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Research Project Evaluation

Introduction

This Evaluation Report seeks to assess how far the aims and objectives set out in the original project plan have been realised and consider specific issues raised during the management of the project. It will further address the project's dissemination and promotion, and evaluate its future maintenance, long term impact and potential for expansion.

Project description

The Cultural Studies Department at the London College of Fashion introduced an Oral History Unit in the Summer Term 2003 and it is now part of the Credit Framework. Its purpose is to offer students the opportunity to engage in primary research by conducting oral history interviews, and through their interpretation and analysis, understand the value of such research in relation to contemporary approaches to the study of fashion.

This project set out to establish a permanent Archive of the resulting recordings to expand and support student learning for those students participating in the unit by offering a tangible demonstration of both the relevance of such research to the study of fashion and dress, and of students' own contribution to its furtherance. Oral History interviews provide unique insights into the historic and experiential consumption of fashion and it was felt that an Archive would contribute to a more culturally diverse curriculum and supporting materials and further facilitate their wider use, particularly in dissertation and extended research.

The Project's aims were thus broadly as follows:

1. To establish a basic sound Archive and evaluate a longer term strategy for its future expansion and development;
2. To research and analyse the pedagogic value of oral history interviews in enhancing student learning experiences and outcomes;
3. To advance personal and professional working practice in the field of oral historical approaches to the study of fashion.

Project Evaluation

1. Establishment of Archive and Evaluation of Longer Term Strategy

In the early weeks of the Fellowship, contact was established with both London Institute staff and a number of institutions and practitioners involved in recording, researching and archiving oral history interviews and life history testimonies: London Transport Museum, National Sound Archive, Museum of London, YMCA Croydon, Waltham Forest Oral History Society. Discussions centred around establishing best/standard achievable practice within the temporal, financial and resource limitations of the Fellowship and some invaluable advice was given.

Naming the Archive

Initially it was anticipated that the Archive would be called the 'LCF Oral History Archive'. However, after some discussion with supervisor Adam Briggs it was felt that allowance should be made for the archiving of recorded material other than oral history interviews. For example, recording visiting speakers and industry practitioners could provide, over time, a very valuable collection of unique research material. Both Adam and myself further discussed this with Rob Perks, Curator of the National Sound Archive at the British Library, who recommended that the umbrella term 'the spoken word' would be more appropriate and accurate. After the review of numerous options, it was decided that the Archive should be known as:

'Bespoke: London College of Fashion Archive of the Spoken Word'

The establishment of the *Bespoke* Archive then proceeded around four distinct foci of activity:

A → → → **Acquisition Documentation Preservation Access**
(See Appendix 1)

Acquisition

Archive material has been, and will continue to be, acquired primarily through interviews carried out by students participating in the Oral History Unit. However, through the work of the Fellowship and the Archive's pedagogic potential it is hoped that this will be extended to include interviews carried out by dissertation students. Additionally, through conversations with colleagues across the Institute, other sources, mainly from previous staff research and postgraduate work, have been identified and these need to be investigated further.

Documentation

Through discussions with myself, my colleague Clare Lomas, and Adam Briggs, it was felt that a basic cataloguing database should be established to record information about the material held to date. Although it is anticipated that future cataloguing of archive material will be done through the library Opac system, it was also felt that the Cultural Studies Department via the Oral History Unit remains the initial point of acquisition - and as such the 'gatekeeper' of the archive's ongoing development. For this reason a small database provides at the very least a useful backup of information but also the opportunity of adding student, department, research or unit specific data records or search/query options. Important personal memorabilia and photographs are also sometimes a key addition to the recording of personal memories- especially of clothes, fashion and dress - and these unique ephemera greatly enhance the interview and its understanding and these could be scanned in and added to the database.

Internal IT Training Courses were attended to facilitate the setting up of a simple 'Access' database as this seemed easily available and flexible in terms of compatibility with possible future developments. An Archive database was then set up to record standard information about interviews (names, date, duration, format) as well as more complex details about the interview content – key words, main topics, abstracts, transcripts of extracts from noteworthy recordings and photographs where appropriate. (Appendix 2)

All the currently held recorded data has now been reviewed and catalogued. However, this was a time consuming and lengthy process. Although all the tapes had been marked with names and dates, many had not included the duration of the recording – a vital piece of information whose lack involved listening to each tape in turn to ascertain its length. In addition, current thinking on oral history archives recommends that both key topics/words, and a summary of the order of what is recounted should be recorded with other basic details. Some of this information could be sourced from students' assignments, however, whilst a range of essays had been photocopied this was not true of many of them - without the essay to hand this again involved listening through the tapes.

