

Ideas for using “A Timeline of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History in the United States”

To Teachers:

This lengthy timeline is far too much for a student to digest all at once. Even if students would attempt to read it in its entirety, chances are that after the first several pages, their interest would flag. The suggestions below give you and your students a method of approach that will engage students in the facts, a way to make sense of them, and to respond in a personal way to them.

Objectives

1. Students will consider what they already know about attitudes towards LGBT people and the history of LGBT history in the US.
2. Students will become familiar with an overview of LGBT history in the United States from the 1600s to the present by interacting with the timeline.
3. Students will have a chance to form and express personal reactions to the history they are learning.
4. Students will attempt to see changes over time.

Materials

- “A Timeline of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History in the United States”
- Timeline chart
- Pencil

Other things to decide in advance

- How you will assign parts of the timeline
- Whether to have individuals, pairs, or small groups work on parts of the timeline
- How you want to handle the timeline after students have studied it: sharing in small groups, whole-class discussion, or some other way

Procedures

1. Introduction to the subject. Engage students in thinking about the subject of LGBT history before giving out the timeline.

Explain that the class will be spending some time on the subject of LGBT history and that you want them to begin thinking about what they already know.

Ask questions such as:

1. What attitudes do you think Americans had about LGBT people in the past as compared to now?
 - a. Do you think attitudes have improved (become more accepting or favorable to LGBT people)?
 - b. If so, when do you think this might have happened, and why?
 - c. What important historical events in LGBT history are you aware of?
2. Were there or are there any differences in how different American subcultures regarded gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender people either in the past or present? If so, what subcultures are more accepting of LGBT people?
3. What changes in attitude, if any, are you aware of within your lifetime? Have you noticed different attitudes based on age or generation or any other characteristic (religion, region or place)?
4. How did you first become aware of LGBT people and attitudes toward them?
5. What would you most like to know about LGBT history?

2. Introduction to the timeline

This would be one way to **introduce the timeline**:

There are many ways to approach LGBT history in the United States including lectures, literature, biographies, movies, current events, research, and so on. The material we have to work with right now is a timeline. It is an easy way to get an overview. In particular, the timeline you are about to see gives more information than most timelines. However, because of its length, I don't expect any one of you to read the whole thing. We are going to break up the task of looking at it, and you will also get a chance to give your own personal reaction to the events and information you read about in the time line.

Teacher: In advance, **think about** how you want to **assign portions** of the timeline:

- by number of pages, such as 2 or 4 pages per student
- by century or portion of a century (7 periods): 1600s, 1700s, 1800s, 1900s to beginning of WW II, WW II to 1970, 1973-1990, 1993-present
- by letting students look over the timeline and asking them to choose the 2 to 4 pages they want to concentrate on (Just be sure that all pages will be covered.)

You may want to have groups of 2-3 work together, reading the information aloud if they want.

Explain how you want students to process their portion of the timeline and tell them they will then be sharing some of their findings and reactions with the class. One choice would be to use the chart that is provided with these materials. Another option would be for students to put the codes provided below on their copies of the timeline or to color code the timeline boxes to show L,G,B, or T. They could also write their reactions right on the chart. Whatever choice you make, demonstrate the process using selected events from the timeline. See suggested dates below.

If you decide to have students use the chart to help them process the information, give each individual or group a copy of the chart and demonstrate how to use it by choosing several items from different parts of the timeline and asking for input on how to fill it out. Pick important events information or events. Examples would be the following: 1698 (French explorer noting number of “berdaches” among Illinois Indians), 1782 (Deborah Sampson enlists as a man in Continental Army), 1896 (Sarah Orne Jewett publishes short story on love between women), 1948 (Kinsey’s study), 1969 (Stonewall resistance).

