Technology and Pedagogy in the Oral History Classroom

Rina Benmayor

Until recently, my undergraduate oral history course was structured much like a graduate seminar. After 15 weeks, students completed an oral history project from beginning to end, from design and implementation, to analysis and dissemination, including some form of public "return" of the research to the relevant communities, and the interviewees.[1] Each student chose a topic of personal interest, defined a research question, found and used relevant secondary sources, learned interview techniques, constructed an interview guide, identified interviewees, conducted field interviews, logged or transcribed the interviews, synthesized their primary and secondary findings, produced a final research paper, gave an oral presentation to the class, and archived their interviews and research. In sum, a very tall order, favoring the self-motivated, highly organized, outgoing student with sharp research and critical thinking skills.

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Field(s):
Oral History, Literary and Cultural Studies, Latina/o Studies.
Course(s):
Oral History and Community Memory
Context:
Upper division methods course Fulfills requirements in Humanities and Liberal Studies. Enrollment 18-20. Multicultural student population, 30% Chicano/mexicano, many becoming elementary teachers. CSUMB is a small, new campus of the CSU.
Intentions:
--to see if technology could ease the labor-intensive nature of oral history and enable a collaborative, team project and learning experience.

Aside from being ambitious, my model also contained problematic assumptions. While my course provided a comprehensive oral history research experience, it assumed, for one, that students

could accomplish all these tasks in 15 weeks. In addition, I would be expected to have content-expertise in topics about which I might know nothing. More importantly, although I believe that students learn best when following their individual interests and passions, working individually also turns them into lone researchers who experience the process as isolating and intimidating. Ironically, my own experience as an oral historian has been within a collaborative framework, and as part of an interdisciplinary team.[2] And yet, I was asking my students to do otherwise.

My encounter with "new media" led me to rethink and restructure my approach to teaching oral history. For the last two years, I have participated in a number of New Media Classroom workshops, sponsored by the American Social History Project-Center for Media and Learning (CUNY), and the American Crossroads Project (Georgetown). These workshops introduced me to ways in which new media can help convert the "architecture" and "ecology" of the classroom into a more interactive, collaborative and student-constructed learning space, in which students engage in oral history practice as active, dialogic agents, critical thinkers, and collaborators in their own learning (Bass I-14). New media pedagogy suggested ways to revamp my oral history class and its objectives.

Technology played an important role in this process, but it was not the focus of my endeavor. I used information technologies to *facilitate* organization, communication, and collaborative production, and to *enhance* the classroom learning experience. I underscore 'facilitate' and 'enhance' to emphasize that technology was harnessed to pedagogical concerns, to a desire to engage students in all the phases of oral history research and to teach oral history in a more interactive, participatory, and collaborative way.

This class was an experiment in applying information technologies to transform oral history teaching into a more interactive and collaborative learning experience. The end result of 15 weeks of collaboration was a study—in three different forms—of the impact of higher education on students who are, or will be; the first in their families to go to college. The study appeared first as a special 4-page feature insert in our campus newspaper. This was followed by a public presentation by all 18 students to the University community and interviewees. Finally, we put up a more comprehensive webpage (http://classes.monterey.edu/HCOM/HCOM314SL-01/world/index.html), with scholarly references and notations, visuals, voice, and video. And we built an archive of interviews. This paper describes and assesses how we were able to reach these goals as a group, using information technologies to support the col-

laborative process. As one student said at the end, "We really bonded in this class and it feels really good to do something to better our University."

The Context and the Topic

I teach at California State University Monterey Bay, a new campus of the CSU established to serve the communities in the region that have been traditionally under or un-represented in higher education.[3] Ours is a largely working-class student body, thirty percent of which is of Mexican heritage – self-identified as either Chicana/o, Mexican American, or Mexicana/o. Many are the children of migrant farm workers who settled in the surrounding Salinas Valley and Watsonville. Most of our 1800+ students combine school with full- or part-time work. Many are raising families, and many are re-entry students. Sixty percent of our students are transfers from community colleges in the region, and six of every ten students are female.

As one might expect of a new university, many of the student support structures are yet to be established.[4] Mandated to be a multicultural, pedagogically innovative campus "for the 21st century," institutional programs need to ensure access, retention, graduation, and quality opportunity for working class and under-served students. What are the effects of these programs, or lack of them, on the lives of students – particularly those for whom the public university is a new experience?[5] Here was an opportunity for oral history to play an action-research and community service role.

