

## Briefing document

### **AHRC Workshop 2: Methodological approaches to the use of cultural forms of testimony in understanding the past**

**How can and do museums and educators approach both biographical and literary/fictional forms of testimony in understanding the past?** The contributions from education specialists and practitioners made clear the challenges that teachers and museums face when approaching the teaching of the Holocaust and the role of testimony in that context. These challenges also need to be explored and considered when testimony is used when teaching about other genocides and events in post-conflict societies – what are some of the similarities and differences?

Participants with experience of using live survivor testimony with school pupils of different ages repeatedly affirmed the power of this method of engaging younger learners with difficult histories. This power relates to the emotional impact of the survivor testimony and the feeling of ‘realness’ in the face-to-face contact with the witness. This might be framed according to the two-up-two-down principle, following which individuals tend to form emotional attachments to the two generations above and below them, but not to those further back- or forward. The presentation of a living witness – an individual who looks like the grandparents of great-grandparents of the children in the audience – connects the history they recount with family members with whom those young learners already feel emotional ties.

Nonetheless, a number of problems were raised in relation to the use of live survivor testimony in this way. The most evident is the gradual loss of the witnessing generations – an ever more urgent challenge in relation to Holocaust education. With regard to the Holocaust, the vast majority of survivors were child survivors, who thus present a very specific experience of the genocide. The loss of the witnessing generation, along with the practical and financial difficulties of organising visits by survivors to schools or by schools to museums such as the NHC, mean that teachers of the Holocaust have for a long time made use of other forms of testimony, notably written testimony in textbooks and film. The advent of digital media, online testimonies and, in particular, the development of interactive video testimony by the NHC, USC Shoah Foundation, USHMM, Fortunoff Archive, Yad Vashem Archives etc. present particular opportunities and challenges. In all these cases, workshop participants emphasised the need for contextualisation, for linking micro- and macro- histories, locating the individual in the bigger picture, and finding local historical connections with the event. It was noted that school teachers sometimes lack the subject knowledge and quality source materials in order to develop deep understanding. It is here in particular that the network could have significant long-term impact.

**How can cultural forms of testimony, especially in the museum, function as a method of providing victims with symbolic justice or reparation?**

One issue that was raised in the first network workshop was the function of giving testimony for survivors and, in this context, the importance of being heard. The idea that museums might have a particular role in this process is underpinned by research that shows that individuals, especially younger learners, consider the museum as a site of special authority. Museums are trusted more than almost any other kind of source. Museums therefore also have a particular responsibility when it comes to dealing with the fragile and

subjective nature of testimony. How do they deal with this responsibility? Do they see testimony as something sacred, which is not open to the forms of source criticism readily deployed in relation to other material? Do they always provide visitors with the tools to be critical of testimony and to place the experiences of survivors in a wider historical context? How do they reflect on the historical narratives that they produce using testimony?

This discussion also centred on issues of a hierarchy of knowledge and of different forms of testimony. Survivor testimony is often not subject to the same level of scrutiny as other sources. The emotional and affective impact of testimony might therefore impede genuine understanding of the past and, importantly, learning to engage critically with all forms of evidence. In this context, an issue that was touched upon and which will form the basis of more detailed discussion at workshop 3 was the position of perpetrator or bystander testimony within this hierarchy. This also relates to the issue of authenticity, which is created in an interaction between production and reception. Why are some testimonies received as being more authentic than others?

### **What are the opportunities and challenges for educators, museums and other producers of culture in both using and creating testimony?**

As outlined above, a pressing issue is the loss of the last generation of Holocaust survivors and the ensuing need to find an alternative to live testimony. We should not think about this anxiety as especially recent. Efforts to record the testimony of survivors in different forms can be observed in the immediate post-war period and, indeed, even in the camps and ghettos as the events of the Holocaust were taking place. Nonetheless, the emergence of new media, especially the internet and other digital technologies, has given this project a new dimension, which brings with it both opportunities and challenges. The ready accessibility of a large number of online testimonies can make this form of historical knowledge available to new audiences, but do we have the pedagogical tools necessary to encourage students to critically evaluate and engage with it?

Linked to this question is the issue of the perceived 'sanctity' of testimony, as discussed above, that is, the sense amongst many teachers, visitors and museum professionals that this source is 'untouchable' and cannot be subjected to historical source criticism. This is perhaps especially challenging with live testimony, but is also an issue with testimony inscribed in a variety of media, from written forms to film and museum exhibits. If we do not teach students to engage with testimony critically, are we failing in our duty to teach them to engage with other sources critically, for example, those they encounter online?

### **How can one do justice to the complexity and ambiguity of cultural sources while using them as testimony?**

The issue of source criticism was also key to participants' responses to the final guiding question. The definition of 'cultural' remains an unresolved discussion point amongst network members; however, even if we define it as anything other than live testimony (itself a problematic distinction), then a range of issues were raised in relation to doing justice to these forms. From the start of the day, the question of social and digital media and of the impact of new technologies on pedagogy and learning was central to discussions. It is clear that students are engaging with the world in new ways and that new forms of testimony are part of this. For some participants this meant a need to develop pedagogies that reflect the media worlds that students inhabit, including teaching students how to use these media reflectively. Others resisted this development, arguing that the use of

technology could take away some of what is unique about testimony and that in a 'post-truth' society we should 'disconnect' the teaching of the Holocaust from the uncontrollable information flow of social media.

These questions relate to the issue of mediation discussed in workshop 1 and are also central to the NHC's 'Forever' project which formed a special focus of discussion. Whilst participants were largely in agreement that the technology offers an important way of sustaining some of the experience of live testimony beyond the lifespan of the survivors, several concerns were expressed. The interactivity of the medium was seen as having numerous potential benefits in terms of engaging visitors and especially young learners; however, it was pointed out that the interaction is with a database and that it is in this sense a simulation. It was also argued that the artificiality of the interaction, whilst implying a loss of spontaneity and sense of authenticity, would encourage visitors and students to ask questions they might feel uncomfortable about in a face-to-face encounter. The importance of contextualising the testimonies was raised, along with concerns about how it would be possible to control this if the technology were to be used outside of the museum. Consideration also needs to be given to how 'exposure' to testimony in this format might impact on the pedagogy in classroom settings more generally and certainly in relation to pre and post visit preparation and debriefing of pupils.

The Forever project also raised further definitional questions in that some participants wondered if this could still be considered 'testimony' in that it edited out the dynamics of a real-life interview. This issue of defining testimony was even more acute when it came to discussions around other cultural products, such as literature and feature film. Can these be viewed as testimonies where they are based on lived experience? If so what are the limits of this definition? Can these media be used alongside traditional forms of testimony in the teaching of difficult pasts in post-conflict societies? The discussion around the definition of testimony is also one that has continued on the network's blog and will be the focus of further debate in workshop 3.