

Making History Come Alive



Students interviewing survivor Lucille Eichengreen in her home.



Students at work during the interview process.

By *Howard Levin*

Subject: History, PBL, digital storytelling

Audience: Teachers, teacher educators, library media specialists

Grade Level: 9–12 (Ages 15–18)

Technology: Internet/Web, digital video editing, video camera

Standards: *NETS•S 3–5; NETS•T II, III* (<http://www.iste.org/standards/>)

Students interview Holocaust survivors on camera and publish their stories on the Web.

PHOTOS BY HOWARD LEVIN

The interest in project-based learning models combined with new and powerful technologies such as digital video and the Internet have created opportunities for students to contribute in meaningful ways to a worldwide audience not possible 10 years ago. Such projects educate students in an authentic and effective way that incorporates important learning goals. Additionally, the projects can be stunning.

“Click here and watch what happens,” I repeated to attendees at NECC 2003 in Seattle who seemed content to read segments of the full-text testimonies of Holocaust survivors. Invariably, observers were surprised as a small movie popped up to reveal Gloria describing a critical moment during her miraculous survival in Auschwitz. “We were given tattoos then ... mine is A6374,” she says as the camera zooms in to reveal the tattoo on her left forearm. They were impressed by the technology used to document and publish more than 20 hours of video now available on a public Web site. Even more amazing is that high school students are creating this resource. (*Editor’s note:* Find this and other URLs in the Resources section on p. 27.)

During the past two years, 10th–12th graders in *Telling Their Stories: Oral History of the Holocaust*, an elective history class at the Urban School of San Francisco, have gained an entirely new perspective on modern history through personal involvement in documenting the experiences of European Holocaust survivors.

Working in teams of three, students conduct background research

and prepare interview questions. They travel to each survivor's home, set up a professional-style mobile digital video studio, and conduct a two-hour interview. Students then transcribe each interview into a full-text transcript using the digital video files transferred to their personal laptops. Finally, they edit the digital video files into hundreds of mini-movies directly corresponding to the text. The result of their work is a public Web site containing the interviews, complete with full-text, video, and audio. *Telling Their Stories: Oral History of the Holocaust* currently contains 12 interviews of six different survivors and refugees. The Holocaust is the first topic among several to be explored in the coming years to the ever-expanding *Oral History Archives Project* housed at the Urban School, a small independent high school located in the heart of the historic Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco.

While expanding students' depth of understanding of the Holocaust, the project provides a public service through the publication of their interviews. It directly addresses part of the Urban School's mission of extending our reach to the community by meaningful engagement with the world outside the classroom.

Background

I first conceived of the course and broader Web project several years ago after serving as an interviewer for the

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Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, a Steven Spielberg-funded project through which thousands of survivors throughout the world have been interviewed. Although impressed with their incredible scope, superb training models, and ground-breaking use of digital technologies, I was frustrated with the lack of public access to the interviews, which are only viewable at a handful of museums and research centers.

My colleague in the project is Deborah Dent-Samaké, history teacher at Urban. Last year, Deborah completed the three-day intensive Morrissey Oral History Workshop in preparation for the course. Several years ago, she received a teaching fellowship to attend a course at the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. Deborah handles the course organization and curriculum, as well as trains and assesses students in both the background history and oral history techniques. I manage the technology directions, travel with each team for the onsite interviews, and oversee the Web site development.

"History is usually taught," explains Deborah. "It is the opposite for students to discover history through people who have lived through it. At first, students want to ask about the experience of the Holocaust. They don't always see solutions to grief, death, or love. By the end, they ask compelling questions. They talk and take risks.

"I saw that the students were fearful initially. They thought they might cry during the interviews. But quickly they realized that the survivor's stories were sad but important. The respect for these people and the connections they made helped them deal with their emotions," said Deborah. "They became a real part of the experience and focused on the survival aspect. All of the survivors worked hard to convey to the students that they loved life. They had strong personalities." (*Editor's note:* For more on how the project affected participants, see *Stories about Getting Stories* on p. 25.)

The course is a model of integrating technology into the curriculum, the guiding principle for computer use at Urban. Students access their homework and post reflective journal entries online. They share their research and questions online, as well as access the work of previous years' students. Students and survivors get to

In most cases, this requires teachers to have the patience and confidence to allow their students to figure out often-complex applications on their own.

know each other in such an intimate retelling of history; some continue to correspond with one another online. The technology tools enhance collaboration among and between the students, the teams, and the instructors. Students are learning to digitize and edit video so that their interview work can be shared with a worldwide audience. This is an educator's dream come true.

This year, students returned to the same six survivors' homes for follow-up interviews. They carefully studied last year's interviews and developed dozens of follow-up questions, helping to fill out complex stories of survival and escape. They used the material gathered from last year's class as the basis for much of their learning and preparation. The new text and video segments will be inserted into the original interviews to provide a more complete story.

