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THE THIRD AGE TRUST



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

Living History

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U3A

GETTING STARTED IN LIVING HISTORY

LIFE STORY WRITING AND ORAL HISTORY



1959

Making good use of our memories

The interest in 'Living History' emerges from many different activities—local, family and oral history, creative writing and current affairs. The outcomes vary, too - individual Life Stories written for family and friends, recordings and resource materials for museums and schools, books and CDs for sale to the general public.

This leaflet offers a range of ideas for both writing and recording Life Stories, based on the experience of members of the U3A Living History Network.

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Remember, we are 'living history' and we owe it to future generations to leave behind the story of our times.

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Starting with ourselves—Writing our own Life Stories

How many times did you say to older relatives ‘you should write that down. . .’ as they told you some particularly interesting story from their life experience? But did they do it? Now we are the older relatives—and we have a unique story to tell - so let us make good use of our memories.

Writing is essentially a solitary occupation, but working with other people provides support and encouragement. This leaflet is written for Group Leaders/Co-ordinators, but it will also provide useful insights for writers working on their own. Do remember that there are many ways to write a life story, as any library reading list will indicate. The writing itself can be a voyage of discovery, and no life is ‘ordinary.’

1. Establishing a group

Experience suggests that the Co-ordinator needs to have two main priorities in mind when setting up a Life Story group - first, to create an atmosphere of trust and confidence within the group to encourage the flow of memories and second, to ensure that members have opportunities to experiment with, and to find, the writing styles which suit them.

Think carefully about the size of your group. Eight, regular participants are probably enough if the aim is to produce individual life stories, though a larger group may be necessary to gather material, edit and publish a general book of memories, or to record and transcribe discs for a local history project.

‘But nothing exciting ever happened to me . . . I really can’t remember much . . . and I’m no good at spelling.’ This is a common response when you float the idea of a Life Story Group. Other people, however, may have written a great deal but need encouragement to finish the task.

So one half of the group may need ideas to get started, while other members need help to select and shape existing material. This combination of skills and interests in a group can be very productive. It is amazing how one person’s memory can stimulate forgotten memories for other people, and we uncover a lot of social history in the process.

2. Target audience?

Who is the book for? Who will read, use or possibly buy it? Identifying the target audience helps to shape the work. Don’t be too ambitious. Writing a whole life story from childhood to retirement can be a daunting task, so consider a more limited focus for your initial project. Even a few chapters, written with obvious enthusiasm about key events in your life, will leave a valuable document for your family, and for possible future research. Think what we have learnt from Pepys’ diary . . .

3. First meeting

Ask your members to look around the house and bring a small object, for example a tool, ornament, embroidery, toy or book of special significance to them by which to introduce themselves to the group. Selecting this object will encourage a greater awareness of all the personal ‘treasures’ which we keep around us, (but often barely notice), and which may be useful to stimulate other memories.

Be aware that sharing memories can be unexpectedly painful as well as enjoyable. Agree the ground rules at your first meeting—confidentiality within the group and no obligation to answer questions if these feel intrusive

Following the introductions, ask people to write down the ten most significant Milestones in their lives. These key events could provide chapter headings for their Life Stories, and members should keep these notes for further expansion. The exercise will also indicate some of the common experiences which might be worth exploring in subsequent meetings, for example the response to the birth of a brother or sister, the first day at school, leaving home.

Encourage members to put pen to paper at the first meeting, to write up one of the Milestones and read out their memory to the group (hence the importance of limited numbers). Write . . . read and discuss . . . and more memories will emerge.

Homework might be to re-write the Milestone from the perspective of someone else who was there, or even an animal/item of furniture which observed the incident. Set a five minute limit per person on the read-back time to make sure that everyone can contribute. There is no need to set limits on the total amount written.

4. Vary the Writing Style

The idea behind the homework is to introduce different writing styles early in the project. This will add variety to the Life Story, and it may be useful for the experienced writers in the group to gain new insights into their memories by re-working some of their existing material from another perspective.

This exercise is best introduced at the beginning of the project before there can be any suggestion of criticism of the work being produced. Memories are very precious! Confidence grows with group support and many people discover hidden skills in the process. 'I didn't know I had it in me!' as one surprised, 'reluctant' writer said.

