JIMMY AND ROSALYNN CARTER SCHOOL FOR PEACE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION
George Mason University

Media Literacy Activity: Danger of a Single Story

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Overview:

This activity connects a fascinating Ted Talk from award-winning author Chimamanda Ngozi with an exercise in media literacy and anti-bias. In **Part 1,** students watch Ngozi's Ted Talk and respond to and discuss reflection questions. Teachers can end there or use Part 1 as a jumping off point for a follow up exercise in media literacy included below.

In her Ted Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," Ngozi talks about the danger of only believing in and listening to narrow descriptions of people, places, and events. After reflecting on the Ted Talk with some debrief questions, students will be assigned to find examples of "single stories" in news outlets in the accompanying assignment.

The goal of this activity is for students to gain skills in media literacy by learning to recognize bias and one-dimensional narratives. In **Part 2**, they will develop an appreciation for the complexity of people and recognize problems that can arise by reducing them to a single idea.

Learning Outcomes:

- Are prepared to discuss issues and ideas with people of different views, learning to listen and ask questions with compassion, open mindedness, and respectfulness.
- Use valid information sources to make informed decisions.
- Develop and practice habits of civic engagement and responsible informed citizenship.
- Acknowledge that perceptions are influenced by various socio-cultural aspects. Develop understanding of difference, cultivating empathy, and building cross-cultural competencies.

Information for Instructor:

- Ted Talk: Danger of a Single Story (20 mins) https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/c
- Assignment: "Danger of a Single Story: Media Literacy"

Instructions:

Part 1: (30 mins)

- Watch "Danger of a Single Story" either in class or for homework. (20 mins)
- Students can receive reflection questions before watching the Ted Talk and bring their responses to class.
- Discussion Questions: (10 mins)
  - According to Ngozi, what is a single story? What is the danger of a single story?
  - What are single stories people have about you?
  - What do people miss when they write a single story about you?
  - What single stories might exist between communities? Nations? Ethnicities?

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Part 2:

- Handout Danger of a Single Story: Activity 1, Media Literacy. Students choose one medium (news outlets, pop culture, social media) and complete the activity. The depth, length, and execution of the assignment can be adapted to the time available to the instructor.
- One way to extend the exercise would be to ask students to complete a concluding writing assignment where they rewrite an article to provide space for multiple perspectives using neutral language and/or providing a more robust picture of the complexity of the issue or topic.

Applications:

This activity could be used in literature, geography, economics, government, history, environmental science, or a contemporary issues course. Examining narrative is useful for digging deeply into what is fact and what is perspective, looking critically at the language used, and drawing connections between the impact of "stories" on policy, culture, and community. Adding this exercise early in the year could elevate understanding of narrative throughout all units.

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Danger of a Single Story: Activity 1, Media Literacy

Part 1: Watch Chimamanda Ngozi's Ted Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story." Come prepared to discuss reflection questions and main takeaways in class.

Discussion questions:

- According to Ngozi, what is a single story? What is the danger of a single story?
- What are single stories people have about you?
- What do people miss when they write a single story about you?
- What single stories might exist between communities? Nations? Ethnicities?

Part 2: *Develop an appreciation for the complexity of people and recognize problems that can arise by reducing them to a single idea.*

Instructions: After watching "The Danger of a Single Story" and discussing reflection questions with classmates, you will find examples of single stories in the news, social media, and pop culture (movies, books, TV Shows, music videos, media outlets) and talk about them with your classmates. After selecting a medium, you will find examples of the different stories that are told about different kinds of issues. Examples include but are not limited to: renewable energy, artificial intelligence, space exploration, violence in video games, school uniforms, social media, child labor laws, standardized testing, etc.

If using the **news**, find two different articles that **a)** are about the same topic **b)** were published around the same time and **c)** are from distinctly different parts of the United States or represent different perspectives/points of view.

- How are the stories different? Is there are any particularly inflammatory language being used or adjectives that invoke emotion? Explain your answer with specific examples.
- *Narrative* is a single story or account, a perspective. What narratives or perspectives are the authors using about this topic? Explain your answer with specific examples.
- Why might the authors or news outlets be painting a certain version of the story for their audience? What specific facts or explanations could be added to the stories?
- If you were to write your own version of the story, what are some specific components you would add or leave out? (rephrase?)

If using **pop culture**, select a demographic and think about all the different stories that are told about them – for example, a young woman, a boomer, a parent, a grandparent, Gen Z, teenagers in general, a person from certain cities or regions, etc.

- What stories are we telling in print or on screen?
- Of these stories, which are dominant? Which are exceptions?
- What are some different stories that you know about people in certain categories? Do you think the narratives within our pop culture do a good job of representing these different stories? How/how not? Give specific examples.

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If using **social media**, think about the different profiles you see and engage with, including your own.

- What things do account holders show on profiles? What is often omitted from profiles? What sorts of things are highlighted?
- What stories are being written? What are the dominant narratives? Are they true?
- What are some consequences of consuming curated stories on social media?

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