



ORAL HISTORY MADE EASY

WEEK 2: RESEARCHING DEFINITIONS OF ORAL HISTORY & MEMORY AS A PROCESS

**WITH DR ANGELA MAYE-BANBURY BA MSC PHD SFHEA
ORAL HISTORIAN & EMERITUS FELLOW IN ORAL HISTORY**

Recording



in Progress

What we will have achieved at the end of today's session

Your reflections on hopes and fears; experiences, beliefs and values and Linda Shopes' paper: your 'student community hubs.'



The emergence of oral history and exploring definitions of oral history.



The emergence of modern day oral history practice: narratives and defining oral history.



Memory as a process: the 'unreliable' witness; evoking our memories; the subjectivity of oral history; individual/collective memory.



The assignment.



Your tasks for next week (i) Identify one resource which you think will be of valuable to everyone; (ii) The listening challenge (iii) Explore the professional organisations which support oral historians in their everyday practices.



Exercise 1: What one thing do you remember from last week? Put in the chat feed!



YOUR REFLECTIONS ON
LAST WEEK'S TASKS

Your reflections from last week's tasks

Hopes and fears
(keep your notes
handy)

Experiences, beliefs
and values (again,
keep your notes
handy)

Linda Shopes' paper –
discussion in pairs.

Exercise 1: Hopes and fears

1

Think about three hopes and three fears when you consider your completion of Oral History Made Easy

2

Put one hope and one fear into the Zoom chat feed.

Exercise 2: Linda Shopes' paper – your reflections

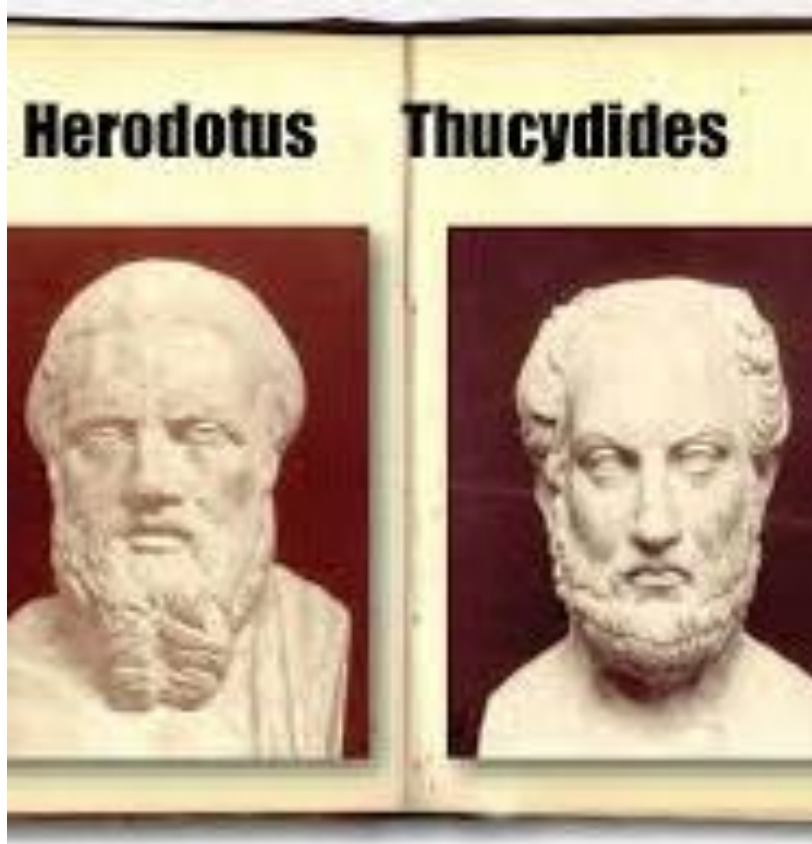
1

Zoom room discussion in pairs:
Linda Shopes (2011) paper entitled
'Making sense of oral history.'

2

Your task: What is the value of oral history, according to the author?
In your opinion, does oral history have any other benefits not mentioned in the paper?

THE EMERGENCE OF ORAL HISTORY & EXPLORING DEFINITIONS



The emergence of oral history

The first ever oral historian is generally regarded to have been Thucydides (c.460 BC c 400 BC) chronicled nearly 30 years of war and tension between Athens and Sparta using eyewitness accounts.

Mention must also be given to Herodotus 425 BC whose accounts of history were infused with myth, legend and narratives of triumph.



