

Who we remember and who is forgotten: An online lesson plan on Historical significance

How do we decide who is important enough to remember and who is to be forgotten by history? How do we determine who or what is important historically? What is the difference between someone who is famous and someone who is historically important? How do historians decide what is worth researching, remembering? There is no simple answer to these questions. Historians, teachers and students (knowingly and unknowingly) grapple with these kinds of questions every time they select a topic of research or study. There is no doubt that Canadian history is marked by some great and very important people, but it has also been changed by people who are not widely known or celebrated. Many of these people are immigrants to Canada.

This online lesson plan and activity will challenge students to think critically about how history is recorded, and what it really means to be “historically significant”. It is also designed to bring to light the incredible contributions that immigrants have made to Canada’s economy, culture and way of life. Students will be asked to answer these questions by applying their [historical thinking skills](#). Using the methods outlined in the instructions, students will be asked to determine why some people are considered important, while other are not. What do students notice that these figures have in common? Students will also be challenged to think about important people of the past who are not as celebrated in the historical records.

Introduction

The following activity is a variation of the “Ranking Topics in a unit” activity, which can be found in The Big Six by Seixas and Morton, page 28-29. There are numerous resources on the [Historical Thinking Project website](#) that can provide more context in establishing historical significance for educators. You can also reference this [blog](#) written by our very own historian, Steve Schwinghamer.

In this activity, students will be asked to rank influential Canadian immigrants in order of historical significance. We have provided some sources with biographical information for the students so they can build their arguments. If a student wants to find other sources, they should be ready to defend their viability.

Set up

1. Print out the profile sheets from our website – **be sure to print them single sided**. There are four sheets, with two portraits on each sheet. Depending on the size of your class, you may need to make several copies. For instance, if you have a class of 24 students, you should print out three copies of the package.
2. You may cut them out, or you may chose to have your students do that.
3. Having a timer ready can help to keep students on task – see recommended times below.

Program Instructions

1. Introduce the notion of Historical Significance to your students.
2. Divide the class into groups of 2 and name each group either group A, B, C or D. Depending on the size of your class, you may need to create a group of 3 students. You will end up with several groups A, B, C and D.
3. Distribute the profile sheets to the appropriate group (Sheets A to group A, B to B and so on)
4. Share the following rules with the class:

Rules for students:

-Use the following measures to establish historical significance, looking at its affects on Canadians today:

Quantity: How many people were affected by this person's life? By their decisions?

Profundity: Did this person's actions affect the course of events in a deep or meaningful way?

Durability: Were this person's actions felt for a long time?

Revelation: Does this person's life reveal interesting information about the times or circumstances?

-Expect that you will disagree. This is part of the process of consensus. You can justify your opinion in a respectful way all while respecting other's opinions.

-If you are struggling to find consensus, reach out to your teacher for help.

-If you feel that two or more people are tied for a certain ranking - that is okay. Sometimes, people and events have equal historical significance - just in different ways.

5. Ask the students in each group to rank their two people into historical significance following the criterion of quantity, profundity, durability, and their connection to other important events (one being the most important, two being the least.) This step should take them about 10 minutes. Student should mark the ranking for this first round in the box on the profile sheet. They have to agree on the ranking.
The students may decide that some people are tied for their ranking, which is perfectly fine.
6. Once they are done with the first round of ranking, combine groups A with B and C with D. Now, as a group of four, they will do the ranking again but with four subjects. Students must reach a consensus on their ranking. Encourage students to refer to the notes they made on the back of the profile sheet to justify their opinion. This step should only take 15 minutes.
7. Next, combine groups AB and CD together, making a SUPER GROUP. Allow the students to work on their rankings for up to 20 minutes. At this point, you should have a ranking of eight people. Once again, consensus must be reached.
8. Depending on the number of students in the class, compare the super groups together and allow for discussion on the differences between the rankings. You can help students to compare their rankings by having each super group tape their profiles on a wall in their order. Let them walk about and discuss together their justifications.

9. Encourage the students in a class discussion about their findings.

Here are some discussion prompts:

Why did you score this person as a ___ while the other group scored them as a _?

Can you justify your stance on the historical significance of this person?

What do many of these people have in common?

Is there someone you know of that you think is significant but not acknowledged?

Is there another immigrant to Canada that you feel should be included?

Note about group dynamics: You may notice that the stronger voices in the group are able to sway their group mates into their line of thinking. This is a part of how historical significance is established – the more dominant voices (the voices of white men, for instance) often determine who we believe to be important, while other potentially important figures are forgotten by history. Historical significance can change from person to person, and it can also change through time.

Note about reaching consensus in groups: In order to help students to reach a consensus, you can use one of the following methods:

-Make sure that everyone gets an equal amount of time to speak. You can even use a timer, and let each team member speak for a specific amount of time.

-Students can vote either openly or anonymously on scraps of paper.