

Considerations and Guidelines for the Use of Visual History Testimony in Education

So this is in perpetuity. This is something that will be perpetuated, in the libraries of the world and there will be an exchange. Because every survivor has a story to tell and it is not repetitious. Some people think, well I've heard this story before. From every story you learn a little bit.

– Excerpt from the testimony of Holocaust survivor Isaac Goodfriend, June 18, 1996, Atlanta, Georgia

Introduction

More than 60 years after the end of World War II, the topic of what to do when the generation of Holocaust survivors is no longer here is being discussed at conferences, seminars, and schools worldwide. Circumstances increasingly dictate that educators find alternatives to inviting a survivor into the classroom. While meeting, listening, and interacting with a survivor in-person is an unmatched experience, using video testimony can provide students with a different, yet meaningful and potentially sustaining, educational experience. Established in 1994, the USC Shoah Foundation Institute has dedicated the last 15 years to collecting, digitizing, indexing, and building the infrastructure and systems to provide access to videotaped testimonies of Holocaust survivors and other witnesses.

The Visual History Archive, at eight petabytes in size, is one of the largest digital libraries in the world and a resource with tremendous breadth and depth for scholarship and teaching. Currently, the entire archive of nearly 52,000 videotaped testimonies (collected in 56 countries and 32 languages) is available and searchable at 23 institutions in the U.S., Europe, and Australia via a high-capacity network called Internet2 - or its variants in other countries.¹

The archive is digitized, fully searchable, and indexed to the minute, allowing students, professors, researchers, and others to retrieve both whole testimonies of interest, as well as specific segments (moments) within testimonies that relate to their area of interest through a set of over 50,000 keywords and keyword phrases, 1.2 million names, and 500,000 images.

Today, the Institute reaches educators, students, researchers, and scholars worldwide and has begun assisting other organizations' efforts to document other genocides.

¹ For a complete list of the institutions where the entire archive is available, please visit <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/testimoniesaroundtheworld/>.

Visual History Testimony

Often, the term "visual history" is applied to visual images or relics of the past such as drawings, graphics, and other non-verbal representations. In this sense, visual history can be defined as a way of learning about the past with our eyes. However, while history is recounted in documents and words written by historians, it is also told by those who experienced it. While the term "visual history" seems to focus only on the image, when we use "visual history," we are referring to the totality of audio and video that combine to create meaning and message in a videotaped testimony. In this document, we will use "visual history (testimony)" interchangeably with "video testimony."

A visual history testimony is a videotaped interview between an interviewer and an interviewee subject. Interviews in the Institute's archive average just over two hours in length and capture an individual's life story within a broader historical context.

Experiences Represented in the USC Shoah Foundation Institute's Archive

From 1994 until 2000, the Institute interviewed Jewish survivors, Jehovah's Witness survivors, political prisoners, Roma and Sinti survivors, homosexual survivors, survivors of Eugenics policies, as well as rescuers and aid providers, liberators and liberation witnesses, and war crimes trials participants. As reported by many interviewees, survivors and other witnesses gave testimony for their own deeply personal, often complex, reasons. Their motivations included to bear witness or testify, to remember, to pass family history to future generations, to mourn, to heal, to speak for others who can't or won't, to warn, to educate, to encourage social activism, and/or to document a role in history. The visual history testimonies in the archive represent the personal experiences only of those who survived and/or witnessed the Holocaust firsthand; and only those who were aware of the project and were willing to speak.

The Structure of a Visual History Testimony

Interviews were often recorded in one day at the home of the interviewee, or at another suitable location. Around 150 "walking interviews" were conducted, in which a portion of the interview was videotaped at sites of former concentration camps, ghettos, mass graves, or in front of prewar family homes.

All interviewees were guided by an interviewer trained to follow a consistent methodology and structure developed by the Institute. This methodology was inspired by a number of existing oral history projects including the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, the Holocaust Oral History Project in San Francisco, and the Center for Holocaust Studies in New York. Prior to giving their testimony, each interviewee completed a *Pre-Interview Questionnaire* designed to collect biographical data such as birthplace, education, ghetto and camp experiences, resistance activities, and family information.² This data became

² To view a copy of the Pre-Interview Questionnaire, please visit our website: http://college.usc.edu/vhi/download/USCSFI_JSPIQ_1.pdf.

part of the record of the interview. Each testimony covers pre-war, wartime, and postwar experiences of the interviewee.

