



Identity Sculptures

Submitted by: Jenny Epstein, MA, DTR

Subject Area: American Judaism

Target Age Group(s): 10th-12th grades

Abstract: Students are encouraged to explore and express the multiplicities of their Jewish identities. This unit on American Jewish identity develops over the course of several (four or more) lessons. In general, lessons begin conceptually and become more and more personal. This unit is designed for a multi-denominational class of mature 10th-12th graders. All four lessons could also be taught successively within one weekend retreat. First, the instructor teaches introduces the concept of identity with a values clarification exercise. Secondly, the teacher invites students to name the major movements in American Judaism, and gives a brief introduction to the history and values behind each movement. The instructor also asks students to come up with words that they would use to describe themselves. In the third lesson, students make identity blocks out of the words they have developed. In the fourth lesson, students use blocks to create a personal identity sculpture, and then share their sculpture with the group.

Materials

Lesson One: Large pieces of paper, markers, tape

Lesson Two: Blackboard and chalk, computer labels, printer, scissors

Lesson Three: One inch cubes, wood or plastic (available at toy stores, or can be made by cutting 1x1 strips of lumber into 1 inch blocks.)

Lesson Four: A completed set of blocks for each student. Or, one set for every two students.

Procedure

Lesson One: Introduction

1. Instructor puts the following words on separate large pieces of paper: American, Jew, Woman, Man, Young person, Human.
2. Instructor posts these words around the room.
3. Instructor then leads group through a values clarification exercise. Students are told to stand by the word that is most important to them, or the word that they would use first to define themselves.
4. Each student is invited to speak from where he/she stands, explaining why he/she chose to stand where he/she did. Note: if the group is creative, some members may choose to stand between two words. The instructor should decide ahead of time if this is permitted and or encouraged.
5. Students are then asked to move to their second most important identity.



Identity Sculptures

Submitted by: Jenny Epstein, MA, DTR

6. Students are again invited to speak from where they stand.
7. Lastly, ask students to imagine they now live in the United States six decades ago, just after the Holocaust. Ask them to stand where they imagine they would stand if they were young people at that time in history.
8. Bring the group together for a discussion. If the group is large (more than 10-12), consider creating multiple groups.
9. Ask the following questions:

What was surprising to you about this exercise?

What have you learned about your own identity?

What have you learned about your peers?

Which of the identities posted around the room are currently common targets of oppression.

How do you think oppression affects how we identify? Are you more or less likely to identify with an oppressed group? Hint: For comparison, observe number of group members that identified as a man vs. as a woman.

What were the two most commonly chosen identities in this group?

What were the two least common? Why?

Do you think this exercise would look the same amongst a different group of American Jewish teens (e.g. in a different region, within a different denomination, etc.)?

How do you think this group represents or does not represent American Jewish teens in the U.S?

Lesson Two : Naming our Identities

1. Instructor asks group a series of questions in order to help students grapple with the concept of identity. Sample questions: 1) When I say the word identity, what do you think of? 2) What does the word identity mean? 3) Can we have more than one identity? 4) How many identities can we have?
2. Ask students to identify the major denominations of American Judaism (Orthodox, Chassidic, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform, Renewal, Secular, etc.) These names are written on the board as they are called out.
3. Ask students to define the values of each movement. Give a brief history of each movement to put it in context. (See resources below for a review.)
4. Ask student to call out words that describe styles of religious participation, for example: (secular, traditional, spiritual, independent, eclectic, community-oriented, family-oriented). Write these on the board under a new heading.



Identity Sculptures

Submitted by: Jenny Epstein, MA, DTR

5. Ask students to call out words that describe social positions at school. Be sure they include words they would use to describe themselves: (athlete, activist, clown, actor, nerd, goth, preppy, skater, dancer, photographer, artist, etc.) Write these on the board in a different area.

6. Ask students to call out words that describe family position, being sure they include descriptions of their own positions: (only child, eldest, youngest, middle, member of blended-family, child of single parent, etc.) Record these on the board as well.

7. Continue with words that describe personalities: (funny, caring, serious, curious, creative, shy, outgoing, eccentric, etc).

8. Students are then asked to list any other categories that might be important to include: year in school, other religions practiced, racial/ethnic identity, etc. Include words under these categories on the board as well.

9. Discussion questions:

Which of the above identities are things you can't change about yourself?

Which are parts of you a stranger would know by looking at you?

Which are things you can choose to make known, or not make known?