Other variations in writing style include dialogue, poetry, 're-creating' diaries, letters, school reports, writing imaginary postcards, inventing newspaper cuttings etc. The resource materials listed in section 8 provide more ideas, and every group will be different in how they respond.

5. Further Topics

As well as writing chronologically about events, try taking sounds or smells as the starting point for a session, or write about a series of memories associated with a particular 'space' - the kitchen, or garden or the railway station. Use brainstorm techniques if ideas are slow to emerge.

Try writing about some of the significant people in your life. Identify them by drawing up the invitation list for an imaginary 'Life Celebration Supper'. Include neighbours, friends, teachers, authors, pop and sporting stars etc who have been important to you. The results can be very thought-provoking.

Don't forget to add the historical context to your story. 'The 20th Century Day by Day' pub. Dorling Kindersley revised 2000 (ISBN 0 7513 2162 1) in your local reference library is useful for this. Future readers will appreciate the inclusion of key dates and your CV, as well as a family tree to identify who you are writing about, and do include some hand-written material in your folder to provide another insight into your personality.

Involve the U3A group members in choosing the topics and running the sessions, and if the stories are written for your families, let them see what you have written from time to time so that they can ask additional questions. Don't be surprised if they come up with quite different versions of shared events. This is the nature of human memory and all versions are valid.

6. Presentation

Most members will probably use a computer for this work, but encourage the others to write in a loose-leaf folder, rather than directly into a book so that it is easier to edit the text and insert photographs etc. Many craft shops sell archive-friendly 'Scrapbooking' resources which can be used to enhance the presentation of a Life Story book, but avoid cutting or sticking original materials, especially photographs. Use photocopies rather than the originals, which should be identified and stored carefully in archive-quality plastic sleeves.

Use white archive-friendly card, corner mounts and transparent envelopes to display memorabilia, and avoid sellotape, coloured card and inappropriate glues which can do irreparable damage to precious resources. Pack artefacts and textiles, eg a wedding dress, in white, acid-free tissue paper for long-term storage. Try 'arrowfile' for suitable materials by mail order (www.arrowfile.com 0844 855 1100)

Finally, in this computer age remember to download, print and label your current photographs so that you retain a record of the present, as well as the distant past.

7. Possible questions which may arise during discussion

How do I distinguish between a genuine memory and hearsay?

We may be perpetuating a family myth, rather than giving a first-hand account of a real event, but this is still part of who we are and worth recording. Cover yourself by writing an introductory paragraph to your book which recognises that there are many ways to interpret an event, depending on who tells the story.

What do I include and what do I leave out? Will I offend my relatives?

A 'warts and all' life story, written to help to come to terms with difficult circumstances is entirely valid, but avoid libel and consider putting an embargo on your papers during your lifetime. In a group setting there will always be memories which we do not want to discuss or pass on to our families. We cannot hope to write about everything which has happened to us, but neither should we ignore all the difficulties. Subsequent generations may gain valuable insights from our experience of coping with problems.

How do I deal with the blank periods in my memory?

Our memories can play strange tricks and some sections of your life story may seem, initially, to be a complete blank. Try this – think of the house where you lived at that time, and the community around it. Research the local and national papers for that period. Do the headlines bring back more personal memories?

If you are really stuck, let a colleague or a family member read your work and ask them what else they want to know about your life story. This will probably help you to write with more enthusiasm again. Remember, if you are getting bored with it – so will your readers, so curtail that section and move on!

8. Resources for Life Story projects

- 'Write Your Life Story' Michael Oke ISBN 978 1 84528 305 6 Get the 4th edition
- 'Family Fables' Maisie Robson ISBN 0 9542318 2 1 Writing your own, or your family's stories.
- The U3A Resource Centre History and Music lists contain much useful material to stimulate memories, see also the 'Sources' magazine
- The 'Handbook for Creative Writing Groups' by Maggie Smith, U3A Adviser, contains many exercises and useful suggestions to help improve the quality of your writing. £2.50

Details U3A National Office: 020 8466 6139 national.office@u3a.org.uk

NEW ! U3A Self-Publishing Advisory Service – contact Francis Beckett, the Editor of Third Age Matters, francis@francisbeckett.co.uk Aims to 'help members produce properly edited and designed work which reaches the people they want to reach, and give them the best chance of getting back the money they invest in it.'

