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Creating Family and Community Film Testimonies: Empathetic Listening as a Learning Tool

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the production of film testimonies as part of an academic course and how this structured educational process develops transformative competencies in learners. The semester-long course involves students from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds, drawn from all segments of the Israeli and Palestinian communities. Students study and experience the theoretical, pedagogical, ethical, artistic, and practical approaches of a psychiatrist and testimonial documentarist Laub and his writing partner Felman (Felman & Laub, 1992). They are also introduced to central authors in the history of documentary film. The process culminates in the students' documentation of stories within their own families and communities and the creation of their cinematic testimonies, which they present and discuss in class. The study aims to explore how the learning process helps students acquire transformative competencies as defined in the OECD 2030 document on meaningful learning needed today. Quantitative and qualitative content analyses tools were used to analyze the products of two testimonial courses, 19 film testimonials, and 32 reflective texts written by the students about the process they had undergone. The content analysis reveals that the students acquired three key skills: (1) taking responsibility, (2) balancing tensions and dilemmas, and (3) creating new theoretical and poetic values. The results also confirm the hypothesis that the pedagogical process of producing cinematic testimonies about social and historical crises can serve as a source of inspiration and growth by promoting empathetic listening and meaningful social change.

KEY WORDS

Difficult Knowledge. Empathetic Listening. Film Testimonies. Meaningful Learning. Media Literacy. OECD 2030. Transformative Competencies.

1 Creating Films as an Act of Critical Learning

Researchers agree that media education should inherently include the original production and creation of responsible and effective media content (Martens, 2010; Silverblatt et al., 2014). The dominance of digital media further increases the need for media education as a means of providing people with opportunities and tools for participation and creation in the present culture and media scene. The assumption is that people who are capable of critical reading of the media and its meanings, on the one hand, and who create and act through it in pursuit of fulfilling their personal and social needs, on the other hand, will enjoy some advantages (Bruinenberg et al., 2021; Jenkins et al., 2009; Walker, 2018). However, despite the positive feelings regarding media literacy and its contribution to learning, little research has been conducted on the development of the skills and qualifications that learners acquire during the educational process (Baylen & D'Alba, 2015).

Hobbs and Moore (2014) assert that the study of students' media productions should not solely analyze the works or the films themselves. They argue that extracting the educational investigative process, discovering the educational value, planning, cooperation, learner development, or the perceived audience of such student films is not always feasible based on these sources alone. Therefore, a critical examination of the educational meanings and products of the filmmaking of higher education students appears to be necessary. This examination should encompass the theoretical, practical, educational, and ethical knowledge required by students for their creations and their personal development (e.g., Adamson, 2020; Hakkarainen, 2011; Mateer, 2019; Nunn, 2020).

1.1 Empathetic Listening, Testimony, and Pedagogy

One of our goals was to examine whether the testimonial course model can serve as a means of developing listening skills and fostering empathy and sensitivity towards the suffering of others, particularly in historically and politically hostile groups. Thus, these ideas also align with practical educational research on facilitating encounters between conflicting groups through filmmaking (Ratner, 2020).

The concept of empathetic interview, which the course studies on both the theoretical and practical levels, is based on the work of a Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Laub (1937 – 2018). In the late 1970s, Laub and his colleagues initiated a video testimony project aiming to provide as many survivors as possible with a platform to tell their stories. This project later evolved into the groundbreaking Fortunoff Holocaust Testimonies Archive at Yale University, where Laub developed the empathetic interview approach with rehabilitative qualities. The seminal book *Testimony* (Felman & Laub, 1992), which Laub co-authored with literature scholar Felman, delineates the main principles of the approach, emphasizing the interviewers' weighty responsibility of assisting survivors in navigating their traumatic memories. Felman's pedagogic suggestion constitutes a main element of the educational theory that influenced an education scholar Deborah Britzman (2000), who employs the term 'difficult knowledge' to describe the challenges of teaching about murderous historical phenomena, such as the Holocaust, genocide, and violent political and social attitudes. Britzman's followers examine documentary testimony as a central teaching tool, utilizing it to expose students to issues of difficult knowledge (e.g., Stoddard et al., 2017).

