Lesson One:

Language, Power, and American Identity

**Lesson Framework**

Context

I have designed this lesson for eleventh graders in U.S. Literature, largely based on the student population I teach at Sacred Heart Academy. While every student in the two sections acquired English as their first language, I have incorporated the model English Language Learner, Daniela, into my prospective students in order to differentiate my lesson to a greater degree. Creating this lesson with Daniela in mind also prompts me to take students’ varying proficiencies of language into account, regardless if English is their native language or not. While in reality, one of the sections of my classes has seven students with IEPs, I have specifically taken Stephanie Fox (the fictitious IEP) into account when creating this lesson. The included specificities of her learning difference informs my instruction, more so than the students in my classroom whose IEPs I cannot access.

This lesson will take place in the second and third classes of the semester, as students will have turned in the first assignment and I will have had the time to read their first assignments. The assignment from the first class is an ungraded, one-page statement answering the prompt “What does it mean to be an American?” Students are permitted to use first-person and personal narrative accounts, but they are also encouraged to bring in understandings of America learned from other courses. The assignment serves as an initial diagnostic of students’ basic writing abilities and gauge their understanding of the United States, including their own place within America.

Students will come to class having read the introduction of Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’s *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*, which I will pass out in the second class. The passage is under ten pages, but a bit more dense. I instructed them to read with special attention to the language Dunbar-Ortiz uses in regards to U.S. interactions with Native American populations. I will have encouraged them to come to class with any questions or clarifications needed.

The English Language Arts Department works in collaboration with the Social Studies Department. Students will be simultaneously learning about the origins of the contemporary United States, especially in the Colonial interactions with Native Americans.

**Essential Questions**

How can we see power in language?

What role does language play in constructing reality?

How has language affected the American story?

What are the implications of the different language we use in our writing?

**Standards**

* Standard - CC.1.2.11-12.I: Analyze foundational U.S. and world documents of historical, political, and literary significance for their themes, purposes, and rhetorical features.
* Standard - CC.1.2.11-12.F: Evaluate how words and phrases shape meaning and tone in texts.
* Standard - CC.1.2.11-12.B: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences and conclusions based on and related to an author’s implicit and explicit assumptions and beliefs.
* Standard - CC.1.2.11-12.D: Evaluate how an author’s point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
* Standard - CC.1.2.11-12.G: Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g. visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.
* Standard - CC.1.2.11-12.L: Read and comprehend literary nonfiction and informational text on grade level, reading independently and proficiently.
* Standard - CC.1.3.11-12.C: Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama.

**Concepts and Competencies**

By the end of the lesson, students should be able to: (Concepts)

* Reframe understandings of history to include the author's perspective and potential biases as viewed through language, especially in regard to the United States.

By the end of the lesson, students should be able to: (Competencies)

* Deconstruct power structures in language using a critical lens.
* Analyze how tone, subjectivity, and sentence structure influence a text.
* Put texts in conversation with one another in order to foster a new, original, perspective.

**Materials**

“Language, Power, and American Identity,” Powerpoint

*An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

*The Declaration of Independence,* Excerpts

* “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”
* “He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.”
* “In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.”

**Lesson Objectives**

At the end of the lesson, students should be able to:

* Deconstruct power structures in language using a critical lens.
* Analyze how tone, subjectivity, and sentence structure influence a text.
* Put texts in conversation with one another in order to foster a new, original, perspectives.

**Evidence**

* Diagnostic Assessment: Students will write a one-page response to the prompt “What does it mean to be an American?” Students are permitted to use first-person and personal narrative accounts, but they are also encouraged to bring in understandings of America learned from other courses. The assignment serves as an initial diagnostic of students’ basic writing abilities and gauge their understanding of the United States, including their own place within America.
* Formative Assessment: Groups and partner pairings share out questions regarding language and power. Share outs give the instructor a general idea of how students grasp of lecture material mid-lesson, and can go back and review if necessary.
* Summative Assessment: Select a contemporary American news article. Print out the article and annotate, highlighting potential words suggesting the author’s attitude or tone. Write a response to the questions: How does the author’s language reflect their understanding of the issue? How does this translate into the reader’s perception of the event? Responses should be about a ½ page, double-spaced.

**Procedures**

*Anticipatory Set/Introduction* (**5 minutes**)

* Teacher will pose the question “What do you think of when you think of America?” Students will have already written their one page responses on what it means to be an American and will have the opportunity to share one-word answers. The teacher will write these words on the board as students share them. If students are hesitant to share, the teacher can pull from the written responses at the beginning of the year. Ex: “Some of you wrote about freedom in your responses. Can I put freedom on the board?”
* Teacher explains the impetus: People have many different associations with the United States. Some are positive, while some are negative, but it largely depends on personal experience and perspective.

