Theorie & Praxis-Austausch im Göttinger
Zeitzeugenprojekt

A Trip through Time
The concept of „Biography-Groups“ in an oral history/eye witness project
(Göttingen, Germany)

A Presentation from the Conference at Bad Bederkesa, March 2001
„Research Meets Practice“ – Biographical Approaches in Adult Learning

For more than five years an oral history/eye witness project has been running within a Göttingen charity organization (FAG e.V.) whose main concern is the empowerment of the aged. This project offers a forum for historical reflection, most particularly for an inter-generational exchange of life stories. The „Biography-Groups“ are small, moderated discussion groups, which provide a sheltered space for individuals of varying ages, to explore their own life in retrospect and to compare these lives together with those of others.

We are going to present our project’s goals, principals, and methods, and report on how we realized and are realizing these in practice. We will emphasise the self-reflective life long learning nature of these experiences, and include a short summary of the consciousnous raising history of this project and its revision.

The „Zeitzeugenprojekt“ is part of a charity organization concerned with the empowerment of the aged. We introduce you to our concept: a „Biography-Group“. (We have chosen not to translate this name; if our concept is extended to an English speaking community, we think names like „His-story Exchange“ or „Her-story Exchange“ or „Our-story Exchange“ would be fun.) First we’ll explain how the biography group fits into our larger project, and then we’ll present the guide lines we use in these groups and give you some examples from our five years experience. Finally we’ll answer any questions you might have about what we are doing and dicuss anything you want to explore further.

Here are the building blocks of our project:
What the „ZEITZEUGENPROJEKT“ offers

- Erzählcafé A place for all ages to reminisce in public
- Politisches Forum topics A place to share reflections on controversial topics
- Schulprojekte “History Live!” in primary and secondary school
Biographiegruppen  A safe place for personal reminiscing and processing the past

*Erzahlcafe* is a monthly afternoon tea with coffee and cake for all ages. The sessions are carefully prepared in advance, usually have a main first speaker who is followed by a moderated discussion open to everyone. The topics are taken from history or everyday life and are announced ahead of time.

*Politisches Forum* is an evening discussion group, for all ages and whoever wants to come and listen to topical and controversial subjects and to discuss the many different points of views possible. At the same time we try to discover and uncover the biographical roots of our own opinions or those of the „experts“. “How has it come about that I have arrived at this conclusion? Is it „objective“, or a result of my past, my biography?“

*Schulprojekt* is part of our project is concerned with providing an „eye-witness“ service to schools, making it possible for school children of different ages to meet older people who who have reflected on their own lives and who are willing to speak to them about their past and who can make history come alive for them. The project includes finding, training and preparing these eye-witnesses to share their life experiences with different age groups. We do not take this project lightly, and we have come to know these various „eye-witnesses“ through extensive interviews before we arrange for their meetings in the school.

These first three building blocks are the most public and most widely influential parts of our projekt.

But now we come to the part perhaps closest to our heart, for it has had the most impact on our own lives, the „Biographiegruppe“, these small closed groups that offer individuals a safe, protected place to activate their memory without fear of societal taboos or condemnation.

What is a “Biography-group“?

First, it is not a therapy group, nor an encounter group, but rather a group to help individuals process their past and learn from the life stories of others. Reminiscing in a group has a different quality than remembering alone. The group discussion promotes memory and allows participants to compare their memories with those of the others, either younger or older. We have written down for you some of the „ingredients“ that make up a biography group, what we think of as the learning situation, the group environment.
The “learning situation“ of “Biography-groups“

- 5-8 persons, all ages
- mutually binding
- bi-weekly, 2 hour sessions
- prepared in advance
- transparent structure
- moderated
- uses memory aids

GOAL: Gaining insight into our past

We have been conducting “Biography groups“ for five years now and began our first one at the expressed wish of some older women. In short, BG are fun, are rejuvenating; they can be emotional, even painful; they recall lost memories and generate AHA experiences; they leave a lasting impression and have permanent effects.

From the experiences that we have gained with our various groups, and from our own understanding and aspirations for political impact, we have gleaned and formulated 5 essential qualities that we are continually striving for in our groups and that we want to present to you here. We think of them our guide lines for establishing and running our Biography groups. We will introduce each in turn and often give you some examples from our own experiences within our various groups.

By the way, we have run 5 groups all together, and two are still in progress. The lengthiest ran 4 years, and the shortest one, that has been running for 1 year, is still in going on.

