

HerstoriesCafe: A How-To Guide

What is a HerstoriesCafe Event?

Our free monthly Toronto-area events are informal talks by local historians, archivists, artists, curators and community members, and are designed to generate dialogue. Our speakers cover a wide range of topics but are united in their interest in women's stories.

Cafe talks are located throughout the city, in places which are historically relevant to the evening topic, and often include an on-site historical walking tour. The locations that we choose for events allow us to directly engage with historical spaces in Toronto—to tell stories about the diverse heritage of the city and to deepen our historical understanding of the urban landscape. Talks take place at 6 p.m. so that participants can come directly from work. The events begin with light snacks and tea, and usually end at 7:30 p.m. Speakers usually speak for about 30 minutes, with ample time for questions and networking.

Over the course of our three years of programming we've realized how essential HerstoriesCafe has been as a tool for expanding local history education by supporting and developing public programming designed to integrate Canadian women's narratives back into our neighbourhoods, classrooms and historical spaces. What follows is a step-by-step model for community members, educators and history and social studies teachers to use. The model includes the process of building talks: finding speakers; accessing historical societies and venues; setting up a website; and building networks among diverse communities such as history teachers, elders, heritage sites, museums, archives, graduate students and academic historians.

Where to Start?

In our first year of programming we often began by seeking out particular speakers because we were familiar with their work. For some of the talks, we wanted to develop an event around a particular theme. For other talks we wanted to challenge our speakers to look at their historical research using the lens of women's experiences. There is no magic formula or order for this process: sometimes we began with a theme, or a person whose work we wanted

to showcase, or sometimes we were inspired by a particular historical location that we felt would be perfect to feature some aspect of Toronto's social history. It's best to start with communities with which you already have connections and build up your base of networks from there. Because we were largely unfunded during our first year, the economic imperative of finding supportive heritage communities and venues that would not charge us for an event was also a factor in our decision-making. One way to ensure that this happens is to team up with partners who have connections in a multitude of communities who can provide space and support for venues. Once we made those initial contacts we were able to build a supportive network of heritage sites and organizations that were interested in repeat events, resulting in a sustained partnership with various historical locations throughout Toronto.

The Process:

1. Finding a Topic:

Make a list of topics or themes that you would like made more public in your community. Are there locations that are linked to those themes?

2. Finding a Location:

Make a list of the locations that would support the topic: don't forget to think outside the box! The beauty of the HerstoriesCafe model is that it offers communities an opportunity to engage with historical landscapes that they may not have considered: parks, churches, schools, art galleries, train stations, hotels and hospitals are all historical locations that could be ideal to host a HerstoriesCafe!

3. Researching:

Once you've established a list of locations (it's good to do months at a time so you have a firm grasp on your yearly programming and potential corresponding advertising), do some research. Do they have community outreach funding to support local community events? Many venues are open to the idea but have never been approached in that way. Make sure when you establish contact with them that you explain how your programming benefits them in terms of broadening and strengthening community networks that ultimately bring in more visitors.

4. Finding Speakers:

One of the central tenets of HerstoriesCafe has been to bridge the gap between scholarship in history and the larger community, including history classrooms. Our model provides a guide to create stronger relationships between history communities and provide a bridge between history teachers and students, community leaders, curators, archivists, and academic and local historians. When you are compiling your list of speakers (whose research or work relates to the location and/or theme), make sure to think creatively to allow for a multitude of expertises. We've had museum educators, artists, performers, community activists, and elders give wonderful talks about our evening theme. We often found our speakers by asking members of the community themselves.

5. Involving Local Communities:

Your most willing partners are local museums, theatres, libraries, community centres, galleries, archives, historical houses and historical societies that operate within your community which will gain much from an evening that features their collections to history educators and enthusiasts. Compile a contact list at an early stage in your programming and be sure to keep those communities aware of your monthly programming. Oftentimes they will also be helpful in advertising events through their own newsletters etc., and will let you know about upcoming exhibitions and programming around which you may be able to build a HerstoriesCafe event. They are also helpful places to source speakers. Be sure to maintain contact with local staff as they are often engaged in research projects that could serve as future talks.

