

DESCRIPTION

When teaching about race and racism, teachers often encounter resistance from students. For some, the topic is just too uncomfortable; other students fear that the topic won't be taken seriously enough. It is not uncommon for students to react defensively, claiming that "I wasn't around during slavery (oppression of women, the Holocaust, Jim Crow laws, etc.), so why do I have to feel guilty?" Other students are confused by the state

of different racial groups in our country, wondering why some groups do not do as well as others economically or educationally; these students exclaim that "slavery ended 150 years ago" or "they don't want to fit in to our country" or "anyone can make it in America; look at all the other immigrants who have done well." All of these reactions are normal ways for students to isolate themselves from the pain of our often race-obsessed culture and racist history and to protect themselves from the fear of blame and guilt. Even students of color will distance themselves at times, insisting on their absolute individualism and that nothing determines their future but themselves.

This lesson plan seeks to challenge some of this thinking and to help students think in systematic and institutional, rather than solely personal, ways about race and racism. Too often, people focus on racism as something that occurs when one person is not nice to or discriminates against another. We all must recognize race and racism as elements that transcend our interpersonal interactions and that are shaped and determined by our histories, both national and personal.

This lesson plan also seeks to help students understand how history influences the present and to be open to the complexity of societal structures, historical causes, and environmental context both in their own lives and in the lives of other individuals and groups. While this lesson focuses on race, class, and gender, the basic principles in these activities apply to any situation that can be analyzed for cause and effect. The skills practiced in these activities will help students think through their own and others' initial responses and engage in more thoughtful analysis of a situation instead of jumping to conclusions.

This lesson plan contains three short activities. Each activity can stand on its own or be combined with one or both of the other activities. The introduction should be used the first time you do any of the following activities.

Grade Level: Grades 9-12.

Subject Area(s): Social Studies and Language Arts.



WHAT'S RACISM GOT TO DO WITH ME?

How Our History and Context
Shape Us and Others



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Purpose

- To help students recognize causal relationships between historical events, societal structures, and current events.
- To help students analyze both how events are influenced by the past and how events might influence the future.

Outcomes

By the end of this lesson, each student will

- Create a personal influence web
- Hypothesize the outcome of an event
- Examine a current event, research possible influences, and draw conclusions

Materials Needed

All Activities:

- Teacher Instructions, including lesson plan
- Optional: Internet access for research

Activity #1

- Student Handout #1: Personal Influence Web
- Markers, colored pencils, etc. for Activity #1



Activity #2

- Student Handout #2: Past Event: How Will the Story End?
- Sample Stories

Activity #3

- Student Handout #3: Current Event: How Did We Get Here?
- News Article(s) on a Current Event (Supplied by the Teacher)

LESSON PLAN

Outline of Activities

- Introduction (5 minutes)
- Activity #1: Personal Influence Web (15 minutes)
- Activity #2: How Will the Story End? (20 minutes)
- Activity #3: Current Event: How Did We Get Here? (20 minutes)

Introduction (5 minutes)

Introduce the importance of understanding how we are all affected by our histories and contexts.

If you have time, ask students to think of one of their own personality traits or hobbies. Then ask students to think about what in their past (family, cultural, national, etc.) may have contributed to that trait or hobby. Then ask them to think about how their current context (family, friends, social group, neighborhood, etc.) may have contributed to that trait or hobby. Ask a few students to share their answers with the group.

Then explain that just as we know that we, as individuals, are influenced by our own histories, families, friends, contexts, and more, so must we understand other people and other groups of people as influenced by their histories and contexts. Not only must we think about how “things got this way,” but we can also turn that around and try to predict how an event happening now might influence the conditions of a person, group of people, or nation in the future.

Activity #1: Personal Influence Web (15 minutes)

Explain to your students that they will start to consider how we are all influenced by our past and our contexts; sometimes those influences are good, sometimes they are not. Although you do not want to negate the idea that we are all responsible, moral agents, it is nonetheless true that we learn our



attitudes and behaviors and often reproduce patterns that began long before we were born. Certainly we want students to take responsibility for their actions, but we also want them to be able to identify and examine their own beliefs and values and determine whether these are beliefs and values that they hold because they are true or helpful or because they have just been passed down from their grandparents and parents. See the sample story for an example of this; you may want to share it with your students. If you do share the story, lead your students in discussion of it and help them understand how we have images and ideas in our heads that we are completely unaware of until they are challenged; only we can choose, then, whether we will do something about them!

