

METHOD: A European museum of history



PROJECT

“Once upon today...” in Europe



AUTHORS

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PARTICIPANTS

10-50



DURATION

minimum 1,5 days



KEYWORDS

representation of history, narratives,
European history, rewriting history,
multi-perspectivity and diversity

Objectives

- Participants contemplate their understanding of European history and the possibility to create shared spaces of memories and histories in Europe
- Taking over the role of exhibition makers and educators, the participants have to make a number of practical choices that translate their understanding of history into a tangible concept for a European museum of history
- Throughout the process, participants become aware of different presuppositions, perceptions and beliefs about history and the way it should be told
- In finding a common solution in their group to tell history in a way that fosters understanding and brings people together, they develop ways to let diverging and even conflicting interpretations coexist

Overview

The method encourages the participants to think about the representation of history in a European museum of history. Participants split up in groups and are given the task to develop a concept for an exhibition that fosters mutual understanding and respect among the people living in Europe. They can freely decide about any features of the museum. This includes the name, place, the structure and form of presentation (including digital formats), the time period and topics to be covered. After this phase, they have to pitch their concept in a plenary session and receive feedback and critical advice from other groups. In the next step, the working groups are asked to develop their concept further, creating a narrative and deciding on specific concepts, events, processes or objects to be covered. They are also invited to work creatively, designing their own objects, media or other components of the exhibition. It is crucial to the exercise that the participants are encouraged to add their personal perspectives and stories.

Background

In 2007, Hans-Gert Pöttering, the President of the European Parliament at the time, first proposed to create a House of European History in Brussels. The opening of the museum is scheduled for 2016 and will give visitors the opportunity to learn about European history and the history of the European Union in particular: “The House of European History will be a cultural institution with a very specific scope, that of conveying a transnational overview of European history that is inclusive of its diversity, its varied interpretations and differing perceptions.”⁶

⁶ See European Parliament (2013): Building a House of European History, p. 8, online:
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/visiting/ressource/static/files/en_building-a-house-of-european-history.pdf.

It comes as no surprise that such an ambitious project has been watched with great interest from the very start by politicians, historians and the general public: Critical questions were raised, whether it was the aim to present history in a way that reflected the perspectives of the whole continent or to construct some kind of new European meta-narrative. In this respect, the concept for the permanent exhibition states: “The scope of the House of European History transcends national, regional and local boundaries. Its permanent exhibition will present a broader perspective than the summation of national histories. It will also reveal the diversity of European history and its interpretations and perceptions. [...] The development of the House of European History [...] is based on a dichotomy of objectives: on the one hand, the exhibition will convey a coherent historical narrative which will be easy to grasp for any interested visitor; on the other hand, it will raise awareness of the existence of a variety of different historical interpretations, points of view, nuances of perception and memory, so as to stimulate reflection and debate.”⁷ There certainly is some ambiguity in this mission statement that reflects the different objectives every history museum is meant to achieve: It should at the same time impart knowledge as objectively as possible, educate people about different perceptions and interpretations, trigger critical reflection and debate, but also foster better understanding among people from different countries and communities. Since its initial conception, the House of European History project has been controversial. From a critical perspective, it has been argued that European history should not be conceived of in the same way as traditional national history. In this perspective, European history is mainly a space of shared memories and histories which necessarily entails a multitude of places of remembrance spread across the continent, in particular at the periphery. It has also been argued that the inclusion of minority perspectives, a dialogue about conflicting perceptions and a focus on the Holocaust, Gulag, genocide, the colonial past, war and migration history will be crucial.⁸

Against the background of these critical debates, the method “European museum of history” gives participants the freedom to develop their concept fully, because any assumption about the place, form or concept of such an endeavour would effectively prescribe a certain understanding of European history and the way it can be told. For instance, the idea for the museum will change considerably when the place is not Brussels as the capital of the European Union, but some city in Central and Eastern Europe. Likewise, the time period that participants may want to cover will vary according to their understanding of “Europe”. Others may even decide that a single, central exhibition is not the right approach, opting instead for a network of exhibitions or a digital format. These are just a few examples to encourage trainers to keep their instructions to a minimum and to not give any specific advice on the concept or form of the museum. The only normative objective that is given in advance does not refer to the European Union as a political entity, but Europe as a continent and to the people living in it: How can European history be told in a way that fosters mutual understanding in Europe and brings people together? Yet again, the answer to this question may focus on positive achievements in some concepts, but on the downsides and conflicts of European history in others.

Preparation

As for the practical preparation, the following is needed:

- handout with tasks for each group (described further down);
- large papers and pens in different colours;

⁷ loc. cit., p. 22.

⁸ See Leggewie, Claus; Lang, Anne (2011): *Der Kampf um die europäische Erinnerung. Ein Schlachtfeld wird besichtigt*. München.

- for the creative workshops: a broad range of material giving participants the possibility to work creatively, i.e. to paint, draw, work with digital media / video / photography, build a model, etc.

Course of the workshop

The workshop includes six different phases. The duration of each phase can be adjusted to the overall timeframe. In the following time indications refer to a 1,5 day long workshop.

Phase 1:

Introduction (20 minutes)

The trainer informs the group that the next method will last 1,5 days and briefly explains the task:

“Imagine the following situation: The European Parliament has decided to commission an European museum of history. It has issued a Call for Proposals asking for innovative concepts. The primary goal of the project is to present history in a way that fosters mutual understanding in Europe and brings people together.”

