
Building Connections and Strengthening Community Project

Overview

This project provides students with an opportunity to tell and champion the stories of individuals and groups in their school that they believe have been told in a limited way, as “single stories,” or not told at all. Students will compile and analyze their school’s demographic information and then work in collaborative groups to explore a space in depth, learning about the narratives presented in those spaces and who authors and controls these narratives. Finally, they will create an action plan with suggestions for how the space might include a wider range of stories and present their ideas to the class and members of the school community in a culminating celebration of learning.

Timeline for the Project

This project is designed to take two weeks, with at least one day devoted to the final group presentations and celebration of learning. While the “Steps for the Project” include suggestions for journal responses and activities to help guide students through the research process, you can decide how many class periods your students will need for each stage of the project. Depending on your students’ experience conducting research, you may need to include mini-lessons and support their efforts to analyze demographic data, create interview and follow-up questions, request interviews, and compile data.

Steps for the Project

Before starting, watch Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED talk, *The Danger of a Single Story* (available at facinghistory.org), and discuss the following questions with your students, if you have not already done so:

1. What does Adichie mean by a “single story”? What examples does she give? Why does she believe “single stories” are dangerous?
2. Is there a single story that others often use to define you? Can you think of other examples of “single stories” that may be part of your own worldview? Where do those “single stories” come from? How can we find a “balance of stories”?
3. Adichie herself admits to sometimes defining others with a single story. Why is it that people sometimes make the same mistakes that they so easily see others making?

1. Introductory Journal

Have students reflect in their journals in response to the following prompt:

What individuals and groups of people—youth and adults— make up your school community? Where and how do you learn the stories of these individuals and groups of people? Where and how do you see your story told or not told in your school community?

2. Gather and Compile School Demographic Data

To learn more about their school community, have students gather its demographic information. You might choose the following categories or have students brainstorm their own list:

- Number of students/teachers/staff/administration
- Number of students per grade
- Student demographics
- Student gender
- Languages spoken at home

Students might find the information on the school or district's website or by inviting a school administrator or office staff member to the class for an interview. After gathering the data, divide students into groups and ask them to create a chart to represent the data for each category. Students should decide how to best display their data using pie charts, bar graphs, or line graphs, which they might create by hand or using a computer. Then ask groups to discuss what they learned about their school community. To guide their discussions, you might create questions or use a teaching strategy like Connect, Extend, Challenge (visit facinghistory.org to learn more about this strategy).

3. Our School's Stories

Using the demographic information they gathered about their school community as a starting place, have groups choose, or assign to them, a space in the school and tell them that they will be learning about how individuals' and groups' stories are told in these spaces. Throughout their inquiry, they should revisit the project's guiding questions with the goal of collecting information about whose stories are told, whose stories are mentioned but are perhaps incomplete, and whose stories are missing. Choose from the following list of school spaces or brainstorm a list with your students:

- English Language Arts Curriculum:** Make a list of the ELA texts taught in your students' grade. If multiple courses are taught, choose one or two to focus on for this project. How many authors are male? How many authors are female? How many authors are Asian, black, Latin American, Middle Eastern, mixed race, Native American, Southeast Asian, and white? How many protagonists are male? How many protagonists are female? Whose story is represented in each text (consider gender, race, and sexual orientation)? Based on your demographic data, whose story in your school community is included in the curriculum? Whose story seems incomplete (a "single story")? Whose story is missing? Who makes decisions about the ELA texts and curriculum at your school? What is the process by which those decisions get made?
- Social Studies Curriculum:** Focus on race, gender, or sexual orientation and then review your students' social studies textbook through that lens, recording observations about the images, the number of chapters or pages devoted to each group's history, and which individuals are profiled in sidebars. Based on your demographic data, whose story in your school community is included in the curriculum? Whose story seems incomplete (a "single story")? Whose story is

missing? Who makes decisions about the social studies texts and curriculum at your school? What is the process by which those decisions get made?

- c. Hallway Spaces:** Tour your school building and record the topic and a brief description of each hallway bulletin board and display case. Which groups are represented on the bulletin boards and in the display cases? Whose work is displayed? What is the purpose of each bulletin board and display case and what message does it send? What else is displayed in your school's hallways? Based on your demographic data, whose story in your school community is included in the hallway displays? Whose story seems incomplete (a "single story")? Whose story is missing? Who in your school community makes decisions about the hallway bulletin boards, display cases, and walls? What is the process by which those decisions get made?
- d. Assembly Program:** Gather information about this year's assembly schedule from a school administrator or member of the office staff. Focus on grade-level and whole-school assemblies. How many whole school and grade-level assemblies are planned for the year? What is the topic of each assembly? Which films are shown? Who is invited to speak? Who is invited to perform? Based on your demographic data, whose story in your school community is included in the assembly program? Whose story seems incomplete (a "single story")? Whose story is missing? Who in your school community makes decisions a
- e. School Garden:** If your school has a garden, tour it and interview the adults and students who oversee the project. What is growing (or planned to grow if it's winter) this year? What is the process of deciding which vegetables, herbs, plants, and flowers to grow each season? Based on your school's demographic data, whose story in your school community is told in the garden through the vegetables, herbs, and flowers? Whose story seems incomplete (a "single story")? Whose story is missing? In order to answer these questions, you may need to research which vegetables and herbs are commonly used in each ethnic group's cuisine. Who in your school community makes decisions about what to plant? What is the process by which those decisions are made?
- f. Student Choice:** Choose a space or program at your school to research with your group. Write 3–5 inquiry questions and identify how you will answer them (research, interviews, observation, etc). Then reflect on what you learned as a result of your inquiry. Additional ideas for areas of inquiry include school publications, the athletic program, or the art/music/drama program.

4. Create an Action Plan

After groups have finished researching their spaces, prompt them to reflect in their journals about what they learned. You might provide one or more questions, such as asking how their research helps them answer the project's guiding questions, or choose one or more passages from *The Danger of a Single Story* and ask students to draw connections between Adichie's ideas and their research. Challenge students to consider how access to a narrow or wide range of stories can impact their universe of obligation

and their community's universe of obligation. Finally, debrief the journal response using a modified Save the Last Word for Me (visit facinghistory.org to learn more about this strategy). Have students choose three ideas from their journal responses to record on index cards and then choose one to share in group discussion.

Next, instruct groups to create an action plan with one or two specific suggestions to help the community expand the range of stories they tell through the curriculum, communal spaces, and extra-curricular programs. You might introduce your students to SMART goals to help provide a framework for their action plan: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.

5. Presentation Preparation and Celebration.

Explain to the class that each group will present their project to the class in a celebration of learning. You might invite members of the school community to hear the results of your students' research and suggested plans for action. Decide how you would like the groups to display their findings, such as on a tri-fold poster board or in a Powerpoint or Prezi. For individual accountability, you might also assign a written reflection that students complete on their own.

The final presentations could include the following elements:

- School demographics charts
- An overview of the space they investigated
- Their research findings and how they believe their discoveries impact the school community's universe of obligation
- An action plan to raise awareness and enact change
- Questions that this project raises for them