Our 5 essentials or guide lines

I Emphasizing personal Biography
II Bringing different generations together
III Promoting Dialogue
IV Maintaining gender-consciousness
V Emphasizing individual empowerment and recognizing responsibility for self
I Emphasizing personal Biography

- Concentrating on personal, individual life stories
- Enabling participants to discover their “practical knowledge“
- Giving participants a chance to reconstruct their own lives
- Learning to conceive of what has happened to us as our own experience, and to recognize choices in life

- Personal experiences are the most interesting and absorbing to listen to. In the groups, it is the personal and concrete memories from each of the participants that are being sought out. Memories from their own life and not hearsay, or second hand narratives that can be found elsewhere. The biography group helps the individual to sort out and reflect upon and evaluate these individual, these personal memories and possibly even to re-evaluate and re-interpret the past events and experiences.

- After awhile, a new perspective on ones own biography is gained, a reconstruction of ones own past takes place.

- The conscious memory, and then the experience of reflecting upon the incident or event remembered, and finally reflecting upon this very act of remembering, generates a new kind of knowledge, a knowledge which we call experiential knowledge.

- Within the group, a personal and subjective understanding of the historical past can be transmitted, and often proves more solid and lasting than „Book knowledge“.

- Within the group, through the factual knowledge of the other participants or with the help of other media, the participant’s personal life story can be understood afresh and placed within the broader context of the history of their society, their times.
The group experience can prove to be clarifying for the individual, or can even be healing and/or exonerating. Successes and failures, also guilt, can be more easily recognized and acknowledged. Chances to change and opportunities for development can be discovered and the participants can learn to accept themselves. All this means they can become more authentic.
A time-witness-story – By Kathrin Helbig

We were talking about formation, studies, profession – about all the way how we became what we are now. One question was: “What was your favorite profession? What did you really like to become?” – “A doctor!” I answered without having to think about. – “What happened that you didn’t become?” – Good question! I started to think about my life and found some reasons hindering me in becoming a doctor. I finally recognized that it would have been possible to me to become a doctor, but I had never decided to do it or to leave it. I had the wish in me without thinking about facilities. At this point in the “Biography group” I saw that I can even still now decide on my favorite profession – and learn for my future professional life to take the chance of actively choosing my professional way in taking awareness of it and taking time of thinking about it.

II Bringing different generations together

• Linking up the chain of generations/traditions
• Confronting the inherent tensions between the different generations
• Creating solidarity among and between the different generations
• Viewing an historical event from all generations’ viewpoints

“How capable of developing a society proves itself to be, depends primarily on what the generations are able to learn from each other”. (Kade, 1977)

– These are the important points that we want to make, especially that the young need elders and the elderly need youth.

– In contemporary society traditions and knowledge are often unable to be passed on from one generation to the next and the generations are often unable to reach and teach each other. Within the concrete practice of our groups, we have been able to provide this space for generations to share, the place and time for generational exchanges to take place.

– The lack of familiarity between the generations can be stimulating, can be used as a productive tension which enables fresh insights and understandings and creative confrontations to take place. Critical but sympathetic inquiries can be the spice in the stew, so to speak.
Our goal is Solidarity between the generations. Groups of mixed ages give the participants the chance to understand and see an historical event from another point of view. (e.g. the fall of the iron curtain from the point of view of a 20 year old and a 60 year old observer) Thus the individual can not only gain understanding of another generation, but can also revise and broaden their own perception, and the historical event can acquire contours and depths otherwise missed.

III Promoting Dialogue

- Ensuring equal time for each participant’s contribution
- Ensuring that each contribution is accepted without being evaluated and judged
- Enabling the external dialogue, between “You“ and “I“
- Enabling the internal dialogue, within ones own Self
- Encouraging exchanges between the young and old
- Coming together to process our lives

Here we are pointing out that we encourage dialogue at various levels of group communication.
- The main activities of our BG are listening, remembering, telling, exchanging and sharing. To escape falling into a discussion where we find ourselves judging or even condemning one another, we have developed used the concept of “speaking in turn, and not evaluating each other’s-narrations“. The participants learn to speak directly from their own experiences, and to speak about their own emotions, and to not speak in generalizations.
- We speak directly, speak in the first person, in what we call “I-messages“ The various experiences and opinions are listened to side-by-side, without being passed over or belittled, or without being heard as if they were an affront or an attack, and without being rejected or ignored.
- External Dialogue: Here we mean the tension that exists between „I“ and „Thou“, this special empathetic curiosity that exists in the group. It is an excellent memory-stimulant. Listening to the stories of others triggers ones own memory.
Internal Dialogue: Here we mean that what takes place in the group also generates an internal dialogue, tension between an „I“ and another “I“. This tension directly encourages a self-reflective process, a self-discovery.

Both the old and the young in the groups relate episodes from their past, both are eye-witnesses of their times. Both of them must learn to actively listen to each other as they tell their histories and stories. They interchange their roles.

This kind of dialogue assumes complimentary Respect und Acceptance among all the participants.

