

A Testimonio on Passing Knowledge: Creating Digital Testimonios for Future Generations

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Abstract

This article describes a learning experience in the Digitizing Testimonios (CLS-4900) course, where we developed a digital testimonio, using video editing, publishing, and creating a lesson prompt for educators to use for current and future students. This project aims to empower students the opportunity to create their own stories, producing a unique perspective that only they can tell. With technology becoming more accessible via phones, students can develop their work in a non-film major setting, highlight the values of their voices and concerns of racism, classism, or provide stories to challenge hegemonic narratives within their communities. This class provided the necessary space to develop and create future storytellers and pass that knowledge on to students and continue this model from community college to K-12.

Keywords: digital testimonio, storytelling, community college, passing knowledge, micro-documentaries, ethnic studies, non-film majors, healing, elementary students

The first time I heard the word *digital testimonio*, I thought it was confined to the world of YouTubers or vloggers. After engaging with the creation of digital testimonios in an academic setting, I learned that they can inhere in classroom spaces. Digital testimonio, a term typically used by Latinx and Chicax scholars, is a form of digital writing and space that challenges, and complicates dominant narratives by providing a counter narrative experience that would otherwise not be explored. Conducting a digital testimonio, which involves storytelling with digital tools to record an individual's story and their experience, has led to the creation of videos that challenge dominant narratives and systemic oppression. More importantly, digital testimonios connect to multiple audiences by bringing to light the silenced stories of marginalized communities.

Despite the fear, uncertainty, and doubt that comes with creating digital testimonios, I pressed on and started, like always, by figuring it out as I go. This experience taught me that there are personal stories that can contribute to scholarship, while also bringing communities together to challenge policies, public health, and awareness. In this narrative, I explore my experience creating a digital testimonio, how I developed it, and the questions I generated that brought out community voices within LGTQIA+, while bringing awareness to a marginalized community.

My first attempt at making a digital testimonio was a midterm project for one of my undergraduate courses. Our professor provided a midterm prompt that required writing a 7- to 10-page paper,

interviewing someone (e.g., family, friend, neighbor, etc.), and talking about their life experiences. As I read the prompt, there was an alternative option at the end: *Digital testimonio*. I'll admit, the idea of making a digital testimonio, a video essay, sounded interesting compared to writing an essay. Given that I was reading *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg at the time, the stories for my digital testimonio concerned the LGBTQIA+ community and their struggles within the United States. In taking on this project and its theme, I reflected on the invisibility of this community. During my elementary and high school years, issues impacting the LGBTQIA+ community were rarely discussed, as their stories were considered taboo or kept silenced. Back then, I did not realize that there were LGBTQIA+ classmates: they were forced to keep their identity in secrecy in fear of being targeted and ostracized by the school and their families.

Here, I outline the processes I underwent in creating my first digital testimonio. First, I decided to look up references on how to create a video. While there are many video tutorials available online, many suggested starting with a phone. From there, I learned the basics of creating digital media and using programs like OpenShot, an open-source program designed for video production. The challenge was how to include scholarly sources in ways that the audience won't lose interest. I learned that introducing primary and scholarly sources can be presented within a video, while providing a counter narrative that further pushes the argument for the audience to understand. Much like creating an outline, it is a matter of how to present concepts and research within a short amount of time.

Another challenge pertained to the interview. How does one ask the right questions in a way that the interviewee's voice comes through and guides the story? My first interviewee was Meagan Amaral, and she agreed to talk about herself and her life experiences. Given the newness of the experience, I wasn't sure what to expect from this interview. But after a few minutes of conversing, it turned into a moment of bonding and relationship building. During the interview, Meagan recalls a moment when she proudly wore a pink dress with combat-style boots⁹. Her story and imagery reminded me of Sylvia Marcos' book, *Women and Indigenous Religions*, that describes the Mapuche tribe and their concept of cross-dressing: "Machi are individual women and men in their everyday lives, but in ritual



Figure 1. Film poster of Meagan's Voice. My testimonio project turned award-winning film in the OC Film Fiesta.

⁹ Rick Garcia, "Meagan's Voice."

contexts their sex and age becomes secondary as they engage in various relational personhoods that link machi, animals, and spirits.”¹⁰

The interview lasted over 2 hours, and from there, it was a matter of finding the best pieces to present in the final digital testimonio in consultation with Meagan. With some basic understanding of OpenShot, the editing process ensued. After spending hours editing and formatting the video to the best of my abilities, I played a draft with Meagan and made necessary changes that she and I felt were needed. The video was 5 minutes long, as required for the project, and I submitted it, labeling it “Meagan’s Voice.” Meagan’s participatory role enriched the development of her story in authentic ways, thus leading to a rich story of crossdressing, her family’s acceptance of it, and how her concerns were largely dismissed when it comes to discrimination towards LGBTQIA+ and people of color.

The video was well received in the class, and it was one of the videos selected to become part of the Otros Saberes¹¹ project, showcasing student-created stories, revealing unique life experiences from communities within Los Angeles County. My film was recognized by Jimmy Gomez, a member of the United States House of Representatives representing California’s 34th congressional district, praising and congratulating the highlighted works of not only myself, but also other students and classmates that are bringing light to marginalized communities and people of color. Eventually, the film was featured at the OC Film Fiesta, and was praised by the audience.

