
Lesson Plan

What's in a (Racial) Name?:

Contextualizing racialized language and defining oneself through poetry



Theme: How one's racial identity is defined by others in the past and the present is an important conversation and allows us to reflect on how we identify ourselves.

Use this lesson plan BEFORE attending Portland Opera To Go performance of Beatrice.

The activities in this lesson plan were compiled by Dr. S. Renee Mitchell for Portland Opera To Go. Formatting and supplemental materials were created by Alexis Hamilton. For more information about Dr. Mitchell, please visit her website at <https://www.reneemitchellspeaks.com/>

Essential Question:

- How can artists make art based on knowledge (personal, societal, cultural, ethical, and historical) to impact their social context?
- How does understanding cultural and societal context in the arts to empathically prevent and resolve conflicts in constructive ways?

Social Emotional Learning

- Demonstrate an awareness of the differences among individuals, groups and others' cultural backgrounds
- Demonstrate an awareness of the expectations for social interactions in a variety of settings
- Recognize and identify the thoughts, feelings and perspectives of others

Culturally Sustaining Elements

Understanding the intention behind how one’s racial identity is defined is an important conversation to have, because it allows you to reflect deeply on how you choose to define *yourself*, outside of the boxes into which others would put you. Portland Opera To Go’s new production, *Beatrice*, tells the story of Beatrice Morrow Cannady, a civil rights activist working in Oregon from 1912 to 1935. The composer and librettist, Dave Ragland Jr. and Mary McCallum and the creative team behind the opera used historically accurate language in the opera that would have been considered polite, correct, and positive at the time. They felt that it was important to use these words because of the story we were telling and the time in which it was set. While the language used within the context of the opera was acceptable in Ms. Cannady’s time, we no longer use these words, because they have developed negative connotations. This lesson plan provides an opportunity for students to discuss the context of the language used in the piece, a timeline of appropriate usage, and consider how they personally wish to be addressed. Language matters and the language used to describe us may or may not feel appropriate to us.

The writing options in this lesson plan help students become storytellers of who they believe they are, rather than basing their self-concept on someone else’s judgements. This helps build inner confidence and helps them see the similarities and humanity of others.

Learning Targets

I can...

Understand that language used to describe groups of people that was once considered appropriate can change based upon societal changes and the desires of the groups being described.

- Consider what constitutes respectful language today.
- Identify and declare my truth despite any stereotypes others may believe about me because of my skin color, gender, different abilities, etc.
- Be respectful of how others wish to be described and listen to what they say about how they wish to be identified.
- Celebrate what is unique about me.
- Write a poetic exploration of my racial identity.
- Share my work with others orally.

IMPORTANT NOTE TO TEACHERS:

Make sure Black students in your classroom do not feel overwhelmed during this conversation.

Pay attention if other students stare at them. Don't expect Black students to answer questions as if they speak for the entire Black community or relate to all Black experiences—and correct other students if they do. The best way to make your Black students feel comfortable is:



- Set group norms in advance for how racial conversations should go. (For instance, remind students that just because they might be members of a particular group, that does not mean that they speak for the group or that they relate to all the experiences of that group. This is true no matter what group we are talking about but is particularly true of traditionally othered groups.)
- Provide context but make it **factual**. When you allow generalizations to creep in, racial conversations can go south very quickly.
- **Correct misinformation**. Don't put your black students in a position to have to correct other students' racial propaganda. That's too much pressure. Speak up when students need to be challenged on racially insensitive statements.
- Don't just focus on the pain and tragedy of the Black experience. In this case, for example, emphasize how brave and committed Cannady was for standing up for what she felt was right, despite her life being threatened. She was an accomplished Black pioneer – and an example of a trailblazing woman.

Activities to Use:

Synchronous:

- **Establish Norms:** Lay the ground rules for respectful conversation. (suggestions on how to do this are below in “Directions” section.)
- **Discuss:** What is the difference between a name and a label?
- **Introduce:** Beatrice Morrow Cannady and the Label Timeline using the *What's in a (Racial) Name* slideshow available here: [What's in a \(Racial Name\) Slideshow](#)
- **Discuss:** Feelings around the label timeline.
- **Respond:** Using one of the poetry prompts. (This may be given class time or be an asynchronous activity. Teachers may opt to assign one of the different forms presented or allow the students to choose.)
- **Share:** Students share their work and are thanked for their contribution.

Asynchronous:

- **Review** the *What's in a (Racial) Name?* slideshow here: [What's in a \(Racial Name\) Slideshow](#)
- **Consider** the discussion questions presented.
- **Respond** by writing a poem based on choice of the presented forms or assigned by instructor.

