

Community Broadcasting Foundation Oral History Workshop 8 and 9 February 2024

Following a successful workshop in Cairns late last year, Dr Elaine Rabbitt brought her workshop to Brisbane. The workshop was funded by the Community Broadcasting Foundation. Elaine was assisted by Suzanne Mulligan and there were 14 participants. The main theme of the workshop was Ethics because this is a fundamental requirement when doing oral histories, particularly in the Indigenous community. The participants wanted to learn how to be ethical interviewers and observe cultural protocols.

The participants came from many places including Sydney, Darwin, just south of Queensland border, North Stradbroke Island, Cherbourg, and Sunshine Coast. Elaine herself came from Broome.



Elaine outlined her extensive experience doing oral histories including many interviews with Indigenous persons. As an example of her ethical practice, she told the group about an interview she'd done and the many hours she had put into it. However, the interviewee was having doubts about the story being made public and eventually decided not to proceed. Elaine withdrew the interview from her project and made the interviewee feel comfortable about his/her decision. It was his/her story to tell, or not.

There were some Queensland University of Technology (QUT) students who had some interesting projects. A couple of them will be interviewing Indigenous women in Queensland in an effort to learn about health issues and how they can be improved. Another QUT student has been working with Queensland Aboriginal artists and also Indigenous artists in Taiwan. Most of these students had done interviews in the past but had no formal training so were keen to learn how to do it, particularly within an indigenous context.

Another QUT research student is writing her PhD and would have liked to include interviews with Aboriginal people but was unable to connect with them. She would like to improve her interviewing skills to see if an oral history approach might elicit more or different information. She and other students were interested to understand how ethics is seen from an oral history perspective compared with the academic institutional one, which seems to exclude some marginalised groups rather than inviting them in so their voices can be heard. Other QUT students had similar reasons for attending the workshop.

There were a few participants who had been working in radio broadcasting who wanted to learn the correct way to approach people for interviews, particularly people from different cultural backgrounds. Another participant was from North Stradbroke Island, has a background in photojournalism and is working with the people from the Museum there on oral history projects and is keen to learn more about oral history practice. Another person who attended believes story is a way to break down barriers and build connections. The workshop was an opportunity to learn new skills.

OHQ President Elisabeth Gondwe attended as she's keen to learn, part of continuously improving her practice. Elisabeth works at the North Stradbroke Island Museum on Minjerribah and has done many interviews with Indigenous people on the island. She pointed out there's quite a useful document on the national website which looks at oral history ethics. It's a guideline for the academic world, which is poles apart ethically from accepted ethical practice in oral history. This document may be presented by students to the university to demonstrate the case for including oral history.

See: <https://oralhistoryaustralia.org.au/guide-ethics-and-university-research/>

On Day 2 of the workshop Elaine discussed the practicalities of using recording equipment to do the interview. The 14 participants paired off to record each other's stories. This took most of the day and everyone seemed to enjoy the process. Each person in the pair hadn't known the other before the workshop. It was very interesting to hear how much each person learned about his/her pair partner. They displayed a lot of confidence and had fun with it.

Elaine said, "there's no such thing as a perfect oral history. Every time we do an oral history, we learn something and we learn something about ourselves. The more we practise, the more we learn."

Suzanne Mulligan