When I began designing the course, I decided to structure the entire class around a theme that I hoped students would find personally engaging and rewarding. The central question became: What is the experience of first generation college students on our campus, and what does the campus need to do to ensure their success? Students would conduct life histories of other students (on and off campus), and through their research, provide University administrators with culturally-specific insights into the needs of our first-generation students. These insights could have direct impact on the design, structure, philosophy, and quality of services to support their retention, success, and graduation.

I hoped that the students would be able to approach this topic with passion and personal investment. Although they did not take part in defining this topic, they felt connected to it from the start. Some in the class were first-generation, some were Chicana/o, Mexican American or Mexicana/o, some were from migrant farm-

worker families, some were re-entry women students, most were working class, and all had friends and classmates who fit the category. Moreover, all the students had an acute understanding of the need for more and better student support services on campus.

It was a happy choice. By the end of the course, students demonstrated a passion not only for the topic but for the collaborative learning process as well.

Integrating Technology

From the outset, let me say that while I am exploring the use of new media for teaching oral history, I remain critical about where and when new technologies should be used and about what value they can add to the learning process. I continue to believe that the real (vs. virtual) classroom is the primary and best space for interactive learning. New media (multimedia, CD-roms, Web-based archives, hypertext authoring, email, electronic discussion lists and chat rooms) have interesting implications for pedagogy in the broad sense, and for the teaching of oral history in particular. The digital world provides exciting new possibilities for representing, interpreting, archiving, and teaching ethnographic and field-based research. But the key verbs are "enable, help, enhance, facilitate, promote," emphasizing the role of technology as a tool. Even in the most utilitarian sense, electronic media can make a difference in the architecture of the classroom. Rather than a space to "deliver" information, technology can help to turn the oral history classroom into a project-based, collaboration workshop.

In *Engines of Inquiry*, a pathbreaking "cyber-book," Randy Bass, argues that:

> …there are three things that drive the learning of experts: the *questions* that we want to ask, the *cultural record* and materials that we have to work with, and the *methods* and theories that govern our practice....The question confronting us as teachers...is how can information technologies play a role in the engines of inquiry that drive learning? (I-14)

Bass offers a useful synthesis of how "information technologies can serve to enhance six kinds of quality learning" (I-14) — distributive learning, authentic tasks and complex inquiry, dialogic learning, constructive learning, public accountability, and reflective and critical thinking. I refer to many of these categories throughout this essay, to suggest ways in which my experiment with oral history and new digital media embodied many of these quality learning

goals. I found that even very simple electronic applications facilitated the learning process, enhancing communication, building teamwork and collaborative construction, facilitating reflection and interpretation, enabling socially responsible research, and allowing almost instant archive-building. Some of these moments of good learning are worth capturing here.

Initial Strategies

One of the advantages of beginning an oral history class with a pre-selected topic is that students do not have to begin secondary research from scratch. Having a bibliographic point of departure (secondary readings already on reserve), students were able to advance swiftly to discussing issues and theoretical approaches, and prepare for field work.

Identifying subjects for interview creates tension and takes time. My pre-planning included establishing connections with college-bound programs at local middle and high schools, and on our own campus.[6] In addition, students were able to draw upon their own friends and peers on campus for some interviews. The 18 students in the class conducted a total of 36 interviews, on and off campus.[7] Interviews were conducted in the traditional one-on-one fashion, and each student was asked to transcribe and critically annotate her or his best interview. Apart from this, all other stages of the process involved group work, culminating in a collaboratively constructed newspaper feature, a webpage, a public presentation, and a new section of the Oral History Archive (all detailed below).

In terms of technology, we set up a class folder on email, where course materials, assignments, original documents (transcripts), and student work could easily be accessed and exchanged. This became our "class central." We designed a template to ease transcription of interviews, and another for field journals.[8]

The availability of electronic communication and centralization was a critical ingredient in our ability to work collaboratively.

Distributive and Constructive Learning

As Bass points out, new technologies give "direct access to the growing distribution of cultural knowledge across diverse resources." It also provides the means to "distribute the responsibility for making knowledge, … and to construct and share their ideas…in a whole range of public learning contexts." The experience of our oral history classroom confirmed that, indeed, tech-

nology enabled and enhanced sharing particular cultural knowledge gained by each student in the field. It also facilitated students' ability to share responsibility for building a collective analysis that took multiple public forms.