Interviewers conducted research and obtained background knowledge in order to build rapport with the interviewee and to prepare for the interview. Interviewers were trained to ask open-ended questions that allowed the interviewee's testimony to flow largely uninterrupted. When necessary, interviewers also asked specific questions to clarify, probe, and follow-up. The result was the documentation of a full life history from early childhood up to the time at which the interview was conducted.

At the end of the interview and when available, interviewees displayed photographs and other artifacts and introduced family members.

Using Visual History Testimony in Education

In classroom and university settings, video is a much-used educational medium for today's professors, teachers, and students, who are accustomed to and interested in receiving information in multimedia formats. For example, in 2007, 57% of American teens surveyed on their online behaviors said that they watch videos on video sharing sites such as YouTube.³ 3 in 4 young adult Internet users who participated in a national survey in 2007 reported that they watch or download video online.⁴ Since students in the U.S. and abroad increasingly live in an online environment and rely on video for information, more and more teachers use video (films, documentaries, etc.) to teach about a variety of topics, including the Holocaust and/or genocide.

Video testimony is also a visual resource that can be valuable in the classroom, but its use and educational impact can be different from narrative film or even documentary. The below guidelines are intended to help teachers use testimony responsibly and effectively in their classrooms.

When used appropriately in the classroom, video testimony from the USC Shoah Foundation Institute's Visual History Archive can:

- Provide a human face to history.
- Help students learn history from an individual perspective.
- Help students and teachers appreciate the invalidity of stereotypes, misconceptions, and/or generalizations.

³ Lenhart, A. Madden, M. Rankin Macgill, A. Smith, A., "Teens and Social Media," Pew Internet & American Life Project, Dec. 2007. National study. n=935 parent-child pairs who have access to Internet in their house.

⁴ Lenhart, A. Madden, M. Rankin Macgill, A. Smith, A., "Teens and Social Media," Pew Internet & American Life Project, Dec. 2007. National study. n=935 parent-child pairs.

- Help students discount misconceptions they might have had about the period/topic of study, and the events and/or people involved in the topic.
- Help students identify different types of information available in primary sources.
- Sensitize students to the distinction between fact and opinion, and essential and non-essential information.
- Provides students with an affective understanding of history.
- Help students understand the long-term ramifications of extreme persecution and trauma.
- Introduce students to new—and various—perspectives, themes, discrete events, or concepts of a historical event and/or period.⁵

Integrating Video Testimony into Curricula

There are many ways to integrate visual history testimony effectively into a course curriculum. While it is a natural fit for history classes, it also aligns with curricula standards in other disciplines in middle and secondary schools, such as literature and language arts, social sciences, government, art, civic education, and religious studies, to name just a few. In addition to this broad range of subject areas, video testimonies can be used to meet skills-based curricular standards, such as the development of critical thinking skills, visual/media literacy skills, single and comparative source analysis, etc. At the university level, testimonies from the Institute’s archive have been used in over 130 courses, in disciplines from psychology, sociology, and political science; to business, criminal justice, philosophy, and theology.⁶ When integrating video testimony into a course curriculum, educators should keep the following in mind:

Create a rationale: Educators should start by asking themselves what their rationale is for the use of video testimony, and what they hope to accomplish by its use, to determine where it most naturally can be integrated, how, and why.⁷

⁵ In addition to the insights that the USC Shoah Foundation staff have contributed here, we have learned about the educational use of testimony from several educational experts. In the introduction to the educational guide *Nazustrich Pam’iati (Encountering Memory)* that they wrote to accompany the USC Shoah Foundation Institute-produced film *Spell Your Name*, Oleksandr Voytenko and Mikhail Tyaglyy elaborate on several of these points. In addition, Samuel Totten, in an educational review conducted for the Institute, also offered some ideas presented here. Oleksandr Voytenko, Mikhail Tyaglyy, “Introduction,” in *Encountering Memory [Nazustrich Pam’iati, “Vstup”]* (Kiev: Oranta, 2007), 5-22. Correspondence between Amy Marczewski Carnes and Samuel Totten, 18 September 2009.

⁶ For more information on the use of testimonies in university-level courses, including a complete list of courses offered to date, please refer to <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/scholarship/courselists/>.

