



# SNAPSHOT

NEW LEARNING BASED ON PAST EXPERIENCES

## THE BIRREN GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY METHOD

**GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY** There are many contemporary approaches to helping adults of all ages, especially older adults, talk about their lives. Often terms “reminiscence” and “life review” describe an individual or group process where participants recall their experiences. In such sessions, participants may choose to discuss any aspect of their lives in the order of their choice. Conversation and exchange is the essential feature of these approaches. The underlying purpose generally is to relieve loneliness in life.



By contrast, the "Guided Autobiography" (GAB) method developed by Jim Birren is defined and structured, permits evaluation, and is in fact being evaluated. Guided Autobiography was designed to assist individuals to recall, organize and share the contents of their life experiences. A structured series of themes evokes memories of events, family, money, health, work and other common threads in the fabric of life. A combination of individual writing and group discussion sensitizes participants and primes their memories of the details of their lives and encourages them to organize those details.

The GAB method includes four key elements:

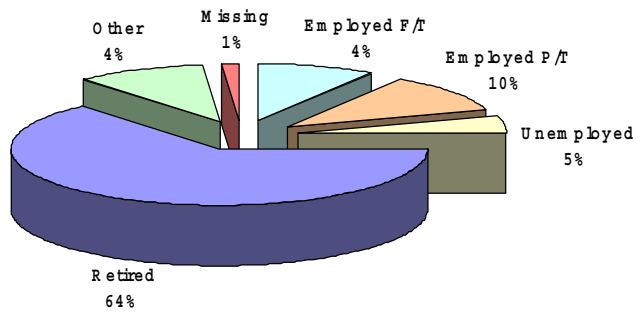
- A series of 10 sessions of about two hours each, once a week for 10 weeks.
- A written two-page response to the week's theme.
- Participants' sharing their responses to the week's theme by reading or oral response.
- Concluding with writing a wish for another participant, who then reads the wish aloud. The wishes are personal and give evidence that each person's life story has been listened to and appreciated.

Several important themes that are addressed during the 10 session series include: the major branching points in my life, my family history, the role of money in my life, my experience with death, the history of my aspirations and goals. According to Dr. Birren, addressing these themes provides important insight into your life because “you can’t know where you’re going if you don’t know where you’ve been.”

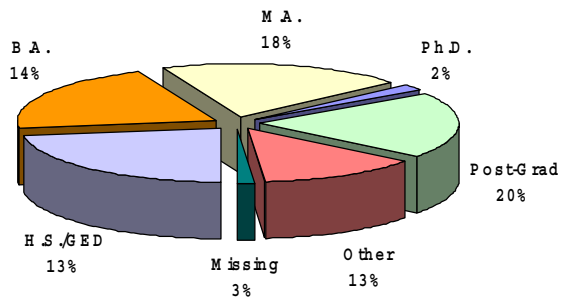
The Guided Autobiography method was developed more than 30 years ago within the context of university education and has served the entire adult age range. Older adults have become increasingly attracted to the method, and those who facilitate Guided Autobiography programs have increasingly targeted elders. In the past several years, Guided Autobiography has been offered in numerous settings. Examples include older adult and lifelong learning programs, assisted living and long-term care facilities, churches and interfaith groups, libraries and senior centers.

**RESEARCH** 140 participants in the GAB program that took place during Fall 2000 and Spring 2001 were included in pre- and post-test evaluations. Within the group: 73% were female (27% were male); 35% were married and 35% were widowed, (17% were single and 11% were divorced or separated); 83% were Caucasian (4% were Hispanic, 4% were Asian, 2% were African American and 7% identified themselves as other). Almost 70% lived alone or with a relative. The educational and employment status of the participants is indicated below.

**Employment Status**



**Education**



In addition to the high level of education and the high number of retiree participants in the course, as many as 20% had an annual household income of at least \$100,000.

The evaluations of these participants indicated that they believed participation in GAB results in several outcomes. (1) They are stimulated to recall their life events and to develop an accepting view of them. (2) They believe the combination of a systematic review of the major themes of life, the sharing of life stories, and the group experience in doing so result in a more integrated perspective. (3) They often identify their participation as leading to more accepting attitudes towards others.

The latter result is evidenced by the fact that group members often continue contact after the 10-week program, holding reunions and corresponding to keep up-to-date on one another's lives. This suggests that participation in the GAB experience can lead to new friendships and perhaps, confidant relationships.

**THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STUDIES PROGRAM** In 2000, as part of an experimental project for training master teachers, a workgroup of 15 Guided Autobiography graduates was assembled at the UCLA Center on Aging. Their responsibilities included designing curriculum and instructing students in the GAB method.

In addition to Guided Autobiography, several spin-off classes were developed to meet the request of students for continued training. The courses include:

**Guided Autobiography II (GAB II)** – The purpose of GAB II is to expand upon the life themes of Guided Autobiography and to develop them into a framework for a more in-depth life story.

**Family History** – The purpose is to assist participants in locating, recalling and organizing the histories of their families while looking for lost family culture and traditions embedded in their histories.

**Life Portfolio** – The principle goal of the course is to create a framework that enables participants to examine how they have invested themselves in the activities of life, their gains and losses, and to identify how they want to invest their lives in the future.

**eGAB** – A distance learning course is being designed for those unable to meet at traditional classroom sites.

As of 2003, the "home base" for Guided Autobiography was moved to its new location at: California State University – Fullerton, Ruby Gerontology Center, 800 N. State College Blvd., Fullerton, CA 92834 714/278-4686 [www.fullerton.edu](http://www.fullerton.edu)