

A Mile in Another's Shoes: A Thematic Approach to Ethnic Studies

Ingrid E. Fey

The push for high school Ethnic Studies courses is slowly spreading across the country.¹ Five years ago, in response to local activist groups, the Los Angeles Unified School District Board passed a resolution requiring that Ethnic Studies be a graduation requirement for all in-coming ninth graders.² Although funding, textbook selection, training, and course design issues have delayed district-wide adoption of this graduation requirement, the course, and other courses designated as comparable, has flourished across the district. Then-Governor Jerry Brown approved legislation calling for the state to develop a model high school curriculum for Ethnic Studies. However, Brown vetoed a bill that would have made Ethnic Studies a statewide high school graduation requirement.³ Nevertheless, a similar bill was reintroduced at the end of January 2019.⁴ As has been noted in other contexts, “as California goes, so goes the nation.”

In early 2015, my principal asked me to design and begin teaching a one-semester ninth-grade Ethnic Studies course at our school. Our school is a magnet school that draws an ethnically, racially, and economically diverse student body from all over Los Angeles. For this reason, it became evident very quickly that the course would have to focus on multiple ethnic and racial groups and would need to provide some exposure to the demands of AP World History, which nearly all tenth graders in the school take. The thematic, inquiry-based approach I eventually developed has provided curricular and pedagogical flexibility over the years while staying true to the spirit and goals of the Ethnic Studies movement.⁵ Reflecting the student body's diversity, each unit focuses on six groups that have been racialized in the United States: Native Americans, Jewish Americans, Arab/Muslim Americans, African Americans, Latino Americans, and Asian Americans.

California's new guidelines for the teaching of history and social sciences make clear what an Ethnic Studies course should entail.

Ethnic Studies is an interdisciplinary field of study that encompasses many subject areas including history, literature, economics, sociology, anthropology, and political science. It emerged to both address content considered missing from traditional curriculum and to encourage critical engagement.⁶

Further, the framework states that the intent of the course is to analyze how race and ethnicity have been constructed historically and how they have shaped the world in which we live today. Most important is the idea that

[C]entral to any ethnic studies course is the historic struggle

of communities of color, taking into account the intersectionality of identity (gender, class, sexuality, among others), to challenge racism, discrimination, and oppression and interrogate the systems that continue to perpetuate inequality.⁶

This is a tall order for a one-semester course; however, with careful planning and an appreciation for the interests and backgrounds of the students enrolled, it can be a rigorous and empowering experience for all involved.

My course revolves around five thematic units: Identity; Race and Ethnicity; History and Migration; Language, Culture, and Learning; and Action. The underlying idea of this approach is to focus on some of the major conceptual and theoretical issues up front and develop them with more specificity as the course unfolds. Reflecting on one's personal identity and psychological frameworks for analyzing ethnic and racial identity development lays the groundwork for the next unit on race and ethnicity in which we focus on the psychology of social biases, dehumanization of the “other,” and stereotype creation and propagation. Students then gain exposure to a “reimagined” narrative of American history that focuses on key events in history—especially Los Angeles history—involving multiple racial and ethnic groups. The course



Figure 1. This is an example of a “My L.A.” Collage.

culminates with units that look critically at the American education system, the power of language to oppress and protest, and the variety of ways in which students might act to, in the words of the California History Social Science Framework: “challenge racism, discrimination, and oppression.” What follows is a more detailed descriptions of each unit and a sample of some of the lessons taught in them.

UNIT 1: Identity

The essential question for this unit is: How are personal and group identities formed? In this unit, students learn that one’s personal identity is shaped by many factors, including, but not limited to gender, ethnicity, race, and nationality. Students begin by creating six-word memoirs, then “Where I Am From” poems, and “My Los Angeles” collages

depicting their neighborhoods see Figure 1, above, all of which they share with the class to illustrate the extent to which one’s community affects one’s identity. After learning about the stages of ethnic and racial identity development, students watch *Little White Lie*, a film that traces the efforts of a biracial woman to understand her true background by uncovering long-hidden family secrets (see related student work, Figure 2, on p. 157). They then analyze the film in relation to established stages of racial identity formation.⁷ At the end of the unit, students respond to an actual college application essay prompt (this year’s was from the Common Application) in which they explain how the world in which they live has shaped their individual identities. One of the major advantages of starting with this unit is that I get to know my students and the worlds they come from,

which guides my instruction throughout the semester.