⁷ Many experts have written about the importance of establishing rationales when teaching topics such as the Holocaust and/or genocide. See, for example, Samuel Totten’s chapter “Issues of Rationale: Teaching about Genocide,” in *Teaching About Genocide: Issues, Approaches, and Resources*, ed. Samuel Totten, 7-22 (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2003).

Know the intended audience: Knowing and respecting one’s audience is a primary consideration when using testimony. Teachers interact with their students every day; they know what is appropriate, what will be challenging for them, and what will resonate in their minds. When using video testimony in the classroom, it is crucial for the teacher to consider his/her audience and choose content based on the abilities of the students.

In addition, while working with visual history testimonies, it is important to be aware of local sensitivities and any stereotypes that students may have been exposed to in order to address them appropriately. One of the values of using eyewitness accounts in the classroom is the potential of these accounts to counter misconceptions and confront stereotypes. Since the archive consists of 52,000 individual stories, students can hear the voices of dozens of survivors and witnesses who shatter these stereotypes and/or misconceptions. However, since each interview is a reflection of an individual’s personality and emotional state, personal opinions, attitudes, and beliefs are all communicated as part of the interview. With this in mind, it is important to realize that testimonies may also contain stereotypical or even judgmental comments, and that these could reinforce existing stereotypes. Being sensitive and alert to the presence of stereotypes in students’ lives and in testimonies is an important aspect of teaching with testimonies.

Provide historical context: Teachers should educate themselves about the time, place, and culture surrounding the events described by interviewees, and share this information with students (or have students conduct research to find the information themselves). Teachers can consult primary, secondary, and other sources to obtain this contextual information. This context will help viewers more fully understand and appreciate the interviewee’s motivations, choices, actions, or inactions as well as those of the people around him/her.

For example, in their testimonies, many Jewish survivors describe their educational experiences in Nazi Germany. Upon hearing of an experience, either positive or negative, a viewer may be tempted to generalize that all Jewish students were treated similarly. However, how an interviewee remembers and describes his/her education in Nazi Germany depended on any number of variables including the particular year and the laws in place, the type and location of the school, the age of the student, and the beliefs and behaviors of individual teachers and headmasters. By viewing a variety of visual history testimony clips, as well as consulting other sources, students can begin to realize that history is about the accumulation of individual experiences, and that generalizing a “Jewish” experience during WWII is not a fair assessment of the historical record. The breadth of the Institute’s archive allows the teacher to include a multiplicity of voices, so that students can appreciate the individual experience of persecution.

Encourage transparency: Considering the context in which the interview occurred may be appropriate as well. Some considerations to explore might include: the prevailing attitudes, norms, values, local sensitivities, and political circumstances of the society in which the interview was recorded, and the language(s) and culture(s) of the interviewee and/or interviewer. For example, in the case of survivors who immigrated to various countries after the war, many gave their testimony in a language other than their native tongue. Students might be

encouraged to consider the ways in which the language of a person's story affects the content of the testimony, the level of detail provided, the choices of words used, etc.

Encouraging transparency about the medium itself can provide additional context for students and also offers students the opportunity to engage their media literacy skills by challenging them to consider the source: who is this person? why is he/she telling her story? to whom? under what circumstances? etc. In short, students should understand the story behind the testimony. Some of this could be covered in the classroom, some of it could be included in an outside research activity, but considering the origin of the video testimony can be a very valuable educational exercise in encouraging students to deconstruct the medium.⁸

Include additional sources: Because interviewees generally convey a story about their place in larger historical events, testimony can quite naturally and effectively be combined and integrated with other primary and secondary sources such as photographs, historical documents and artifacts, timelines, films, novels, poetry, biography, diaries, and memoirs. These additional sources provide context, as well as provide points of comparison for activities in comparative source analysis.

Using this method, video testimony can also provide corroboration of a story that students read in a memoir, for example, and, at the same time, students can learn about different types of information provided in written and audio-visual sources.

Choose testimony wisely, and edit appropriately: While the average length of visual history testimonies in the Institute's archive is just over two hours, some testimonies are shorter while others are much longer. To ensure the integrity of the resource, testimonies in the archive were preserved in their entirety. While raw, unedited footage is useful for research in a host of disciplines, educators with limited available class time may prefer to utilize excerpts, or clips, of testimony.

