

Lesson Plan: Don't Judge Me

Understanding the Power of a Stereotype

Grades

6-12

Subjects

Current Events, Fine Arts, Journalism, Language Arts, Media Studies, Social Studies

Overview

In this lesson, students will examine the origins and manifestations of negative stereotypes in post 9/11 America, and will share ideas for how to counter stereotypes and spread tolerance in their communities.

Materials Needed

- *This Is Where I Need To Be* - Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 10. Chapters 9 connect most strongly to this lesson. Other related chapters are 11, 13, 14, and 16.
- Reproducible: "A Lesson from Santa"

Activities/Procedures

1. WARM-UP/CONVERSATION STARTERS:

Note to Educators: This lesson touches on a sensitive subject, and some words associated with negative stereotypes may come up in class during the suggested warm-up exercise. Students should be briefed on the difference between using such words in an academic versus a social setting, and should be advised to maintain a respectful environment throughout the lesson.

Provide students with a definition of "stereotype." As a class, brainstorm a list of groups based on religion, race, ethnicity, or social standing (e.g.: geeks, jocks, punks, etc.) on the board.

Next, divide students into four groups and have each group generate a list of slang words or visual stereotypes associated with a particular social group (they may draw from the list on the board).

Then, reconvene as a class and have students share their lists and reflect on the exercise. Some reflection questions you might ask include:

- Where did you hear or learn about these slang words and/or stereotypes? Are they positive, negative or neutral?
- Do you know someone who is part of this group but doesn't fit this stereotype?
- Why do you think labels such as these exist in society?
- How do stereotypes and labels harm the people they are used to describe?
- What about the people who use them? How are they harmed by forming these stereotypes?

Tell students that they are going to examine the effects of stereotyping on one group of Americans—Muslim Americans.

stereotype: "A generalization about what people are like; an exaggerated image of their characteristics without regard to individual attributes"

2. QUESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION:

As a class, read and discuss the related chapters of *This Is Where I Need To Be*, focusing on the following:

- a. What is the critical event that these oral histories pinpoint as affecting the way the world views them? Find, highlight, or identify at least two quotes or examples to share with your classmates.
- b. As you read these chapters, make a list of the common stereotypes associated with Muslims that the authors repeatedly encounter. In other words, what does the world seem to think a “real Muslim” is?
- c. Is there a story in these oral histories that surprised you? That made you think differently about Muslim Americans than you did before? If yes, what is it? Explain how it affected you.
- d. What solutions do these authors propose to counter the stereotypes that they bump up against in their schools and communities? Which of these actions do you think would be most successful and why?
- e. Have you ever been in a situation similar to these authors where you have had to defend, justify, or explain your views, appearance, or behavior because another person assumed something about you? How did it feel?

3. CLASS PROJECT:

Divide students into small groups and provide each group with a copy of the reproducible “A Lesson from Santa.”

Ask students to look at the image closely and to discuss the following questions in their small groups:

- What do you think the artist’s purpose was in creating this image?
- Who might her intended audience be?
- What impression does this image leave on you? Does it stir up a memory?

Reconvene as a class and invite students to share their impressions with each other. Share with them that this was a poster created by visual artist Cynthia Duxbury to address the negative power of stereotypes in post-9/11 America.

You may wish to share the following background information about the artist with students. It’s excerpted from an article, “Unwrapping Stereotypes: Lessons from Santa” at <http://tinyurl.com/69xob9>:

“I was looking at images of people in newspapers and books and started thinking how unfair it was, people just judging others on the way they look,” she said. “I started to notice myself making some judgments on the people around me. I figured if I’m doing it, then a lot of other people are doing it, too.”

INS roundups, racial profiling, patriotism slipping into jingoism: Duxbury weighed it all as she created an image that played Santa’s hat off the turban of a bearded, faceless man.

“We have all been fed so much fear,” Duxbury said.

After creating the side-by-side Santa/turban images, Duxbury added the words: “Funny how the tiniest thing can make people feel different about you.”

Duxbury emphasized that her message is less about politics and more about humanity. “It’s common sense,” she said. “I’m not very educated when it comes to political matters. This is about simple humanity.”

Duxbury hopes people pause when they see her artwork, take a moment to think more deeply, moving beyond shallow, conditioned responses.

“It’s about awareness and empathy,” she said. “To stop and think, ‘Gosh, maybe I looked at someone today and judged them when I shouldn’t have.’”

After the group discussion, ask students to create their own posters to spread awareness about the harms of stereotyping. They can select any group from the list that was generated during the warm-up activity. Remind students that, like Duxbury, they should write a caption for their poster. You might also encourage them (especially if they’re not comfortable drawing) to pull images and/or create a collage from a variety of media, including newspapers, magazines, and the Internet.

Note: An alternative lesson plan for this reproducible PDF is available at <http://tinyurl.com/5656hk>.

