

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Teaching the holocaust through digital heritage, experiential and project-based learning: *Finding Matilda*- A documentary by students, about a student, for students**

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Recent research has reported that two-thirds of American Generation Z has vague knowledge of the genocide of World War II. Twenty-two percent of millennials said that they have never heard of the Holocaust or were just not sure. Armed with this knowledge we set out to create a project, a documentary, to help students better understand this horrifying part of our history on terms that they can identify with. This documentary is about a young college student in the midst of war. By creating a documentary by college students, about a college student, for college students I set out to teach the Holocaust. Through digital heritage, experiential and project-based learning; we created a project to help Gen Z better understand history. We are using these approaches to give an understanding of the Holocaust through our journey to Finding Matilda.

**Key words:**Digital media, teaching, experiential learning, project-based learning.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Recent research has reported that two-thirds of American Generation Z have vague knowledge of the genocide of World War II. Twenty-two percent of millennials said that they have never heard of the Holocaust or where just not sure (Zauzmer, 2018).

Currently, three states-Florida, Illinois and New Jersey require Holocaust education from grades K-12. California, Michigan, New York, Indiana, and Rhode Island require genocide education in high school (Jewish Telegraphic, 2017). There are also 20 states in the legislative process of making Holocaust education

mandatory.

Digital heritage is the process of making cultural heritage available to the public through the use of technologies. Armed with this knowledge we set out to create a project, a documentary, to help Generation Z students better understand this horrifying part of our history on terms that they can identify with. By creating a documentary by college students, about a college student, for college students I set out to teach the Holocaust.

This research and documentary are about a young

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college student in the midst of war. Her name was Matilda. The author and four University of Hartford students travelled to Lithuania in the summer of 2018. We followed a team of archeologists and geoscientists in the search for both the story and the grave of Matilda, which had never been found. This documentary and paper take the audience on our journey. We were able to interview witnesses and locals who knew the family. We visited the church where the diary and poetry were found, after being hidden by a local priest for many years. We were involved with GPR (Ground Penetrating Radar) that was used to search for her remains. We were joined by students from the University of Wisconsin on our search. This story will not only teach those who watch the final project but also create invaluable learning experiences for the students who helped to create the work.

### **Purpose statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to use a documentary (digital heritage) and the filming of a documentary (experiential and project-based learning) as tools for teaching and learning the history of the Holocaust with Generation Z students.

### **Framework**

The focus of this study is to consider the way digital tools can teach history to a generation that has been raised in advanced technologies. This paper looks at the principals of experiential and project-based learning that work along with digital heritage to create a learning experience for those who do and those who watch.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Generation Z (Gen Z) are people born between 1995-2010. A few of their nicknames include the Generation 2020, Internet Generation (IGen), Digital Natives, Screensters, and Zeds. This generation is tech-savvy and prefers to communicate using social media and other digital formats. Students today were born into a globally connected world where the internet has always been available and a major part of their lives (Rothman, 2016).

According to Zauzmer (2018), fifty-eight percent of the Gen Z surveyed said that they believe that something like the Holocaust could happen again and that they believe there should be more education on the subject. They also admit that they know very little about the Holocaust. Students who grew up with advanced technologies do not have strong interest in reading about history; they prefer instead to watch digital narratives to glean information. Because their use of technology has developed the visual ability portion of their brains, visual forms of learning are more effective for these learners (Rothman, 2016). Brains of Gen Z have been naturally wired to understand

complex visual imagery. This make visual approaches to teaching more effective than other approaches, such as lectures and readings (Hallowell and Ratey, 2011).

According to Northeastern University's Innovation Survey, Generation Z students prefer more specific hands-on learning which can be immediately applied to their lives (Seemiller and Grace, 2017).

Bowen (2005) and Mandernach (2015) believe that student engagement can be defined in 4 related ways: (1) engagement with the learning process through participation activities –project-based, (2) experience-based or object-focused learning-experiential learning, (3) focus on the real-world context of study, and (4) engagement with the human condition or basics of human existence.

In her course, *The Holocaust in History* at Marquette University, Professor Rebecca Wittmann recalls, “the Holocaust was a completely new encounter (for most students in my course), it was an eye-opener, something of a shock to the system about man’s inhumanity to man. They were earnest, engaged, and horrified....” (Wittman, 2012).

There are several countries that have laws requiring the teaching of information concerning the actions of Germany to the Jews in its territory during the period of the Nazi Party control from 1933 to 1945. In the United States, laws of this kind are maintained by individual states.

