

With Their Voice: Constructing Meaning with Digital Testimony

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“For the dead and the living, we must bear witness.” For not only are we responsible for the memories of the dead, we are also responsible for what we are doing with those memories.

Elie Wiesel¹

It is always a special time when a Holocaust survivor visits our classroom. The class prepares by reading articles and books, analyzing poetry, watching films, studying primary source images from Yad Vashem and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and constructing questions (as well as baking desserts to welcome our guest). We have learned a great deal from these survivors who have overcome great adversity and who now share their stories to help us make meaning of such an unthinkable act of genocide. During a recent visit with a Holocaust survivor, we were captivated by her account of being a child in Poland, who at the age of two was given up by her biological parents to a non-Jewish family in order to keep her safe. We listened with rapt attention to the tales of her childhood and daily life, and we rejoiced as she detailed the successful reunification with her parents. Students listened with awe as she described how she became a medical doctor, got married and now has a family with children, grandchildren and even a few great grandchildren. Our guest acknowledged the responsibility of future generations in her lineage to continue sharing her story long after the last survivors and witnesses are gone. We recognized how precious an opportunity

we had to benefit from this first-hand account. The students sought to optimize their learning by asking questions about friendships and pastimes while in hiding. We inquired how she managed lingering anger and intense emotions from an event that consumed her early life. We concluded the visit with pictures and autographs, resulting in a memorable day for both the students and educators.

What was different about this visit was that after our visitor left, we continued learning and constructing meaning from other survivors’ testimony using *IWitness*, a free resource developed by the USC Shoah Foundation-The Institute for Visual History and Education to help students develop a deeper understanding of the Holocaust and other genocides alongside digital and media literacies. These visual archives provide access to multiple representations that add depth and rigor to the learning experience and require students to grapple with the myriad complexities reflected in the stories of individuals from around the world who survived and witnessed the Holocaust. The application empowers students to inquire about difficult questions related to identity and choice, and provides tools for students to investigate ideas, analyze information, and collabo-

rate with others on projects to represent both content knowledge as well as personal perspectives on the impact of the event.

Teaching with Testimony

The use of testimony in teaching about the Holocaust has long been a practice, relying on resources such as memoirs, diaries, and audio recordings. Having first-person accounts provides a window into the experience of those who lived the historical events that now fill the pages of text. As we mark the 70th Anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe, it becomes increasingly difficult to find survivors and witnesses to share their stories with students. The question of how these personal accounts will endure once the last survivor is no longer here is a pertinent issue in the field of Holocaust education. Though not equivalent to in-person accounts, video testimony can provide an important experience. As the USC Shoah Foundation’s “Guidelines for Using Visual History Testimony” states,

While meeting, listening, and interacting with a survivor in person is an unmatched experience, using video testimony can provide students with a different, yet equally meaningful and potentially sustaining, educational experience.²

IWitness

The Visual History Archive of the USC Shoah Foundation houses over 53,000 testimonies of survivors and additional witnesses of the Holocaust and other genocides. These full life histories have been collected from individuals in 61 countries and 39 languages. Each of the testimonies is fully searchable and discoverable through the process of cataloguing and indexing each testimony using thousands of keywords. For example, students can search testimony using terms such as rescue, resistance, racism, or using locations such as Lodz or Auschwitz.

IWitness (iwitness.usc.edu), the USC Shoah Foundation's educational website, provides access to over 1,350 survivor and witness testimonies. Secondary school students and teachers may search, watch, and interact with testimonies to construct multimedia projects in a secure, password-protected space. The resources are free for all students and educators. Users need only an Internet connection; all of the tools are self-contained on the server and are compatible with Macs, PCs, iPads, and tablet devices, although video editing requires a Flash-enabled device.

Even prior to registering, the IWitness home page features a rotating group of curated clips. These short clips run less than five minutes and draw learners into compelling stories. Linked from the home page, the Watch page provides more clips from a breadth of topics to anyone visiting the site. Registered users are able to search among the full-length testimonies, then save clips from the testimonies for use in projects. Testimonies have been indexed to the minute with keywords. If, for example, students search for "music," they will get a list of clips where the interviewee discusses music, and they can go right to the exact minute in which music is discussed in a testimony. Users also can narrow search results in various ways.

