

LESSON

Why Identity Matters

Overview

About This Lesson

The concept of identity is complex, multidimensional, and fluid. The answer to “Who am I?” depends on a range of factors: how you define yourself, your membership in certain groups, and how other individuals and society label you.

In this lesson, students consider how the interplay between individual identity and our membership in certain social groups can impact how we answer the question, “Who am I?” They will also explore the relationship between identity and human behavior and the ways in which the labels we place on ourselves and others can serve as what Dr. Kwame Anthony Appiah calls “living guides.”

The lesson ends with a social identity wheel— an activity that invites students to reflect on their group identities and the ways in which these identities can influence their sense of who they are, how they perceive and treat others, and how others might perceive and treat them.

Essential Questions

- What makes me, me?
- What story do I want to tell about who I am and what matters to me?

Guiding Questions

- What are we talking about when we talk about identity?
- What dilemmas arise when others view us differently from how we view ourselves?

Facing History Learning Outcomes

- Examine how their identity is a combination of who they say they are, who others say they are, and who they hope to be in the future.

What's Included

This lesson uses the following texts and materials. Find materials and a lesson Plan-on-a-Page in this [Google Folder](#).

- Image: **Untitled: Four Etchings [A]**
- Image: **Untitled: Four Etchings [B]**
- Reading: **Exploring the Concept of Identity**
- Reading: **Exploring the Concept of Identity (Adapted Version)**
- Handout: **Social Identity Wheel**
- Handout: **Complexity of Identity Exit Card**

Preparing to Teach

Notes to Teacher

1. Glossary of Social Identity Terminology

Identity can be difficult to talk about, and the more you try to understand your students and give them the tools they need to express their ideas and experiences in the world, the more supported they will feel. The following definitions can help your students understand identity:

- **Ethnicity:** A group of people who are connected by a common language, culture, spiritual tradition, and/or ancestral history.
- **Gender:** A set of enforced roles, behaviors, and expectations that are assigned to individuals at birth based on their biological sex. Gender is a social construct, and individuals can reject or create a gender identity that feels true to their sense of who they are.
- **Nationality:** Your membership in a country where you were born and/or where you have citizenship.
- **Race:** A socially constructed system of classifying humans based on their skin color and other physical characteristics. Race is not grounded in genetics or scientific fact.
- **Sex:** A label that individuals are assigned at birth that is based on chromosomes and the physical characteristics that distinguish male and female bodies.
- **Sexual orientation:** The inner feelings of who a person is attracted to emotionally and/or physically, in relation to their own gender identity. People may identify as “asexual,” “bisexual,” “gay,” “lesbian,” “pansexual,” “queer,” “straight,” or in other ways.¹

2. Pacing

These activities are designed for two class periods. Build schema and read about the complexity of identity on the first day. Then review these concepts and create social identity wheels in the next class period.

Lesson Plan

Activities

1. Consider How Identity Can Be Felt in Certain Situations

Glenn Ligon’s etchings can help students understand how aspects of our identities may be more visible or felt in some social situations than in others. To introduce the concept of social identity, share the image **Untitled: Four Etchings [A]** and lead the class through a quick [See, Think, Wonder](#) activity. Then repeat the process with the image **Untitled: Four**

¹ “[Key Concepts and Terms](#),” Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 2014.

Etchings [B]. Have students share their ideas with a partner and then discuss the following questions in pairs or as a class: *What did you notice about how Ligon incorporated Hurston's quotation in the two etchings? What circumstances can cause parts of a person's identity to stand out or to be more intensely felt? The etchings, which Glenn Ligon created in 1992, use quotations from writer Zora Neale Hurston's famous essay "[How It Feels to Be Colored Me](#)," published in 1928. How do you think these works of art are still relevant today?*

Invite students to make personal connections to Ligon's etchings by having them write their own "I do not always feel . . ." and "I feel most _____ when . . ." reflections in their [journals](#). Let students know that these are private journal entries that they won't have to share with others unless they volunteer to do so.

2. Explore the Complexity of Identity

Review the concept of "narrative identity" from the last class, perhaps using the "Snowstorm" strategy, in which each student writes one thing they learned on a piece of scrap paper that they crumple into a ball.² When you give the signal, have everyone toss their "snowball" into the room. Students pick up one they didn't write to read out loud in a [Wraparound](#) format.

Then let students know that they will continue their exploration of identity in this class by considering how they each have both a personal identity and a social identity. Choose a [Read Aloud](#) strategy to read **Exploring the Concept of Identity** or **Exploring the Concept of Identity (Adapted Version)** as a class. There are stopping points built into the reading to help students process the new concepts. After reading the text, divide students into small groups to discuss the connection questions. Since there are a number of questions, you might have all of the groups answer the first question and then assign or invite them to choose between the remaining questions. They should all answer the final question, as it asks them to synthesize the new information in a creative way.

3. Create Social Identity Wheels

A "social identity wheel"³ helps students consider the multiple dimensions of their identities and how their sense of who they are may or may not align with how others perceive and label them. Students will also reflect on how certain aspects of our identities can become more felt or visible in certain contexts, which they will revisit later in this text set.

Explain to students that the purpose of the activity is to help them think about the ways they identify socially and reflect on the extent to which their social identities impact their sense of who they are and how they experience the world. Then distribute the **Social Identity Wheel** handout and clarify terms as needed. You might model with a [Think Aloud](#)

² From Todd Finley, "[22 Powerful Closure Activities](#)," *Edutopia*, December 15, 2015.

³ Activity adapted from "[Social Identity Wheel](#)," LSA Inclusive Teaching Initiative, University of Michigan.

if you feel comfortable doing so. After students have had time to complete their graphic organizers, ask them to respond to the reflection questions in their journals. *Because social identity can be a difficult topic for students to discuss with their peers, especially if it is a new concept, it is important that they do not have to share their graphic organizers or their written reflections with you or with others.*

4. Complete an Exit Card

Capture a snapshot of your students' thinking about the complexity of identity on the **Complexity of Identity Exit Card** handout. Invite them to consider the texts and activities from the first half of this text set when crafting their responses. Use their feedback to determine which, if any, concepts you need to revisit before moving on to the next group of readings.