



# Up close and personal: Increasing student engagement and understanding through eyewitness interviews

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This paper evaluates an innovative assessment task designed to engage students by analysing student, staff and community responses. For the past four years German Studies at The University of Western Australia (UWA) has trialled an eyewitness interview project, with the intention of enabling students to connect more personally with their studies. These interviews have allowed students to adopt a thought-provoking hands-on approach, complementary to the lecture material. The task involved students finding an interviewee from the German-speaking community and questioning them on their experiences and perspectives of historical events which the students learnt about in their course. Culminating in a public presentation, this project was well-received by students, staff and the general public, yet the assessment task was not without its problems. Issues which required attention were students' competing commitments and the difficulties these sometimes posed for group-work situations, as well as the sensitive subject-matter for which students may have been unprepared (e.g. eyewitness accounts of World War Two atrocities, stories of rape in the post-war years and political persecution during the subsequent East German dictatorship). Nevertheless, as our evaluation study demonstrates, it enabled students to connect personally and emotionally with the learning material, thus becoming truly engaged. These findings pose the question: Do the eyewitness interviews strike a balance between the educationally beneficial ideals of maximising engagement and the reality of students' time constraints? How can this apparent disjuncture be overcome? The findings will be widely applicable.

Keywords: German Studies, eyewitness interviews, oral history, student engagement.

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## Introduction

In relation to university courses (particularly those involving historical aspects), eyewitness interviews have the potential to enhance student interest in the course content. They promote greater student engagement, which is "generally considered to be among the better predictors of learning and personal development" (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006, p. 2) and is "likely to lead to quality learning." (Coates, 2005, p. 26). This approach is underpinned by oral history, which is "the interviewing of eyewitness participants in the events of the past for the purpose of historical reconstruction" (Grele, 1996, p. 63).

Oral history encourages awareness of the value of recording a living history in order to better understand the past, and has the unique ability to give voice to 'ordinary' people. Nevertheless, oral history has been criticised by some scholars for its inaccuracies as discrepancies between eyewitness accounts and official historical documents have come to light (perhaps due to personal motives or to memory distortion over time). As Silverman asserts:

Qualitative research is subjective. It is personalistic. Its contributions toward an improved and disciplined science are slow and tendentious. New questions emerge more frequently than new answers. The results pay off little in the advancement of social practice. (Silverman, 2000, p. 9)

However, the qualitative oral history framework has been gradually growing in credibility as other scholars:

began to question this emphasis on the ‘distortions’ of memory and to see ‘the peculiarities of oral history’ as a strength rather than a weakness. One of the most significant shifts in the last twenty-five years of oral history has been this recognition that the so-called ‘unreliability’ of memory might be a resource, rather than a problem. (Thomson, 1999, p. 292).

Interviewing eyewitnesses certainly stimulates discussion, encouraging engagement as students realise that it can reveal not only much about an individual, but also the culture, “what a society remembers and what that means.” (Charlton, Myers, & Sharpless, 2006, pp. 37-38). Inconsistencies and ‘gaps’ in memory prompt students to question their preconceptions, generating the formulation of an interpretation of the interviewees’ accounts through the sharing of ideas with their classmates. It is

[t]hrough working with memories – both ‘reliable’ and ‘unreliable’ – [that] the need arises to negotiate the relationships between past and present, between individual and collective memory. (Thomson, 1999, p. 301).

This critical and reflective process of negotiating and questioning oral histories promotes deeper learning and reflection, not solely involving the historical period in question, but further highlights the issues surrounding the documentation of historical events and the subjectivity of personal memory.

Although uncommon, oral history has been employed by some academics in the past to enhance students’ understanding of course content. One early application at tertiary level to teach about the past occurred at Oxford Polytechnic, for an assignment in the module “The Sociology of Childhood.” (Wilson, 1992). Here students were required to interview people who had experienced very different childhoods from their own in order to gain an insight into what life had been like in the past. Furthermore, students were requested to reflect on their research process and provide commentary on its applicability as a teaching aid.