A note on narratives

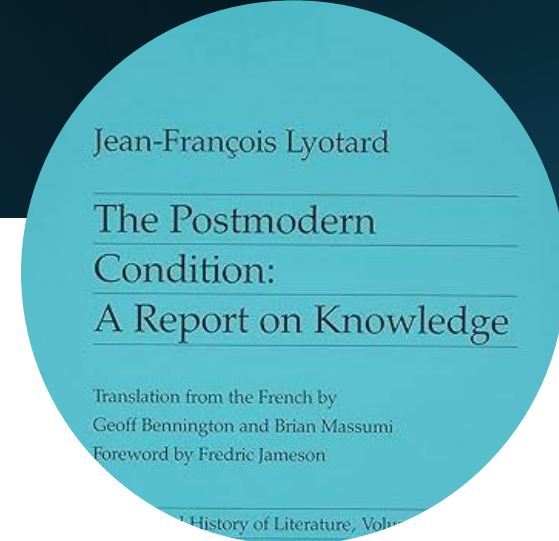
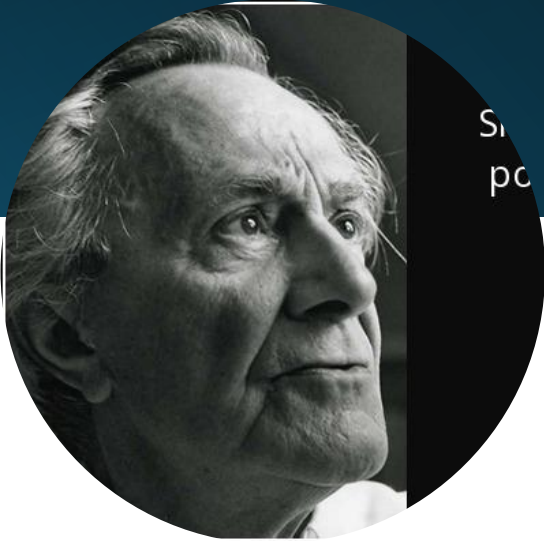
We need to be always vigilant when considering how narratives are formed, by whom and why.

Meta narratives: a plot or backstory widely accepted in society presented top down in such a way as to minimise critique; associated with modernism. Even the emergence of oral history itself is often presented as a metanarrative.

Micro narratives: individual accounts such as oral histories which are generated from the bottom up recounted by those who have born witness to past events; associated with postmodernism.

And everything in between...

Petites histories – little stories



Jean-François Lyotard (1924 – 1988)

French philosopher, sociologist, and literary theorist.

Exploring the emergence of modern day oral history practice



Allan Nevins 1948 from Columbia University began to record spoken memories of white male elites (Yow, p 3) including politicians, business and civic leaders.



Studs Terkel 1912 – 2008: saw oral history as a tool for social justice
[Listen to Studs Terkel's oral history interviews](#)



Improvements of technology meant that oral history began more popular with the advent of the cassette recorder and much more besides.



Defining oral history (1)

Oral history is a people's history; concerns events of the past recounted in an individual's own words. Silent voices, hidden stories and personal narratives.

"The interviewing of eyewitness participants about in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction" (Grele, 1996: 63 in Thomson, 1999).

"Memory is the core of oral history. Put simply, oral history collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews" (Richie, 2014: 1).



YOUR VOICE
YOUR STORY



SHARE
YOUR
STORY

Defining oral history (2)



“Oral history is the recording of personal testimony derived in oral form for purposes beyond the recording itself” (Yow, 2014 p 4).

“Oral history draws on memory and testimony to gain a more complete or different understanding of a past experienced both individually and collectively” (Bornat, 2004).

The method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices of people, communities and participants in past events...the sharing and maintenance of stories (OHA, 2024) Watch this [short film by Oklahoma Oral History project.](#)

Defining oral history (3)



- Oral history is: (i) the recording itself (ii) the transcript and (iii) the practice of doing.
- Interdisciplinary practice which yields rich primary data which can be applied to a diverse range of contexts.
- Recordings are intended to be accessible and often kept in public repositories.
- British Library Sound Archive; East Midlands Sound Archive; Columbia Centre For Oral History; Achill Oral Histories.
- Professional communities of practice: Oral History Society; Oral History Network Of Ireland; Oral History Association.

What makes oral history different



Gives us access to undocumented rich life experience to generate 'thick descriptions' of past events.



Hidden histories of people whose voices have been neglected or misrepresented to create a 'shared authority' (Frisch, x)



Allows us to focus on aspects of life rarely documented



Enables us to understand how experiences felt and their consequences



Allows us to have a dialogue with interviewees enabling them to assign meaning to past events.

Capturing
real life
experiences

THIS IS ME

Exercise 3



IN YOUR OWN WORDS,
WRITE A DEFINITION OF
ORAL HISTORY



THINK OF ONE GROUP WHOSE VOICES HAVE
BEEN MARGINALISED FROM ACCOUNTS OF
THE PAST.