1.2 Meaningful Learning and the 2030 Document: Knowledge, Values, and Skills

Recent decades have witnessed considerable discourse on twenty-first century skills, which include critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, and innovation (Ohio Department of Education, 2015). Binkley et al. (2012) have mapped these skills into four domains: thinking skills (creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, decision-making, learning, and innovation); working skills (communication and collaboration); working tools (information and communication technologies and information literacy); and living skills (citizenship, life and career, and personal and social responsibility). This and other similar mapping are based on the development of educational approaches related to meaningful learning that have developed since the 1960s. This learning was largely supported by David Ausubel's theory, which provided inspiration for many learning processes among scholars and psychologists, with an emphasis on learning that opposes rote learning, and as a cognitive process of construction of new knowledge based on previously existing knowledge and the ability of this new knowledge to be implemented in new contexts. Over the past few years, attempts have been made to redefine how significant learning takes place, including the psycho-emotional aspects of understanding (Newton, 2012).

Based on the understanding of the urgent need to foster teachers' and learners' readiness for the twenty-first century, in 2014, Israel began implementing a reform through the National Program for Significant Learning in the Education System. The program aimed to bring about a fundamental change in teaching methods used in schools, making them experiential, relevant, and active.

To address the future of education and the skills that will be needed in 2030, the OECD published a paper written by philosophers, policymakers, academic experts, educators, students, parents, and social organizations from around the world. The authors estimated what children entering school systems in 2018 would need in terms of knowledge, values, skills, and competencies when they became adults, in order to design and develop their world (OECD, 2018). The document defines competencies as an integration of knowledge, values, and skills; translates the skills and other basic concepts of education into a set of specific competencies, including creativity, critical thinking, responsibility, resilience, and cooperation; and encourages future syllabi constructed on this basis. The competencies found to be the most relevant for the evaluation of the learning process were transformative competencies (Helin, 2021). The three primary competencies used as criteria for assessment of the level at which learning is significant in the educational process are: (1) Taking responsibility, which necessitates making decisions and acting in a manner that benefits others. This involves expressions of compassion and respect, self-awareness, self-regulation, and reflective thinking. (2) Reconciling tensions and dilemmas – in a world characterized by inequality and conflict, students are expected to develop the ability to understand others' needs and wishes and demonstrate empathy and respect for their points of view. (3) Creating new value – according to the report, when we create new value, we are adding value to society, such as new forms of thinking and new social models, while developing critical thinking skills and the ability to cooperate.

The OECD follow-up documents (OECD, 2024) transfer the focus from learning, which the first document focused on, to teaching, i.e., who the teachers are, and the types of skills and curriculums they need to assist their students to fulfill their potential, thrive and create transformative competencies. The documents point to the importance of focusing on curriculums that include a change in pedagogy and evaluation, as well as in teachers' professional development, for example, by using curriculums that encourage flexibility and autonomy, also suggesting the dimensions for measuring flexibility.

However, while the present study adopts the OECD competencies, it also acknowledges two main criticisms regarding the learning standards documents. The first concerns the education system's increasing reliance on standards-based assessment, a trend promoted, among other things, by the OECD itself, through the use of comparative international achievement tests. The second criticism pertains to the diminishing status of art-related subjects, partly due to their intrinsic emotional and creative nature, which cannot be adequately captured using quantitative measures and standards (Levi-Keren, 2017). The perception of education system graduates as expected contributors to the country's future economy, coupled with the evaluation of teaching syllabi and methods based on quantifiable metrics akin to industrial products, inevitably diminishes the role of art education. When art education is assessed solely based on skills, achievements, standards, and career preparedness, it becomes relegated to serving technology and the market rather than fostering critical thinking and resistance or releasing the imagination (Greene, 2000).

2 Methodology

The present study aims to analyze how an educational process of creating personal film testimonials contributes to the development of transformative competencies that are necessary for life in the third decade of the twenty-first century, as mapped by the OECD. Through documentation, exemplification, and evaluation of the structured educational process of creating family and community film testimonials, we examine how this process contributes to the acquisition of the above-mentioned competencies.

The course in question integrates documentary filmmaking with social-educational action. Initially, students delve into the philosophical approaches of Laub and Felman, alongside those of documentary filmmakers. They then select a story they wish to document within their family or community, which together encompass diverse Jewish and Palestinian communities. Engaging in the creation of film testimonials, they showcase their productions to classmates and other guests, stimulating discussions centered around the presented testimonies. Finally, students compose a reflective paper scrutinizing the process of documenting, crafting, and presenting the testimonials in class and considering the theoretical frameworks explored throughout the course.

