

Curating a Museum Exhibition to Enhance Students' Understanding of Historical Interpretation



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Bob's strategy - Curating a museum exhibit to enhance students' understanding of historical interpretation - provides opportunities to engage students in historical interpretation. Students will learn that museum curators (like historians) interpret what they present to the public. Museum curators are involved in a process of selection, whereby they must make decisions about which exhibits to exclude and include and justify the selection. This in turn helps to construct the narrative or the main theme of the given museum exhibition. The audience/museum visitors, like readers of history textbooks, interpret what they see, read or hear.

This lesson plan is part of a ten-part teaching strategy series designed and tested by teachers for teachers. The overall aim of Sharing European Histories is to help young people understand the complexity, multiplicity, and transnational character of European history. For more information, go to sharingeuropean-histories.eu.



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Curating a Museum Exhibition to Enhance Students' Understanding of Historical Interpretation

BOB STRADLING

Like historians, museum curators are involved in a process of selection, making decisions about which exhibits to include and which to exclude. By curating a museum exhibition, students are provided the opportunity to learn about the complexity of historical interpretation.

OVERVIEW OF THE STRATEGY

All written accounts, museum exhibitions and television documentaries that reconstruct some aspect of the past are historical interpretations aimed at making sense of what happened at some point in time, why it happened, its significance and the consequences that followed. The most common approach deployed by teachers is to ask students to deconstruct and compare the interpretations of two or more historians who have written about the same historical event, person or development.

This teaching strategy takes a different, though complementary, approach to historical interpretation. Rather than students deconstructing historians' interpretations it engages them in the process of constructing their own interpretation of a given historical event, development or person. The students are presented with a relatively large collection of sources on a given topic and, working in groups, they are asked to select a sample to be used for a museum exhibition. This exhibition may be virtual (online) or actual (i.e. located in a physical space such as on classroom walls or in school corridors). To facilitate the production of a digital or virtual exhibition a template for the Digital Curation Tool can be found at [this link](#).

The students discuss possible criteria for selecting and excluding sources, they make decisions about how to group these sources (or exhibits) around themes and sub-themes or key questions; they decide how best to order the sources in sequence and they contextualise their exhibitions with introductory panels and labels for each exhibit.

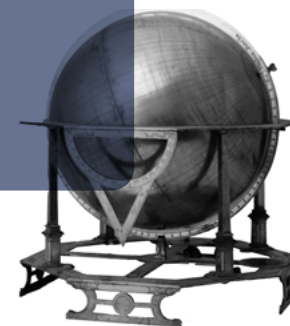
After the exhibitions have been completed, the students review each other's work and, in a teacher-led discussion, they identify and evaluate what each exhibition was trying to say about the chosen topic.

This teaching strategy would be best used either before starting a new topic or at the completion of that topic as a way of summarising what has been learned.

It should be possible to use this strategy with all secondary-aged students although it may be necessary to simplify some of the learning tasks for younger students and for lower attaining students. The whole learning process should take around 3 to 4 hours approximately, but some of the preparation work could be completed at home by students.

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

Through the interpretation of historical events, people and developments, historians and museum curators present what they believe some aspect of the past means. There will always be different interpretations of the same events and developments because historians and curators begin with different ideas and questions that give focus and purpose to the way they do their research; they work in different fields of history (political, social, economic and cultural history) which influence their approach; and their access to the available sources may be restricted by their fluency in different languages. Their narratives also depend on the questions they ask, and the answers, may differ according to context and when they were asked.



WHAT IS THE AIM OF THE STRATEGY?

This teaching strategy aims to provide students with direct experience of employing the processes involved in constructing an historical interpretation. It helps students to understand that there will always be different interpretations of the same historical events, persons and developments because each historian (and curator) will begin their research from different starting points and with different questions and purposes.

The strategy also aims to supplement or complement the more conventional historiographical approach to historical interpretation which involves students in comparing examples of historians' accounts of the same event, person or development, while providing a useful means of introducing students to a new topic or, after completing a topic, providing a means of reviewing and utilising what they have learned. Furthermore, it provides formative feedback opportunities at various stages during the process.

Finally, the strategy aims to help students to understand that historical interpretations are not just constructed by professional historians. Museum curators, producers of radio and television documentaries and makers of films on historical events are all constructing their historical interpretations of the past, and so are we when we read historical accounts, visit museums or watch and listen to documentaries and films about the past. Therefore, it offers students the opportunity to enhance their media literacy skills.

CURATION

Curation is required in museums because they have far more exhibits than they can ever possibly display in their public rooms. So a selection process is needed when planning an exhibition. Curators in history museums usually seek to either select sources which will tell a story/narrative or they select them because they are relevant to certain themes or issues which are important in understanding a particular topic. Once they have selected their exhibits they need to decide how best to arrange them e.g. which rooms they are put in, how they are grouped together, what goes next to each other, how they are labelled, described and contextualised.