When signed in, teachers should go to the "Dashboard" to get started exploring IWitness. From here, videos



The IWitness homepage at IWitness.USC.edu

will populate on the left side under "Connections." The Connections videos highlight important topics to address with students: ethical editing of video clips, effective searching, and defining terms like "archive" and "testimony." There is an Educators' page designed to orient teachers to the site and highlight available resources. Teachers may create groups and generate access codes students can use to register and link to class assignments. For students and teachers alike, IWitness offers a Tool Kit, which

can fly out from the right side of the screen. The Tool Kit provides users with quick access to their assigned activities, as well as to an encyclopedia, glossary, and note-taking tool.

IWitness also provides a library of multimedia activities, each containing a diverse set of resources to engage students in learning. These activities vary in focus, ranging from the power of story in learning about genocide, the 1936 Olympics, the voyage of the *St. Louis*, immigrating to America, and the *Kindertransport*. Teachers may also use the "Activity Builder" to construct their own activity for students aligned to curricular and technology standards. Using predesigned templates, teachers can create a video activity that allows students to conduct research on a theme and use a variety of multi-media to produce a digital story. Information Quests focus on a single survivor or witness of the Holocaust. Students listen carefully for information in testimony clips and then reflect on their learning, using—among

IWitness Essentials

The Getting Started tutorial is a great way to see key features of IWitness.

The Watch page, accessible in the top right corner, offers curated clips on the most popular search topics for easy access.

The Share page has examples of student video projects.

The Resources link, available in the bottom right corner, provides access to safe and reputable sites for further research.

When searching, an auto suggest feature will help students connect keywords and ideas.

Your Dashboard is your launch point. You will navigate from here and can see recent activity by students or other teachers in your network.

Teachers can create groups and classes under the tab "students and groups" on your dashboard.

You can create your own activities or customize existing activities by copying them to your account.

IWitness is accessible on iPads and tablets, except for the Video editing feature.

The FAQ contains answers to many questions.



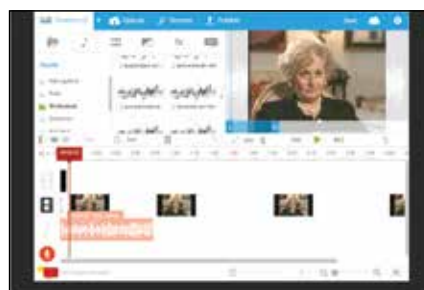
above: A girl gets involved at the USC, Hybrid High School in Los Angeles.

upper left: Two boys at the IWitness launch at Chandler School in Pasadena, California.

lower left: Group of students at Valhalla High School in El Cajon, California.

other things—a word cloud tool. As students complete the activity chosen by their teacher, they are introduced to a multitude of resources for analysis, which may include text, video, maps, photographs, and testimony. Each section of the activity involves student analysis and concise writing that is reflective or evidence-based in nature. Throughout these activities, students use a myriad of skills as they progress through the activities and construct a testimony-based final project. Skills such as analysis, questioning, evidence-based reasoning, synthesizing, developing information literacy, and writing, to name a few, are cultivated. Each step in an IWitness activity has students analyzing and reflecting, typically using evidence, from clips of testimony, text-based primary and secondary sources, maps, and other assets. Many of these resources are available directly within IWitness, as it has built-in access to the

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s online encyclopedia, Yad Vashem’s photo archive, and the Kigali Memorial Resource Center. Students are able to search through these reputable sites in researching about a topic that resonates with them on a personal level.



Students can create video-essays using the built-in video editor.

IWitness is organized using a framework of 4 Cs: Consider, Collect, Construct, and Communicate and focused on student-based inquiry and communication.³ In utilizing resources that draw on emotionally laden and sen-

sitive topics, such as the Holocaust, it is vital to provide context on the topics in order to progress through the content in a responsible manner.⁴

Video activities within IWitness culminate in the construction of video-essays, in which students can use clips of survivor testimony, as well as other embedded resources explored during their research. This is done using a built-in video editor in IWitness, run by WeVideo, providing students the tools needed to responsibly interact with the testimony to perform research, record findings, develop multiple perspectives, and construct multimedia essays from the testimony and other digital resources, including self-reflections recorded from your computer’s camera and microphone or other recording device. The built-in video editor includes a recently expanded selection of royalty-free music that students are able to use within their projects, including a new catalog of

classical music. Students often associate the emotions that they wish to portray through the soundtrack included in their videos, so the expansion of available music is an exciting feature.

IWitness also provides an opportunity for students to learn about the ethical behavior associated with editing testimony into a video. There are a number of short, accessible tutorials for students in IWitness. The topics for the tutorial include Ethical Editing, What is an Archive, What is Search, and What is Testimony, and are readily accessible from your dashboard, which is where you navigate from on the site.

