IWitness is a free educational website by USC Shoah Foundation – The Institute for Visual History and Education primarily for middle and high school students.

Teaching the World Through Testimony

The award-winning educational website brings the first-person stories of survivors and witnesses of genocide from the Institute’s Visual History Archive to students via multimedia-learning activities that are accessible via Macs, PCs, iPads and tablet devices connected to the Internet.

The learning activities are built around short, curated clips of testimony and complement curriculum across many subject areas, including history, social studies, English language arts, foreign language, government, and character education. Because the testimonies are full life stories, they also lend themselves to the study of universal themes and topics relevant to students. These include tolerance, justice, family, identity, and standing up for others.

IWitness learning activities promote digital literacy and develop students’ 21st century skills, including teaching the basics of research, effective searching, archival curation, ethical editing and digital literacy.

IWitness activities have been proven to boost students' subject matter knowledge while developing their critical-thinking skills and empathy for others. The aim – and often the result – is to spark the motivation to act and, ultimately, to help shape responsible participants in civil society.

IWitness currently offers 38 learning activities that engage students to explore and analyze testimony. The activities are supported by other primary source materials such as text, video, poems, photos and maps – as they also write written responses to guiding questions, strengthening students’ multiple literacies.

Stored on the IWitness platform are 1,600 full-length testimonies from the Visual History Archive, which houses 53,000 video testimonies of survivors and witnesses of genocides including the Holocaust, 1994 Rwandan Tutsi Genocide, 1937 Nanjing Massacre and 1915 Armenian Genocide. Although the testimonies are viewable in full on IWitness, the platform’s learning activities are built around short, curated clips.

Developing Voice Through Testimony

There are several types of activities in IWitness that require students to build word clouds, analyze photos, construct art projects, write poetry, create sound collages or produce short videos.

One type of activity, Information Quests can be completed in less than two hours and generally require students to create word clouds based on testimony they have watched. They are then required to write short answers to guiding questions about their word cloud and engage in a virtual discussion with their peers about their work.

For example, the Information Quest “Kizito Kalima” centers on a young man who survived the 1994 Rwandan Tutsi Genocide. Students watch a clip of his emotional testimony recounting the last time he saw his mother. They also watch short educational videos explaining the significance of testimony as well as the socio-political dynamics that gave rise to the Rwandan atrocities. Then they choose another clip of Kizito from a menu of five, each representing a different topic addressed in his testimony: “Surviving Survival,” “Hope for the Future,” “Experience of Genocide,” “Individual Culpability” or “Discrimination.” Students listen and closely watch the selected testimony. When they listen to the topic they selected, students enter eight words that resonate most with them into a field that describes or explains the experience told in the story, and then adjust the size and color of the words

“The power of I Witness is that it is available and discoverable to teachers all over the world and offers truly transformative education. Surveys show that after using I Witness, students are 93 percent more likely to believe it is important to speak up against stereotyping and 61 percent less likely to believe stereotypes are really true.”

Dr. Kori Street, director of education
USC Shoah Foundation

Visit iwitness.usc.edu
in accordance with their significance. Students share and discuss their word clouds with classmates.

IWitness also currently offers 10 Video Activities, which generally require deeper engagement to complete than the other activities. With its built-in video editor, IWitness enables students to construct video essays using curated video clips, photos, music, voiceover narration and text. Video Activities guide students as they search for and curate photos and clips of testimony from the library of assets stored on the site and use them to construct short video essays complete with voiceover narration and other audiovisual elements. In the activity, “Community Perceptions on Policing,” students analyze primary and secondary source material to examine community perceptions of police and law enforcement from an historical perspective and in terms of their own experience and contemporary perspectives.

Students search the archive, create a video essay and share their work with peers.

“When I finished creating my video, I felt like I knew the survivor speaking on the screen. After all, I had heard their life story in all its depth. After watching the videos, the Holocaust was no longer stories of strangers facing torture in a camp, but in a strange sounding way, that stranger was my friend.”

Benjamin Newman, Welsh Valley Middle School in Pennsylvania

In 2014, IWitness added a new type of activity called Mini Quests. Mini Quests engage students in testimony-based learning designed to be flexible, encouraging a wide

range of student outputs that can be created off-line, including writing projects, photo projects and creative representations, among other possibilities.

For example, the Mini Quest, “Bystander Effect,” engages students to consider the meaning of the bystander effect and its potential impact as they learn about the Rwandan Tutsi Genocide. Students listen to testimony from witnesses to and survivors of the genocide and describe the bystander effect. Then they construct a social media contribution to USC Shoah Foundation’s #beginswithme campaign as a way to counteract bystander behavior.

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 material from the Kigali Memorial Resources Center. Students are able to search through these reputable sites in researching about a topic that resonates with them on a personal level.

IWitness activities are created by the education department at USC Shoah Foundation, as well as by educators around the world who have been trained on the effective use of testimony in the classroom.