

Assemblage

Raising Awareness of Student Identity Formation through Art

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Introduction

Much of the research on adolescent identity formation began with the work of psychologist Erik Erikson (1968), who emphasized cultural identity as central to the formation of adolescent identity. Erikson (1950 & 1968) was primarily interested in how individuals arrived at a unique interpretation of identity within the cultural context in which they found themselves.

Modern adolescent identity formation no longer takes place in “uncomplex and uniform” contexts (Mead 1928/1961, p. 11). Jensen (2003) reminds us technology and globalization has granted modern young persons exposure to many cultural communities from which they derive answers to identity related questions.

These questions range from the vast; what does it mean to be a human, to the more specific; what activities do I enjoy? For example, anthropologists connected a rise in traditionally frowned-upon public displays of affection amongst Inuit Native American teens, with exposure to the late 1970’s American sitcom *Happy Days* (Condon, 1988). As complex as identity formation used to be, it appears to have become more complex and more individualized.

Recent research on adolescent identity formation typically falls into one of three categories of interest: group, context, and process. Much existing research focuses on student identity formation through the lens of a specific group of students, be it an ethnic (Baron, 2014; Nasir & Saxe, 2003; Stritikus & Nguyen, 2007), at-risk (Gardner, 2011) or class related group (Ariesa & Seiderb, 2010).

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Researchers have also been interested in knowing how identities develop within particular contexts, such as whole school (Creese, Bhatt, Bhojani, & Martin, 2008), STEM situations (Brickhouse & Potter, 2011; Johnson, 2011; Malone & Barabino, 2009; Polman & Miller, 2010), or even music classrooms (Adderley, Kennedy, & Berz, 2003; Parker, 2013).

Other research has outlined more broad frames of identity in secondary education, such as the racial formation process (Flory, Edwards, & Christerson, 2010; Staiger, 2004) and gender formation (Brutsaert, 1999, 2006; Erarslan & Rankin, 2013).

It was through these lenses that I became interested in helping students understand for themselves how identities have and can be shaped by individuals and societies. Identity formation within the U.S. has a long and contested history (Vecoli, 1996) and I wanted students to become critical consumers of identity.

Asking students to physically construct manifestations of their identities is not necessarily a new technique (Dowling, 2011; Goodman, 2010), but I wanted students to experience the iterative and fluid nature of identity formation with the hopes of beginning a longer discussion of how other individuals, groups, and varying contexts shape our identities with and without our permission.

Method

For the assemblage activity, 24 ethnically diverse 11th grade students from predominantly middle class backgrounds sat at desks in groups of four, each group separated from one another. On each desk was a container filled with various artifacts. One week prior, students had been given the instructions:

For homework this week, you will construct an assemblage which reflects your cultural identity. An assemblage is a collection of artifacts. The artifacts should reflect your cultural identity and be stored in a container. Be prepared to share the significance and stories behind several of your artifacts.

Each student was given three minutes of class time to present her or his assemblage to their group. Group members were instructed to take detailed notes on the artifacts and stories shared. After the three minutes, I allowed one minute of questions and answers before directing the next student to present.

Once all four members had presented, students were instructed to write a first-person narrative as if they themselves were the person to their left. The narrative would explain how the student to their left constructed their identity. They were encouraged to include details, stories, and themes from which the original student used to make sense of their identity. The following day students exchanged and read the collegially-constructed narratives of their own identities.

Students concluded the activity with a two-part reflective essay. First, they were to provide a critique analyzing the extent to which their current perception of their identity was reflected in their assemblage and their classmate’s narrative. Second, they were asked to write their current understanding of how identities are constructed.

Results and Discussion

Presenting assemblages provided a unique opportunity for students to share with their classmates. Many students were giddy with the opportunity to play “show and tell” in high school, while others paled with dread at the thought of speak-

ing about their personal lives with their peers.

The students' containers, within which they their assemblages were stored, varied significantly. Many students utilized carefully selected containers; an elaborately festooned sandalwood box from India, a duct taped Super Nintendo case, and a battered acoustic guitar covered with pictures and trinkets. Others opted for the utility of a nondescript grocery bag or off-brand cereal box to shuttle their wares.

