

# Using commemorative practices to teach that history is a constructed narrative



KATRIA TOMKO  
& STEVEN STEGERS  
OF EUROCLIO  
Executive Editors

MARJOLEIN DELVOU  
& HANNA ZIELIŃSKA  
OF THE EVENS FOUNDATION  
Associate Editors

DAVID SYPNIEWSKI  
Design & Creative Direction

# Joanna Wojdon



is an Associate Professor at the University at Wroclaw (Poland) and Chair of the Department of Methodology of Teaching History and Civic Education. She is a board member of the International Society for History Didactics and managing editor of its scholarly journal – the Journal of Research on History Didactics, History Education, and History Culture (JHEC). She is also a member of the International Federation for Public History Steering Committee.

Joanna's strategy – *Using commemorative practices to teach that history is a constructed narrative* – encourages students to analyse and deconstruct how the past is commemorated in their locality by looking at historical plaques, monuments, and names of public spaces. Students are asked to determine what message(s) these commemorative works carry, by whom, for whom, and when they were formulated, who is excluded, and why they might be excluded. Students explore how and why these commemorative practices changed over time in order to develop an understanding of the constructed nature of history in public spaces. This strategy is an innovative approach to class excursions – an alternative to visits that are typically meant to teach what the past is,

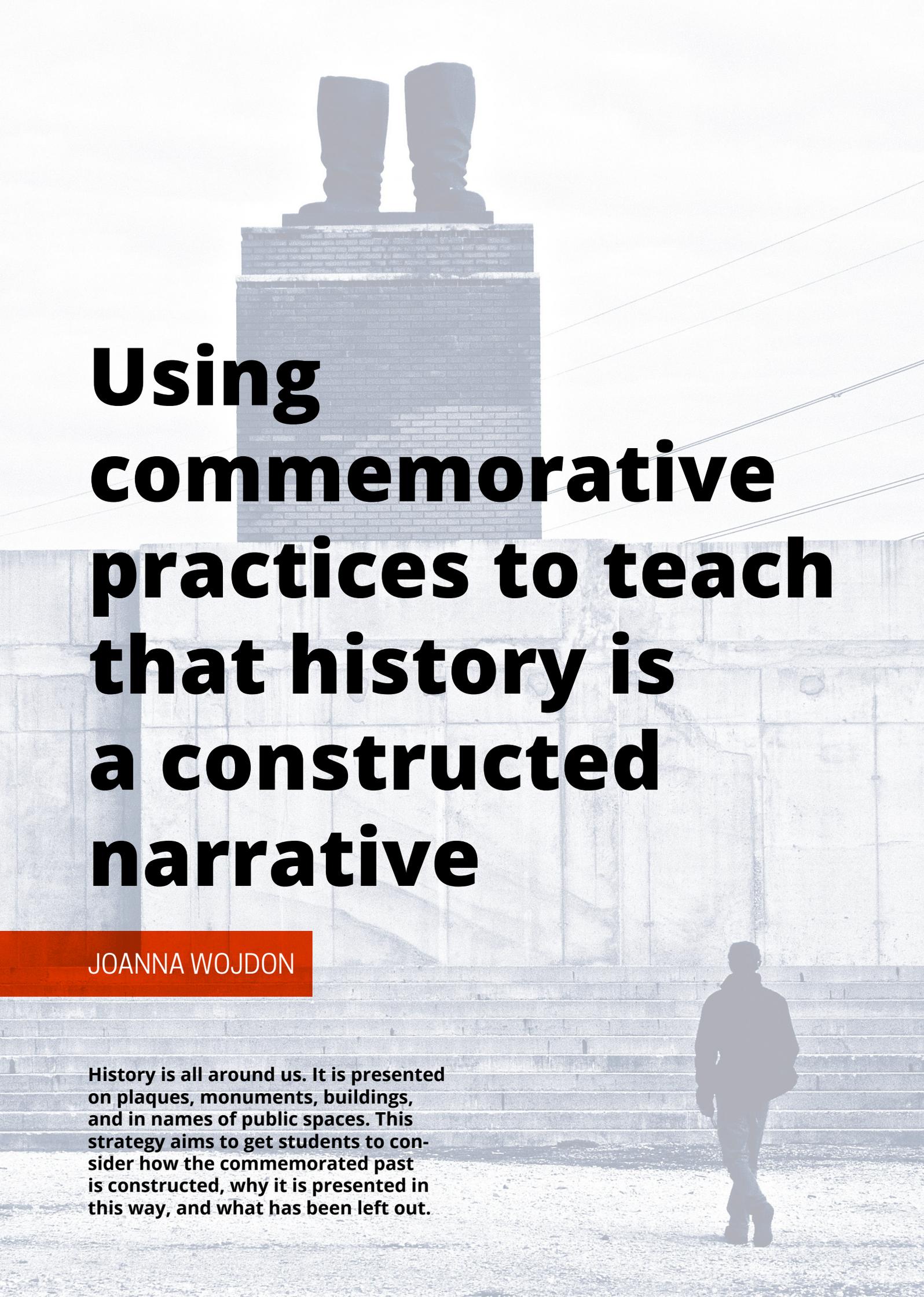
rather than how the past is told. The strategy is part of the book “Thinking on Multiethnicity” (Myśląc o wieloetniczności), based on the Big Six concepts of historical thinking developed by Peter Seixas.

