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### Exploring Our Identities: Narrative Reflection

In designing this unit, I was initially a little caught up on how to create a unit that could accomplish the start of year goal of community-building while still covering valuable course material and allowing for rich critical conversations. At the intersection of these goals, I arrived at “identity.” After all, “getting to know you” activities are essentially explorations of each other’s identities, whether or not we express this as the purpose. Framing these exploratory conversations as critical examinations of identity builds essential skills for literary analysis, so I decided to employ this intersection of inter/intrapersonal exploration and critical reading to the benefit of my unit.

The first step of “backwards planning” this unit was identifying essential questions to guide the unit (Tomlinson and McTighe, 2006). Following the arc described above, I wanted these questions to capture the familiarity and enthusiasm of “getting to know you” activities (hopefully amplified by the fact that my freshman would likely all be meeting each other for the first time), and carrying this energy into “getting to know” the characters in the text. The five essential questions of the unit seek to follow this path:

1. What is identity? What different details about me make up my identity?
2. What is the relationship between identity and setting? When do I not notice my identity? When do I especially notice my identity?
3. Can parts of identity conflict with one another?

4. How can our identities change our experiences and how we act in different situations?
5. How can understanding identity help us understand conflict?

The first question is explicitly personal, but the second question and onward merely use personal experience as a jumping off point to explore identity in the abstract. I began to see that by developing a certain fluency in discussing personal identity would build skills for examining identity within the text.

As a first step for determining appropriate evidence of understanding, the framework called for goals that, if accomplished, demonstrate an understating of the essential questions (Tomlinson and McTighe, 2006). Again, I attempted to make the goals follow the arc of personal reflection and community building moving toward critical analysis:

1. Students will understand the types of factors that comprise their own identities.
2. Students will understand that components of identity contribute to different experiences, understandings, values, etc.
3. Students will be able to respectfully explore similarities and differences within the class community.
4. Students will be able to apply these understandings to questions of perspective in the text.

From there, I needed to determine acceptable assessments through which students could demonstrate having accomplished these understandings (Tomlinson and McTighe, 2006). I decided that for much of the week I could develop and check understanding using a series of journal entries, small and large group discussions, and exit tickets. As a culminating activity of the week, I decided students could demonstrate their understandings of their own identities and how these identities affect lived experience with a “Story Slam:” a presentation/performance of a story from their lives that demonstrates something about their identity.

With these bigger questions answered, I felt as though I already had an idea of how the week's instruction might look. Before I could get into the class content, though, there is a certain amount of "housekeeping" to be done on day one. Growing up, I feel as though every teacher handled day one more or less the same, but looking critically at these practices had me wondering how to improve this more or less standard practice.

The first counterpoint which came to mind was from the day Ms. Warfield visited the Leaders of Change group and talked to us about her day one procedure. She emphasized coming in strong with your expectations and non-negotiables: she says the first thing she does when her students sit down on the first day of school is slap a 7 page class contract onto their desks, making the students and their parents sign and return it for a test grade. Ms. Warfield's approach is obviously tried and true, all of her students attest to this, but I just don't think it would feel natural, given my personality and teaching style. A popular alternative tactic I saw at my school last year was taking time on day one to collaboratively determine class norms. This method resonated with Wentzel's findings on defining attributes of successful, caring teachers, quoted within *Comprehensive Classroom Management* (Jones and Jones, 2013): "[caring teachers] demonstrate democratic and egalitarian communication styles designed to elicit student participation and input, who develop expectations for student behavior and performance in light of individual differences and abilities..." (p. 59).

I could see myself doing a combination of these two techniques: leading with setting clear expectations of how the class will run and then determining behavioral norms collaboratively with the class. I could then create our joint contract and we could all sign it, showing students that their voices are valued, and that the class can operate as a democratic community *if* they meet my expectations of class structure. I think it is important to observe

findings on “ethic of care,” since the class will be jumping pretty quickly into explorations into identity, which can be a very personal topic.

To conclude day 1, we would begin to discuss and define identity. Once we had determined a strong definition, I would introduce the concept of an identity web and we would collaboratively create one for Junior from *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (one of the summer reading books for my 9th graders at Palumbo). We used this activity as a get to know you in TLUC, but I also found it to be useful in my work last year with City Year. Once students have established a basic definition of identity and have collaboratively created an identity web, they will receive their homework assignment of completing an identity web of themselves and reflecting on three times (one paragraph each) that they felt proud of a specific identity.

