designed to ask and answer questions relating to individual, humanistic perceptions of learning, teaching, and the role of schools in society. Qualitative methods, such as ethnography, focus group interaction, narrative analysis, biography/autobiography, case studies, in-depth interviews, and oral history, have helped diversify educational research methods, encouraged researchers to confront issues relating to human experience, and provided more lenses with which to examine the impact social and cultural forces have on learning, teaching, and school structure (Seidman, 2006, p. 2).

Qualitative research methods, unlike quantitative strategies that are deductive in nature, often take an inductive approach to inquiry and derive conclusions and theories by means of a thorough analysis of particular experiences. For example, life history researchers Ardra Cole and J. Gary Knowles (2001) employ methods of inquiry that recognize the potential individuals possess as “windows into broader social and societal conditions” (p. 12). Qualitative methodologies are playing an increasingly prominent role in educational research. By providing opportunities to examine educational issues through individual lenses, they offer important insights into diverse perspectives on important societal issues. They also offer access to the meanings behind and contributions made by particular individuals.

Oral history, defined as the collection, preservation, and dissemination of historical data obtained through planned in-depth, life history interviews, was first developed and popularized in 1948 by Columbia University historian Allan Nevins as he collected spoken reminiscences of political leaders, statesmen, and academic scholars for “future historians, for research, and as a tool for orally based biography” (Dunaway, 1996, p. 8). Nevins recorded and archived historical data often not found in traditional written records (Moss, 1974, p. 9). He did this by collecting spoken data with a tape recorder and producing near-verbatim transcripts that preserved the resulting narratives.

Nevins was the leader of the first generation of historians to utilize oral history in their research and teaching. However, oral history was slow to gain recognition as a legitimate scholarly method, in spite of the increasing usage among groups of researchers. Many historians, archivists, and other academics adopted a skeptical stance and questioned the validity and reliability of individual memory, as well as the role memory plays in the interpretation and writing of history.

The decades of the 1960s and 1970s, a period of widespread social, political, economic, and cultural change, brought out a new generation of scholars who rejected much of the elitism inherent in traditional history-writing. Oral history began to play a significant role in empowering and “giving voice” to ordinary people, viewing them as contributing actors in the process of change and continuity on the historical stage. A new generation of scholars, who pursued history from the “bottom up” rather than from the “top down,” began writing and rewriting history from the perspective of those who had been excluded, rather than the perspective of the elite (Griffin, 1989, p. 4).

Historian Paul Thompson (2000) echoes the opinion of his generation of reform-minded historians by asserting that “oral history is a history built around people” (p. 23). By expanding the scope of history to include the perspectives of ordinary people, oral history “offers a challenge to the accepted myths of history, to the authoritarian judgment inherent in its tradition. It provides a means for a radical transformation of the social meaning of history” (p. 23–24).

As oral history methodology gained legitimacy and attracted converts among historians and social scientists as both a legitimate data-gathering tool and a means to democ-
ratize the interpretation and writing of history, it advanced to a third stage. Researchers began to examine many of the methodology’s theoretical underpinnings by acknowledging a shift in emphasis from an “interest in the object to an interest in the description of the object and the observer” (Grele, 1999). Leaders of this movement claimed that the theories and processes involved in oral history *themselves* represented key epistemological components of the discipline of history. They saw oral history as being “compiled within a historical frame negotiated by the interviewer and the narrator, within contemporary trends, within certain definable conventions of language and cultural interaction” (Dunaway, 1996, p. 8). These advocates regarded oral history not only as a method of primary source *documentation*, but also as a *process* for constructing and transmitting history from oral sources (Dunaway, 1996, p.8–9). No longer interested only in *(what)* knowledge is accumulated, oral historians increasingly sought answers relating to *(how)* knowledge is acquired from individual memory; how interviewees make sense of and find meaning in their life experiences; what role interviewers play in the process; and how, why, and in what forms this knowledge is preserved, presented, and passed down. This emerging, reflexive viewpoint of oral history has been accompanied by an increasing skepticism toward the notion of universal truth. Recent historical and social science scholarship reflects an emerging subjectivity associated with oral history—a subjectivity emphasizing the analysis and interpretation of meaning in people’s life experiences. According to literary scholar and oral historian Alessandro Portelli, this subjectivity has generated a form of scholarship that departs somewhat from the traditional fact-based notion of history, and moves toward a more reflexive and phenomenological explanation of why we study history in the first place:

> ... memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings. Thus, the specific utility of oral sources...lies not so much in their ability to preserve the past, as in the very changes wrought by memory. These changes reveal the narrators’ effort to make sense of the past and to give a forum to their lives, and set the interview and the narrative in their historical context. (Portelli, 1991, p. 52)

This construction and interpretation of meaning from individual life experiences can best be accomplished by examining the intersection of human experience and social context. Educational sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot stressed the importance of context in documenting human experience:

> By context, I mean the setting—physical, geographic, temporal, historical, cultural, aesthetic—within which the action takes place. Context becomes the framework, the reference point, the map, the ecological sphere; it is used to place people and action in time and space and as a resource for understanding what they say and do. The context is rich in clues for interpreting the experience of the actors in the setting. We have no idea how to decipher or decode an action, a gesture, a conversation, or an exclamation unless we see it embedded in context. (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 41)

Central to the discussion of meaning and context in individual lives is the need to study the interaction between interviewer and interviewee in creating an oral history document. Historian Ronald Grele (1985) has said that oral history interviews are collaborative, “joint activities, organized and informed by the historical perspectives of both participants” (p. 136–37). Grele referred to oral history interviews as “conversational narratives: conversational because of the relationship of interviewer and interviewee, and narrative because of the form of exposition—the telling of a tale” (p. 135). According to Grele,