Building an Interview Guide

Technology significantly facilitated collective construction of a framework for field work and interpretation. The computer enabled us to turn the classroom into a hands-on workshop, and to expose everyone to a critical design and selection process. Based on team assessments of secondary research, students determined which issues needed to be explored through oral history. Then we came together in our "smart classroom," and with professor at the keyboard, digitally built an Interview Guide. The various topics for exploration (transition from high school to college, expectations of college, financial support, cultural support, campus support, culture/race/gender issues, and future goals) formed categories for interview questions. Subsequently, these same categories provided a framework for analysis, interpretation, and writing.

Excerpts from COMPOSITE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Introductory questions:

When did you first realize that you wanted to go to college?
What motivated you to start college?

Open and ended questions:

High School to College
Did your high school prepare you for college? How?
Did anyone in high school encourage you to go to college?

Expectations of College
What did you imagine college was supposed to teach you?
What do you expect college to do for you now?
What do you feel are your greatest gifts and talents?

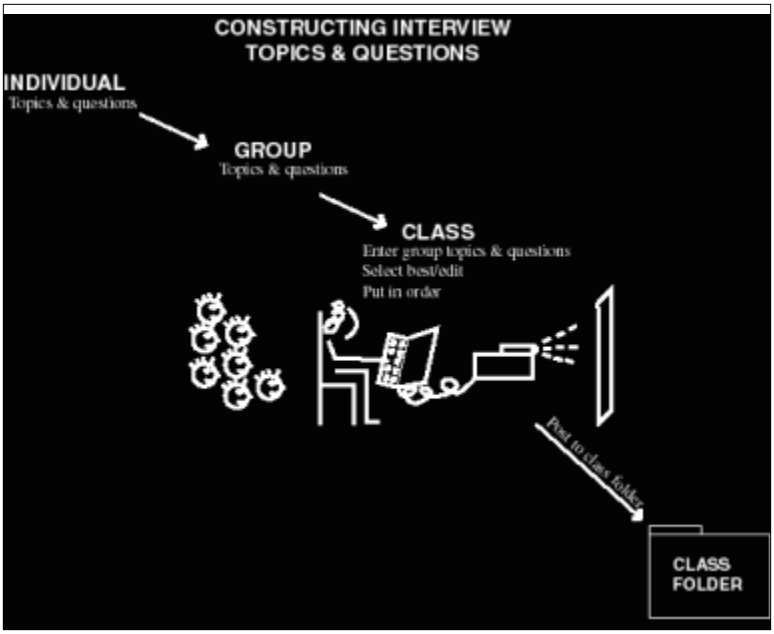
Financial Support
How does your family's economic status affect your college experience?
How do you make it financially in college?

Other Supports
Is there anyone who gives you guidance and emotional support in getting through college?
Has your community supported you in your efforts to get a college education?
Did you have role models? How did they inspire you?

Race/Gender/Class
Do you feel you have a lot in common with other students?
Is your peer group on campus of your same ethnic background? Gender? Class?
Has your language, culture, or gender presented any advantages/barriers for you in college?
Does your family worry about you losing your culture
Do you think your experience as a fe/male college student differs from that of the opposite gender?

Future Goals and Plans
What do you plan to do with your education?
Would you like to continue your education?
How do you see this University aiding in the attainment of your goals?

Each student was asked to bring to class ten questions they thought important to ask his/her interviewees. In class, students met in small groups to put forward the five best questions from the group, then each group entered their selections into the computer. We projected all the entries on the large screen, and while I sat at the keyboard, students guided the revision process. They determined the categories, clustered the questions by category, and ana-



lyzed the efficacy of each question (identifying whether it was an open- or closed-ended, leading or non-leading, double barreled, loaded question, and so on). They made collective choices — to

keep, revise, or dump a question. They identified repetitions, natural clusters, sequences, and closed gaps. All eyes were focused on the screen and voices freely called out, "That's a loaded question," "That's a good one," "That goes together with...," "That's a good follow-up."

