

# THE POTENTIAL AND POSSIBILITIES OF ORAL HISTORY FOR SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AT UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL

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## ***Abstract***

Since 2003 the History Department of the University of the Free State (UFS) has been offering a third-year module on oral history. From the time of its inception this module has aimed at providing a balance between oral history theory and methodology, thus enabling students to master and apply the oral history technique in practice. Students are taught how to manage an oral history project from start to finish. The teaching approach is resource-based with a stronger emphasis on learning than on teaching, which is in line with a current international trend towards constructivism. During the past nine years it has become clear to the authors that apart from the theoretical knowledge gained by the students, various skills are also taught and developed in the practical session of this module. This is clearly revealed when the questionnaires, interviews and student evaluation forms are assessed and analysed. The main purpose of this article is to identify and interpret certain trends and patterns regarding skills development as both a direct and an indirect outcome of this oral history module by using data obtained from the mentioned questionnaires, interviews and evaluation forms. The article addresses certain questions which are crucial for understanding the potential and many possibilities of oral history as a tool for skills development in a transforming society. It is argued that oral history's potential creates new methodological approaches for developing a diversity of new skills required by a changing social environment. Understanding this potential and its possibilities provides a basis for further developing oral history as a skills development tool, which may also lead to the improvement and expansion of existing oral history courses offered at tertiary level.

**Keywords:** Oral history; Constructivism; Teaching and learning; Undergraduate module; Third-year university students; Outcomes; Assessment; Evaluation forms; Skills development; Interdisciplinary research.

## **Introduction**

Since 2003 the History Department of the University of the Free State (hereafter UFS) has offered an oral history module as part of the third-year History course. During the past nine years this module has not only grown in numbers, but also in stature, with students from disciplines other than History also showing interest. Since its inception this module has aimed at providing a balance between oral history theory and methodology, thus also enabling students to master and apply in practice the oral history technique and specifically oral history interviewing. Throughout the past nine years it has become clear that apart from the theoretical knowledge gained by the students, a range of skills are transferred and developed in the practical sessions of the module. This is revealed when the students' module evaluation forms, as well as their questionnaires and interviews, which form an integral part of the module, are analysed. The main purpose of this article is to identify and interpret certain trends and patterns regarding skills development as both a direct and indirect outcome of the oral history module (Oelofse & Du Bruyn, 2010-2011:1).

In this article the following questions will be addressed: How is the oral history module structured and presented? How are the students assessed? Which skills are developed? How is this verified? What trends, patterns and themes have emerged over the past nine years? And finally: What are oral history's possibilities in terms of future skills development for undergraduate students? The key issue is: What skills do students need to function in a diverse and changing society such as South Africa, and do they actually obtain or develop these skills during an oral history course? The answers to these questions are crucial for understanding the potential and the many possibilities of oral history as a tool for skills development in a transforming society. It may be argued that oral history's potential indeed creates new methodological approaches for developing a diversity of new skills required by a changing social environment. Understanding this potential and its possibilities provides a basis for further developing oral history as a skills development tool, which may also lead to the improvement and expansion of existing oral history courses offered at tertiary level.

## **The need for an oral history module at undergraduate level**

Although strong opposition against oral history still exists, the various benefits

of oral history as both a discipline and a methodology have become widely accepted by several historians (Ritchie, 2003:13, 23). One of these benefits deals with oral history as an effective tool for teaching History. Oral history has become closely associated with the modern teaching trend of moving away from the emphasis on purely political history to a stronger focus on social, community and local history (Thompson, 2000:8-9, 17, 23; Sideris, 1986:44). The history of everyday life, the role of ordinary people in shaping events and the importance of social issues such as racism, gender equity, reconciliation and social justice are gaining more prominence in tertiary education in South Africa (Oelofse & Du Bruyn, 2004:161-164; Ritchie, 2003:201; Ludlow, 2007:207-208). Considered a fringe development during the eighties and nineties, it has now become part of the mainstream programmes. The History Workshop project at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, has led the way in this regard with its pioneering scholarship on the social histories of marginalised communities in South Africa. As a result of this ground-breaking work, History departments at several South African universities offer some or other oral history module (Bonner, *s.a.*; University of the Witwatersrand, *s.a.*; Lekgoathi, 2009:105-107).

