

Preserving Survivors' Memories

Peter Gautschi, 21 November 2012, Berlin; comments

Dear Colleagues, dear Ladies and Gentlemen

This first workshop of the *Education Section* of the conference *Preserving Survivors' Memories* is entitled "Teaching with Video Testimonies in Different National Memory Cultures". The core questions are therefore how can learning be made possible by means of video *Testimonies* and what is conveyed through it.

It is not easy to analyze teaching and learning. Teaching and learning can be looked at from different scientific perspectives. None the less, there are certain constants. These are demonstrated in the "Didactical Triangle" model, which was created by general pedagogy. The "Didactical Triangle" is considered "the basic measure of teaching" in German-speaking areas and reflects the structural elements of teaching and learning.

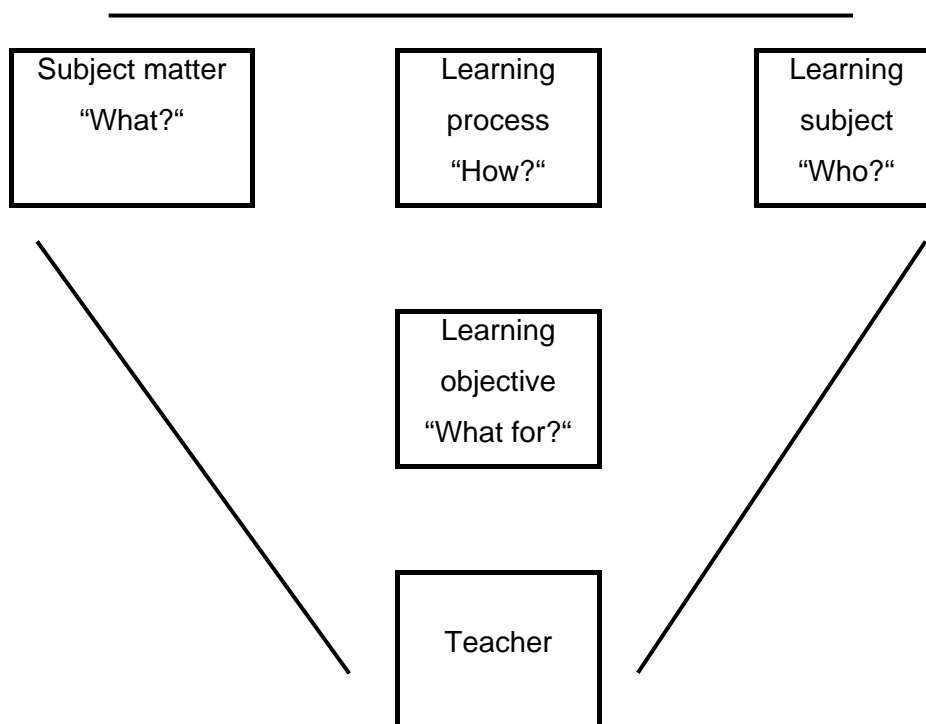


Figure 1: Didactical triangle (Gautschi 2009, S 34)

I will structure my comments according to the main aspects of this didactical basic measure, according to the *four main pedagogical questions*. I will look at the three contributions presented above with respect to the subject matter – to the “what?” - then with respect to the learning subjects – to the “who?” - after that with respect to the learning process – to the “how?” – and finally with respect to the learning objective – to the “what for?”.

Subject matter: The “What?”

Video testimonies are a phenomenon of the second half of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. Basically, video testimonies are *suitable for any historical phenomena*, for example the period of the economic boom after World War Two, the Cold War, of course, decolonization, genocides and wars of recent times, migration or globalization.

Video *testimonies* are also suitable for all historical-scientific dimensions, for example for governance, economy, culture or forms of social inequality, as well as for *race, class, gender*.

What becomes obvious first of all is the fact that all the examples presented deal with World War Two. This shows us, that *World War Two* still seems dealt to be a universal subject today.

What also stood out is that all of the people who appeared in the video testimonies and were introduced today were *in the latter third of their lives* at the time that the video testimonies were made. That could make it a little bit difficult to teach pupils with these videos.

However, the subject and the people in the videos testimonies are not all that matters with respect to the subject matter, but also the concept behind the videos themselves. As is the case with other historical film, witness testimonies can be produced for two purposes: The film is intended to serve as a *source*. Or the film tells a story and wants to evoke understanding by serving as a *portrayal*.

What prevailed for a long time were video recordings of contemporary witnesses who were interviewed by an invisible journalist or by a historian in their own environment, in their living room, in their favorite armchair and were supposed to serve as an oral history source. The interview was played practically uncut and evoked a feeling of experiencing a direct *encounter with the contemporary witness*. The audience felt like it was in the shoes of the interviewer.

Another possibility is to rearrange the interviews in particular if several contemporary witnesses were interviewed about the same issue. Dr. Nadine Fink explained us an example, she called it the *kaleidoscope*. In such a kaleidoscope a lot of different people are shown one after the other, each answering the same question or discussing the same topics.

