

Lesson

Identifying and Affirming Core Values

Overview

About This Lesson

Our decisions and choices are largely shaped by our values—the things that are most important to us. Giving students an opportunity to reflect on what matters most to them can be a self-affirming exercise. Evaluating their most important values can help students reflect on their sense of purpose and make choices aligned with what really matters to them.

In this lesson, students will engage in a values-affirmation exercise in order to identify and reflect on what matters most to them. Then they will create their own mantras, inspired by poet and author Amanda Gorman. The activities in this lesson lay the groundwork for a deeper exploration in later lessons of the costs and benefits of belonging to a group and the ways in which our values may shape our actions and decisions.

Essential Questions

- What are the forces that shape belonging?
- How can we reduce barriers to belonging for ourselves and others?

Guiding Questions

- What matters most to you?
- How do your values shape who you are and the decisions you make?

Facing History Learning Outcomes

In order to deepen their understanding of the text, themselves, each other, and the world, students will . . .

- Value the complexity of identity in themselves and others.
- Describe the factors that influence their moral development, such as their personal experiences, their interactions with others, and their surroundings, and reflect on how these factors influence their sense of right and wrong.

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What's Included

This lesson uses the following texts and materials. Access materials and a lesson Plan-on-a-Page in this [Google Folder](#).

- **Handout:** What Do I Value?
- **Video:** Using Your Voice Is a Political Choice

Preparing to Teach

A Note to Teachers

1. Preparing for the Values-Affirmation Activity

In this lesson, students will complete a values-affirmation activity that was designed for youth ages 12 to 16 by social psychologist Geoffrey Cohen. This activity is intended as a private reflection; **it should not be collected or assessed**. You can review a complete set of instructions and find other values-affirmation activities for your classroom on [Cohen's website](#).

Here, we highlight two of Cohen's instructions for the activity. You can find further instructions in the Activities section of the lesson plan and by downloading "Instructions for Delivering Affirmation Activities" on [Cohen's website](#). We hope this guidance can help you determine the best approach for this activity with your students in the time you have available.

1. "On the handout, you can add a space for students to write their names, but you want to convey that their responses will be private so that they write freely and authentically." They will not be sharing what they write with you or with other students.
2. "When you distribute the [handout], it's important that you convey that you take their responses seriously and that you care about the answers. If the activity is presented in a rote or perfunctory way, it's unlikely to be beneficial. You also want a quiet and safe environment for students to complete it, so that they can reflect and write authentically. You may want to provide the activity in manila envelopes with the respondent's name on it, so that it feels special and private. It's critical for [students] to understand that the activity is not evaluated or graded—that it's just an opportunity for them to express who they are, and what they care about."¹

¹ From Geoffrey L. Cohen's "[Instructions for Delivering Affirmation Activities](#)."

Additional Context & Background

There is universality in our desire to belong, to feel like we are part of a larger group that values, respects, and cares for us—a group to which we can contribute our ideas and talents. Social psychologist Solomon Asch describes this desire as “among the most powerful forces to be found.”² When we feel a sense of belonging, it has a positive effect on our self-esteem, agency, and the meaning we ascribe to our lives. The young people in your classroom are no different from adults in this regard; the importance of belonging grows as we move from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood.³ Adolescents are deeply attuned to their peers, and they seek respect and belonging in groups where they can be supported, heard, and understood.