The main question guiding the research was:

How does the creation of film testimonies and their analysis through a structured educational process allow for learning that promotes the acquisition of transformative competencies as defined in OECD 2030?

The sub-questions were:

- How do the films' topics contribute to the development of these competencies?
- How does the familiarity between the documenters and the witnesses contribute to the development of these competencies?
- How do the students perceive the meaning of learning within the educational process of creating film testimonies?

2.1 Data Collection and the Research Process

The corpus of the present study includes:

1. Nineteen film testimonies created by 35 students (30 women and five men) who participated in two semester-long undergraduate courses.
2. Thirty-two reflections written by the students who participated in the two courses. The reflections were written based on the following structured guide:

- a) Analyze the meetings with the witness while working on the testimony, the emotional coping, and your role as a listener.
- b) Discuss the cultural, social, and educational aspects of the testimony you have created.
- c) Consider whether you made any aesthetic cinematic choices.

2.2 Grounded Theory and Mixed Content Analysis

To examine the value-based and educational contribution of the testimonial courses, we analyzed the films' thematic characteristics and the familiarity between the witnesses and the filmmakers using grounded theory. This approach aims to create a theory from the raw data collected in the field, which best represent the studied phenomenon, rather than relying solely on existing theories (Kassan & Kramer-Nevo, 2010; Shimoni, 2016). The present study used a two-stage analysis: (1) Using the definitions provided by the filmmakers themselves of their films' topics and the familiarity and connection between the witnesses and the documenters according to the students' reports. (2) Content mapping carried out by the two researchers who examined the films' topics (both overt and covert), providing an overview regarding the entire corpus of films, their content, and the production process. In the second stage of the study, we analyzed the students' reflective comments using quantitative and qualitative mixed content analysis. A mixed analysis method challenges the dichotomous division between qualitative and quantitative and is particularly suitable for this type of research, which is based on interpretation and participant perception (e.g., Eylon & Sabar-Ben-Yehoshua, 2010; Mayring, 2014). The content analysis method was developed for the analysis of spoken and written texts. It is considered to be methodologically clear, systematic, trustworthy, and objective, although there are always elements in the text that also relate to the wider cultural context to which they belong, and therefore their analysis necessarily involves interpretation (Rose, 2001). Bauer (2000) defines the quality of content analysis using cohesion in the framework of coding and transparency through documentation, reliability, and validity, suggesting an eight-stage model of content analysis. The mapping includes coding of both text levels: (1) the semantic dimension, that is, a certain vocabulary that the competencies document defined as belonging to each, as well as the general meaning of the entire text; and (2) the syntactic dimension, that is the general meaning of the entire text. The content analysis included a mapping of the students' written statements and their analysis according to the above mentioned three competency categories which the OECD 2030 document defined as transformative competencies: taking responsibility, reconciling tensions and dilemmas, and creating new value. The content analysis was carried out by the two researchers, first separately and then together. The comments were sorted and divided into tables according to the criteria of the three transformative competencies, classifying similar answers together. We compared the coding schemes and used their similarities and differences to refine the analysis by combining indistinguishable categories. For example, at the beginning of the coding process, we classified the data so that "creating new value" included three components: theoretical, ethical, and aesthetic value. Following the analysis, we realized it was impossible to make this distinction within the students' reflections. We combined the values in the third category, which we redefined as 'creating theoretical and poetic values'.

A major aspect of the aims and content of the course was a discussion of the ethical dilemmas of documentary filmmaking, and the dangers of exposure that are a natural part of testifying and making documentary films. The research process was based on written permission provided by all the students, and all the identifying details of both the students and the witnesses were kept confidential. Another ethical issue considered was the authors' involvement in the course as both lecturers and researchers.

3 Results

3.1 Mapping the Content of the Films

Ten of the 19 films analyzed deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including wars, serious terrorist attacks, returning occupied territory as part of a peace process, and the effects of these events – in the form of physical injuries, bereavement, post-trauma, and human rights violations – on civilians and soldiers. The second most common category, accounting for four films, includes topics of immigration to Israel, including experiences of antisemitism in the country of origin and absorption difficulties in Israel, such as poverty and discrimination. Two films unique to Palestinian society deal with violence and discrimination against women in the Arab sector. One film deals with first- and second-generation holocaust survivors.