Classroom Pedagogy

About a year ago, I was invited to facilitate workshops on creating digital testimonios for prospective teachers. The professor was open to the idea of a digital testimonio as a vehicle for students to tell their counter-stories. I conducted a short presentation on my personal experience with digital testimonios, as well as techniques and best practices. Students created reflection pieces as a form of shared knowledge and discussed their experiences around film technology and storytelling. The purpose of my presentation was to provide step-by-step guidelines on creating a digital testimonio.

I began my presentation by introducing digital testimonios as a concept and a practical tool for preserving community voices and oral histories that are often not represented in the dominant storyline. I shared my own story, describing how I was alone creating a video essay at first, little to no guidance in creating one but learned through trial and error. I then gave a tutorial on OpenShot, a free video editing program, which is easy to use for beginning storytellers.



Figure 2. Teaching my lesson plan to an urban learning education class where students training to become teachers can apply this model to their K-12 teaching

¹⁰ Sylvia Marcos, “Women and Indigenous Religions”, (Praeger, 2010), 146

¹¹ <https://calstatela-exhibits.libraryhost.com/exhibits/show/otros-saberes--digital-testimo>

I want to continue building and developing digital testimonios as a pedagogical practice. My personal goal is to inspire future educators to teach digital testimonios within K-12. I feel that digital testimonios provide students a way to express themselves academically, counter hegemonic stories, and work toward healing in the classroom. A growing number of Ethnic Studies teachers are seeking ways to create learning environments that elevate student and community voices, especially those that come from historically marginalized positions in society. Healing, according to Villanueva, is achieved through communal gatherings and the recognition of each other: "Healing cannot be achieved without community, which includes having a healthy relationship with the ancestors. In this sense, the important balance of relationships is restored and harmonious"¹². By bringing digital testimonios into academic settings, educators will have the tools to bring students, families, and communities together in ways that allow them to tell their own stories. In the words of Delgado-Bernal, et al., "As a listener, another's testimonio is much like a gift—the listener unwraps the testimonio to reveal the heart of the matter. In doing so, the listener's responsibility is to engage the testimonio in an effort to understand."¹³

SAMPLE PEDAGOGY

The following sample was presented to K-12 prospective teacher candidates to serve as a resource and modify for a grade level of their choice. It is intended for teachers to develop their own project lesson plans to engage youth in the study and production of digital testimonios.

What is a Digital Testimonio? Digital Testimonios are counterstories-storytelling through media (film, podcast, etc.) that incorporates oral history interviews and personal lived-experiences that challenge dominant narratives.

Digital Testimonio Project:

You are to create a *digital testimonios* or video documentary that is between 5 – 10 minutes. This video project is open to those who wish to learn more about how to make a video essay as a non-film major. This does not require top-of-the-line programs and video editing skills but will challenge you and your creativity.

Objective: Design your own digital testimonio for the grade level of your choice. Be sure to include the class that you would be teaching in as well as detailed instructions. This is a list of learning outcomes for your consideration:

Learning Outcomes:

The purpose of this discussion is to help you practice the following skills that are essential to your success in this course:



Figure 3. Students actively asked questions about my approach and how it could apply to their own grade level of K-

¹² Silvia Toscano Villanueva, "Teaching as a Healing Craft: Decolonizing the Classroom and Creating Spaces of Hopeful Resistance through Chicano-Indigenous Pedagogical Praxis", (*The Urban Review*, 2013)

¹³ Bernal, Buriaga, Carmona, Rebecca Burciaga, and Judish Flores Carmona, "Chicana/Latina Testimonios: Mapping he Methodological, Pedagogical, and Political", (Routledge, 2012), 368

Module Objective 1: Students will explore how sources are used, diminished or silenced through a series of collaborative activities and readings that focus on developing a digital testimonio project.

Module Objective 2: Students will delineate primary and secondary sources about a specific topic, theme and/or event that can be used to develop interview questions.

Module Objective 3: Students will compare and contrast information extracted from primary and secondary sources from the assigned course readings that center on counter-storytelling.

Requirements:

- Desktop, Laptop, or Phone that allows video software and audio recording
- Openshot: <https://www.openshot.org/>
 - NOTE: You do not need to use this program, if you have another program in mind
- VLC Media Player: <https://www.videolan.org/>

If you prefer to use something that isn't listed here, please discuss it with me.

Language: English; Please include subtitles for any other languages or translator to match the audio to the best that you can.

How to Submit: YouTube; If you plan to submit them online from another domain, please be sure that it is public and viewable.

Things to Consider: Guiding students to create a digital testimonio will be challenging and it will require you to set aside time to also learn how to create, edit, and extract videos. You might also want to include a rubric/criterion for success to give students feedback. The following is a sample rubric for your consideration.

Criteria	Developed	Developing	Not Addressed	Total Points
Cinematography: Composition, Camera Movement, Lighting	5 points	3 points	0 points	5 points
Storytelling/Script Quality: Film is compelling and purpose of film is developed	5 points	3 points	0 points	5 points
Audio Editing: Clear and effective. Assists in communicating the main idea	5 points	3 points	0 points	5 points
Film Editing: Excellent use of transitioning	5 points	3 points	0 points	5 points

Creativity: Film shows imagination, creativity, thoughtfulness and mood of the film	5 points	3 points	0 points	5 points
Originality: Considerable originality, content is presented in a unique and interesting way	5 points	3 points	0 points	5 points

Figure 4. Criteria For Success: Rubric is a 30-point assignment

References

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