HOW MIGHT ORAL HISTORY MAKE THIS
GROUP'S STORY MORE ACCESSIBLE?

MEMORY AS A PROCESS: THE 'UNRELIABLE WITNESS' AND EXPLORING SUBJECTIVITY

Key issues – oral history and memory

With audio recordings and verbatim records of our experiences, we are able to report on those experiences faithfully. Without documenting, each iteration of the story will shift.

In an oral history interview, people seldom recount their experiences chronologically – and in a moment, we shall see why. What is the relevance of the tangents?

Our inability to remember our lives aged between – 3 (approx) and our limited recollections of past experiences until we are around 10 years old is called ‘infantile amnesia’ and is attributed to evolving neurological development in the early years of our lives (Callaghan et al, 2014).

The mechanics of memory



Prefrontal cortex: short term memory.

Takes around 7 repetitions for something to go from short to long term memory.



Hippocampus: long term memory; strong; emotional.

Visual stimuli: pictures more 'memorable' than words.

Sensory stimuli.

Marilee Sprenger's work on memory:
"The brain is programmed to forget, it filters out about 99 percent of incoming information. This usually allows us to focus and keep our sanity."

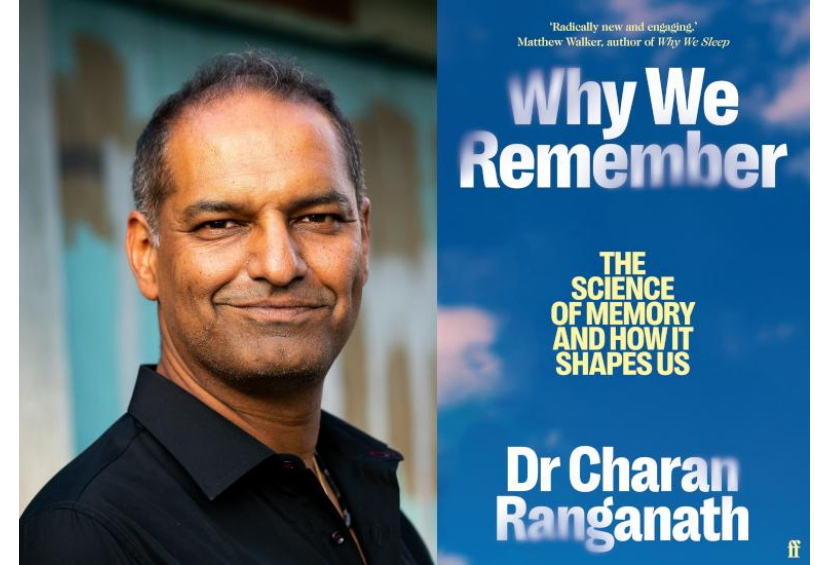
Attention and intention.