This lesson plan is part of a five-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 and recognise how history can engage everyone in understanding Europe. For more information, go to [sharingeuropeanhistories.eu](https://sharingeuropeanhistories.eu).



**EuroClio**  
Inspiring History  
and Citizenship Educators

**Evens  
Foundation**

A person is standing on a large, multi-tiered stone monument. At the top of the monument, there is a silhouette of a pair of boots. The person is seen from behind, looking towards the monument. The background is a bright, overcast sky with some power lines visible. The overall scene is in grayscale, with the person and the boots highlighted in a dark silhouette.

# Using commemorative practices to teach that history is a constructed narrative

JOANNA WOJDON

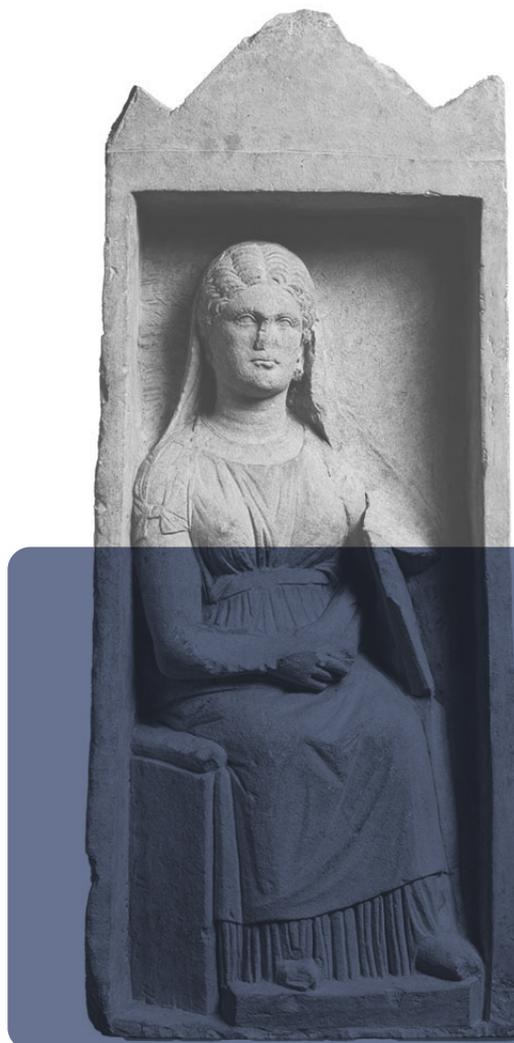
History is all around us. It is presented on plaques, monuments, buildings, and in names of public spaces. This strategy aims to get students to consider how the commemorated past is constructed, why it is presented in this way, and what has been left out.

## OVERVIEW OF THE STRATEGY

This strategy encourages students to analyse and deconstruct how the past is commemorated in their city / town / village by looking at historical plaques, monuments, and names of public spaces, such as streets, squares, buildings, and boroughs/cities.

Students will be asked to determine what message(s) these commemorative works carry, by and for whom they were formulated, when they were formulated, whose interests they serve, who is excluded, and why they are excluded. They will explore how and why these commemorative practices changed over time – e.g. how street names changed or what plaques were added, removed, or renovated – in order to develop an understanding that history in the public space is constructed and reconstructed for various reasons.

This strategy is an innovative approach to class excursions, an alternative to visits that are typically meant to teach *what* the past is rather than *how* the past is told.



## WHAT IS THE AIM OF THE STRATEGY?

This strategy aims to show that history presented in public spaces, and history more broadly, is a constructed narrative and one that should be approached critically.

It reveals how history is consumed outside of classrooms and beyond textbooks and asks students to look for diversity in representations of actors or groups of interest who are or may deserve to be represented.

Close analysis and comparison enable us to find commonalities, influences, and supranational trends. Simultaneously, students may come to notice sensitive, conflicting narratives or issues and discuss how they could deal with them in public spaces.



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

## STEP 1: PREPARE THE MATERIALS

### A - Decide on the historical site you will analyse

Choose an area in your city / town / village where there is a meaningful set of plaques / monuments / buildings / names of public spaces that commemorate the past. You should try to pick a site where there is a range of commemorative works within relative proximity to one another. This could be organized as a virtual excursion using Google Maps, Street-View, or another application.