A second example of the use of oral history projects to teach German Studies, corresponding to our study, was provided by James Stark (2001). He adopted this method with his Intermediate German students in 1998 to build on their comprehension of German historical events, such as the Nazi period, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and life in reunified Germany, emphasising how

history from the ‘ground up’ complement[ed] the story that professional historians [told] about the ‘great’ people. (Stark, 2001).

A more recent study pertinent to this paper was one undertaken in French studies at the University of Adelaide. Students were set the task of interviewing a French native speaker on a topic of their choice relating to any aspect of French culture, in order to foster intercultural understanding (Sobolewski, 2009). As explained by the author, there was

an emphasis on the experience of engagement in languages and cultures from the learner’s point of view. (Sobolewski, 2009, p. 29),

This was significant in that students were encouraged to be actively involved in guiding their own learning.

## Background of our research project

At UWA, curriculum and assessment reviews in German Studies have prompted the introduction of eyewitness interviews with Germans, Austrians or Swiss who lived through particular eras of history, in order to gain a better understanding of the time period which comprised much of the content of the weekly culture classes. This assessment task was first introduced in 2008 in the Advanced stream, and its subsequent evaluations challenged the assumptions of personal and academic benefits. The latest iteration of the interview assessment, conducted in semesters one and two, and its evaluation provided the data for this research project.

In semesters one and two, 2011, this ‘hands on’ approach was expected to not only encourage greater comprehension, but also enhance student engagement and interest in the topics covered. In preparation

for the interviews, students applied their prior knowledge of the era of study to the development of an open-ended list of questions and discussion topics. Students were strongly encouraged to have these proof-read by the conversation tutor before the interview took place (however, this did not always happen as some students did not hand it in beforehand). This questionnaire formed the basis for the interviews, in which the participant was encouraged to respond to the questions from their own perspective.

An analysis of the data from students' focus interviews as well as staff responses were sought in order to answer the question: Can eyewitness interviews indeed improve student engagement, and does the time on task justify the educational benefits? Can the introduction of personal experiences and opinions into the study of German social and political history further encourage critical thinking amongst students, who may have been confronted with memories and views which were not consistent with the 'official' historical narrative?

## **Participants**

The students in Advanced German studies at UWA are comprised of predominantly third year ex-beginners and second year post-TEE students, although there are usually between two and five first year native speakers in this course as well. In 2011 a total of 48 students (23 in semester one and 25 in semester two) were in the Advanced German stream. These were sorted into groups for the eyewitness interview assessment (10 groups in semester one and 12 groups in semester two). For the evaluation in first semester, follow-up focus interviews were conducted on a group basis, whilst second semester follow-up focus interviews were held individually. In addition to the data from these focus interviews, the study drew on observations of staff members of the German Department and my own personal observations as participant-researcher as one of the teachers in the unit.

## **Methodology**

The methodology of this project consisted of three diverse aspects including: the analysis of field notes from the presentations and the analysis of the eyewitness interviews themselves (and the manner in which they were conducted), the students' understanding of the project's purpose (through follow-up interviews with focus groups and individual students), and our own and other staff members' observations (taking into account their experiences on the night of the interview presentations, i.e. gauging audience reaction and observation of student presentations). In addition, the data collection and analysis was completed in two cycles, providing findings discretely for semesters one and two which were synthesised and integrated in a final analytical step.

### **Step 1: Analysis of eyewitness interviews recorded by students**

Once students had recorded and edited their eyewitness interviews, they presented these to their fellow classmates, staff and general public (mainly members of the Goethe Society of Western Australia). It was required that students play a 5-10 minute edited film or audio recording of their interview, covering aspects which they thought most relevant to the historical period of study on which they had been focusing during the semester. Staff assessing students' eyewitness interviews analysed the questions which students asked in their interviews and the relevance of these questions, as well as the accuracy of language use and general presentation quality of the recording. This formed the basis of the marking criteria for the project. In addition, students were requested to submit their recording to the conversation class tutor as a CD or DVD, which could then be stored in the German Department for further analysis.