The most traumatic topic that the students raised appears to have been the experiences of both Jews and Palestinians, from both sides of the long-running conflict that is experienced by everyone in the country, and particularly how this bloody conflict has impacted the country's citizens. The testimonies dealing with this issue included testimonies of the Palestinian Nakba and the persecution and bereavement suffered by Arab Israelis at the hands of the security forces. On the Jewish side, some testimonies dealt with soldiers' battlefield experiences, and testimonies of terrorist attack survivors emerged from both sides of the conflict.

With the exception of two films about coming out and domestic violence – which, despite their local characteristics, deal with universal topics – most of the topics selected highlighted local content and attributes that are characteristic of the Israeli population.

3.2 Mapping the Familiarity between Documenters and Witnesses

Mapping the family ties and familiarity between the documenters and the witnesses they chose reflects that most of the students interviewed chose close family members: five chose a parent (four fathers and one mother), two chose a grandparent (one of each gender), one chose a partner, and one a more distant family member. Three films dealt with heroes who are friends, and five films dealt with inhabitants of the place of residence or members of the community. Not even one film was made in which the documenter and the witness were not close in some way. Some of the students heard from their parents or grandparents for the first time about a formative event in their past, allowing the witnesses to share their pain for the first time. This aspect found expression in the reflections that the students wrote at the end of the process: "S. has agreed to open up for the first time and to testify regarding his experiences in Lebanon, only because he wants to introduce his children to what he has gone through... so we tried not to 'dig' too much into his wounds and allowed him to choose what he wanted to share. It was important for us to give him the feeling of passing on a message, that his testimony has a role beyond his personal story" (L & M).

In one testimony of a father to his daughter, the father shared with her his memories from the Holocaust. Another father told his daughter his story from the Yom Kippur War. Other students chose to bring testimonies from the community outside of their family, wishing to bring these stories effectively to their classmates and wider potential audiences: "It was clear to us that we needed to make important cinematic choices, such as the sad, authentic Arabic music (particularly the oud) at the beginning, pictures from the destroyed village at the end of the film, and the emphasis on her facial expressions, in the hope that we receive attentiveness and openness from the Jewish side, which has heard very little about events from the Nakba. Making these choices stemmed from the wish to make the voice of our community heard, without going into the political-historical argument" (Z & A).

In this case, we can see how poetic choices of cinematic expressions served the documenters in their attempt to reach possible audiences, a point we expand on below when discussing the competency of creating new value.

One of the films contains the testimony of a post-traumatic soldier who served as a medic in the Lebanon War, as he recounts his experiences to his partner. This testimony joined that of others from the battlefield, exposing personal emotional wounds and presenting a poignant claim regarding the price of wars and Israeli society's failure to deal with the price paid by the soldiers and their families.

In another testimony of a father to his daughter, this time regarding his family's difficult absorption into Israel following their immigration from Afghanistan, he discussed the humiliating way his family was received as compared to the way his neighbors who immigrated from European countries were received. As she listened to her father, the daughter brought up the ethnic discrimination that Mizrahi Jews suffered when they immigrated to Israel – one of the major sources of tension in Israeli society.

3.3 Analysis of Students' Written Reflections regarding the Learning Process, Using Transformative Competencies

Taking Responsibility

The ability to take responsibility emerged clearly in the students' words as part of their role as 'listeners'. This role required them to allow the testimony to be heard as a mission and involved a great sense of responsibility for this testimony, as well as for the witness, his or her welfare, and the respect they were due. According to the 2030 document, this competency necessitates moral and intellectual maturity through which a person may evaluate and critique his or her actions in light of personal and social experiences and goals, and discuss the moral and ethical implications of these actions. "When listening to the testimony..." explained one student, "we felt we had a very important mission by making him...share the pain he had kept closed up inside for such a long time" (A). This dynamic is also reflected in the following quote: "During the filming, we decided to respect the witness and not make it any more difficult for him, so when S felt that it was too difficult, she was silent together with her father, and she offered him a drink and to wipe his tears" (S, A & H).



