
CHAPTER 10

BUILDING A CIVIL SOCIETY: BREAKING DOWN STEREOTYPES

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This chapter focuses on one important aspect of building a civil society, specifically the need for breaking down **harmful** stereotypes. Because this lesson raises potentially sensitive issues, it is recommended that the lesson only be implemented after students and teacher have gotten to know one another, after they have developed some level of trust, and after some of the other lessons in the Civic Education volume have been used. The lesson not only raises students' consciousness about the impact of **stereotypes** and stereotyping on society, but it also gives them the opportunity to improve their language skills through meaningful interactions with classmates. Because the theme of the lesson can be explored and interpreted from multiple perspectives, teachers may use the proposed lesson plan in a variety of ways: They can use it for a single, stand-alone lesson; they can design a series of connected lessons that explore the theme in more detail; or they can develop a thematic unit that examines the theme from a variety of perspectives over a longer period of time. The ideas presented here are meant to serve as a starting point for teachers interested in introducing this topic to their students.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Building a civil society is a complex task. It requires that individuals, groups of individuals, and governmental institutions make a commitment to tolerance, respect, a willingness to listen and consider new perspectives, openness, honesty, compassion, self-control, understanding, cultural sensitivity, compromise, and participation with the common good of society in mind.

Civil societies are difficult to nurture because there are so many forces that can tear them down. Some of these negative factors include **ethnocentrism, xenophobia, prejudice, discrimination, racism, intolerance, hostility, attitudes of superiority, alienation, and stereotypes**. In this chapter, we'll focus on the importance of breaking down stereotypes as one way to build civil societies.

Stereotypes are defined in a number of ways. Consider these definitions of a stereotype:

1. A simplified and fixed image of all members of a culture or group (based on race, religion, ethnicity, age, gender, national origins)
2. Generalizations about people that are based on limited, sometimes inaccurate, information (from such sources as television, cartoons or comic books, minimal contact with one or more members of the group, second-hand information)
3. Initial predictions about strangers based on incomplete information about their culture, race, religion, or ethnicity
4. A single statement or attitude about a group of people that does not recognize the complex, multidimensional nature of human beings
5. Broad categories about people that fail to differentiate among individuals, peoples, and societies
6. Identification of easily observable characteristics of groups of people

Stereotypes can be either positive or negative, but they are all unfair and misleading. In general, stereotypes reduce individuals to a rigid, inflexible image; they do not account for the fact that human beings are complex and multidimensional, with unique attributes. Stereotypes suggest that people or groups of people are the same, when, in fact, they are quite different. Stereotypes about human beings tend to dehumanize people, placing all members of a group into one, simple category.

Although generalizations, the basis for stereotyping, represent a natural part of the learning process, when they are directed at human beings, they can be dangerous and harmful. When we stereotype people, we prejudge them; we assume that all people in a group have the same **traits**. This form of blind categorization leads to false assumptions about people and causes misunderstandings, hostility, abusive behaviors, conflicts, discrimination, and prejudice.

Civil societies can only thrive when damaging stereotypes are broken down. The difficulty is that stereotypes are sometimes hard to recognize because they are fixed beliefs. Learning to identify stereotypes is one of the first steps we must take to build a civil society. After identifying stereotypes, we can work toward eliminating them from society. When stereotypes are eliminated, it will be easier to acknowledge and appreciate individual differences. When we live in a society that is open to cultural diversity and that values the contributions of all society members--regardless of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, race, life styles, and belief--we will be one step closer to living in a civil society.

CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

The following 50-minute lesson highlights special issues related to the theme of stereotypes. Teachers are encouraged to adapt this lesson to the language and content learning needs of their students. Adjustments can easily be made so that the lesson matches the needs of lower or higher proficiency English language learners.

Preliminary Lesson Planning

Materials:

- For the warm up activity, create a list of five partial sentences (see [Appendix A](#) for sample items). The goal is to create prompts that will generate quick responses from students and highlight stereotypes that exist in the students' communities.
- For Activity 1, create two separate sets of cards. For the first set of cards, you'll need pairs of city/country cards; select cities and countries (or states and provinces) that all students in class are likely to be familiar with. There should be one card per student so that half the students in class receive a city card and half the students receive a country card. (See [Appendix B](#) for some examples.)

