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Holocaust Remembrance: Making Meaning through Oral History across the Generations

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Language of presentation: English

State if you are a member of IOHA or COHA: IOHA

Necessary equipment:
LCD projector
Computer with DVD player

Sub-theme: Memories of violence, war and totalitarianism. The persecuted, civil rights, trauma and forgetting

Title of paper in English:

**Holocaust Remembrance:
Making Meaning through Oral History across the Generations**

Abstract in English (300 words):

Our university writing course, “Visual Media and Holocaust Narrative,” brings students closer to the Holocaust through affective engagement with the stories of survivors. With its informative and performative properties, video testimony engages the intellect and emotions of the students and reveals the dignity and humanity of the interviewees. The course requires writing a proposal for a film based on the lives of the survivors as well as creating a short promotional trailer made as a digital story. Preparatory assignments include archiving work for the oral history project, reading and discussing theoretical texts, watching and discussing Holocaust films, and writing an analytical essay. After this, students work with a partner to create the film proposal. Before doing research about the historical context of the idea, location and events they choose, we offer library workshops to teach them how to find and evaluate reliable sources. We also require a 2-unit media lab, the first part devoted to learning the technologies to capture web multimedia resources, to create audio and enhanced podcasts, and to write and produce digital stories. The second is devoted to creating their own trailers. We end with a public symposium presenting the student work.

It is evident that the students become personally committed to their work, and that the ideas they grapple with at each step enrich their overall learning. They engage in deep learning and develop insights about oral history, Holocaust survivors, the challenges of making accurate Holocaust films, and the Holocaust itself. Using the oral histories as the center of the course grounds the work in a profound way. Our students’ work is also significant for the survivors who have given testimony, as many of them find satisfaction in their stories being used to educate and take action to prevent future genocide.

Holocaust Remembrance: Making Meaning through Oral History across the Generations

“The first-hand experience of trying to take a person’s story and turn it into a compelling movie was extremely difficult. However, I think it becomes fun and interesting because of the passion that you develop for your survivor’s story. After hearing Rebecca’s story, I immediately wanted other people to hear her unbelievable experiences. Creating the film proposal allowed me to feel as though I would be able to get her story out to the world.” (Santa Clara University student)

Oral history has come to play a pivotal role in educating about the Holocaust and about the social preconditions and far-reaching consequences of war. As we attempt to understand and remember in the post-Holocaust generation and beyond, we face the challenge of constructing ways for ensuring a continued legacy. This paper describes a creative approach for bringing students closer to the tragic event that is receding in memory – bringing them closer through affective, emotional engagement with the powerful life stories of Holocaust survivors.

The quote above comes from one of the students in the Santa Clara University upper-division writing course, “Visual Media and Holocaust Narrative.” We will explain the underlying pedagogy we have developed, which we believe leads to students gaining insight into the implications and meanings of the Holocaust. We will illustrate that a high level of learning is taking place and that the students’ work reflects a deeper than usual level of understanding and an integration of various kinds of learning. The learning is inherently active and, for most students, powerfully transformative. In Lynn E. Swaner’s words, “they begin to question, test, and reformulate” their old ways of making meaning and “their views of themselves and the world in which they live” (18). We think this course, which uses Holocaust testimonies as an experiential teaching tool, is an effective model that others might consider adopting.

Oral history video testimony is a powerful teaching resource in an increasingly audiovisual culture. It is also a stimulus for research. With its informative as well as performative properties, Holocaust video testimony engages both the intellect and emotions of the students and reveals the dignity and humanity of the interviewees. It is a compelling way to intensify the immediacy of history as it comes alive in the context of a person’s life. The difference lays in the detailed, in-depth story, including the emotion that is visible in the survivor’s voice, expression, and even the silences. These stories do not present a stereotype of a victim, but rather a survivor, often a warm grandparent figure in his or her own home, one who has an incredible story to tell. As scholars in many disciplines recognize, narrative is powerful and important. As one of our students wrote, “it is hard to separate oneself from

tragedy after uncovering a lost story.” Reflecting the experience of many of the students, another said: “learning from oral history is completely different from reading a textbook.” Because survivors are aging, and each year fewer are able to travel and speak personally to classes, it is often their videotaped oral histories that now fulfill the mission of education and public memory.

Students are often amazed by the dignity of the survivors and the calm and poised way in which they tell their stories. They are also intrigued by both the amount and the subtlety of new information they learn. One student wrote:

“Before I did the work in this class, I hadn’t viewed the communities of Jewish victims as a complex layering of actions and reactions that we normally associate with the idea of community. I just lumped them all together as human beings that were reduced to shadows of their former selves.”