> When we interview someone, he not only speaks to himself and to the interviewer, but he also speaks through the interviewer to the larger community and its history as he views it. This is a dialogue, the exact nature of which is difficult to define. There are seemingly two relationships contained in one—that between the informant and the historian, and that between the informant and his own historical consciousness. (p. 136–37)

Psychologists Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich (1995) place stress on the collaborative relationship between interviewer and interviewee that is vital to obtain useful historical data as well as a coherent historical narrative. Emphasizing a relationship built around empathy, they see the need for the interviewer to be “sensitive to the problems of dealing with human complexity and contradiction,” stressing that it is always important to consider “how much one needs to know about someone else to feel that one can understand something about them” (p. xi). Historian Jan Vansina (1985) views oral history as representing an emerging form of collaborative subjectivity, where interviewees and interviewers collaborate to construct and transmit human observations, interpretations, and emotions in the form of narrative:

> Eyewitness accounts are always a personal experience as well and involve not only perception, but also emotions. Witnesses often are also not idle standers-by, but participants in the events. Furthermore, an understanding of what happened cannot occur through mere data of perception. Perceptions must be organized in a coherent whole and the logic of the situation supplies missing pieces of observation. (p. 4)
The underlying premise of the collaborative nature of oral history was that interviewees, above everyone else, are the center of attention. Without them, researchers would have nothing to present or interpret. In oral history, data and stories are not so much extracted by the interviewers so much as they are willingly given by the interviewees for posterity. The researcher, in turn, accepts the gift, contextualizes it, and transmits it for the benefit of future generations (Kline, 1996, p. 39).

The Center for Oral History at the University of Hawai‘i

The Center for Oral History (COH) is a unit of the Social Science Research Institute in the College of Social Sciences. It was established in 1976 by the Hawai‘i State Legislature and is the only state-supported center of its kind in the islands that conducts and publishes oral history interviews focused on Hawai‘i’s past. Since its inception, COH has researched and conducted forty-six oral history projects, interviewed more than 800 individuals and deposited in archives and libraries a collection of over 36,000 transcript pages.

In addition to providing researchers with primary-source documentation centering on individual life experiences, COH has produced educational materials including journal articles, newspaper features, books, audio/visual presentations, dramatizations, and websites based on the interviews. COH has also presented lectures and facilitated discussions on local history, conducted classes and workshops on oral history methodology, and served as a consultant to community groups conducting their own oral history projects.

Introduction to the oral history narratives

The seven narratives contained in this issue are edited from transcripts of oral history interviews conducted by the Center for Oral History. The interviewees are educators who witnessed and participated in the many developments that occurred in public education in Hawai‘i in the twentieth century. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by COH-trained student transcribers, audio-reviewed by the interviewers to correct omissions and other errors, and edited slightly for clarity and accuracy.

The researcher/interviewers then collaborated with each interviewee to review the transcripts. The interviewees were asked to verify names and dates and to clarify statements where necessary. In some cases, interviewees made wholesale changes to their transcripts; in others, minimal alterations were required and made. The researchers then incorporated the interviewees’ changes in the final version— the version that included all statements that the interviewees wished to appear in the public record.

The interviewees read and signed a legal release allowing the University of Hawai‘i Center for Oral History and the general public scholarly and educational use of the transcripts.

The aim of oral history interviews is the creation of truthful narratives reflecting interviewees’ life experiences. To achieve this end, the researchers conducted extensive research, selected interviewees carefully, established and maintained rapport, listened carefully and with empathy, asked thoughtful questions, collaborated with the interviewees over the transcripts, and, when possible, corroborated interviewee statements with available written documents.\(^1\)

The interview transcripts were then edited into narratives by removing interviewers’ questions, moving sections for readability and coherence, and deleting sections due to space limitations.\(^2\) In some cases, words were added for clarification and transition purposes. Added words are bracketed [ ].

Andrew W. S. In, professor and dean, University of Hawai‘i College of Education, 1951–1984; and
Harlan Cleveland, president, University of Hawai‘i, 1969–1974.

Prior to holding the taped interview, researchers conducted an untaped preliminary interview with each of the interviewees. The preliminary interviews helped establish rapport and enabled the researchers to obtain biographical data on the interviewees. In addition, the researchers were able to assess each interviewee’s depth and breadth of knowledge, clarity of memory, ability to articulate life experiences, and willingness to participate in the project.

Center for Oral History researchers/interviewers Warren Nishimoto and Joe Rossi conducted interviews at the interviewees’ homes. Because interviewees were asked to comment on experiences and incidents oftentimes specific to their own lives, no set questionnaire was used. Instead, a list of topics tailored to each interviewee was developed, creating biographical case studies centered mainly on the families, childhoods, education, and professional careers of the interviewees and the events that shaped their lives.

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REFERENCES


Grele, R. J. (December 15, 1999). Email to author.


ENDNOTES


2 Readers wishing to view the transcripts in their entirety should consult the following COH publications: *Kalihi: Place of Transition* (Albert Like); *Public Education in Hawai'i: Oral Histories* (Amy Lum Fern, Laurence J. Capellas, Marion McGregor Lee Loy and R. Burl Yarbbery); and *Presidents of the University of Hawai'i: Harlan Cleveland* (Harlan Cleveland). Andrew In’s transcript, yet unpublished, will be part of a future COH oral history publication focusing on Hawai’i-born University of Hawai’i faculty.