What do you need to do to use this strategy in your classroom?

UP WITH ART: Preparing for the opening of the 46th annual exhibition Chairman William Babcock (left) and Harvey F. placement of a Fred Buchholz painting in the North Gallery Association in Old Lyme. This final show of the season will be held on the 10th at the galleries on Lyme Street

STEP 1: PREPARE THE MATERIALS

Choose a topic suitable for an exhibition. While a curation strategy will work with almost any period, event, development or historical person, it is particularly fruitful in history education when applied to transnational historical developments which transformed societies.

Option 1 – Use a ready-made collection

You will find on Historiana.eu a wide variety of source collections that provide transnational and multiple perspectives across a wide array of topics. You can also look for source collections using the Europeana search option.

Option 2 – Prepare your own materials

There are a number of transnational digital resources that you can draw upon for composing your own source collection. Among these are Flickr, Google Images, and Wikipedia. Also, a number of major museums have excellent websites such as the Rijksmuseum, U.S. Library of Congress, the British Library, and the International Consortium for Photographic Heritage. There are also digital resources that examine specific historical themes and issues, such as the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, the Adam Matthews Digital Migration to New Worlds resource with online material reflecting the experiences of diverse ethnic and religious migrants.

Student preparation common to both options

Students individually or in small groups should prepare a simple timeline or storyboard of the key moments or events relating to the chosen topic. The aim is to provide a context for the topic: what was happening (locally, nationally, regionally or globally depending on the topic) around the time that the given event or development was happening. If students have just completed a series of lessons on this topic then the timeline or storyboard can serve as a recapitulation and consolidation of what

they have learned. If they are about to start work on this topic then this will require some research online or in textbooks to obtain a context both for their exhibitions and for the lessons they are about to begin.

Students creating a virtual exhibition will have access to online source collections or search engines in order to access relevant sources. If students do not have access to computers, laptops or tablets, and they are planning an actual, physical exhibition then it will be necessary for teachers to provide them with a collection of sources from which they will be able to select samples for their exhibition(s).

STEP 2: USE THE MATERIALS IN THE CLASSROOM

Activity 1: Hook the students' interest

This warm-up activity gets the students straight into a discussion of how they will approach the task of curating an exhibition.

Explain that, working in groups, they will be creating their own exhibitions on a given topic. Either announce the topic (if it is new to the students) or explain that the exhibition will be a way of summarising the key points they have learned in previous lessons about this topic.

Mindshare in which students call out what they first think of when focusing on this topic.

Using a digital whiteboard, powerpoint projection or simple blackboard list their answers, highlighting the most common responses.

Activity 2: Students make a timeline

Students should review their timelines or storyboards and identify those aspects of the context which they think are most relevant to understanding the given topic. They will need this information to guide their thinking about the content to be displayed in their exhibitions.

Activity 3: Students review the available sources

Working in groups (mixed ability if possible) students should review the available source collection(s) or, if this is not possible, they should be asked to look through the bank of sources which the teacher has prepared in advance.



Discussion within groups

Students are informed that they are going to use a sample of these sources to create an exhibition on this topic. At this point you should remind them that they cannot use all of the sources in the online source collection or the offline handouts. They will have to choose a minimum of 24 and no more than 36.

Question 1: What will be the main theme (or focus) of their exhibition?

Question 2: Once they have identified their main focus or theme, do they also want to introduce some sub-themes as well?


Question 3: Now they should choose their sample of potential exhibits (24 to 36) that they intend to display in their exhibitions.

Question 4: After making their selection. What were their main reasons for choosing their particular set of sources?

By the end of this activity each group should have:

- A main theme for their exhibition;
- Sub-themes (if they wish);
- A sample of sources they want to display in their exhibition.

Activity 4: Curating an exhibition

 *The student groups now engage in the process of curating their exhibitions*

Task 1: Short discussion session within each group about how they want to organise their exhibition:

- Will they distribute the sources throughout the exhibition at random or will they cluster sources around some sub-themes?
- Will the source clusters be organised to tell a story or to explore different issues, or both?
- Within clusters what will be the sequence of sources on display?

Task 2: Members within each group should be assigned to write a brief introduction that would appear on a panel at the start of the exhibition. Their draft should be discussed and then approved or amended by the whole group. The agreed introductory panel should then be completed for display.

NOTE

The text on the panel should be brief, no more than 100 words, with short sentences intended to explain to “visitors” what this exhibition is all about: the main theme and the sub-themes. The aim is to draw the attention of “visitors” to the key messages of this exhibition.