Digital media is a powerful tool which both enables and empowers students to become storytellers, historians, cultural theorists and researchers. The digital format transforms students' capacity to synthesize, interpret, theorize, and create new cultural and historical knowledge. In this way, digital formats potentially democratize learning and produce critical subjects and authors (Weis et al., 2002).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Experiential learning**

First, we will look at the Experiential Learning Theory. This theory draws from the work of scholars such as, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Carl Jung and others who insist that experience takes the central role in human learning and development. Experiential Learning Theory is defined as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1884).

When a student is experiencing the moment or, “real life learning”, understanding is maximized because it is active, engaging, and collaborative. Actual experiences allow students to connect theory and practice. These real-life experiences allow students to learn in unfamiliar situations, to understand others who are unlike themselves, and to practice using this knowledge to create and develop valuable skills (Ash and Clayton, 2009a, b).

Through the work of philosopher John Dewey (1959) and his Laboratory School at the University of Chicago we understand that students will develop personal investment in the material if they engage in real, meaningful tasks. Learning research has shown

that the most effective learning occurs when the learning is embedded in an authentic, real-world context (Krajcik and Blumenfeld, 2005).

### Reflection through research and editing

Learning and understanding the learning process does not happen through experience alone. The learning experience also requires thinking about what you have experienced and reflecting on it. Stanton (1990) reported that when students' reflection is weak, "learning" may be "haphazard, accidental, and superficial" (p. 185). When the reflection is strong it promotes significant learning, including problem-solving skills, higher order reasoning, integrative thinking, goal clarification, openness to new ideas, ability to adopt new perspectives, and systemic thinking (Eyler and Giles, 1999; Conrad and Hedin, 1990). We saw this clearly during the research and editing process of *Finding Matilda*. Dewey (1910) defines reflection as the "active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 6). As the students began to review the footage they found that much more research needed to be done. Through consultations with historians and professors they were able to begin to piece together their work. Schön (1983) emphasizes that there is a link between reflection and action. It is the interweaving of thinking and doing that creates the best results. He states that one who "reflects on the understandings which have been implicit in [one's] action, which [one] surfaces, criticizes, restructures, and embodies in further action" (p. 281). Critical reflection creates deeper learning. By considering research/editing as a reflection, students were able to take what they learned in the field and create a deeper understanding of the subject matter as well as the person-Matilda.

### Project-based learning

As experiential learning is learning through experiences, project-based learning is the approach in which students acquire a deeper knowledge through active exploration of real-world challenges and problems. Students choose how they will approach a problem and which direction to go. Next, they utilize a variety of resources to analyze the problem and determine solutions. This type of learning is valuable because it is connected to something real (Solomon, 2003). In project-based learning, students drive their own learning through thought provoking inquiry and decision making. With Project-based learning students work collaboratively to research and create projects that reflect their knowledge (Bell, 2010).

### Digital heritage and digital media for learning

Digital heritage is the process of making cultural heritage available to the public through the use of technologies. Digital heritage often refers to the digitization of existing analogue resources. For this paper digital heritage is being considered as a digital work that preserves heritage.

According to the definition from UNESCO, any digital content which possesses cultural values, either in the form of 2D (such as text, image and motion pictures), or 3D (such as navigational virtual environment, three-dimensional objects) belongs to digital heritage (Rahaman, 2012).

Digital technologies present many new possibilities for the creative interpretation and presentation of heritage (King et al., 2016). Engagement with heritage, particularly for younger people, is often through digital surrogates such as video and film (Economou, 2015).

Digital media can be transformative as a learning tool for

students.

In the *State of Video in Education* report by the Huffington Post, 500 educational professionals from across 300 institutions agreed that video has the potential to create a real impact on education. These scholars noted that video can:

1. Change the way students learn
2. Boost attendance
3. Create stronger alumni relations
4. Increase the chances for success
5. Influence learning outcomes and the overall students' experience

Forrester Research estimates that since 90% of the information transmitted to the brain is visual and it is processed much faster than text, he concludes that video can improve learning and increase retention (Tsur, 2014).

Using film to teach history is not a new concept. Most schools in the United States have a vast library of historical video learning tools. Historical film media is a solid teaching resource in history classrooms (Donnelly, 2014; Marcus and Stoddard, 2007; Russell, 2012).

