

**LESSON**

# Identity and Choices

## Overview

### About This Lesson

The last two lessons of this unit demonstrated how outside factors such as names, labels, and assumptions can influence identity. One goal of this lesson is to help students become more self-aware and realize that they have the opportunity to make choices about who they are. Sometimes the choices a person makes, consciously or unconsciously, can affect how others perceive that person. Students will consider how choices—like deciding what to wear in the morning, how to style themselves, or how to present themselves on social media—can emphasize some aspects of their identities while minimizing or hiding others.

Sometimes others react to us based on choices we make, and the reactions of others can affect our future choices. This feedback loop can be observed perhaps most plainly in the ways that we create and revise our identities online. When we first join a social media platform, we pick and choose the parts of our identities to share in our profiles and postings, and if we do not receive the comments and “likes” that we are looking for, we revise. In this lesson, by examining the thought processes of others who are negotiating identity online, students can better reflect on their own experiences and also make connections to the ways that they manage their identities in “real life.”

Another goal of this lesson is to prompt students to explore the idea of choosing to follow personal interests, for it is often through pursuits we feel passionate about that we are able to break free from the identity feedback loop described above. When we are able to lose ourselves (or “find ourselves,” as it were) in a topic or activity that speaks deeply to us, the perceptions others make about us often matter at least a little bit less and we are able to present ourselves maybe in a more accurate form.

### Essential Questions

- What choices do we make about our own identities?
- How can our choices influence how others see us?
- How can our choices influence how we understand ourselves?

### What's Included

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

- Image Gallery: **Our Kind of People**
- Reading: **Creating Ourselves Online and in “Real Life”**
- Reading: **Computer Keyboard**
- Reading: **Chameleon**

## Lesson Plan

### Activities

#### 1. Reflect on the Relationship between Our Choices and Others' Perceptions

Students begin this lesson by reflecting on the various, seemingly mundane choices they make in their daily routines and how these are influenced by what other people might think about them. This activity helps to illustrate how the opinions of others (or, at least, our perception of their opinions) can influence the way we choose to represent ourselves.

- Give students a few minutes to write down their school-day morning routine in their journals. You might want to provide an example by sharing a sample routine (yours or the one below):
  - Wake up
  - Use the bathroom
  - Eat breakfast
  - Brush teeth
  - Shower
  - Style hair
  - Get dressed
  - Put on accessories
  - Put on shoes
  - Pack bookbag, backpack, purse, etc.
  - Leave for school
  
- Then instruct students to indicate, on a scale of one to ten, how much other people's opinions matter when they make choices such as those about what to wear and how to style themselves in the morning. They should put a number between one and ten next to each step of their morning routine. Explain the scale:
  - 1 = choice based solely on personal desires and wishes
  - 10 = choice based entirely on what other people think
  
- After students have had a chance to reflect on their routines, use the questions below to lead the class in a short discussion to identify some of the instances in which they—consciously or subconsciously—make choices that might affect how people perceive them.
  - Which choices do you make in your morning routine that might affect people's opinions of you? What assumptions might someone make about your identity based on these choices?

- What might happen if you made different choices one morning? How could making a different choice in your hairstyle, fashion, or another aspect of your routine affect how people look at you?

## 2. Analyze the Connection between Appearances and Assumptions

In this activity, students explore images from Bayeté Ross Smith's **Our Kind of People** photography exhibit and think about how the choices individuals make about the clothes they wear can influence how others perceive them.

- Before you start, prepare for this activity by taking these steps:
  - Visit the website for artist Bayeté Ross Smith's [online photography exhibit](#). This exhibit includes six sets of photographs. Each series consists of the same person photographed six times, each time in a completely different outfit from his or her own wardrobe. The power of each series comes from the fact that one might draw very different conclusions about the identity of the same person depending on which photograph of him or her one is viewing.
  - One set of individual images are provided in the **Our Kind of People** image gallery. Print out each of the six photographs of that person on separate sheets of paper.
- Divide your class into six small groups, and provide each group with one of the printed photographs. Each group should have a different photograph, but do not tell the students that these are all photographs of the same person.
- Instruct each group to brainstorm and write down a list of labels or assumptions someone might make about the person in the photo, answering the question: What assumptions might someone make (regardless of what this person intended to convey) about this person's identity?
- At this point, have groups leave their photos on a desk or table and have students walk around the room to see the other photos. It will likely be a surprise to all the groups to see the same individual in different outfits and with different labels and assumptions assigned to him. After students return to their seats, conduct a class discussion, using the following questions as prompts:
  - Why did each group have different labels for photos of the same person?
  - How do we use labels to understand each other? When might those labels be incorrect or incomplete?
  - Where do the labels and stereotypes we apply to others come from?
  - All of the subject's clothing came from his own wardrobe. Does this surprise you? Why or why not?