Task 3: Based on the decisions taken in Task 1, each group should now decide which sources will appear in each room of the virtual exhibition. Members of each group should also be assigned to write short introductory panels (between 60 and 100 words) for each room in the exhibition to explain the thinking behind the selection of sources there. Each source will also need:

- A label briefly describing what the source is, the date it was originally created, the event, development, person or period it refers to;

- A commentary providing some contextual background to the source. The digital exhibition tool limits the group to a maximum of 60 words per commentary. This is to reduce the scope for plagiarism from websites such as Wikipedia or [Historiana](#). The curators need to summarise in their own words the contextual information to which they have access.

Task 4: The student groups arrange their selected sources - online or physically - to create their exhibition.

NOTE

If students are able to access personal laptops and tablets, or one is allocated to each group, then the groups will be able to use the museum curation tool on [Historiana](#) to display their selection of sources, using different “rooms” for different sub-themes. For access to the template of the digital curation tool [click here](#). **When using the tool, please make sure to make a copy first.**

If students do not have access to Information Technology it will be necessary to:

- Either allocate wall space in the classroom and/or space in the adjacent corridor to each group for their display;
- Or work with the class as a whole (rather than in groups) so that the teacher can upload the students’ source selections onto the museum curation tool using a digital whiteboard or equivalent, for example Padlet. *[Note: while some teachers may have the IT skills to be able to run several separate exhibitions online, it is likely that this approach will work better if you do not break the class up into different groups at the beginning].*

Task 5: Presentations

Each student group prepares a short presentation about its exhibition. The following questions should help them draft their presentations.

1. In choosing your approach, what were you trying to say to the visitors to your exhibition about this topic?
2. Did you aim to tell a story or to present certain themes that you felt were relevant to understanding this topic?
 - If a story/narrative: What was it?
 - If themes: Which were they? Why these?
3. Did you choose to focus on any particular historical dimension, such as:
 - The political;
 - The social;
 - The economic;
 - The cultural;
 - Ideas.

Why this/these dimension(s)?

4. Did you choose to focus on:
 - Individuals and families;
 - Groups;
 - Towns and cities;
 - Nations;
 - Regions;
 - Europe as a whole.

Why this/these?

5. When you were selecting sources, what were your **main** criteria:
 - Sources that best represented the historical event or development?
 - Sources that were the most important ones for understanding this event or development?
 - Sources that represented each theme and sub-theme?
 - Sources that helped to answer important questions about the topic?
 - Sources that were the most eye-catching or visually interesting?
6. What were your reasons for organising your chosen sources into different exhibition rooms?

Task 6: Reviews

Provide each student with a handout of questions to help them evaluate each exhibition in terms of the extent to which it achieved its objectives.

1. How convincing was each exhibition in:
 - Attracting your attention?
 - Telling a story about this topic?
 - Presenting important themes, issues and questions about the topic?
 - Persuading you that their choice of sources were the most appropriate for what they were trying to say?
2. Were there any aspects of each exhibition that you found difficult to understand? Were there other, better sources that they could have used instead?
3. Was there a clear link between the exhibits on show and (1) the overall introduction to the exhibition and (2) the introductions to each room?
4. Did each exhibition encourage you to reach any conclusions about this topic, i.e.
 - What happened and when?
 - What caused the events or developments represented there?
 - What impact these events or developments had on the individuals or groups or countries involved?
5. Finally, could you detect any signs from each exhibition that the curators had a specific point of view about this topic that they wanted to present to you? If so,
 - What was it?
 - Did the selection of sources support this point of view?
 - To the best of your knowledge, were there other sources that they left out that would have contradicted this point of view?

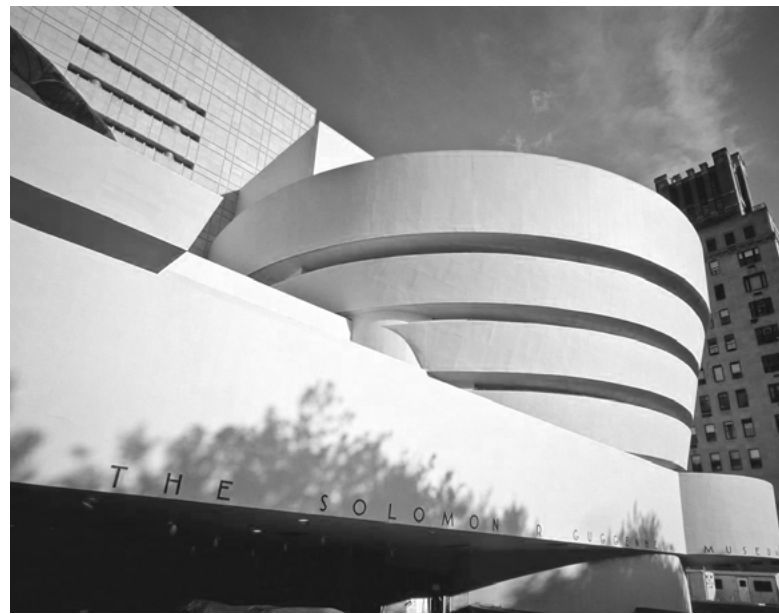
Teacher-led Summary and Discussion

Begin by reminding them (i) that they have been engaged in constructing an interpretation using samples of sources drawn from a larger source collection, and (ii) that there was no single correct way of presenting this topic. It all depended on the sources they selected, the issues they wanted to focus upon and the story they wanted to tell.