Oral History - Recording in the Community

So far, we have talked about writing individual life stories. In an ideal world, it would be good to add a voice recording to your written work, but the technology changes so quickly now that keeping recordings up-to-date and playable has become a national problem. Nevertheless, several U3A groups have undertaken major local history projects, for example, recording memories of life in a village before it was overtaken by suburban sprawl, the loss of particular industries, significant celebrations and disasters.

Other groups have worked with local museums to make sound recordings to complement exhibitions. This collaboration has many advantages—access to expertise and equipment, space to work in, and most important of all, the assurance that the material can be stored safely, and will remain accessible for future use.

Joint projects with local history societies or local radio are also worth exploring, but if you want to work with schools, remember that they are constrained by the National Curriculum and it is essential that you talk with the teachers in advance.

9. Planning a recording project

Your first, essential, move should be to download a copy of the extensive guidelines from the Oral History Society website. (www.oralhistory.org.uk 020 7412 7405) These cover the responsibilities implicit in setting up an oral history project, advice on interviewing, understanding copyright and Clearance Forms, also the latest information on equipment and possible funding.

The Oral History Society runs one-day, basic and advanced training courses in different parts of the country and it is well worth signing up for one. Joining the Society also brings a comprehensive bi-annual publication on national and international projects, conferences, and details of regional advisers. (£20pa)

10. Who will use or buy your recordings?

The comments made earlier in this leaflet about starting with a limited, defined project are even more important with local history projects. Each recording will need a detailed summary to ensure subsequent access to the material, and a complete transcript will take at least four times as long to type up as the original interview. The Oral History Society has additional instruction sheets on the processing stages, which are essential if the material is to be offered to a museum, the Records Office or the BBC for long term use.

Listen to some of the excellent CDs produced by the British Library Sound Archive, which you can get on loan from the U3A Resource Centre, to learn from the 'experts', and practice interviewing each other before you go out to meet the general public.

Remember that interviews can uncover some very painful memories as well as sharing 'the good times'. Discuss in advance how you would cope with someone's distress, or the possible disclosure of criminal activities, and avoid passing on any comments which could be considered libellous. It may be useful to explain to everyone at the start of the project that though you greatly value their contributions, it may not be possible to include all the material in the finished product.

11. Still uncertain where to begin? - Try Memory Boxes

If the idea of launching into written or recorded Life Stories feels too big a step, try getting your group to make Memory Boxes—a practical version of the Milestones exercise.

Look around the house and put together a small collection of everyday items through which to tell your Life Story. It's worth looking in sewing baskets, button tins, tool boxes and those jars of oddments which we keep on the top shelf for some of these items, and cast your eye along your bookshelf, too

12. Working in schools and Day Centres

Introducing yourself in this way is particularly useful for an intergenerational schools project. Sharing life experience with our sixth form partners in 'Project 16' as we compared the contents of our Memory Boxes gave us many insights into their lives as teenagers, and it was a revelation for the students, too.

'Talking to the members of U3A made me realise just how similar the ladies had been to us when they were 16 or 17. The same kind of things mattered to them that matter to us now. It was really interesting and enjoyable.'

There is still potential for Life Story work with schools. World War Two features several times in the curriculum, and 'Growing up in . . .' can involve members who are local to the area. In addition, events to commemorate the start of WW1 one hundred years ago will provide further opportunities for using your family stories to enhance the curriculum.

Age Exchange produce a range of practical handbooks for intergenerational work, also suggestions for reminiscence activities in day centres and sheltered housing. (020 8318 9105 www.age-exchange.org.uk)

13. Wartime memories to spare?

The Imperial War Museum is very keen to collect material relating to any of the 20/21st Century conflicts - photos, tapes, memoirs, service records etc for civilians or combatants. The main galleries are closed for refurbishment until July 2014 but if, like some other groups, you have collected material but lack the capacity to process it, IWM may be very glad to add it to their archives. Contact them first. (020 7416 5320 www.iwm.org.uk)

Your members may also be interested to dip into the vast range of stories and photographs in the BBC archive 'WW2 People's War' (www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar).

Do enjoy your work! For further information on the U3A Living History Network

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