Wiedeman, Carnes, and Street contend “that engaging with compelling personal stories in a complex digital environment builds the media and digital literacies, empathetic and cross-cultural understanding and respect for others,”⁵ which gets to the heart of many objectives of the social studies, and civic and moral education. While IWitness was initially purposed for the middle and secondary classroom, recently IWitness has expanded into the upper elementary grade levels with an activity on bullying, which demonstrates the applicability of testimony to a younger audience if used in a responsible manner.⁶

Recently, IWitness has continued to advance by expanding the availability of testimony beyond survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust to include testimonies from the 1994 Tutsi genocide in Rwanda and the 1937 Nanjing Massacre. Further, there are plans to integrate testimony from the Armenian genocide later this year. The USC Shoah Foundation believes in the cross-curricular nature of testimony in engaging students in a study of humanity to overcome prejudice. January 2015 also marked the 70th Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz. This milestone has prompted a new set of activities, including a new Mini-Quest format. Mini-quests are activities that can be downloaded, including all directions and testimony clips, for a one-computer classroom. The work products may involve writing

projects, photomontages, or analyses that include other innovative interpretations and representations. This new feature demonstrates the fluid and progressive nature of IWitness as an accessible tool for all social studies classrooms.

Teachers are using IWitness as a way to integrate twenty-first-century literacies into a range of subjects, including social studies, language arts, media studies, and psychology. One history teacher built an IWitness activity so that his students could compare and contrast the Hollywood portrayal of the Sobibor Uprising in film with how survivors of the event remember and describe it. Through his IWitness activity “Escape From Sobibor: Hollywood and Memory,” his students were able to use critical thinking as they watched testimony and compared it to the film, and then to select clips of that testimony to construct a more historical depiction of daily life in the concentration camp.

You can also use IWitness to help teach online etiquette and respectful dialogue skills. Within IWitness, students finish their activities by viewing and commenting on their classmates’ projects. This is a great way to spark conversation that can continue in IWitness through social-media-style commenting tools. Teachers are able to mediate conversations and communicate with students within the application. IWitness also provides reminders to students about good digital citizenship when communicating with their peers within the site.

What makes IWitness especially compelling for students is that it transforms them from passive observers and provides opportunities to actively engage with witnesses and survivors through their personal narratives. In the students’ video-based projects, their learning demonstrates depth and a more refined exploration of complex events and diverse experiences. The individualized nature of their inquiry allows students to critically construct meaning as they investigate topics. Students’ digital stories have explored a wide variety of themes, ranging from the Hitler Youth, courage

and resistance, the first impressions of arriving at Auschwitz, and medical experiments; each video is as personal as the student who constructed it. Through the process, students make connections between their contemporary experiences and the stories of the witnesses and survivors. Moreover, when students take the time to watch the projects of classmates, they are exposed to multiple perspectives, both of the survivors, but also the varying viewpoints of their peers. This is powerful learning. 🌍

Notes

1. Elie Wiesel, “Dedication Speech” (presented at U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C., April 22, 1993), www.ushmm.org/research/ask-a-research-question/frequently-asked-questions/wiesel.
2. USC Shoah Foundation, “Guidelines for Using Visual History Testimony” (2014), 1, <http://echoesandreflections.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Guidelines-on-the-use-of-vt-updated-2014.pdf>.
3. Holly McBride, Brandon J. Haas, and Michael J. Berson, “Teaching The Holocaust at a Distance: Reflections from the Field,” *The Ohio Social Studies Review* 51, no. 1 (2014), <http://edhd.bgsu.edu/ossr/journal/index.php/ossr/article/view/105>.
4. USC Shoah Foundation, 9.
5. Claudia R. Wiedeman, Amy M. Carnes, and Kori Street, “Fostering Intercultural Dialogue at the Intersection of Digital Media and Genocide Survivor Testimony,” in *Global Citizenship in a Digital World*, Sherri H. Culver and Paulette Kerr, eds., (Gothenburg, Sweden: International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media, 2014), 122. See www.nordicom.gu.se/en/publikationer/global-citizenship-digital-world.
6. IWitness: USC Shoah Foundation, “First Elementary School IWitness Activity Piloted in Chicago” (November 12, 2014), <http://iwwitness.usc.edu/SFI/News/Default.aspx?nid=b113bf07-929a-46a6-b338-86eff415f4ec>

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