

Integrating Oral History into University Curriculum Teaching: Constructing a New Educational Paradigm of “Community Memory Practice”

Gaofu Xie, Yun Lin

School of Tourism and Historical Culture, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing 526061, Guangdong, China

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Abstract: Currently, higher education is actively advancing the construction of “New Liberal Arts” and emphasizing the concept of “practice-oriented education”. Against this background, how to organically integrate academic training, social care, and the cultivation of students’ comprehensive abilities in traditional history teaching have become a practical challenge. This study focuses on the reform of university oral history courses and proposes a “community memory practice” teaching model. This model deeply integrates the collection, interpretation, and inheritance of local historical memory into teaching, promoting the transformation of teaching from “knowledge transmission” to “literacy development” and “community participation”. Taking Zhaoqing, a national historical and cultural city, as the practice field, we guide students to conduct in-depth exploration of local history from dimensions such as spatial changes, the polysemy of events, and the living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage through oral history interviews and field investigations. Practice shows that this model not only helps cultivate students’ historical empathy, critical thinking, and field research capabilities but also promotes the transformation of academic achievements into public cultural products, achieving a win-win situation for education, practice, and services. This study aims to provide an operable and promotable teaching plan for the reform of oral history and related humanities courses in universities.

Keywords: Oral history teaching; University courses; Community memory practice; Historical and cultural city; Practice-oriented education

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1. Introduction

Currently, China’s higher education is in the strategic promotion period of “New Liberal Arts” construction. Its essence lies in breaking disciplinary barriers, strengthening interdisciplinary integration, and particularly focusing on cultivating students’ practical abilities, innovative spirit, and social responsibility. Against this macro background, the traditional teaching models of history and related humanities and social sciences are facing significant challenges: teaching centered on classrooms, taking texts as carriers, and relying mainly on knowledge

indoctrination are difficult to fully meet the era's demand for compound and innovative talents. Oral history, as a research method and public practice rooted in the field, relying on dialogue, and committed to capturing diverse voices and micro-experiences, just provides a key bridge connecting the academic ivory tower and the social classroom^[1]. It can not only embody abstract historical theories into vivid life stories but also transform static knowledge transmission into a dynamic exploration process.

However, examining the oral history courses offered by universities across the country, their development is often limited by three dilemmas. Firstly, the course content is easily disconnected from specific social reality, becoming a castle in the air of methodological concepts, lacking long-term and stable practical anchors, which can be called the “suspension” dilemma. Secondly, the teaching process may over-focus on procedural skills such as interview techniques, equipment operation, and text transcription, ignoring the in-depth educational value of oral history in fostering historical thinking, understanding narrative construction, and stimulating social empathy, falling into the narrow alley of “technicalization”. Thirdly, students' practical achievements often present as isolated interview reports or scattered audio transcripts, which are difficult to systematically integrate and academically improve, let alone transformed into meaningful cultural archives or public products for the community, leading to the “fragmentation” of teaching effectiveness^[2].

To address these dilemmas, this study proposes and practices the “community memory practice” teaching model. This model does not regard oral history merely as an independent course but redefines it as a comprehensive education project integrating theoretical research, method training, fieldwork, public communication, and reflective evaluation. This study selects Zhaoqing, a national historical and cultural city with profound historical heritage and at the forefront of reform and development in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, as the consistent teaching case and practice base. By deeply embedding student research groups into specific communities in Zhaoqing and guiding them to conduct long-term and systematic exploration around core issues of local memory, we attempt to explore a teaching reform path that can truly realize “the unity of knowledge and action” and “mutual nourishment between schools and communities”. The following will elaborate on the theoretical conception of this model, its specific implementation process in Zhaoqing, the achieved results, the faced challenges, and reflections on its sustainable promotion.