By the end of the session, students not only had a comprehensive interview guide, but they also understood how to construct open-ended questions, follow up questions, questions asking for feelings as well as facts, questions that would elicit longer or shorter narratives, and so on. Their guide had been constructed collaboratively, reflecting critical thinking, collective deliberation, and a new understanding of interview methods and strategies. Coupling digital technology with group work enabled the class to address the dialogic nature of oral history, to understand how teamwork can produce the best thinking, and the practice of shared responsibility. And, although blackboards can serve the same didactic function of recording group thought, digital technology in the classroom enabled us to produce a needed document on the spot (we did the same for our Release Forms) that could be emailed immediately to everyone for use in the field.

Cross Talk: Weaving a Collaborative Analysis

To construct their analysis and build a collectively-authored article, students worked in groups. They broke into small teams of two or three. Each team had the responsibility to develop and write a specific section of the analysis (e.g., the transition from high school to college, financial aid, family supports and mentoring, etc.). This way, the topical categories of the Interview Guide structured the outline of the article and the division of labor in the classroom. Based on extensive classroom discussions of interview findings, each team outlined the points it wanted to make, drew on transcripts and secondary readings to develop its critical analysis, negotiated a point of view and conclusions, integrated specific life history excerpts, and wrote drafts of each section. Drafts were then circulated, reviewed, and revised by the entire class until we had a polished and integrated piece.

How did technology support this process? Email facilitated a sustained dialogic environment outside the classroom. It enabled immediate access to and circulation of primary documents (transcripts, excerpts) and drafts for collaborative review. The digital medium enabled students to 'pull out' the texts they wanted to use, assemble drafts, and print them out for review the next day in class. The classroom then became a workshop space, where teams brain-

stormed, outlined arguments, identified materials, discussed perspectives, built collaborative interpretations, defined next steps, assigned homework tasks, edited texts, arranged for the next stages of document sharing, revised, and polished drafts. Technology enabled a "weaving" process, where electronic exchange from home facilitated group process in class and built each successive stage of production. Electronic communication helped build the momentum of the project and significantly streamlined production of various collectively-authored pieces (newspaper feature, oral presentation, and webpage).

In the end, technology stimulated a student-constructed process and product. Technology also enhanced the decentralization of the learning. Students worked autonomously within their teams, and I became a resource and facilitator rather than a singular authority in the classroom.

Complex Inquiry and Critical Thinking

There are several ways in which new media helped model the complexity of interpretation. To begin with, we produced a digital working archive of primary interview documents. I asked each student to transcribe their best interview. Once the transcripts existed in digital form, the entire corpus or select pieces were immediately accessible to other members of the class. In essence, we created our own primary database which the student teams could retrieve, examine, and use with great ease. They could now place pieces of transcript side by side, compare texts, compare perspectives, and construct interpretations. The interpretation process, however, was guided.

In order to engage students in collaborative analysis, I devised inquiry assignments. The objectives were to engage students in analysis from more than one perspective, to stimulate "cross talk," and to help weave different pieces of narrative into a collaborative interpretation.

Multiple Perspectives

At the beginning of this course, I had hoped to find a way to merge the multiple interpretations of a single piece of text into one document. This way, many students could comment on the same piece of text, and examine each others' interpretations. Such an exercise might help train students to consider varying interpretations and to engage in more complex analysis. However, I was not aware of any program that would allow me to do this easily. I

wanted to keep my use of technology simple, requiring a minimal learning curve for all.

Instead, in order to illustrate multiple levels and perspectives in critical interpretation and the dialogic interaction between the text and the interviewer's analysis, each student developed a multi-layered "explication de texte." Each successively annotated the same piece of interview transcript as described below.[9] Each student selected a substantial segment of transcript addressing one of the interview topics. Criteria for selection include:

> Does the segment give insight into the topic?
> Does it reinforce/contradict secondary readings and research?
> Does the emotion and tone influence meaning?
> Does it convey something about memory?

Each segment of transcript was annotated four different times, each time attending to a different dimension of analysis:

> 1. Subject content: What issues related to first-generation students stand out in this excerpt and why? Does your material reinforce/contradict secondary research or present new insights into our subject?
>
> 2. Oral v. Written: How does the meaning you derive from reading the written transcript stack up against your impression from listening to the oral delivery on tape? How do tone and emotion add meaning to the topic?
>
> 3. Memory: What can you say about the strategic role of memory in this excerpt? Is memory here nostalgia? Is it breaking or reinforcing silences? Is it playing a role of historical affirmation?
>
> 4. Self-reflection: What is your own personal experience with regard to the issues and experiences narrated by your interviewees?