### **Step 2: Observation of presentation of eyewitness interviews by students**

As a component of the public screenings of the eyewitness interviews, it was essential that students provided an introduction, supplying the audience with background information about the person they had interviewed and hence how his or her story could be viewed within the wider historical framework and timescale. These introductions, together with the content of the presentation and linguistic quality,

were taken into account when determining the final mark, reflecting students' learning and engagement. Staff of the German Department attended all presentations, and commented on their perceptions of student work both in emails and in conversations from which I kept field notes for inclusion in the data pool.

### **Step 3: Observation and analysis of student perception of the project**

In the final weeks of each semester, staff members (three in semester one and two in semester two) conducted follow-up interviews with the participating Advanced German students. In first semester, they were held in a focus-group like setting with the same groups in which students had undertaken their eyewitness interviews. During the focus group interviews students were asked to reflect on the oral history projects which they had completed and the process of presenting them to the general public, fellow students and staff. Students' comments relating to their perception of the project's purpose and the extent to which it had contributed to their understanding of the course content, were the primary source of data for the evaluation of the project (When discussing the findings, students are labelled from numbers 1-23 in the semester one, and from letters A-Y in semester two).

The semester two focus-interviews involved similar questions. As they were held this time on an individual basis, students were at liberty to contribute their individual opinions. This allowed them to make more critical comments about the strengths and weaknesses of the project groups. Consequently, students appeared more at ease and were more forthright in providing critical comments. Students' observations from both semesters' interviews were then compared and contrasted as is outlined in the section below.

The following discussion focuses separately on the latest research cycle, conducted in semesters one and two, 2011.

### **Action research: Cycle 1**

At the beginning of semester one, 2011, students divided themselves into groups of two or three when allocated the task of finding an eyewitness "who [could] comment on any time from the 1930s to 60s in Germany, Austria or Switzerland." (xx05 Unit Outline, 2011). Some interviewed family members, whilst others were faced with the more challenging task of searching for interviewees through organisations such as the Rhine Donau Club and Goethe Society. The intention was for students to draw on their understanding of the time period (1930s-1960s), to decide on topics of discussion for their interviews e.g. WWII and the post-war period. After filming or recording the eyewitness interviews, students presented them to the general public, also providing a short introduction for contextualisation.

### **Findings**

Some of the presentations ran according to plan, yet others encountered considerable problems. On the one hand a number of technical issues arose, including poor sound quality, which caused difficulties with understanding questions which had been asked and answers which had been given. On the other hand, some of the questions which students had asked in their interviews were far too simplistic or did not directly relate to the relevant time period. The project was a challenge for some, as 9/23 reported, yet it became clear in interviews with them, from frequent statements such as "I found out new things" (Student 7) and "I learnt a lot about historical background" (Student 15), that the majority (13/23) believed that they had gained something from this assessment type. In particular, students responded that the project had broadened their minds and made the subject matter come alive, while providing many stimuli for further reflection and engagement. Student 4 illustrated this:

It was a bit of a different history from what we learnt [...] it was more personal than the whole general history of this time.

The interviews had evidently prompted students to consider the reality of history and the experiences of people who had been, in a sense, 'hidden' from it (Thomson, 2009, p. 14), as articulated by Student 14.

It is maybe difficult to understand exactly what it [history] means for people when you read it out of a book. It [the interview] is more realistic.

However some expressed that the project's workload had been very demanding and that they had experienced some further difficulties (which will be discussed below). Nevertheless these students shared the belief that the exercise had been worthwhile in hindsight. Furthermore, linguistic benefits were evident for some students, who stated that they appreciated what they had considered a valuable opportunity to speak to native German speakers, as:

there aren't that many opportunities to speak with German-speaking people in Australia. It was good to look for German people and to ask them things. (Student 7).

In tandem to this, the interviews with the local German community exposed students to a variety of accents and dialects in the interview-setting, allowing them to experience 'immersion' in the German language.