Date	L, G, B, or T	Classify as +, -, I, or A	Brief description in your own words	Comparison to today	Your personal reaction to this information or event
1777	G, L	+	<i>Thomas Jefferson revised VA law to lessen punishment for sodomy from death to mutilation.</i>	<i>Neither death nor mutilation are punishments for sodomy today.</i>	<i>I was shocked to learn that a person could be executed for sodomy.</i>

- Date is the year.
- L, G, B, T stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender
- Classification key is shown at the bottom of the chart:
+ = positive for LGBT people; - = Negative for LGBT people;
I – informational; A = Assertive on part of LGBT people

3. Timeline processing.

Give a “deadline” for completion – ½ hour probably. Students who finish their portion may continue beyond their portion or choose any other portion (Your choice, or theirs).

4. Immediate Sharing.

- First have students do some **general sharing**. You might want to call on individuals or groups chronologically so that the class can see how things have changed over the years. It might be best to give students the first 5 questions below on paper 5 minutes before sharing time so they can be better prepared to share.

Ask questions such as:

1. What was the most unexpected thing that you learned from studying your portion of the timeline?
2. How did you feel as you read about this history? Give specific examples.
3. In your portion of the timeline what proportion of entries were positive for LGBT people?
4. In your portion of the timeline, which classification (L,G,B, or T) was the most common? The least represented?
5. In your portion of the timeline were LGBT people mainly acting as individuals or being acted upon by others or were they organizing to work as a group? What groups were formed?
6. Listening to the reports by date, what patterns or progress do you see in LGBT history?
7. What do you think may have caused LGBT people to start organizing to work for better conditions?
8. What historical conditions or experiences could have contributed to organizing?
9. The word "homosexuality" (as well as "heterosexuality") was coined in the late 19th century. Before then same-sex attractions and relationships were seen as a behavior and not an identified sexual orientation. With this being the case and with the knowledge that people did not start identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) until the mid 20th century is it fair or accurate to apply the LGB label to individuals who practiced same-sex behavior in the years and centuries prior to these terms?

B. Next, to give more students a chance to talk and set the history in their memories, have them form **groups to share** what they learned. Each group should include students to cover the entire timeline. For example, if you divided up the timeline into 7 portions, there should be one student from each portion in each group, i.e. 7 students per sharing group. In the interest of time, direct students to choose only the most important items to share from their portion of the timeline. Discuss how to determine what's most important. Allow no more than ½ hour for sharing.

C. Reconvene the class to discuss questions based on knowledge of the entire timeline.

1. What do you think are the most important mileposts in LGBT history as presented by this timeline? In other words, if you had to select 5 or 10 events from the whole timeline, what would they be, and why? For teacher. See list of items with question #3 below.
2. Which people mentioned in this timeline do you think had the most influence on attitudes toward LGBT people? Give dates, names, and what they did.
3. What are the mileposts and information in US LGBT history that an informed person would know about? [For teacher. This list below is the information most historians would name.
 - a. 1698 – French explorer notices the number of “berdaches” – men living as women, homosexual activity.
 - b. 1781 – Deborah Sampson, disguised as a man, enlists in the Army (Revolutionary War).
 - c. 1928 – Radclyffe Hall’s lesbian novel Well of Loneliness is published in the U.S.

- d. 1950 – Mattachine Society, a “homophile” organization is founded in Los Angeles.
 - e. 1954 – Army-McCarthy hearings include gay-baiting.
 - f. 1955 – Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon found lesbian organization Daughters of Bilitis. (Five years later the Daughters of Bilitis hold their first “national lesbian convention” in San Francisco.)
 - g. 1973 – American Psychiatric Association declares that homosexuality is not a psychiatric disorder.
 - h. 1978 – Gay city supervisor Harvey Milk and San Francisco Mayor George Moscone murdered.
 - i. 1979 - First march on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights draws over 100,000 participants.
 - j. 1982 – Wisconsin passes the first lesbian and gay rights bill in the U.S.
 - k. 1985 – Movie star Rock Hudson acknowledges that he has AIDS.
 - l. 1993 – “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy for U.S. military becomes law.
 - m. 2000 – Vermont becomes the first state to legally recognize civil unions for gays & lesbians.
 - n. 2003 - In Texas case, U.S. Supreme Court rules that sodomy laws in the U.S. are unconstitutional.
 - o. 2004 – Same sex marriages become legal in Massachusetts.
4. How has learning about this history affected your own feelings and attitudes toward LGBT people?
 5. What would you like to learn more about?

