



educating for cultural literacy
and mutual respect

Creating Inclusive and Equitable Communities – A Call to Action

*Understanding the origins and impact of bigotry in the
U.S. today and what we can do about it*

Lesson 1: Introducing Narratives

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Relevant Curriculum Standards	2
Background Information for Educators	2
Learning Objectives	3
Guiding Questions	3
Key Concepts and Terminology	3
In-Class Activities	4
Discussion Questions	5
Homework	5
Additional Resources	6
Student Worksheets	7

Introduction

To understand dominant narratives about ethnic groups, students must first grasp the concept of a narrative. A narrative is an account of an event or series of events, usually in the form of a story. The story that is told shapes how a person views, or forms an opinion about, the event behind the story.

Consider how “conservative” and “liberal” news outlets, for example, often cover the same event but tell completely different stories about it. Depending on which news outlet you read/watch/listen to, you will form an opinion about an event that will vary slightly or greatly from one news outlet to the next. This is because the story that is being told will vary depending on who is telling the story and how they interpret the event.¹ The story told will differ from one source to another; differences may include what different storytellers choose to highlight and whom and what they include or leave out.²

This lesson introduces students to how narratives are formed about events or people by probing the sources of narratives in two ways: a) identifying who the storyteller is and their prior or pre-conceived knowledge about the event or person, the assumptions they are making, and their personal biases; and b) determining how different storytellers have interpreted the events or people they’re talking about in what they’ve selected to feature and highlight in the story and in what they’ve chosen to leave out.

¹ “Perspectives,” Legacy Project, accessed November 4, 2020, <https://legacyproject.org/activities/perspectives.html>.

² “Dominant Narratives,” Inclusive Teaching Collaborative (University of Michigan), accessed September 6, 2020, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/sample-activities/dominant-narratives/>.

Theme: Identity; Systems of Power

Disciplinary Area: General Ethnic Studies

Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: 1, 5

Relevant Curriculum Standards

California's [Literacy in History/Social Studies Standards](#):

- **Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies: RH.9.10.6; 9.10.5; 9.10.9**
 - Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.
 - Analyze how a text uses structure to emphasize key points or advance an explanation or analysis.
 - Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

- **Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects: WHST.9.10.4; 9.10.9**
 - Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
 - Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Background Information for Educators

A narrative is an account of an event or series of events, usually in the form of a story. Every day we encounter narratives in the news, popular media, governmental discourse, education, advertisements, etc. These narratives are often presented as neutral, objective truths but are actually shaped by a storyteller's underlying assumptions, motivations, and biases.

The way that authors present their narratives, the tone they use, and the information that they feature or omit all influence how audiences interpret a narrative's messages. While audiences are not passive receivers of knowledge, their opinions can be impacted by the narratives that they are exposed to, especially if those narratives are reinforced through frequency and are expressed by authoritative sources.

Just as an audience's perceptions can be shaped by the narratives they read or hear, an author's narratives are also shaped by her or his own perceptions and assumptions. Consider how a doting parent would portray their child versus how a peer may describe the child. Both narratives are informed by the narrator's unique experiences and relationships with the child.

The current lesson introduces students to how narratives both shape and are shaped by opinions and assumptions. Future lessons will discuss the dynamics of power and authority in shaping people's perspectives.

Learning Objectives

Identity: *How will my instruction help students learn something about themselves and/or others?*

- Students will be able to critically evaluate the sources of narratives they come across in their own lives.
- Students will be able to articulate how narratives are shaped by who is telling the story.

Skills: *How will my instruction build students' skills relating to the content?*

- Students will be able to identify sources of narratives.
- Students will be able to compare and contrast narratives to evaluate them for perspective, tone, and information.

Intellect: *How will my instruction build students' knowledge and mental powers?*

- Students will be able to explain how the information that is featured in and/or left out of a story influences the audience's interpretation.
- Students will be able to explain the role of assumptions, preconceptions, or biases in narrative formation.
- Students will be able to articulate the importance of both the story-teller and the audience in influencing the impact of a narrative.

Criticality: *How will my instruction inform students' views of power and equity and the disruption of oppression?*

- Students will be able to explain how personal biases and underlying assumptions shape oppressive narratives about a people.

Guiding Questions

1. What are narratives and where do we encounter them in our daily lives?
2. How do narratives shape our opinions and impact our behavior towards others?
3. How do an author's underlying assumptions shape her or his narrative?