Annotations were posted to the Class Folder, so students would be able to read each others' interpretations prior to class discussions and group work.

Although we were not able to merge and juxtapose the various annotations into one document, students learned how to build

analysis in stages, using different criteria and different perspectives. From a pedagogical standpoint, the ability to easily confront texts in their original and edited versions—in their visual, spoken, and written representations—provides a richer palette for illustrating the constructed nature of interpretation itself. Clustering also has the potential to promote a more dialogic critical practice. The single authoritative control of a body of material and its interpretation can be reshaped into a more polysemic, dialogic model, where multiple and competing interpretations of and debates around a single text are linked.

Real Research and Public Accountability

Oral history involves producing primary research materials. At teaching institutions, where funds for research are often limited, deficits can be turned into opportunities for what Bass terms "authentic inquiry" (I-15). Our Oral History and Community Memory Archive is being built through student coursework and independent projects The interviews, transcripts, logs, and research papers are accessible to other students, faculty, and the public. In this way, students are engaged in real research that exists beyond the life of a class. Oral history is not a make-believe exercise. The policy outcome of this particular class project also made the work all the more purposeful.

When I designed the class, I expected that students would present the results of their research in a public forum. The tapes and transcripts would also comprise a new section of the oral history archive. It was the students' idea to publish a special insert in the


CSUMBSpecial

"First In My Family To Go To College"

Life Histories of CSUMB and College-Bound Students

Excerpt from *Other Realm*, May 13, 1998

school newspaper and to make a Webpage. Understanding that they were engaged in real research, they pointed out that newspaper and web publication would extend the life of the project beyond the class experience and provide lobbying tools for planning student services. The products emerged in succession, each building on the one before it: Newspaper Article > Public Presentation > Webpage.

Newspaper Article

In an extensive four-page feature article, titled "First in My Family To Go To College," students synthesized their research and presented their findings to the campus community. The article was read widely by students and administrators, and students felt a strong sense of individual and collective accomplishment that, despite the labor intensive nature of oral history research, the end result made an impact. The newspaper article provided the narrative framework for the more extensive webpage.

Public Presentation

Once the newspaper article had been assembled, students then had to grapple with how to best take this material to the "stage," and adapt it for public presentation. Not surprisingly, the face-to-face human context in which 18 students spoke directly to an audience composed of the interviewees, other students, campus administrators and planners, was moving. It was a bonding experience that culminated three months of teamwork. Students were challenged to produce a synthesis that was didactic, critical, dramatic, and attentive to ethical oral history practice. Again in teams, they scripted out a presentation that combined dramatic readings of selected oral histories, paraphrasing of narratives, and analytical interpretations.[10] Many students also wove in their own personal stories, as many were first-generation college students themselves.

The process of developing the script followed a similar working pattern to that of the newspaper article. Students used the classroom to work in teams to script and rehearse the presentation. They used email exchange at home to produce drafts. The entire event (1 1/2 hours) was video-taped, and a clip of this material, along with audiotape, was integrated into the Webpage.

Class Webpage

The Web provided an important forum for presentation of our research, one that increased the after-life and purposefulness of the project far beyond a grade. The class webpage (http://classes.mon-

terey.edu/HCOM/HCOM314SL-01/world/index.html) now forms part of the permanent electronic archive of the University. It stands as an example of the relationship of oral history research to the life of the students and the campus itself.

Structurally, the webpage permitted us to link a kaleidoscopic set of materials for multiple (different) readings by multiple (distinct) audiences. These materials include:

primary texts – narrative excerpts
research tools and templates
interpretive analyses
critical commentaries and references
multimedia integration of audio and video
still photographs and graphics
links to the Archive
links to related documents—the class syllabus, the Interview Guide
an e-mailbox inviting commentaries and questions from website visitors.

The website also serves as a permanent archive for all the class materials and assignments. In time, I hope to be able to add readings and make the Webpage the digital reserve reading site as well. Since the subject of first generation college students lends itself to longitudinal study, I will teach the class in Spring 2000, focusing on the same topic. Students will be able to re-interview many of those who participated as interviewees in Spring 98. In this case, the webpage provides an already structured resource for comparative study.

