Annals of Social Studies Education Research for Teachers (ASSERT)

The Digital Dimensions of Witnessing: Learning with Technology and Testimony

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ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry

Published: December 31, 2025

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DOI:
https://doi.org/DOI: 10.29173/assert94

Pages: 1-7

ABSTRACT

This introduction to the special issue on digital testimony provides context to the articles that follow including an overview of key issues in using digital Holocaust survivor testimony and a discussion of some challenges and dilemmas. Teaching with digital testimony must consider the transition from in-person to digital survivor testimony, issues of memory and history, and the benefits and limitations of the technology. There are important implications for teachers who often see testimony as a way to develop empathy.

How to cite this article (APA): Marcus, A. S. (2025). The digital dimensions of witnessing: Learning with technology and testimony. *Annals of Social Studies Research for Teachers, 7*(2), 1-7. https://doi.org/DOI: 10.29173/assert94

INTRODUCTION

“That technology is crazy” was the positive response of a high school student when first experiencing an interactive digital Holocaust survivor in class. This type of response was repeated over and over in my research with thousands of secondary students, along with comments such as “I wanted to hear more.” However, as a field, evidence to support the effective use of digital testimony is thin.

Advances in technology provide opportunities to engage students through virtual experiences and preserve the memories of first-person witnesses. For the Holocaust in particular, we have reached the point where in-person Holocaust survivors speaking to school groups is being replaced (if at all) by interactive digital survivors – the future of first-person Holocaust testimony. Scholars believe that digital Holocaust memory is a turning point in the way we remember the Holocaust (Tirosh and Mikel-Arieli 2023). This special issue of ASSERT is dedicated to examining the potential uses, challenges, and ethical issues of testimony and technology with profound implications for learning, civic engagement, and the future of historical knowledge.

The Holocaust provides one of the most extensive and well-documented attempts to digitize testimony and use it for educational purposes. The use of testimony in education became more prominent and accepted as survivors emerged from the shadow of the Holocaust to share their personal stories with secondary students and as survivor stories became preserved in digital form through the Fortunoff Video Archive at Yale University and the Shoah Foundation at the University of Southern California, among other efforts. The growth of first-person testimony as a legitimate and powerful tool in Holocaust and genocide education generated scholarship and debates about the difference between history and memory (Baquero, 2021), the reliability and purpose of first-person testimony in education, and the role of testimony in historiography (Baquero, 2021). Other scholarship has focused on pedagogical practices with testimony, the tension with testimony as on the one hand being necessary but at the same time “the impossibility of fully bearing witness to this

particular traumatic past" (Hirsch and Spitzer, 2009, p.152), debates about the purposes and limitations of Holocaust and genocide education more broadly (Haas, 2020), and other disciplinary, ethical, and educational issues.

We are now entering the "post-survivor era" (Michlic, 2017, p.xxvii) where the Holocaust will move from ''contemporary history'' to ''remote history.'' (Assmann, 2006, p.271). The loss of Holocaust survivors who can testify, combined with new technologies and an online environment that dominates daily life, provides new educational opportunities and significant dangers. Classroom visits by survivors were the exception, but the digitization of survivors provides much wider access and expands the range of events that can be explored beyond the Holocaust. While the Holocaust has been the focal point of much preservation of testimony and scholarship, there is an expanding availability of digital testimony provided by museums, universities, and other organizations. Some testimony is still in traditional video format while other testimony is interactive and uses augmented and/or virtual reality. Just a few examples include the Genocide Archives of Rwanda, the US Veterans History Project, VR testimony from survivors of sexual assault, Oral testimony from 9/11, testimony from displaced Palestinians, and testimonies from the Armenian Genocide and Nanjing Massacres among others. By digital testimony we include video, interactive digital representations, social media apps, and virtual/mixed reality programs.

