Teaching Social Identity

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Abstract

Early adolescence is a time for students to move beyond interests-based definitions of themselves - things like, "I am a soccer player." Middle school students must begin to recognize and understand how a mosaic of social identifiers constitutes an individual's social identity. Identifiers are characteristics like race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, gender performance, physical and sensory ability, religion, and many more. This essay explains why making social identity a central curricular pillar is crucial, how to do so in an engaging, meaningful way, and what it can look like once students have the understanding of social identity to use as a tool for constructing or unpacking class content.

Teaching Social Identity

"Integrating one's past, present, and future into a cohesive, unified sense of self is a complex task that begins in adolescence and continues for a lifetime."

-Beverly Daniel Tatum, in *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*

When I recently read this line in Tatum's book, I reflected on my past few years as a middle level educator. Specifically, I thought about how supporting students exploring their own identities has taken space from some of the traditional curriculum building-blocks from my past. Less world history, and more understanding of one's self. Tatum's words are an affirmation of this switch in what I value as an educator.

Where she says "sense of self," I insert the language that I have been using: social identity. Over the past several years of learning about, co-planning, and implementing curriculum centered on social identity, it has become fundamental to my pedagogy. Here is why (and, again, my thinking is inspired and bolstered by Tatum and several other researchers, practitioners, colleagues, community members and, most importantly, students):

Why Social Identity?

Early adolescence is a time for students to move beyond interests-based definitions of themselves - things like, "I am a soccer player." Middle school students must begin to recognize and understand how a mosaic of social identifiers constitutes an individual's social identity. Identifiers are characteristics like race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, gender performance, physical and sensory ability, religion, and many more. Crucial to this process - especially, as I am finding while teaching in a racially and socioeconomically homogeneous community - is explicitly focusing on social identifiers that are often unexamined and unspoken within schools and homes. Again, Beverly Daniel Tatum:

> In the areas where a person is a member of the dominant or advantaged social group, the category is usually not mentioned. That element of their identity is so taken for granted by them that it goes without comment. It is taken for granted by them because it is taken for granted by the dominant culture. (2003, p. 39)

Through collaboration, reflection, and refining the process, exploring social identity and using it as a framework for examining curricular content has become a centerpiece for my classes. Here are the essential elements of the format I have been using. They are listed sequentially, sort-of (things naturally shift each year as I co-plan curriculum with students).

Set the Stage

Teacher Defines Social Identity and Identifiers

This provides "the why" - the relevance and intended impact - for students. As I continue to learn, my working definition of social identity gets fine-tuned each year. In general, it is something like:

Social identity is a collection of characteristics that make up who we are. These pieces - the

identifiers - can be visible to others, and are sometimes assumed, or also invisible to others and sometimes hidden. Some identifiers can be "fixed" and remain constant throughout our lives, and some can be "fluid" and change over time. These identifiers and the intersections between them can, due to social and cultural factors, lead to advantages or disadvantages in our lives.

Students Brainstorm Social Identifiers

This starts with an opening prompt to get students thinking and sharing ideas. Something like: "What makes up a person's identity?" I love this experience. Especially with early adolescents, this is where students often list things like "soccer player!" as their entire identity. These moments provide learning opportunities. I can guide a student into understanding how identifying as a soccer player is interconnected with social identifiers like physical ability, sensory ability, or others like family/ancestry (perhaps the student's family is full of passionate fans of "The Beautiful Game"). In these early moments of teaching social identity, I will tell students: there's nothing wrong with identifying as a soccer player. In fact, it is great. And with that we will use the constructs of social identity to deepen, not dismiss, your understanding of self. So, it starts with a student-generated list. During this process I refer to the list of social identifiers I have been using over the years, to ensure that each student-generated list is thorough. This list was originally shared by my friend and collaborator Jeanie Phillips. It is her original list of social identifiers and definitions that I have used and updated each year. While student groups are working to list identifiers, sometimes I will drop hints or ask questions throughout the process to broaden the thinking of the class.

