

Transgenerational encounters: Expanding the *For real?* VR workshop to adults

The Germany-wide tour of the *For real?* exhibition extended its educational scope for the first time to include adults, with the aim of gaining new remembrance-cultural perspectives on the history of National Socialism. Older visitors often showed reservations about the new technologies and tended to associate digital exhibits with younger generations. However, people of advanced age are also very interested in critically examining innovative ways of presenting history, and should not be excluded from modern educational opportunities. In addition, adults can act as influencers by passing the knowledge they gain on to family and friends and integrating it into their professional lives. These considerations led us to adapt our proven workshop concept to an adult target group.

Target groups

For the adult educational format we deliberately sought different groups of people with a range of knowledge and a variety of professional or occupational connections to the topic. Among others, we held workshops for the general public, college students, police officers and specialists in the field. This diversity required a flexible approach to conducting the workshops in order to meet different expectations.

Another special feature of the adult target group was its broad range of ages that encompassed multiple generations and various types of previous experience. Although the age range posed a challenge to the workshop design, it also offered unique opportunities for transgenerational dialogue on the history of National Socialism and a culture of remembrance. Young people today have hardly any opportunities to speak with witnesses of the Nazi period. Older generations, by contrast, did have that possibility. Visits by Holocaust survivors or other witnesses of the period were increasingly integrated into school curricula in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the 1970s, and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in the 1980s. After German reunification in 1990, interest remained

high and ever more witnesses were invited to speak at schools. As a result, workshop participants aged 30 and over could answer more specific questions about live discussions with Holocaust survivors. That gave them a basis for comparing and evaluating the reception of analogue versus digital eyewitness interviews.

Challenges involved in reaching this heterogeneous target group were another reason to expand the workshop's educational aims.

Educational aims

The educational work with adults pursued the same general aims as those for young people: gaining greater familiarity with the historical content, understanding the technology, sharpening media skills, and placing historical knowledge in reference to today. The first aim, that of gaining familiarity with the historical content, focused on expanding participants' knowledge of the crimes of the Nazi period via intensive exposure to eyewitnesses' life stories and reports. At the same time, participants were encouraged to acquire a substantive understanding of the VR technology by trying it out and experiencing how it can be used today to convey the history of the National Socialist period. Media skills were to be sharpened by critically examining how the VR experience is produced and applied. And finally, participants were ideally also expected to draw connections to current events and to their own local or regional histories.

The adult workshops had the additional aim of encouraging ethical reflection and dialogue on a digital culture of remembrance. Topics included how the VR technology affected the Holocaust survivors and vice versa, and the moral questions that thereby arose. To foster dialogue on the culture of remembrance, the workshops specifically created space for discussing the potential and limitations of digital formats.

Workshop structure and observations

The adult workshops took the same station-based form used successfully with the younger focus group, to enable researchers to compare it between age groups. The truck's small storage space limited the amount of materials it could carry. The workshops were held inside the truck and led by two educational specialists and one technical support person. Like the version for young people, they were 90 minutes in length with the following structure: greeting (15 minutes), work at the stations (60 minutes) and reflection (15 min-

utes). Participants were limited in number to 24, and could spend 10 minutes at each of the six stations.

The greeting was held outside the truck. The leaders introduced themselves, followed by the participants briefly with their names, ages and expectations. Asked about previous experience with eyewitness reports from the National Socialist period, participants often mentioned their family members. “Idea cards” (*Impulskarten*) were used instead of e.g. exercise sheets to lessen the schoolroom character and encourage open dialogue.

Station 1: VR application

Participants tried out the VR application independently and then discussed their impressions. Many described it as deeply immersive, and the design of the VR space as having a powerful effect. Some found themselves nodding their heads or sighing in affirmation. However, they expressed the desire for greater interactive possibilities such as the chance to ask their own questions. Like the young people, they wanted more time with the application. The adults, at least, could be offered an additional session with the VR headset after the workshop. Compared to the tent-based version of the mobile exhibition, the properties of the truck reduced complaints about external noise (e.g. traffic). Its interior was also perceived as protected and therefore more conducive to concentrating on the VR application.

Station 2: Production at Volucap

A three-minute video showed how the interviews were conducted at the volumetric studio. Participants worked through a few questions about the recording process and then shared their impressions of the first station. Discussion of the 3D videos’ strengths and weaknesses depended greatly on participants’ previous knowledge. The less they had, the more quickly the group returned to the feedback task. It was helpful if a workshop leader was nearby and could answer questions about the recording process.

Station 3: Biographies

Intensive exposure to the survivors’ life stories prompted lively discussions about the reasons and motivations for giving testimony. Here participants usually brought up their previous exposure to eyewitness accounts of the Nazi period, and often told emotional stories

about family members. This station had a pronounced personal and affective character.