## Action research: Cycle 2

In semester two, the structure of the eyewitness interview presentations remained largely unchanged, apart from the size of groups. This time students were encouraged to work in pairs, rather than groups of three to encourage easier coordination amongst students. The period of history on which the unit focussed was the Cold War, from the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961 until its fall in 1989. Consequently, students were to "interview an eyewitness who ha[d] experienced the 1960s, 70s, or 80s in a German-speaking country" (xx06 Unit Outline, 2011). A number again interviewed family members or family friends, whilst similarly to first semester, others sought help from outside organisations such as the Rhein Donau Club and Goethe Society in order to find suitable interview partners. The weekly lectures once more provided the students with the background knowledge necessary for identifying crucial historical events about which they could ask their interviewees. Topics such as the post-war period (in particular 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung' i.e. the way in which the Nazi-past was dealt with) and East and West Germany were the focus for this semester. As in semester one, students developed a list of topics or questions which they were supposed to show to their conversation class tutor (again, some did not do this) before discussing them with their interviewees. Once students had filmed or recorded, and edited their interviews, these were presented to the public.

## Findings

The quality of the presentations in semester two was mostly very impressive and they had improved markedly from semester one, as noted by German Department staff member I:

The editing and the way it was presented were very good and also very professional.

This was most likely as students were now, on their second attempt, more familiar with the technical equipment, the general expectations of the project, and had gained more confidence in using the German language. There was evidence of deeper engagement with the interview content and its relationship to general views of the historical period of study. As one student described,

[t]his time I found it was a better project from last semester. I think last semester was about a topic that is too distant from us, and it was difficult to find people to speak with, but this semester it's very close to our generation and the fall of the Wall was one year before my birth and my mother remembers it. (Student F).

Students' ability to appreciate the relevance of the interview project to more recent historical events, illustrates the power of interviews in portraying not just facts about the past, but reasons for the

present state of affairs (albeit on a personal level). The presence and value of this personal history was echoed in students' follow-up focus interviews. As Student A expressed,

Yes [I learnt] a bit about life, how it was in the family, at home. So not the whole of Europe's history, but history of the family and 'Kleingeschichte' ['small' history].

Student B supported this statement by saying:

I find the interview itself good in the sense that people get a real glimpse of how it was, and personal experience of the people who lived through the whole thing, and I think that it makes the dry history more interesting.

In second semester, fewer students (4/25) experienced technical difficulties, although two students commented that they still felt linguistically inadequate when speaking with a native speaker. However, both noted that their interview partners had been supportive and understanding. Student V provided some insight into this:

[I]t's such a big thing to say to someone you don't know 'oh can I do an interview with you?' and to have the courage to speak German with someone who is German and who doesn't know you. I think everyone thinks 'oh they think I'm stupid or I can't speak German'. It's such a big step to take, sometimes.

In semester two, it was evident that students had been involved in a crucial learning experience involving the thought process most highly encouraged at university: that of critical thinking. When comparing students' comments in semesters one and two, the presence of critical thinking was definitely more evident in the latter. Students began to compare what they had learnt about in class with the views expressed by their interviewees, as Student T illustrated:

Yes it was important to hear a personal perspective of the history and [the interviewee] had other opinions about what we spoke about in class, particularly about the reunification [of Germany]. In the class we always heard about it as being good, and he said some things that were not so good, for example, it didn't happen overnight, but over a long time.

Students displayed an increased awareness of the value of oral histories as a whole, not solely in regard to their individual projects, but also through comments made about other groups' presentations in their written culture exams in the last week of semester two. Student S showed this increase in awareness during the follow-up focus interviews:

I think that it is a very different and interesting task and I think it's better to learn history through a person in an informal conversation instead of just from books and lectures... Every person has different memories and perspectives and so that's why we have to speak with a lot of people to understand the whole picture of history.