Young people are totally immersed in digital media representations and find it to be a more comfortable way to learn, as it is what they have grown up using. As Briley and Pultorak would suggest "...a great deal of what students, and perhaps the general public, "know" about the past comes not from textbooks or teachers but from... movies" (Briley, 2002; Pultorak, 1992). Teachers find that movies tap into youth popular culture and increase student attention and motivation.

Films are able to discuss events of the past that might be difficult for teachers to explain due to the sensitive or horrific nature of these events. Anti-Semitism is one of these areas that teacher have a difficult time explaining (Stoddard et al., 2017).

Digital media that address controversial issues in history; by making connections from the past to the present is making strong connections with young people.

In Figure 1 from *Teaching History With Film* (Marcus et al., 2018) you will see that, when surveyed, students felt that watching a film helps them to make mental pictures of what the past must have been like. It also helps them to discuss history better than reading in historical text.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Experiential and project-based learning was present immediately as students began their journey to Lithuania. For the filming of this project we traveled with archeologists, Dr. Richard Freund and geoscientists, Dr. Harry Jol and Dr. Phillip Reeder. Armed with Ground Penetrating Radar equipment, maps and the promise of interviews with survivors and those with first-hand knowledge we travelled to three parts of Lithuania looking for answers.

We started our investigation and research in Vilnius with a trip to the Great Synagogue as well as Vilnius University. The Great Synagogue was the oldest and most significant monument in Lithuanian Jewry (Seligman, 2015). We considered the "Jerusalem of the North" until it was destroyed during World War 2. We joined the team of archaeologists as they worked on a current project (begun in 2016) to unearth the original synagogue which dates back to 1633. In preparing to understand the life and heritage that Matilda would have experience

**Students' Understandings of Their Learning About History With Film (Likert Scale Survey)<sup>50</sup>**

	strongly agree (1)	agree (2)	somewhat agree (3)	agree very little (4)	disagree strongly (5)	% who agree or strongly agree	mean
1. I now watch television shows or movies about the past and wonder if the events are true.	4	8	9	6	2	41.4%	2.79
2. I now look for bias in television shows and films.	2	11	3	8	5	44.8%	3.10
3. After I see something on television or film, I will now go and read some information about it to see what other sources of information have to say.	2	1	6	8	12	10.3%	3.93
4. In other classes, teachers use films but do not require students to compare information in the film to other sources of information.	6	13	8	2	0	65.5%	2.21
5. Watching a film helps me to better understand what I read in textbooks and primary sources.	10	14	2	2	1	82.8%	1.97
6. Watching a film helps me to make mental pictures of what the past was like.	14	9	4	2	0	79.3%	1.79
7. Watching a film in class helps me to better participate in class discussions or online forum discussions.	5	12	8	3	1	58.6%	2.41
8. Watching a film, and comparing it to written sources of information helps me to learn about the past.	6	12	8	2	1	62.1%	2.31

**Figure 1.** Teaching history with film.  
Source: Marcus et al. (2018)

during her time in Vilnius, the students decided to not only take footage and conduct interviews here but also to help in the digging. They were able to interview the head archeologist and director of Excavations, Surveys, and Research Department of the Israel Antiquities Authority, Dr. Jon Seligman. Dr. Seligman gave them an oral history of not only the synagogue but also about the life of Jews in Lithuania. This gave the students a good foundation to move forward with on their quest to learn more about Matilda.

We next visited the University of Vilnius and spoke with History Professor and expert of Early Modern Jewish History, Dr. Jurgita Verbickienė. Dr. Verbickiene told us of what life was like in Vilnius during the early 1940s. She also took us on a tour at the University and shared stories of what life was like for Jewish college students during that time.

Dr. Verbickiene is also involved in a program entitled, Memory Diplomas. This program is working to give posthumous diplomas to those Jews who were either removed from or were killed due to the occupation during WW2. We spoke with her about having Matilda receive this honor. We shared what we knew about Matilda with Dr. Verbickiene who was able to find her in the archives and has put her into the process of receiving this honor. The students were thrilled to know that they were, in part,

responsible for getting Matilda her diploma- the goal of every college student.