- For the second set of cards, you'll need pairs of group/stereotype cards. For each matching pair of cards, you'll need a "group" card that identifies a nationality, cultural group, religious group, or ethnic group. Each group card should begin with the word "all" (e.g., "All Americans..." or "All Canadians..."). The matching stereotype card should include a positive or negative stereotype about the group; stereotype cards should include a verb, followed by a common stereotype (e.g., "...drink strong coffee" or "...are materialistic" or "...eat garlic"). Stereotype cards need to be provocative and should reinforce stereotypes that are prevalent in the students' communities. There should be one card per student so that half the class receives an "All..." card (the group card) and half the class receives a matching stereotype card (verb plus stereotype).
- For Activity 2, be prepared to distribute a handout with discussion questions (see [Appendix C](#)). If copying facilities are unavailable, write these questions on the blackboard. Ideally students should not see these questions until they are put into groups for Activity 2.

Student grouping decisions:

Decide on procedures for grouping students for Activity 2. It is recommended that groups have five participants each. If appropriate, make up tentative lists of group members. Make last minute adjustments when it is determined which students are actually in class.

Vocabulary considerations:

Consider the vocabulary that students need to know to complete the lesson successfully. Determine which vocabulary items the students already know and which items they will need to be introduced to. Some important terms, and their definitions, are included in a glossary in [Appendix D](#).

Warm Up Activity (approximately 5 minutes)

Purpose:

- To stimulate student interest
- To tap students' background knowledge
- To introduce concepts associated with the theme of the lesson
- To build up student expectations about the rest of the lesson

Procedures:

1. Ask students to turn to a neighbor so that they can work in pairs.
2. Tell students that you are going to read the first part of five different sentences, one at a time. (Refer to [Appendix A](#) for sample items.) Ask students to take turns completing the sentences with their partners. (If students would benefit from some limited practice in writing, you can have them write down their responses. If you would prefer that students practice speaking and listening, have them share responses orally).

3. After reading each prompt, and after students have conferred with one another, ask students to report on their answers. (Do not spend a lot of time going over student responses.)
4. After completing all five prompts, ask the class these questions:
 - a. What do these statements have in common? (Possible student responses: Every sentence begins with "all." They are all **generalizations**. They are all stereotypes. They are all based on some degree of truth but they are not true for everyone in the group.)
 - b. Did the completed statements make you feel uncomfortable? Why? Why not?
 - c. Was it easy to complete the sentences? Did your answers come naturally? Why? Why not?
 - d. In general, were your responses positive or negative?

Transition from Warm Up to Activity #1

Ask students what topic they think the class session will be devoted to. (Try to elicit concepts related to stereotypes, the theme of the lesson.)

Activity #1 (approximately 20 minutes)

Purpose:

- To introduce students to procedures (matching cards)
- To focus on stereotypes that are prevalent in students' communities
- To begin to understand the nature of stereotypes
- To begin the process of breaking down negative stereotypes

Procedures^{1[1]}:

1. Distribute one card (from the city-country set of cards) to each student. (Refer to [Appendix B](#) for sample items.)
2. Ask students to stand up and circulate around the room to find the student with a matching card. Encourage students to find their match as quickly as possible. When students find their "match," they should stand (or sit) side by side.
3. After every city-country pair is matched, ask pairs of students to read their matching cards aloud, starting with the city, followed by the country.
4. Collect cards quickly.
5. Distribute a new card to each student (from the group /stereotype set of cards).
6. Again ask students to circulate and match a group card with the most appropriate (whether they agree or not) stereotype card. Encourage students to find their match as quickly as possible. When students find their "match," they should stand (or sit) side-by-side. (Note:

^{1[1]} I'd like to thank Mike Maggio, who introduced me to a version of this activity in the early 1980s. Since then, I've used the activity successfully, in a variety of ways, with hundreds of language students and language teachers.

