

Creating Inclusive and Equitable Communities – A Call to Action

*Understanding the origins and impact of bigotry in the
U.S. today and what we can do about it*

Lesson 11: Comparing Dominant Narratives with Counter Narratives

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Introduction

Dominant narratives about non-White ethnic groups continue to influence society's perspectives and attitudes towards these groups. Viewing Latinx as illegal, African Americans as criminals, or Arabs and Muslims as terrorists are some of the most common dominant narratives that still permeate society today. These narratives are promoted in popular culture, including the news media, film, and television, and through our educational system and government policies. In recent decades there have been efforts to counter these often one-sided narratives with counter narratives put forward by people within these marginalized groups through a variety of channels, including alternative media outlets, blogs, and books, as well as the internet and social media, all of which have provided a platform for marginalized voices. This lesson helps students compare these counter narratives with dominant narratives and enables them to see some of the ways that dominant narratives can be countered and rewritten.

Theme: Identity

Disciplinary Area: General Ethnic Studies

Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: 1, 3, 5

Relevant Curriculum Standards

California's [Literacy in History/Social Studies Standards](#):

- **Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies: RH.9.10.6; 11.12.8; 9.10.9**
 - Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.
 - Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.
 - Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.
- **Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects: WHST.9.10.5; 9.10.6; 9.10.8**
 - Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.
 - Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.
 - Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources (primary and secondary), using advanced searches effectively; assess the usefulness of each source in answering the research question; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.

Background Information for Educators

A dominant narrative is a story that serves the dominant social group's interests and perspectives. These narratives become normalized through repetition, authority, and the absence of a counter narrative, and are viewed as objective yet are far from being so.¹ Dominant narratives define not only the world we live in but also the way we look at ourselves. For marginalized groups, this

¹ "Dominant Narratives," Inclusive Teaching Collaborative (University of Michigan), accessed September 6, 2020, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/sample-activities/dominant-narratives/>.

impacts their view of their place in society, their ideals of beauty, their aspirations, and even how they feel about themselves.

In recent decades historically marginalized groups have increasingly pushed back against these hegemonic and one-sided narratives in a variety of ways that assert their perspectives and identities. Merely telling their stories is a means of resistance to the oppression of those in power because it challenges the idea that there is only one narrative and that only those in power can dictate the narrative of those who are powerless. Therefore, the very act of telling one's story is empowering to these communities.²

Learning Objectives

Identity: *How will my instruction help students learn something about themselves and/or others?*

- Students will be able to question their assumptions about what qualifies as a source or evidence.
- Students will be able to better understand how their perspectives are impacted by the dominant narrative.
- Students will be able to use counter narratives to challenge dominant narratives they encounter daily.

Skills: *How will my instruction build students' skills relating to the content?*

- Students will be able to understand how images and text are used to create a biased narrative.
- Students will be able to identify how to push back against a biased narrative.

Intellect: *How will my instruction build students' knowledge and mental powers?*

- Students will be able to identify a dominant narrative and a counter narrative.
- Students will be able to challenge a dominant narrative with a counter narrative

Criticality: *How will my instruction inform students' views of power and equity and the disruption of oppression?*

- Students will be able to deconstruct narratives that support oppression and inequality.
- Students will understand how counter narratives challenge oppression.

Guiding Questions

1. What are some common sources of dominant narratives?
2. What are some alternate sources of counter narratives?
3. How are dominant narratives amplified and normalized?
4. How can counter narratives effectively challenge dominant narratives?
5. How do counter narratives empower those conveying them?

² Raúl Alberto Mora, "Counter-Narrative," Center for Intercultural Dialogue Key Concepts in Intercultural Dialogue, <https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/key-concept-counter-narrative.pdf>.

Key Concepts and Terminology

- **Perspective** - point of view; a particular attitude toward something or someone.
- **Comparing narratives** - noting similarities and differences between spoken or written accounts of connected events or a story.
- **Rhetoric** - the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing.

In-Class Activities

1. **The Hook** – As a class, watch [Counternarratives - Alexandra Bell](#) (Photography Expanded 2018). Then lead a discussion about how not only the content of an article or text but also accompanying images, placement, and headlines play a role in creating a dominant narrative.
2. **Main Activity** – Break the class into small groups (3 or 4 students) and ask each group to find an article in a mainstream newspaper about an event which negatively portrays people of color in contrast to White people. Following the approach of Alexandra Bell in the video, recreate the article with a different layout, photos, headlines, and text to tell the counter narrative. Have each group share their before and after articles with the class.
3. **Class Discussion** – As a class, discuss the main takeaways of the exercise and how students might use their new skill to read and critique future articles. Use the Discussion Questions (page 5) to facilitate conversation.
4. **Reflection** – As a group discuss the following questions:
 - Where are we taught to look when we want information about a topic?
 - If it is news, who typically writes these stories? (i.e., White people writing history)
 - What is evidence?
 - What is an artifact?
 - What role does implicit bias play in the creation of news?
 - Write the following quote on the board and have students reflect and explain what it means to them either verbally or on paper:
“We all have our narratives, our stories about who we are and how the world works. Some of the narratives hold us back. Others remind us we are stronger than we may think.”³

Next, have students brainstorm where they can find counter narratives. Examples include: Ted Talks, Zinn Project, BLM webinars, NGOs. (This helps students learn that we must actively search for these narratives, since dominant news sources, popular media, or

³ Jason D. Dehart, “Countering the Narrative: How to turn “I’m not good at this” into “I’m not good at this—yet!” Teaching Tolerance (Southern Poverty Law Center), Issue 56, Summer 2017, <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/summer-2017/countering-the-narrative>.

textbooks don't provide them for us.)

5. **Extension Activities** - Here are some ideas for further student exploration:

- Assign an important event in American history to each group. Have the group create a news article describing the event from a counter perspective. Groups should include images or illustrations for the article that also reflect a counter perspective. Have students share their projects with the class in print or digitally.

Discussion Questions

1. What stood out most from today's exercise?
2. What was most surprising about today's exercise?
3. How will what you learned today influence the way you engage with the news in the future?
4. How can we apply the skills learned today in telling our own stories?
5. How can we apply the skills learned today in listening to other people's stories?

Homework

Venn Diagram to compare narratives - Students will choose an important historical event from their history textbook about a non-White group in American history. As a small group or individually students will research one or two counter narratives about the same event. Have them create a Venn Diagram using the template provided on page 6 to fill in important details about the event, including where the differing narratives intersect with each other. Students should share results with the class and answer questions about the competing narratives.

Assessment, Application, Action, and Reflection

- Refer to steps 3-4 of the In-Class Activities section

Additional Resources

- "Countering the Narrative," by Jason D. Dehart - <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/summer-2017/countering-the-narrative>
- Edutopia, "Teaching Adolescents How to Evaluate the Quality of Online Information" by Julie Coiro - <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/evaluating-quality-of-online-info-julie-coiro>
- Teaching Tolerance, "What Counts as History?" - <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/tolerance-lessons/what-counts-as-history>
- Teaching Tolerance, "Exploring History through a Multicultural Lens" - <https://www.tolerance.org/learning-plan/exploring-history-through-a-multicultural-lens>

Student Worksheets

Note-taking sheet for Venn Diagram

Event details	Dominant Source	Counter Source	Counter Source
When?			
Where?			
Who?			
What happened?			
Motivations?			
Images			