## Synthesis and recommendations

However, the question remains: have we succeeded in increasing student engagement and comprehension through this eyewitness interview assessment and do the benefits outweigh the shortcomings? As the majority of students' reflections suggest (nearly all the students commented that they had found the assessment "good" or "interesting"), it is apparent that the interviews did enrich students' understanding of the past and acted as a complement to the content of the culture classes, whilst still maintaining their interest. As Student G expressed:

I found it interesting, to hear the memories of other people and what was important in their history or what was happening in that time.

The value of this assessment in maintaining student engagement was observed by German Department staff member II who reflected:

The students really got into it, taking on the challenge with more creativity, resolve and dedication [compared to semester one]...I felt many took it to extra lengths and were prepared to put in much more than was required. The fact that they invited their interview partners was also a testimony to the pride in their work.

However, although there are visible advantages to this type of assessment, there are some remaining problems which must be overcome in the future. In spite of the perceived increase in critical thinking amongst students, more attention is still required in this area, as one member of the German Department reflected:

The reluctance of some students to verify the generalised claims of eyewitnesses presents itself as a problem. (German Department staff member III)

The most common complaints from the students themselves were that it had been difficult to find an interviewee, the assignment had been too time-consuming, and that there had been some technical issues which they felt were frustrating and distracting. A few had resorted to finding relatives or family friends who could take part in an interview, rather than contacting the German clubs or societies (although more students attempted this in second semester). Even when students had found an interviewee, the person was not necessarily ideal for the timeframe of history covered in that particular semester, as Student 9 explained:

I found this project difficult. I couldn't find any German who was old enough, and when I went to the Rhein Donau Club, they told me that there were no Germans who were contactable.

This issue was particularly evident in semester one, as the number of older Germans who remembered the 1930s-1950s has been slowly declining in the last few years. Furthermore, one group in semester two had to cope with the withdrawal of their interviewee at short notice, and yet another group reported that group work had often been difficult to coordinate, especially considering students' external commitments, as stated by Student 10:

organisation was difficult... [our interviewee] had a full-time job, and we're also busy. We have uni, work, and, yes.

Problems involving the workload within the group did not appear to be an issue for most students (perhaps due to the fact that many of the students are in their third year and therefore, one would assume, relatively committed to their studies). Technical difficulties were encountered by a number of groups at different stages of the assignment, both in semesters one and two (although this was more evident in semester one). Some encountered difficulties editing their interview, whilst others experienced drawbacks involving the unclear sound quality on their DVD-recording, or others' interviews did not operate on the night of the presentation. Student V encountered one of these issues:

The problems for me are always the recording, the video or audio because we are not Communication Studies students, so when we do something we need hours and hours to do it.

Linguistic problems were encountered by a small number of students, who explained that they had found it very challenging to speak German in front of a native speaker whom they did not know, although they did describe their interviewees as supportive and understanding. Another major problem, although only encountered by one group, was related to the intense emotional response of their interviewee, who began to cry when describing the reunification of Germany and its personal significance. The students were taken by surprise and were unsure of how to respond as they had not been prepared for this situation.

In light of the insights gained from observations of student eyewitness interviews, presentations and interviews of the students themselves, it is recommended that, in the future there be:

- more thorough preparation of the assessment and clearer explanations of the task to the students in the initial stages i.e. how to find interviewees, interviewing techniques and the overarching purpose of the assessment.

- debriefing sessions in the interactive lecture after the eyewitness interview presentations i.e. to allow time for more critical reflection on the interview content.
- careful preparation for possible interviewee responses when discussing emotive subject-matter.
- more guidance with technical equipment (recommendations that students attend an information session in the Arts Multimedia Centre before commencing the interview assessment).

The above recommendations will be addressed in a manual on eyewitness interviewing, which the German Department is planning to develop. The manual will provide information on qualitative research methodology (specifically oral history), issues surrounding memory and history (i.e. how to think critically about these), questioning techniques, and ethics. This will serve to better equip students for their eyewitness interviews in the future as well as to consolidate the function of this assessment as a truly worthwhile learning experience which encourages students to query, ponder, reflect, critique and ultimately engage with the material taught in the culture classes.

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