



Placing Identity at the Epicenter of Socially Just Classrooms

by [Nancy Kwang Johnson](#) and [Nicole Brun-Mercer](#)

Advancing social justice—equitable and inclusive participation—in English language classrooms has become paramount in order to cultivate intercultural competence among multilingual learners (MLLs). Delivering activities designed to empower the multiple and overlapping identities of MLLs has the effect of resituating their critical language narratives from the periphery to the core of the curriculum.

The question for instructors then becomes: How can activities be designed to place the multiple identities of students at the epicenter of a socially just classroom?

Embracing Multiple Identities

In this article, we draw upon [Social Justice Standards: The Learning for Justice Anti-Bias Framework](#) (Chiariello et al., 2022). Of the four domains delineated in the standards (identity, diversity, justice, and action), we focus here on identity, highlighting the recurring theme of multiple identities. Following are the identity anchor standards from the framework (p. 1):

Identity

1. Students will develop positive social identities based on their membership in multiple groups in society.
2. Students will develop language and historical and cultural knowledge that affirm and accurately describe their membership in multiple identity groups.
3. Students will recognize that people’s multiple identities interact and create unique and complex individuals.
4. Students will express pride, confidence and healthy self-esteem without denying the value and dignity of other people.
5. Students will recognize traits of the dominant culture, their home culture and other cultures and understand how they negotiate their own identity in multiple spaces.

Our objective is two-fold. First, we, as social justice practitioners, serve as facilitators who strive to create brave spaces, such as nonjudgmental circles (in synchrony with Native American traditions) and communities of belongingness for MLLs. Second, we develop materials and

activities that empower MLLs to include and share *their* stories within a safe, affirming classroom community.

4 Activities for Creating Brave Spaces and Communities of Belongingness

In the following sections, we describe the purpose, preparation, and procedure for four sample activities that accomplish these goals.

1. Identity Mapping and Story Sharing

Purpose: To begin guiding students through the process of exploring their intersecting identities

Preparation and Materials: Paper and pen, or access to word processing software. (Optional: a written or spoken text on identity, e.g. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TedTalk, “[The Danger of a Single Story](#),” to introduce the topic.)

Procedure

- Introduce the notion of identity (e.g., religion, race, gender, profession) through the use of a short article, talk, and/or discussion questions.
- Students brainstorm identities in small groups and then pool their ideas in a class discussion.
- Students create a three-by-three table to form a total of nine squares. In each square, they enter one of their identities (see Figure 1).

Teacher	Communicator	Middle aged
European ancestry	American and French	Speaker of English, French, and Russian
Female	Cisgendered	Mother

Figure 1. Identity map sample.

- You can remind students that it is neither desirable nor possible to include all one’s identities in the nine squares of the identity map. Students should select the identities that are most meaningful to them personally. You might also encourage students to consider identities that are both important to their sense of self as well as unwelcome labels that others have projected onto them.

- After completing their identity maps, students reflect on stories related to their identities. For example, the time the student overheard an unwelcome comment about her hijab or the party the student’s family held to celebrate her college graduation. Have students write at least one identity-related story as a journal entry.
- If comfortable, students may share either their full identity maps or one or two identities with a partner or small group. They can also tell each other the identity-related story they wrote in their journal entry.
- This identity map can be used as a springboard for a variety of other activities, such as the following Activities 2–4.

2. Creating an “I Am” Poem and Delivering a Poetry Slam

Purpose: Over two lessons, to reflect on and compare how one’s self-identity differs from societal perceptions and constructions of the “Other”

Preparation and Materials: Your visual aid or photograph to model your “I Am” poem. Have each participant bring their own visual aid or photograph for their own poems. In alignment with Native American and restorative justice practices, place chairs in a circle. The circle provides a sense of equality and belongingness in the group.

Procedure

- Invite each participant to join in a circle.
- Model the activity by showing each circle member your photograph or visual aid (see Figure 2), and read aloud your poem (see Figure 3) as the visual aid or photograph passes through the hands of each circle member.
- For the following lesson, have each circle member bring a visual aid or photograph and their own “I Am” poem. For intermediate levels ([B1–B2](#)), students would just make “I am” statements for each line. For the advanced levels ([C1–C2](#)), students have more flexibility, as suggested by the example in Figure 3.
- Participants join the circle. Taking turns, each circle member passes their visual aid or photograph to other members of the circle as they recount their “I Am” poem. You might not want to have a time limit for each circle member. Rather, encourage each circle member to engage in the art of poetry slamming and storytelling—without limits. After each circle member shares their “I Am” poem, the circle, as a collective, thanks the storyteller for sharing *their* story with the circle at large.



Figure 2. Visual aid for an “I Am” poem.