Attempt to summarise what you have learned from their exhibitions and provide opportunities for them to respond. For example, what was common to all or most exhibitions and what were the main differences in terms of:

- Telling a story or focusing on certain issues or themes?
- Seeking to answer key questions about this topic, e.g. what happened, why it happened, what were the consequences, how significant was it, etc?
- Showing clear awareness of the historical context to this topic? Did they make use of the information in their timeline or storyboard?
- Selecting sources that were appropriate to the story they were trying to tell or the issues and themes they were examining?
- Providing an exhibition that was interesting and meaningful to their visitors?

Finally, can you give any examples of what amounted to historical interpretations in their exhibitions?



WHAT OBSTACLES COULD A TEACHER WITH THIS STRATEGY FACE?

Starting from scratch could be very time consuming for the teacher. Therefore using a ready-made collection could be advantageous.

Producing a timeline or storyboard to provide students with the necessary contextual background is also time consuming, unless this strategy is deployed after lessons on the chosen topic.

Without a certain amount of flexibility in the history syllabus or curriculum it may be difficult to find time to deploy this strategy on a regular basis, i.e. as a summation to lessons on a variety of topics.

Lack of access to desktop computers, whiteboards, personal laptops and tablets in the classroom is an obstacle, but not an insurmountable one. As noted earlier in this chapter, this Strategy could be deployed using just the walls of a classroom and/or the corridor outside the classroom.

There will be terms and concepts that will need to be explained or simplified. Some of these will be substantive concepts concerned with the subject matter of history. Others are more concerned with the processes of the historian and curator. Two concepts in particular may need explanation and discussion: curation and historical interpretation. Brief definitions have been provided alongside the **Brief Explanation of the Strategy** at the beginning of the teaching strategy.

It is possible that some, maybe most, of the students have not been to a museum let alone thought about how the exhibits are chosen and displayed. [This short film](#) (just under 6 minutes long) was made by staff at the Victoria Art Gallery, in the city of Bath, United Kingdom. There are some parts of the clip that are not particularly relevant to the teaching strategy (e.g. the museum shop, marketing, etc) but there are some clear messages here for the

students before they begin the learning tasks regarding the selection and arrangement of exhibits, the importance of communicating with the visitors, a layout that takes the visitor in a particular direction, labels and commentaries that are less than 100 words long and use short sentences and plain language.

HOW COULD YOU MAKE THIS STRATEGY MORE INCLUSIVE?