During the past decade the general teaching approach at the UFS has also become more resource-based with a stronger emphasis on learning than on teaching. The focus has shifted from the lecturer to the students. This approach is in line with a current international trend towards constructivism whereby students are expected to become more directly and actively involved in creating their own knowledge and their own process of learning (Ludlow, 2007:201). The basic premise is that knowledge is not always textbook bound and waiting to be accessed. Students are encouraged to construct their own understanding of the subject through first-hand experience. From a constructivist perspective, knowledge is not passively received from the lecturer but rather created as students adapt to and make sense of their experiential environment (Wilton, 2011:473-474; Golding, 2011:*passim*; Thirteen online – Concept to classroom, 2004).

In the case of the oral history module offered by the History Department, UFS, students construct their understanding of oral history by being exposed to a real-life interview situation, which makes the learning practice-orientated. Oral history has thus become a valuable tool for teaching students how to become the creators of their own knowledge as they are personally involved in their own learning; how to explore new techniques of acquiring knowledge;

how to ask critical questions; how to formulate questions which interest them; and how to assess what they already know about oral history. Through the interviews, strong emphasis is placed not only on personal development, but also on social interaction. Social interaction occurs in the students' experiential environment and it relates to, in both the group discussion nature of the lectures, as well as the oral interview set-up (Maclellan, 2005:*passim*; Davis & Sumara, 2002:410-411; Gray, *s.a.*). Based on the above it may be argued that the real-life interview facilitates a constructivist approach to teaching and learning.

### **Teaching and learning oral history at the History Department, UFS**

In 2003 oral history teaching at the UFS was formalised when the oral history module, commonly known as GES 361: Oral History was officially launched. Since 2007 the Department of History of the National Museum,<sup>1</sup> Bloemfontein, has become formally involved with the educating and facilitating of the students. Because of its strong focus on oral history, the Museum became specifically involved with the practical aspects of the oral history module. This partnership and collaboration between the University and the Museum (Du Bruyn & Oelofse, 2009:*passim*) has benefits not only for the two institutions, but also for the students because they have the opportunity to tap into the Museum's field work expertise. The collaboration also increases the possibilities of oral history for skills development. This is discussed in more detail later in the article.

### ***The content and structure of the module***

The content and structure of the oral history module was designed to enhance not only the transfer of knowledge, but also skills development. The oral history module counts four credits and consists of a total of six lectures, namely three oral history theory lectures, three oral history methodology lectures, as well as a practical assessment session. The module is presented in Afrikaans and English. The theory part focuses on the status and value of oral history as a discipline and its role in reconciliation and nation-building in the South African context. Furthermore, the challenges confronting oral history are examined. Oral historians are concerned with memory because memory forms the core of oral testimonies. What makes oral history so distinct and

sets it apart from other branches of history, is its reliance on memory and not on text. Nevertheless, the dilemma is that memory can never be absolutely certain and therein lies its weakness as a source of historical knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Factors that may negatively affect memory's objectivity are discussed to help the students to implement reliable techniques and methods to minimise problems. Additionally, steps are highlighted to examine oral evidence for factual credibility by implementing historical interpretation and the principles of historical critique in searching for authenticity in sources.

The methodology section of the module focuses on oral history in practice and specifically how to plan and implement an oral history project from start to finish. The specific focus areas include the planning of an oral history project, conducting an interview and transcribing the interview. Students are also made aware of the importance of interview ethics.<sup>3</sup> The issue of copyright and the protection of the interest of both interviewer and interviewee are addressed in an agreement form, namely the 'Gift and Release Agreement'. During the lectures there is a strong emphasis on the uniqueness of oral history in the African context. It is considered essential that students are made aware of the fact that interviewing people from an African background, in many respects, differs from interviewing people from a Western background. The interviewer needs to respect and acknowledge the norms and customs of the person he or she intends to interview (Du Bruyn & Challa, 2004:*passim*). The National Museum's Batho Community History Project, which focuses on the history of Bloemfontein's oldest township, namely Batho, is used as a practical example of an African oral history project (Du Bruyn, 2008:*passim*; Du Bruyn, 2010:6-16). With the Batho Project in mind, students are encouraged to apply the oral history technique to their families and/or communities and start their own projects (Ludlow, 2007:207-208).

