THE POWER OF WORDS

LESSON 8
ETHNIC AND MULTIETHNIC IDENTITY

TEACHING GOAL
Students will increase their awareness of some of the issues faced by people of mixed ethnic or racial heritage, including those who are biracial and multiracial.

LEARNING ACTIVITY SUMMARY
Students will consider several case studies of individuals of mixed racial heritage and discuss terminology used to classify people by race and ethnic background.

TERMS/CONCEPTS ADDRESSED
Words for people of mixed racial or ethnic backgrounds, including: biracial, mestizo/a, mulatto, multiracial (for more, see *The Color of Words: An Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Ethnic Bias in the United States*; available from www.interculturalpress.com).

Biracial (*The Color of Words*, p. 26): Being of, combining, or representing two different races. The parents of a biracial person may be of different racial heritages, or one or both parents may have a mixed ancestry. The racial identity of a biracial person may actually be fluid and dynamic, as the person who is free to do so shifts affiliations from one group to another, or from one time to another. An identity that is relatively fixed often revolves on more than one axis, including the tone of one's skin, the texture of the hair, and the social and cultural background of one's parents. Pressure from others, including labeling by the dominant or minority group, may also be involved. For example, persons who are part black and part white and claim to be biracial may draw criticism from black people who think the biracial identity presumes superiority to them or who may wish to have biracial individuals identify as black for reasons of consolidating political clout.

An American obsession with classifying people into neat racial categories has traditionally produced a set of epithets for biracial people.

Mestizo/a (*The Color of Words*, p. 144-145): A person of mixed blood. From Spanish mestizo, from Latin mixtus, past participle of miscēre, "to mix." ... Commonly in Latin America it has referred to a European-Native American mix, especially the offspring of a Spaniard and a Native American, a product of the Spanish conquest. The racial mix may also include black African. ... The designation has acquired so many meanings in Mexico that it was dropped from census reports. ... In the United States it is used largely for Mexican Americans — who are predominantly of mixed Spanish and Indian background — but also sometimes for the mixed white-black-Native American people of the eastern United States.

... As mestizos increased in numbers, however, eventually becoming the large part of Mexican society, they acquired legitimacy. The modern Mexican and Mexican American is a result of the post-Colombian mestizaje blending of cultures and genes.

Mulatto/a (*The Color of Words*, p. 153-154): From Spanish and Portuguese mulatto, from mulo (from Latin mulus), "a mule"; in other words, a hybrid. ... In early ethnic discourse, mulatto loosely meant a person of mixed descent, especially someone half African, or someone half Native American and half black; but typically and now almost always white and black. More specifically, it refers to a person descended from one black-identified and one white-identified parent. ... The mulatto category was part of the U.S. Census until 1920.

... Today in the United States, mulatto is common but may still be associated with its historical context of enslavement (hence its potential derogatory connotation). The term is not necessarily used today with pejorative intent and in fact may be a self-identification, preferred because it is more specific than biracial.

Multiracial (*The Color of Words*, p. 155-156): Consisting of or involving more than one race, often more than two (biracial is used when only two races are involved). The term is often heard in reference to persons from mixed-race backgrounds or in a mixed-race relationship (also called interracial), but it is also frequently used to refer to the variety of minorities that make up American society.

... The identity, and thus self-description, of an individual of multiracial background will be expressed differently depending on the individual and his or her family preferences, on the social and political context (and often pressure), or on the legal definitions of the state the individual lives in.

Typically, an individual with a black and a white parent, or parents of even greater mix, has been regarded by the broader society as black, and the individual often grows up with that identity.

... Some multiculturalists have expressed concern that creating a new classification only divides communities of color and distracts from the central issues of injustice, thus buttressing racism. Others see it as a challenge to the traditional system of racial classification in the United States, which shoves mixed-heritage people into definite racial boxes.

TYPE OF LEARNING ACTIVITY
Case studies • Storytelling • Research

MATERIALS NEEDED
• This lesson plan
• Copies of the case studies handouts
• Access to research materials: library, Internet, etc.

TIME RANGE
• Several hours for research
• 1 class period for presentation of research findings and discussion

GROUP SIZE
Small to medium (2 to 10+). Large groups may want to divide into smaller groups for presentations and discussion.

LEARNING ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS
Assign, or let students select, one of the three case studies presented in the handouts which follow. Allow students time to conduct research and complete handout activities before beginning this exercise.

Group students by completed handout; let them share findings with one another. Ask each group to select a representative to brief the class on the case study and the group's discussion.

As a whole class, debrief each case study using the following questions.

Case Study 1: Tiger Woods
• Why do you think Tiger Woods created the term "Cablinasian"?

• Why do you think some people objected to it?

• Why do you think some people supported it?

• Why do you think many people continue to see him as black?

• Were you surprised at what you found? How did you feel about your findings?

Case Study 2: Susie Guillory Phipps
• Why might Ms. Phipps care that the birth certificate identified her as black? Why might she have wanted to change it?

• Do you think the court's decision was fair? Why or why not?

• What might be a state's compelling interest in identifying a person as black (or as white)?

• How did the "one-drop rule" come into use? What factors perpetuate its use?

• Why is this rule used only in the United States? How does it differ from classifications used in other countries?

• Why does the rule apply to people with black ancestry but not to any other ethnic group?

• What are some of the possible advantages and disadvantages of this rule for people with mixed racial heritage who are identified as black?

