



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2005 Volume II: The Challenge of Intersecting Identities in American Society: Race/Ethnicity, Gender and Nation

Introduction

With an emphasis on identity and American society, this seminar featured a challenging set of readings and discussions. By beginning with an exercise discussed by Beverly Tatum in her book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, each seminar Fellow confronted her own identities - who "I am." We also built on that exercise with a dispelling of stereotypes each Fellow had confronted in their personal and professional lives, listing many false assumptions about themselves, entitled, "I am not." All of the members of the seminar - Fellows and the seminar leader - were pushed to think about difficult topics confronting each other, ourselves and, most importantly, our students.

What is identity, and how can identities, "intersect?" This seminar explored the politics of identity from an intersectional perspective, which acknowledges that each of us has a list of who "I am" and that list is not limited to one specific group or category. In this way the seminar builds on an approach that has emerged in many disciplines over the past 20 years to dissect and examine the organizing structures of society. In the United States, there are seven politically relevant categories of difference that have an impact upon individuals, groups, and public policy, many of which are listed in the title. Each of the units defines identity in age-appropriate ways and examines different intersecting identity groups. Many of the units acknowledge and examine how people identify simultaneously with specific race, gender, national origin, or class groups in American society, and how those allegiances to different groups can conflict with each other in a single person's life (e.g. to be African American and female) or among groups (e.g. the combining of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans and many others as "Hispanic" or "Latino"). Allegiances to different groups can promote intolerance and prevent coalitions or cross-group solidarity.

Historically, the work of social movements in the United States such as the modern civil rights movement, Brown Power, the American Indian Movement as well as the first and second waves of the women's movement have in many ways forced America to "live up to what it wrote on paper," to use the words of Martin Luther King. Previous political efforts have focused more on intergroup relations - that is, forbidding discrimination against a group or providing group-specific political and economic benefits - certainly one important component of ensuring equality and justice for all. However, one unexpected, disturbing outcome of these movements has been what Elizabeth Martinez terms the "Oppression Olympics," where various marginalized groups compete with each other for the title of "most oppressed," in order to obtain political or economic resources. Given the perception that resources are scarce, groups strategically argue for specific benefits on behalf of the entire group, even though the entire group may not ultimately benefit from the request, and, more problematically, ignoring requests that may serve these minorities within minorities.

Who has the authority to define who counts as Black, Latino, or Native American? Can a person opt out of these identities? How do the sweeping generalizations made regarding the political and economic interests of "Blacks," "Latinos," "Asian Americans" or "Native Americans" mask a wide variety of socioeconomic positions within these groups based on the role of gender, class, national origin, or citizenship status? How can we ensure that all members of a group can gain remedies to the injustices they have suffered?

As a new seminar leader, it was enlightening to learn about the role of teacher identity and student identity and the interaction that occurs in the daily classroom. I learned from two magnet school teachers that the self-segregation process many learning disabled or physically disabled students engage in is markedly similar to the self-segregation process many racial minority students engage in when they find themselves in a majority context (see Tatum 1997). Several teachers also told of experiences with students who are members of the same "umbrella category," such as Latino/as, and the separation within such a broad group; for example, the chasms often existing between students who identify as Puerto Rican and those who identify as Mexican.

Beyond examining the multiple identities of students and teachers, seminar participants were treated to a visit from Dr. Charles R. Hancock, Associate Dean of Curriculum and Instruction at the Ohio State University and Mrs. Theresa Hancock, a recently retired reading specialist and elementary school teacher specializing in children's literature. Their presentation was based on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Dean Hancock's 35 years of experience in conducting workshops with educators led to a very engaging, activity-filled session for everyone. Based on the Fellows' appreciation of and engagement with the workshop, most of the units in this volume include attention to students' varying learning styles and academic strengths well beyond the traditional limit of early elementary years. Fellows have attempted in as many ways as possible to develop units that can educate an entire child regardless of the subject matter or grade level. Moreover, most of the units mention specific nation-, state- or district-wide standards for curriculum and/or strategies that they have found useful for working with a very diverse population of students.

The 10 members of the seminar included seven first-time fellows and six teachers with five or fewer years of teaching experience. The Fellows teach students in a wide variety of grade levels (K-12), skill levels (honors to special education), and subject areas (English, History/Social Studies, Art, Spanish). The units in this volume are organized according to grade level, with high school, middle and elementary school units grouped together. The only exception is a relatively unique pair of units for teachers of Spanish, who may need units for any age but a variety of language proficiency levels. These two units are grouped together.

