

Tips for Using Visual History in the Classroom

1) Start With An "Empathy Builder"

One way to introduce a testimony to students is via an empathy building activity – a writing or small group exercise that encourages students to identify with the experiences communicated in the testimony. With empathy builders, students are more apt to become engaged and less apt to become overwhelmed by the enormity of numbers, atrocities, or historical events. Some suggestions for empathy builders include:

- (a) Write about an object, place or person of special significance to you. Explain where and when you obtained this object and why it is important to you.
- (b) Pretend you are on an important life-journey. Write an imaginary dialogue between you and a stranger that you meet on this journey. Who is this stranger? How is this person important to your "life-journey?" What lessons might you extract from this short conversation? What symbolism or import might this conversation take on over time?
- (c) Describe a painful separation that you have experienced. How did this separation come about? What emotions did you experience during this time in your life? How do you feel as you recount this experience of separation? How has this experience affected you as a person?

2) Think "Outside The Box"

Consider using the testimonies out of the typical context. The people in these testimonies are not simply Holocaust survivors. These are stories of students and teachers, brothers and sisters, of best friends, of families, of teenagers and children. They recount anger, frustration, humor, surprise, relief, and fear. Stories with such universal themes are easily applied and can be used to draw connections between history lessons, literature, current events and other often-taught topics such as character education, diversity education, and conflict mediation.

3) Empower Your Students To Participate In The Discussion

Encourage students to conduct background research on their own before viewing the testimony. For example, you might ask your students to do a brief report on such topics as "Hungary, 1944" or "Children and the Holocaust." Empowering students to bring information to the discussion ahead of time encourages individual involvement and investment, and chips away at the misconception that using video in the classroom creates a passive audience.

4) For The Techno-Phobic...

There are many resources that offer general guidelines and trouble shooting points to facilitate the use of video in the classroom. One of our favorites is a PBS/ National Teacher Training Institute (NTTI) web site, <http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/ntti/resources/video1.html>.

5) History = Memory + Fact

It is helpful to consider the use of oral history as an integral tool, not as supplemental to a standard history lesson. History is, at its core, a combination of memory and fact. Alone, neither memory nor fact can effectively represent an event or period in history. Yet together, they place historical facts on a continuum of time that includes the present day, allowing the lessons of history to seep into the minds, lives and choices of our students.