Pass out Student Handout #1: Personal Influence Web and give students ten minutes to complete it on their own. Have students pair up and share their influences for a few minutes. End by asking for a few students to share one or two observations from their Personal Influence Webs.

Personal Influence: Sample Story

Sam and Amy are good friends and working together on planning Junior Prom. The budget this year is tight, and they've spent a lot of hours talking over how they are going to be able to afford the DJ that everyone in their class loves, making phone calls to find the cheapest decorations, and trying to keep the ticket prices as low as possible. After a particularly frustrating meeting when they realize they aren't going to be able to afford the DJ unless they slash their decorations budget, Amy exclaims, "We've got to Jew them down! We just can't afford these decorations at that price!" Sam gets very quiet, looks down, and says, "Amy, you know my dad is Jewish, right?" Amy blushes and says, "Sam, you know what I mean! It doesn't mean anything. My mom says it all the time. I just mean, you know, we have to force them to give us a better price." Sam nods but is distant from Amy after that.

Activity #2: How Will the Story End? (15 minutes)

Now that students have connected how history and context affect their own lives, it's time for them to imagine how a past event might influence the future. This lesson plan provides a fictional story that has elements of the history of communities where there is discrimination or distrust between groups of people. Using an imaginary story allows students to talk without any relying on assumptions based on what they know has happened; there is no "right" answer. The story is similar enough to many events in history to serve as a bridge to a discussion of an actual historical event.

Create diverse groups of three students, assign a recorder, reporter and a timekeeper, and then read the story out loud. Ask students to discuss the story and their hypotheses in their group, using the



questions on the handout to guide their discussions. After students have had time to discuss, ask them to share their observations with the class.

Activity #3: Current Event: How Did We Get Here? (20 minutes)

Now that students have looked at their own lives, have them examine a larger current event and analyze what may have led to it. Because this should be an activity that fits into your classroom content and helps students see how events in their lives today are related to the past, you should choose an event that is a recent. You could assign a topic to students as homework and ask them to do some background research on it before coming to class or you could choose an issue related to a topic you have been studying in class. This activity could be done by allowing students to do research in a computer lab or by allowing them to hypothesize together in a group. Once students have their topic, pass out handout #3, place them in small groups, and let them brainstorm the historical and contextual causes and contributors to the event. Ask some student groups to share their hypotheses with the rest of the class.

You might want to practice doing this kind of hypothesizing by using the fictional “current event” below—**How Did We Get Here?**—as a way to discuss why people of different backgrounds often see events differently and how a history of racism might lead to the reactions seen in this story.

Topic Ideas for Connecting Current and Past Events

These are sample ideas to get you started, but you could choose a number of contemporary events to study and many historical and contextual causes for each one. For a quick summary of any of the following, search the italicized terms at Wikipedia or Google.

1. Relate a current labor union strike in your city to the struggle between industrial powers and *labor unions* at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century.
2. Share editorials and Presidential speeches written soon after September 11, 2001 or in the months leading up to the U. S.-Iraq War, and connect them to how *propaganda* influenced American support of *World War II*.
3. Study the spate of *hate crimes* in the late 1990s, such as the dragging death of *James Byrd, Jr.*, the torture and killing of *Matthew Shepard*, and the racist shooting spree of *Benjamin Smith*, and ask student to research the history of lynching and hate crimes in the United States and/or the history of backlash against groups when they receive increasing civil rights and prominence in media and the larger culture.



4. Examine articles about the *housing crisis* and *mortgage foreclosures* in 2008 and how they describe the cause of the problems and the people who are losing their homes. Connect this to decisions made by legislators and the banking industry. Then connect it to *discriminatory lending* behaviors in the past, such as *redlining* neighborhoods, and charging different interest rates to people depending on their race.
5. Study contemporary maps that represent the racial distribution of residents in your city or engage students in conversation about why different areas of your town or city are populated by people of different races. Relate this to the history of the *great migration* of African Americans from the south to the north during the 20th century, *redlining*, and *block busting*.
6. Examine the racial and gender distribution in the U.S. Congress or the intense interest in the 2008 presidential race because of the race of Senator Barack Obama and the gender of Senator Hillary Clinton. Look at the history of *voting acts*, *reconstruction*, *Jim Crow laws*, *racism*, *white privilege*, *women's suffrage*, *the nineteenth amendment*, and/or *sexism* in the U. S. to understand and explain the above.

Current Event: How Did We Get Here? Sample Story

A big trial has been taking place with lots of media coverage: entrepreneur, Ty Jones, the first African-American billionaire, is accused of embezzling millions from his own company. Students have been talking about it at school a little but not as much as it has been showing up on the covers of the tabloids and entertainment magazines. When the time comes for the verdict, tension rises a little in the school, but teachers aren't worried because the students get along well there, and lots of white and black students both like and support Jones.