Nevertheless, whilst this was time consuming and at times quite tedious, it did have some very beneficial side effects – not least in identifying some very good interviews and original material. The trials and errors of the database construction and the inputting process also gave an understanding as to what data information was needed - and what was lacking, which will facilitate its future transfer to the Opac system. Additionally, as a result, as from 2005 students on the Oral History Unit will be required to provide full details on an Interview Summary Sheet to be handed in with the finished assignment and this will overcome many of the problems identified.

Preservation (and Storage)

Current thinking about preservation procedures is that there should be 3 copies held of any recording to ensure safekeeping: the original, a backup copy and an access copy. However many oral history practitioners, myself amongst them, feel it is also important that the interviewee is also presented with a copy, if they so wish, for their own information and by way of appreciation of their participation/contribution.

At present, student interviews, with one exception, have been conducted on (analogue) tape cassette, borrowed from LCF Media Services – a system initiated at the start of the Oral History Unit as a simple, cheap and widely accessible means of recording. However, digitisation of these was seen as essential to facilitate copying, long term preservation, and future access. Although this is a time consuming process it was felt at this early stage of development that it was important to get this underway to avoid building up a backlog of analogue recordings – a huge problem now being faced by most of the major sound archives. The Media Services Team have been very helpful and having liaised with James Rutherford and James Kerry, approximately 10 hours of recorded data has been digitised. I have also similarly transferred about 5 hours of the most informative interviews myself via a minidisc recorder. At present therefore, out of the 40 recordings held, just under half still remain in their original format. There are no plans to digitise these remaining recordings at present because of quality issues and the establishment of a selection procedure for future Archive material (see 'Access' below).

Canvassing current professional opinion and the problems posed by the present system of copying and preservation has highlighted a number of issues for consideration with regard to future preservation:

- Digitisation is a priority (especially at this early stage of development.)
- The transfer of analogue to digital is extremely time consuming (real time) and
- the present system is not cost effective.
- The acquisition of digital recording equipment (minidisc or digital voice recorders both with usb connections for uploading to pc) although incurring an initial capital cost* would prove considerably more cost effective in money and time - removing the need for lengthy transfer procedures and the provision of preservation copies **both of which could in effect be carried out by the students themselves as part of the assessment criteria.**

*It has been suggested that an allowance might be made from the Innovation Fund to cover their acquisition and this is being further investigated.

At present all the recordings, both originals and copies, in a variety of formats, and the associated paperwork, are being held in the Cultural Studies Department, Room 200, Davies Street. For the time being this is tenable because of both the size of the Archive and its nascent status. However, if the Cultural Studies database of interviews and recordings is to be maintained and extracts provided (an essential part of the gatekeeping process before transfer to the library) storage/documentation arrangements both electronic and physical need to be addressed. Currently we only have one pc with a sound file (and this is the very old one unconnected to the printer). There are also no facilities to burn to cd which is also fairly fundamental to the archiving process and for providing copies for the participants. (See Archive Procedure Plan, Appendix 1)

Access

Because of issues of security, and the lack of room space and IT provision it was thus felt impracticable to provide any form of access (other than to Cultural Studies staff) to the archived material held in the Cultural Stud. Department Office in Davies Street. However, as previously stated it is recommended that interview data is still monitored and recorded via the Access database that has been set up and copies of recordings of import held for future research or pedagogic use.

Discussions between myself, Rob Lutton, Katherine Baird and Adam Briggs (7/7/04) resulted in the **LCF Library** being established as the most practicable means of providing future access to students, staff and those involved in research. However, this raised fundamental issues of gatekeeping. It was felt that all the recorded data

acquired from the students should be reviewed and undergo a process of selection according to an agreed criteria based on both material and sound quality. The selected interviews would then be passed to the library to be processed: catalogued in the library system and made accessible to staff, students and researchers from the wider academic community via cd rom.

Transcription was not seen as necessary at the moment, on the grounds of cost in time and funds. The National Sound Archive operates a procedure whereby material is stored in audio format and then transcribed by any researcher using the material where necessary (with copies of transcription then being supplied to the Archive). This would seem a potentially good idea to initiate in the future as and when it might arise. However, current professional opinion is that in the absence of full transcription the provision of **small transcribed extracts** is an adequate and very useful alternative. A sound editing software package (CoolEdit Pro) was purchased with the Fellowship grant which enables the fast and relatively simple removal of specific extracts and their collation. This is also particularly useful pedagogically on the oral history unit: providing examples of other students' work, explaining what oral history is and practically demonstrating the value of dress based oral history testimony and research. The very easy collation of a range of extracts into a multitrack (attached sample CDrom) is also invaluable when putting together say, a case study of a particular aspect of fashion historical research, say subcultures or wartime weddings. These small extracts, usually between 1 and 2 minutes long can then be transcribed and added to the Bespoke database (Access). It is proposed that these also be regularly collated and lodged with the library as additional Archive material, as well as a selected few being added to any future web page and potentially to the Blackboard site.