An educator might want to show brief clips of testimony to enrich students' understanding of commonly-taught topics of the Holocaust, such as the study of ghettos, camps, or liberation. Moreover, since visual history testimony often contains not only interviewees' recollections but also their personal reflections, educators often seek multiple clips that highlight concepts and themes such as courage, survival, hope, or alienation, to name just a few.

Additionally, it is important to remember that a testimony clip is a single moment of a full life history. When possible and available, provide students with additional details of the interviewee's story. For example, viewing a series of clips featuring the same interviewee,

⁸ The issue of transparency is particularly important in the field of new media education. Many scholars in this field emphasize the critical importance of helping students to understand the ways in which media impact perception and how to determine the credibility of a source. Henry Jenkins discusses this issue in, for example, "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century," The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, http://digitalllearning.macfound.org/atf/cf/%7B7E45C7E0-A3E0-4B89-AC9C-E807E1B0AE4E%7D/JENKINS_WHITE_PAPER.PDF, accessed 7 October 2009.

reading a biographical profile of an interviewee, or even watching the whole testimony as a supplement if needed will expose students to a more full context of the life of an individual.

The Institute's website contains a number of examples of the ways in which video testimony enhances lessons on a variety of topics. To see a few examples, please visit the following URLs: <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/about/segmentsfortheclassroom/index.php>, <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/education/livinghistories/>, <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/education/liberation/>, <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/education/kristallnacht/>.

In addition, the Institute has partnered with a number of European partners to develop lessons and other educational materials for teachers in Croatian, Czech, German, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Russian, Slovak, and Ukrainian. Information about all of these materials can be found on foreign-language portals of the Institute's website: <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/croatian/>, <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/czech/>, <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/german/>, <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/hungarian/>, <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/italian/>, <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/polish/>, <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/russian/>, <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/slovak/>, <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/ukrainian/>.

In the Classroom

Define terms and establish accepted vocabulary: It is imperative that students understand what they are studying and that they know the appropriate way to refer to the subject matter, the players involved, etc. Teachers may choose to share their rationale with students, which can help establish this vocabulary.

Prepare students before watching testimony: Because of the nature of the subject matter contained within them, visual history testimonies in the Institute's archive are most appropriate for students aged 14 or older. Testimonies can include graphic descriptions of horrific events, stark emotions, and coarse language.

Teachers should prepare students for the visual medium itself, the context/content of testimony, unfamiliar terminology, and the emotions it may evoke. Students often will have difficult questions and strong reactions to testimony. They may wonder why the atrocities were allowed to happen and the reasons perpetrators chose certain victims. They may feel outrage, anger, sadness, guilt, and vulnerability. They may laugh out of nervousness or discomfort or even have no visible emotional response at all.

Provide time to process during testimony viewing: Given the nature of the content, teachers might consider pausing for a few moments after each clip is shown to give students time to grasp and appreciate the interviewee's meaning.

Follow up and/or debrief after watching testimony: In addition to preparing students prior to watching testimony, it is recommended that educators debrief with them afterwards. If handled responsibly, students' questions and reactions can lead them to examine their own behaviors, biases, moral choices, and even inspire dialogue about their roles in contemporary society. These are the types of conversations that can heighten students' respect for diversity and multi-cultural understanding.

Viewing testimony offers a variety of valuable learning experiences including individual reflection through journaling as well as cooperative learning and large group discussions; some or all of these may be effective tools for follow up activities.

Promote relevancy for your students: Consider encouraging your students to explore similarities and differences between the survivors' and witnesses' stories and the contemporary context.

In almost every story within the Institute's Visual History Archive, along with the historic events, dates, and places, are memories of the nature and essence of the people who lived alongside the interviewees. While they vividly recall people who helped them despite the risks involved, they just as frequently describe their persecutors and people who stood by and did nothing.

When viewed, these memories and reflections may compel some viewers to examine themselves and the myriad social and cultural issues surrounding them. Thus, visual history testimonies, within the larger context of a lesson or curriculum, can be a useful stepping off point to inspire critical thinking and discussions of human rights and contemporary events such as acts of prejudice, discrimination, violence, and other genocides, and then, perhaps even to channel knowledge into social action. In fact, interviewees often make such contemporary connections within their own testimonies, often stating the reason for sharing their story was to educate and inspire others to help prevent acts of violence.

However, it is important to be responsible when conducting discussions which connect historical and contemporary acts and events. It is critical always to provide context, as previously noted, to recognize the similarities between events, but also to highlight the differences. Every situation and event is unique to its time and circumstances.