Supporting lower attaining students

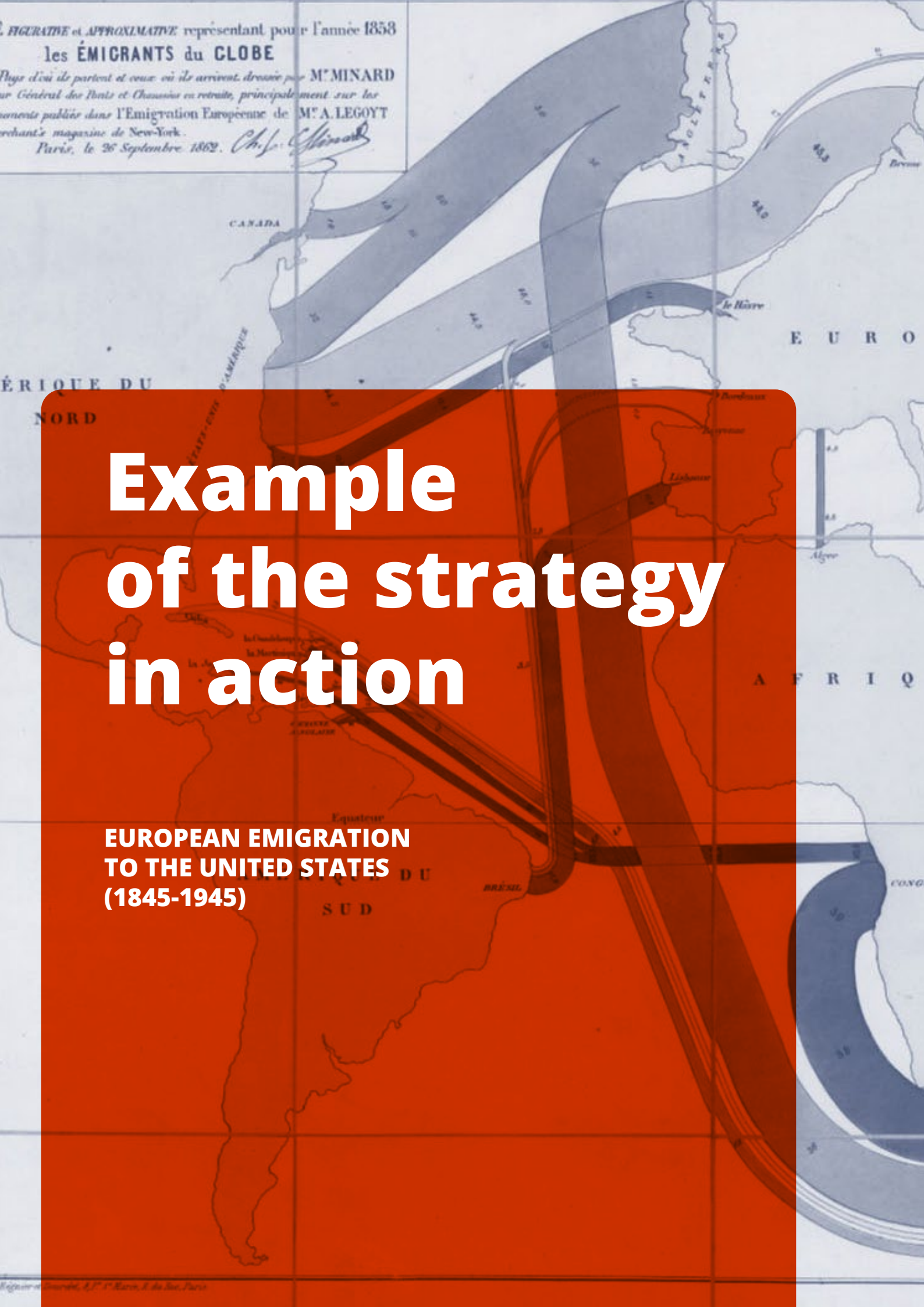
Much depends on the ability range within the class. With genuinely mixed-ability classes it should be possible to ensure that groups are also of mixed ability and roles are assigned to make best use of individual aptitudes: online research, writing panels, doing voice overs, labelling exhibits, positioning exhibits, providing drawings or paintings to illustrate introductory panels, etc. If the numbers of lower attainers far exceed the higher attainers it might be necessary to:

- Opt for a storyboard rather than a timeline (please see template Annex 2);
- Reduce the number of exhibits from 24 to 12;
- Reduce the maximum number of words per label;
- Distribute a help sheet on selection;
- Preselect the sources;
- Identify the themes which students can choose from.

Challenging higher attaining students

Higher attaining students could be tasked to:

- Carry out their own research on the context for the topic to be curated;
- Take the lead in preparing the timeline;
- Involve them in paired work to support lower attainers;
- Ensure that all students are assigned a role within the team and feel valued;
- Within mixed-ability groups assign a scribe who checks that each task has been completed and keeps a log of all of the decisions taken by the group.



Example of the strategy in action

EUROPEAN EMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES (1845-1945)

PREPARE THE MATERIALS

This example follows Option 1, and thus uses a ready-made Source Collection: **European Emigration to the United States (1845-1945)** which can be found on [Historiana.eu](https://www.historiana.eu).

For those of you familiar with [Historiana](https://www.historiana.eu) you can also access this example on [Historiana.eu](https://www.historiana.eu) formatted in the Digital Curation Tool at [this link](#).

There are three assumptions underlying this particular example:

1. This activity is deployed after students have completed some lessons on the topic of European emigration to the United States and have a broad overview of some of the main developments in Europe and in the United States during this period which may have had some impact on European emigration;
2. Students have access to some form of Information Technology: computers in a computing room, personal laptops or tablets, or access to the teacher's digital whiteboard (in which case it might be better to make this a whole-class activity);
3. Students have access to the Digital Curation Tool on [Historiana.eu](https://www.historiana.eu).

USE THE MATERIALS IN THE CLASSROOM

Activity 1: Hook the students' interest

Explain that later in the session they will be working in groups to create their own online museum exhibitions on the topic: European emigration to the United States (1845-1945). Also explain that this exhibition will be a way of summarising the key points they have learned in previous lessons.

Mindshare: Ask the students to call out what they first think of when they focus on this topic. List their answers on a digital whiteboard, powerpoint projection or ordinary blackboard and highlight the most common responses.

Activity 2: Student make a timeline

After dividing the students into working groups (preferably mixed ability) ask them to use their class notes, textbooks and online search engines to cooperate in producing a basic timeline or storyboard which summarises what they agree is relevant knowledge of the historical context for this topic. An example of a timeline on this topic is provided in Annex 1. A word template for a storyboard is provided in Annex 2.