Key Vocabulary/Concepts:

Labels are different than names. ♦ Language evolves and what is appropriate usage today might not remain so in the future.

Digital Resources:

- *What's in a (Racial) Name* slide show available here: [What's in a \(Racial\) Name slideshow](#)
- Artistic response and poetry instruction sheet/s and examples for students (teacher instructions available in this lesson plan) available here: File includes instructions for four possible activities. Please make clear to your students which option they are to complete:
 - Imagine Outside the Box (visual art) [Imagine Outside the Box Instructions](#)
 - “I Am” Portrait Poem [I Am Portrait Poem Instructions](#)
 - Just Because Poem [Just Because Poem Instructions](#)
 - “Where I’m From” Poem [Where I'm From Poem Instructions](#)
 - Video example for “Where I’m From poem” [George Ella Lyon Reading video](#)
 - Listening sample: [George Ella Lyon reading audio](#)

Materials & Apps Needed:

- Access to the internet to access slideshow and poetry instruction sheets and examples or pre download and print as handouts
- Paper and pencil (or computer)

Direction:

Synchronous

Prior to beginning this lesson, set up your classroom so that students can see and hear each other clearly. (Circular set up works well.)

Establish Norms: Tell your students that you will be having an important conversation about race and language today and that now you are going to work together to create some rules around how we are going to talk together.

- Explain to students that you would like to suggest a first rule: We will use “people-first language.” People-first language is a way of talking about identity that prioritizes an individual’s humanity over their identity group. For example, we would say, “black people” or “white people” in place of “blacks” or “whites” or “transgender people” in place of “transgenders.” Then ask the following questions and create some norms surrounding the answers:
- What do we want our conversation to sound like? (For instance, no insults; letting every person speak before speaking again; not talking over people, etc.)
- How should we disagree? They may also ask for clarification, “What did you mean when you said?” They may say “I disagree because” or “I agree with this part of what you said, but disagree with this part because...”
- What do we want our conversation to look like?

Discuss: Ask students the following (these questions are also those that should be considered by students before they write their poems). Explain to students that they will be asking and answering these questions of and for themselves more than once and at different points during this lesson. (*NOTE: You may want to answer the first three questions in smaller groups and come together for the larger group discussion.*)

- Who chose your name?
- Do you like your name?
- Have you ever wanted to have a different name than what your parents named you? Would you like to share that name?
- How does it feel to choose what people call you versus what they decide to call you?
- What do you think is the difference between a name and a label?
- Has someone called you a label before? How did that feel?

Introduce: Beatrice Morrow Cannady and the Label Timeline using the What’s in a (Racial) Name slideshow available here: [What's in a \(Racial\) Name slideshow](#)

Discuss feelings and reactions surrounding the Label Timeline using some of the same questions from above (listed in slideshow).

Respond using one of the following (Follow links for instructions):

- Imagine Outside the Box (visual art) [Imagine Outside the Box Instructions](#)
- “I Am” Portrait Poem [I Am Portrait Poem Instructions](#)
- Just Because Poem [Just Because Poem Instructions](#)
- “Where I’m From” Poem [Where I’m From Poem Instructions](#)

Share: After students finish writing, have them share their poems out loud in the oral storytelling tradition of using a circle, drumming, and verbally thanking the person who shared for their wisdom. If some are not comfortable sharing in public, that’s OK. They can read it to you individually, too.

Asynchronous

- **Review** the *What’s in a (Racial) Name?* slideshow here: [What’s in a \(Racial\) Name slideshow](#)
- **Consider** the discussion questions presented.
- **Respond** by writing a poem based on choice of the presented forms or assigned by instructor.
- **Share** your work with your class!



<h2>More Ideas!</h2>	<h2>Differentiation</h2> <p>How will all learners be supported? (BIPOC, SPED, ELL, TAG)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Expand the discussion by considering other groups that are stereotyped and labeled. Ask students why they think we create labels and groups. (Try to guide your students into thinking deeply about this—go beyond ideas of labels just being mean.) Ask students if there is ever a time when they might take pride in a label.● For older students (or TAG students), discuss whether or not it is ever appropriate to use historically accurate language that is not considered appropriate today. This might be a good debate topic.● Discuss whether or not art, literature, music, plays, movies, etc. that we consume should have to reflect our values today. Is there value in consuming the art of the past? If there is, how should we approach outdated or hurtful ideas we find in art? How does the concept of free speech and freedom of expression apply to hurtful language?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● All students will have the opportunity to explore their own identities and claim the name they choose to hold for themselves● BIPOC students will express their individuality and have an opportunity to explore how labels affect how they view themselves.