FIGURE 1: The Witness Rafi: His Childhood in Poverty and Deprivation after Immigrating from Afghanistan to Israel
Source: Aharon (2019)

This example is indicative not only of respect but also of empathetic participation in the witness's pain. Despite the pressures inherent in the production process, the filming crew did not push the witness, giving him all the time necessary to cope emotionally with the difficult memories that surfaced during the process. Taking responsibility also means acting ethically and asking yourself questions regarding norms and values. This aspect formed the theoretical and cinematic basis taught in the course, which, in the students' words, became a basic element in the students' works. "During the interview, P related that, through his connections, her father had managed to get an ID card for her sister and her husband. This is a very sensitive issue in Palestinian-Arab society regarding the Nakba, because he could simply be marked as a 'traitor' or 'collaborator'. I thought about this during the interview, but I listened to the end and did not want to judge, as this was not my goal in the interview" (Z & A).

Reconciling Tensions and Dilemmas

To reconcile tensions and dilemmas, the report says, students need cognitive flexibility, the ability to examine situations with perspective and complexity, and abilities such as empathy and respect for others and different views. To this end, for example, the students demonstrated awareness of the joint watching of the films in class and the role they have assumed in coping with controversial issues as part of the course. N testified that: "Our class has a mixed population with different origins and different opinions. Some of the testimonies presented were controversial, but all were personal stories encouraging identification. I believe that everyone who went out to film a testimony thought of the class population... So, I think that, like me, everyone thought about how to present the events to leave things authentic, real, and respectful to the witnesses, but at the same time not hurtful to the students".

H emphasized the importance of the academic course in which the students encountered testimonies, in the absence of a place where certain narratives can be heard outside of the course. In the case of the evacuation of Gush Katif and the uprooting of Jewish settlements due to the agreement signed, H noted "the importance of this testimony in the existing 'testimony basket', as this is part of Israeli history that is not heard in many spaces, only in certain sectors..."

CH and N use terminology relating to the intensity of the experience, multiple narratives, and complexity in addition to the fragility of the realities present in the film testimonies: "The intensity of the many testimonies was an extremely powerful experience... I suddenly realized how fragile and not to be taken for granted our reality is. How much we walk on thin ice, trying not to become injured by the abundance of narratives locked within each other. I felt that the only chance of something changing would be if we continue to unveil the personal stories and the painful places to one another, simply and cleanly".

Creating New Value

The unique ethical competencies of the course functioned side by side with additional learning competencies that can be identified, including the competency of creating new value using critical thinking and creativity while cooperating with others. In their films and writings, the students testified to the creation of new value regarding both theoretical and poetic-aesthetic aspects, also related to the ethics of creating film testimonies. Thus, for example, the student's writing made repeated mention of the cinematic use of silence, and demonstrated awareness of the fact that the testimony comes across through silence as well, together with editing or filming limitations: "I handed in the testimony full of silences...I felt that that is where I, and I believe also the audience, could really experience N, along with the pain..." (H).

H then continued to explain how she integrated the theory (Laub) and the film from a cinematic point of view, using silence as a basic element: "Dori Laub also mentions the importance of silence, which serves the witnesses as a place to escape to... I felt that based on the slogans, N is undergoing an internal process of re-experiencing the trauma, with the silences being the only testimonies of this".

That is, we observe an integration between Laub's theory and the film testimony and the aesthetics the students chose to use. Despite the film including only "talking heads" and paying a price for a lack of cinematic poetics in aspects of action and space, the students were aware of this price and discussed it in their writing. However, they also testified to what they gained by focusing on the witness's spoken content and the fact that this helped them develop the ability to listen more closely. "How much power is there in a clean, sharp frontal testimony? We don't always have to provide another level of visuals, as this way the words enter you as you are unable to ignore them, and the role of the listener, 'the witness of the witness', gains added value" (N & CH).

On the one hand, the students internalized and expressed awareness of the poetic process due to the public screening of the testimonies in class and their influence on the audience, which became partner to the testimonies; on the other hand, they connected all of this with Felman's theory, which regards art's pedagogical power to testify: "Artistically speaking, Felman writes that to testify means to create a performative speaking act. The screening we had was such an act – a cultural, artistic event that created a conversation with the audience" (A & M). "After we screened the testimony, there was another kind of discourse, even if it was not very prolific. It was a discourse not stemming from a logical, theoretical place, but rather involving the experience, so that, according to Felman, the testimony changes from theory into a life event, which includes endless learning" (A).