Hermann Ebbinghaus



Marilee Sprenger

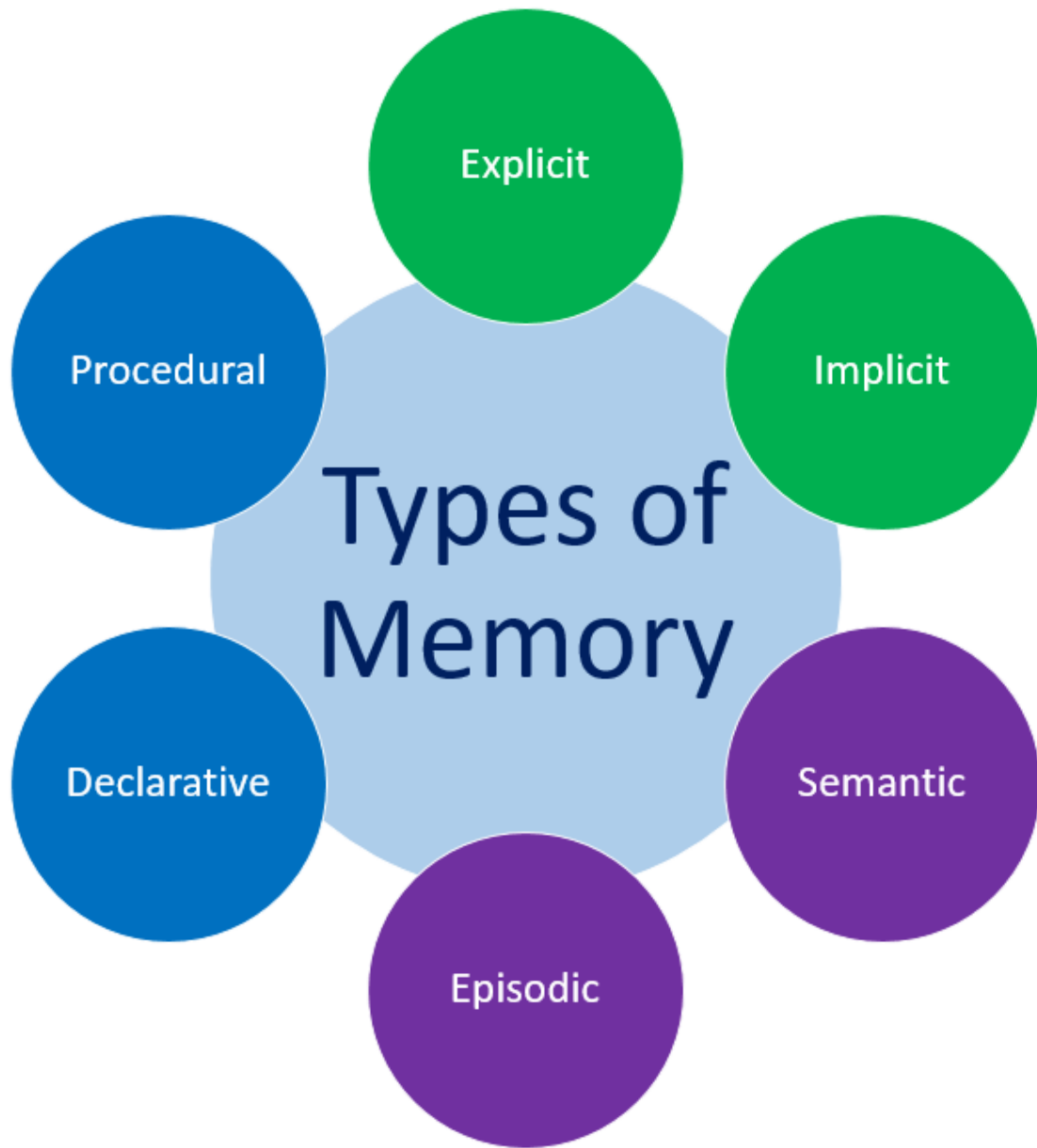


Charan Ranganath

Pioneers of memory

Why we remember – and why we forget





Implicit - remembering things subconsciously by rote e.g. knowing the route to home or work

Explicit - consciously remembering things e.g. appointments.

Procedural - remembering how to perform a task or skill e.g. riding a bike; using software.

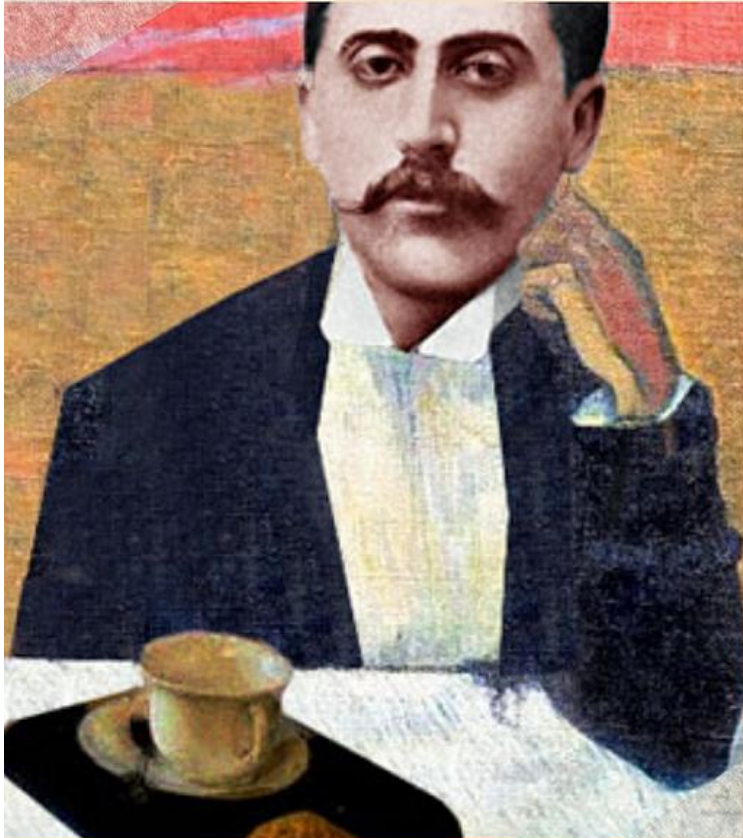
Declarative - remembering facts; faces; phone numbers.

Episodic - remembering recall of personal experiences at specific moment.

Semantic e.g. recalling facts triggered by words/phrases.

Exercise 3: What aroma gives you a Proustian rush?