By listening closely, finding powerful passages, and identifying key motifs and locations in the oral histories, students were compelled to think deeply about the essence of one person’s experience and what he or she hoped to share with the world. Interestingly, students often reflected on their own families and values, which we think speaks to this very personal kind of learning and to the fact that the stories that emerge from oral history have the potential to help students recognize commonalities, bridge differences, and ensure continuity through generations. In the surveys they filled out, 100% of our students said that watching the tape gave them a “better understanding of the experience of a Holocaust survivor,” and 100% said they responded “on a personal level to watching the tape.” Many grew fond of their subject (referring to “my person” in class discussions), and some became passionate advocates for them. One student was especially moved when he realized that his survivor had been only 19 years old when he joined the Polish resistance, that he was “younger than I am now.” The empathic engagement with the subject through oral history often leads to a transformative experience. As one student wrote:

“I came out of this class immensely more aware of myself as a person. Learning about the Holocaust and hearing, reading, and watching the experiences of survivors really helped to put my life in context. . . . Often times I get caught up in the daily grind and all of the stresses of life, and I forget just how lucky I am to be healthy, safe, and loved. These are three things this class has taught me never to take for granted.”

In a way, the students also feel entrusted with the survivor’s oral histories and obligated to hold their stories and pass them on. As another student wrote,

“I feel connected to the people whose interviews I watched, and I feel like I am one of the few people who can pass on their stories – even [if] just to my family and friends. I can bear witness to what they went through, even though no one can ever know exactly what it felt like. Also, I

can remind people of specific things that happened and describe some of what the people went through – when they need to remember.”

We had a number of specific goals when we began developing this course, and it is important to note that the thinking and talking took place over many years and always in collaboration with each other and several other colleagues. Our goals were to use the oral histories more fully than we did in previous courses we had taught in order to create an opportunity for deeper learning, to enhance the experiential and community-based learning components of the course, and to fulfill the mandate of the new Santa Clara University core curriculum by adding a new media component. We also wanted to create a more sophisticated research assignment, one that demands more student engagement and cognitive complexity: higher-order thinking skills (analysis, synthesis, and creativity as well as an opportunity to teach others about what they have learned).

The course focus on the intersection of film and first-hand accounts of the Holocaust appeals to undergraduates. It is grounded in the Holocaust testimonies, and the major project, the writing assignment that shapes the course, is a proposal for a documentary film based on the lives of the survivors whose oral histories the students work on. Their film can be about the survivor’s war experience generally, or focused more narrowly on some event or segment of his or her life. In pairs, using their oral histories as primary sources, the students decide on a focus and theme, do the research, and write the proposal. In other words, the primary material itself takes the students in various directions, and together with their partner, they must determine their own research path. To go along with their proposals, we ask the students to create a 2.5-minute promotional trailer – a digital story made using multimedia resources, which we will explain later. The film proposal and trailer could not be done without a number of preparatory, scaffolded assignments, all relating to their work with the oral histories.

The first part of the term is devoted to doing the archiving work for the oral history project, reading and discussing theoretical texts, watching and discussing Holocaust films, and writing an analytical essay about Holocaust film based on memoir and biography. Much of the reading, especially selections from James E. Young’s book, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, and articles by Assmann, Hartman, Laub and Lubin, enriches the work the students do with the testimonies. The readings also help them to appreciate some of the nuances and challenges of the films we watch, particularly *Shoah*, *Forgiving Dr. Mengele*, and *Into the Arms of Strangers*.

While students were working on their testimonies at home, in class we watched segments from films and discussed the articles about Holocaust film. We also read and talked about memory and the subtleties (including the pain and liberating value) of giving testimony as well as the importance of

second-hand witnessing. In the fourth week, we assigned the analysis essay to push students to grapple with these issues in writing: a 6-8 page paper in which they examine some aspect of the question of adapting Holocaust memoir and testimony to film. Besides referencing the works mentioned above, they could refer to other primary and secondary sources as well, including reviews, director's commentary, and other films.

The analytical essays the students wrote were thoughtful and critically rigorous, and many students pointed out in their addenda that they finished the assignment with even more questions, which we thought was an important insight about Holocaust research and a sign of their deeper learning. One student, who majored in political science and German, tackled the question of historical truth and the difference between historical documents and personal testimony. Another examined the way Polanski adapted Szpilman's memoir. Yet another studied the way Spielberg avoided sensationalism and kept the focus of his film on the experiences of individuals. Some students grappled with the big ethical issues of films about the Holocaust as demonstrated in this passage from a student's paper on Eva Kor's *Forgiving Dr. Mengele*:

"The film ... does not compromise the enormity of the Holocaust by giving aesthetic form to its horrors. Rather it supplements our knowledge with the acknowledgment that its victims were complete human beings; the image of Eva Kor, feisty, flawed and fully alive, forces us to remember not just the victims as they were in the midst of death, but themselves entire, as full human beings. In this way the power of film is triumphant in helping us understand . . . the victims' suffering . . . and the scope of what was taken. We are forced to remember what they started with and the potential of life after the Holocaust, the potential that millions never realized."