UNIT 2: Race and Ethnicity

This unit asks: Where do racial ideologies and stereotypes come from and why do they matter? Through exposure to the psychology of social biases, the historical development of racism, and the perpetuation of stereotypes through film and other cultural products, students learn that although the concept of race is socially, culturally, and historically constructed, race, racism, and racial-ethnic stereotypes have real effects that impact all members of society. Exposure to the concepts of microaggressions, stereotype threat, and parasocial relationships form the initial focus of this unit.⁸ After students engage in a gallery walk of historical and contemporary stereotypes of our chosen groups, I show films to uncover the ways in which Hollywood movies have developed and perpetuated stereotypes of Native Americans (*Reel Injun*), Latinos (*Latinos Beyond Reel*), and African Americans (*Ethnic Notions*). At the end of the unit, students write an essay that analyzes the uses and abuses of stereotypes (e.g., to dehumanize enemies in wartime or justify diverse forms of oppression) using historical and contemporary evidence to support their arguments.

UNIT 3: History and Migration

Inspired by the underlying message of Ronald Takaki’s book *A Different Mirror*, this unit asks students to consider how U.S. history is multiethnic, multicultural, and multiracial. In this now classic book, Takaki urges readers to “reimagine the master narrative” of American history.⁹ By this he advocates a revisioning of our understanding of the past that includes the multiple groups that have been in the United States often from before the nation’s founding. We do this in a variety of ways, many inspired by document-based activities developed by the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG, see Resources on p. 159). For

example, students are asked to “open up the textbook” to explain what the so-called “War on Drugs” has had to do with race and racism.¹⁰ In a similar lesson, students reimagine the narrative of Dodger Stadium, incorporating an account of the eviction of Mexican American homeowners initially to make way for affordable housing (which never materialized due to Cold War fear-mongering about socialism) and ultimately for the new home of the Los Angeles Dodgers.

Crime scene investigation lessons immerse students even further into Los Angeles history and expose them to document-based questions and historical thinking skills. I have students spend considerable time analyzing how historical context, intended audience, purpose and perspective impact document meaning. One CSI lesson is about who or what sparked the Chinese massacre that took place in Los Angeles in 1871 and led to the lynching of 19 men and boys. The second asks who or what caused the L.A. Riots of 1992. Both lessons revolve around Los Angeles’s historic and contemporary diversity, which, since the mid-nineteenth century has included Asians, Blacks, Latinos, and Whites of many nationalities and backgrounds. Furthermore, these events developed from the *interaction* of these groups.

UNIT 4: Language, Culture, and Learning

Diverse questions guide this unit: How does ethnicity and race shape cultural expression? How does culture serve resistance? What does it mean to “be educated” in the United States? By the end of this unit, students understand that language, education, and culture are powerful mechanisms for creating, reproducing, preserving, and oppressing racial-ethnic identities and for challenging those oppressive structures. We begin with a Structured Academic Controversy around the question “Does the N-Word have a Place in Today’s Society,” then move on to critically examine the educational system in the