### B - Prepare background information on the commemorative sites

Familiarise yourself with some background information on the sites you are going to ask the students to analyse. The following questions could be asked to prompt analysis:

- When was this commemoration created?
- Who created it?
- On whose initiative was this commemoration created?
- What circumstances led to this commemoration being created?
- What does it commemorate?
- Does the commemoration reflect a local, national, international event, or a combination of the aforementioned?
- What theme does this relate to (politics, culture, religion, etc.)?
- What historical periods are reflected in these commemorations?
- Has this commemoration changed over time? (This works particularly well with street names.)

## STEP 2: USE THE MATERIALS IN THE CLASSROOM / ON THE EXCURSION

### Activity 1: In advance of the excursion

Depending on the amount, kind, and/or quality of information available on-site, students can be introduced to the general time period or theme in advance of their excursion. This can be done via a short lecture, a video clip,

or an open class conversation on the topic of memorable events in history (geographically or time-bound to be relevant to the future excursion). This will allow students to confront their previous findings or understandings with the objects they find in the public space during the visit/excursion

### Activity 2: The excursion

Students will be taken on an excursion of the commemorative site(s). There they will gather information on what they observe. They can be asked to document their findings by taking notes or taking photos of the objects in question. It might be useful to create a worksheet that students can fill out while on the excursion and refer to during the guided discussion following the excursion.

### Discussion 1: After the excursion

Students are asked to deconstruct the commemorative practice(s) they have investigated by considering a few questions. These questions might include:

- Who erected or named these commemorative objects?
- When were these commemorative objects erected or named?
- For what reason(s) were these objects placed in the public space?
- Whose views do these commemorative objects represent?
- What historical period is reflected in this commemorative object?
- What purposes do these commemorative objects serve?
- Has this commemorative object changed over time?

This is an opportunity for the teacher to understand which points and issues need underlining or further explanation. It is also an opportunity to address history and related issues that might be sensitive, contested, or controversial. Students should come to understand the selectively constructed nature of historical narratives.



## WHAT OBSTACLES COULD A TEACHER WITH THIS STRATEGY FACE?

### **Organisation of the excursion**

As in the case of any excursion, this is a time-consuming activity that demands organisation, discipline, and a good deal of attention. Additionally, some teachers may find it difficult to identify enough objects of desirable quality/usefulness within their locality. A possible solution for both of these issues could be the organisation of a virtual excursion, despite an in-person excursion being preferable.

### **Conceptual understanding**

Teachers will need to provide more or less information in advance of the excursion, bearing in mind their students' prior knowledge. There may well be terms and concepts that need explaining or simplifying to make the excursion accessible to all.

### **Question prompting**

Some students will be able to think critically about the narratives portrayed by the commemorations without prompt questions. Others will need prompt questions. Examples of these are given in the exemplar material.

## HOW COULD YOU MAKE THIS STRATEGY MORE INCLUSIVE?

### **Supporting lower attaining students**

- Choose relatively simple commemorative objects or practices to analyse and/or present. Monuments are often best-suited for this.
- Select fewer commemorative objects/practices to analyse or fewer aspects of analysis to consider.
- Assign students specific roles in the course of investigating an object/practice. For example, a lower attaining student could serve as a documenter, while a higher attaining student could be a researcher.

### **Challenging higher attaining students**

- During the excursion, students could be asked to conduct a survey asking passers-by about the meaning of the commemorative objects. Ask the students to discuss similarities and differences of interpretations of meaning.
- Organise additional post-excursion activities (see *Additional – Option 1 and 2*) and prompt them to address more sensitive themes, issues, or events that require additional research.
- Assign more in-depth research into the past in search of events or individuals to commemorate. Encourage the use of local archives or press.
- Compare commemorative practices in other places, whether that be comparisons of general practices or comparisons of the same/similar events to those in their own locality.





# Example of the strategy in action

**WROCLAW**

Wrocław was a city that changed its state affiliation many times throughout the centuries. The ethnic composition of the inhabitants of Wrocław has also changed, both gradually (e.g. under the influence of Germanization of medieval patriciate) and abruptly (e.g. as a result of post-war displacement of the Germans).

Prussian leaders and the Third Reich emphasized the German character of the city, while the leaders of the Polish People's Republic after World War II emphasized its Polish origins. After the fall of the Soviet Empire, at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, the city's slogan became "Wrocław – a meeting place". The new leadership strived to showcase the city's centuries-old diversity and highlight the various ethnicities of its past inhabitants.

In the early 21st century, the "Path of History" was installed on the pavement in Wrocław's Nankiera Square. Bronze plaques placed there symbolized important events in the history of the city. New ones are added from time to time. The students' task is to analyse the existing plaques, identify preferences and omissions of their creators, and design additional plaques.