“You will now split up in groups of 5-6 people. For this exercise it is important that you find a group of people with whom you would like to work during the next two days. Please also pay attention that there is at least one member from each country in your group.”

Groups assemble in different corners of the room. The trainer writes down the members of each group on a poster.

The trainer distributes the handout with the written task:

“Imagine the following situation. The European Parliament has decided to commission a European museum of history. It has issued a Call for Proposals asking for innovative concepts.

You are a team of historians, educators and exhibition makers that wants to participate in this competition. Please develop your ideas for a proposal, including the following aspects:

- History in the museum should be presented in a way that fosters mutual understanding in Europe and respect among Europeans.
- You are free to choose the name, place, architecture, the structure and form of presentation, including digital formats, the time period and topics to be covered.
- Reflect about the relation between official history, individual stories and maybe even hidden stories.
- How do you create interaction with the visitors?
- Give examples for objects, images and documents that should be part of the exhibition.”

The trainer informs the participants that they now have time to develop their concept and prepare a 3-minute presentation of their main ideas. The team also offers its support in case of questions.

Phase 2:

Conceptualization – Participants develop a concept for a European Museum of History (2,5 hours)

Groups exchange their ideas and develop a concept for their European museum of history. Trainers can walk around to offer support, but should not interfere with the group interaction or conceptual discussions.

Phase 3:

Pitch – Groups present their concept in a plenary session, collecting feedback and ideas from the other participants (1,5 hours)

Back in the plenary, the trainer invites the participants to sit in a circle. The trainer may change to the role of the president of a commission that has to select the most promising concepts for the European museum of history:

“Today we have come together to present a first selection of concepts for the future European museum of history. We are very pleased to announce that so many teams from all over Europe have answered our call and sent in their proposals. We are now going to hear presentations of the most promising concepts. Each presentation must be no longer than three minutes. Afterwards every member of the commission (i.e. all the trainers and the other participants) are invited to give their feedback and share their ideas. Please note: In this session you are asked to put special emphasis on positive feedback: Which aspects of the concept are convincing? Which ideas do you support and would like to see further elaborated?”

Groups present their work one by one in a strictly limited timeframe. The trainers should remind the participants of the positive feedback culture. They could even propose to start a statement with the sentence “What I like about your idea is...” Groups are asked to write down ideas that can help them to further develop their project.

Phase 4:

Realization / Creative workshops – Groups work out a sample part of their future exhibition (4 hours)

After the presentations, the trainer explains the next phase of the workshop:

“We have seen many inspiring ideas for the future museum. The commission now invites all of you to develop your ideas further and to work out a sample part of the exhibition. That means: you should now put your concept into practice. Of course, you may also take some time to reconsider your ideas in the light of the feedback that you have just received.

Please create a narrative for your exhibition and decide on one part of it that you are going to work out in detail, selecting specific concepts, events, processes or objects.

We also invite you to work creatively. This can include designing a certain object, creating videos or photos, writing a text, building a model, drawing or painting, etc.”

During this phase it is important that for each creative method or medium at least one team member is competent to give guidance and help with practical questions.

Phase 5:**Gallery Walk – Groups put the results of their work on display and give a presentation (1,5 hours)**

Before the actual gallery walk and the presentation of the projects can take place, approx. 30 minutes are needed for setting up the objects and models in the room, uploading videos or photos to the computer or testing the technical equipment (projector, sound).

The trainer officially opens the gallery and invites the participants to walk around and have a look at the different projects. Afterwards, all participants come together in a circle. Each group presents its concept and answers questions from the other participants.

Phase 6:**De-briefing (1 hour)**

In this last phase, the trainer thanks all groups for their work and invites them to individually think about the experiences they have made:

“We now want to switch back to our roles as participants in this seminar. Please take a moment to think about the last one and a half days. Which experiences did you make during this exercise?”

After a short time of reflection (up to 5 minutes), everybody is invited to share some insights in the plenary. The trainer may bring in some of the following questions to trigger the discussion:

- Was there anything surprising when you first started working in the group?
- Was it difficult to agree on an idea for the museum?
- Was it difficult to agree on a narrative?
- What was your understanding of history/European history in the group?
- Were there any conflicts in the group? How did you solve them?
- How did you solve the task of telling history in a way that fosters mutual understanding in Europe and brings people together?
- Are you satisfied with the results?
- Which of the projects would you like to see being put into practice?
- Do you think that it is a good idea to have a European museum of history?

Recommendations for implementation

The method can be adapted to different settings ranging from a short workshop to several days. However, in order to work properly, it is recommended to assure a prior establishment of a good working atmosphere, trust and reliable rules for dealing with conflicts in the group. Equally, participants should already have discussed theoretical concepts of history, made the experience of different perceptions of historic events or processes, and gained some insights in different ways how history can be rewritten.

It is not necessary, though, that the participants know about the actual project of a “House of European History” in Brussels.

Variations

With regard to the participants, it can be advised to encourage participants to develop alternative narratives in detail. For instance, some participants may find it interesting to create a museum of untold European history by actively referring to stories they know from their own life, family, friends, communities, cities or countries.