In the example of Dr. Na'ama Shik we instead met Ovariah Baruch at the sites of where the historical events took place. In Saloniki or at the place of horror: in Auschwitz.

Such video testimonies act as portrayals and convey the character of a documentary: *We accompany the people* on their journey through life: from their neighborhood where they grew up to their school, their place of work, their place of suffering, their hideout. Such video testimonies are heavily edited by editorial staff, who often seek to guarantee objectivity. These edited interviews impart an intentional meaning created by the contemporary witnesses and the editors.

Of course, there are other possibilities: Anna Lenchovska showed us photographs where *pupils produce their own videos*. This seems to be also an interesting phenomenon that we should discuss further.

And I think we should also discuss another phenomenon that I mentioned in the last two years: Swiss teachers and Swiss teacher's students use often video testimonies from *youtube*. Of course, you also can find on youtube video testimonies that are proved by historians and arranged professionally by editors. But normally on youtube there are mainly self-portrayals whose statements have not undergone any editorial process; testimonies, therefore that have neither undergone any review in respect to their content nor been intentionally produced by third parties, but in which the contemporary witnesses immediately and directly address the audience, and of course, often with their own message. In such a case it is often difficult for the audience to figure out whether such a testimony serves as a source for a past event or whether a fictitious depiction about a past event is being given.

Learning subject: The "Who?"

Since learning is a lifelong process, teaching *with video testimonies* may, in principle, occur during every cycle of human learning, from the pre-school period to the seniors' education.

In our section, the recipients' view became clear in the presentation of Dr. Nadine Fink. She observed fifteen years old pupils. And she showed us with her observations a very important thing: we have *to focus on students*: what do they learn, when they are studying videos?

Anna Lenchovska showed us another important aspect. She showed us how *to work with teachers*: what do they think when they are watching video testimonies, what do they learn?

As a textbook author, I know very well, that it is impossible to write a textbook for pupils from the primary school to students at university. So I completely agree with Dr. Na'ama Shik: the *age appropriateness* is really a core element. How students at the age of twelve to fourteen or teachers at the age of forty to fifty are really using the videos. That's the important question. I made for example very good experience with the video from Ovadiah Baruch that Dr. Na'ama Shik presented us in Swiss teacher courses, but in school with pupils at the age of fifteen the video didn't work that well. The students didn't like the music, they didn't like to read all the subtitles, all that translated text in the film. But of course, they also were captured by the love story. But after twenty minutes they lost their concentration.

For didactical purposes unspecific media are as a rule less suitable than those which focus on a *clearly defined target audience*. A certain closeness of the audience to the people portrayed with respect to age group would result in a more empathetic reception. That is one reason for the unique success of the Anne Frank-story in our schools with the pupils at the age from twelve to sixteen years.

Learning process: The “How?”

It should not come as a surprise to you that I, as a historical educator, have looked at the three contemporary contributions from the perspective of whether *historical learning* is possible. We describe the individual's confrontation with segments from the universe of the historical as “historical learning”. Rüsen defined historical learning as a “process of the human consciousness in which certain temporal experiences are acquired in an interpretive way and at the same time the competence for this interpretation is created and further developed” (Rüsen 2008, p. 61).

Historical learning can be illustrated graphically by means of a structure and process model: the processes are shown as arrows, the products as squares. Historical learning can start the moment learners first of all focus their attention (for example, based on a question or their own interest) on a segment of the universe of the historical and take notice of suitable issues from history (sources, representations, people). Secondly, the learners develop what they took notice of; that is, they delineate reconstructed facts from historical testimonies, and thus clarify historical issues. They work out a “*factual analysis*”. As a third step, they interpret what has been delineated and establish references to other historical testimonies and in that

way arrange an order in the universe of the historical based on the greater connection of causes and effects. Thereby they gain a *“historical factual judgment”*. Fourthly, the learners then establish a relationship between the historical facts and their historical meaning on the one hand, and a personal or social concernment on the other. They assess what has been arranged along their individual questions and thus develop a *“historical value judgment”*.

Historical learning is a mental movement between factual analysis, factual judgment and value judgment – take place by means of *“historical storytelling”* (Rüsen 2008, p. 75). Since Arthur Danto (1974) first pointed out that storytelling is the specific form of explaining historical knowledge, *“historical storytelling”* has been recognized by historical education as a central process for providing meaning for historical learning. In particular, Rüsen emphasized in several publications the importance of independently constructing meaning. “Not until one has realized what it is that the subject learns when it learns history, namely the ability through historical storytelling to construct meaning in a certain way for temporal experiences, with which the learner can orient its existence in the flow of time; only then does it becomes evident that the learning subject does not simply act in a receptive way, but also in a productive one, and how” (Rüsen 2008, p. 44).