We next travelled to Rokiskis, Lithuania, which is the area where Matilda grew up and ultimately died. Matilda was a rising poet who studied languages at the University of Vilnius in 1941. Matilda was Jewish. She also kept a diary that was hidden for years after her death, by a local priest. The diary speaks of the life of an average young college girl. Matilda wrote of being in love with a boy, who did not return her feelings. She describes arguments with her siblings and parents. And she also discusses her ideas about the war and how it was affecting her. In early 1941 the war had not yet reached Lithuania but it was closing in. From Matilda's diary we can see that she was similar to most college girls of any generation. The story of Matilda's death is a difficult one. The students had the opportunity to interview survivors, historians and neighbors of Matilda. Something serious and unexpected happened during these interviews: The students became aware that Matilda's murderers were not the Nazis that they were expecting, but her own neighbors who were carrying out the wishes of the Nazis. These people were called white arm-banders and they were considered "unfortunate collaborators" in the war effort.

Historically when we imagine the Holocaust, we think of

the horror of the gas chambers and the torturous life in concentration camps. But things in Lithuania were different and our students received quite a history lesson from those they interviewed. Lithuania was under Russian occupation during the 1940 time period. As history will tell us, Russia and Germany had a non-aggression pact. But in June of 1941 Hitler broke that pact and invaded Russian occupied territories. The build-up to this was brutal for the Jews. The white arm-banders were anti-Russia so they were, at first, sympathetic to the Germans. Jews became the scapegoat for the suffering under Soviet rule. This led to the mass murder of Jews in many parts of Lithuanian. These murders were carried out in killing pits. They would line the Jews up and shoot them as they would fall one on top of the other into the pits. Many of the shooters were neighbors of the Jewish people that had all lived in the community together. This was a shocking surprise to the students. As they heard interview after interview telling stories of this time, it became clear that it was all true. It also became clear that their story must be told.

In Rokiskis the students visited the place that was Matilda's home, the train station where all of the Jews of the town were rounded up and the stable that Matilda and her family were ultimately brought to. Through interviews and research, we found out that the white-armed banders were rounding up all of the Jews in the area. Matilda was away at college (in Vilnius) at the time. Matilda heard of this and took the first train home. Once there she too was taken to the train station. Then, Matilda, her parents, siblings and an aunt and uncle were separated from the large group and taken to a stable. It is surmised that the captors believed that the Olkins had money and they wanted it. When their captors realized that the Olkins had nothing they blindfolded them, took them by horse-drawn carriage to the woods, made them strip down and shot them, one at a time. We know this because there was a young girl who lived on the farm near the edge of the forest and she was a witness. This young girl is now in her 90's but is still alive to tell the story. Our students traveled to the barn, and from the barn to where the research pointed to the killing site. This is where the archaeologists began their work. After days of clearing and mapping out the area, led by Dr. Harry Jol, the GPR (Ground Penetrating Radar) began. After 3 days of GPR work on the site, the results were in. We found the bodies. We found Matilda. The students were overwhelmed with happiness, sadness and a sense of relief. They went to Lithuania with the mission of Finding Matilda, and they did.

Experiential Learning Theory is defined as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1884). The students gained knowledge and respect through this transformative experience.

Upon our return to the United States the students began to comb through the footage. Interviews, site

markings, b-roll, the entire experience was laid out on their computer screens. Now, to put it all together, we first sat down and created a working script for narration. This took hours of effort on all of our part. We needed to look at it as both a historical project and the story of a young college girl. We decided to have the students that were on the trip with us create some of the narration themselves. We asked of their experience and how it affected them. This was all brought into the script.

During this time, we also worked with Dr. Avinoam Patt, Chair of Judaic Studies and Director, Center for Judaic Studies and Contemporary Jewish Life at the University of Connecticut. He is also the director of the Museum of Jewish Civilization and previously worked in research for the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. Dr. Patt has been our historical reference on this project as well as putting the student in touch with the archival footage from the museum.

Learning through critical reflection has been evident throughout this process. The main evidence here is the completed film. The project is 20 min in length (Generation Z attention span). Since we are also using archival footage the ratio of footage to final cut is approximately 6:1. This means that the students are consistently reviewing 320 min of historical footage in order to complete their 20-min digital video project. This means that our students were learning six times more than the normal lecture/reading scenario.

Digital heritage is the process of making cultural heritage available to the public through the use of technologies. Armed with this knowledge we set out to create a project, a documentary, to help Generation Z students better understand this horrifying part of our history on terms that they can identify with. By making a documentary by college students, about a college student, for college students, we created a project to teach the Holocaust.

## Conclusion

Through experiential and project-based learning students were able to create a historical documentary by experiencing the life of someone who lived and ultimately died for her beliefs. Through digital heritage the audience receives the benefits of this knowledge and also learns history through the life of a student.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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