Recipe: The Proust Phenomenon



- Ingredients:**
- 1 tbsn of Scent
 - 1/2 tbsn of Taste
 - 2 tspns of emotion

- Directions:**
- In a small bowl, stir scent and taste until well combined. Resulting mixture: Flavour.
 - Add in emotion, one tspn at a time and mix well.
 - Resulting mixture: Memory

- Storage:**
- For best use, store the memory in a cool, dry place at the back of your mind.
 - Best eaten when remembered

Things that help us remember

Stories	Stories have emotional components that attract the amygdale, the emotional centre of the brain. They also have beginnings, middles, and ends that make sense to the hippocampus, the structure that helps store these episodes.
Humour	Humour, laughter, and joyfulness release important brain chemicals that make us feel good and aid in retention. Some research suggests that we remember at least 30 percent more of what we learn with humour.
Games	Learning through play is one of the most powerful ways to learn. Limiting competition is important.
Analogy	Creating assists brains in connecting new information to what it is being compared to.
Metaphor	Oral History Made Easy is like a delicious buffet of tasty knowledge.
Movement	Active, hands-on learning will bring back memories of prior movement and movement patterns.

Exercise 4: Musical memory moments



Soundtracks of our lives.

Choose a song that evokes particular memories for you.

[BBC's Desert Island Discs Series](#)



Eight tracks, a book and a luxury: what would you take to a desert island?



Exercise 5: How observant are we?

[Test Your Awareness: Whodunnit – YouTube](#) –

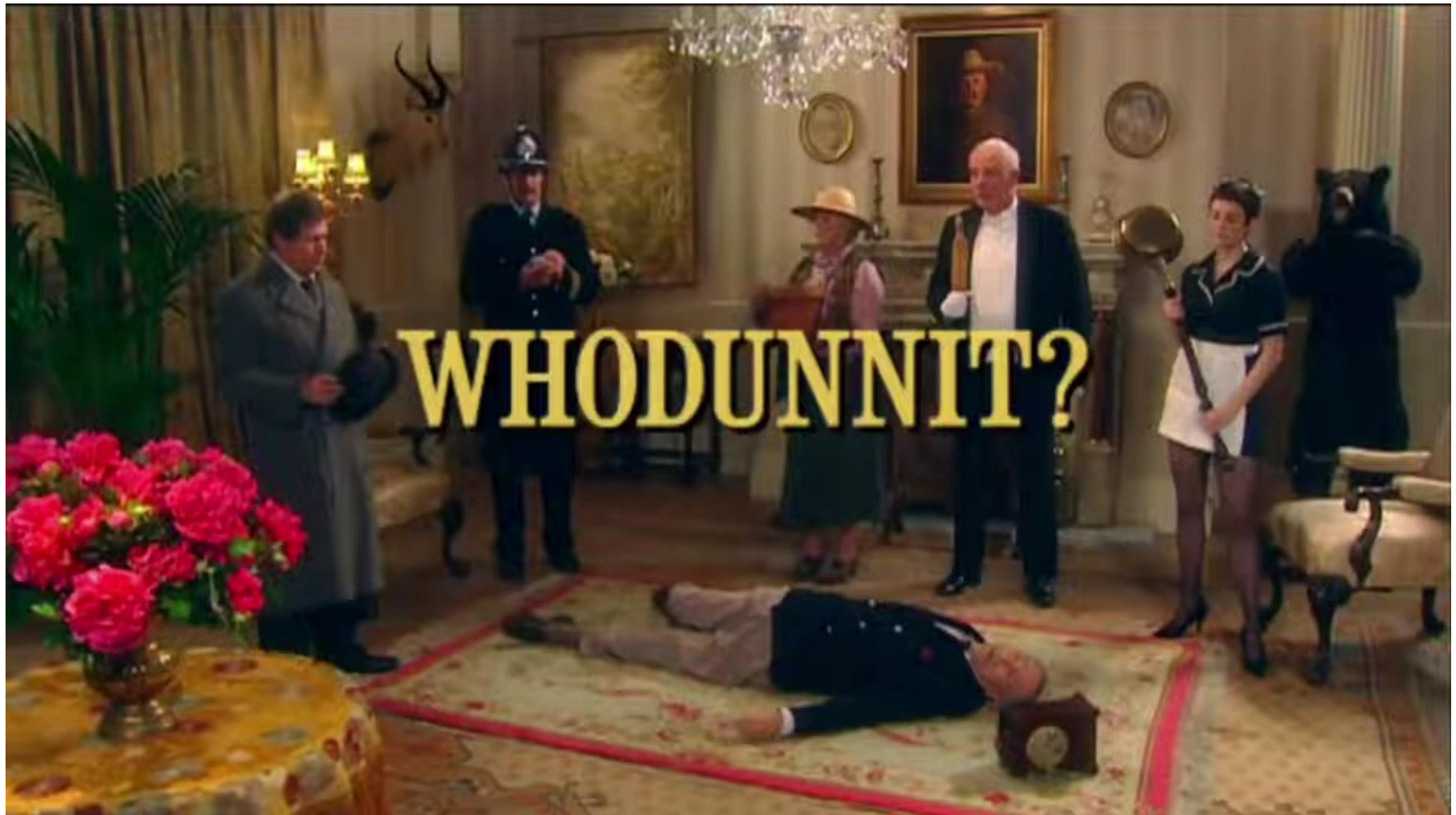
Part 1 stop after 52 seconds. How many changes in the set did you spot?