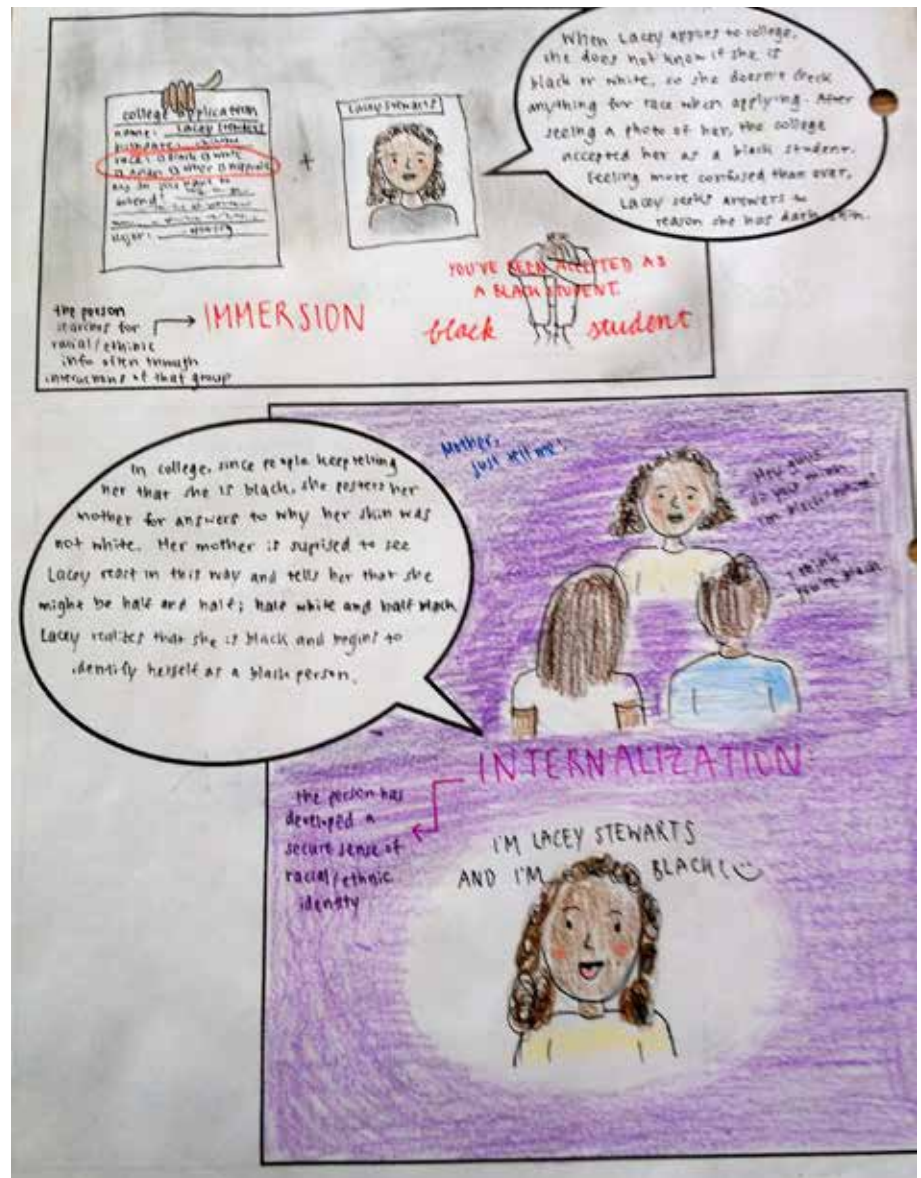


Figure 2: Students create comic strips that reflect the stages of identity development presented in *Little White Lie*.

country and the extent to which it has benefitted or oppressed racial and ethnic minorities.¹¹ Students begin to think about education on a personal level, by creating an “educational autobiography.” Lessons like SHEG’s “What was the purpose of the Carlisle School?”, films like *Tell Them We Are Rising* about Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and analysis of Chicano students’ demands from the 1968 blow-outs are all effective ways of addressing educational issues and resistance on a broader scale. I also take time in this unit to address critical media literacy, since

it is clear that Americans must be able to analyze and evaluate the credibility of information from a wide variety of sources.¹²

UNIT 5: Action

After having students identify and analyze problematic features of our nation’s past and present, I want students to explore the question: How can we become agents of change? By looking at historical and current movements for social change, students learn that change is possible through individual and collective action and that effective agents

of change make use of many strategies to achieve their goals. When time in the semester allows, students assess real-world solutions to challenges facing the community. I also have students create “What’s in Your Bag?” poster presentations that ask students to research important leaders, identify objects they would have with them at all times, and explain how each object represents an aspect of their leadership traits and life’s work. (See Figure 3, at the right)

This thematic unit approach to an Ethnic Studies course has a variety of advantages over courses that focus on either one specific group or on multiple groups in succession.¹³ First, these themes could form the foundation of any number of Ethnic Studies courses focused on specific ethnic or racial groups. Each one of the themes could be tailored to focus