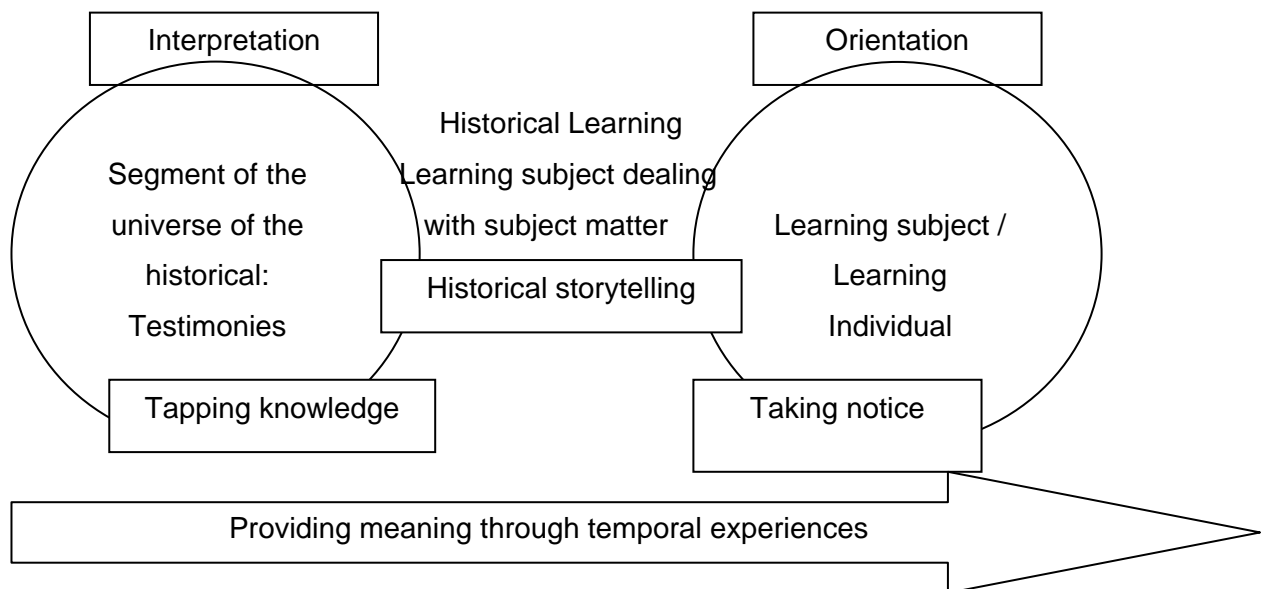


Figure 2: Historical Learning (Gautschi 2009, S. 49)

It's a hard work for teachers to enable pupils and students that they learn historical. Anna Lenchovska told us in her contribution, that teaching is even harder when the circumstances are so difficult as described.

Dr. Nadine Fink has demonstrated most clearly in her contribution how in her example historical learning takes place through video testimonies. Students do their interpretation in their own ways. They come to a value judgment of their own. And these interpretations and value judgments can be completely different from our own interpretations and value judgments. If we want, that students learn, we have to know these interpretations and these value judgments, and we have to discuss them in classes. That means, that we have to *focus on this process of historical learning*.

I should also like to briefly mention in this context what Martin Lücke and Alina Bothe have recently presented on the occasion of our conference on *Shoa and Education in Switzerland* and what truly excited me with a view to historical learning: They pointed out how learners took notice, chose, exploited and interpreted in class certain testimonies from the *Visual History Archive of the Shoah Foundation*, and after that they also told their own story on the basis of sequences they themselves had excerpted from the interview, which can be seen as their own testimony and positioning.

Werner Dreier was asked this morning: what is a good interview for education? I would say: a good interview for education *gives students the chance* to formulate their own interpretations and to find their own value judgments. And a good interview for education invites students and teachers to discuss these interpretations and these value judgments in their classes. If this is the case, so there is a learning process and that's what we are aiming for.

Objective: The “What for?”

Preserving Survivors' Memories – that is, “preserving the memories of survivors” as well as “preserving the memories for survivors” – is, of course the most important objective of all of these activities.

This can only be successfully done if learners acquire the skills needed to deal with testimonies. Since it is well known that memories tend to fade, learners also need to learn in such settings *how to independently deal with testimonies* so that they are also able to individually refresh their own memories later on. The learners developed such abilities and skills with the video that Dr. Na'ama Shik presented to us.

In addition to knowledge and skills, memories have a lot to do with interests, attitudes, beliefs and emotions. Whether and how one succeeds is only shown by the actual work with

testimonies. So far we still do not know very much on why such attempts are successful. I hope that we have made a big step toward our objective here at the end of the conference *Preserving Survivors' Memories*, and I would like to thank our speakers for their very interesting and inspiring contributions. I have learned a great deal. Many thanks.

Index of literature:

- Danto, Arthur C. (1974): *Analytische Philosophie der Geschichte*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Gautschi, Peter (2009): *Guter Geschichtsunterricht. Grundlagen, Erkenntnisse, Hinweise*. Schwalbach/Ts.: Wochenschau Verlag.
- Rüsen, Jörn (2008): *Historisches Lernen. Grundlagen und Paradigmen*. 2., überarbeitete und erweiterte Auflage. Schwalbach/Ts.: Wochenschau Verlag.