

Theory of Knowledge Unit Plan: Language and Race/Ethnicity

Ways of Knowing: Language

The Theory of Knowledge course explores four ways of knowing: reason, language, sense perception, and emotion. These are used to investigate knowledge across areas of knowledge (mathematics, natural sciences, human sciences, history, arts and ethics). This lesson introduces students to questions regarding language as a way of knowing. It should be pointed out to students that this is the type of real life, contemporary knowledge issue they will be asked to investigate in the presentation which is a required assessment component.

Questions from the Theory of Knowledge guide addressed by this lesson

Ways of Knowing—Language

- How do the words we use to describe an idea affect our understanding of the world?
- What is the role of language in creating and reinforcing social distinctions, such as class, ethnicity and gender?

Linking Questions--Interpretation

- To what extent do the classification systems (labels and categories) adopted in the pursuit of knowledge affect the knowledge we obtain?

Key Questions for the lesson

How does the language we use shape the way we think and understand race and ethnicity? Does language construct reality or describe reality?

Day 1

Introductory Activity

Students need a copy of the school's *Ethnicity and Race Survey* (handout #1) which was sent home in a large diverse school district for parents to fill out and return. The form states that students are required to identify both their racial and ethnic classification and instructed that they may choose multiple racial categories.

Ethnic designation choices include:

- Hispanic/Latino
- not Hispanic/Latino

Race designation choices include:

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White

Ask students to fill out the ethnic and racial designations. After students have an opportunity to read and fill out the form a teacher-led discussion follows. (Some students may choose not to fill out the form or won't feel comfortable completing it.)

In a diverse class in which the teacher has a very comfortable relationship with students, questions can be more targeted to individual class members. In a less diverse class, the questions can be phrased hypothetically.

Sample discussion questions:

- What did you select for ethnic designation? For race designation? Did you have difficulty selecting a designation in either category? If yes, why?
- How did filling out the form make you feel? Did the choices that are provided present any difficulties for you? If they did, why? (Students will usually point out the limited choice of ethnic designations—Hispanic/Latino or not Hispanic/Latino). Follow up may include questions such as, “What are the consequences of only having these two options?”
- What information **isn't** captured with these options? Is it important to capture that “missing” information? Why? Does only having two choices for ethnic designation and 5 choices for race designation shape our understanding of ethnicity and race?
- What difficulties are presented by the race designations that are provided? Who might have trouble finding a race designation that they feel is accurate? Why?
- What does the term *race* mean? It is a description of physical characteristics? Cultural characteristics? National origin?
- How does national origin play into the designation of race or ethnicity? (Ex: If a French citizen moves to the United States should their children be labeled American or French? What about their grandchildren? If someone moves from Vietnam are their children still Vietnamese? What about their grandchildren?)
- Is ethnic or nationality mutable, but race permanent? On the form one option for race designation is Black or African American. Are these terms synonymous? Do these labels race or ethnicity? Is it useful to have the same label apply to recent immigrants to the US from Ghana or Somali, for example, and someone whose family may have lived here for generations, even centuries? Why or why not?
- How do we decide what labels to apply to people? Why do we use racial and ethnic labels? What do we gain or lose by using these labels? If it were possible, would it make sense to eliminate such labels entirely? Would that change our understanding? How and why? How do racial and ethnic labels shape the way we understand identity?
- Are there aspects of your identity that are important to you that are not revealed by these labels? How would our understanding of your identity be different if we asked different questions or labeled you differently?

Day 2

Developing the Argument

Each student is provided a reading selected by the teacher based on the student's interest and reading level. In a larger class, or one in which the teacher is less familiar with students' interests or reading levels, the teacher may wish to summarize the articles and allow student to choose. To facilitate

grouping for the follow up activity, divide the articles evenly among the class. Note that the readings span a range of disciplines, reading levels and time periods. Students are required to read their assigned article, annotate/highlight and identify the argument the author makes and prepare to represent the author's point of view in the discussion. Students can then be grouped to review and outline the argument presented by the article.

