

Using Testimony in the Classroom

Briefing Note

This **Briefing Note** provides a concise summary of the key ideas contained in the two **Research Briefings** in the full **Using Testimony in the Classroom** pack. The Briefing Note is designed to provide teachers with an overview of and easy reference to the key considerations in the use of testimony. It should be used in conjunction with the full pack and, in particular, with the **Lesson Sketches** contained in it.

Testimony is an account of an individual's personal experiences by that individual. But the form that account takes could be anything from theatre, documentary film, autobiographical writing and literature to video recordings, or digital technologies.

First-person accounts can be incredibly powerful tools in the teaching of traumatic and violent histories. The use of first-person testimony allows students to connect what they are learning to an individual life and to begin to understand the human impact of the catastrophe. Engagement with perpetrator testimony can promote better understanding of the conditions in which “ordinary” people come to commit horrific acts of violence. Testimony can also be used in the values education that is attached to Holocaust education, as witnesses often draw connections to the present day and highlight the ongoing legacy of the Holocaust.

Research Briefing I Using Testimony in the Classroom

The **challenges** in using testimony centre on both ethics and methods, with the two aspects being closely interwoven around some core issues: *medium/genre, authenticity, empathy, perpetrators, secondary witnesses.*

Medium/Genre The medium that is used to produce the testimony has an effect on the way in which the story is told. Students should be encouraged to engage with the issues around medium, not in order to detract from

the importance of the message imparted by the survivor, but to help them recognise the nature of testimony and what it can teach us.

Authenticity A testimony is authentic because it is produced by an individual who had the experiences that they recount. “Authentic” testimony does not have to be 100% accurate. Instead, it is important that there was an intention to tell the truth about a personal experience. If we agree that a text is “authentic”, then we are recognising the person giving testimony as trustworthy.

Empathy is in many cases a desirable response to hearing testimony. However, in order to be productive, empathy needs to be of the right kind. In particular, we should avoid using learning activities that encourage students to feel as if they were themselves the victim or perpetrator of violent events (e.g., through role-playing). Students cannot (and should not) experience the same emotions as the victims of Nazi persecution and it is dubious ethically and pedagogically if they feel they have done so.

We adopt a model of empathy in which the student recognises the emotion experienced by the survivor (fear, sadness, despair). However, they recognise it from the perspective of the survivor, and are continuously aware of the difference between themselves and the witness. We describe this as “other-oriented”. This doesn’t mean that emotional responses should be avoided; however, those emotions should come from a

recognition of what the witness experienced, rather than what the student is experiencing.

Perpetrator testimonies can be used alongside those of victims, survivors and other witnesses in order to promote better understanding of the causes of genocide. However, this needs to be done in a framework that encourages students to identify the challenges posed by these sources. It is especially important when approaching these texts that empathy is “other oriented” (as described above).

Secondary Witnesses The term “secondary witness” describes individuals who give an account of a past event from a personal perspective, but who didn’t experience that event themselves (e.g., children and grandchildren of survivors, or creative artists who work with first-person testimonies). However, this term can be confusing as it uses a term (“witness”) that has a very specific meaning in this context, to in fact mean something else. The pack does not therefore use the term “secondary witness” and instead refers to “second and subsequent generations”, when we are describing the children and grandchildren of survivors.

Research Briefing II Teaching the Holocaust through “Family Frames

“Family Frames” describes how individual stories are interwoven with those of the people closest to them. For those who arrived in the UK on the Kindertransport, memories of family members from whom they were separated are key to the trauma that motivates the account. This is similar to (and, in important ways, different from) the testimonies of the second and third generation who recount the stories of their parents and grandparents and the impact of growing up as the child or grandchild of a Holocaust survivor. A focus on “Family Frames” can allow us to consider not only the history of the Holocaust, but also its legacy and ongoing impact. It can also help us to

think about how Holocaust education might make use of testimony after the survivors.

Teaching of the **Kindertransport** using testimony should:

- make clear the place of the Kindertransport within the history of the Holocaust
- encourage consideration of the “child perspective”
- avoid using the Kindertransport as a way of unequivocally celebrating Britain

Working with the **testimonies of the second generation** should:

- Avoid confusing the testimony of the second generation with the testimony of survivors.
- Be used a complement to survivor testimony (also testimony produced in different media), rather than a substitute for it.
- Ensure the second generation speaker receives adequate briefing and understands that they are: (i) there to tell the story of their parents *as* the story of their parents; (ii) that their own story is also of interest and importance.
- Prepare students by: (i) providing necessary historical context for the particular experiences of the parents of the second generation witness; (ii) engaging with the biography of the second generation witness, alongside that of his or her parents.
- Encouraging a mixture of follow-up questions about the experience of the parent and questions relating to the ongoing impact of the Holocaust.

The full resource pack – **Using Testimony in the Classroom** - explains the Research Briefings in more detail and, through a series of **Lesson Sketches**, shows how these ideas might be applied to different media (video testimony, diaries, poetry, literature, documentary film, theatre, and digital media). The pack is available open access here: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/cultureandtestimony>