ing
educating for cultural literacy
and mutual respect

# Lesson 1: Introducing Narratives

To understand dominant narratives about ethnic groups, students must first grasp the concept of a narrative. A narrative is an account of an event or series of events, usually in the form of a story. The story that is told shapes how a person views, or forms an opinion about, the event behind the story.

Consider how "conservative" and "liberal" news outlets, for example, often cover the same event but tell completely different stories about it. Depending on which news outlet you read/watch/listen to, you will form an opinion about an event that will vary slightly or greatly from one news outlet to the next. This is because the story that is being told will vary depending on who is telling the story and how they interpret the event. The story told will differ from one source to another in what different storytellers choose to highlight and in whom and what they include and whom and what they leave out.

This lesson introduces students to how narratives are formed about events or a people by probing the sources of narratives in two ways: a) identifying who the storyteller is, their prior or pre-conceived knowledge of the event or person, the assumptions they make, and their personal biases; and b) how different storytellers have interpreted the events or people they're talking about in what they've selected to feature and highlight in the story and what they've chosen to leave out.

## Learning Objectives:

Students will be able to:
- identify sources of narratives.
- articulate how narratives are shaped by who is telling the story.
- explain how what's featured and left out in a story produces an interpretation.
- critically evaluate the sources of narratives they come across in their own lives.

## Key Concepts and Vocabulary:

- Narrative (an account of an event or series of events, usually in the form of a story)
- Bias (an attitude of favor or disfavor toward something or someone)
- Opinion (a view or judgment formed about something or someone)
- Perspective (point of view; a particular attitude toward something or someone)
- Preconceptions (opinions formed prior to actual knowledge or experience)
- Assumptions (a thing that is accepted as true or as certain to happen, without proof)

## Materials:

- Reflection Worksheet for homework (page 4)

## Preparation:

- Tailor list of discussion questions for class
- Make copies of the Reflection Worksheet for homework (one per student)

## In-Class Activities:

1. **Activate Prior Knowledge** - Write the following questions on the board and ask students to write down their answers independently. Explain to students that you will revisit their answers to these questions at the end of class.
   - What does the word "narrative" mean to you?
   - Where do we get information from?
   - How do we form opinions about events or a people?
   - Do other people's opinions in narratives influence our behavior?

2. **Comparing Narratives Partner Activity** - Pair each student with a classmate. Within each pair, one student will write an autobiography and the other student will write a biography of their partner. Give the pairs 15 minutes to write independently. Once students are done writing, ask each partner to read what they wrote to their partner. Write the following questions on the board and ask the pairs to discuss among themselves:
   - How do the two narratives differ? What is similar about them?
   - What information did the autobiographer choose to highlight about themselves? What information did their partner highlight?
   - Which biography is more reliable? Can either be seen as an "objective source"?

3. **Class Discussion about Activity -** Bring the class back together and lead a discussion about their answers to the questions they discussed in their pairs. Use this activity to open a class discussion about how narratives are shaped by the assumptions and biases of the author. Explain that the narratives we read or hear on a daily basis also shape our viewpoints, so we have to be careful to examine authors' motivations, underlying assumptions, and bias. Explain to students that narratives also influence our perceptions of members of different ethnic groups. Some discussion questions might include:
   - Where do we encounter narratives about other people?
   - What role do prior knowledge, preconceptions, or bias play in shaping someone's narrative about other people?
   - How do narratives shape our opinions and affect our behavior towards others?
   - What are some examples of narratives about you? How would your parents or guardians talk about you? How would your siblings, your friends, your teachers? And why would their narratives about you be different from each other? And does it influence how they behave towards you?

4. **Revisit Introductory Activity** - Ask students to revisit the "Activating Prior Knowledge" questions that they answered at the beginning of class. Based on what they learned today, answer the questions again. How has their understanding of narrative changed? What questions are they left with? What do they want to learn more about?

## Homework:

1. **Reflect on Lesson's Takeaways** - Students answer the questions on the Reflection handout on page 4 to help them consolidate and reflect upon what they learned in this lesson.

## Additional Resources:

- Equality and Human Rights Commission, "Lesson 11 - Influencing Attitudes" - https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/secondary-education-resources/lesson-plan-ideas/lesson-11-influencing-attitudes
- UC Berkeley Greater Good Magazine, "How to Avoid Picking Up Prejudice from the Media" - https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_avoid_picking_up_prejudice_from_media
- Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, "How to Detect Bias in News Media" - https://fair.org/take-action-now/media-activism-kit/how-to-detect-bias-in-news-media/

## Reflection Worksheet

Please answer each question in two or three sentences. [The suggested answers should, of course, be omitted in the worksheet given to the students.]

1.  Where do we encounter narratives that shape our opinions?
    *(everywhere, from the people around us to the news to television.)*

2.  How does an author's underlying assumptions shape their narrative?
    *(It shapes how they interpret information that they're writing about.)*

3.  Why is it important to know the author's assumptions, preconceptions or biases in the narrative?
    *(It helps us understand where they're coming from and whether we agree with them or not.)*

4.  How do authors demonstrate their opinions in narratives?
    *(by the choices they make in what they highlight in the story and what voices they choose to feature)*

5.  What questions do you still have about narratives?
    *(Students will ask: if all narrative is biased, how do I get to the truth of an event or a group of people?)*