Students Define Social Identifiers in Their Own Words

This is a crucial step in the process. It's important for students to come out of this early activity with a functioning understanding of these social identifiers - not just a memorized list of overly-wordy definitions. This past year, for example, the definitions put together by my 5th and 6th grade students came in the form of a Google Slides presentation, complete with age-appropriate definitions of each identifier and images or symbols that helped provide all students with access to a handy resource. Another method is to provide students with the formal definitions, then let small groups break those definitions down, create their own "user-friendly" versions, and even create visuals to support the understanding of what each identifier means. Here is an image from a recent 8th grade activity:

Figure 1

A Classroom Wall Mural of Student-Created Social Identifier "User-Friendly" Definitions

Individualize

Each Student Creates a Social Identity Mosaic

As I have heard in the education community, "before students go out, they need to go in." Meaning, that students should apply these new terms and ideas to their own lives before applying them to their surrounding world. I start by having students dig in and create an identity "mosaic" - a collection of words, images, symbols, etc. that represents what each of the social identifiers looks like in their own lives. Students may need support with this. For many early adolescents, there are gaps in understanding or awareness of particular social identifiers. An example of this is socioeconomic (or "class") status. Not only is it a complicated concept, but most students have never been asked to consider how their living conditions might place them in a socioeconomic bracket. This requires care and intentionality to teach and engage students in reflecting on this element of their identity.

Also, students may not feel comfortable sharing certain social identifiers. For example, I would never force students to out themselves when representing their sexuality or gender identity. So I have approached how to review these student identity mosaics in a couple of ways: a simple method is asking students to only represent the identifiers that they are comfortable sharing. Or, in an interesting twist on the traditional school assignment model, I do not actually review their mosaics. I provide students with time and resources to complete their mosaics, and then ask them to reflect on the process afterward. This helps me get a sense of student efficacy and the effectiveness of the activity.

I have also experimented with asking students to choose a person that they are comfortable sharing their mosaics with, in order to provide an authentic audience. This balancing act of honoring student comfort, while ensuring engagement/efficacy with the activity in an effective way, is still something I am tinkering with each year. The reflection & self-assessment form will look something like this.

Figure 2

Social Identity Mosaics Rubric

Social Identity Mosaics

Self-Direction Self-Assessment

Transferable target language (levels 1 - 4): →			
I can identify a work plan to further my learning.	I can write specific, measurable, and attainable action steps in support of progressing in my work plan.	I can work at my action steps and measure my progress.	I can reflect on my progress to inform my course - revise my work plan as needed.
What each level looks like for this project/assignment (read the boxes below carefully!):			
I planned an outline for my mosaic and tried to include some identifiers in it.	My mosaic started to take shape and I have included some social identifiers in it. It's clear what I was trying to create for my mosaic.	I maintained a focus on completing my identity mosaic. It includes a design and many of the identifiers connected to my own identity.	While working toward completing my identity mosaic I made some changes to better suit the needs of the plan for my product.

Apply to Content

Use Social Identifiers as a Tool for Unpacking Content

This gets really interesting. Students, at this point, are starting to have a working understanding of social identity and the identifiers. To apply their new learning, I will take any range of pieces of content (short stories, poems, current events articles, picture books, videos, audio-stories, etc.) and challenge students to determine which social identifiers are most important within the source. Not only does this push their thinking, it is the perfect opportunity to apply any of our district's transferable skills. A simple example that we used earlier this year: our class read the picture book *Those Shoes* by Maribeth Boelts. Students were then challenged to do the following:

- List which social identifiers are a part of the story
- Choose one social identifier that you think is the most important in the story
- Explain why you think that social identifier is most important in the story
- Use evidence from the story to support your thinking

It was a great way to teach and practice one of our transferable skills (using evidence) while applying social identifiers to a source.

Use Social Identifiers as a Construction Tool

Students can also use social identifiers as a tool for constructing their own content. This applies to any form of student-created product: narratives, poetry, argumentative writing, expository essays, blog posts, scripting podcasts, debate preparation, whatever. With any of these examples, students are tasked with building, from the ground up, their product with social identifiers at the core.

Concrete example: In a narrative writing project an early step is for students to create characters and a story arc with social identifiers at the center. For students with social identifiers that represent a minority or marginalized population, this allows them to explore that piece of their identity through narrative. An impactful piece of feedback from a former student's parent came in response to the way I had structured an "historical avatars" writing project several years ago (this is paraphrased): "any time a black girl wants to explore her racial identity it must be encouraged." Heck yes, she should. And if I am doing this properly, any time students are creating content in my class they are doing so built on social identifiers.

This also provides opportunities for students to create stories that work less as mirrors (reflections of themselves in characters/plot) and more as windows (opportunities to explore more diverse characters/plotlines). With this process comes complexities. At its most constructive, this engages students in an empathy-based approach to story creation. At its most damaging, this allows students to center characters or storylines on stereotypes. As we enter situations where students are using social identifiers to construct content, I remind them of these two guidelines:

#1: Write about what you know

#2: Expand what you know by learning throughout the process

It has taken a few missteps over the years to learn how my role as the educator can best prepare students to find success and depth in this learning process. Importantly, there have been countless examples of students structuring complex characters or storylines where social, intersectional issues have been the central focus, instead of a traditional, cliche, and irreverent conflict-based storyline of an action hero defeating a menacing monster.

Add Complexity & Deepen Understanding

Determine Advantages and Disadvantages

Students use evidence (personal, anecdotal, testimonial, etc.) to determine the advantages or disadvantages connected to particular social identifiers. This takes care and intentionality on the part of the teacher while guiding students in this work. If done improperly, this could become a damaging experience for students where they start to conflate particular social identifiers with negative consequences. Here is another Beverly Tatum piece of insight, as she writes on the experience of Black students learning about racial identity:

> ...the immersion/emersion phase [of developing racial identity] is energized by the new information he or she is learning - angry perhaps that it wasn't available sooner - but excited to find out that there is more to Africa than Tarzan movies and that there is more to a Black history than victimization. (2003, p.71)

I have been thinking about finding balance; between investigating socially and politically unjust structures, and exploring a diverse set of inspiring figures. This is tricky, not due to a lack of content or resources, but because of the universe of options available. In the social studies world, an age-old struggle with content planning comes from choosing, from seemingly limitless content that we *could* explore, the content that we *should* explore. Fortunately, I am not alone in this venture; an abundance of content options provides the perfect opportunity to co-plan curriculum with students while providing in-roads for choice-based, personalized learning. Here are just a few examples of the types of resources I can share with students as they customize their learning experience:

Figure 3

Social Justice Portraits (American Who Tell the Truth)

Figure 4

Profiles in Perseverance (CNN)

Explore the Unique Complexities of Particular Social Identifiers

Some social identifiers have more influence (social capital or consequences) than others. I do not think that creating a hierarchy of power among each of the social identifiers would be an effective way to learn about social identity. However, through societal, cultural, and political lenses of historic and current events there are clear social identifiers where systemic advantages and disadvantages hold a particular relevance. With this understanding I justify a heavier focus - at least with full-group activities – on issues connected to race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity and gender performance. Other topics connected to particular social identifiers are explored as a group, especially when current events necessitate being addressed. And there's also, always, the opportunity for personalized learning, where students move from our classes' shared learning to individualized, deeper-dives into content. A student, for example, might have their own reasons for being particularly interested in the role of sensory ability and the inherent advantages or disadvantages. That's great, and it is my duty to build opportunities for that student to apply that curiosity and eagerness into in-class learning via our choice-based projects.

Figure 5

"26 Mini-Films for Exploring Race, Bias and Identity with Students" (NYT)

Simultaneously, it is my responsibility to engage all students in investigating the particular relevance that certain social identifiers have on our lives and communities. Racial injustice, political conflict, heteronormativity, neo-colonialism, and other instances of social injustice maintain a central place in the content that we, as a learning community, explore. Having laid the groundwork of social identity for students provides language tools and a critical lens for this work.

Investigate the Intersectionality

Learning about individual social identifiers in a vacuum is not enough. As students acquire the knowledge and language of social identity, it is crucial to begin investigating the intersectional nature of these identifiers. I was lucky enough to partner with a former student, Heidi Berger, a few years ago as she introduced me to a deeper understanding of intersectionality. Together we created a learning experience centered on introducing the work of Audre Lorde and Kimberle Crenshaw to upper middle level students, while guiding their understanding of intersectionality. This challenged students to explore topics and create content while determining how multiple social identifiers influence, intersect, and then impart advantages or disadvantages on the people involved. It is deep and relevant learning. And the lens of social identifiers and intersectionality is something that I have acquired and now shapes my worldview. I am thankful for that, and for being in a position to share this with my students each year.

Significance

One more Beverly Tatum quote: "Just as racial identity unfolds over the life span, so do gender, sexual, and religious identities, to name a few" (2003, p. 78). The presence, implications, and intersectional nature of the social identifiers that Tatum names (as well as those that she does not) represent a lifetime of learning. And that learning cannot stop. It cannot for me. It certainly cannot for my students. Above all, the reason that I have made teaching social identity fundamental to my curriculum every year is that - for the rest of their lives - I hope that students

apply, expand, and evolve their understanding of social identity. Not just as future high school students, but as future adults and community members; ones taking active roles in an American society where, of late, the look and feel of reckoning for social justice has significantly shifted.

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