Activity 3: Students review the available sources

Next, the groups should access the source collection: **European emigration to the United States (1845-1945)** on [Historiana.eu](https://www.historiana.eu). There are over 90 sources in this collection. So the first task for each group will be to select no less than 24 sources (or exhibits) and no more than 36 sources which they will include in their digital exhibition on this topic.

NOTE

If the time available or other constraints make it difficult for the student groups to review all 97 sources in the online [Historiana](https://www.historiana.eu) source collection the teacher may want to reduce the students' workload by making a prior selection of around half of the sources which the student groups can work with instead of the whole collection. To facilitate this teachers can go to [Historiana.eu](https://www.historiana.eu) and then log in or register to use E-Activity Builder to create their own source bank which can be saved to **My Historiana** for the students to access.

To help the groups make their selection of exhibits use the following questions to guide them through the selection process:

1. What will be the main theme (or focus) of your exhibition? In other words, what is the 'Big Idea' that you want to present to visitors to your exhibition?
2. Are you going to use the exhibition to tell a story about the experiences of European emigrants or are you going to focus on some themes like where the emigrants came from, how they got to America, what

- happened when they arrived, where did they settle, etc.
3. Which sources are you going to select to display in your exhibition?
 4. Why did you choose these particular sources instead of other similar ones?

By the end of this activity each student group should have:

- A main theme for their exhibition, either in the form of a story, or some issues or some key questions about the topic (e.g. what happened, when, why and with what consequences, etc);
- Sub-themes and/or mini-stories within the main story;
- A sample of 24 – 36 sources which they want to display in their exhibition.

Activity 4: Curating an Exhibition

The student groups should now be ready to begin curating their exhibitions. For illustrative purposes, here is an example of how one group set about curating their exhibition. To see the results using the Digital Curation Tool go to [this link](#).

Task 1: Decisions made on how the exhibition would be organised

1. 36 sources were selected from the Historiana source collection.
2. A basic narrative was adopted which focused on why many Europeans emigrated to America between 1845 and 1945. This covered: where many of them came from, how they travelled to the United States, what happened when they arrived, and, once they had been processed by the immigration authorities in their ports of arrival, where they then went and what they did.
3. The sources were distributed according to this narrative:
 - **Room 1:** The causes of Emigration (1845-1945);
 - **Room 2:** Embarkation from European voyages, experiences on board ship, arrival at Ellis Island where they were processed by the American immigration authorities;

- **Room 3:** How immigrants were received by Americans, where they settled, their occupations and to what extent they integrated into American life.
4. Within the rooms no decisions were taken about the sequencing of the exhibits. The presentation in each room included sources drawn from across one hundred years but they were not displayed in chronological order or by type of experience.

Tasks 2 & 3: Producing introductory panels, writing labels and commentaries for each exhibit/source

The main introduction to the exhibition focused on the growth of the population in the United States during this period and the European countries where the majority of immigrants came from. While the evaluation by “visitors” found this helpful it was thought to be too long (131 words) and some of the sentences were also too long.

Each room also has an introductory panel based on the theme being covered by the exhibits there. Again each introductory text was thought to be helpful in providing context for the exhibits but they were all around 30 words too long. However, the sentences were shorter.

A label was provided for each exhibit. Of these 36 labels 23 included a date relating to the event or happening portrayed in the exhibit. In most of these cases it was because the original source collection did not include dates for some of the sources. The most problematic ones were recent photographs of places which had historical significance many years before. The commentary can clarify this. In some cases the source was given an approximate date or range (e.g. likely to have been taken between 1890 and 1904).

A commentary providing some contextual background was also provided for each exhibit. The majority of these (60%) were around 60 words or less. Just 4 exhibits had commentaries of 100 words or more.

Task 4: Accessing the template for the Digital Curation Tool at [this link](#) and entering the introduction panels and selected exhibits/sources.

Task 5: Presentation on the exhibition

What was the main message we were trying to get over to visitors to our exhibition?

That many Europeans were “pushed” to emigrate by extreme poverty, famines, conflicts, and by political, ethnic and religious persecution. They were “pulled” to emigrate to America because of the economic opportunities, the farming land available and the political freedoms compared with their homelands. Voyages were often long until steamships were developed. Conditions in steerage, where poor people stayed on board, were very uncomfortable and people often got sick. When they arrived at Ellis Island some people were sent back to Europe because of their ill health, their poverty or their involvement in radical politics. Once in America many stayed in the city they first arrived in and worked in sweatshops, factories and building the railroads. Some took wagon trains west to settle in areas where they could farm.

Did we aim to tell a story or focus on a number of themes or issues?

Both. The exhibition tells the story of why and how people emigrated to America from Europe but it also looks at certain themes: e.g. their experiences in Europe, getting to America, being examined by the immigration authorities, how they were received and how they settled in America.

Did we focus on any particular historical dimension(s)?

