Historical Timelines

Designing a timeline and placing events on to it are skills in the social studies area of the curriculum. Writing and interpreting timelines can be problematic. Learners need to be aware of the possible pitfalls in developing their own or using those created by others. It is important that they are able to analyse timelines critically. In this respect the creation and use of timelines fall into the realm of political literacy.

Learners should understand that historical timelines are not objective. Like other historical sources, they are selective and subjective. For learners to write one involves making choices based on their own priorities or interests. They must decide what to include and what to leave out. When reading one produced by someone else, they have to think about the possible bias of the writer, and what special interests the writer may have.

Learners should also be aware that putting a series of events together in a timeline can imply that those events are in some way connected and that one event may lead to the next (historical determinism). However it is rarely that simple and each event in itself will have many contributing factors. It can be difficult to add those factors to a timeline due to the nature of its design. Also it may be difficult to add in developments which occurred over a period of time, rather than on a specific date.

This example has kindly been provided by Dr Joanna Tucker from the University of Glasgow:

Take the Scottish 'wars of independence' as an example. You could write a timeline of events that prioritised battles and conquests. This would give the impression that this was a period of constant warfare for Scots, because the many periods without significant conflict are not explicitly highlighted. You could also write a timeline that prioritised the deeds of kings and national leaders. This would obviously only represent 'top level' activities, not the everyday lives or experiences of the majority of the people (which are difficult to represent on a timeline). While some timelines might be more detailed than others, their creator has always had to make choices about which they think are the most important 'events'. This in turn depends on how they see (or want to see) the past.

Another decision that has to be made is when to begin and end the timeline. For the Scottish 'wars of independence', for example, timelines usually begin in 1286, even though the war itself did not begin until ten years later. It is also not clear when the wars officially ended since there was no final treaty after the wars resumed in 1332.

An example of a timeline:

The Scottish Parliament has an interactive timeline which tells the story of the journey to the formation of a Scottish Parliament. This resource is also available in Gaelic.
www.parliament.scot/global/games/education-timeline/timelinejs/index.html