The high school units are from all four subject areas - English, History, Art and Spanish. As well, they combine specific skill-based learning goals with content areas that touch on a variety of intersecting identities. For example, Dana Altshuler's "Anatomy of Your Enemy" draws comparisons between discriminatory treatment of gays and lesbians during Nazi Germany to post-September 11th policies affecting gays and lesbians in the United States. Dana Buckmir encourages critical thinking about gender norms and their impact on teenage girls in her Basic English unit, "Female Adolescent Identity: Am I Powerful or Powerless?" Kristen Grandfield, also a high school English teacher, uses the biographies and literature of four women of color - Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros, Nikki Giovanni and Ntozake Shange - to develop a unit that teaches students about the role of "voice" in literary analysis. Sara Thomas, a teacher of art, developed many creative ideas for activities to teach her students to abandon their stereotypes about themselves, each other and about what is "successful art" in her unit, "Teaching Art Through Identity."

The last high school teacher, Maria Cardalliaguet Gómez-Málaga, is a Spanish citizen who teaches Spanish at

the high school level. Her unit, "The Americas in America: Un Mar de Identidades" is designed for advanced (Spanish IV) language students and uses multiple media to reflect upon the intersecting identities and histories of Hispanic [sic] peoples throughout the Americas. In particular, Gómez-Málaga confronts the concept of mestizaje, or racial/ethnic mixture, that is a part of all Spanish-speaking cultures in the western hemisphere.

Both Spanish units acknowledge the politics of whether the appropriate term should be "Hispanic," or "Latino," a debate that continues among Latin American populations within the United States. Alexandra Reyes' unit, "Hispanic Heritage Month: What Are We Celebrating, Anyway?" also acknowledges the varying cultures contained within the label "Hispanic." In developing a unit that is appropriate for beginning Spanish speakers (middle school), Reyes takes advantage of her own Bolivian heritage in selecting the countries of focus for her students. It is both a strategic content choice and part of an effective teaching strategy: as she explains in her unit, it helps to humanize her to her students and they are more attentive to the lesson in general.

The next two units were created by teachers who are among a team of colleagues at East Rock Global Magnet School. Seminar coordinator Jacqueline Porter-Clinton and Institute Fellow Judith Dixon both sought ways to teach the stories of voluntary and involuntary immigration to the United States in a way that addresses the truly global student population at this K-8 magnet school. Porter-Clinton's unit, "Who Am I and Why Must I Be Called Anything?" is designed to go beyond bringing together learning-disabled and mainstream students to learn the eighth grade social studies curriculum concerning immigration. An experienced special education and disabilities teacher, Porter-Clinton's activities target the tendency toward self-segregation many students enact during a developmental stage where fitting in is so very important. Dixon's "Why is Ethnicity Valued, or Is It?" is designed for a fifth grade classroom and brings students into a special conversation with their parents, guardians, grandparents and other relatives across the generations to discover through oral history the cultural treasures (music, fashion, values) each race or ethnicity possesses. In addition to the separate units each author created, the team will engage in joint efforts during the school's "Diversity Day" to bring the content of their units and their students' projects to the entire learning community.

The final two units are written by elementary school teachers. Stephanie Sheehan's unit, "Defining Cultural Identity: Thinking Outside the Box" is perhaps the most ambitious unit in its attempt to create a unit that can encompass the entire first grade New Haven Public Schools social studies curriculum. She covers all four themes students are expected to learn in her unit, encouraging them to engage in critical thinking and avoid stereotyping through her diverse selection of children's literature showing different story protagonists and families of different races and economic classes. Jean Sutherland's unit, on the other hand, focuses on the multiple of identities of African American women such as Harriet Tubman and Faith Ringgold to present a unit targeted for third grade students.

It has been both an honor and privilege to lead a seminar with such a wealth of diverse experiences, unit topics, and approaches. Readers of all the units in the volume will see a consistency of content and flexibility of organization across grade levels and subject area. In addition to definitions of terms like "identity," or "ethnicity," the majority of units reveal a wealth of strategies that teachers bring to the classroom - some with evocative names like "flushing" or others with self-explanatory purposes such as "do now." I hope all of the Fellows are proud of their hard work. Their successful implementation of the units in the New Haven Public Schools and the wide dissemination of such up-to-date research on identity will hopefully inspire many more teachers around the world to take up the challenge of intersecting identities in their classrooms explicitly.

Ange-Marie Hancock

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>