Using Visual History Testimony in the Classroom

This document is intended to help post-secondary educators teach with testimony from the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive responsibly and effectively in their classrooms. Educators will find testimony-based lessons, modules, and resources on IWitness University (iwitness.usc.edu/university). When used appropriately, video testimony from the Visual History Archive can:

• Provide a human face to the past.
• Engage students from a broad array of disciplines to critically think about universal themes of tolerance, diversity, and justice from an individual perspective.
• Sensitize students to the value of primary resources as meaningful sources of knowledge.

Guidelines for Effective Teaching with Testimony

Create a Rationale
Educators should consider their rationale for the use of testimony to reach course learning outcomes and where it most naturally can be integrated in the syllabus.

• Make explicit to students why they are going to learn about the topic of study through testimony. Help students understand its value for learning across academic disciplines and the topic of study.

Know the Intended Audience
When using video testimony in a course, it is crucial for the educator to consider her or his audience and choose content based on the abilities of the students.

• Consider students’ background experiences and existing knowledge (for example: is this a lower division, an upper-division course, or a graduate seminar?). This will help the educator choose appropriate testimony and context to provide.

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Provide Historical Context

Educators should educate themselves about the time, place, and culture surrounding the events described by interviewees, and share this information with students. This context will help students more fully understand and appreciate the interviewee’s motivations, choices and actions, as well as those of the people around him/her.

Consult other primary and secondary sources to enhance understanding about the time, place, and culture surrounding the events described in the testimonies.

Make this information available to students before, during, and after viewing testimony to help them understand and appreciate motivations, choices, actions or inactions described in the testimony.

Encourage Transparency

Consider the context in which the interview occurred. The medium itself can provide opportunities for students to engage their media literacy, as well as their critical thinking skills.

- Enhance students’ media literacy skills by challenging them to consider the source: Who is this person? Why is she or he telling her story? Who is asking the questions? To whom? Under what circumstances?

Include Additional Sources

Not only does the use of other primary and secondary sources such as photographs, historical documents, artifacts, timelines, films, and diaries provide context, it also offers an opportunity for comparative source analysis and discussion.

Choose Testimony Wisely and Edit Appropriately

The objectives of the course and its intended learning outcomes should guide the use of testimony. Carefully reviewing testimony for its appropriateness in the lesson is important. The Visual History Archive provides educators with full life histories that have been preserved in their entirety. Therefore, with the ability to edit testimony comes the responsibility of doing so with integrity (See USC Shoah Foundation’s video, Guidelines for Teachers Using Video Testimony in Classrooms, and for students and educators, the IWitness Connections Video: Ethical Editing).

Identify the clips of testimony that will support students’ learning of the topic under study. For example: How does the clip(s) of testimony reference, illustrate or extend ideas or concepts in the curriculum, unit or lesson?

Professor Feedback

Colin Keaveney, University of Southern California (French): "The VHA can provide factual and emotionally powerful information to allow students to better understand those who experienced the German occupation of France in the 1940s."

Carolyn Ellis, University of South Florida (Sociology/Communications): "The testimonies from the VHA are an important and useful resource."

Martin Lücke, Freie Universität Berlin (History): "Reflections on the use of language in the testimonies provide students with insights that history is language and expresses the pain of persecution."