Still, when the guilty verdict comes down, black students erupt in anger, talking loudly in the hallways and in the cafeteria. Many white students look nervous and seem confused by the strong show of emotion. During the "Current Events" section of her social studies class that day, Ms. Wilson asks students their opinions about the trial. The class is split neatly by race: black students think Jones got a bad deal; white students think the verdict was fair. When students start explaining their position, it becomes clear that they don't understand one another.

Jason, a white student, says, "Hey, I admire Ty, but, let's face it, he's guilty! Did you see all the evidence against him? They have e-mails between him and his vice president about how they were moving money around. How is that not proof!?"

Danielle, an African-American student, responds, "Look, you don't know! How easy is it to plant evidence!?! Anyone could have faked those e-mails!"



Jason asks, "Why would they do that?"

Seemingly worn out, Danielle explains slowly, "You don't get it, do you? That's how we get treated. We're always suspected and we never get a break. Every time a black man does something good, they're just looking for ways to tear him down."

The black and white students eye each other warily and seem to retreat into their own worlds.

Note to Teachers:

This lesson plan can be expanded as you sit fit and as best meets the needs of your students and content area. This lesson plan is by no means exhaustive. Please see one or more of the resources if you would like more ideas of how to help students connect events in our past to current realities.

Resources

Lee, Enid, Deborah Menkart, and Margo Okazawa-Rey (eds.). *Beyond Heroes and Holidays: A Practical Guide to K-12 Anti-Racist, Multicultural Education and Staff Development*. Washington, D. C.: Network of Educators on the Americas, 1998.

Loewen, James W. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York: Touchstone, 1995.

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.





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Activity #1: Personal Influence Web

Student Handout #1

Directions:

Write your name or draw yourself in the middle of the page. Then list or map all your major personality traits, interests, hobbies, and future career(s) and draw lines between them and you. Focus on two or three of those and list or connect all the events, people, and other influences that have made you who you are today. Remember to consider your relatives, friends, education, neighborhood, major events in your past, mentors, gender, social class, country of origin, race, religion, and so on.



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Activity #2: How Will the Story End?

Sample Story

Soon after World War II, around 1947 or 1948, when your grandparents were still children, a new group of people moved to town. They were fleeing the war and the refugee camps in Europe and somehow they got sent here to start their lives over. So many had died in that war, that the people who showed up here often came alone, or with a couple of children, some had their spouses, others had been widowed by the war. Sometimes it was a woman with her parents, or a father with his four children, or a single man with no one else, or an old couple with no children. All of the immigrants seemed sad and didn't want to mingle much with the people who already lived here, but they were willing to work hard. Even though most of them did not speak English, they found jobs in factories, as housekeepers, cooks, tailors, and bookkeepers.

They were hard workers but they created their own community where they spoke their own language, cooked their own food, and taught their own children. Because they had been devastated by the war, they were distrustful of government and of those who looked German. They refused to send their children to the public schools, to marry or even socialize with people outside of their community, or to comply with many of the rules regarding vaccination for children. They had spent years under a government that had used schools and medicine as a way to manipulate their lives and to indoctrinate children.

A decade after they moved here, disease came through the town, an old disease that we thought had been wiped out years ago, but it raced through their community because none of their children had been vaccinated, and they refused to take the children to the hospital. Townspeople all watched in horror as they buried tiny coffin after tiny coffin.

The whispering started then: people called them "savages" and "murderers" and started refusing them service in the local stores and restaurants. Soon, they found it hard to keep or get a job. Before this, people had only whispered when they saw them in public, but now they shunned or shoved them and called them disparaging names to their faces.

It's 50 years later. Finish the story.





Activity #2: How Will the Story End?

Student Handout #2

Recorder Name: _____

Reporter Name: _____

Time Keeper Name: _____

Discussion Questions

1. Listen to the story your teacher reads to you. Take one minute just to react to the story. What caught your attention? What do you think is important to remember from the story?



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**Activity #3:
Current Event:
How Did We Get Here?**

Student Handout #3

Recorder Name: _____

Reporter Name: _____

Time Keeper Name: _____

Directions:

1. Read about the issue that your teacher has given you. Take 2 minutes to brainstorm as a group everything that you think might have caused this issue; don't censor yourself—just brainstorm!

2. After you have brainstormed for 2 minutes, choose a couple of your ideas to pursue further. Write them down here:



