

The History Line

History making and teaching is always prone to ethnocentrism, nationalism and sometimes xenophobia. While playing an important role in one's socialisation and identity, history, because of the way is taught, often reinforces prejudices and stereotypes about other peoples or countries. Inter-cultural education should promote a reading of history that takes into account different perspectives. There is never only one truth, and this is even more true in history than in any other discipline. Listening to, or reading about, the history of others helps us to a better understanding of our own history.

Issues addressed

- Different readings of history and different interpretations of historical events.
- Ethnocentrism and nationalism.
- Empathy and promoting a broader vision of the world.

Aims

- To explore different perceptions of history and history teaching.
- To look for similarities in our education systems.
- To raise curiosity about and empathy with other peoples' cultures and histories.
- To generate a critical approach to our own history.

Time: 30 minutes - 1 hour.

Group size: Any size

Preparation

- Draw a calendar dating from 1500 to the present on a large board or on several sheets of paper.
- Pins or tape

Instructions

1. Invite each participant to think of 5 historical dates which are very important for their country or culture and to write their name on the calendar against each of the years.
2. When everyone has done this, ask them to say why those dates are important, what they stand for and why they have chosen them.

Debriefing and evaluation

Invite participants to say if they found any dates or events surprising or if they were familiar with all of them. If any events are unfamiliar to some participants ask those who recorded them to explain.

Discuss how and why we learn about certain events in our history and not others.



Tips for the facilitator

This exercise is likely to work better with younger groups than with older ones. It is particularly suited for multi-cultural groups although it can also work well with monocultural ones. In this case, it may be interesting to reflect upon what makes us remember some dates instead of others and what influences us.

You may prefer to write the names on the calendar yourself rather than inviting each person in turn to write their own.

Variations

The activity can be adapted and used with a one-year calendar. Ask people to mark on the most important holidays celebrated by different countries, cultures, religions, etc.

Suggestions for follow up

Always be aware that what people tell you may not be the whole story. Work on developing a critical approach to what you hear and read. Keep on asking questions!

We learn attitudes towards others not only from what we are taught formally, for example in history lessons, but also informally by picking up bits of information from what people do and say and especially from the jokes they tell. If you are interested in looking at the ethnocentrism perpetuated in jokes and humour use the activity, the 'Eurojoke Contest' (page 76).