Based on the ethical and pedagogical commitment to bring the testimonies to their classmates along with potential future students, the students demonstrated awareness of the cinematic choices they made in pursuit of the effective presentation of the testimony: "Indeed, there were cinematic aesthetic thoughts about the frame, lighting, editing, etc. We chose to bring archival segments so that the audience could better connect to her story" (D & S). "We decided to film Omer outside, in the open air, in his yard, where he feels comfortable on the one hand, and on the other...it will have something that's not estranged from the Lebanon story...something that will provide some kind of counterforce to the story, which exposes a complicated tale and disturbing statements and conclusions about the IDF and sending boys into battle" (N & CH).



FIGURE 2: The Witness Omer: Testimony of a Difficult Battle During his Service in the IDF in the First Lebanon War
Source: Rotem (2019)

4 Discussion

This study examines how an educational process of creating family and community films can help students acquire the transformative competencies defined in the OECD 2030 document. To this end, both the films and the students' written reflections were analyzed to evaluate the learning process during the course. The starting point of the course syllabus was the assuming of personal responsibility and empathy toward the witnesses and their communities, as well as the development of a commitment to them to introduce their testimony to the public social space of the audience in the most influential way possible. In addition, the creative, poetic aspect of film testimonies emphasizes minimalist aesthetics rather than complex film language to sharpen the messages of the testimonies and to create a deep emotional connection between the audience and the experiences of the witnesses. This aspect was added as a complementary, value-based theoretical layer to the foundation of ethical action based on the study of the concept of witnessing. Thus, the course's creative learning process is enriched by an additional layer that goes beyond Laub's teachings, which focus on listening to witnesses, but lack the additional commitment to carry their testimony into society. This layer is expressed in a commitment to the process of processing and mediation reflected in the students' decision making regarding directing, shooting, and editing.

Students testified to having experienced a deep encounter with the dilemmas, tensions, and fissures that are characteristic of Israeli society, alongside the development of a sense of universal human partnership and empathy. Since the entire course was based on the discussion of the ethical dilemmas inherent in all aspects of documentary film, these ethical issues were internalized by the students not only through the discussion of the theory studied, but also through the creation of the cinematic testimonies and their content. Students attested to having developed an ethical sensitivity to the witnesses and the ability to have a meaningful ethical discussion about how the topic is addressed in class and the impact it might have on the audience during the screening and subsequent discussion.

"Can the process of the testimony – that of bearing witness to a crisis or a trauma – be made use of in the classroom situation?" ask Felman and Laub (1992, p. 1). In this respect, the course adopted the spirit of the pedagogical experiment that Felman and Laub conducted, the importance of testimony as a teaching and educational tool, and the significance they attribute to pedagogical processing and the creation of meaning, especially in a time of sometimes traumatic historical, political, and human crises. The emotional quality of cinema allows testimony to become an empathy-enhancing process, even for people unfamiliar with the experience described by the witness. In this respect, the results of the present study confirm Felman's hypothesis that testimonies about overcoming conflict and crisis can serve as a resource for inspiration, growth, and social change, with an affinity to the field of education.

The course was structured to create an arena in which film testimonies are created, followed by a structured discussion. The work is collaborative, involving both the shared learning process of the theoretical foundations and the practice of creating film testimonies based on Laub's films. In the next phase, the film testimonies are created in small groups, screened in class, and commented on orally and in writing by the other course participants. In this respect, the course is in line with the fundamental finding of the OECD report, that learning involving knowledge construction, new value creation, and creative development must take place in an arena of collaborative learning rather than individual learning that is detached from others and from the community.

The themes that the students dealt with in their films can be situated along a continuum between the global and the local. However, most of the student films dealt with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the family casualties of terrorist attacks and wars that depict the ongoing suffering in Israel. As Israel is characterized by a bloody long-standing conflict and Israeli society exists in a unique reality of immediate life-threatening situations along with a

series of past traumatic events such as the Holocaust, wars, terrorist attacks, and internal social divisions, these themes are clearly unique to local Israeli history. Student-written reflections revealed that the course in question is sometimes an initial and unique opportunity for them to engage with family stories that express national traumas central to the history of people living in this country. These themes, which appear in the students' film reports, are not present in other educational or public institutions in the country.