Web Access was seen as vital and a fundamental part of the future development of the Archive. Rob Lutton suggested that a web page could be added on as a link to LCF's main site and I am liaising with Rob to get this under way. At present this will be information only, raising awareness of the Archive's existence, explaining access and stressing the importance of dress based oral historical research – although hopefully small sound file extracts might be possible.

The **Blackboard** site was also seen as a possible access point – again raising awareness of the Archive's existence and the value of oral historical fashion research, as well as promoting the opportunity for students to participate through the Oral History Unit elective and the possibilities of using oral history interviews as a vital primary research tool in dissertation work and the utilisation of Blackboard access is still under evaluation.

2. Pedagogic Research into the Role and Value of Oral History Assignments in Higher Education Electives

Encouraging active learning is a central element in the paradigmatic shift towards a student centred approach to teaching and learning that has occurred over the past twenty years or so. Pedagogic scholarship has focused on how students learn and how different approaches to learning - characterised as either 'deep' or 'surface' - have a marked influence on students' capacity to think and write critically. (Entwistle 1988; Gibbs 1992¹) Such research has clearly demonstrated that different previous educational and life experiences, and different expectations and beliefs as to what constitutes learning, its delivery and assessment at undergraduate level radically affect how students study.

This is particularly relevant in the context of teaching Cultural Studies' electives and the delivery of complex theoretical content to students whose main specialism is largely creative and often vocational. The radical potential of oral history as a methodology is that it gives a voice to those absent from or excluded by traditional 'big history'. But as the unit progressed and interviews began to take place it also seemed to give a voice to many of the students. Each interviewee and their recorded testimony is clearly unique, but it is also unique to each student and this, it could be argued, creates a sense of ownership and intellectual property that empowers students to express opinions about the content, validity and interpretation of *their* material:

In that I was doing something that there wasn't a lot of books on or information on ... I mean, it made it just more interesting.

It made me want to find out a little bit more, and it made his words, or what he was saying more valid. Because he represented a genre that there wasn't a lot written about. (FG1: 06/03²)

The power relationship is slightly shifted and this I believe has a significant knock on effect.

The data held in the recorded interviews and the specific perspectives offered by individual testimony could not be referenced in a set text or on a reading list and it was self evident that the very nature of the huge topical range and variety of interviews and interviewees precluded its possibility. Whilst key debates, theoretical perspectives around methodologies as well as case studies made up the unit outline and its delivery, in order to successfully meet the assessment criteria it was apparent

that students needed to actively engage with their material both inside and outside the classroom. As one student put it:

*With the other electives, they kind of, they tell you what you have to do and sometimes you do find, I know everyone's different, but to be honest, I found most of them pretty boring ... and this to me I found really interesting. Its nothing I've ever done or been taught before. **So it was all about me having to find out**. And its been the best project I've ever done. **I've never gone to the library so much in my life.** (FG1: 06/03)³*

It could be argued oral history, its theory and its practice, (as well as its long battles with academic prejudice and exclusion) plays out many of the pedagogic issues surrounding the links between student voice and identity and the difficulties that arise in addressing systems of knowledge and theoretical understandings which exclude personal experience. With oral history one cannot avoid a constant cross over between what Creme (2000)⁴ describes as the 'autobiographical' and 'discoursal' self and questions of interpretation or validity, the separation of the public and the private and the exclusion of the domestic are integral to both its study and its ethical, epistemological foundations.

Students are clearly at times alienated by the 'academic style' that scholastic writing requires. As Burn and Finnigan's (2002)⁵ research has shown, **their** perception of theory is often informed by fear and a sense of inadequacy leading in turn to demotivation, last minute work and low grades. This is also often accompanied by a corresponding failure to grasp how a critical understanding of theory and its demonstration in essays might relate to their main degree.(MFG: 03/06/04)⁶ Fear, a lack of confidence as well as this perception of irrelevancy thus results quite often in passive, unreflective, reproductive and wholly descriptive work. The opportunity that the Oral History Unit offers to use practical skills plays to what many LCF students themselves see as their particular strengths: good verbal communication skills, creativity, resourcefulness. Thus, whilst the OH elective and its assessment task are not necessarily seen as more relevant or more closely linked to their main degree specialism, students do nevertheless appreciate the 'hands on' approach that the unit involved.

