Dancing where you dig: Heritage and Critical Historiography

Astrid von Rosen & Andrew Flinn
Sven Lindqvist’s 1978 publication Gräv där du står ['Dig Where You Stand']
Democratising knowledge production

• “It is only by seeking and recognizing political relevance in history that we can bring it more directly into the battle of ideas — history is too important to be left just to the professional historians.” (Sally Alexander & Anna Davin, Feminist History, History Workshop, 1 1976)

• “Do not fear the experts. You know your job. Your professional experience is a firm basis on which to stand when judging other people’s activities – and non-activities. They may be experts, each one in his area, but when they discuss your job, you are the expert. That is why your own job is such a good starting point for our research. **Dig where you stand!**” (Sven Lindqvist, Preface, Dig Where You Stand, 1979 (English translation)
This is a research handbook for non-professional researchers. It describes 30 different ways of investigating a job and a place of work.

For this I needed a concrete example: a job going back roughly as far as the Swedish industrial society. I needed a basic industry which is representative of many different countries. I wanted to avoid glamorous niches and romantic products. I wouldn’t opt for an easy way out. That is why I chose the cement industry as my example.

The book is aimed at anyone who wants to try and explore his own job. But it is of course equally suitable for people who want to investigate their future or their past job. Secondly, the book is aimed at teachers, students, journalists, authors and others who may have a professional ambition to find out more about jobs in Swedish industry.

I do not intend any single reader to do all the things suggested in this book. Life isn’t long enough for that. Treat the book as if it were a hand catalogue or a brochure from a travel agent. Choose whatever suits you! Do cooperate with others and divide the tasks up between you. Concentrate on whatever applies to your particular problem.

It would be easy to point out another 30, perhaps even more interesting ways to explore a job. I never meant this book to be the final word. But as far as I can see, it is still the most comprehensive demonstration available in any language of possible ways to research a job.

This comprehensiveness has its price. In each of the areas I discuss there are specialists who would have written a much better handbook than I – on that particular subject. I have a word for them too: Please do! No one would appreciate it more than I.

And my word to other readers is this: Do not fear the experts. You know your job. Your professional experience is a firm basis on which to stand when judging other people’s activities – and non-activities. They may be experts, each one in his area, but when they discuss your job, you are the expert. That is why your own job is such a good starting-point for your research. Dig where you stand!
"Documentary arts present opportunities to connect schools with their
eighbourhoods, young people with old people, arts with life, history with now.
There is nothing magic or difficult about getting started.
You just have to dig where you stand."
The Documentary Arts Process

Each Documentary Arts project has the same basic 5 ingredients:

1. The inspiration or starting point

   "How do you decide what to do?" is a question often asked. The truth is that it is not necessarily planned; it might be a lucky chance. It might be an old person's story, a newspaper headline, an old photograph. There’s no simple answer but, if you are receptive, sooner or later, someone's life, story, some change in the local environment, a bundle of letters or a diary, could spark off a chain reaction of research which could then be developed into an arts project.

2. Recording and researching

   Once you’ve found your inspiration, you’ll need to collect all the relevant information you can. It’s important, wherever possible, to find the primary source - the actual document, the original minute book, or newspaper report, the actual words of eye witnesses. Free from any gloss, original materials carry within them an authenticity of statement, tone, feeling and intention that is lost when filtered through another medium. If you can preserve it, this authenticity will ring through your ultimate artistic expression, to be felt and recognised by your audiences.

3. Making the research accessible and usable

   You’re not doing the research just for it to be kept in an archive and forgotten. Original documents need to be copied; those that are written in old script need to be word processed; photos need to be digitised; tape recordings need to be transcribed; photocopies need to be made, so that a group can explore the material.

4. Arrangement into an art form

   The research findings can be transformed into a form which communicates your message clearly, effectively. This might be a piece of sculpture, a play, a folklore or musical piece, a film or a dance.
Dig Where We Stand – Or when you are in a hole don’t stop digging!

By Sarah Dhanjal, on 8 April 2012

What does ‘digging where we stand’ mean? The phrase has its roots in Sweden, popularised by Sven Lindqvist and then in the History Workshop movement in the UK. The idea is that by researching and learning about their own history and the place where they are living, individuals and groups would regain some control over the understanding of their lives and their interconnectedness.

We are a UCL research team funded by the AHRC’s Research for Community Heritage awards. We will be telling you a lot more about the project and what we intend to do over the coming weeks and months, but to start with we thought we might give you a quick introduction. At a national level these projects are intended to collaborate with HLF funded projects in the ‘All Our Stories’ strand. This will help universities and groups to establish partnerships in order to support community heritage research.

What that might mean in terms of research and of collaboration is in practice very open. The possibilities are only really restricted by the finances – none of the grants are huge but there are plenty of interesting community heritage and community heritage collaborations and applications we could develop if we set our minds to it.

The project is in its early stages, so we intend to arrange a series of events to bring together people from across London and the south east who are interested in researching community
Scena-graphing! Or Devising Digging-Dancing Methodologies