[Test Your Awareness: Whodunnit – YouTube](#)

Part 2 – Note the changes on set.

We only see what we're looking for.

We only see what we are looking for (1)



Watch the video again



How many changes did you spot?



Narrators as ‘unreliable’ witnesses

Oral histories are **coded**, **decoded** and **recoded** at multiple points.

Oral histories contains insights framed by context, layers of time and experience of the narrator. It is how people remember from a ‘web of meaning’(Abrams, 2014, p 89).

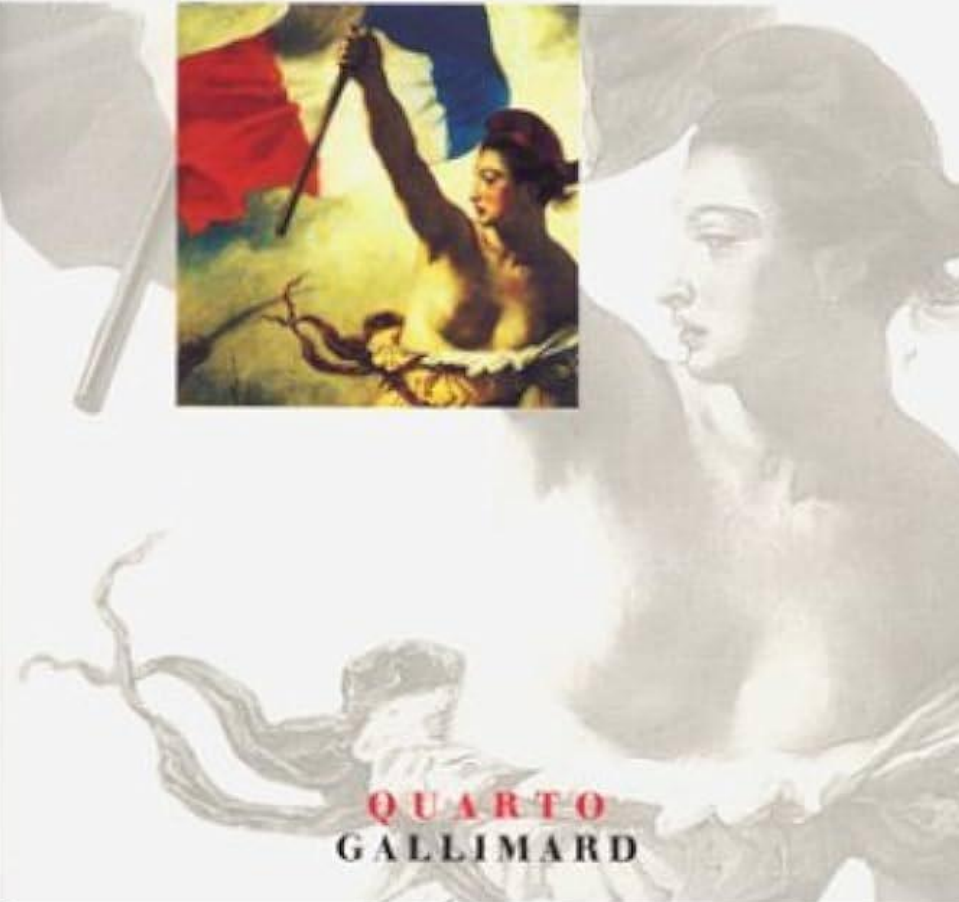
“What is really important to remember is that memory is not a passive depository of facts but an active process in the creation of meanings” (Portelli, 2002).

Pierre Nora & sites of memory.

Fallibility of human memory

LES LIEUX DE MÉMOIRE

1 • sous la direction de Pierre Nora



QUARTO
GALLIMARD

The role of memorials:
purpose and prospects.

Sites of memory may be:

- Physical
- Digital
- Imagined.

Embracing (& interrogating) subjectivity



Importance of habitus.

“One precise advantage of oral evidence is that it is interactive and that one is not left alone, as with documentary evidence, to divine its significance. The source can reflect on the content and offer interpretation as well as facts” (Lummis, 1988).