The social and economic dimension, because these were the main differences between the emigrants and they affected what happened to these people when they arrived in America.

Did we choose to focus on particular categories of emigrant? (e.g. individuals, families, groups, places, regions, global, etc)

Mainly individuals and families from particular regions of Europe: The North West, Italy and Greece from the 1840s, and Eastern Europe from about 1890.

What were our main criteria for selecting sources?

Sources that illustrated why people emigrated when they did and what happened to them and sources that represented some of the different kinds of experiences of the emigrants.

Task 6: Review of the exhibition by others

1. How convincing was each exhibition:

In telling a story? The focus on reasons for emigrating was stronger than the emigrants’ experiences of getting to America and getting permission to enter the country.

In addressing important themes? Yes, although it left out the fact that many emigrants had long and difficult journeys across Europe before they could even get to a port where they could board a ship to America. This would have been good because it would have shown that even then, just like now, emigrants experienced difficulties passing through neighbouring countries as well as getting acceptance in the country they wanted to settle in.

In attracting your attention? Beginning with images of starving young people in Ireland and Polish farmers being cleared off their land by Prussian soldiers was a powerful starting point. It could have been even more powerful if the image of the pogrom in Bialystok was also included next to these two images.

In persuading you these were the most appropriate sources? In the green room you get the impression that most people were pushed to emigrate by local factors. There is only one exhibit which represents a pull factor: the railroad poster advertising cheap farming land near to the railroad.

2. Were there any aspects of the exhibition you found difficult to understand?

There was very little information to help us make sense of the map in the Red Room. It shows us just how many people in the USA today have European ancestry but it doesn't tell us what the clustering of ethnic groups in different regions and states meant for the development of the USA from 1845 onwards.

3. Was there a clear link between the exhibits and the overall introduction to the exhibition.

Not really. The main introduction is all about the population of the United States and how many were immigrants. The exhibits are mostly about the experiences of individual families who were immigrants.

4. Were there clear links between the introductions to each room and the exhibits there?

Yes.

5. Did the exhibition help you to reach any conclusions about this topic?

Without the high levels of immigration from Europe in the 19th and early 20th centuries America would not have expanded west or become a major industrial power as quickly as it did.

6. Could you detect any signs that the curators of this exhibition had a specific point of view that they were presenting?

Yes, that people were pushed to emigrate but also pulled to choose the United States to emigrate to because it was a land of freedom and a land of opportunity.

TEACHER'S SUMMARY

Focus: There are three main themes and these address important questions about European emigration during this period:

- Why people emigrated?
- What were their experiences as emigrants?
- What happened to them when they arrived in the USA?

Selection: The selection of sources conveys a sense of the bigger picture and the commentaries draw on the timeline and other contextual information.

Historical interpretation: It is not particularly explicit but a number of the exhibits challenge the idea of America as a melting pot welcoming all. Some of the selected sources indicate that people were more likely to be welcomed if they came from Northern and Western Europe and were Protestant. There were references to the emergence in the late 19th century of a new ideology - Nativism - and a new political party, the American Party, which was committed to protecting the interests of those who had been born and bred in the USA (Anglo Saxons rather than indigenous peoples). The issues raised in the exhibition have parallels with the 21st century and some governments' attitudes to refugees and asylum seekers. However, these parallels were not made explicit.

ANNEX 1: TIMELINE OF EVENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS IMPACTING ON EUROPEAN EMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES 1845 TO 1945

1840S

- Famines in much of Northern and Western Europe, often combined with land clearances, forced many to emigrate seeking employment or cheap farming land in America.
- The United States began annexing new territories soon after its declaration of independence. But the purchase from France in 1803 of the Louisiana territory for \$15 million doubled the size of the USA. Further territories were annexed during the first four decades of the 19th century – land which then needed to be populated.
- In 1848 there were revolutions in most of Europe as the growing middle class began to demand political and civil rights and constitutional government. Most uprisings were brutally suppressed between 1849 and 1852 by the forces of the old regimes. Many of the revolutionaries sought refuge in America and came to be known as “the fortyeighters”.
- The annexation of Texas in 1845 led to the Mexican-American war. Victory for the United States led to Mexico ceding California to the Union. Many of the settlers who then joined the wagon trains going west were immigrants from Europe. In 1849 gold was found in California which led to the Gold Rush. Many of the gold prospectors were also European immigrants.

1850-1870

- 1850s to mid 1860s: increased industrialisation in the north east of the United

States, the development of a railroad network (15 000km by 1850) and the development of a telegraph network all helped to create markets in the new territories and to serve farms and ranches which supplied cereals and meat. Immigrant farmers from rural Europe were attracted by the offers of cheap land near the railroads in the Mid-West, while urban and urban poor from North, West and Southern Europe sought employment in the factories and sweatshops of the cities in the Eastern states.