Midway through the course, after the students knew their oral histories well and after seeing and analyzing Holocaust films, we asked them to work with a partner to create a 12-15 page proposal for an original documentary film. It was to be concise, clearly written, in a particular form, and accompanied by an annotated bibliography. Along with brainstorming together in class, they began doing research about the historical context and background of the idea, location and event(s) they chose to focus on.

Part of the thinking required for this assignment is creative – imaginative -- and draws on the images, ideas, and techniques of the films they see and read about in the first part of the term. At this point, we also watched the "extras" on the DVD of the Austrian film "The Counterfeiters," which explains how primary materials from Adolf Burger, a survivor of Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp, were gathered and used to create a relatively accurate portrayal of the men imprisoned by the Nazis to work on "Operation Bernhard." This served as an example of the kind of in-depth research required in

the subject of the Holocaust they are focusing on: the Warsaw uprising, the Kindertransport, or the prisoners' experience in the Soviet Gulags, for example. In order for them to do this assignment well, we needed to demonstrate to students that the tools they were most comfortable using, such as Google, Wikipedia, and YouTube, were insufficient. We felt it was imperative to make them more skeptical of what they find on the Internet and teach them how to evaluate what is out there. We also needed to introduce complex library databases they would need, like *Historical Abstracts*, and teach them how to use databases they already use, like the library catalog, in more sophisticated ways. These quotes from two of the final reflection papers express what we aimed to achieve:

“Creating the film proposal taught me more about research in general, and Holocaust research more specifically, than any other class . . . Until taking this class, I always thought of the Internet as the best source of information for research papers. I was addicted to the convenience and availability of online resources.”

“The most beneficial aspect of learning to research the Holocaust for me was identifying and avoiding sources that were not scholarly, reliable, or accurate in their information.”

To prepare students to do this kind of research, we asked them to answer (in writing) preliminary questions about their oral histories, including the timeframe and key places and historical events and figures mentioned in the testimony. We also asked them to describe images they might want to use and anything else they would like to find out about. In three library workshops and numerous class discussions, we taught students the library and information literacy skills they needed to create a solid film proposal. We hope that doing this kind of deliberate research gives students a sense of the complexity of Holocaust study and the importance of careful research strategies. We want students to practice working with disagreement and making judgments about the reliability of sources and texts. Ultimately, the students are responsible for evaluating the quality of the sources and determining which voices are the most important to listen to and which to be skeptical of. This kind of judgment and strategizing is what we expect to see in the annotated bibliographies. Here is an example of what two students wrote in their annotated bibliography about one of their sources:

“Irena Skrzynska's article was the only source that specifically addressed life in the Oberlangen prisoner-of-war camp, where Krystyna was held. Skrzynska was a fellow prisoner, so in this article she described details about life in the Oberlangen camp. . . Our only concern with this source is that it seems to be based on the author's experiences, rather than a historically accurate source. We cited several statistics that the author stated, though we made every effort to verify Skrzynska's statistics (which was challenging given that the Polish government was in exile and

did not keep reliable records). However, we decided to include this source because Skrzynska's experiences are so similar to those of Krystyna."

We were impressed by the thinking process revealed in this annotation. Reflecting more generally on our students' success with the library and information literacy aspect of the course, we believe that it was essential to require them to turn in drafts of their annotated bibliographies early in the research process so that we could offer feedback and suggestions. It was also important to organize additional library workshops to teach them nuanced skills and strategies, to make specific suggestions in regard to their topics, and to give them the chance to work together, ask questions, and hear each other's questions.

Another important aspect of the course is that students do much of the work collaboratively. Students do the archiving work independently and they write their own analysis paper, but from then on, they work in pairs. Ideally, as Ede and Lunsford argue in their article, "Why Write . . . Together?", when students work together on such creative projects, they take more time than when they work alone: they talk more about both the project and the writing. Together, they figure out what they do not know, what they need to learn, and what they think. Of course, collaboration takes time, flexibility, and compromise, but the results are worth it. As Lunsford explains in a more recent article, research reveals substantial evidence for the cognitive advantages of collaborative work. Lunsford found that collaboration aids in problem finding as well as problem solving; it aids in transfer and assimilation; it fosters interdisciplinary thinking and provides practice in both synthetic and analytic skills. It also leads to sharper, more critical thinking and to deeper understanding of others; it engages the whole student and encourages active learning ("Collaboration" 49). Much of that happened in our class. To support our philosophy, we made time for students to work together in class and in library workshops. Our students also worked collaboratively on their promotional trailers in the media lab.