2. Paradigm transformation from “Method Training” to “Community Co-Cultivation”

Based on the examination of the “suspension”, “technicalization”, and “fragmentation” dilemmas in current university oral history teaching, this study believes that the fundamental way out lies in promoting a profound teaching paradigm transformation. The core of this transformation is to shift from regarding oral history mainly as a set of research methods or teaching skills to constructing it as a social process that promotes the collaborative generation of academic knowledge, practical abilities, and public values^[3]. To this end, we propose the “community memory practice” teaching model, aiming to engage in dialogue with relevant academic fields at home and abroad and systematically clarify the core of this new paradigm.

The proposal of this paradigm is based on dialogue and integration with relevant academic fields at home and abroad. Firstly, it responds to the call for “shared authority” in public history. Public history challenges the monopoly of professional historians on historical interpretation and advocates that the production and application of historical knowledge should be carried out through dialogue and cooperation between scholars and the public^[4]. This concept is highly consistent with the recent call in domestic academic circles for history

to “step out of the ivory tower” and participate in social and cultural construction. Domestic scholars such as Yang Xiangyin point out that one of the core concepts of oral history is its “democracy”, which endows ordinary people with the right and opportunity to write their own history, thereby challenging the elite discourse of traditional historiography ^[5]. Wang Jun, in his discussion on Chinese “image historiography” and public history, also emphasizes the decentralization and sharing of “historical narrative power”, believing that this is an important trend in the development of contemporary historiography ^[6]. This model introduces the concept of “democratization” and “shared authority” into classroom practice, transforming students from individual learners of knowledge into collaborators who co-construct historical narratives with the community, which is the specific practice of domestic public history concepts in the teaching field.

Secondly, it absorbs the core principles of community-based participatory research. This method emphasizes establishing an equal and mutually beneficial partnership between researchers and the community to ensure that the research process and results can effectively respond to and serve the needs and interests of the community ^[7]. This methodological orientation is consistent with the research ethics and practical concepts advocated in domestic sociology and anthropology, such as “rooting in the field”, “service learning”, and “writing papers on the land of the motherland” ^[8]. For example, in community research in sociology and anthropology, scholars emphasize the importance of the “emic perspective”, requiring researchers to deeply understand the internal logic and cultural significance of the community ^[9]. The “service learning” theory in the field of education also advocates that through the combination of organized community service activities and curriculum learning, students’ academic knowledge, personal growth, and social responsibility can be promoted simultaneously ^[10]. This teaching model draws on and integrates these ideas, and its goal is not only to “research the community” but also to “research with the community” and “research for the community”, making the academic training process also a process of fulfilling social service functions.

Finally, it deeply integrates the educational orientation of practical pedagogy and “New Liberal Arts”. The construction of “New Liberal Arts” emphasizes interdisciplinary integration, integrated innovation, and particularly focuses on cultivating students’ practical abilities and family and country feelings ^[11]. Domestic education scholars have long advocated the concept of “practice-oriented education”, believing that practice is the key link connecting knowledge learning, ability cultivation, and value shaping ^[12]. As a research method highly dependent on field practice, oral history teaching naturally has the advantage of practicing “practice-oriented education”. However, traditional teaching often stops at the technical level of “practice”. The “community memory practice” paradigm aims to elevate this practice into a “social practice”, that is, completing a collaborative task with public cultural value in a real and complex social relationship network. This precisely responds to the core requirement of “New Liberal Arts” for cultivating compound talents who integrate knowledge and action and care about society.

The “community memory practice” paradigm is the concretization and integration of the above theoretical contexts at the level of higher education teaching theory. Its core connotation lies in redefining the teaching process as constructing a “teaching-practice community” between universities and local communities, centered on “local memory” and based on equal cooperation ^[13]. In this community, the traditional binary relationship of “teaching-learning” is expanded into a three-dimensional interactive network of “scholars (teachers and students)-community-knowledge”. Students’ roles transform from skill trainees to “junior cultural workers” with public responsibilities; community members transform from interviewees to “co-instructors” with local knowledge authority; and oral history work itself upgrades from a classroom assignment to a social collaboration project with public cultural output.

