

Two Learning Experiences for High School Students

About Stereotyping and Community

NOTE: In March 2016, WKCD's Barbara Cervone and international service learning consultant Cathryn B. Kaye teamed up to create a collection of 72 40-minute learning experiences centered on social-emotional learning. Still in its pilot phase, the curriculum is designed for advisory programs in international schools around the globe—but could be used by educators anywhere.

The experiences are inherently interactive, with students creating their own knowledge as well as learning about the science and views of "experts." They are grouped around four themes—identity, learning to learn, relationships, and wellbeing—and the topics are as deep as they are wide (from belonging to the science of the teenage brain). The learning experiences can stand alone or, better yet, create their own momentum.

Here we offer two that seem appropriate to the times. The first builds off of Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story." The second begins with students drawing, in silence, their own visions of community.

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STORIES AND STEREOTYPES (40 minutes)

Purpose

- To explore how a “single story” can perpetuate stereotypes
- To imagine the single stories we might tell—or might be told by others—about ourselves
- To consider ways we can transcend our perceptions in relation to other people’s “single stories”

Materials

- ✓ Index cards
- ✓ Video: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on “The Danger of a Single Story”(18:42 min):
https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en

Context

We are all guilty of perpetuating stereotypes that create a single story, whether we intend to or not. “Show people as one thing over and over again, and that’s what they become,” says Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

In her now famous TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” Adichie warns that the problem with stereotypes is not that they “are untrue, but that they are incomplete.” Adichie reminds us that we must not only seek diverse points of view, we must also tell our own stories, ones that are true to our own personal experiences. “Stories matter. Many stories matter,” says Adichie.

“Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.”

In this learning experience, students watch Adichie’s cautionary yet inspirational TED Talk about stereotypes and storytelling, then explore its meaning in their own lives.

Opening

- Write on the board the word: *story*. Ask students to free associate to the word and record what they say. You might add some prompts: e.g. Who are in stories? Why do stories exist? How do you know what you are reading/writing/listening to is fact or fiction?
- Now ask: What is the danger of a *single* story? Students probably won’t have an answer to this question before watching Adichie’s TED Talk—and that’s fine.

Process

- Show the video, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on “The Danger of a Single Story” (18:42 min):
- When the video ends, have students break into groups of 3-4 and generate two or three central ideas from Adichie’s talk. Allow 2-3 minutes, then reconvene and have each group share their ideas, then discuss.
- Write the following quote from Adichie on the board: “*The single story creates stereotypes...and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.*”

- Have students make a list, on an index card, of the potential “single stories” that people may have created or *could* create about *them*. Ask students to partner with another student, pick a story on their list, and take turns interviewing each other to add detail to their story. Allow 2-3 minutes.
- Reconvene and invite students to share their story (that is not a single story).

Closing

- Close by asking:
 - How and why do we project single stories on others?
 - How do our emotions shift when we realize there is more than a single story?
 - How can we transcend our perceptions in relation to other peoples’ single stories?

COMING TO KNOW “COMMUNITY” (40 minutes)

Purpose

- To discuss what “community” means and represents
- To enrich one’s perspective through a collaboration with others
- To consider our role in changing community

Materials

- ✓ Easel paper and markers (at least one per student, different colors)

Context

“Community” is easy to say. The word describes an experience so common that we rarely take time to explain it; it seems so simple and natural. But the meaning of community is complex. Community is both a feeling and a set of relationships among people. It is often based on neighborhood, nation, faith, politics, race or ethnicity, age, gender, hobby, sexual orientation, or as some might argue today, social media. Most of us participate in multiple communities within a given day.

In the best of all worlds, members of a community trust and care for each other, yielding a feeling of belonging and safety. They may have an individual and collective sense that they can, as part of that community, influence their environments and each other. Some communities, often marginalized by race or class, are as vulnerable as they are strong; they may breed despair in place of hope. All communities, however, are human. Neighborhoods, companies, schools, and places of faith are context and environments for these communities, but they are not communities themselves.

We enter life belonging to the communities of which our families are part. It is often in adolescence that we consider, perhaps for the first time, these de facto affiliations, as well as forge relationships with people outside our communities. Community service, which often connects students with people and places unknown to them, not only underscores the ways we are our “brother’s and sister’s keepers,” but it also expands the boundaries of our notions of community.

This learning experience offers students a space for exploring and developing their own ideas about community. It begins with students in small groups gathering around an easel paper and drawing, in silence, what “community” means to them. Later, they review each other’s work, the group dynamics behind their art, and the larger contours of our connections to one another. The silence that opens this experience maintains the integrity of each student’s concept of community, encourages them to collaborate differently, and strengthens the reflection that follows.

Opening

- Ideally, this activity starts as students enter. Inform them that they are to be silent and stay silent. Ask students to form groups of 3-4 and to gather around a piece of butcher paper (if there isn’t enough room in the classroom, you might move into a hallway and tape the butcher paper to the wall). Give each student a marker. Remind students, again, that they are to be silent during this activity until otherwise instructed.

Note: This is an example of using what's called "Authentic Image Language." You state only the behavior you want to see: that is, "remain silent" as opposed to "no talking."

Process

- Instruct the students with these words only: *Draw community. Absolute silence.* Students can work from all sides of the paper or may, silently, decide to work all from one side. There is no "right" way to do this. The only "right" is silence!

Note: Here, you should "Under Direct." Giving additional directions dilutes originality and the integrity and purpose of the experience. If a student asks for further clarification, simply repeat, "Draw community." Observe closely how each group works.

- Typically, after five to seven minutes, students will appear to be done (though do allow more time if a good portion of students still seem engaged). Invite students to silently walk around and see each other's drawings. Suggest that they look at what is common and unique to the drawings and to think, too, about what might be missing from the art as a whole. Encourage them, as well, to imagine how each group worked: Does the easel paper appear to show collaboration or all individual expressions? Remind students to be silent, if needed.
- Initiate a discussion (yes, they can talk again!) in which students reflect on the process, itself. What was it like to do this? Typically, students initially focus on the silence before other observations emerge. Next, discuss the process more directly: How did they interpret the directions? What got them started? Did they work individually? Were they aware of what others drew and did that influence them? What is most apparent in their drawings: people, buildings, and/or animals? What is missing? Does the art reflect the idea of community at its best or does it include its challenges, too?
- Now ask students to step back from their art and to consider the larger concept of community and its complexity. (Please add or replace these questions with your own.)
 - What defines a community?
 - What may members of a community have in common?
 - What do we gain or draw from the communities of which we are a part? What do we contribute?
 - What do virtual communities offer that face-to-face communities do not? Where do they fall short?
 - When people talk about a "global community," what do they mean?

Closing

- Many of us may know Mahatma Gandhi's quote: "Be the change you wish to see in the world." Is being a changemaker an essential part of being in a community and helping (or keeping) it just? Is being a changemaker a moral obligation or a choice? How important is it to you and why?