Student instructions

Read the article paying particular attention to how the author makes his argument. Look for the elements you are required to have in your TOK essay specifically:

Highlight/annotate

- the thesis or question that is being explored
- the claims or evidence presented to back up the argument
- the examples used and what disciplines or fields of study are referenced
- counterclaims that are presented and evaluation of counterclaims

Articles

On the Non-Existence of Human Races

Frank B Livingston and Theodosius Dobzhansky

Current Anthropology, Vol. 3. No. 3 (Jun., 1962) pp. 279-281

The University of Chicago Press on behalf of Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2739576>

This exchange between two anthropologists discusses abandoning the concept of race based on arguments advanced by "a growing minority of biologists". Reading level is difficult. Students enrolled in IB Biology will enjoy the many connections.

Race: An Outdated Concept

Russell K. King

American Medical Writers Association Journal, Vol. 10, No. 2 1995, pp. 55-58

This commentary describes the problems created by use of labels which have no biological basis in medical research. The argument is straightforward with many easy to understand examples.

The Biology of Race and the Concept of Equality

Ernst Mayr

Daedalus, Vol. 131, No. 1, On Inequality (Winter, 2002), pp89-94

The MIT Press on behalf of American Academy of Arts and Sciences

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20027740>

This exploration of the question, "Are there races in the human species?" written by a science historian can be used as a model for the TOK essay in the use of examples and construction of the argument.

The Concept of Race

Ashley Montagu

American Anthropologist, New Series, Vol. 64, No. 5, Part 1 (Oct., 1962) pp. 919-928

Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the American Anthropological Association

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/666943>

The vocabulary and style in this article will seem dated to students and should be assigned to capable readers. The article explores the concept of race from the biological, anthropological and "man on the

street” viewpoints and illustrates for students skillful handling of counterclaims (key to success on the TOK essay).

The Ordinary Concept of Race

Michael O. Hardimon

The Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 100, No. 9 (Sep. 2003), pp. 437-455

Journal of Philosophy, Inc

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3655723>

The most difficult reading conceptually, this article explores the question, “What is the concept of race?” as a philosophical investigation. This provides a good differentiation option for the most capable student who enjoys a challenge.

Day 3

Discussion Guidelines

Opening Question: Representing the point of view of the author of your assigned reading, discuss the question, “Should the term *race* be eliminated? Remember to stay in your role for the first part of the discussion and refer back to your outline to make your claim, give specific examples and address the arguments presented by others.

Part two of the discussion:

Now speaking as yourself, “What is the anthropological argument for or against using the term race? The biological argument? The philosophical argument?”

Part three of the discussion:

Provide the Concepts of Diversity reading and the Canadian definitions of race and ethnicity to all students and give them time to read through and highlight the readings.

Concepts of Diversity: race culture and ethnicity

The University of Warwick

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/med/research/csri/ethnicityhealth>

Distinguishes race, culture and ethnicity as used in the UK census.

Canada Statistics definition of race and ethnicity

<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/concepts/definitions/ethnicity>

Defines race and ethnicity and establishes that ethnicity replaces the term race which is no longer in use

In summary

Ask students to write a thinking log (journal) entry on this prompt: How is our identity shaped by the language we use to describe it? Do we construct our identity with our language or do we describe an identity that exists apart from language?

Depending when in the year the lesson is being taught, teachers may want to require student entries to include a thesis, claims, evidence (examples), counter claim, and evaluation of counterclaims in bullet form.

Extensions

1. Radiolab Episode *Race*, Friday, November 28, 2008

<http://www.wnyc.org/shows/radiolab/episodes/2008/11/28>

This episode explores the scientific basis for the claim that race has no basis in reality. It works well to address the linking questions (from the Theory of Knowledge guide),

- To what extent is certainty attainable within each of the ways of knowing or within each of the areas of knowledge?"
- What constitutes **good evidence** within the different ways of knowing and areas of knowledge?

Give students large sheets of paper markers and instruct them to listen and write, draw or diagram any word or ideas that "catch their ears".

2. The controversy in 2009 over South African track star, Caster Semenya, raised the issue of how we determine gender and sex identity. A useful article for addressing questions of the role of science in determining truth is, "Which side are you on? In athletics and elsewhere, the line between male and female can be hazy." The Washington Post - Washington, D.C. Author: David A Fahrenthold, Oct 20, 2009
3. Teachers interested in using this lesson in less diverse schools may find the lesson, "Reconstructing Race: A Teacher Introduces His Students to the Slippery Concept of Race" to be a good starting point. <http://www.zinnedproject.org/posts/1424>
4. Theory of Knowledge teachers in schools in which students are studying History, Route 2 may want to explore the use of racial identification used in Nazi Germany. Resources are available from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum at <http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/>