

Graduate School of Library and Information Studies
LBSCI 790.3: Theory and Practice of Oral History

Professor:
Office:
Email:
Office Hours:

A. COURSE DESCRIPTION

Bulletin Description

3hr, 3cr. Prereq.: LBSCI 700, 701, 702, 703, 730, 732. Prior experiencing working with oral history is not required. Topics vary from semester to semester, according to trends and developments in the profession; announcements to be made in advance. N.B. The professor reserves the right to alter course schedule to accommodate guest, site visits, or the opportunity for similar curricular advancement.

Course Narrative

Oral History is the practice of recording interviews with narrators who wish to preserve significant life experience. In this class we will prepare ourselves to be effective interviewers, by learning research methods, developing productive questions, indexing our work with finding aids to make it searchable, and connecting individual interviews to larger projects. We will look at academic and popular models of oral history and frame our hands-on approach with readings about the philosophy and politics of oral history work, the art and science of memory, legalities associated with interview preservation and dissemination, the contribution of new technologies and the development of archives. Our own practice interviews will be eligible for inclusion in the Queens Memory Project, a digital archive established in the Rosenthal Library of Queens College.

Oral History has been present in the American academy since 1945, when the historian Allan Nevins founded the Oral History Office at Columbia University. In the last sixty-seven years it has spread to college libraries and historical societies throughout the country. Throughout this period there has been an international presence in the field, with some philosophical differences which have influenced American oral history practice. More recently the populist approach to oral history has been developed by organizations like StoryCorps, a project in which relatives or friends are invited to interview each other in recording booths outfitted with professional recording equipment and trained facilitators. All recordings are deposited at the Library of Congress as well as in local repositories such as the Queens Public Library, so they are both preserved and freely accessible to the public. Excerpts from these interviews are broadcast on National Public Radio and on the StoryCorps website. Thus oral history has loosened the bonds of the university and become a popular art form.

This course is the result of a special collaboration between the Cultural Studies concentration of the English Department, the American Studies Program, and the Archival Certification Program of the Library and Information Studies Graduate School. This course is uniquely positioned between academic and popular oral history, as the Queens Memory Project has established a partnership with StoryCorps. This may be the only oral history course in the country in which a student's work could be entered into

the permanent collections of a massive public system like Queens Library alongside StoryCorps interviews and interviews conducted by professional folklorists documenting life in New York City.

Each student will produce three practice interviews which will be audited and critiqued by the instructor. Students who successfully complete this course will receive a detailed letter affirming their readiness to participate in professionally established oral history projects. This credential may provide an advantage in applying for jobs in teaching, in local historical societies, in business, libraries and government.

B. COURSE LEARNING GOALS 7BOBJECTIVES

Course Goals

This course is specific in addressing the introductory expectations and competency as they pertain to the successful planning and development of a oral history and as articulated by The Society of AMerican Archivists and the Oral History Association of America.

1. Become familiar with the history of oral history as both an investigative practice, and, its gradually acceptance among academicians during the decades following World War II and its incorporation into the Social History Movement.
2. Develop sensitivity to the breadth of logistical and ethical concerns that provide foundation to a successful oral history interview and project.
3. Through a combination of academic discussion and practicum become comfortable engaging subjects in oral history practice.
4. Become well exposed to the range of archival challenges that shape how oral history is Accessed: transcription, migration etc.
5. Becoming conversant in current projects that use oral (both migrated into, and captured with, digital technologies and be able to articulate basic visions for what future projects might entail.

Learning Objectives

- 1 Be able to articulate contemporary perspectives on the history of oral history as both a strategy for historical documentation as well as its evolution as a field of study; and, to understand its role in the capture of 20th century “social history” movements. (Goal 1 and 2)
- 2 Analyze establish oral history projects and articulate their innovations and shortcomings according to current professional discourses (Goals 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5)
- 3 Become proficient with the logistics (costs, equipment, community engagement etc.) that provide foundation to a successful oral history (Goals 2, 3, 4 and 5)
- 4 Establish a expanding vision for how oral history can most effectively engage and operate in 21st century contexts and how it might capture 21st century movements in “social history.”

C. REQUIRED PURCHASES: TEXTBOOKS

Donald A. Ritchie. *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*. Second Edition Oxford University Press, 2003.
Paul Thompson. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. Third Edition. Oxford University Press, 2000.

For each week, there will be short additional reading, an article available from Rosenthal Library's electronic databases, or a chapter drawn from an example of published oral history, available on our electronic site. These are listed in the week-by-week section of this syllabus. As part of your final exam, you will be asked to choose one of these books to read in its entirety (borrowed from the library or from Professor Weidman) and to evaluate. (See book list at the end of the syllabus)

D. COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Required Writing:

One 5-page interpretive essays for each of the three interviews students produce. The essay should respond to these four matters:

- 1) Summarize the subject matter of the interview. What was your pre-interview preparation?
- 2) What were the best moments of the interview? Why?
- 3) Into what larger project or projects might this interview fit?
- 4) What contribution might your interview make to a historian's work?