Geoffrey L. Cohen, professor of psychology and author of *Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides*, and his colleagues have conducted research to determine how we might increase students’ sense of belonging in schools. They have found that value-affirmation activities can, in many situations, have an overall positive effect. Value affirmations are quick check-ins where we remind ourselves of the things that matter most to us. Whether with young people or adults, these short check-ins can reconnect us with those core values that give our lives meaning.⁴ They can help to reassure us that we belong. As explained by Cohen, “Because values reflect our deepest commitment, when we reflect on them, we bring our sense of who we are, and particularly our awareness of our better nature, into clearer focus, curbing our defensive need to blame others.”⁵

In this lesson, students will complete one of Cohen’s values-affirmation activities. This lesson prepares students to analyze how values shape the actions and decisions of protagonists in various texts throughout the unit, and it supports them in connecting the unit’s texts and essential questions to their own experiences. Because this activity has been extensively tested and validated, we have not made modifications to it. While it may be tempting to add additional values to the list that students will receive, this activity is designed to introduce students to values affirmations and does not need to be comprehensive. You can learn more about these activities and explore other versions for future lessons on [Cohen’s website](#).

² Quoted in Geoffrey L. Cohen, *Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 5.

³ Cohen, *Belonging*, 215.

⁴ Cohen, *Belonging*, 180–83.

⁵ Cohen, *Belonging*, 136.

Lesson Plan

Activities

1. Reflect On Core Values

Start class by having students sit in pairs and take out their poems from the previous lesson, the reading **“Identity” by Julio Noboa Polanco**. Explain that today they will be thinking about values, which are the things that matter most to them.

To get started, prompt students to consider how they think the speaker of the poem would respond to the following question: *What matters most to you?* They should write their ideas as a list in their journals. After they have had a few minutes to generate ideas, invite students to share with the class. Record their ideas on the board.

Explain to students that in order to understand where we belong and the various factors that can motivate us to make choices and take action, it can help to understand what we value—in other words, what’s most important to us and why. The class touched on these ideas in the previous lesson when considering the attitude of the speaker of Julio Noboa Polanco’s poem toward the flower and weed and how the speaker’s values shaped the decision to take an unconventional path.

2. Engage in a Values-Affirmation Activity

Follow the procedure outlined in Teaching Note 1. Explain to students that they will be doing a short written exercise to help them explore their own values—the things that matter most to them. Make it clear that there are no right or wrong answers and that their responses will not be collected, shared with other students, or graded. This is an opportunity for them to reflect on who they are and what they care about.

Pass out the **What Do I Value?** handout and read the instructions together. Reiterate that students’ responses are private and will not be shared. We recommend that you do the activity alongside your students in order to convey its importance.

After students have finished, see if any volunteers would like to share *what it felt like to think about their values* (you are not asking them to share any information from

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their handouts). You might start by sharing your own reflections and seeing if anyone else has something to add before moving to the next activity.

3. Create a Personal Mantra

Let students know that they will be watching a short clip from former youth poet laureate and author Amanda Gorman's 2018 TED Talk, in which she reflects on the people who have impacted her sense of self and purpose. Play a short clip from the video [Using Your Voice Is a Political Choice](#) (00:00–02:13).

Write Amanda Gorman's mantra on the board and read it out loud to the class: *I am the daughter of Black writers who are descended from Freedom Fighters who broke their chains and changed the world. They call me.*

Ask students to respond to the following questions in a short class discussion, or have them discuss in pairs:

- If Amanda Gorman were to circle her two most important values from the list on the handout, what do you think she would circle and why?
- How do you think Gorman's values influence her sense of who she is and the decisions she makes?

Next, let students know that they will be writing their own mantras, or motivational statements grounded in their most important values. To get started, have students respond in their [journals](#) to the following questions:

- Whose shoulders do you stand on? Make a list of people and/or events that you think helped shape who you are today and helped you develop your values. Then choose one and write about how that person or event has impacted who you are today.
- What do you stand for? In other words, what are your core values? What are the things that matter most to you? What are the things that you would take action for, small or large?

Invite students to create a mantra for themselves, using ideas from one or both of the preceding questions and their values-affirmation handouts. Consider providing the sentence stem *I am the . . . , who is/are . . .* if they are struggling to get started. Students can finish crafting their mantras for homework if there isn't time during

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the lesson, or if time allows, they can share their mantras using the [Wraparound](#) strategy.