3. Practical path of “Community Memory Practice” Teaching with Zhaoqing as the field

The specific implementation of the “community memory practice” teaching model in Zhaoqing is a systematic project that transforms macro concepts into micro actions. It runs through the entire cycle of the course and conducts an in-depth exploration of several core dimensions of local memory.

At the course initiation stage, while receiving systematic oral history theory and ethics training, students quickly establish a cognitive framework for Zhaoqing’s historical context, cultural characteristics, and contemporary protection issues through special lectures, literature reading, and discussions with local cultural and historical experts. This is not a general local introduction but to guide each group to form preliminary problem awareness rooted in specific communities. For example, facing Xiayao Village, students may be concerned about how the legend associated with the village name and “kiln” is told and debated; facing Baishi Village, they are curious about the contemporary adaptation of Duan inkstone craftsmanship between family inheritance and market opening.

Entering the field practice stage, each group conducts systematic oral history collection work under the guidance of teachers according to the selected theme. This process profoundly reflects the multi-dimensional educational value of oral history teaching. For example, when exploring the theme of “spatial changes”, students interviewed elderly people who participated in the “artificial excavation of Star Lake” in the 1950s. In the interview recordings, the interviewees detailed the labor division of “women carrying soil and men compacting it” and the extremely tired physical feelings. This allowed students to transcend the grand narrative of water conservancy projects in textbooks, directly touch the embodied and gendered experiences in historical events, and understand the vivid collective life investment behind spatial transformation. When exploring the “polysemy interpretation of events”, interviews in Xiayao Village regarding “whether bricks were burned for the Song Dynasty city wall” presented completely different versions: some villagers proudly claimed this as the glory of the village’s history, some firmly denied it, and others grafted it with the folk legend of “Song Dunyi leading people south to build the city”. Guiding students to face and analyze these contradictory narratives is an excellent opportunity to cultivate their historical critical thinking. Students need to think about why these differences arise. What kind of internal community relations, identity demands, or historical communication mechanisms do they reflect? The complexity of historical truth is vividly displayed here.

When focusing on the “living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage”, students’ interviews with Liang Yuling, the founder of the Tangwei Village Women’s Lion Dance Troupe, presented a picture of active cultural adaptation. Liang Yuling not only broke the traditional lion dance tradition of “passing on to men but not women” but also injected new gender connotations and contemporary vitality into this traditional craft by organizing the troupe to participate in formal competitions and winning awards. Her story made students deeply realize that the vitality of intangible cultural heritage does not lie in rigid preservation but in the creative practice of inheritors based on the current context. Similarly, interviews with Duan inkstone craftsmen in Baishi Village revealed the adaptive transformation of craftsmanship inheritance from strict intra-family transmission to limited external apprenticeship and combination with research travel.

After the fieldwork, the focus of teaching shifts to in-depth data processing and achievement transformation. Each group converts dozens of hours of recordings into verbatim transcripts and conducts coding and thematic analysis. In classroom discussions, different groups share their findings, and teachers guide students to interpret scattered personal stories in the broader context of social changes (such as urbanization, modernization, globalization), attempting to extract meso-level issues from micro-experiences. For example, from the

land acquisition narratives of multiple villages, collectively explore the connections between land function transformation, livelihood model changes, and community cohesion changes.

More importantly, the course emphasizes transforming academic discoveries into public achievements. Student groups attempt to produce community history micro-documentaries, design “Zhaoqing Memory” digital story maps, write narrative articles for the public, or plan small-scale oral history exhibitions for the community. The course’s achievement report meeting invites community residents and local cultural workers to participate, forming a social feedback closed loop of teaching achievements. This process not only exercises students’ comprehensive expression abilities but also makes them truly feel the possibility and significance of academic work serving society and communicating with the public.