Additional supporting material:

<b>1000</b>	Establishment of the Bishopric	<b>1842</b>	First Rail Line – Wrocław to Otawa
<b>1241</b>	Mongol Invasion	<b>1913</b>	Construction of the Centennial Hall
<b>1242</b>	Location under Magdeburg Law	<b>1945</b>	Fall of Festung Breslau and devastation of the city
<b>1335</b>	Incorporation of Wrocław into the Kingdom of Bohemia	<b>1980</b>	Solidarity Trade Union
<b>1526</b>	Incorporation of Wrocław into the Austrian Habsburg Monarchy	<b>1997</b>	Eucharistic Congress
<b>1530</b>	Five-Field Coat of Arms granted	<b>1997</b>	Millennium Flood
<b>1720</b>	Founding of the University of Wrocław	<b>2012</b>	UEFA Euro Championship
<b>1741</b>	Incorporation of Wrocław into Prussia	<b>2016</b>	European Capital of Culture
<b>1793</b>	Tailor's Revolution	<b>2017</b>	World Games
<b>1807</b>	Occupation by the Napoleonic Army		

## EXAMPLE EXCURSION

For each plaque, identify

- its connection to political, social, cultural, and/or economic history;
- which ethnic group's past it reflects;
- whether it is a part of local, regional, national, and/or international history;
- what changes it reflects; and
- which spheres of life are missing in the plaques and why.

800–907	Great Moravia, Silesians																		
907–985	Duchy of Bohemia Silesians	985	985																
985–1025	Duchy of Poland	1025	1025																
1025–1034	Kingdom of Poland	1034	1034																
1034–1038	Duchy of Poland	1038	1038																
1038–1042	Duchy of Bohemia	1042	1042																
1042–1076	Duchy of Poland	1076	1076																
1076–1079	Kingdom of Poland	1079	1079																
1079–1138	Duchy of Poland	1138	1138																
1138–1173	Duchy of Silesia	1173	1173																
1173–1248	Duchy of Lower Silesia	1248	1248																
1248–1335	Duchy of Wrocław	1335	1335																
1335–1469	Kingdom of Bohemia / Holy Roman Empire	1469	1469																
1469–1490	Kingdom of Hungary	1490	1490																
1490–1620	Kingdom of Bohemia / Holy Roman Empire	1620	1620																



<b>1620-1742</b>	<b>1742-1807</b>	<b>1807</b>	<b>1807-1871</b>	<b>1871-1918</b>	<b>1918-1933</b>	<b>1933-1945</b>	<b>1945-1952</b>	<b>1952-1989</b>	<b>Post-1989</b>
Habsburg Monarchy / Holy Roman Empire	Kingdom of Prussia	First French Empire	Kingdom of Prussia	German Empire	Weimar Republic	Third Reich	Republic of Poland	People's Republic of Poland	Republic of Poland



# EXAMPLES OF WORKSHEET



Political / Social / Cultural / Economic	Polish / Czech / German / Jewish / other	Local / Regional / National / International	Social groups	Changes



Political / Social / Cultural / Economic	Polish / Czech / German / Jewish / other	Local / Regional / National / International	Social groups	Changes

## VARIATIONS OF THIS STRATEGY

### Option 1

Students could present their own proposals explaining possible adjustments and alterations to existing commemorative objects and practices, taking into consideration the changing realities of the contemporary world, values, societal goals, etc. For example, they could design their own commemorative plaque or monument(s), re-name the streets or squares in the area, etc. and provide reasoning for its placement in the public space. The inclusion of multiple perspectives of the past (e.g. those of marginalized groups) should be encouraged.

- What will your commemorative object look like? Alternatively, what will your public space be named?
- Will you include a plaque or inscription? If so, what will it state?
- Where will you place this commemorative object in the public space? Why have you chosen this location?
- For what reason(s) is this commemorative object placed in the public space?
- Whose view(s) does this commemorative object represent?
- What historical period is reflected in this commemorative object?
- What purpose does this commemorative object serve?
- Could this commemorative object change over time?

### Option 2

Groups of students could be asked to design the commemorative practices in various time periods. For example, what monuments would they put in the square in the 18th, 19th, 20th, 21st century so that they reflect dominant virtues, political preferences, newest achievements, and political goals of the particular society.

### Option 3

Design plaques such as the ones in Nankiera Square in Wrocław for your own town/village/district taking into consideration the turning points and the elements of continuity in its history. Make sure your pavement is acceptable and attractive to tourists from different countries.



**Set in stone,  
history blinds.  
Set in motion,  
it opens minds.**

**HISTORY TEACHING MATTERS.**

Find out how you can make a difference:

[sharingeuropeanhistories.eu](https://sharingeuropeanhistories.eu)

An initiative of the Evens Foundation and EuroClio.