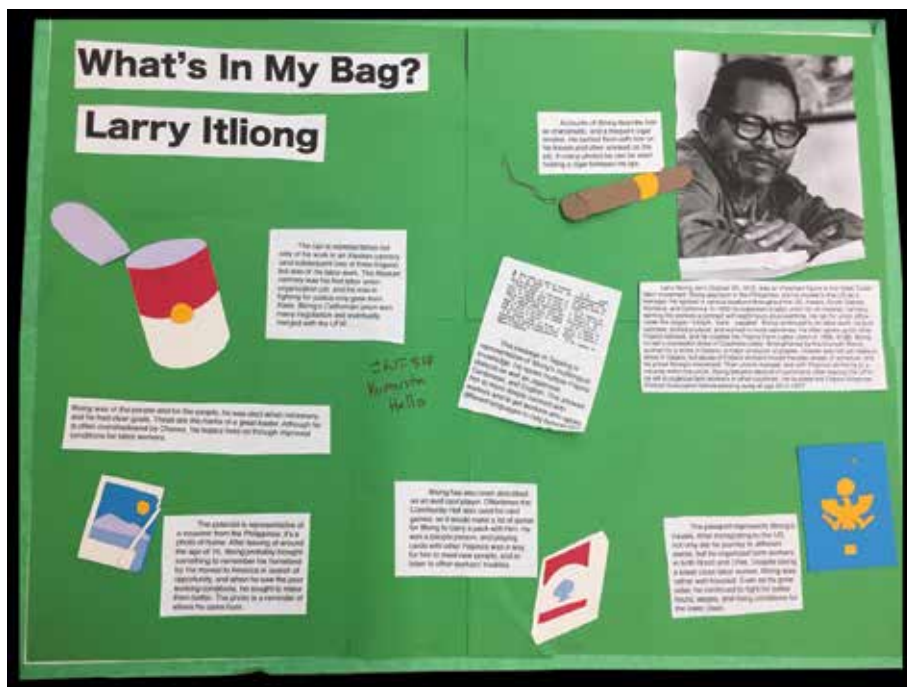


Figure 3: What’s in Your Bag? Leader Activity on West Coast labor activist Larry Dulay Itliong.

A common misunderstanding is the belief that framing instruction with a question equates to “doing inquiry.”

on Latinos or Asian Americans, or on a combination reflecting a school’s population. Secondly, themes like History and Migration can focus on local histories or on histories deemed underappreciated in a state’s standard curriculum. A thematic approach also allows for the study of multigroup interactions, such as Filipino-Chicano participation in the United Farm Workers or the contrasting experiences of Asian American groups during World War II. A thematic approach allows for including more groups. Greater inclusion may prevent the critical reception these classes have had in some places, notably Arizona,

where school board elimination of the Mexican American Studies curriculum in Tucson high schools pushed teachers to successfully sue to have the courses reinstated.¹⁴ Finally, themes could be developed to reflect the specific orientation of different schools. Units on Law, Economics, Science and Health (e.g., Eugenics or medical experimentation on minorities), and the Arts would be very relevant to both the Ethnic Studies mission and to schools with specialization in these areas.

Student and parent reactions to my Ethnic Studies course have been very positive. Parents have expressed appreciation about having such a course at our school and say that their children often discuss the course content at home. Student comments demonstrate growth in both academic and socioemotional development. At the end of the course, one student wrote:

The assignments encourage exploration of one’s personal experiences and familial circumstances. The class allows students to see past stereotypes hurled at them or at those

around them and gives them something to be proud of. If people don’t see people who they identify with in positions of power or success, they cannot see themselves there, and they settle for mediocrity. This class presents those examples of achievement.

Another student observed, “I believe this class has a lot of benefits when it comes to social acceptance. This is my one class where I see people of different races interacting with each other by choice. It brings us together in and out of school.” Another frequent student reaction was that the course “truly sparked an interest in history and other cultures. I have learned how to analyze evidence from multiple perspectives and study history in an engaging environment.” Finally, students often opine that “this class will help create better citizens who know how to accept others into their community.”¹⁵

An Ethnic Studies course with this design is not without its challenges. First and foremost, there is not, to my knowledge, a grade-appropriate text that approaches the content in this manner.

Related to this challenge is the extensive amount of research and preparation that can confront a teacher offering this course for the first time. That said, there are many social studies-oriented websites with well-developed lesson plans (see Resources below) that can make these tasks easier. A final challenge, which is rather easy to overcome, is aligning the course with state social science standards. I have designed my lessons to enhance our state's content standards and conform to California's grade level Common Core Standards for English Language and the Social Sciences. Ultimately, teaching a class like this needs to be an act of dedication to the ultimate goals of the Ethnic Studies movement, which, at least from my perspective, makes this class so rewarding and imperative to teach. 🌍

Notes

1. Casey Parks, "Ethnic Studies Classes Coming to all Portland High Schools," oregonlive.com (May 4, 2016), www.oregonlive.com/education/index.ssf/2016/05/ethnic_studies_classes_coming.html.
2. Vanessa Romo, "LAUSD Board Adds Ethnic Studies to Schools' Curriculum," laschoolreport.com (November 19, 2014), <http://laschoolreport.com/lausd-board-votes-to-add-ethnic-studies-to-schools-curriculum/>.
3. Frances Kai-Hwa Wang, "California Governor Signs Bill to Develop High School Ethnic Studies

Curriculum," nbcnews.com (September 14, 2016), www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/california-governor-signs-bill-develop-high-school-ethnic-studies-curriculum-n648396.

