

Connecting: Identifying Dominant + Creating Counter Narratives

This lesson plan is part of the [Connecting through Time: Intergenerational & Family Storytelling](#) toolkit

Students explore how dominant narratives about their community are created and reinforced through web searches, algorithms, history textbooks, & media. After identifying what the dominant narratives are regarding their community, students then disrupt and speak back to the dominant narrative by creating their own counter narratives.

Facilitation Notes:

This lesson is best taught once students have discussed an awareness of identity, how we carry these intersecting identities, and how our identities affect the way we navigate the world (race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, sexuality, ability, & more).

Check out the Photoville lesson plans themed [Identity and Representation](#) for resources to have these discussions.

1. Begin with a warm up activity. Have students, individually or in groups of 2-3, create a web search of a community or neighborhood they identify with. Search terms such as: 'beautiful' or 'women bronx' provide results for generative discussion. This conversation can also be generated through school curriculum especially within Social Studies courses by bookmarking how often students see their identities represented in the curriculum. Then, have students create a list of their noticings through the following guiding questions:

- Who is represented?
- What is implied by this Google search?
- Which stories are missing? Who is missing?
- Is this a full picture?
- Extended questions:
 - How often do you see your community reflected in what you're learning?
 - What have you learned about your personal identity & community from school?
 - When have you seen your family represented in what you're learning? In art pieces?

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GRADE LEVEL

middle-high school

TIME REQUIRED

3-5 sessions

MATERIALS NEEDED

internet access, paper, pen, post-its

KEY IMAGES

[Image Bank](#)
[WOC Archive](#)
[WOC Archive](#)
[Instagram](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

photoville.com/edu

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Points to Consider:

- Searching the web is one of the fastest and most common ways that we obtain information so it's important to think critically about who is missing.
- Dominant narratives in algorithms, textbooks, and other forms of media & text are all created by a human, and that human's lived experience affects the way those artifacts are created. Many times, the artifacts are not created from the community represented and we should be critical of the identities people carry and their relationship to how a story, image, or algorithm is created.

2. Another way to begin this conversation is through the work of [Kehinde Wiley](#). First, show a more traditional painting by Google searching '[Napoleon Bonaparte painting](#).*' Then, ask students to write a story about this image, or journal about the following questions:

- What is this painting telling us?
- What identities are showing up?
- How are these identities being represented?
- What words (adjectives) would you use to describe this image?

Debrief through a partner share or in a small group. After students share their initial thoughts, show Kehinde Wiley's [Rumors of War](#) as a reimagined counter narrative. Take note of the images 'Officer of the Hussars' and 'Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps'.

Now, answer the same questions (above) for Kehinde Wiley's counter-narrative piece.

3. **Define** dominant narrative & counter narrative: **Dominant narrative** can be used to describe the lens in which history is told by the perspective of the **dominant** culture. This term has been described as an "invisible hand" that guides reality and perceived reality. They also continue to reproduce inequalities in that they do not tell the full story and have historically been rooted in the experiences of cis-heterosexual white men. A counter narrative speaks back to the dominant narrative and nuances the story — fills the gaps.

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4. Create a T-chart on a large piece of paper or on the board, labeled **dominant narrative** (or Napoleon Google search) on the left and **counter narrative** (or Kehinde Wiley) on the right. Students will list respond to the following questions about each image. They will write their answers on post-its and place them in respective categories, **dominant narrative** and/or **counter narrative**.

- Who is represented?
- What is implied by this visual representation and comparison?
- Which stories are missing? Who is missing?
- Is this a full representation of your community? Is this a full picture of who you are?

In a whole group discussion, ask students to take note of what they notice listed in each column.

5. **Discuss** what a counter narrative would look like. Using the example above, how would we speak back to classic art? Who is not included in the types of pieces? Using the 'women bronx' example, who is not included in this google search? Who lives in this neighborhood? What are our lived experiences and how can we make these experiences more visible? Which parts of our experiences do we want to highlight? Showing Kehinde Wiley's piece as an example of a counter narrative, what would yours look like?

6. As individuals or as a group, students will **explore** their own dominant and counter narratives. Create a T chart and label each side **dominant narratives** and **counter narratives**. What are some dominant narratives that are perceived about a specific identity, community, neighborhood, of which you feel connected to? List them on the left side of the column. Now that you've brainstormed dominant narratives, add to the counter narrative column: how do you want to speak back to those dominant narratives? How do you want to nuance this story?

Facilitators Note: It's best to choose narratives you identify with because of the sensitive nature of retelling stories and the importance of being the authors of our own stories. Many times, dominant narratives can be associated with stereotypes but not always.

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7. **Create** counter narratives through the creation/selection of photographs. Choose five photos (existing, take new ones, or collage) that you will caption and curate to speak back and disrupt dominant narratives. Get creative! Consider the following methods:

- Create a themed collage with photos that represent parts of your narrative that are not always seen. You can create this collage by juxtaposing photos as a way to show your complexity.
- Capture your home life or your commute to school, what parts of these moments do you want others to know? What do we learn about your identity through these photos?
- Choose a specific dominant narrative and speak back. What photograph would you create that provides a counter story to what a general audience would assume?

7. **Exhibit** and showcase your projects! Group student projects by themes (you'll notice that the project themes will overlap and have trends based on identity, historical event, neighborhood etc.) Have students create an artist statement to accompany their projects.

Artist Statement Template:

ARTIST NAME

Title of your piece

Materials used to create your piece

YEAR, CITY, STATE

Paragraph 1: At least 3 sentences for your biography. Include your name, pronouns, age, how you identify, etc. Include how you identify as an artist

Paragraph 2: A general introduction to your work including dominant & counter narratives you explored through this activity.

Paragraph 3: Discuss your photo selection process and what inspires you. What materials you used etc. (Collage? Existing photographs? Where/When/How you took the photos)