In this way, the course enabled students to engage with what Britzman (2000) defines as "difficult knowledge", meaning the pedagogical management of issues such as violence, illness, death, and social catastrophe, and the processing of collective traumas that are difficult to deal with in the classroom and are therefore silenced. Britzman, therefore, can be linked to the ideas of Felman, who argues that dealing with testimonies represents a pedagogical opportunity to overcome crises. In this course, the students were not only confronted with difficult knowledge that the teachers imparted to them, but they also ventured forth into the real world to listen to and document the survivors and victims of history. In the next step, they processed the knowledge into short films, which they showed to their classmates and teachers. In this way, a filmed testimony about the Nakba presented by the students of the course enabled the Jewish students to contend with this traumatic chapter of Palestinian history for the first time, and the testimonies of Holocaust survivors documented and edited by Jewish students enabled the Palestinian students to contend with personal experiences from this traumatic chapter of Jewish history for the first time.

The fact that most students chose a close family member as a witness reinforced the educational view, which they adopted in the course, that they have a responsibility to uncover and recount family histories. This is an attempt to articulate and share with friends forgotten, repressed, and culturally forgotten historical stories from a personal and intimate point of view, using the power of the filmed testimony. In the spirit of the challenge of sharing "difficult knowledge", it presents an opportunity for students to learn, be present, and be recognized by other communities for this difficult and traumatic knowledge, which was shaped and sometimes defined by the history of the family from which they came. This personal element may explain the great motivation that characterized the students' work in the course, which combines theory and creation. It is also a recognition of the opportunity to discuss the issue of intergenerational transfer of trauma and painful, identity-forming memories within the students' families. The students' decision to bring testimonies from the familial-communal space into the socio-political arena practically enacted the perception of the role of film testimonies as a personal call for historical justice (Ufaz, 2017).

The results of the study therefore emphasize the importance of this kind of personal creation in awakening in students in general, and education students in particular, the understanding that personal family traumas are also the collective history of Israel.

The significance of empathetic listening and compassion within educational frameworks, and the necessary skills and methods of measuring their acquisition, have been discussed in the educational literature (e.g., Barton & Garvis, 2019; Kourmoussi et al., 2017). Our study is based on a humanistic approach of empathetic listening as defined by Laub: "For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an 'other', in the position of one who hears" (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 70).

Laub describes a total and present empathy as a condition for the existence of testimony. Based on our experience of accompanying student testimony, we learned that in many cases the documentation itself creates this empathy among the listeners, thus combining Felman's pedagogical perception with Laub's ethical-rehabilitative perception – the students experience empathetic listening during the testimony and learn to also adopt it when dealing with a social-historical crisis.

5 Conclusion

The findings of the present study point to the potential that lies in the creation of family and community films as part of a structured educational process to acquire the competencies learned by encountering 'others', recognizing difficulties, developing sensitivity to their suffering and struggles, and even encountering the narratives of confrontational social and political groups to develop values such as tolerance and empathetic listening, as well as intellectual and not just emotional skills for coping with the divisions in Israeli society. These findings echo Perkins' (2016) assertion that meaningful learning is measured by how much it impacts the lives of our students in the future.

In this spirit, future research should investigate the impact of the course on students as teachers, and the extent to which they have implemented all or parts of the course in their teaching as part of meaningful learning, particularly concerning teaching empathy and listening to others.

The original course design was aimed at prospective teachers of the media and cinema. In view of the results, we concluded that students from other disciplines who took the course without training in documentary film could also achieve a high level of performance and significant learning success concerning the aspects examined in the study. Based on these findings, the course was changed, as we realized that it would allow students to acquire basic skills needed by any learner in the twenty-first century – i.e., technological and practical media literacy skills. Since the media is everywhere and everyone, in their pocket, has a sophisticated camera on their smartphone and simple apps for film editing, it is easy to bypass the technological challenges and develop the principles and values that are important for every learner, as the present study shows. In this regard, the course has been modified and its objectives reformulated so that any student, anywhere can acquire this pedagogical and ethical method so that they can apply it, without being dependent on film equipment and professional training. The conclusion is that, before any technological or professional training occurs, training and experience should be based on human and ethical responsibility and sensitivity.

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