Day 2 was the subject of my detailed lesson plan. The specific goals for this lesson included: expanding understanding of identity as complex and multifaceted, building class community and fluency in respectfully discussing identity with peers, and exercising these skills in text analysis. To begin the lesson, I would pose the “Big Question” of the day: “Can identities conflict with one another? How? How does identity help us understand the source of conflict?” In this I had Carey in mind, with his suggestion of a pre-test to “prime the pump” to check for prior understanding, introduce important vocab, and guide learning towards important concepts (Carey, 2014). Given the open-ended nature of this lesson, I didn’t think a traditional quiz would be helpful, so I went with a pre-lesson “Big Question” as we discussed in the Facing History and Ourselves workshop. I think this accomplishes the same goals of introducing the key concepts of “identity,” and “conflict,” and posing a transparent, open ended question to guide students in their explorations. This priming question would then become a formative

assessment by the end of the class, as students would reflect on the class and answer the “Big Question” in 1-2 sentences on an index card as an exit ticket.

I wanted to use the self-reflection from the previous night’s homework as a foray into more complex, interpersonal connections. The scramble activity is described in detail in the lesson plan and the activity guide, so I won’t summarize it here, but I will discuss the theoretical bases I drew upon in creating the activity. First, I wanted to make sure that this activity felt active and communal, rather than static and academic. Both my personal experience and direct recommendations from instructors in all our courses this semester endorsed warm up activities that included physical movement. I believe that this motion, as well as the timed rotation, will keep students in higher spirits and make them more willing to share personal information. I also had Gardner’s multiple intelligences in mind, as bodily-kinesthetic learners especially will probably be more comfortable while moving around and meeting new people (Gardner, 2015). Additionally, this activity is, at its core, a bridge between interpersonal and intrapersonal learning: pairing self reflection with external connection. Ideally, this will exhibit the strengths of both introverted and extroverted students, making the activity more accessible to multiple kinds of learners.

As we move through the rotations, posing new guiding questions, I would model ways to respond to each question from my own life experiences. On a basic level, this lets students know a bit more about me and my background, but it also contributes to the democratic classroom environment suggested above by Jones and Jones. Additionally, it acknowledges my own positionality as a person and a member of the class. Milner emphasizes the importance of this self-reflection for researchers, but the logic extends to both educators and students. Additionally, the ability to critically examine your own cultural context is essential to successful interpretation

of text. In describing the role of positionality in interpreting research, Milner notes: “People typically put on their filters or their interpretive lenses to separate fact from fiction or to disentangle the implicit biases inherent in the presentation of ideas, stories, philosophies, and experiences,” though these skills are just as essential in understanding literary texts (Milner, 2007, p. 396). A fluency in examining perspective is thereby essential to understanding not only text, but life experiences. Through exploring the identities of others, we learn that, “Truth, or what is real and thus meaningful and ‘right’ [to someone]... depends on how they have experienced the world” (Milner, 2007, p. 395).

So by exploring similarities and differences of classmates’ identities, students inevitably witness the importance identity plays in determining individual values and life experiences. Further, by including myself in this exercise, I demonstrate that my perspective is not absolute and objectively correct just because I am the teacher. This challenges the power model of traditional, behaviorist classrooms where the teacher plays the dispenser of “correct” knowledge, instead making me a member of the class with a socio-cultural identity of my own (Oakes, Lipton, *et. al.*, 2013).

As each rotation comes to a close, I would ask the class for sharebacks, prompted by simple questions: ex. “did any group find something in common they were surprised about?” or “who learned something new or heard a surprising story?” I suspect, at least early on, most groups would be hesitant to share back, but if at least one would be willing to share after each prompt, I think it would contribute greatly to the quality of conversation once we moved back to the large group. This is a tactic we used often in Leaders of Change: priming conversation with pair-shared personal reflections, then bringing the topics to large group discussions.

Hopefully, by the final rotation, there will be consistent sharebacks, and students will be comfortably enough talking about identity to transition back to the large group and apply these skills directly to the text. Perhaps most importantly, though, this exercise contributes to a safe space for discussing identity by recognizing 3 components of Dr. Becki Cohn-Vargas's ABCDE Strategies for Identity safety: Autonomy of student voice, Belonging in a community, and Diversity as a resource. As stated in the essential questions and goals of the unit, a deeper understanding of identity in general and a fluency in respectful discussion of identity are the key takeaways of this unit.

Following this activity, we would enter into a more traditional, class discussion-based activity applying these skills to the text. This activity is detailed in the lesson's activity guide, but I believe the scramble activity is the key of the lesson and the unit. If this activity is successful in connecting critical discussions of identity to personal experience and creating a safe class environment for discussing these topics, then bridging those conversations to the text would be the easiest part of the unit. This activity would effectively "rehearse" the end of the week "Story Slam," not only by having students brainstorm potential stories to share, but would also build a comfort and situational fluency in discussing these topics with peers. If so, I envision the "Story Slam" being a fun classroom event that gives students the opportunity to proudly share themselves and share in the richness of the diverse experiences of their peers.

## Works Cited

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