

LESSON

Identity and Labels

Overview

About This Lesson

In the last lesson, students looked at different factors that can shape our identities. In this lesson, students will explore more deeply one particular influence on our identities: the assumptions others make about each of us and the labels they use to describe us.

Throughout our lives, people attach labels to us, and those labels reflect and affect how others think about our identities as well as how we think about ourselves. Labels are not always negative; they can reflect positive characteristics, set useful expectations, and provide meaningful goals in our lives. Often, however, the labels that we use to describe each other are the result of unfounded assumptions and stereotypes. We regularly apply labels to people whom we barely know or have never even met, and the same is done to us. Thus, for good or for bad, labels represent an influence on our identity that is often beyond our control.

The goals of this lesson are to provide students with the opportunity to explore some of the ways we use labels to identify each other and to consider the ways that those labels affect how others think about us, how we behave, and how we think about ourselves. By better understanding the effects of labels and stereotypes in their lives today, students may reach a better understanding of how similar ideas influenced Americans, and characters in American literature, in the past.

Essential Question

- How do the labels and assumptions others make about us influence our identities?

What's Included

This lesson uses the following student materials, which you can access from this [Google Folder](#).

- Image: **Street Calculus**
- Video: **What Kind of Asian Are You?**
- Reading: **Still Me Inside**

Lesson Plan

Activities

1. Reflect on How We Use Labels, Assumptions, and Stereotypes

In this opening activity, students will analyze a cartoon that comments on the calculations we make about each other, even during anonymous encounters on the street. Then students will explore the meaning of the terms *label*, *assumption*, and *stereotype*.

- Pass out or display the cartoon **Street Calculus**.
- Discuss students' first impressions of the image, beginning with the following questions:
 - What's happening in this image?
 - What do you notice about what each person is thinking in his thought bubble?
 - How are each of their thoughts similar? How are they different?
- Next, analyze the cartoon more deeply by having students discuss the following questions:
 - Do you think the situation depicted here is realistic? Do people use similar "lists" to make judgments about each other?
 - How aware do you think people are of the lists they make? When someone sees you walking down the street, what lists might they make about you? What lists do you sometimes make about others?
 - How might these lists shape choices people make (beyond greeting each other)? What would it take to change the lists people make about each other?
- Then introduce the terms *label*, *assumption*, and *stereotype*, using the definitions below. You might ask students to work together to write, share, and refine their own working definitions for these terms over the course of the lesson.
 - *Label*: A name, word, or phrase used to classify or categorize a person or thing (labels are often, but not always, inaccurate)
 - *Assumption*: Something that is accepted as true before one gathers any proof that it is so
 - *Stereotype*: An often incorrect assumption made about all of the members of a particular group
- Ask students how these terms could be used to describe the situation illustrated in the cartoon.

2. Analyze a Satire of Stereotypes

Students will watch a short video that satirizes the way we sometimes rely on stereotypes about race, ethnicity, and nationality to make assumptions about each other. Even when intentions are good, these types of assumptions have the power to complicate our interactions and to offend.

- Watch the video [What Kind of Asian Are You?](#) with your students. It is important, before sharing this video with the class, to help them understand the purpose of satire: to use exaggeration and humor to ridicule harmful behavior.
- As they are watching, ask students to make a T-chart, recording the man's actions on one side of the chart and the woman's responses to him on the other.
- After watching the video, lead a class discussion using the questions below.
 - What does the man want to know about the woman jogger? Why does he have such a difficult time asking his question clearly?
 - What characteristics does he associate with being Korean? Are his associations accurate?
 - How does the woman jogger respond? Do you think she is offended? What evidence does the video provide?
 - What point is she trying to make when she asks the man where he is from? Does he understand? What effect did stereotypes have on this conversation? How can they complicate the interactions between people?
 - Describe a time when you found yourself in a similar situation. Were you the one making the assumptions, or were assumptions being made about you? How did you feel during that interaction? Did the interaction make you think about your identity differently? What might you do differently if the same situation happened again?

3. Consider the Effect Stereotypes Have on Us

Students will read the story of a young woman who, feeling the need for a change, cuts her hair, dyes it red, and gets an eyebrow piercing. Students will learn not only how these changes in her appearance led people to treat her differently—and sometimes hurtfully—but also how they taught her to be confident in who she truly is, despite the judgments and stereotypes applied to her by other people.

- Ask students to complete the following sentence, either in their journals or in pairs: Based only on my appearance, people would never expect that I _____.
- Then ask them to read **Still Me Inside**. Check their understanding of the text by leading a discussion, using the following questions as prompts:
 - What adjustments did Mai Goda make to change her appearance from “dork to punk”? Why does she say she decided to make these changes?
 - What do you think Goda means when she writes, “I felt somewhat obliged to appease the stereotype imposed on me”? What was the stereotype?
 - How did people's treatment of Goda change after she altered her appearance? What evidence does she give of people's new ideas about her identity?

- What do you think Goda means when she says that she “performed well but felt awful” at her recital? What affected how she felt?
 - Why did Goda’s conversation with her friend’s dad make her feel like she had “won a battle”? How did this victory change her?
 - What do you think Goda means when she says that she “traded one stereotype for another”? What is the “new” stereotype?
- Ask students to work individually to come up with three possible ways that Goda might complete this sentence:
Based only on my appearance, people would never expect that I _____.
Use the [Think, Pair, Share](#) strategy to briefly discuss students’ responses.
 - Close the activity by leading students in a [fishbowl](#) discussion based on the following questions:
 - What do you think Goda means when she says she now enjoys proving the people who make assumptions about her wrong? How does she do this?
 - Did Goda’s identity ever really change? What did change about her?
 - How do labels, assumptions, and stereotypes affect how other people identify each of us? How might labels, assumptions, and stereotypes affect how we think about ourselves?
 - For homework, ask students to write a response in their journals to the following question (repeated from the class discussion). They can draw on ideas from the class discussion in their written responses:
 - How do labels, assumptions, and stereotypes affect how other people identify each of us?
 - How might labels, assumptions, and stereotypes affect how we think about ourselves?