“The importance of oral testimony may often lie in not in its adherence to facts but rather in its divergence from them where imagination, symbolism and desire break in.” (Portelli, 2002).

Individual & collective memory

COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Collective memory refers to the shared memories and experiences that help define a group or community's identity.

DEFINITION

The concept of collective memory refers to how groups within a culture retain and exchange information amongst themselves. It is something that allows groups of individuals to hold onto familiar experiences across generations. It includes shared memories, values, beliefs, narratives, and cultural heritage collectively held by a group or society.

EXAMPLE

- **National holidays:** National holidays, such as Independence Day or Thanksgiving, reinforce the importance of historical events and help to create shared meanings about the past.
- **Songs and anthems:** National anthems and patriotic songs also contribute to collective memory by serving as a reminder of key moments and values in national history.

THE ASSIGNMENT

Purpose of the assignment



A record on your time as a student on Oral History Made Easy so you may reflect on the activities you have undertaken and the extent to which they have impacted on your personal, academic and professional development.



An important evolving development tool as part of your on-going professional, personal and academic development. Share it with your professors, head of experiential learning and others, family and friends.

Content (1)

(i) A summary of your hopes and fears on beginning Oral History Made Easy. Please include a minimum of three hopes and three fears.

(ii) What did you enjoy most and why? Any challenges you encountered? Anything surprise you along the way?

(iii) Your reflections following your pilot oral history interview, the listening exercise and other tasks undertaken as part of the course.

Content (2)

(iv) A summary of how the knowledge, skills and attributes you acquired during your time on Oral History Made Easy and how you hope these may help you in the future

(v) A brief personal and professional development action plan which shows the next steps in your own development journey.

Date for submission to Angela by email 4 pm Mon 27th April 2026.

YOUR TASKS FOR NEXT WEEK

Listening challenge (1)

The importance of the interviewer's and interviewee's "inner voices" (Roberts, 2020) in non-judgmental way.

Enables interviewer to ask more appropriate questions; indicates to respondent that you have been listening.

The art of "hearing data" (Rubin and Rubin, 2011).

Audit interview transcripts; look at proportion of interviewer and interviewee speaking.

Actively listen; avoid thinking of quality of final recording.

Minimal interviewer interruptions: be comfortable with silences.



The listening challenge (2)

Between now and next week, find someone with whom you can speak for 30 mins (this could be divided into 2 x 15 mins slots or 3 x 10 mins slots. This can be in person, online or on the phone/WhatsApp.

Safeguard informed consent by telling your co-conversationalist that you are doing this exercise as part of Oral History Made Easy. Your partner will be anonymous.

Try and use a 'naturally occurring' conversation. Use as many open ended questions as possible. You can focus on something specific "Tell me about a place you loved as a child." Or you can simply begin by asking "What are you planning to do today?" "How was your day?" Make a discrete note of the time.

Resist the temptation to graft your own autobiographical experiences onto the conversation or tell anecdotes. Be fully present in the conversation.

The listening challenge (3)