Required Interviewing:

1. Interview #1 : with a member of the Queens College faculty or staff
2. Interview #2: with a friend or family member
3. Interview #3: with a resident of the Flushing, Queens community

E. ASSIGNMENTS, DUE DATES AND GRADING PLAN

Evaluation of Each Interview: 15% (Objectives 1, 2 and 3)

Evaluation of each Interpretive Essay: 15% (Objectives 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5)

Class participation: 10% (Objectives 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5)

There will be no extra credit assignments

Letter grades for the course are assigned following Committee on Graduate Scholastics Standards table of equivalents found on page 23 of the Queens College *Graduate Bulletin* 2009 – 2012.

Written assignments should be typed, and are due at the start of class. Late assignments are only accepted at the following class meeting for half the credit. Late class projects or presentations are accepted at the instructor's discretion.

F. CUNY POLICY ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Please familiarize yourself with the CUNY Policy on Academic Integrity at <http://web.cuny.edu/academics/info-central/policies/academic-integrity.pdf>.

G. USE OF CANDIDATE WORK

All programs in New York State undergo periodic reviews by accreditation agencies. For these purposes, samples of candidates' work are made available to those professionals conducting the review. Candidate anonymity is assured under these circumstances. If you do not wish to have your work made available for these purposes, please let the professor know before the start of the second class.

H. REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION FOR CANDIDATES WITH DISABILITIES

Candidates with disabilities needing academic accommodation should: 1) register with and provide documentation to the Office of Special Services; 2) at the first class meeting, bring the letter to the instructor indicating the need for accommodation and what type. For more information about services available to Queens College candidates, contact: Office of Special Services, 171 Kiely Hall, (718) 997-5870.

I. Additional and Supplementary Readings

David Isay, *Listening is an Act of Love*

Ronald Blythe, *The View in Winter*

John Egerton, *Generations, An American Family*

George Ewart Evans, *Where Beards Wag All and Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay*

Studs Terkel, *Hard Times and Working*

Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*

Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers, The Life of Nate Shaw*

Onnie Lee Logan, *Motherwit*

Sarah Rice, *He Included Me*

Linda Wagner, *Interviews with William Carlos Williams*

Studs Terkel, *The Good War and American Dreams Lost and Found*

Ann Banks, *First Person America*

William Montell, *The Saga of Coe Ridge*

Ronald Blythe, Akenfield, *Portrait of an English Village*

Warren Lehrer and Judith Sloan, *Crossing the Blvd.*

Susie Tanenbaum, *Underground Harmonies: Music and Politics in the Subways of New York*

Course Calendar

Feb. 2.

1. Introducing ourselves and the project: the readings; equipment; the interview assignments; arranging a visit to the QMP and the Archives; arranging tour of Flushing with Jack Eichenbaum; student memberships in OHA.
2. Jumping right in with practice interviewing. Follow-up question exercise with volunteer interviewees.
3. Presentation of first readings (electronic access): "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History," by Alistair Thomson in the *Oral History Review* Vol. 34, Issue 1, pp. 49-70 (ProQuest); "Listening Exercises created by Martha Norkunas," (on our electronic site).
4. Assignment for next week: Read these articles and Thompson, Chapters 1 and 2; Ritchie, Chapter 1.

Goals 1, 2 3, and 4

Feb. 9.

1. Preparing for Interview 1 with a member of the QC faculty or staff. More practice.
2. Presentation of background reading, selections on our electronic site from *The People's College on the Hill; 50 years at Queens College*.
3. Various internet resources related to Queens College. Discussion of last week's reading.
4. The QMP and resources blog: <http://queensmemory.qwriting.org/>
5. The release form
6. Discussion of Thompson, Chapter 1 and Ritchie, Chapters 1 and 2
7. Topic #1: Academic and popular Oral History: differences and continuities. Presentation of selection from David Isay's *Listening is an Act of Love*, and Elizabeth Pozzi-Thanner's review, *StoryCorps*, from the *Oral History Review* (on our electronic site)
8. Assignment for next week: Thompson, Chapter 6; Ritchie, Chapters 2 and 3. (in addition to electronic selections listed above).

Goals 2, 3 4, and 5

Feb. 16.

1. Professor Ben Alexander: "What is Orality?"
2. Your arrangements for Interview 1. More practice. Discussion of last week's reading.
3. Topic #2: Oral History and Old Age. Presentation of selections from Ronald Blythe, *The View in Winter*; John Egerton, *Generations: An American Family*; Eliot Wigginton, "Reaching Across the Generations: The Foxfire Experience," (on our electronic site).
4. Assignment for next week: Thompson, Chapter 3; Ritchie, Chapter 6 in addition to electronic selections listed above).
5. Interview 1. due on Feb. 23.

Goals 2, 3, and 4

Feb. 23.

1. Interview 1 is due today. Discussion of the experience. I will collect them and audit, bringing them back during the next two weeks for class auditing of selections;
2. Natalie Milbrodt, Director of QMP: indexing, processing creating a finding aid.
3. Discussion of last week's reading.
4. Topic #3: Oral History and Work. Presentation of selections from George Ewart Evans, *Where Beards Wag All* and *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay*; Studs Terkel, *Hard Times and Working*; Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (on our electronic site)
5. Assignments for next week: Thompson, Chapter 4, Ritchie, Chapter 4. In addition to electronic selections listed above.