One of the strengths of the oral history module is that the theory and methodology sections of the module are interlinked and the lectures gradually build up to the practical session, namely the real-life interview. Therefore, the students realise the importance of attending lectures. Missing out on a lecture will negatively affect their performance in the practical session, which counts for 50% of their semester mark. Especially challenging for the students is the transcribing of their interviews as it is a first-time experience for most of them. This emphasises the importance of class attendance and the technical information shared during lectures. Because the classes are small, the lectures are interactive and adequate opportunities for class discussions are provided.

Students are also encouraged to share their personal experiences of any previous interviews they have conducted. From the start we have realised that most students have limited knowledge and no prior experience of even the most basic oral history techniques and concepts. Therefore, this module is not only an intensive, but also a challenging teaching and learning experience for the students. At the same time, however, a variety of skills are developed and enhanced to the benefit of the students.

During the past nine years we have frequently adapted the module content, as well as our teaching approach in order to stay in touch with the students' expectations, as well as a changing social and technological environment. This environment not only includes emerging social trends that influence the way people communicate, but also constantly changing technology. Fast changing technology has its own challenges regarding financial expenses for both partnering institutions. The recording equipment needs to be upgraded continuously in order to stay abreast of technological advances. Being able to handle sophisticated recording equipment correctly is also one of the skills that are developed in the oral history module.

The UFS is becoming increasingly multi-cultural and the changing demographics, which are also reflected in the composition of the classes, are challenging. At the same time, it is also a learning curve for the lecturers, because it allows us to experiment. During the past nine years we have accommodated students from vastly different ethnic, nationality, language, age, gender and social and economic backgrounds. We have also accommodated students with physical disabilities and we had to liaise with the University's Unit for Students with Disabilities (USD); see Image 1. This affects the planning of the module, because we have to accommodate these students on different levels including the accessibility of the lecture venue, module material which must be made available in Braille, specialised technical equipment and also the final assessment. Given South Africa's changing socio-cultural environment, the lecturers of the module consider it crucial to expose the students to people from culturally diverse backgrounds and different age groups in an interview situation. In order to make the interviews more relevant in a historical context, students are encouraged to ask questions that deal not only with campus-related issues such as integration and diversity, but also national issues such as racism and reconciliation (Oelofse & Du Bruyn, 2010-2011:2).

### ***The outcomes and assessment of the module***

In line with the 'Higher Education Qualifications Framework' and the 'South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Level Descriptors for the South African National Qualifications Framework' the expected outcomes of the oral history module are divided into critical and specific outcomes. The critical outcomes include the ability to gain knowledge of a certain historical theme and to understand how that knowledge may be relevant to other academic fields; the development of the ability to independently evaluate different sources, to select information relevant to a task, and to utilise the process of analysis to evaluate information; the development of the ability to present information; and to effectively communicate it in the relevant academic format. More critical outcomes include the development of the ability to solve problems and make decisions with an awareness of the impact thereof on the wider context and the ethical implications of decision-making and actions; an appreciation for the value and methods of effective independent study; and the ability to function productively in a group; and to demonstrate appreciation regarding the acceptance of responsibility for one's own decisions and the way these decisions impact on the group as a whole (Oelofse & Du Bruyn, 2010-2011:2). The achievement of the stated outcomes is evaluated by the students at the end of the module.

The specific outcomes are unique to the module. In terms of these outcomes the students must be able to:

- Recognise and explain oral history as a discipline within history as a science;
- Discuss the advantages and challenges of oral history;
- Debate the influence of memory in the obtaining of information;
- Effectively use methods to test the truth and objectivity of oral sources; and
- Plan a practical oral history project which includes compiling a suitable questionnaire, conducting an interview and transcribing the interview (Oelofse & Du Bruyn, 2010-2011:2).

The students are assessed according to the continuous assessment process. They are required to write one formal test on the theory part and also complete three practical assignments that focus on each of the three key aspects of the methodology part. These aspects include compiling a questionnaire for a life history-type interview, conducting the interview, as well as transcribing the complete interview (Oelofse & Du Bruyn, 2010-2011:3-4). For the purpose

of the interview the students are expected to compile a questionnaire of at least 15 questions for an interview with a person for whom we provide only the basic personal details, namely his/her name, race, gender and approximate age. For the rest, it is up to the student to find out more about the interviewee's life history. As already mentioned, some students are expected to interview people who are not only older than they are, but who are also from a different cultural and racial group. Interviewees include lecturers and academic assistants from the UFS History Department, as well as staff members from the Museum's History Department. As can be seen in Images 2-4, we aim to create interviewer/interviewee combinations that defy stereotypes.<sup>4</sup> Although it is possible to make use of the conventional same-sex interviewer/interviewee combination, the lecturers specifically wish to expose the students to a multi-cultural interview environment.