4. Former Governor Brown vetoed Assembly Bill No. 2772, Session of 2018 (Calif., 2018), https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180AB2772; however, a similar bill, Assembly Bill 331 was introduced on January 31, 2019. See Assembly Bill No. 331, Session of 2019 (Calif., 2019), <https://legiscan.com/CA/bill/AB331/2019>.
5. See the special "Ethnic Studies, K-12" issue of *Xchange: Publications and Resources for Public School Professionals*, centerx.gseis.ucla.edu, <https://centerx.gseis.ucla.edu/xchange/ethnic-studies-k-12/>
6. California Department of Education, *History Social Science Framework for California Public Schools Grades K-12*, (Sacramento: California Department of Education, 2016), 310-311. www.cde.ca.gov/ci/hs/cf/documents/hssfframeworkwhole.pdf.
7. Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 52–74.
8. Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender and Sexual Orientation* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley & Sons, 2010); Claude Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do (Issues of Our Time)* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011).
9. Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (New York: Back Bay Books, Little Brown and Company, 2008), 5.
10. Lessons that ask students to "open up the textbook" start with a passage from an established textbook, but then have students analyze a series of new documents that shed greater light on the topic than what the textbook passage presents.
11. "Structured Academic Controversy (SAC)," teachinghistory.org, <http://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/teaching-guides/21731>
12. Brooke Donald, "Stanford Researchers Find

Students Have Trouble Judging the Credibility of Information Online," Stanford Graduate School of Education (November 22, 2016), <https://ed.stanford.edu/news/stanford-researchers-find-students-have-trouble-judging-credibility-information-online>.

13. The LAUSD has so far approved five courses that qualify as Ethnic Studies classes. These are Ethnic Studies (looking at multiple groups, but one at a time, chronologically); Native American Studies; Asian American Studies; Mexican American Studies; and African American Studies. These broad categorizations are umbrella designations for multiple ethnicities and nationalities.
14. This controversy is engagingly depicted in the film *Precious Knowledge* (Directed by Ari Luis Palos, Produced by Eren Isabel McGinnis, 2011), www.preciousknowledgefilm.com/.
15. These reflections come from a final assessment that asked students to write letters to the superintendent of our school district in which they express their views on whether Ethnic Studies should be a high school graduation requirement. A study conducted by Stanford University researchers found that high school students able to take Ethnic Studies courses in ninth grade had lower rates of unexcused absences, higher G.P.A.s, and greater accrued credit at graduation. See Thomas Dee and Emily Penner, *The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance: Evidence from an Ethnic Studies Curriculum*, NBER Working Paper No. 21865, January 2016, JEL No. IO.

INGRID E. FEY is a Teacher at the Los Angeles Center for Enriched Studies, Los Angeles Unified School District, in California. She can be reached at ief4208@lausd.net.

Resources

Films

(Most are available on YouTube, Netflix, Amazon, or Kanopy)

Ethnic Notions, Directed by Marlon Riggs, California Newsreel, 1987.

Latinos Beyond Reel, Directed by Miguel Picker, Open Lens Media, 2013-2014. <http://latinosbeyondreel.com/>

Little White Lie, Director Lacy Schwartz, Truth Aid Media in Association with ITVS, 2014. www.littlewhiteliethefilm.com/

Reel Injun, Directed by Neil Diamond, Lorber Films, 2009.

Tell Them We Are Rising, Directed by Stanley Nelson, Firelight Films/PBS, 2017.

Thirteenth, Directed by Ava Duvernay, Forward Movement, Kandoo Films for Netflix, 2016.

Websites

Asian Americans Advancing Justice: Untold Civil Rights Stories

www.advancingjustice-la.org/what-we-do/leadership-development/untold-civil-rights-stories

California Department of Education Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Guidelines

www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ethnicguidelines.asp

Facing History and Ourselves

www.facinghistory.org/

Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

www.gilderlehrman.org/

Los Angeles Unified School District High School Ethnic Studies Curriculum

<https://achieve.lausd.net/cms/lib/CA01000043/Centricity/Domain/226/Ethnic%20Studies%20Survey%20Course%20.pdf>

Rethinking Schools (see the recent publication *Rethinking Ethnic Studies*)

www.rethinkingschools.org/

Stanford History Education Group

<https://sheg.stanford.edu/>

Teaching Tolerance

www.tolerance.org/

Zinn Education Project

www.zinnedproject.org/