Range and Scope of Artifacts

The range and scope of artifacts within the containers also proved significant. Almost all assemblages included current family pictures. Some students showcased photocopies of vintage pictures, while still fewer carefully exhibited original sepia-toned portraits admittedly borrowed without parental permission. Trinkets such as ball caps, ribbons, and buttons signified affiliation to sports teams, while Pokemon cards, Game Boys, and paintbrushes highlighted connection to less athletically oriented hobbies. Several students glowed with affectionate discomfort as they shared deeply personal religious artifacts or valued family heirlooms, feeling such aspects of their lives were out of place in the context of school.

There were artifacts which proved particularly vexing for some students. Two examples included a set of Mexican Tarot cards and tin of Irish tea. Such artifacts gave reason for pause during presentations as the student was forced to publicly articulate why such outliers had been included. The owner of the Tarot cards admitted in her presentation that she did not know how to use the cards and concluded, "I don't know why I included these, it just seemed appropriate."

Language such as this exhibited a sense of responsibility on the part of many students to fulfill some aspect of their identity not readily accessible in artifacts used on a daily basis. As such, slightly out-of-place ornamentation proved to be the best at-hand physical representation of a part of some students' identities not often accessed, but still significant. Such holding on may represent a resistance to cultural shedding where students leave behind or unlearn aspects of their families' culture (Berry, 1997).

Challenging Activities

Many students, particularly those who self identified as White, were challenged

in articulating their cultural identity through objects. One student said, "I just didn't know what to include," while another admitted, "I don't really know what my culture is or feel like I have one." Such responses provide a concrete example of "Whiteness," the belief in the neutrality of cultural phenomenon associated with persons who self-identify as White (Henry & Tator, 2006), as discussed by researchers interested in uncovering racism in everyday life (Warren, 1999). The sense of possessing a standard, normal, or boring identity was visible both in the tone and posture of many self identified white students as they presented their assemblages in close approximation to non-White students.

Most non-White students expressed some connection towards a tension of being (insert ethnicity)-American and uncertain about what this position meant. Students whose families relatively recently immigrated from Latin America or the Middle East expressed a feeling of not belonging in either the U.S. or their family's country of origin.

Courtney's experience in particular highlighted a slightly different take on this tension. Courtney initially devised her assemblage to be evenly divided between her Asian and American identities. She included a fork and chopsticks, a sack of jasmine rice and a box of Rice-a-Roni, etc. In her reflection she recounted how a friend had awkwardly and passionately confronted her during her presentation. The friend adamantly stated the assemblage was not "who she really was." Courtney confided the comment gave her pause and forced her to reconsider how she framed her identity, both the assemblage and the actual notion of her identity. She continued, "if forced to do it [the assemblage] again, I would not include as many Asian artifacts. It is part of who I am, but I am not perfectly evenly divided," and she would include, "way more Rice-a-Roni. It's my favorite!"

The construction of personal narratives, which reflected their peers' identity formation process, proved challenging for many. After the directions for the personal narrative were made, heated conversation erupted between linked students. Clarifying questions about objects and stories of particular significance eventually died down as students began reconstructing each others' identities.

Many students were hesitant if not uncomfortable at being asked to pattern the collection of artifacts, details, and stories of a fellow classmate. The result was

often a listing of objects and streamlined recitation of their significance. However, some students embraced the challenge and elaborated extensively about the themes and connections linking objects, beliefs, places, and people.

One student saw how music interwove family, home, friends, school, and religion of a fellow classmate's identity. The student of interest later noted, "It was interesting seeing how much of an influence music apparently plays in my life." In such cases, the process of experiencing how another human might make sense of their identity formation process deepened some students' understanding of themselves.

Conclusion

Helping raise students' cognizance of how they and other factors influence their identity formation process is an important albeit imperfect task. No singular assignment will move all students towards a deeper and more holistic understanding of identity.

However, the assemblage activity proved successful in raising students' awareness of several factors. Students came to see identities as consciously and unconsciously constructed by both individuals and others. Students began to see individual's identity construction processes as not necessarily the same as others. Students also recognized that cognizance of identity formation grants some leeway in what identity is and can be, given some external limits.

The assemblage activity is a good starting point leading toward more complex questions such as: why do White students feel they lack a culture, what does it mean to be American or (insert ethnicity)-American, as well as what are the privileges linked with identity.

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