Key Concepts and Terminology

- **Narrative** - an account of an event or series of events, usually in the form of a story.
- **Bias** - an attitude of favor or disfavor toward something or someone.
- **Opinion** - a view or judgment formed about something or someone.
- **Perspective** - point of view; a particular attitude toward something or someone.

- **Preconceptions** - opinions formed prior to actual knowledge or experience.
- **Assumptions** - things that are accepted as true or as certain to happen, without proof.

In-Class Activities

1. **The Hook** - Show the [following image of Uncle Sam](#) by Oleg Shuplyak. The image is an optical illusion in which each part of Uncle Sam's face is formed by a different object. Ask students what they see in the image. Students will see different things depending on their perspective. Use this image to demonstrate that just as in this picture, narratives differ depending on someone's perspective. Next, write the following questions on the board and ask students to write down their answers independently. Explain to students that you will revisit their answers to these questions at the end of class.
 - What does the word "narrative" mean to you?
 - Where do we generally get information from?
 - How do we form opinions about events or a people?
 - Do other people's opinions expressed in their narratives influence our behavior?
2. **Main Activity** - Pair each student with a classmate. Within each pair, one student will write an autobiography and the other student will write a biography of her or his partner. Students writing the autobiography should tell their partner three facts about themselves. The partner will then use these facts to construct the biography. Give the pairs 15 minutes to write independently. Once students are done writing, ask each partner to read what they wrote to their partner. Write the following questions on the board and ask the pairs to discuss among themselves:
 - How do the two narratives differ? What is similar about them?
 - What information did the autobiographer choose to highlight about themselves? What information did their partner highlight?
 - Which biography is more reliable? Can either be seen as an "objective source"?
3. **Class Discussion** - Bring the class back together and lead a discussion about their answers to the questions they discussed in their pairs. Use this activity to conduct a class discussion about how narratives are shaped by the assumptions and biases of the author. Explain that the narratives we read or hear on a daily basis also shape our viewpoints, so we have to be careful to examine authors' motivations, underlying assumptions, and bias. Explain to students that narratives also influence our perceptions of members of different ethnic groups. Use the Discussion Questions on page 5 to guide the class discussion.

4. **Reflection** - Ask students to revisit the questions that they answered at the beginning of class during “The Hook” exercise. Based on what they learned today, have them answer the following questions.
 - How has their understanding of narrative changed?
 - What questions are they left with?
 - What do they want to learn more about?

5. **Extension Activities** - Here are some ideas for further student exploration into the concept of narratives.
 - Students choose a topic or event and conduct research to see how various news outlets have portrayed this issue. Students will compare and contrast the narratives covered by these outlets and consider the underlying motivations behind the stories.
 - Students create a list of all of the sources of narratives that they encounter in their lives.
 - Students brainstorm tools to use for identifying assumptions and biases in narratives that they encounter.
 - Students read the fable [“The Blind Men and the Elephant,”](#) which highlights the need for multiple perspectives in order to capture a fuller picture of an issue or person. Ask students to write a reflective paragraph or essay about the fable’s message.

Discussion Questions

1. Where do we encounter narratives about other people or groups?
2. What role do prior knowledge, preconceptions, or bias play in shaping someone’s narratives about other people?
3. How do these narratives shape our opinions and affect our behavior towards others?
4. What are some examples of narratives about you? How would your parents or guardians talk about you? How would your siblings, friends, or teachers talk about you? Why do their narratives about you differ from each other? Do their narratives influence how they behave towards you?

Homework

Reflect on Takeaways from this Lesson - Students answer the questions on the Reflection Handout (page 7) to help them consolidate and reflect upon what they learned in this lesson.

Assessment, Application, Action, and Reflection

- Refer to steps 3 and 4 of the In-Class Activities section

Additional Resources

- Equality and Human Rights Commission, “Lesson 11 - Influencing Attitudes” - <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/secondary-education-resources/lesson-plan-ideas/lesson-11-influencing-attitudes>
- UC Berkeley Greater Good Magazine, “How to Avoid Picking Up Prejudice from the Media” - https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_avoid_picking_up_prejudice_from_media
- Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, “How to Detect Bias in News Media” - <https://fair.org/take-action-now/media-activism-kit/how-to-detect-bias-in-news-media/>

Student Worksheets

Reflection Worksheet

Please answer each question in two or three sentences.

1. Where do we encounter narratives that shape our opinions?
2. How do authors' underlying assumptions shape their narratives?
3. Why is it important to know the author's assumptions, preconceptions or biases in the narrative?
4. How do authors demonstrate their opinions in narratives?
5. What questions do you still have about narratives?