

Understanding Ethnography
Lecture No 41
Forms of Interviews

Let us begin by looking at the different forms of conversations we may have with our participants.

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Opportunistic chats are the kinds of conversations we strike up with individuals or groups of participants we come across in the field. They can be spontaneous or pre-planned. Spontaneous is when we accidentally run into our participants and use the opportunity to ask questions that occur to us at that moment. In a pre-planned situation, we might turn up at a particular site hoping to run into participants who may be present at the event, and then strike up conversations with them.

These chats by not long or in-depth may give us leads or directions to follow. Usually, these are useful at the beginning of our research activity. They could also be precursors to more in-depth interviews with some of the participants.

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These are the kinds of conversations that we have with our participants when we are observing them. They have clarified questions that arise from our observations.

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Let us watch this example of one such interview.

Video: Playing in regional language (1:12 to 3:44)

The objective here is usually to hear our participant's views on the activity we are observing to learn more about it. These conversations will be complemented with longer, slightly more formal in-depth conversations in the future.

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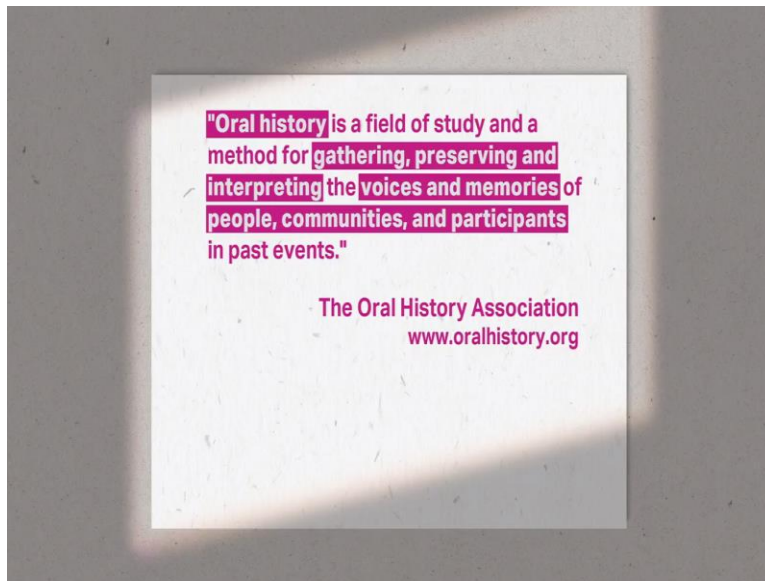
In-depth conversations, as we have discussed, can also take place exclusive of participation. We will have a more detailed discussion about this later.

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Sometimes in our research, we find it important to learn the life history of our participants to understand the trajectory of their lives. This helps us situate the events and phenomena we are studying. Similarly, we may find ourselves seeking narratives that elaborate upon the history of a particular incident or event as experienced by individual participants.

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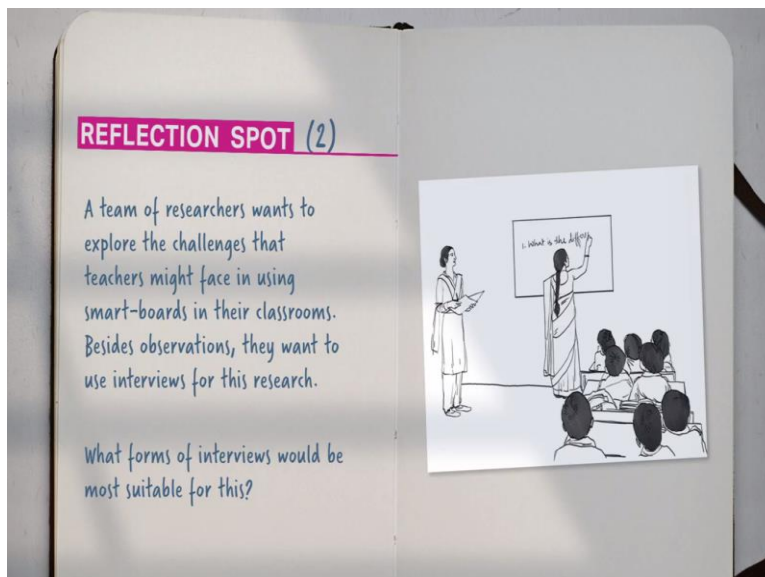
In doing this, we borrow from the discipline of Oral history. Oral historians believe that we must understand an event through the narratives of different people who experienced it. And among these, our particular focus needs to be on narratives that are less likely to be heard or recorded. So Oral historians give primacy to oral narratives. This is so that participants who cannot read or write can also have their narratives recorded. Many oral historians actively focus on the narratives of people from marginalised groups. They recognise that it is often these narratives that are not included in the grand narrative of history.

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A common thread runs through these different forms of interviews. That is, they are linked to observation. In fact, as you will see later in our discussion, in an interview, we learn as much from observing, as from speaking and listening. Let us pause here for a moment and reflect on the following situation.

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A team of researchers want to explore the challenges that teachers might face in using smart boards in their classrooms. Besides observations, they want to use interviews for this research. What kind of interviews would be more suitable for this?

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Some of you may have suggested Oral history interviews. This would not be a suitable method because in this case, the researchers have a very well defined and narrow focus. Their research focuses on the situation in the classroom and the teaching styles of their participants. Observation will form an important part of their fieldwork.

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Some of you may have suggested Opportunistic chats. These go well with observing; however, in this particular scenario, having chats with participants as they teach will not be very productive. The researchers will be interrupting the teaching.

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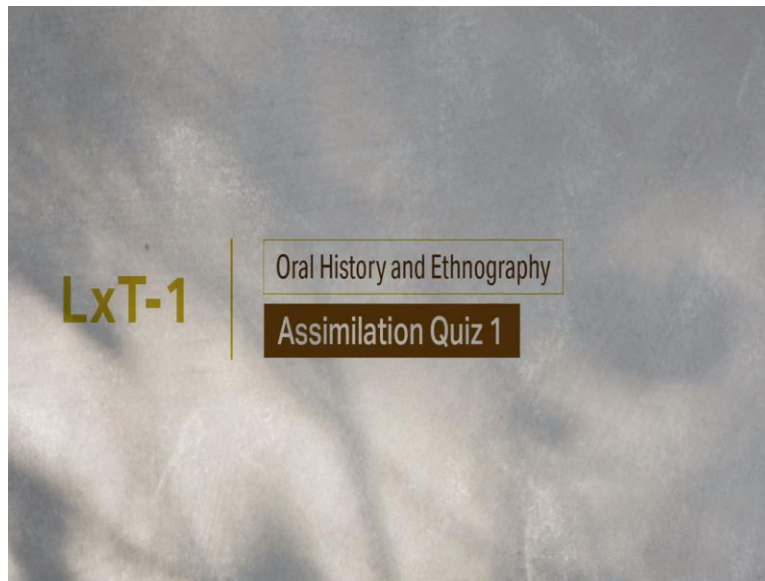
So the best option is to have conversations with the teachers before or after the class to eliminate the observations. Then they may also do In-depth interviews to understand the teacher's reaction to using smartboards.

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And now, for those of you who may be interested in learning more about Oral history, we have a presentation by Oral historian Indira Chowdhury. Professor Chowdhury is the director of the Centre for Public History at the Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology in Bengaluru.

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Watch this presentation by Professor Chowdhury, and then there is a quiz for you to take.