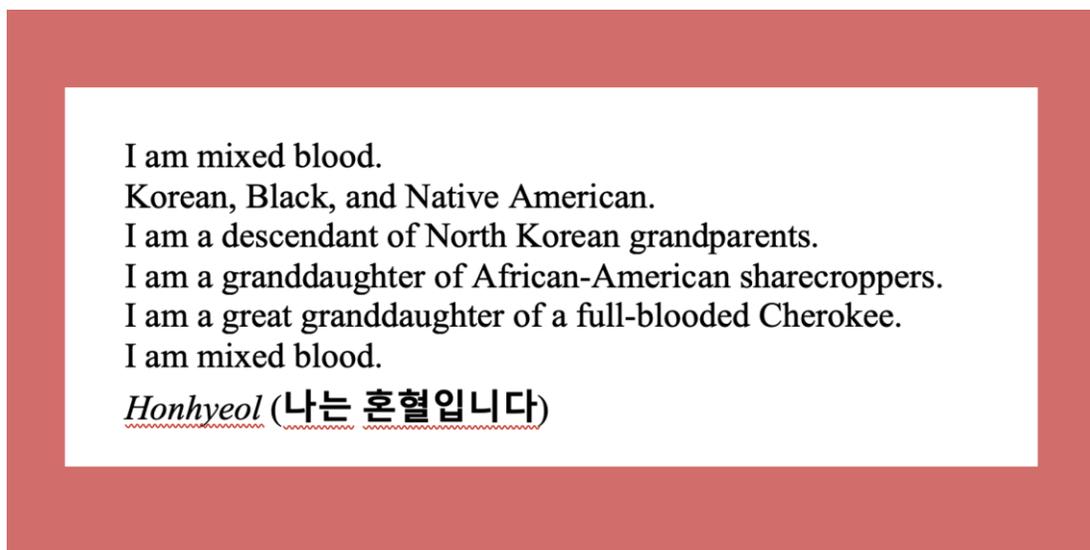


Figure 3. Example of an “I am” poem.

3. Double-Entry Journal Storytelling

Purpose: To examine and relate to poem excerpts addressing the visibility, invisibility, multiplicity, and intersection of “Other” identities

Preparation and Materials: Provide a poem for modeling. (In this example, we use “[Others Are Us](#)” by Nathalie Handal.) Create a two-column journal for each participant (see Figure 4). Place chairs in a circle.

Procedure

- Create a circle.
- Invite each circle member to select three quotes from the poem and record them in the left column, including the line number of the poem, and then write what each excerpt means to them and how they connect to it in the right column.
- Model the selection of poem excerpts and demonstrate how the circle members may share their individual connections and interpretations of the poem.
- Taking turns, each circle member shares double-entries with the rest of the Double-Entry Journal Circle. You might want to allocate an appropriate time limit (3 minutes) for each participant.
- Discuss similarities and differences in poem analyses and interpretations in terms of our own individual and societal assumptions and perceptions about identity.
- Compare and contrast what accounts for the variances regarding how one self-identifies vis-a-vis societal constructions (and perceptions) of the identities of the “Other,” as well as the phenomenon of “being visible” and “being invisible.” After each circle member shares their double-entries, the circle, as a collective, thanks the storyteller for sharing *their* story with the circle at large.

Quotation	Commentary/Connection
“He said I was different because I was dark” (Handal, 2021, Line 1).	This quotation really resonated with me. Why? In the African-American and Korean cultures, the color of one’s skin is paramount. Case in point, in Korea my maternal grandparents’ servants were instructed to “keep me out of” the sun. Since I was racially mixed, my grandparents wanted to make sure that I was not “too dark.” Moreover, people who work in the sun are placed in a different social class. Hence, my grandparents did not want me to be mistaken for a manual laborer.

Figure 4. Sample double-entry journal.

4. Identity-Based Poster Presentations

Purpose: To explore the importance and personal meaning of an identity or intersecting identities

Preparation and Materials: A small poster board or access to an online platform (e.g., Padlet) for creating a poster-like document.

Procedure

- From their identity maps (Activity 1), students choose one or more identities that are particularly meaningful or important to them.
- Students write multiple journal entries about their identities. Here are some suggested journal prompts:
 - Tell a story related to this identity or these intersecting identities.
 - Write about people you know who share this identity or these intersecting identities.
 - Describe how this identity or these intersecting identities make you feel and either draw or collect images representing these feelings.
 - Make a list of famous people (writers, artists, politicians, scientists, etc.) who share this identity or these intersecting identities.
- Students create a poster based on their journal entries. There is no “right answer” to what they include on their posters. Some students might make a collage. Others might write a story. Still others might create a word cloud.
- Students share their posters with classmates, describing why they chose a particular identity or intersecting identities and the significance of each item on their poster.

Conclusion

These activities are just some of the many ways in which instructors may engage students in the exploration of the identity domain. Using the target language, MLLs are empowered to tell their stories. As a result, they are forging greater connections with their classmates, affirming positive social identities, and creating a sense of belongingness.

References

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