Station 4: Orientation sentences

This station examined further technical aspects of the VR production, namely orientation sentences such as “Would you like to ask more?”. These constructed moments from the production process were not used in the VR application, but could potentially support the immersive quality of the digital encounter. Some of the survivors had difficulty grasping their purpose or parts of the recording situation in general, leading to misunderstandings or uncertainties. The technical aspects of VR production prompted heated debate with widely divergent views. Some participants considered the recording situation excessively demanding and therefore ethically inadmissible for some of the interviewees, whereas others focused on benefits for the immersive experience. Agreement was generally reached that respect is essential when making the recordings.

Station 5: Interviews with Ruth Winkelmann

A direct comparison of a 2D and 3D recording of the same eyewitness elicited a range of responses at this station. The 2D recording was considered more relaxed and “authentic” and its interview situation more natural. The VR application, by contrast, was considered more striking, emotionally accessible and comparable to a live encounter. Participants found it difficult to state a clear preference, because the two formats could have different respective purposes.

Station 6: Exercise with one’s own memories

This station’s role play asked participants to recall memories from their childhood or recent past. It highlighted the complexity of human memory and enhanced understanding of the eyewitnesses’ challenges. Mixed-age groups held especially fruitful discussions about different ways of remembering. Groups with similar-aged members concentrated more on emotions and what went into the decisions to select certain memories.

The concluding discussion focused on the subjective reception of the VR experience. Participants reflected on positive as well as critical aspects and considered to what extent the virtual space can be viewed as an authentic encounter. Attention was devoted to differ-

ences between the 3D and 2D recordings and to whether VR enables emotional access to the history of the National Socialist period. Some participants expressed a desire to know more about the role of eyewitnesses and the opportunities and limitations of their work for the teaching of history. Overall, participants described the workshop as enriching their understanding of the history of National Socialism and of ways of conveying this history in a future culture of remembrance.

Conclusion

This initial expansion of the mobile VR exhibition's target group to adults proved very rewarding and opened new perspectives for the project. Participants' different generations and previous experiences formed a fruitful basis for detailed reflection on analogue versus digital testimonies. However, the work with adult participants also brought specific challenges that differed significantly from those for groups of pupils. The organizational aspects alone posed structural hurdles. For example, it proved difficult to reach this target group in general, which made the logistics more complicated. Bookings could usually only be acquired in connection with (community) colleges, night schools, institutes or other associations. Moreover, the workshops could not be held at the usual times because they would have conflicted with work obligations.

In contrast to a school context, the workshops could not be flanked by a structured lead-up or follow-up, and therefore required more intensive contextualization themselves. In addition, different generations differed greatly in their openness to VR technology. Young adults generally engaged with it naturally, whereas older participants usually had reservations or inhibitions that needed to be overcome. Older individuals also generally associated digital exhibits with younger generations and tended not to see themselves as target groups for these educational possibilities.

Participants from all age groups were able to critically examine VR technology, which indicates a high level of media competence and a nuanced willingness to consider new forms of education. Of special note were the intensive discussions of ethical questions that prompted often heated but invariably constructive debate. Sharing memories and family histories also led to very personal conversations and in turn to animated and expressive exchanges. Knowledge gained from the workshops confirms the potential benefit of immersive technologies for a culture of remembrance, but also shows the absolute necessity of ethical reflection and a respectful framework.

The workshop format had its limitations, especially regarding the time allotment and lack of longer-term educational guidance. Nevertheless, the adult workshops generated valuable ideas for further developing digital means of teaching history, and were an impressive demonstration of how different generations can jointly shape the future of remembrance work.

Fig.1: View of a workshop with adults, Potsdam, 2024, (© Wenke Wegner)



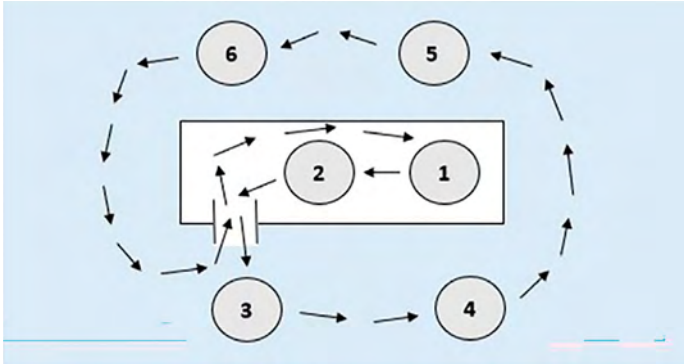


Fig.2: Rendering of the exhibition truck (© freybeuter)

Fig.3: Placement and sequence of the adult workshop's six stations (© Julia Baumann)

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