Archive

As with all my other oral history classes, the interviews and final work are archived in our campus Oral History and Community Memory Archive. From the beginning, students were aware that they were producing primary documents to be archived for future research, thus, the importance of care, accuracy, appropriate transcription and formatting. Students also then felt that their work had a lasting value, and they tried to produce the best primary documents they could.

Currently, the interview tapes, transcripts, and subject logs are physically archived with appropriate releases. Except for the tapes and releases, all other materials also exist in electronic form. Building a fully functional *virtual* archive will be a long and complex process, involving the establishment of ethical protocols of permissions, access, and so on. Even the process of digitizing

audio and video documents involves complicated technical questions for experts. In the meantime, students in other classes may access the materials by coming to the physical archive.

Digital technology enables the construction of rich virtual archival sites that cluster primary documents, original and translated texts, complete and edited versions, secondary resources, visuals, sound, competing critical analyses, and lengthy bibliographies.

Next Steps

Since Spring 98, the work of the oral history class has been presented to various planning committees concerned with student success and retention. The research has been recognized as a model of how our own curriculum can effectively tie student learning to institution building. I look forward to the follow-up, longitudinal study. I will be enhancing the webpage to include an electronic reserve reading room, more voice and video, and student field journals, and I will continue to design and refine exercises for critical inquiry. In these ways, my course will become "web-based," but it will remain a course delivered in the real classroom. As my first real foray into marrying pedagogy and technology, I am now anxious to find appropriate software tools for modeling the polysemic and dialogic nature of oral history process and interpretation. We will also be experimenting with mounting a virtual archive, with audio and video streaming.

The comfort which successive generations of students will have with information technologies suggests that creative adaptation of oral history teaching methods must include electronic strategies. If there is one image in my mind that represents this class, it is the day we built our interview guide, when I was able to completely step out of my role as professor to become the "inputter," the person at the keyboard who merely executed instructions. The screen had everyone's rapt attention, and students became the directors, empowered through new media to become constructors of their own learning.

Notes

[1] My approach stresses oral history as a form of action research, in which memory and the investigation of the past is connected to community efforts for social change.

[2] The oral history projects I helped develop and conduct at the

Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, always involved a team of researchers and community activists.

[3] California State University at Monterey Bay opened in Fall 1995, with very little advanced planning. Consequently, the infrastructure, the curriculum, the student support services and policies are still being designed and planned with the University in full swing.

[4] Students who are first in their families to go to college are a growing college population. Campuses recognize their responsibility in providing targeted, culturally informed support to ensure college success. This often involves programs and support mechanisms that are sensitive to the combined emotional, practical, academic, financial, social and cultural pressures felt by students who do not have this experience in their family memory and history. Support services include advising, academic and emotional counseling, career counseling, mentoring, tutoring, and the provision of social spaces, cultural clubs and organizations.

[5] Our student body reflects larger state demographics: increased immigration, and a general explosion in numbers of college-age youth. It also feels the effects of right wing California politics: increased xenophobia reflected in the passing of Propositions 187 (denying social services to undocumented immigrants), 209 (rolling back Affirmative Action, which has had dramatic immediate effects in the public university systems), and 227 (abolishing bilingual education). In this right-wing political climate, increased pressure is placed on the public university to remove what conservatives call "special interest" programs and courses of study — those that serve the interests of women, immigrants, and students of color in general.

[6] With the support of the Educational Talent Search program, which recruits first generation, minority and working class students, a freshman group of Chicano/Mexicano students on our campus agreed to participate in the research. We also worked with AVID, a middle school program, and a high school Upward Bound program.

[7] In total, the 18 students enrolled in the class conducted 36 life histories with Chicana/o, Mexicana/o, African American, Asian American, and European American students.

[8] The 'Style' function in MSWord facilitated the design of a transcription template. Striking the 'Enter' key switched the format from Question to Answer, and back to Question (from Non-Bold to Bold and back). Students could then transcribe tapes without stopping to format manually each voice shift. Once transcribed, they

went back to revise spelling, punctuation, and format errors. Format revisions encouraged re-listening to the tape for accuracy of content transcription.

[9] For a model of text annotations in oral history, see *Acoma*, esp. the introduction by Grele.

[10] The webpage integrates an audio clip of an interview and a video clip of the public presentation.

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