- Anticipate uneasy laughter and possibly a bit of discomfort. Walk around to see what matching takes place, to see if the matches reflect your intentions.)
7. Ask each pair to read their completed statement (the combination of the two cards). Before going to the next pair, ask the class questions such as these:
 - a. How do you feel about this statement?
 - b. Is the statement true 100% of the time?
 - c. Is the statement true some of the time? When?
 - d. What's wrong with the statement?
 - e. Where do people get ideas like this?
 - f. Are you angry when you hear statements like this? Why? Why not?
 8. Follow the same pattern for each "match."
 9. Once all student pairs have read their statements and discussion has taken place, pose the following questions to the class:

What do all these statements have in common? (Possible student responses: Every statement begins with "all." They are all generalizations. They are all stereotypes. They are all based on some degree of truth but they are not true for everyone in the group.)

10. Put students' answers on the blackboard in an abbreviated form. When you have enough information on the board to generate a good definition of "stereotype," ask students to define the term.
11. Collect cards.

Activity #2 (approximately 15 minutes)

Purpose:

- To provide students with opportunities to use English in a meaningful way
- To reinforce key vocabulary and concepts associated with the theme of the lesson
- To continue the process of breaking down negative stereotypes
- To give students the opportunity to discuss a topic of a serious nature in English

Procedures:

1. Assign students to groups. While they are forming groups, distribute the handout ([Appendix C](#)) to all students.
2. Ask students to number off 1-2-3-4-5, in each group. Tell students that they are each individually responsible for reporting group responses to the question corresponding to their assigned numbers. For example, student #1 will report on question #1, student #2 will report on question #2, and so forth. If groups have more than five students, multiple students can be assigned to each question and share responsibility for reporting group responses. (If necessary, remind students to take notes so that they can represent their classmates' opinions accurately when they report responses to the entire class.)
3. Ask students to discuss the questions on the handout. Give students a time limit so that they understand how much time they have to get through all five questions.
4. While students are working in groups, circulate to answer questions and keep students on task.
5. Review student responses to the five questions on the handout by asking for student volunteers to report on group deliberations.

Cool Down Activity (approximately 5 minutes)

Purpose:

- To provide some closure to the lesson
- To give students an opportunity to discuss the relevance of the lesson
- To give students tools for breaking down negative/harmful stereotypes.

Procedures:

Ask the class to consider questions such as these to provide closure to the lesson:

1. Why is it important to break down stereotypes?
2. What can you do personally to break down stereotypes?
3. How would our country benefit from breaking down common stereotypes?

Possible Extensions to Lesson

1. To find out what stereotypes students have, ask students to complete statements such as the following: "You can always tell who is a XXX because of the way they..." Students can compare responses and then answer questions such as the following:
 - a. Are your perceptions similar or different?
 - b. Where do your ideas come from?
 - c. To what extent do your statements represent stereotypes?
2. Ask students any of these questions to extend the lesson:
 - a. Some people think that stereotypes get in the way of communication. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not? Have you ever experienced communication difficulties because of unfair stereotypes? Explain.
 - b. Do stereotypes serve any useful purpose? Why or why not?
 - c. Is it possible to have a society free of stereotypes? Why or why not?
 - d. Who is responsible for breaking down stereotypes? What can they do?
 - e. Is there a relationship between stereotypes and prejudice? Between stereotypes and discrimination? If so, explain the relationship.
 - f. How can stereotypes help you understand people from other groups? How might they prevent you from understanding other groups?
 - g. Why are all stereotypes potentially harmful?
3. Bring in items that reinforce stereotypes (e.g., food packages, newspaper and magazine advertisements). Ask students to identify the stereotypes being reinforced. Can they think of other ways in which society reinforces stereotypes? Can stereotypes be eliminated from society?
4. Ask students to research commonly misunderstood cultural, religious, or ethnic groups in your country/region. Ask students to share their findings with classmates in oral presentations or poster/bulletin board displays.
5. Have groups choose one stereotype that interests them. Ask each group to develop a formal plan of action for breaking down the stereotype. Is the plan of action really possible? How long will it take to accomplish?

- 6.
7. Refer to the web sites listed in the next section of this chapter for more information and lesson planning ideas.

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Appendix A

Sample Items for the Warm-Up Activity

Put together a set of five "partial" sentences for the warm-up activity. Every sentence should begin with the word "all." Choose from the list below or create a set of your own. Devise partial sentences that will elicit a quick and strong response from your students.

1. All famous actors and actresses...
2. All politicians...
3. All university professors...
4. All doctors...
5. All teenagers...
6. All vegetarians...
7. All rock stars...
8. All professional athletes...
9. All university students...
10. All smokers

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