All the students are expected to complete their interviews within 30 minutes. Apart from asking questions from their self-prepared questionnaires, the students are also expected to ask probing or follow-up questions. These types of questions usually indicate that the student has reached a certain level of interviewing skill. All interviews are assessed by the lecturers who observe and consider all aspects of the interview process, including the informal pre-interview conversation, interview style, use of gestures, handling of equipment and post-interview conversation; see Image 5. It is expected of students to consider the ethical issues of interviewing by completing a 'Gift and Release Agreement', contextualise the interview by completing a 'Field Work Report', and also consider the do's and don'ts of interviewing in the African context. During the final contact session with the students, feedback on the questionnaire, the real-life interview and the transcription is provided.

The successful achievement of these specific and unique outcomes demonstrates that the students have acquired a variety of skills. The acquisition of these skills and how they indicate the development of the students will now be discussed.

### **Oral history and skills development**

Combining oral history theory with exposure to practical hands-on oral history methodology has numerous advantages for third-year History students of which the development of skills is according to the authors of the utmost importance. Apart from the generic skills which History students are expected

to develop, including research, writing, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, other subject specific skills are also developed. This became apparent after we had analysed the students' module evaluation forms, questionnaires and interviews of the past nine years. Apart from the generic oral history skills, such as oral communication and interviewing, creative thinking, social and interpersonal skills, the handling of equipment and the transcription of the spoken language, other less obvious skills also seem to develop (Oelofse & Du Bruyn, 2004:164-166; Steffe & Gale, 1995:4-6).

Some of the comments made in the module evaluation forms completed by the students provide an indication of the skills they have learnt:

- "I have learnt how important it is to prepare myself for an interview."
- "During an interview one must be prepared for anything."
- "The module taught me how to 'understand' the interviewee."
- "I have learnt the importance of 'reading' people."
- "During the module I have learnt more about interpersonal relations."
- "The module taught me the importance of patience."
- "The oral history module taught me how to handle stress, tension and nervousness."
- "Now I know what it means to be under pressure."
- "The module helped to build my confidence."
- "Now I know what it means to be taken out of one's comfort zone."
- "I have learnt to respect the interviewee and his/her cultural background."
- "The module taught me how to respect the personal information an interviewee shares with you."
- "The skills I have learnt in this module will help me in my future career, even if I do not continue with History" (Oelofse & Du Bruyn, 2011).

These and other comments are particularly insightful, because they not only indicate how the students perceive the module, but also the type of skills they have learned according to themselves. The students' comments indicate that other less obvious skills, e.g. how to approach the interviewer/interviewee relationship, how to 'read' an interviewee, how to handle stress and pressure, time management, how to deal with people from different cultural backgrounds, and how to treat personal and confidential information, are

also developed. These are the type of skills that need to be developed further, because they are not only important in themselves, but also enhance and complement basic oral history skills, such as interviewing techniques and non-verbal behaviour.

Apart from the student evaluation forms, the students' questionnaires and interviews also give an indication of the type of skills that are developed by the module. Most students responded to the challenge of asking questions that deal with the issues on campus, as well as national issues. Noteworthy are, for example, the similarities and differences between the African<sup>5</sup> and white students' questionnaires. Almost all the students ask questions about their interviewees' experiences of apartheid and apartheid-related events, e.g. the political unrest of the 1980s, the post-1994 changes and how these events had affected and changed their lives. Other questions asked by most students include questions about the importance of role models and/or mentors, who the role models and/or mentors are, as well as the issue of religion and the role it plays in their lives (Oelofse & Du Bruyn, 2011).