*Teaching/Modeling/Demonstrating/Learning Activities*

Contextualizing Goals and Introducing the Lesson (**10 minutes**)

* Teacher uses an example to transition into the lesson with two siblings going to their guardian after getting in a fight. In my case, I will use the example of my two sisters, for clarification with names. Visuals on the PowerPoint shows the below interaction:
	+ Frances would say, “Hannah is a monster! She hit my arm and then pulled my hair! My arm hurts so badly.”
	+ Hannah would say, “Frances provoked me! She was hit because she asked for it! She deserved it!”
* Visuals in the PowerPoint allows students to see the language as the teacher continues to explain the relevance.
* The language of the differing perspectives use tells another story:
	+ Frances: She is the subject of the sentence while the sibling who was hurt is the object → Suggests the action was done by Hannah, unprovoked by Frances
	+ Frances: Equates her sister to a monster → Perhaps she felt that her sister was a monster because she felt her feelings were disregarded. A person would not disregard feelings, but a monster would. Suggests Hannah’s inhumanity.
	+ Hannah: Suggests that the Frances actively invited to be hit when placing Frances in the subject and removes her own guilt by using passive voice. Implies Hannah’s hit was only a reaction to Frances’s previous action.
	+ Hannah: Claimed self-defense because she felt threatened.
* Through reading language closely, we can gain a greater understanding of different perspectives. Teacher asks the following questions and calls on students to respond:
	+ How does our understanding of Frances shift when we hear Hannah’s perspective?
	+ How would our understanding of the fight be different if we only heard the perspective of one sibling?
* Both siblings told their account with their audience in mind. It becomes the job of the guardian to discern what the truth is. As readers, we take on the role of guardians when we read texts with different perspectives — it’s our job to read these differing narratives to gain a closer understanding of what the truth is.

Transferring Language Evaluation to American Texts (**20-25 minutes**)

* Teacher hands out sheet with excerpts from the Declaration of Independence.
* Teacher gives overview and contextualization of authors, as written on PowerPoint.
* Teacher describes how founding document of the United States acts as a representation of one perspective on the founding of the United States.
* Students read the text, then work with a partner to evaluate the author’s language in a think-pair-share exercise. (**5 minutes**)
	+ Who is the subject in these sentences? Who is the object?
	+ What words reflect the author’s attitude? What is the tone of these words?
	+ Who is included in this declaration? Who is not included?
* Teacher asks students to refer to Dunbar-Ortiz’s text, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States.* Teacher poses a question to the whole class: If Dunbar-Ortiz were here, what do you think she would write on the board? (**3 minutes**)
* Teacher highlights specific passages/sentences on the PowerPoint. Teacher selects students to read passages out loud. Students break into groups as designated by seating to discuss. (**10 minutes**)
	+ Who is the subject in these sentences? Who is the object?
	+ What words reflect the author’s attitude? What is the tone of these words?
	+ How does this text offer a different perspective?
	+ What does this text add to the understanding of the founding of the United States as outlined by the Declaration of Independence?
* Students come back together and have the opportunity to share out. Teacher transitions into whole-class-discussion:
	+ How does language in the Declaration of Independence justify the actions outlined by Dunbar-Ortiz?
	+ How does Dunbar-Ortiz’s language undermine this justification?
	+ What happens when we only read one perspective/side of the story?

Conclusion

* Students watch Chimamanda Adichie’s “The Danger of a Single Story.” (**20 minutes**)
* Enter whole class discussion. Teacher poses the questions: (**10 minutes**)
	+ How does Chimamanda’s talk relate to American Literature?
	+ How does it relate to Frances and Hannah’s fight?
	+ How does it relate to the pieces we just read?
* Explain homework assignment (Summative assessment).

**Checks for Understanding/Assessments**

* Diagnostic Assessment: Students will write a one-page response to the prompt “What does it mean to be an American?” Students are permitted to use first-person and personal narrative accounts, but they are also encouraged to bring in understandings of America learned from other courses. The assignment serves as an initial diagnostic of students’ basic writing abilities and gauge their understanding of the United States, including their own place within America.
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**Differentiation/Accommodations for Students**

I have differentiated the modes in which students can process the material. As I explain content orally, students have access to the visuals on the “Language, Power, and American Identity,” Powerpoint as well as the texts in front of them and excerpts highlighted on the screen. Using the sibling example, students receive a review of subject vs. object and passive and active voice. Group work and partner pairings take pressure off for students to share out in front of the entire class, and encourage contributions outside of whole-class discussion. Walking around during this time can also check to see where students are in their understanding of the content, especially for Stephanie and Daniela. The previous assignment “What does it mean to be an American?” provides the instructor with a diagnostic understanding of where students’ writing levels are at, especially in Daniela’s case.

 All larger and graded writing assignments can be taken home to work on independently with access to a word processor with grammar and spelling tools, including the news article assignment. The instructor can provide Newsela as an option, which changes to varying reading levels; however, it may be more constructive to use articles as they were published. Instructor could also print different news articles for students ahead of time to ensure the differentiation of articles around the class, taking note of tricky language or overly lengthy articles.