**A time-witness-story** – By Berthold Prill-Kühne

A short story as an example for discovering new patterns of interpreting 1945, at the end of World War II, I lay in a hospital in the Netherlands for some months – as a young soldier. I was a German prisoner of war. I remember the 8th of May pretty well. The Dutch were celebrating their victory over Nazi-Germany. They had walked past our hospital with flags and they were carrying signs with slogans, shouting loudly: „Victory over Germany!“ „Germany kaputt!!“ and even louder: „Germans get out!“

While I listened to these people with their slogans I lay in bed, wounded and ill. Of course, I was afraid of their threat: „Germans get out!“ What is going to happen to the other prisoners and me? I felt like a victim – a helpless and innocent 17 year old boy.

My thoughts often returned in later years to this fearful, threatening scenario – at that time I simply had the idea of being a victim of history, suffering a terrible destiny. In short: behind this experience, I had only one pattern of meaning, the memory had only one dimension: being a victim – and nothing else!

50 years later, in the year 1995, I discussed my experiences at the end of World War II in several intergenerational groups. Now I had become a politically engaged and reflective older person. A young woman asked me: „What did you feel when you shot at British soldiers?“ Her hard and simple question made me feel very dismayed and anxious, I couldn’t give any answer. I recognized the truth, that it was necessary for me to find a completely new access to the meaning and interpretation of my memory. I had to change my patterns of interpreting. Indeed, I had been a soldier, a member of the German army. I had aimed and had shot – and therefore I had been wounded and imprisoned. As a result of this I acquired a new pattern of perception. I was confronted with my position as an active subject, as a perpetrator – and this shift of emphasis became a meaningful door-opener for me to gain a changed view on my personal biography – and this knowledge is still in effect!
IV Maintaining gender-consciousness

- Practicing gender-awareness when making groups
- Choosing gender specific subjects and topics
- Developing sensitivity to history as viewed from a female and/or male point of view
- *Aus der Rolle fallen! / Gendertrouble*

Although we have all learned to be aware of gender as an issue, here in the groups some evident facts, are especially important. We keep in mind the gender-specific socialisation of our participants and their biographies, and the gender-specific manner of processing these biographies. Also important are the gender determined communication styles, and the lack of older men who participate in adult education programs, and this has us to adopt specific methods. They are:

- The composition of the groups is quite conscious. Single sex groups find their own communication style most easily. If groups are mixed they need a space for special reflections just on the problem of gender. Some topics can only be dealt with within a same sex group. (e.g. sex, relationship to ones own body)

- We pay attention to the gender specific communication styles that can affect the group process. We try to make them transparent and try to dismantle them. Our goal is to give equal time and space to everyone and to have a democratic communication structure.

- When choosing our BG topics women’s and men’s subjects play an important role. Some classical examples would be „how were we raised and socialised“ or „how did our careers develope“. Our goal is to have a gender specific consciousness present in the reflections of both the moderator and the members.

- We strive to maintain an eye for gender as we view both our own subjective history and objective history itself. We would like to make room in our groups for a new understanding of history from a female and a male point of view, in fact, a feminist point of view.
A time-witness-story – By Kathrin Helbig

As a member of a biography group I would like to tell you an example of what is going on in such a group:
The example I want to give you is not an experience of my own, but of an old man, who is another member of our group. I'll tell you what I saw:
We were talking about growing up with a certain aspect: did our parents make any difference of sons and daughters? Did we get a different education as a male or as a female? This man in our group said: “No! Absolutely not! My sister and me got absolutely the same education. My parents didn’t make any difference.”
He went home. He continued thinking about this question. He didn’t know whether he was right. So he called his sister and asked her, whether she felt any difference in treatment of their parents between her and him. And she said: “Oh yes! I absolutely did!” – and gave him some examples of their common childhood. Also him remembered the situations his sister was telling him, but didn’t get aware of gender-difference in them until this telephone-call right now. He was happy to get this new aspect of his childhood – and by the way he had never had such a long telephone-talk with his sister before and was surprised that it was possible.

V Emphasizing individual empowerment and recognizing responsibility for self

- Discovering one’s own capacities and resources
- Participating in the planning of the group process
- Encouraging independent and autonomous decisions and learning to recognize where all our CHOICES lie
- Relating the stories exchanged and the personal development to the present and the future
- **Empowerment**
  For the individual this mean learning to recognize their own capacities and abilities, and where they are competent. And in an historical context, „when and where in the past?“ What in the past was always seen as a weakness, could actually be understood as a strength when seen from another point of view.
- At the level of the group, this means making the dynamics of the group process transparent, and having the participants both plan the sessions and the topics chosen.
• We strive to also make some of the repressive structures in society transparent, especially by recognizing how we all have been shaped and forced to be a certain way in the past. We offer the chance for individuals to re-evaluate their past, as they see it with new eyes. Our goal is to help the participants act more autonomously in the future and to experience solidarity as they free themselves.

• An overall goal for us is to not stay in the past, but to look forward, to use what insights we have gained for the future.