

USC Shoah Foundation

The Institute for Visual History and Education

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“Skittles, Deplorables and ‘All Lives Matter’: Leadership and Media Literacy” launches in IWitness, piloted by After School Matters

Los Angeles, Nov. 4, 2016 – In light of the heated rhetoric that has come to characterize this historically polarized presidential campaign, USC Shoah Foundation has released a new activity on IWitness – its free online education platform for secondary students – called “Skittles, Deplorables and ‘All Lives Matter’: Leadership and Media Literacy.”

The aim of the activity is to help students discern the difference between arguments, persuasion and propaganda in an age where the volume and velocity of information via traditional and social media channels can be dizzying.

It also highlights the dangers of portraying entire groups of people based on race or religion as homogenous.

The activity was piloted last month in the classroom of an after-school program in Chicago run by an organization called After School Matters.

“The idea is to encourage teens to carefully consider the source of the messaging they see in the media – no matter their political beliefs,” said Dr. Kori Street, director of education at USC Shoah Foundation. “This activity better equips them to navigate the blizzard of information with a critical eye, and to become savvy consumers of media and responsible contributors to the public dialog.”

Like all IWitness activities, “Skittles, Deplorables and ‘All Lives Matter’” is rooted in the video testimony of genocide survivors and eyewitnesses. It opens with a clip of testimony from Ruth Pearl, a Holocaust survivor and the mother of journalist Daniel Pearl, who was murdered in 2002 by terrorists who denounced his Jewish ancestry.

“Dehumanizing people is the first step on inviting violence like the Nazism and fascism,” Pearl says in the testimony. “It’s very easy to dehumanize. I’m sure the killers of Danny didn’t have any sense of identifying the humanity that connects us.”

Students also view a clip of testimony from Paul Parks, World War II vet who helped liberate the concentration camp in Dachau, Germany. In it, he explains his motivation for fighting on behalf of a country that still mistreated blacks.

“I guess I’m fighting for the right to fight when I get back home,” he says in the interview. “I know what the end of bigotry looks like.”

The activity exposes students to several controversies stemming from current events.

Keeping Parks’ testimony in mind, students are asked to read news articles about the Black Lives Matter movement and to consider the meaning of the “All Lives Matter” mantra that is often used in response to it.

Students then read a tweet posted by Donald Trump Jr. in September 2016 comparing Syrian refugees to a bowl of Skittles, as well as a quote from Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton referring to half of the supporters of her GOP rival, Donald Trump, as a “basket of deplorables.”

With these messages and others, students are instructed to read supplemental news articles and to fill out a “message analysis worksheet,” in which they must classify the message as an argument, persuasion or propaganda based on a set of criteria. Finally, they identify an issue and – after employing responsible research methods – craft a message, which they post on the social-media platform of their choice.

“Teens don’t always know their voices matter and this activity helped them realize their voices do matter,” said After School Matters instructor Michael Levesque. “It also helps enhance their digital literacy skills and, perhaps even more importantly, it encourages critical thinking.”

Students in the Chicago pilot enjoyed learning about how political messages can affect people and the importance of being an informed citizen.

“I learned that we need to be mindful when presenting our ideas on social media and that we must support our opinions with facts to be taken seriously,” one student wrote in a survey after the conclusion of the activity. “I learned that to be worldly knowledgeable, we must learn from multiple sources and be well-informed, especially if we wish to speak of these matters and use our voice.”

IWitness is a free educational website from USC Shoah Foundation that uses testimonies – personal stories – from survivors and witnesses of genocide to teach students worldwide the importance of compassion and bringing about positive societal change.

Geared toward students ages 12-20, IWitness has grown considerably since its 2012 inception, and is used by tens of thousands of students and teachers around the world.

To access the new activity or the 70 others stored on the platform, users need only to visit the website – iwitness.usc.edu – and register.

For teachers interested in learning more about the website, the next IWitness professional development seminar will be on Nov. 17.

<https://sfi.usc.edu/events/iwitness-professional-development-webinar-2>

Evaluations of IWitness are showing the program markedly boosts student interest in civic engagement and significantly increases the likelihood that they will recognize the importance of speaking up against stereotypes.

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About USC Shoah Foundation

USC Shoah Foundation — The Institute for Visual History and Education is dedicated to making audio-visual interviews with survivors and other witnesses of the Holocaust and other genocides, a compelling voice for education and action. The Institute’s current collection of more than 54,000 eyewitness testimonies contained within its Visual History Archive® preserves history as told by the people who lived it, and lived through it. Housed at the University of Southern California, within the Dana and David Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, the Institute works with partners around the world to advance scholarship and research, to provide resources and online tools for educators, and to disseminate the testimonies for educational purposes.

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