6. Involving Local Businesses:

HerstoriesCafe is a community-building talk series. When we support local histories we also seek to preserve local neighbourhood businesses that are also in turn often committed to their communities. In our experiences, those businesses are the most likely to support community-based programming, and we have had much success partnering with organizations like local BIAs, who often support us with free

community venue space and food from local restaurants. We also support local pottery collectives and arts guilds by purchasing all our speakers' gifts from local artists.

7. The Advertising and RSVP Process:

We always include sign-up sheets at each event, which allows us to expand our listserv of contacts. Each event will bring representation from different communities, and this will expand the reach of your programming. Twitter is another way to keep in contact with your followers, as well as monthly email reminders for each event. A management website like Survey Monkey is a tool for keeping track of RSVPs, which is particularly useful when the event has limited seating and you need to keep track of the head count. You can also build in an email based RSVP system into your website, which is a useful way to ensure that everyone who registers receives a confirmation. Not everyone who registers will come: make sure that you allow some flexibility with your limited seating venues and always overbook, rather than turn people away.

8. Thinking the Unthinkable: What if Nobody Comes?

There will always be factors that may make for a less than satisfactory attendance. In our experience these have been bad weather (sudden frost during an outdoor event), bad location (an event that is just too hard to get to), and bad timing (an event in the middle of the day or on a Friday or a Monday). There is not much you can do about the first factor, given that you're planning so far in advance, but you can mitigate the second two with good planning. If possible, choose locations that are easy to access by public transit, or not too far away from city or town centres. Make sure that it's a location that is easy to get to if one is coming to the event from work, as the event should begin at around 6 or 6:30 pm. In our experience, this time has worked best, because it encourages people to stop in on their way home. Providing light refreshments for attendees is also a must, and showcasing food from local bakeries and grocery stores is an added bonus.

9. Building an Online Presence:

Building an online presence is a useful way to connect with your communities and to keep them informed of your upcoming programming. We began with a blogspot site and secured funding for a more streamlined wordpress site from THEN/HiER. Our wordpress website contains archived talk descriptions, resources for teachers in both English and French, registration information for upcoming talks, and a flickr photostream of our events.

10. The Importance of Varied and Diverse Programming:

While you will admittedly start with topics, locations and themes that you know about (which makes it easier to do introductions on the historical location and the theme in question), it's important to explore topics that your public wants to know about and which reach out to broader audiences. Sometimes audiences will request talks or present ideas to you. Being open to the expertise within your community is important, and will expand the diversity of your audience and your programming.

11. Establishing Present Relevance:

HerstoriesCafe talks are not just about the past. Our talks are often motivated by current equity struggles and present situations, and we work hard to link our programming to local historical landscapes by speaking about the place where we hold our talks as well as the present moment within our city. Talks which link to current community activism are well-chosen: HerstoriesCafe events can fulfill important social justice roles within communities, as well as challenge history education communities to re-work their own history education practices in the kinds of narratives they provide within exhibits and programming. Talks can challenge them to re-examine local histories using a broader lens, and we have had much feedback that our programming is facilitating this shift within museums and archives. It's also important to support those institutions who are already honouring diverse historical programming, and to partner with those who are compatible with the goals of the talk series itself. Find your allies.

In this way, the HerstoriesCafe template is more than just a model to follow: it helps lay out the philosophical orientation required to do this kind of history education work. Once you have established your talk series, you can also include pedagogical steps needed in order to integrate new historical perspectives, and establish the historical significance of local stories on your website in a special section entitled *Teacher Resources*. Encourage your speakers to give you material from their talks so that history educators can access them. We have a substantial [Teacher Resources](#) section now which includes resources in both English and French. We have linked new provincial history curriculum expectations in historical thinking concepts directly to our talks. This allows teachers to include our materials in their history classroom.

HerstoriesCafe talks have been instrumental in linking diverse groups together and have acted as a catalyst to help organizations like archives, museums and heritage sites develop local history programming that focuses on women for diverse communities in Toronto. Thank you for starting a HerstoriesCafe in your community and please contact us through our [website](#) if you require more information. With your help, we can set up a HerstoriesCafe network of historically conscious communities across Canada.