

LESSON

Finding Your Voice

Overview

About This Lesson

The goal of this first lesson is to help students consider why, before they embark on their study of United States history, literature, or civics, it is helpful to first consider their individual identities. Students will begin by defining what it means to them, as they begin this unit, to be American. (This is a definition that they will return to and refine throughout the unit.) Then they will begin to consider the idea that the identity and history of the United States is the product of a multitude of individual perspectives, voices, and choices. By understanding their own identities and the stories about how they and their families arrived at this moment in this place, they can begin to understand how they both contribute to and are affected by the larger history of the country. Finally, students will consider the power of their voices and the effect their personal stories can have not only on their friends, families, and communities but also the identity and history of the United States.

Essential Question

- How does each person's story contribute to the larger narrative of United States history?

What's Included

This lesson uses the following student materials, which you can access from this [Google Folder](#).

- Reading: **Coming to America, Finding Your Voice**
- Image: **Flag of Faces**

Lesson Plan

Activities

1. Activate Our Own Assumptions

In this opening activity, students will begin the unit by reflecting on what "American" means to them. Their ideas about this topic may change throughout the unit, as well as over the span of the history or literature course they are beginning.

- Ask students to take out a blank piece of paper and draw a picture of what they think an "American" looks like.
- After a few minutes, have them share and discuss their pictures with a partner, asking the following questions: How did you each decide what to draw? How are the pictures similar? How are they different?

- Discuss together: Where might our ideas of what it means to be “American” come from? Where do we hear messages about what “American-ness” can be?

2. Analyze the “Flag of Faces”

This brief activity invites students to analyze an image of an American flag comprised of a variety of individual faces. The flag serves as a useful metaphor for the relationship between individuals and the national identity of the United States.

- Display the image of the **Flag of Faces** from the Ellis Island Immigration Museum.
- Give students a minute to look quietly at the image. Instruct them to record in their journals three things they notice about the image.
- Then lead them in a class discussion of the image based on these prompts:
 - What flag is represented in this image?
 - What faces are represented? What do you notice about the variety of faces?
 - What do flags typically symbolize? Where do they appear? How do people often respond to them?
 - What do you think this representation of a flag is meant to symbolize? How is its meaning similar to or different from what you drew in the previous activity?
 - This image is part of an interactive digital exhibit in the museum on historic Ellis Island (where millions of immigrants entered the United States). Why might someone have decided to create an exhibit about the United States that is constantly changing and being updated?
- If it does not emerge from the discussion, explain to students that, just as these faces of individuals contribute to the whole image of the flag, individual identities and stories contribute to the identity of a group or country and its historical narrative. The history and culture of the United States, for example, has always been shaped by the interaction of individuals—some famous, many not—from a variety of backgrounds and origins. Explain to students that they will begin the year with an examination of their own identities and stories so that they can better understand their roles in the larger national story.

3. Read and Discuss the “Coming to America” Story

Students will read **Coming to America, Finding Your Voice**. In this text, journalist Maria Hinojosa describes how she learned from her mother to find and use her voice, even when she feels powerless. Hinojosa begins the reading by noting that having a “coming to America” story is a universal experience, even for non-immigrants, since everyone has a

story about how they arrived in their present life and circumstances.

- As a whole class, read *Coming to America, Finding Your Voice*. Students should read the piece twice together, first for comprehension and then to consider ideas and themes to guide their thinking.
- After the first reading, have students reflect on and discuss the following comprehension questions in pairs or triads, and then debrief their answers as a whole group:
 - What does *here* mean at the end of the first paragraph, and why do you think it is in quotation marks?
 - Why does Hinojosa put quotation marks around the phrase "real America"? What is she implying about that idea?
 - What details does Hinojosa include to describe the differences between her mother and the immigration agent? How do those details support the statement, "My mom didn't feel very powerful"?
 - How did Hinojosa's mother make the big Texan feel small?
 - What lesson does Hinojosa say she learned from her mother in her "coming to America" story?
- After the second reading, lead a class discussion using the following analysis questions:
 - What is Hinojosa saying about the value of each person's story?
 - What message is Hinojosa trying to deliver to young people who might feel alone or different?
 - How might you connect Hinojosa's story to the **Flag of Faces**? Does it connect to the image you drew in the first activity?
 - Hinojosa starts her essay by saying that we all have a "coming to America" story. However, it is important to acknowledge that some groups chose to come to this country, while others were forced. This unit is called *My Part of the Story*, and it's important to give students space to share their part, even if it is not represented in the resources in this unit. For this reason, we recommend asking a question such as: How is Hinojosa's experience of the United States similar to your own? How is it different?

- At the end of class or for homework, ask students to respond to *one* of the following prompts in their journals:
 - Describe a time when you felt voiceless or powerless. What led you to feel that way?
 - Describe a time when your voice was strong. What helped you to find the “power in your gut”?