- How does clothing allow people to emphasize certain parts of their identities? In what ways does it allow people to hide other aspects of who they are?
- These images are part of a larger work by an artist named Bayeté Ross Smith, titled “Our Kind of People.” What message do you think the artist was trying to convey by creating this project?
- You might want to share this statement by Bayeté Ross Smith describing the choices he made when creating this exhibit:

The “Our Kind Of People” series examines how clothing, ethnicity and gender affect our ideas about identity, personality and character. The subjects in this work are dressed in clothing from their own wardrobes. The outfits are worn in a style and fashion similar to how that person would wear them in daily life. I have kept the lighting and facial expressions the same in each photograph, changing only the clothing and race. Devoid of any context for assessing the personality of the individual in the photograph, the viewer projects her or his own cultural biases on each photograph. These images may be presented in a series, grouped together by the subject, or mixed together, with images of the various subjects next to each other.

### 3. Compare and Contrast Online and “Real Life” Identity

This activity includes excerpts from interviews with teens, conducted by the Pew Research Center, about how young people share their identities online. Students will use the excerpts found in the reading **Creating Ourselves Online and in “Real Life”** to think about the ways they portray their identities online and how those online identities relate to who they are in “real life.”

- Before you start, prepare for this activity by taking the following steps:
  - Familiarize yourself with the [Gallery Walk](#) teaching strategy and gather paper to use. Chart paper or paper larger than 8.5” by 11” is best.
  - Read through the excerpts in the reading **Creating Ourselves Online and in “Real Life,”** and choose five to six to use with your students. Tape each excerpt you choose on a separate piece of chart paper and post them around the room.
- Tell students that after thinking about outward appearances, they will now be thinking about how they represent themselves online. Ask students to make a T-chart in their journals. Have them write the heading “In Real Life” on the left-hand

column. Then ask them to make a list of all the labels and assumptions a total stranger might make about them based on how they look and act “in real life.”

- Next, have students write the heading “Social Media” on the right-hand column. Under that heading, they should list all the labels and assumptions a stranger might make about them based *only* on their social media persona.
- Give students two minutes to respond to the following prompt in their journals: When I look at the two lists, I notice that my “real life” and “online” identities are \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.
- Introduce the idea that, just as we choose every morning how to represent ourselves with our clothing or hairstyle, every time we open our Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or other social media accounts, we make choices about how we represent ourselves online. Explain that the profiles we create, the comments we make, and the posts of others that we “like” all contribute to an online identity that is often similar to—but sometimes very different from—our identity in “real life.”
- Post the “big papers” with interview excerpts around the room. Give students 10 to 15 minutes to participate in a silent written discussion about their excerpt, following the [Gallery Walk](#) teaching strategy. Ask students to read the excerpts and circle places where the speaker talks about choices he or she made about his or her online identity.
- After the silent portion of the discussion, lead the class in a conversation to explore the themes that emerged during the activity. Use the following questions:
  - What were some of the concerns that each speaker had about how his or her identity was expressed online?
  - How did other people’s opinions of them affect what they chose to share or not share? Where would their choices fit on the one-to-ten scale?  
1 = choices based solely on personal desires and wishes  
10 = choices based entirely on what other people think

#### 4. Discuss What It Means to “Find Your Voice”

In this activity, students read two texts. In the first, **Computer Keyboard**, Gerard reflects on how he developed a love of taking apart gadgets and equipment to learn how they work. In the second story, **Chameleon**, David recalls a time when he bought shoes to fit in with his high school friends, and he describes his surprise when his new shoes did not command the reception he expected. The texts together help students consider the ways that individuals can find their voices as well as the courage to listen to their voices, despite what others say to or about them.

- Divide the class into pairs. Give each pair one copy of each reading; one student will read David’s story and the other will read Gerard’s story.

- Ask each pair to imagine a conversation between David and Gerard, in which they discuss some of the following questions:
  - What are your interests? What draws you to those interests?
  - How have people in your life reacted to your interests?
  - Have you ever felt different from the crowd? When and how?
  - What advice would you give a high school student about trying to fit in?
  - What advice would you give a high school student trying to decide how to represent him or herself to friends and family?
  
- In the remaining class time, or for homework, ask students to respond to one of the following prompts in their journals:
  - Describe a time in your life when your concerns about how you would be perceived by others affected a decision you made, either online or in “real life.”
  - Do you relate more to Gerard’s or David’s story? Why?
  - Who are the people with whom you can be and show your truest self? Who are you when you are with them? In what ways do they give you confidence to just be you?
  - What are you passionate about? How do the things you are passionate about help shape who you are?

### **Extension Activity**

If you want to explore more themes about the role that images, assumptions, and social media play in shaping how we think about and act toward ourselves and others, see the lesson [#IfTheyGunnedMeDown](#) in the unit Facing Ferguson: News Literacy in a Digital Age.