We knew from the first iteration of the course that students needed more time to learn the technologies for their digital stories. They also needed sufficient lab time to complete the trailers. So we added the component of a media lab. An instructional technology resource specialist designed a two-unit lab to give the students instruction in and time to learn the technologies and applications they needed to create their trailers. The first part of the lab was devoted to learning the technologies -- GarageBand, iMovie, Photoshop Elements, and iShowU -- that would enable them to capture web multimedia resources, create audio and enhanced podcasts, and write and produce digital stories. The second half was devoted to creating their own trailers.

The technical skills and understanding of the analytical process that students gained in the media lab contributed to good results on the trailers. It also helped that we had time to treat the first versions of

the trailers the way we do the first drafts of essays – as working drafts that would profit from peer review and discussion. About three weeks before the end of the course, the students presented working drafts of their trailers to the other students in the class and several faculty members. Using a rubric that included the criteria by which we would grade the final trailers, they commented on such things as the pacing of the movie, the appropriateness and volume of the soundtrack, the clarity of the story's purpose and main dramatic question, the quality of the images, and the accuracy of the final credits. The trailers were significantly better after that review. And, indeed, we were all impressed at the final presentation – the digital stories were relatively sophisticated, technically polished, and poignant in their portrayal of the survivors' stories.

Our course ended with a symposium presenting the student work. Besides the students and the faculty involved, we invited parents, friends and other interested faculty. Before the students showed their trailers, each spoke about their oral history testimony, giving the audience a taste of the survivor's story and what in each story had touched them personally. Together, each pair then explained the concept of their film proposal: what they did with the oral history material, how the research progressed, and why they made the decisions they did. For example, the two students who worked with Polish resistance fighters explained that their main character was, in some ways, a composite of their two survivors, but that they had chosen to use mainly the story of the young woman, Krystyna, because she was just a girl when she joined the resistance and, to them, she seemed incredibly brave. They also told us about their research process and some of the choices they made in completing their trailer. In these presentations we saw everything come together in the way we had intended, which is evident in the words of those students: "The more research we did, the more committed we were to telling Krystyna's story honestly and ensuring we did visual justice to those portrayed in our trailer."

Moreover, from the students' final essays, reflections on the work they did in the entire course, it was evident that they had all become personally involved and committed to their work, and that the ideas they grappled with at each step informed the next and enriched their overall learning. The term was demanding, but the work was completely integrated. The work on the oral histories, the reading about theory of testimony and film, the films themselves, the analysis essay, and the creative work of the film proposal and the trailer as well as the final reflection essay all resonated with each other. By the end of the term, it was clear that the students had engaged in deeper learning and had developed insights about oral history and oral historians, about Holocaust survivors, about the challenges of making honest and accurate Holocaust films, and about the Holocaust itself: about the war, Nazism, anti-Semitism, resistance, collaboration, life in death camps, human resilience, the value of family, the importance of memory, and much more. One student expressed this perfectly:

“Synthesizing oral testimony to create a film proposal caused me to think about the Holocaust in new ways . . . I think the most comprehensive approach to learning about the Holocaust is to listen to oral history, read scholarly work on the practice of oral testimony as well as the art of Holocaust filmmaking and then, armed with such knowledge, envision a thoughtful and powerful Holocaust film. Doing so has impacted the way I think about oral testimony, Holocaust studies, and the Holocaust in general.”

In other words, students were not learning only about events that happened in the past, but also gaining insights into the implications and meanings of the events. The presentations and the reflection essays also confirm our belief that using the oral history testimonies as the center of the course grounds the work in a profound and personal way. The students worked hard, and we sense that they have been deeply touched. We believe they will continue to learn about the Holocaust on their own and, recognizing themselves as emerging authorities, will also teach others. Having witnessed living history, they have become witnesses themselves.

We also think that the work our students do in this class is significant for the survivors who have given their testimony. The imperative to pass on their story to their children, grandchildren, and future generations is a persuasive motivation for Holocaust witnesses to give personal testimony. Indeed, who can better advocate justice than those who experienced such extreme consequences of hatred, discrimination, and violence? Not surprisingly, many Holocaust survivors find meaning and satisfaction in their testimony being used to educate and take action to prevent future genocide. In other words, in using their oral histories in such an educational context, we and our students are helping to fulfill the legacy for which they were intended.

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