10. Between classes, instructor collects these words and prints them on individual labels or stickers. When printing, keep each of the categories together. Duplicate the words to make enough stickers for each student to have a set of all the words. Instructor also obtains or makes one inch by one inch by one inch cubes of wood. Obtain enough for each student to have at least six blocks.

Lesson Three: The Parts of Me

1. Students take stickers and place one sticker on each face of a wooden block. Each block contains six different words from one category collected the previous lesson. For example, block #1 has on each of its six sides the words Orthodox, Reform, Renewal, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Secular.

2. While students work with their hands, instructor helps students to discuss the subject of identity by asking questions. Have each student answer before asking the next question. Sample questions: 1) *What percentage of your friends are Jewish?* 2) *Describe a situation when you felt proud to be Jewish.* 3) *Have you ever purposely not mentioned that you are Jewish to avoid discomfort? Describe.* 4) *Have you ever wished you were*



Identity Sculptures

Submitted by: Jenny Epstein, MA, DTR

not Jewish? Describe. 4) Have you ever felt uncomfortable with things about yourself that might identify you as Jewish to other people? What about the opposite (proud of those identifiers)? Why do you think this is?

Note: Students may discuss these questions more easily because their hands and eyes are busy. This means that the intensity of personal exposure may be diffused. This discussion method works best in small groups (less than 8). If the group is large, split into smaller groups and have a different facilitator in each group lead the discussion. If instructor notes that the block making activity is consuming all the energy of the class, the instructor may choose to lead the discussion after the blocks are completed.

Lesson Four: Identity Sculptures.

1. Each student is given a completed set of blocks. The set includes six (or more) blocks. Each block has six faces. On each of these 36 faces is a word that might describe the student's identity.
2. Students are encouraged to spend time alone constructing a personal identity sculpture with the blocks. Students are encouraged to play with public/private spheres spatially. For example, invite students to have an inside view and an outside view. Invite students to work in three dimensions.
3. When sculptures are complete, students break into pairs and share their sculptures with a partner. Instructor leads each pair in listening to each other answer a series of questions:

Describe your sculpture to your partner.

Explain why you chose to make it the way you did, and decisions you had to make while sculpting.

Imagine you were in a different setting (at school, at home). How might you have made your sculpture differently in that setting.

Let your partner know if you are open to questions.

4. Reconvene the entire group to be lead on a tour of each sculpture. Invite each person to share for up to 3 minutes (this will vary with size of group) about their sculpture.
5. Seat group for a concluding discussion. Questions:



Identity Sculptures

Submitted by: Jenny Epstein, MA, DTR

How did this exercise affect you?

What was surprising?

What was limiting about the blocks? Were there words you wish you had? What were they?

6. Ask the group to evaluate verbally how this unit has helped or hindered their ability to understand identity. Gather feedback on the following: 1) highlights of the unit 2) challenges of the unit 3) suggestions for teaching the lesson next time.

Comments and Feedback

The demography of American Judaism today tells us that as Jews, we rarely occupy space within homogenous communities. This means that as a rule, as individuals and as a group, American Jews maintain multiple and complex identities. This unit is designed to give teens the space and tools to grapple with the complexity of claiming their own complex identities. In this way, teens learn that they don't need to give up one identity in order to claim another. Rather, teens model for each other the multiplicity of ways to express one's Judaism, and more generally, one's self.

Bibliography/Additional Resources

Websites:

For a discussion of Jewish identity, written for teens, UJIA's Jampacked Bible (from Britain) has two great sections relevant to this topic:

1) Why Be Different?

<http://www.aj6.org/jpbo/312/index.html>

2) Prejudice

<http://www.aj6.org/jpbo/109/index.html>

For a brief history of Jewish denominations in America:

<http://www.nhc.rtp.nc.us:8080/tserve/nineteen/nkeyinfo/judaism.html>

For an excellent report on the demography of American Judaism in 2001, and its implications:

American Jewish Identity Survey 2001

<http://www.gc.cuny.edu/studies/ajis.pdf>



Identity Sculptures

Submitted by: Jenny Epstein, MA, DTR

For a PDF file of an edition of Contact magazine dedicated to developing positive Jewish identity and programs for teens that promote such, go to:

www.jewishlife.org/pdf/summer_2003.pdf

Books:

Diner, Hasia. Jews in America. Religion in American Life Series. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

How America shaped Jewish identity and how Jews shaped American identity.
For grades 6 – 9.

Finkelstein, Norman H. Forged in Freedom: Shaping the Jewish-American Experience. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2002.

A readable history of the growth of the American Jewish community during the twentieth century. For grades 7 – 12.