- 1855: Immigration was now so high that New York State opened Castle Garden – a small artificial island in New York harbour – to process new arrivals.
- At around the same time (the 1850s) an anti-immigrant movement emerged in the USA known as Nativism. They were particularly prejudiced against Catholics, Jews, Slavs and the radicals (socialists, anarchists and syndicalists) from Central and Eastern Europe.
- 1860 – 1865: Secession from the Union began in 7 Southern States after Abraham Lincoln won the presidential election on a platform of abolishing slavery. The Confederacy was formed on 12 April 1861. Civil war broke out between the Union and the Confederacy on 12 April 1861. Three days later four more Southern States seceded from the Union. The Nativism movement declined during the Civil War, mainly because so many Catholic immigrants from Europe actively supported the Unionist cause. There were Irish, German and Italian divisions in the Union Army, e.g. New York fielded 11 German regiments, Ohio six and Pennsylvania five.
- 1866: Unification of Italy. While this development was widely supported in Italy it began to intensify an “us and them”, “north-south” divide where the north became industrialised and wealthy and the population of the south became increasingly impoverished. The land could not sustain their families and the towns and cities became over-populated. Many emigrated.

- 1865-1870: more famines in Scandinavia and the Baltic States led to a new wave of emigration to the USA.
- Throughout most of the 19th century Poles, were cleared from that part of partitioned Poland that was controlled by Prussia. Around 2 million emigrated to America.
- 1869: the First US transcontinental railroad was opened. Many newly-arrived Europeans took advantage of this to move west looking for farming land.

1871-1920

- 1871: German unification. In the first half of the 19th century most German emigrants were Protestants from the north. After unification the emigrants from the German Empire tended to be Catholics from the south, unhappy about being ruled by Protestant Prussia.
- Although the United States had experienced some industrialisation in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, particularly in the manufacture of iron and steel to support the expansion of the railroads, canals and shipping, it was only after the Civil War that US manufacturing was transformed by the growth of markets for consumer goods and the development of new technologies and fossil fuels. These new economic opportunities led to a rapid increase in European emigration to America.
- By the end of the 19th century immigration had peaked with more than 500 000 arriving every year. Over 80 percent were from Southern Europe, and the Russian Empire, mostly escaping political and religious persecution, famine and extreme poverty. During this period approximately 25 million immigrants arrived. Most of them from Southern and Eastern Europe and the Russian Empire.
- In 1881-4 there were pogroms or anti-Jewish riots in the south-west of the Russian Empire, especially in Eastern Poland and Ukraine. More pogroms broke

- out in 1903-6. Around 2.5 million Jews emigrated to other European countries and many then travelled on to America.
- In 1892 the US federal government decided to take control of the processing of immigrants and established a federal immigration centre on Ellis Island in New York harbour. The anti-immigrant Nativism movement revived.
- During the First World War the opportunities for emigration from Europe were limited and Ellis Island was used as a detention centre for people deemed to be ‘enemy aliens’. At the end of the war there was an increase in emigration from the Russian Empire, seeking refuge after the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 and the Civil War that followed.
- In 1921 US Congress passed the Immigration Quota Act which fixed immigration at 350 000 per annum and also introduced quotas on immigrants from different nations.

1930S-1945

- By 1930, due to the quota system, the number of immigrants entering the USA had declined to around 150 000 per annum.
- The rise to power of Fascism in Italy and National Socialism in Germany meant that many of the Italians and Germans who opposed those regimes, and many Jews already experiencing heightened persecution in Germany, sought refuge in the United States.
- In 1945-6 the War Brides Act allowed foreign-born wives and fiancées of US servicemen to emigrate to the United States. Just under half a million gained entry to the States this way.
- Also there were many displaced people and orphans at the end of the war and in 1948 US President Truman temporarily suspended the Immigration Quota Act. It is estimated that around 600 000 European immigrants entered the USA during this time.


ANNEX 2: STORYBOARD TEMPLATE

TITLE

You have agreed on the title of your exhibition and written it in the box above. Now you need to decide what kind of story you are going to tell using a selection of the sources provided by the teacher. In each of the boxes below write short captions or titles describing the sources you have chosen **IN THE ORDER** you want to display them in your exhibition. It does not have to be a story with a beginning, a middle and an end. Instead you could create it around different issues or questions. The choice is yours.

ADDITIONAL TOPICS SUITABLE FOR THIS STRATEGY

- Mass migrations
- Slavery
- The spread of banking in the 16th century
- Epidemics and pandemics
- Colonialism from the 17th to the mid 20th centuries
- Trade and the age of sail
- Industrialisation in the 19th and early 20th centuries
- The emergence of nationalism in the 19th century
- Women's suffrage in the 20th century
- Cultural movements such as the Renaissance and the Reformation
- Crimes against humanity in World War Two
- The emergence of totalitarian regimes in the 20th century



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