
Sample Lesson 5: Introducing Dominant Narratives

Theme: Systems of Power

Disciplinary Area: General Ethnic Studies

This lesson is modeled on the University of Michigan Inclusive Teaching Collaborative (ITC) (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link11>) discussion guide on dominant narratives (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link12>). According to the ITC, a dominant narrative is

an explanation or story that is told in service of the dominant social group's interests and ideologies. It usually achieves dominance through repetition, the apparent authority of the speaker (often accorded to speakers who represent the dominant social groups), and the silencing of alternative accounts. Because dominant narratives are so normalized through their repetition and authority, they have the illusion of being objective and apolitical, when in fact they are neither.¹

This lesson plan is designed to teach students how to identify and critically evaluate dominant narratives they encounter in their daily lives. This lesson plan also addresses the role of power in perpetuating dominant narratives and determining who benefits from or is harmed by the persistence of these narratives.

Lesson Objectives (Students will be able to ...):

- Identify examples of dominant narratives
- Critically interrogate authoritative sources of information
- Recognize bias in dominant narratives
- Question whose voices are missing from dominant narratives and why
- Articulate how dominant narratives benefit dominant groups and harm oppressed groups

Key Terms and Concepts:

- Dominant narrative (an explanation or story that is told in service of the dominant social group's interests and ideologies)
- Power (political or social authority)
- Authority (the power or ability to make rules and influence others)
- Oppression (unjust treatment of and control over an individual or group)

1 Dominant Narratives. 2020. University of Michigan Inclusive Teaching Collaborative. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link13>.

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- Normalization (making something conform to, or reducing something to, a norm or standard)

Materials:

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED Talk “The Danger of a Single Story” (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link14>)
- “What is a Dominant Narrative?” handout
- “What is a Dominant Narrative? Notetaking Sheet” for class discussion

Preparation:

- Make copies of “What is a Dominant Narrative?” handout (one per student).
- Make copies of the notetaking sheet (one per student).
- Visit WordClouds (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link15>) to prepare for the in-class introductory activity.

In-Class Activities:

1. **Activate Prior Knowledge**—Begin by writing the words “Dominant Narrative” on the whiteboard. Ask students to say what words or phrases come to mind when they hear the term “dominant narrative.” Using WordClouds (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link16>), create a word cloud based on the students’ answers. You will create another word cloud at the end of the class to compare how students’ understanding of dominant narratives has progressed through the lesson.
2. **Show Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED Talk “The Danger of a Single Story”** (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link17>)—This TED Talk further explores the concept of dominant narratives by explaining the damaging effects of being exposed to only one powerful narrative. This video will help students to recognize one-sided perspectives, missing voices, and bias in the dominant narratives they encounter about ethnic groups.
3. **Class Discussion about Narrative, Perspective, and Power**—Lead a class discussion based on the main takeaways from Adichie’s TED Talk to help students understand the importance of critically engaging with and interrogating the dominant narratives they come across in their daily lives.
4. **Class Discussion on Confronting Dominant Narratives**—Write an example of a contemporary dominant narrative on the whiteboard. Some examples are:
 - “America is a land of equal opportunity. If someone does not succeed, it is because they did not try hard enough.”

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- “South and Central American migrants come to the United States to get free public benefits and take American jobs.”

5. (**Note:** you may also want to ask students to brainstorm examples of dominant narratives that they have heard of, but only do so if you believe your students have the appropriate maturity to do this.) Some of these examples may be uncomfortable for students. As the class facilitator, try to create an accepting environment where students feel “comfortable being uncomfortable” but never feel unsafe or triggered. Students are exposed to dominant narratives like the ones above in many different settings of their lives, so the goal of this lesson is to help students explicitly identify these narratives in order to confront them. In other words, students must recognize and understand dominant narratives before they can contribute to changing them.

Lead a class discussion around the example you wrote on the board. Guiding questions may include:

- Have you ever heard this narrative? If so, where?
 - Whom does this narrative serve? (Or who benefits from this narrative?)
 - Whom does this narrative harm?
 - What assumptions are being made?
 - What stereotypes are being used?
 - Whose perspective is represented by this narrative?
 - What narratives or perspectives is it trying to silence?
 - Why do you suppose this narrative has power?
 - What is your personal reaction to this narrative?
 - How has this narrative impacted you? Do you benefit from it? Does it harm you?
 - How have you participated in or resisted this narrative?
6. **Group Break-Out Reading**—Provide each student with a copy of the “What is a Dominant Narrative?” article and the notetaking sheet. Explain that this article will help students deepen their understanding of how dominant narratives function and why they are so persistent. Divide the class into groups of three or four students. Ask the students to read the article with their group members and take notes on the provided notetaking sheet.
 7. **Reflective Discussion**—After students have finished reading and taking notes, bring the class back together to lead a reflective discussion about the main takeaways from the article and from the earlier class discussion. Guiding questions may include:
 - How has your understanding of dominant narratives changed?