Notable differences in the types of questions asked by the African and white students are also evident. Popular topics for the African students include the importance of African culture and traditional African names, the interviewees' political awareness and involvement in politics, and the interviewees' experience of racism on the UFS campus. Almost all the African students asked their interviewees for their personal views of the widely publicised Reitz incident of February 2008 (Volksblad, 2008; Rapport, 2008; Beeld, 2011).<sup>1</sup> Social issues such as HIV/Aids and the status of women in society and on campus also feature prominently, especially in African female students' questionnaires. On the other hand, the white students, especially the Afrikaans-speaking students, favour questions on the importance of family traditions, the issue of Afrikaner identity in a multi-racial society, the interviewees' experience of the political uncertainties of the post-1994 South Africa, and also the issue of affirmative action and the interviewees' views on this issue. Most white male students also include questions about apartheid-era military service and conscription and how the male interviewees experienced it. It is interesting to note that while almost all the white students asked interviewees to share their views

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1 The University of the Free State encountered controversy in late February 2008 following a video made by four white male students of the Reitz residence in protest against racial integration at the university. The video showed five black workers of the university being subjected to various activities, including being forced to eat food which appeared to have been urinated on. Both the South African and international media covered this incident. The video was widely condemned and led to unrest and racial discord among the students. The Reitz hostel was closed by the council of the university as a result of this incident.

and experiences of South Africa's crime problem, almost no African student touched on the issue. Also noteworthy is the fact that no white student asked any questions about the Reitz incident. The students' probing questions also followed these general patterns.

What do the students' questionnaires and interviews reveal about the type of skills developed and the potential of oral history as a skills development tool? Apart from evidence that the students learn to form opinions to become critical thinkers, their questionnaires and interviews also indicate the value of the life history interview for skills development. Particularly important is the opportunity provided for students to apply the principles of basic historical enquiry and analysis to their interviewees' life histories. By interviewing people that are older, diverse and more experienced than they are, the students are exposed to new historical insights and perspectives that enrich and sharpen their historical knowledge and awareness. In the process the students as interviewers take ownership of their interviews and the information they have gained from the interviewees. The interviewees' use of terms and acronyms from previous eras that are mostly unknown to them, e.g. 'impimpi' (apartheid-era police informant) and UDF (United Democratic Front), prompt them to do research. As part of the partial editing of their transcriptions, the students are expected to clarify such terms and acronyms and explain e.g. the meaning of 'impimpi' and UDF in the text. In the process, the students are not only encouraged to conduct further research, but they also create new knowledge. All of this adds to the ongoing process of skills development which has become such a crucial part of the students' learning experience (Kros & Ulrich, 2008:91-92; University of Winnipege, *s.a.*; Ocampo, 2007-2008:42).

Another aspect of skills development that should be mentioned is that the students also discover and understand how similar historical events affect people in different ways. This process expands their historical consciousness of not only what happened, but also of how it happened and of the meaning of what happened. For example, one such event is South Africa's first democratic election of 1994. Most students do have a basic historical knowledge of this significant event, but they were too young to experience it themselves. By interviewing older people who experienced it, they obtain political and historical insight into how it was experienced on a personal level. This issue features prominently in most students' questionnaires, which is an indication that they are curious to know more than just the basic written

facts. Our experience is that even third-year History students possess very limited knowledge of recent South African history and by interviewing more experienced people they significantly broaden their historical knowledge base.

During the past nine years it has become obvious that oral history as a skills development tool for undergraduate students is unlimited in scope and possibility. It is also evident that oral history is an effective tool for developing the type of skills that students need to function effectively in a diverse, complex and changing society. Students are exposed to different viewpoints; they learn how to interview members of other cultural groups and are exposed to the potential of oral history for interdisciplinary research. Furthermore, the students also become aware of the myriad of possible applications of the oral history technique. The oral history skills' usefulness is not limited to History, but extends to other disciplines including Anthropology, Political Science, Sociology and Media Studies, to name a few. Based on these observations, it appears that an oral history module such as the one offered by the History Department at the Free State University has become essential for students who want to develop various skills. By empowering the students with the above-mentioned skills, which are increasingly demanded by a knowledge-driven economy, it also increases their employability.

### **Looking forward**

The growing popularity of the oral history module, which the students describe as 'fun', 'challenging', 'expectations have been surpassed', 'gives a new perspective on history', 'history came to life', 'learnt something that can be used later in life' (Oelofse & Du Bruyn, 2011), as well as the fact that the benefits of the oral history method and the skills developed by it are increasingly in demand by interdisciplinary research projects, have made the authors rethink the existing module. From 2012 the oral history module will be expanded: it will count 16 credits and approximately 12 lectures will be presented. Even more emphasis will be placed on the practical part of the module in order to strengthen the developing of skills. With increasing student numbers the new module will also include group work, focusing on themes such as social justice, reconciliation, global diversity and community history. Group work is considered essential because research has shown that most students learn more easily when they work in collaboration with others (MacLellan, 2005:138; Reach and Teach, *s.a.*).