Outside of dissertation work, undergraduates rarely have an opportunity to engage in this kind of pro-active research activity – gathering and responding to primary data, reporting and analysing their material. Oral History assignments provide a means of integrating the experiential into the theoretical and thus seem to provide a

pedagogically effective method of working through course material and encouraging academic analysis and reflection in a non-threatening way.

3. Personal and Professional Development

The Fellowship provided a unique opportunity to develop my understanding of oral history not as an abstract term or as a useful pedagogic tool but as a concrete practice. Oral history is itself defined through the archiving, not just the recording of personal testimony. In establishing the Archive I was made aware of the problems and challenges that establishing such a resource entails and this is particularly relevant in a field that is peopled with small groups of individuals committed to documenting for posterity the voices and experiences of those who would otherwise be overlooked.

Through the work of the Fellowship I have established a number of links with other practitioners and institutions that have clearly made an impact on my personal and professional development. Likewise through conferences, particularly in Rome, the wider historiographic community is becoming aware of the potential that memories of fashion, dress and textiles can offer and the commitment of LCF to its research and development.

Dissemination and Promotion

The Fellowship has been undertaken in the Summer Term of 2004 and so this has presented some problems for immediate dissemination to Institute staff and colleagues. However, for a range of presentations both formal and informal in the Autumn term are in process.

- A presentation was made at the **Senior Management Conference** in March.
- A talk was given at **YMCA Croydon** in May about the practicalities of conducting oral history interviews and the setting up of a small Archive. (This has also led to my involvement with a current project being undertaken at YMCA Croydon to obtain Lottery Funding to establish an Oral History Project recording local residents' memories of the work of the YMCA and to organise its promotion and exhibition.
- The establishment of the Bespoke Archive has been outlined in a contribution to the section 'Current British Work' to be published in the November edition of the **Journal of the Oral History Society**.

- A paper was presented at the **XIII Annual International Oral History Conference held in Rome in June 2004**. This gathering of oral history practitioners and academics from across the world provided a unique opportunity to outline the establishment of the Bespoke Archive and promote the use of dress based oral history interviews and their value as a primary research tool to a range of practitioners and disciplines.

(Biddle-Perry 2004, *Bury Me in Purple Lurex: Promoting a New Dynamic Between Oral and Fashion Historians*), and

- this paper has further formed the basis for an article currently under review for inclusion in a forthcoming edition of the **Journal of the Oral History Society**.
- Arrangements have been made with Allan Davies and the citad Team to outline the work of the Fellowship, the establishment of the Archive and the pedagogic value of oral history assignments in higher education, to teaching staff from across the university attending the intensive residential **PG Cert course in Leamington Spa** in September.
- Awareness of the setting up of the Archive and its role in the teaching of fashion historical studies at LCF has been raised through a number of meetings with other practitioners in the field and a range of promotional literature (see attached) which has been distributed at conferences and workshop seminars. (Appendix
- Work is being undertaken with my colleague Clare Lomas researching the role of fashion and dress in personal narratives of World War II using recordings held in the Archive. An abstract for a paper has been submitted and is currently under review for presentation at the Annual Oral History Society Conference 2005. (Biddle-Perry & Lomas, *Its a Mrs Miniver: Fashioning the Wartime Narrative*)

- There is a case for actively promoting the use of oral history methodology in final year dissertation research. It provides a valuable primary research tool and clearly demonstrates the shift of emphasis from production to consumption and the influence of new multi-disciplinary approaches to the study of fashion. A **Dissertation Guide to Using Oral History Interviews in Fashion Historical Research** is currently being compiled.

[1](#) Entwistle, N. (1988) 'Motivational factors in students' approaches to learning' in R.R. Schmeck (ed) *Learning Strategies and Learning Styles*, New York: Plenum,

Gibbs, G. (1992) *Improving the Quality of Student Learning*, Bristol: TES

[2](#) Recorded Feedback Session, Oral History Unit:Biddle-Perry, Lomas, 06/03)

[3](#) *ibid*

[4](#) Creme, P. (2000), The 'Personal' in University Writing: Uses of Reflective Learning Journals, in M.Lea and B.Stierer (eds) *Student Writing in Higher Education: New Contexts*. Bucks: SRHE & Open University Press

[5](#) Burn, E. and Finnigan, T (2002) *I've Made It More Academic By Adding Some Snob Words From The Thesaurus*. Paper presented at the Discourse-Power-Resistance Conference, University of Plymouth, April

[6](#) Recorded Focus Group, Action Research Project PGCert 2004

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