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- How do dominant narratives benefit dominant groups?
 - How do dominant narratives harm oppressed groups?
 - What are some ways we can challenge dominant narratives?
 - What questions do you still have? What more would you like to learn about dominant narratives?
8. **Reflective Activity**—Now that students have a better understanding of dominant narratives, ask students to say what words or phrases come to their mind when they hear the term “dominant narrative.” Using WordClouds (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link18>), create a word cloud based on the students’ answers. Compare this word cloud with the one created at the beginning of class to help students visualize how their understanding of dominant narratives has progressed through the lesson.

Homework:

1. **Create a Reference Guide**—Ask students to create a reference guide for how to evaluate the various narratives they encounter in their lives. Students should use this homework assignment to design a plan for how to determine a narrative’s reliability, motivation, and bias. If students need inspiration, refer them to the lateral reading technique (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link19>) or to the discussion questions presented in class.

Additional Resources:

- University of Michigan Inclusive Teaching Collaborative, “Dominant Narratives”: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link20>
- Reclaim Philadelphia, “What Is a Dominant Narrative?” by Kelly Morton: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link21>
- Teaching Tolerance, “Shifting Out of Neutral” by Jonathan Gold: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link22>
- Learning for Justice, “The Danger of a Single Story” by Jonathan Gold: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link23>
- Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain, “The First Six Weeks: Create a Counter Narrative” by Zaretta Hammond: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link24>
- Journal of Language and Literacy Education, “Disrupting the Dominant Narrative: Beginning English Teachers’ Use of Young Adult Literature and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy” by Elsie Lindy Olan and Kia Jane Richmond: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link25>

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- Facing History and Ourselves, “Teaching with The 1619 Project in Ethnic Studies” by Kimberly Young: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link26>
 - The Opportunity Agenda, “Vision, Values, and Voice: A Communications Toolkit”: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link27>

What is a Dominant Narrative?

Every day we encounter narratives that shape the way we view the world around us. The narratives we hear or read every day on the news or in movies and books often represent the voices or perspectives of a society's dominant group. These narratives therefore often portray information in a way that is meant to serve the dominant social group's interests. These narratives are called "dominant narratives."

Dominant narratives "achieve dominance through repetition, the apparent authority of the speaker (often accorded to speakers who represent the dominant social groups), and the silencing of alternative accounts."² Dominant narratives are normalized by being presented as objective facts.

According to Kelly Morton, an activist from Philadelphia,

narratives around gender roles, body types, power, family, immigration, age, ability are all around us. They repeat to us who is dangerous, who is a hard worker, who is lazy, who is attractive, who deserves power. Even if we become aware of them and resist them, the world around us is still playing them on loop and holding us to those narratives.³

Even though everyday people's experiences often contradict the information dominant narratives tell us, dominant narratives are so powerful because they are repeated with the clout of authority that comes with a mainstream source. Think of the American government: many Americans see the government as a credible source of information, so when a governmental official tells us something, we tend to believe it. This information is often presented as apolitical, objective truth, but often governmental officials have motivations for telling us certain information or framing a policy in a certain light.

For example, the harmful War on Drugs campaign began in the 1970s. The government framed this initiative as an attempt to create law and order and combat a drug epidemic by increasing prison sentences for drug-related offenses.⁴ The dominant narrative of the War on Drugs was that drug dealers and users were causing violence, poverty, and addiction in cities across the country. In actuality, this narrative was used to justify disproportionate

2 Dominant Narratives. 2020. University of Michigan Inclusive Teaching Collaborative. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link28>.

3 Kelly Morton. "What Is a Dominant Narrative?" Reclaim Philadelphia, February 11, 2019. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link29>.

4 Betsy Pearl. "Ending the War on Drugs: By the Numbers." Center for American Progress, June 27, 2018. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link30>.

arrests of communities of color, even though Blacks and whites use drugs at similar rates. These discriminatory policies were meant to perpetuate racialized social control.⁵

Dominant narratives in the United States often target nonwhite ethnic groups who face oppression at the hands of the dominant social group. We must constantly be vigilant when we read the news, study our textbooks, watch movies, or listen to politicians. Dominant narratives are so pervasive because they are everywhere and are repeated by the illusion of authority that comes with mainstream media, educational, and governmental sources. When we encounter dominant narratives, we must always ask “What is the motivation behind this narrative?” and “Whose voice or voices am I missing?”

5 “Parallels Between Mass Incarceration and Jim Crow.” 2021. Southern Poverty Law Center Teaching Tolerance. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link31>.

“What is a Dominant Narrative?” Notetaking Sheet

1. What is a dominant narrative?
2. Whom do dominant narratives serve?
3. How do dominant narratives achieve their dominance? (If you aren't familiar with the term “normalize,” look up a definition.)
4. Where do we often find dominant narratives?
5. What should we do when we encounter dominant narratives?