It is the lecturers' aim with this module to focus increasingly on key issues of constructivism, including problem-solving, creating knowledge and the handling of challenging situations. It is important that students learn how to cope with situations they encounter when dealing with the real physical and social world. Students learn effectively by being involved and active in the learning process; therefore, we want to establish an experiential environment where opportunities for deep learning are created.

Finally, it is important for us that the oral history module also benefits the University and society as a whole. On 27 January 2011 the UFS launched The International Institute for Studies in Race, Reconciliation and Social Justice with the purpose of "linking the manifestations of race in higher education, to the related matters of reconciliation and social justice in the South African context against the backdrop of racial and ethnic conflicts in the world" (Bloemnews, 2011). We foresee our participation in this Institute's training, development and dialogue platform as oral history lends itself to addressing these issues. Future students may successfully utilise the Institute as a possible research and resource centre, as well as a place of internship. With our oral history module we see ourselves supporting the UFS Rector, Prof Jonathan Jansen's vision of the University as a "living laboratory" (University of the Free State, 2011a; University of the Free State, 2011b).

## Notes

1. Previously (2003-2006) the Free State Provincial Archives was a training partner when Mr. Du Bruyn was an employee at this Archive before he moved to the National Museum.
2. For more detail on memory and the challenges it poses for the oral historian as an historical source of information, see Ritchie, 2003:20; H Slim, P Thomson, O Bennett, N Cross (eds) 1995, *Listening for a change. Oral testimony and community development*, 140-141; PH Hutton 1993, *History as an art of memory*, 7; J Fentress & C Wickham 1992, *Social Memory*, 7; S Caunce 1994, *Oral history and the local historian*, 214-219.
3. For more detail on ethical issues while doing oral history, see VR Yow 1994, *Recording oral history. A practical guide for social scientists*, 89-98.
4. The traditional approach is to create interviewer/interviewee combinations consisting of people of the same race and gender, as well as similar cultural backgrounds.

5. For the purpose of this article the term 'Africans' includes black people, Coloureds and Indians. By using the term 'Africans', no negative connotation or prejudice is implied towards the people grouped in this way.

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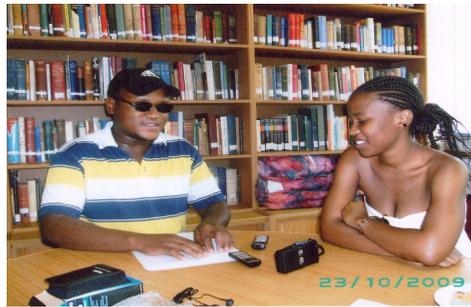
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Image 1: Interviewer: Visually impaired student



Source: D du Bruyn & M Oelofse, 2009-2011, *Private oral history photo collection*. Bloemfontein.

Image 2: Interviewee: Lecturer



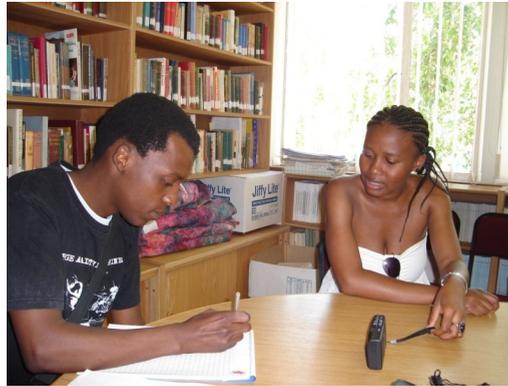
Source: D du Bruyn & M Oelofse, 2009-2011. *Private oral history photo collection*. Bloemfontein.

Image 3: Interviewee: Researcher



Source: D du Bruyn & M Oelofse, 2009-2011. *Private oral history photo collection*. Bloemfontein.

Image 4: Interviewee: Academic assistant



Source: D du Bruyn & M Oelofse, 2009-2011. *Private oral history photo collection*. Bloemfontein.

Image 5: Interview & assessment set-up. Interviewer & interviewee on the right and one of the lecturers on the left.



Source: D du Bruyn & M Oelofse, 2009-2011. *Private oral history photo collection*. Bloemfontein.