

Learning historical thinking with oral history interviews

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Working with oral histories in schools has become very popular in Germany, the United States and many other countries. Eyewitnesses of the past are able to deliver authentic accounts of events in their lives which affect students more deeply than written texts. Furthermore, teachers hope that working with eyewitnesses encourages students to work like historians and, for example, to critically question their sources. But there is also criticism of this method. On the one hand, memory is a reconstructive process which can be influenced by many factors. Thus, individual memories can be distorted and romanticized by one's social environment and post hoc information. On the other hand, the aura and authenticity of the eyewitnesses can result in an uncritical acceptance of their accounts. As a study conducted at the University of Tübingen shows, students enjoy learning with a live eyewitness much more than working with a video or the transcript of an interview, but they are in danger of learning less. The results have now been published in the *American Educational Research Journal*.

There are few studies which examine the effect that the oral [history](#) approach has on students. Thus, the Tübingen scientists set out to examine if and how working with eyewitnesses can promote historical thinking competencies. In the study 900 students from 30 school classes in Germany participated in a [teaching](#) unit on "Peaceful Revolution in the GDR" that included the use of oral history accounts. The aim of the teaching unit was to improve students' insight into epistemological principles regarding history and their understanding of the difference between primary sources and historical accounts. One part of the school classes worked in with live witnesses, another with a video recording and the third group with the transcript of an interview. Additionally there were five control groups which received their "regular" history lessons on another topic altogether.

The lesson unit including working with an oral history account – live, video, transcript – were all taught by the same external teacher to ensure equal conditions. Four eyewitnesses who had experienced the fall of the Berlin Wall and the German reunification as active oppositionists, recounted their political activities, demonstrations against the regime and the oppression through the socialist system. Data on the students' [factual knowledge](#) about the GDR and their understanding of basic history concepts and their insight in epistemological principals of history were collected immediately before and after the teaching unit as well as two to three months later. Moreover, the students evaluated their learning success and interest on the posttest and follow-up test.

Compared with the control group, all school classes which worked with oral history accounts in whatever form performed better: They exhibited a higher historical competence and had more factual knowledge. However, there were differences in the way in which they worked with the eyewitnesses of the past. Students who had worked with a live witness judged their own learning success as well as their interest as higher than students working with text and video. In truth, however, they had not quite met the aim of the teaching unit: they showed less insight into the epistemological principles of history. The [eyewitness'](#) special perspective as well as the necessity of dealing critically with accounts of the past was less clear to them than they were to the other two test groups.

The results of the study could be traced back to an "aura of authenticity." "The fact that eyewitnesses have experienced the past themselves makes them so credible that the students who interact with them in person find it hard to build up the distance needed for a critical

approach to their accounts," explains Christiane Bertram, who is first author of the study and who meanwhile teaches teaching didactics in the social sciences at the University of Konstanz. "It may be that they are so impressed with the persons and their oral accounts that they also overestimate their own learning success," adds Bertram. Her recommendation for history teachers is to utilize the motivational potential of interviews with eyewitnesses and to forestall a possible "overwhelming" with thorough preparation and follow-up processing of the teaching unit. "Our study is a good example of why innovative and interesting teaching opportunities should undergo a thorough scientific examination to better understand their potential and possibly increase their effectiveness," emphasizes Ulrich Trautwein, director of the Hector Research Institute of Education Sciences and Psychology. The interaction of chances and risks of eyewitnesses in history lessons would have to be investigated in further studies.

More information: Learning historical thinking with oral history interviews: A cluster randomized controlled intervention study of oral history interviews in history lessons. *American Educational Research Journal*. DOI: [10.3102/0002831217694833](https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831217694833)

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