CHALLENGES AND DILEMMAS OF TECHNOLOGY AND TESTIMONY

The transition from the oral tradition to the digital realm is not merely a shift in format; it is a transformation in the nature of the historical document itself. For those who are using digital technology because of the new opportunities it creates or as an alternative to first-person knowledge, there are a number of important differences with significant implications for teacher practices. Digital versions of testimony may be virtual or mixed reality experiences that are as much about place as narrative, or they might be like the Shoah Foundation's IWitness program which is focused on

Q&A with a survivor. Digital testimony potentially lessens the connection students can make with a live person and relies instead on the illusion of presence (Marcus, et al, 2021), which can vary greatly. Control over the narrative is changed with digital testimony as agency over the narrative shifts from the first-person to the teacher or museum educator or student depending on who is asking questions and facilitating the experience. Digital testimony, as limited by current technology, is frozen in time, and can become "ossified as a static monument" (Schwartzman, 2020, p.68) so that the testimony cannot respond to related current events (e.g. immigration policy in the US, the War in Ukraine, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) or adjust to the specific audience or educational goals. Finally, digital testimony requires different preparation and training for educators who need additional knowledge and skills such as content background related to the testimony (e.g. to explain an event or concept that might be mentioned) and how to use the technology effectively (e.g. how to phrase questions).

First-person testimony is not just about what happened but helps us understand how an event was experienced, how it is remembered, how those memories are preserved for future generations, and has us ask, "what kind of shadow does the past cast over the present?" (Assmann, 2006, p.263). Educator goals for including these memories and how testimonies are used are critical. Is digital testimony used to improve knowledge of an event? To build empathy? To inspire further exploration? To engage is civic action? Davison (2002) suggests that "because of how human memory works, especially in relation to traumatic events, oral testimonies cannot be taken as true historical fact" (p. 1). Testimony is one approximation of truth but is imprecise (Woods 2021). It is in part what we want it to be and what we want it to enable us to do (Pearce, 2020, 3). Yet Pearce (2020) reminds us why we seek to preserve memory, because remembering is, "more than just an exercise in defying the passage of time and takes on connotations of securing and guaranteeing truth in the face of tyrannical oblivion" (p. 4). The value in survivor testimony is not to convey one truth, but to make the experiences of the survivor personal, accessible, and real compared to other sources (Marcus, 2025). The affective engagement with testimony

creates a pathway for students to transfer historical lessons to contemporary issues. However, trust between the survivor and the audience is a crucial element for effective testimony (Ballis and Schwendemann 2021, 26). Is it more difficult to build trust with digital testimony?

ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE

Research, especially with K-12 students, has not kept up with the pace of change in how testimony is represented and used. The three articles in this issue each tackle a different aspect of technology and testimony, providing insights into research, describing specific programs, and suggesting tips for teachers. All three articles emphasize that digital experiences for students cannot be stand-alone occurrences, they are not self-sufficient. The authors advocate for using digital testimony experiences in combination with traditional media and sources of Holocaust education, while taking into account what is unique about digital testimony.

McGregor, Hicks, and Stoddard describe the Forever Project at the National Holocaust Centre in England. The Forever Project includes interactive digital testimony from ten Holocaust survivors. The authors discuss the ethical issues faced by staff, reactions from students and implications for teachers, suggesting five ways to think about how to use digital testimony. Gloe, Heindl, and Kolb report on findings from multiple studies that examine the use of Interactive Digital Testimonies (IDTs) in Germany highlighting the importance of contextualization and reflection when using IDTs, including at Holocaust museums. They found that the integration of IDTs in Holocaust museums significantly impacts visitor engagement and historical perception and they discuss concerns about authenticity and the nature of digital memory. Effective implementation relies heavily on providing three forms of preparatory context - factual, personal, and technical. Finally, Droumpouki presents a virtual reality experience at the Chaidari Concentration Camp in Greece. The experience, through a VR app, reconstructs the camp's historical and emotional significance. The creators merged archival research, survivor testimonies, and 3D

modeling to create a historically faithful VR experience. Droumpouki reports on the success of the VR experience and encourages interdisciplinary learning. The project also highlights the unique, underrepresented experience of the Holocaust in Greece.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Marcus is Professor in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction at the University of Connecticut and is a UConn Teaching Fellow. His scholarship and teaching focus on museum education, teaching with film, and global education, with an emphasis on the Holocaust, teaching with testimony, and teaching difficult topics. Alan is a Faculty Fellow for the Holocaust Institute for Teacher Education at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and runs an education abroad program for pre-service teachers in Nottingham, England. Alan was the lead editor, and a writer, for the State of Connecticut Social Studies Standards. His current research includes evaluating the potential and limitations of digital interactive Holocaust survivor testimony. He is the director of the *Morris and Judy Sarna Breaking Bias and Creating Community program* using virtual reality and digital Holocaust survivors with secondary school students. Alan is a former high school social studies teacher.