Additional Activities

- Create a game show such as Jeopardy, and play it.
- Ask students to create series of posters with illustrations for the most important information/events in timeline to display in classroom or school’s common space.
- Ask interested students to research one or more of the most important events to find out the reactions of GLBT organizations and the public.
- Interviewing. Have the class create a list of interview questions to ask adults who remember the any of the most important events listed in the timeline. Then have class members do the interviews and report to the class.

Ideas for further discussion and/or research

1. What is the “historical denial of lesbianism?” The “historical denial of lesbianism” is a term coined by the historian, Blanche Weisen Cook, who defines it in the following manner: “The persistent refusal to acknowledge the variety and intensity of women’s emotional and erotic attachments in history.” Has there been a similar historical denial of gay male relationships? How has it been the same or different?
2. How did a gay and lesbian movement develop? How do people who are in hiding create a political movement? Was the creation of a movement (or movements) different for gay men

and women? When did a bisexual movement begin? When did a transgender movement begin? In what ways are these movements separate and in what ways are they connected?

3. As lesbians and gay men have gained more legal rights, there has been a movement toward assimilation into the dominant culture (gay marriage, the right to serve openly in the military). Does assimilation decrease the power of the gay/lesbian/bi movement? When we look at the transgender movement, what would assimilation look like? What are the gains and losses of assimilation?
4. Lesbians and gay men have existed in all racial and ethnic groups and all social classes, but the multiple oppressions of heterosexism, racial discrimination and poverty have made it extremely dangerous to expose our sexual orientation, even in letters or diaries. How have these differences impacted us historically and how do they impact us today?
5. No single sex role socialization holds true for all women or men. Our socialization is different based on our social class, race, culture and geographic location. These factors intersect in various ways to produce different kinds of lesbians and gay men and different kinds of communities. Given all of this, can we ever say that we are a “community” or should we be discussing “communities” and trying to figure out how our different communities intersect? How might our goals be the same or different?
6. Read below and discuss how views of homosexuality have changed over time. Why have these views changed, and who or what is driving this change? How have these changes affected LGBT people?*

a) Colonial America 1619-1800 SINNERS

Sodomy was not seen as a disease; there was no concept of sodomites. All persons were seen as capable of sinning in this and every other way. Sodomy was not called a sex crime or a lust crime, but a social infraction. Rooting out sin in colonial America was a form of self-preservation. There was a moral hierarchy which paralleled the social hierarchy of human relationships. The worst sins were those that were perceived as most dangerous to the colonists’ continued existence. Note: There is no record of any women being tried for sodomy. The earliest mention of women in the colonial statutes was in 1634. Both male and female sodomy were considered capital crimes.

b) Victorian America 1800-1880 CRIMINALS

The legal profession was defining what acceptable behavior was and what was not. It was against the law for women to wear men’s clothing. Women, however, if financially able, did live together in “romantic friendships” or what was later called, “Boston Marriages.” Since women were seen as capable only of sex with men, women together were usually defined as spinsters. (How might this have been different for gay men and bisexuals?)

c) Turn of the Century 1880-1973 MENTALLY ILL “Medical colonization of a people”

Sex began to have specifically erotic references. Emotions were seen as male or female. A “normal” woman or man felt normal emotions. If one felt “abnormal” emotions (attractions to the same sex) then one must not be a woman or man. Women who had been living together in romantic friendships were increasingly being seen, and conversely, seeing themselves, as sick. After 1880 doctors were trying to identify both active and passive lesbians. An active lesbian was perceived as being a true invert. A passive lesbian was viewed as a potential invert, merely susceptible, her homosexuality both preventable and curable. By the 1880’s, the use of the term homosexual (and heterosexual) came into being. An 1892 article, referred to homosexuals as those with a mental condition, with inclinations to abnormal methods of gratification (methods unrelated to procreation).

d) Stonewall Rebellion – 1969 – Present SEXUAL MINORITY

Overt resistance against repression begins, laws are challenged, organizations and communities form.

**dates are approximate*