Technology

Our project was supported by a \$2,500 grant from the Morris Stuhlsaft Foundation, a private educational foundation, and an additional \$500 donation from an intrigued parent. This money purchased all the necessary equipment, including a professional-level Canon GL1 video camera, tripod, high-quality lavalier microphone, lighting equipment (a light, umbrella, reflector card, and stands), a removable high-capacity hard drive system, and a large supply of mini-DV tapes. The actual Web site is running on an older PC that otherwise would have been retired.

Although similar projects could use school labs, our take-home laptop program enables students to complete the bulk of the most time consuming processes—such as transcribing all the interviews—at home instead of consuming class time, which instead is reserved for direct instruction and team collaboration.

Our students' work provides valuable primary source material for students and researchers throughout the world. They are crossing the boundary of "learner" to "contributor." Their work has real meaning beyond the classroom, a concept I've dubbed *authentic doing*.

Similar projects can easily be downsized using a simple digital video camera.

At Urban, all students receive their own Apple iBook laptop computer. (*Editor's note:* Look for an article on Urban's laptop program in an upcoming issue of *L&L*.) This has been a key to the project's success. Students use our online communication software (FirstClass) to access assignments, keep track of the complicated production schedule, to submit homework, and to collaborate in their research and production teams. Although similar projects could use school labs, our take-home laptop program enables students to complete the bulk of the most time consuming processes—such as transcribing all the interviews—at home instead of consuming class time, which instead is reserved for direct instruction and team collaboration.

Laptops are used for all aspects of pre- and post-production. After compressing all the captured digital video into small QuickTime files using Discreet's Cleaner, I burn CDs so students can load the complete interview files onto their laptops; each two-hour interview becomes a relatively small

100 MB file. Each team divides the interview into equal portions, and students transcribe their assigned segments using Listen & Type, one of many audio transcription programs available as shareware. Students then use Apple's QuickTime Pro to create the hundreds of approximately one minute "movie" files. This is a relatively simple process and requires no technical expertise but instead challenges students to struggle with the text to find natural segments. Apple's iMovie does not allow for this type of cut and paste processing of multiple files and therefore was not used other than to capture video.

Students then paste their transcribed text into blank Dreamweaver files and hyperlink each segment of text to its corresponding QuickTime movie. The technology tasks are very simple, although time consuming. Students use the online directions I created for the various steps with very little direct instruction. (Read these on the Telling Stories Web site under About/Production Guides.) The project team approach helps facilitate this as they seek each other's help when directions are confusing. I compile all the segments and add in final formatting for the Web site. Parent volunteers listen and proofread all transcripts for accuracy and spelling prior to inclusion on the Web site.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

Telling Their Stories is meant to be a model course where technology use is seamlessly integrated into the

Stories about Getting Stories

A few reflections from parents and students on the Telling Their Stories project.



Holocaust survivor Max Garcia tells his story.

Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to speak with us. It was truly an inspiration. Your words were extraordinarily powerful and compelling. I can't imagine the strength it takes to tell your story; however, you said every word fearlessly. I learned so much from both your experiences and how you dealt with them. Thank you for being so gracious, giving us lunch, and most of all, thank you for embedding a knowledge that I could not have gotten anywhere else. ... listening to your experiences, it seemed unreal that a man could survive such atrocities. You are truly a survivor! Every single person alive today should hear your story and learn from it. Thank you for allowing me this privilege.

—*Marisa, student interviewer*

I felt very touched throughout the interview. It seems like every emotion that I know went through me. To name a few: sympathy, compassion, anger, and sadness.

—*Matthew, student interviewer*

I felt slightly nervous at first, because I did not know if my questions were the right ones, or if I would be able to come up with others as the interview progressed. However, I grew more comfortable after the interview started. ... I thought it was wonderful that he came and spoke with us. Because of what he endured, I mostly felt sad this afternoon, but he also projected a feeling of hope in spite of all his suffering.

—*Camila, student interviewer*

Honestly, it made me feel like a bit of a brat. After this interview, every time I argue with my parents, it makes me feel like a villain. This experience has not 'changed' me but has given me a better perspective of history and human compassion; that I should have more compassion, and always strive for that.

—*Michelle, student interviewer*

This is the best-conceived oral history class I have seen. I cannot imagine a more valuable educational experi-

ence for students. The Web site is a tremendous resource for people interested in the Holocaust and for other educators. I could not imagine a more successful oral history. It is a terrific accomplishment.

I am particularly impressed by being able to see and hear the narrators tell their stories, while reading the text. I also like the question-and-answer of high school students and survivors ... it is moving.

I think it makes a terrific educational contribution, too. It is remarkable that something like this could emerge out of a high school history class, and the site explains just how that came to be. I like the description of the course and the explication of the methodology and the listing of support institutions. I am confident you will receive a lot of interest from other teachers who will find it an invaluable resource. Please accept my heartfelt admiration and appreciation.