Case Study 3: Ethnic Ambiguity
Consider this quote from actress Jessica Alba: "Everyone keeps wanting to pigeonhole me as something, but I'd rather be known as American" (Young 110). Answer the following:

• What is one argument for, and one argument against, using the 'American' label rather than a more specific ethnic or racial one(s)?

• Why do you think some people would be in favor of it, and some others would not? Could it be a method to increase equality?

• Could it be a method to obscure inequality?

GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. What is the origin of the term "Hispanic"? What does it mean? What group(s) does it include?

2. What do some of the other listed terms mean?

3. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages for celebrities of the popularity of "ethnic ambiguity"?

4. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages for people who are not celebrities?

5. Who else benefits from the "ethnic ambiguity" trend? How was it started?

6. In what other areas besides the entertainment and fashion industries, if any, is ethnic ambiguity becoming more popular? Does this benefit people of mixed racial heritage? If so, how?

7. In which parts of the U.S. are people of multiracial background more accepted, or more prevalent? In which parts of the country are they less accepted, or less prevalent? Why?

8. Who decides what race a person is? How? Why?

9. Do you think racial classification is important? Why or why not?

10. Why do you think racial classification is so important to some people?

11. Who has the power to label people?

12. Who has the right to label people?

13. Has this exercise given you any new ideas? If so, what are they?

14. Will you change any of your language or behavior as a result of doing this exercise? If so, how?

VARIATION
Research and report on the history of racial categories as used in the U.S. Census. Answer the following questions:

- How have the racial categories used in the U.S. Census changed over time?

- What are some of the factors that have influenced the creation or disuse of various categories?

- Are some groups now included under the category "white" that were not included at one time or another? If so, which ones? Why did the category change?

- What is at least one racial category that is no longer in use? Why was it discontinued?

- How do the racial categories used in the U.S. Census compare to the categories used for "ancestry or ethnic origin"?

- Why does the Census include both?

- What are the most recent changes to these categories?

- Which factors, if any, are currently at work?

- What is one argument for, and one argument against, continued use of any racial categorization on the Census?

- Has this exercise given you any new ideas? If so, what are they?

- Will you change any of your language or behavior as a result of doing this exercise? If so, how?

The Power of Words curriculum is based on cultural anthropologist Philip Herbst's ground-breaking dictionaries, *The Color of Words: An Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Ethnic Bias in the United States (ISBN# 1-877864-97-8, $29.95)* and *Wimmin, Wimps and Wallflowers: An Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Gender and Sexual Orientation Bias in the United States (ISBN# 1-877864-80-3, $44.95).* Both are available from:

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CASE STUDY 1 • TIGER WOODS

After professional golfer Tiger Woods won the prestigious Masters Tournament in 1997, he received much media attention for being the first African American to accomplish this feat. Many people were surprised when he expressed, in an interview with Oprah Winfrey, that in fact he does not classify himself as African American, but as "Cablinasian," a word he invented to describe his ethnic background, which includes Thai, black, white and American Indian ancestors.

1. Conduct Internet or library research to gather some responses to Tiger Woods' declaration about his ethnicity.

2. Share your findings with the group. Include the following:

- What did you find?

- Who expressed approval of his statement?

- Who expressed disapproval?

CASE STUDY 2 • SUSIE GUILLORY PHIPPS

In 1983 a Louisiana resident, Susie Guillory Phipps, was denied a passport because the race she had indicated on the passport application did not match the race listed on her birth certificate (she had indicated "white" on the application; her birth certificate listed her as "black"). Because she was surprised at this discovery, had lived as white, and considered herself white, she requested the Louisiana courts to change the race listed on her parents' birth certificates so she could be designated as "white." In a case that went to the state Supreme Court, Ms. Phipps' request was ultimately denied because of a common practice called the "one-drop rule," of which the court took judicial notice (that is, they stated they would abide by the practice even though it was not a law). The "one-drop rule" or "one black ancestor rule" says that a person with any black African ancestry is designated as black, regardless of any factor, such as how they classify themselves.

1. Conduct Internet or library research to learn more about the case and about the "one-drop rule."

2. Share your findings with the group.

- What did you learn?

- Did anything surprise you? If so, what was it? Why was it surprising?

CASE STUDY 3 • ETHNIC AMBIGUITY

A current trend in the entertainment and fashion industries is a preference for what some people call "ethnically ambiguous" physical appearance, meaning people whose ethnic or racial heritage is difficult to determine based only on their looks. While at one time the idea of beauty that was most popular was a Caucasian person with blonde hair and blue eyes, the popularity of ethnic ambiguity means that people with mixed ethnic backgrounds may now be considered mysterious, chic and beautiful. This trend is directed primarily at young people, what is being called "Generation E.A.: Ethnically Ambiguous." Although some people point out that this trend is a marketing tool that helps to sell products to a younger, more diverse market segment, it is also true that actors, models and athletes with mixed racial heritage are finding greater popular interest and acceptance.

1. Consider the following list of celebrities. Classify each according to what you think her or his ethnic background is:
   - Halle Berry
   - Jessica Alba
   - Benjamin Bratt
   - Mariah Carey
   - Dean Cain
   - Christina Aguilera
   - Derek Jeter
   - Vin Diesel

2. Now do some library or Internet research on some or all of the people listed above. Answer the following:
   - What did you discover about each person's ethnic background?
   - How did each person say she or he prefers to be classified?
   - What were some of the reasons they gave for their preference?
   - What are some of the difficulties of classifying people of mixed ethnic background? What are some of the advantages?
   - Did anything you found surprise you?