Goals 2, 3, and 4

Mar.1.

1. "The role of Oral History in the Archives"
2. Auditing selections from Interview 1.
3. Discussion of last week's reading.
4. Topic #4: Oral History –Place and Race. Presentations of selections by Alex Haley, "Black History, Oral History and Genealogy"; Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*; Onnie Lee Logan, *Motherwit*; Sarah Rice, *He Included Me*. (on our electronic site)
5. Assignments for next week: Thompson, Chapter 5; Ritchie, Chapter 5.(in addition to electronic selections)

Goals 2, 3, 4 and 5

Mar.8.

1. Auditing selections from Interview 1.
2. Discussion of last week's reading.
3. Topic #5: Oral history and Literary History: Presentation of Linda Wagner, *Interviews with William Carlos Williams*.
4. Preparing for Interview 2 – with a family member or friend. More practice.
5. Assignments for next week: Thompson, Chapter 7 in addition to electronic selection.

Goals 2, 3, 4 and 5

Mar. 15.

1. Oral History and Activism
2. Topic # 6: Oral History and American History; Presentation of Studs Terkel, *The Good War* and *American Dreams, Lost and Found*; Ann Banks, *First Person America*. (on our electronic site)
3. Your arrangements for Interview 2.
4. Discussion of last week's reading.
5. Assignment for next week: Ritchie, Chapter 7 (in addition to electronic selections).
6. Interview 2 due on March 22.

Goals 1, 2 3, 4, and 5

Mar. 22.

1. Interview 2 is due today.
2. Natalie Milbrodt, Director of the QMP: collecting artifacts
3. Topic #7 Oral History and Science: "Oral history on Space, Science and Technology, An On-line catalog of the collection of the Department of Space History, National Air and Space Museum,"
electronic example <<http://www.nasm.si.edu/research/dsh/ohp-introduction.html>
4. Discussion of Ritchie , Chapter 7.
5. Assignment for next week: Thompson, Chapter 8, in addition to electronic selection.

Goals 2, 3, 4, and 5

Mar.29.

1. Guest lecturer: Jack Eichenbaum, Queens Historian: Flushing history.
2. Auditing selections from Interview 2
3. Discussion of Thompson, Chapter 8
4. Topic #8: Oral History and Community: William Montell, *The Saga of Coe Ridge*; Ronald Blythe, *Akenfield, Portrait of an English Village* (on our electronic site); Warren Lehrer and Judith Sloan, *Crossing the Blvd* (www.crossingtheblvd.org)
5. Assignment for next week: Ritchie, Chapter 8(in addition to electronic selections).

Goals 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5

Apr. 5

1. Guest lecturer: Rebecca Rushfield, QC Art Library Oral History Project; Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation Oral History Archives.
2. Auditing selections from Interview 2.
3. Topic #9 Oral History and Art: Elizabeth Stevens, "Review Essay: Art, Artists and Oral History" in *Oral History Review* 18/1 (Spring 1990)111-115, available on JSTOR.
4. Discussion of Ritchie, Chapter 8.
5. Assignment for next week: Thompson, "Chapter Nine" and "A Life-Story Interview Guide."

Goals 2, 3, 4, and 5

Apr. 19

1. Guest lecturer: Susie Tanenbaum ,Community and Cultural Coordinator, Queens Borough President's Office, "Underground Harmonies."
2. Topic #10 : Oral History and Music: Susie Tanenbaum," Underground Harmonies," (on our electronic site): websites for "Oral History of American Music," Yale School of Music and Yale University Library; Music at MIT Oral History Project; Oral History Collection of Country Music Hall of Fame.

3. Discussion of Thompson, "Chapter Nine" and "A Life-Story Interview Guide."
4. Assignment for next week: Ritchie, Chapter 5, in addition to electronic materials.
5. Interview 3 due next week.

Goals 2, 3, 4 and 5

Apr. 26.

1. Interview 3 due today.
2. 21st century orality
Natalie Milbrodt, Director QMP, technical support
3. Discussion of Ritchie, Chapter 5.
4. Topic #11 Oral History and Anthropology: Kathleen Blee, "Evidence, empathy and ethics: lessons from Oral History," : Marjorie Shostak, "'What the wind won't take away': the genesis of Nisa –The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman" (on our electronic site).
5. Assignment for next week: Ritchie, "Principles and Standards of the Oral History Association" and electronic materials.

Goals 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5

May 3

1. Natalie Milbrodt, Director, QMP, auditing Interview 3 with us.
2. Topic #12 Holocaust survivors' projects; American Indian oral history project -websites
3. Discussion of Ritchie, "Principles and Standards of the OHA and electronic materials.
4. Choice of book for final review

Goals 4 and 5

May 10.

1. Auditing Interview 3.
2. Discussion of Ritchie and electronic materials
3. Review for final.