4. HOMEWORK OR LONGER-TERM ASSIGNMENTS:

- a. Ask students to write an “artist’s statement” to accompany their posters (some helpful guidelines are available at <http://tinyurl.com/3bs2wo>). You may wish to set up an exhibit in your classroom or in a prominent area of your school and invite students to present their work to their classmates or other members of the student body.
- b. Select several images from the website (<http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/traveling2/THEM/>) of the traveling exhibition *THEM: Images of Separation*, which “showcases items from popular culture used to stereotype different groups, including Asian Americans, Hispanics, Jews and poor whites, as well as those who are ‘other’ in terms of body type or sexual orientation.” (Note: some images include strong language so we definitely suggest that you vet the selections). Have students pick an image from your vetted list and ask them to describe the stereotype and research the historical period when such an image might have been created. This assignment should help students to view stereotyping and essentialism in a historical context.
- c. Have students create a visual timeline of popular stereotypes in the United States. Then ask them:
 - In what ways can the types of stereotyping and ethnic, racial, or religious profiling and harassment be remedied?
 - What can we do as individuals and as communities?

Divide the class into groups and invite students to come up with action plans for an anti-bias project with clear start and end dates, goals, and benchmarks. This project could extend over the course of a quarter or semester so that students might see the impact of their vision. Possible projects might include: creating a school club to learn about world cultures and religions; organizing Diwali or Eid celebrations and inviting guest speakers; volunteering with a refugee program and getting to know Muslim arrivals; forming a book club to read books about the Muslim or minority experience in America.

- d. The *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life* published its “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey” in 2008. The document “Beliefs Portrait of Muslims” offers a summary of the diversity of Muslims beliefs. It is available at http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/beliefs_portrait-Muslims.pdf. Have students evaluate the findings of this study and write an essay about why it counters stereotypes.
- e. The website *Change the Story* (www.changethestory.net) is an online resource aimed at transforming harmful stereotypes about Muslims that persist in society. It offers an interactive experience where users—Muslim and non-Muslim alike—can meet their neighbors, learn about Islam and apply techniques of interfaith dialogue and action to local communities. Have students browse this website and its videos “Meet Your Neighbor.” Then, ask them to research a prominent American Muslim or go out into their community and interview a Muslim community member. They can write up their research or make a short video modeled on “Meet Your Neighbor.”

Related Resources

The following websites and organizations can provide additional background information and lesson ideas.

U.S. Religious Landscape Survey

Based on interviews with more than 35,000 American adults, this extensive survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life details the religious makeup, religious beliefs and practices as well as social and political attitudes of the American public, including the Muslim community.

<http://religions.pewforum.org/>

The Power of Words

A lesson plan from “Teaching Tolerance” that provides students with the opportunity to increase their awareness of the effects of using language that reinforces stereotypes.

<http://tinyurl.com/6dsa2w>

Hidden Bias: A Primer

A valuable resource from “Teaching Tolerance” with definitions of “stereotype” and “prejudice.”

http://www.tolerance.org/hidden_bias/tutorials/index.html

Who Are the Arab Americans?

This activity is designed to increase student knowledge about Arab Americans and to challenge misperceptions students might hold about Arabs and people of Arab descent.

<http://tinyurl.com/5vyoka>

Young Video Makers Try to Alter Islam’s Face

May 8, 2008 *New York Times* article about a new wave of young American Muslim performers and filmmakers trying to change the public face of their religion.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/08/us/08video.html>

One Nation, Many Voices

Award winners of the annual film contest, sponsored by Link TV, which invites American Muslims to make short films about “stories, not stereotypes.”

<http://www.linktv.org/onenation/>

<http://www.linktv.org/onenation2007/winners>

I am a Muslim

Murad Amayreh's "I Am a Muslim" video tries to contradict stereotypes with a man named Muhammad who presents himself as an ordinary American. It has attracted over two million hits on YouTube.

<http://tinyurl.com/2x2ulu>

Facing History

A wealth of resources and articles are available at the website of this non-profit organization whose aim is to "engage students of diverse backgrounds in an examination of racism, prejudice, and anti-semitism in order to promote the development of a more humane and informed citizenry."

<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/facingtoday/33>

Teachers Against Prejudice

A non-profit group which helps teachers address issues of sensitivity and respect concerning diversity in the classroom and provides trained professionals to teach students how to confront prejudice.

<http://www.teachersagainstprejudice.org/>

Assessment

Teacher evaluation of classroom participation. Teachers may wish to develop additional rubrics and measures for class projects and longer-term assignments.

National Standards

These academic standards are drawn from the *Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning's "Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education: 3rd and 4th Editions."*

Grades 6-12

- Behavioral Studies Standard 1: Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity, and behavior.
- Behavioral Studies Standard 2: Understands various meanings of social group, general implications of group membership, and different ways that groups function.
- Civics Standard 11: Understands the role of diversity in American life and the importance of shared values, political beliefs, and civic beliefs in an increasingly diverse American society.
- Language Arts Standard 1: Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies of the writing process.
- Language Arts Standard 7: Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of informational texts.
- Language Arts Standard 8: Demonstrates competence in speaking and listening as tools for learning.
- United States History Standard 31: Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.

Key Terms

Islam, Muslim, Muslim American, prejudice, tolerance, essentialism, bias, stereotypes, stereotyping