Additional Considerations Regarding Video Testimony

Each interview and life experience is unique: While other individuals may have witnessed the same event, how each person recalls his/her experience, how (s)he relates it, and the meaning (s)he attaches to it, is distinct. Therefore, one person's testimony cannot—and should not—serve as *'the'* definitive account of an episode, an event, or a historical period. Interviewees come from a broad range of cultural and socioeconomic groups, and their collective memories enrich our understanding of historical events, but they cannot stand on their own. This is why we recommend including additional sources in any lesson that incorporates video testimony.

Factors that can influence a testimony's content and delivery: It is important to note that testimony is based on memory, which can be precise, clear, and sharp and/or imperfect, distorted, or limited. The nature of memory at any given time relies on a variety of factors, including, but not limited to, the interviewee's knowledge of what was happening and his or her age at the time of the events. In some cases, interviewers needed to provide assistance if the interviewee had difficulty communicating his/her experiences due to language, health, or emotional conditions. In general, an interviewee is most authoritative when relating his/her personal story and the meaning (s)he attaches to it.

The number of times an interviewee had told his/her story also influences the content of and way of expressing the testimony. It was not unusual to learn that the USC Shoah Foundation Institute's interview was the very first time a survivor or other witness shared his/her story publicly. In other cases, interviewees were more at ease with the process, having become accustomed to speaking about their experiences to family members, friends, and groups at museums or schools. Regardless of the circumstances, describing and reflecting upon traumatic events many years after the fact was often a deeply affecting experience for the interviewee.

It is also important to note that a testimony reflects the life story the interviewee shared in one sitting on a single day. Individuals in such circumstances are prone to make a mistake, forget, or omit an aspect of their stories. In other cases, in the years since their interviews, some individuals have uncovered details and documents that shed additional light on their own experiences and/or that of their families.

It's not just what is said but how it's communicated that adds another dimension to visual history testimony. In addition to the spoken word, viewers can also read or interpret the interviewee's nonverbal communication to better comprehend the meaning. For example, a long pause or silence can signal an emotional response, the collecting of thoughts, or the searching for the right words. Also, viewers of visual history testimony can build meaning by being attuned to facial expressions, articulated sounds, eye contact, lip and mouth movements, intonation, mannerisms, and/or gestures.

Terminology considerations in viewing visual history testimony: While conveying their personal stories, interviewees will often describe people, places, and events using vocabulary familiar to them and their own experiences, which may be contrary to the historically preferred references or terms. For example, when interviewees refer to World War II-era soldiers and armies from the Soviet Union, they commonly use the term *Russian* rather than *Soviet*. They may use the term *Auschwitz* to mean *Birkenau* or even *Monowitz*. The term *Gypsy* is used at times instead of the often-preferred *Sinti* and/or *Roma*. It is important to remember that not all interviewees are experts in history; they use terminology to which they are most accustomed.

Using testimony to teach topics other than the Holocaust: Because there are testimonies in 32 languages and from 56 countries in the USC Shoah Foundation Institute's archive, there is a unique opportunity for educators and students to utilize the testimonies to explore local

histories and open new paths of inquiry. For example, Ukrainian-language testimonies in the archive not only describe experiences related to the Holocaust in that country but also to the Ukrainian famine of 1932-33 and the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster in 1986. The archive also contains testimonies conducted in 1995 with Holocaust survivors who were also refugees who escaped the Siege of Sarajevo. There are many other examples of historically significant topics on which the archive contains content that would be valuable in education.

When using the testimonies to teach about other topics, it is important for teachers to be transparent about the medium and the context in which the interview was conducted. While interviewees discuss their lives before and after WWII, the primary motivation for collecting the testimonies in the first place was to record the experiences of Holocaust survivors and other witnesses, and this fact should be considered.

Conclusion

Visual history testimonies give viewers an important and rare opportunity to develop an intimate bond with the person on the screen and gain both cognitive and affective understanding of history. The 52,000 stories in the USC Shoah Foundation Institute's Visual History Archive provide a new dimension to the historical record and a platform from which discussion of contemporary issues from prejudice and discrimination to human rights and social justice can occur. Through the telling of their stories, interviewees offered an invaluable resource for present and future generations, and educators have the opportunity to make use of this precious resource to help students learn the lessons of history.

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