4. Teaching achievements, dilemmas, and sustainability

After several rounds of teaching practice testing, the “community memory practice” model has shown positive results in multiple aspects. The most significant manifestation is in students. By completing a real, complex, and emotionally engaging research project, students’ initiative, teamwork abilities, interpersonal communication skills, and ability to solve practical problems have been greatly improved. Many students mentioned in their reflection reports that this course allowed them to “get close to the temperature of history for the first time” and understand “the human factors behind historical writing”, thus gaining a far more profound and three-dimensional historical cognition than reading secondary literature. This transformation from “knowing” to “understanding” is the significance of the “community memory practice” teaching model.

At the same time, the course has produced tangible social and cultural benefits. The systematic collection and collation of oral materials by each group have become valuable “sound archives” for relevant communities, and some achievements have been used by communities for local education or cultural exhibitions, contributing to supplementing the micro-dimensions of local official historical records. Students’ delicate presentation and analysis of issues such as the dilemmas of inheritors and social adaptation after land acquisition also provide valuable grassroots references for policy thinking and practice in related fields.

However, the in-depth implementation of this model also faces many challenges. Firstly, the complexity of organizational management and safety pressure has increased sharply. Long-term off-campus practice requires a more detailed plan design, sufficient funding support, and more reliable safety plans. Secondly, establishing and maintaining long-term, stable, and trusting cooperative partnerships with the community requires investing a lot of time and communication wisdom, which cannot be easily achieved by a single course. In addition, within limited class hours, how to balance the breadth of field practice and the depth of narrative analysis to avoid superficial descriptions of achievements poses higher requirements for teaching design and teachers’ guidance abilities.

To promote the optimization and sustainable promotion of this model, we put forward the following reflections: Firstly, universities should actively co-build “practical teaching bases” with local governments, cultural institutions, and community organizations. By signing cooperation agreements, integrating course practice into local cultural work plans, and forming an institutionalized “school-local-community” collaborative education mechanism. Secondly, it is recommended to design a “progressive” curriculum system, dividing oral history teaching into three stages: “methodology basic course”, “community practice core course”, and “thematic in-depth seminar course”, allowing students to conduct continuous research across semesters. Thirdly, a “digital archive platform for oral history teaching” should be built to standardize the filing, management, and sharing

of practical achievements of students from previous sessions, making them accumulate into long-term usable academic resources and community cultural heritage. Finally, encourage the formation of interdisciplinary teaching teams, absorbing teachers from fields such as anthropology, sociology, digital humanities, and art communication to participate together, so as to enhance the methodological diversity and innovative perspective of the course.

5. Conclusion

Deeply embedding oral history teaching into “community memory practice” is an active exploration of reforming university humanities courses in the spirit of “New Liberal Arts”. The teaching practice with Zhaoqing’s historical and cultural city oral history as a typical case shows that this model has successfully expanded the classroom to the social field, transformed knowledge learning into literacy development, and connected academic training to public services. It cultivates not only students who have mastered oral history skills but also future citizens and potential scholars with profound historical empathy, sharp social insight, strong ethical responsibility, and solid practical action ability ^[14].

Furthermore, the construction of oral history courses in universities should more consciously anchor their dual missions of “practice-oriented education” and “cultural bridge”. Continuously summarize and refine successful experiences such as “community memory practice”, form transferable and adaptable teaching plans, and benefit more regions and universities. At the same time, we should actively embrace new technologies, explore the application of artificial intelligence in data processing and virtual reality in narrative reproduction, and continuously expand the boundaries of teaching topics, extending from historical and cultural protection to broader fields such as rural revitalization, industrial heritage, ecological changes, and immigrant communities, so that oral history teaching always maintains the vitality of dialogue with the times.

In short, the ultimate achievement of an ideal oral history course is not a pile of interview recordings or reports, but seeds sown in students’ hearts: a way of thinking to understand and respect the complexity and diversity of the world, a warm feeling to listen to others and care about society, and a confidence and responsibility to use knowledge to participate in cultural construction and promote social understanding. This may be one of the most vivid interpretations of the “way of university” in contemporary times ^[15].

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