

LESSON

Connecting to the Past

Overview

About This Lesson

This lesson asks students to consider the impact of both family legacies and the broader sweep of history on their identities. As journalist Maria Hinojosa stated in the first lesson of this unit, we all have stories of how we got "here": individual stories, family stories. For better or for worse, we owe at least part of who we are to the choices our families and other important people in our lives have made, as well as the choices made by even older generations. These choices create for each of us a kind of legacy that influences our identities, our circumstances, and, in turn, the choices we make. Yet all of these choices, including the ones we make today, are made within a larger historical context. When we consider the legacies we have received from our individual families, we might also find personal connections to the history of our communities, our nation, and the world. Either way, this examination can bring us to a deeper understanding of who we are.

The exploration of legacies and personal connections to history in this lesson prepares students to think about the impact of history on the identity of a nation in the next lesson. The identity of a nation is certainly affected by the legacies of those who were part of that nation's past; their choices, their collaborations, their conflicts all shape the identity of the nation in the present day.

Essential Questions

- To what extent do we inherit or receive our identities? How do the legacies of older generations influence our identities?
- How is each of us connected to the past? How has history influenced who each of us is today?

What's Included

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

- Reading: **What Are You?**
- Reading: **The Wooden Shoes**
- Video: **The Wooden Shoes**
- Reading: **Blackbelt**
- Reading: **A Strength of My Neighborhood**
- Reading: **Family Names**

Lesson Plan

Activities

1. Reflect on “Object Memories”

Several of the resources in this lesson that discuss legacies relate to objects that remind people of their individual or family histories. Even if we do not have those items in our possession today, we can all think of specific and tangible things (a toy, a photograph, a book, etc.) that feel closely related to our identities.

- Read aloud to students the following paragraph from the essay “Object Memories” by an author named Tova:

I don't like throwing things away. By “things” I don't mean chairs, or blankets, or pants that are too small—I mean boxes of collected scraps and objects from all sorts of different events and times of my life . . . What seems like pieces of trash to everyone else are objects that hold all of my stories . . . It's not so much the fear of letting the thing itself go, but rather a terrible fear of losing whatever time or memory the object has come to signify. . . .

Most of me understands that forgetting is just how life works. . . . Most of me is fine with this. It's nice to know that I don't have to remain tied to the identity and opinions of the person I was three years ago and four years ago and 10 years ago. But, while most of me happily accepts the changes and replacements each year brings, a tiny part of me rejects them. This tiny fearful part of me rebels against the displacing and replacing of memory and identity . . .¹

Explain to students that Tova goes on to describe dried roses, a collection of notebooks, and a shoebox from her past that all connect meaningfully to her identity.

- Ask students to respond in their journals to the following prompt:
Write about an object or some other tangible item that you have (or had) that connects to your personal or family history. What is the “thing,” and what does it mean to you?
- Optionally, you might ask for volunteers to share parts of their journal reflections. You might also ask students to bring in their objects the next day.

2. Explore Identity and Legacy

In this activity, students will analyze four readings in which individuals describe objects,

¹ Tova, “Object Memories” (April 13, 2016), *Rookie*, issue 56

places, and other personal items that represent to them important parts of their identities and their personal histories. Students will use these readings as a springboard for reflecting on the things in their lives that have meaning because of the way they represent their personal or family histories.

- Working in groups, students will use the [Jigsaw](#) strategy to read and analyze four short essays about the influence of the past on identity. Divide the class into groups of three or four, and provide each group with one of the following readings:
 - **What Are You?:** While growing up in Canada, Anna searches for a way to relate to her Indian heritage. Eventually she moves beyond the labels and stereotypes about Indian culture and finds a deeper connection with her grandfather, Poppy.
 - **The Wooden Shoes:** Cassania, a 17-year-old Boston high school student, tells the story of a pair of wooden shoes her grandfather gave to her as a gift. While she initially did not appreciate the shoes, she writes about how they came to represent to her the challenges and sacrifices her grandfather made for the family in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and the United States. (Note that students assigned this reading can also watch the accompanying five-minute video [The Wooden Shoes](#), following along in the reading as they watch.)
 - **Black Belt:** Marc, an 18-year-old Boston high school student, reminds us that legacies are not left to us only by older generations. Marc was raised and mentored by his older brother, Jacky, until his Jacky's death. Marc writes about the karate black belt that Jacky gave him and reflects on the enormous impact Jacky made on his identity by teaching him to believe in himself.
 - **A Strength of My Neighborhood:** Juan writes about his neighborhood in Los Angeles and how it helps him feel connected to the culture and traditions of his family's "old world" heritage in Mexico.

- In their groups, ask students to read aloud their assigned reading together. Then have them discuss the following questions:
 - What connects the author to his or her past? Is it an object or something else?
 - What does that "thing" represent to the author? What does it remind this person of about themselves, their identity, or their personal history?
 - Students should then sketch the "thing" in their journals and write on it or next to it what it represents about the past to the author.

Shuffle students into new groups. Each member of each new group should have read and analyzed a different story in the previous step. In these new groups, each student will summarize their reading and share the images they created in their original group.

3. Connect to History

In this activity, students will think about how names can represent both identities and history. In the lesson **Identity and Names**, students considered the extent to which their names represent their identities. In this activity, they will read how one man learned more about the history behind his family name, and how that history connected him to his family's legacy in the United States.

- Pass out the reading **Family Names**. Read it aloud with the class, and then have students use the [Think, Pair, Share](#) strategy to respond to the following questions:
 - What did Macky Alston learn about his name?
 - Why do you think it felt like a secret?
- After groups have completed their discussions, share the following quotation from African American writer James Baldwin:

"History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history."²
- Lead a brief class discussion analyzing the Baldwin quotation, beginning with the following questions:
 - What does Baldwin mean? In what ways might the past still be present in our lives?
 - Would Macky Alston agree with Baldwin? Why or why not?
- Finally, ask students to reflect on the following questions in their journals:
 - How much do you know about the history behind your family name and the way it connects you to the world?
 - If you decided to explore your family and its history, what places would you visit? Whom would you interview? What questions would you ask?
 - How might the answers you get help you understand something about what happened in the past?

4. Illustrate "Object Memories"

In the opening activity, students wrote about an object that connects them to their

²James Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage, 2011), 154.

personal or family history. To close this lesson, they will return to that object and reconsider the ways in which it represents the past to them.

- Ask students to return to the objects they wrote about at the beginning of the lesson. Before the end of class, or for homework, ask each student to sketch (or visually represent in another way) the object they wrote about and write on it or next to it what it represents to them about their past. (Some students may wish to choose a different object than they wrote about originally.)

Extension Activity

Consider having the class or small groups combine their visual representations from the “Object Memories” activity into a mosaic representing the identity of the class. Use the **Flag of Faces** from the first lesson as a model of a “mosaic of images.”

Ask the class to make observations about their class creation and infer what it suggests about the class’s collective identity. Ask students what the creation says about both the identity of individual students and their group identity as a class of students studying history together.