—*Kenneth L. Kann, one of five parent volunteers who proofread hours of testimony. He is also author of Comrades and Chicken Ranchers: The Story of a California Jewish Community.*

The information didn't necessarily make me feel uncomfortable; it was more like a feeling of disbelief. The epiphany of that emotion was when he showed us his tattoo. Although you told us he might, it was an indescribable, intense rush of emotions when we saw those numbers. The Holocaust felt really distant and unreal to me previous to the interview, because I am not Jewish and my family was not directly affected by the Holocaust, but this interview definitely made the Holocaust a lot more personal.

—*Sophie, student interviewer*



Eve Myers '05, Matt Burkhead '05, Whitney Redd '05, and survivor Gloria Hollander Lyon.

curriculum. At Urban, by design we have no computer skills classes; rather, students learn to use the tools appropriate to the learning situation. This is happening throughout our school but is most obvious in *Telling Their Stories*. In most cases, this requires teachers to have the patience and confidence to allow their students to figure out often-complex applications on their own. Again, this is dramatically enhanced in a project-based, production-team styled course such as *Telling Their Stories*.

The use of technology in a course can completely change the nature of what teachers and students can do. Our students' work provides valuable primary source material for students and researchers throughout the world. They are crossing the boundary of "learner" to "contribu-

tor." Their work has real meaning beyond the classroom, a concept I've dubbed *authentic doing*. Students are not merely modeling and practicing techniques used by professionals; they are completing work that is being used by others throughout the world. The Internet and digital technologies that enable worldwide publishing can provide opportunities for teachers to design their own projects that directly contribute to communities outside their schools. Documenting oral histories is but one example.

Educators need to take several considerations into account before embarking on a similar project.

Choose the Topic Carefully. First and foremost is to choose an initial topic that you and others will be passionate about. Take into account the

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ethnicities of the community you live in and the stories that connect to history lessons. The students may have grandparents or friends who can serve as interview subjects. Any similar project will require extra hours of organization, phone calling, technical learning, and curricular innovations. The more unique the goal, the more public the purpose, and the more compelling the stories, the easier it will be to motivate all the collaborators, students, teachers, and the interview subjects themselves. Our project interviewing and publishing Holocaust survivor stories generated tremendous motivation and passion for all involved.

Set Aside Sufficient Time. Our project consumed the equivalent of a semester-long course. Also, Urban's block schedule provided a two-and-one-half hour class once per week, enabling time for in-depth interviews at survivor's homes. Projects can be downsized by conducting all interviews at the school and narrowing the scope of the topic to shorten interviews. You can look for grants to support summer planning for such a project, or better yet, you can propose a new elective course devoted to the broader topic, which in our case is oral history.

Keep the Technology Simple. For example, we used a single camera on a tripod, a single light with reflector card, and a single lavalier microphone to pick up only the survivor's voice. At every step, we considered more elaborate options that we fortunately rejected. In fact, successful projects can be completed with a simple camera on a tripod—no lights, no external microphone, and no external hard drives. More information about equipment as well as suggestions about simplifying alternative projects is available on the Web site.

And finally, find partners with whom to collaborate. In most cases,

this will be a building-level technology specialist, one who has the access to publish the project on the school's Internet or Intranet servers. In some cases, this may be a responsible student recruited to be your tech support or perhaps a knowledgeable parent who shares the passion for the project. Avoid trying to take on a project like this alone, at least during the first school year.

Conclusion

"Why is it important that you share your story?" Sydney, a sophomore asks Freda, an Austrian refugee who in 1938 narrowly escaped deportation and near certain death. "When my generation dies, it will be a battle for the historians to be constantly fighting to keep this story alive," answers Freda. "And it's important for people who are not threatened by holocausts to know that this can happen to anybody. So if this is part of the human condition it has to be told. And maybe in some way that story will have some impact to change the human consciousness."

We are proud of what we've been able to accomplish with this project here at the Urban School of San Francisco. We encourage other teachers and other schools to use our model to conduct and publish oral histories. We are actively seeking schools interested in directly collaborating with us



Lani Fried '04, Sam Staar '05, Michelle Lai '04, and survivor Lucille Eichengreen.

on our Oral History Archives Project. More information is available on our Web site.

The Urban School of San Francisco: <http://www.urbanschool.org>

Resources

Morrissey Oral History Workshop: http://ohp.fullerton.edu/morrissey_workshop.htm

Professional Development from the Inside: Teacher Collaboration in the Independent Secondary School: <http://www.urbanschool.org/docs/professional.pdf>

Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation: <http://www.vhf.org>

Telling Their Stories: Oral History of the Holocaust: <http://www.tellingstories.org>
U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.: <http://www.usmmm.org>



Howard Levin is director of technology at the Urban School of San Francisco. He began integrating technology in the classroom 16 years ago as teacher and chair of history at the Overlake School in Redmond, Washington. He is the original author of Social Studies Sources, among the first Web sites designed for history teachers, now housed at Indiana University. He is also former assistant head of the Jewish Day School of Metropolitan Seattle. He holds a master's in education from the University of Washington.

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