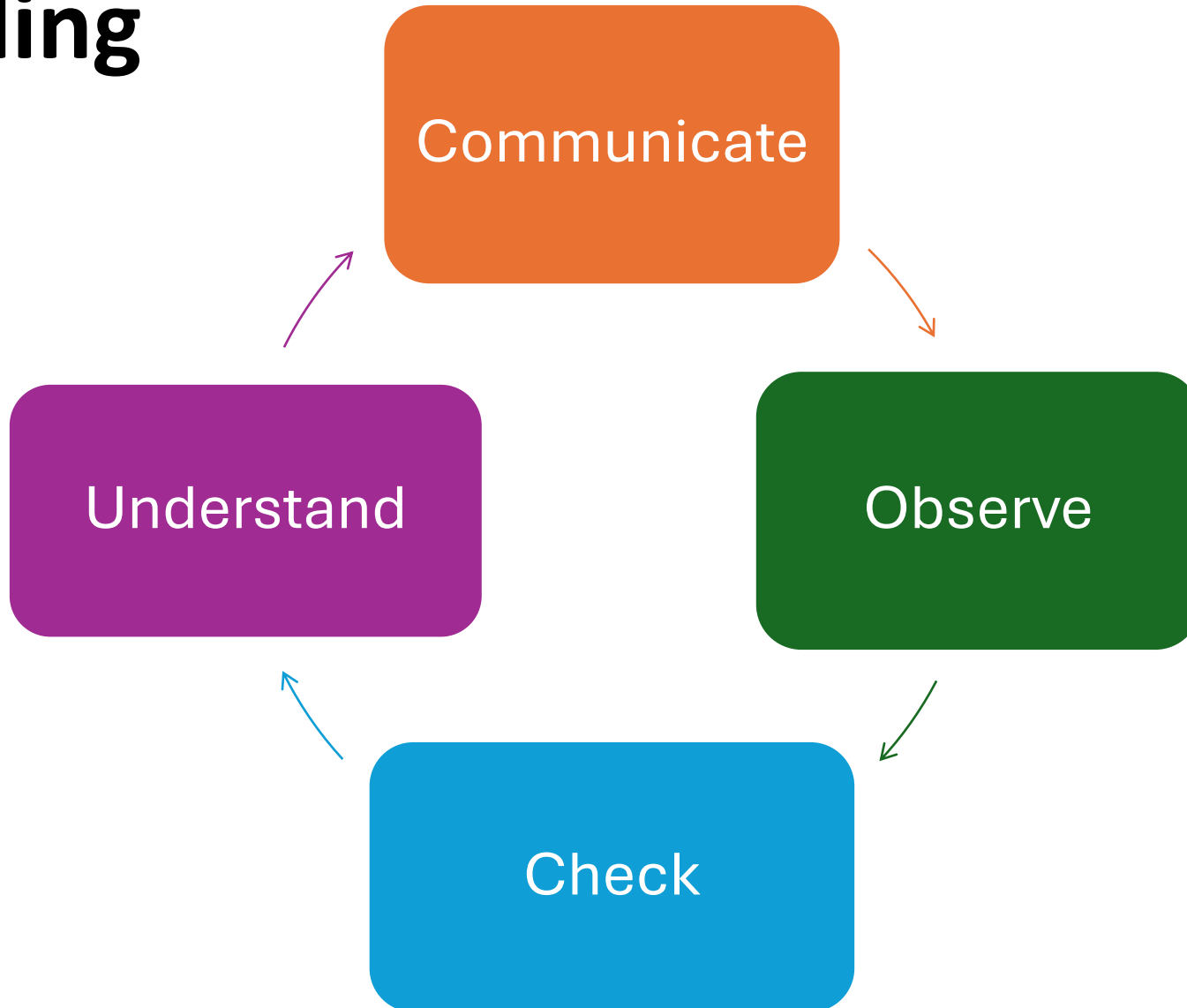
Immediately (or as soon as practical), after you have completed the 30 mins, make some notes on:

(i) How much of the conversation you remember. Make a note of content (headlines); chronology; anything that stood out.

(ii) How you felt when you were actively listening; the extent to which you were able to focus entirely; your level of interest; your energy levels.

For tips on [active listening, see our top ten tips.](#)

The loop of understanding: words, emotions and feeling



Tasks for week 3

1. Find one oral history resource you like and think could be useful to the group. This can be in any format! Please email your resource to Angela oralhistorymadeeasy@gmail.com for sharing with the group on or before Fri April 3rd.
2. The listening challenge: 30 mins of active listening with reflections between now and next week.
3. Explore professional communities of practice: Oral History Society; Oral History Network Of Ireland; Oral History Association. What are your three key takeaways following your review of these web sites?

What we have achieved at the end of today's session

Your reflections on hopes and fears; experiences, beliefs and values and Linda Shopes' paper on your 'student community hubs.' 

The emergence of oral history and exploring definitions of oral history. 

The emergence of modern day oral history practice: a note on narratives and defining oral history. 

Memory as a process: the 'unreliable' witness; evoking our memories; the subjectivity of history; individual/collective memory. 

Your oral history challenges (i) Identify one resource which you think will be of valuable to everyone; (ii) the listening challenge (iii) Explore the professional organisations which support oral historians in their everyday practices (iv) Listening challenge. 



References

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Bornat, J. (2004) 'Oral history' *Qualitative Research Practice*, 34-47.

Callaghan, B. L., Li, S., & Richardson, R. (2014). The elusive engram: what can infantile amnesia tell us about memory?. *Trends in neurosciences*, 37(1), 47-53.

Grele [1973] 1996, 63) in Thomson A. 'Making the Most of Memories: The Empirical and Subjective Value of Oral History,' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*. 1999;9:291-301. doi:10.2307/3679406.

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Lummis, T. (1988). *Listening To History: The Authenticity Of Oral Evidence*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Portelli, A. (2002). What makes oral history different. In *The oral history reader* (pp. 77-88). Routledge.

Ritchie, D. A. (2014). *Doing Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Turnbull, O., & Solms, M. (2004). Memory, amnesia and intuition: a neuro-psychoanalytic perspective. In *Emotional development in psychoanalysis, attachment theory and neuroscience* (pp. 63-92). Routledge.

Yow, V. R. (2014). *Recording Oral History: A Guide For The Humanities And Social Sciences*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Additional resources

[Introduction To Oral History – Texas Digital Library](#)

[Development And The Use Of Oral History](#)