

# Affirming Our Identities

## Identity Webs

### What Are Identity Webs?

Identity webs are personalized graphic tools that help us consider the many factors that shape who we are.

### Why Use Identity Webs?

Self-exploration is not always an easy topic to approach. I first explored identity webs at a Facing History and Ourselves workshop as an introductory lens to how you view and define yourself, in roles you are confident in claiming and sharing: a teacher, a parent, a

reader, a runner, a knitter, a traveler. Once named, these become an entry point to initiating conversation with others. It is a beautiful beginning-of-the-year lesson, but more than an icebreaker. Identity webs help us find commonalities which springboard us to notice, wonder, and see the humanity in one another. What matters is not the web itself, but the dialogue that it makes possible and how that dialogue is a catalyst for rapport building.

### When Could Identity Webs Be Used?

- When introducing yourself to your students.
- When working to connect with your students as well as help them connect with one another.
- When reading about a protagonist or actor in history, with each student creating a web for the person as the class learns more.
- When working to build understanding of and empathy for a particular individual or group of people with whom students may have little background knowledge.

Identity webs can be done on loose paper or in journals. I use them as an opening activity on the first day of school and revisit them many times a year. While you



may choose to display them in the classroom, they are not meant to be decorative wallpaper. They become documents we revisit, reference, and revise over and over as we learn together across the year.

### **STEP 1: CHOOSE AN ENGAGING TEXT TO READ WITH YOUR CLASS**

On the first day of school, have kids come to the community meeting area right away and bring along a pencil and a notebook. Start with a shared read-aloud to help calm the nerves and focus the energy this initial meeting brings. Beginning with a read-aloud also sends the message that reading aloud, reading together, and reading picture books is something the class will do. It is cool and accepted in this room.

Choose a text where the identity of the protagonist is named and inferred through the written language or images. Short, high-interest, biography picture books work well. I recommend reading the text yourself and creating an identity web for the person so you can see if it will work well with your students.

## Suggested Stack for Exploring Our Own Identities

### **Picture Books**

*Ada Twist, Scientist; Rosie Revere, Engineer; and Iggy Peck, Architect*  
by Andrea Beaty

*Amelia and Eleanor Go for a Ride* by Pam Muñoz Ryan

*Emmanuel's Dream: The True Story of Emmanuel Ofosu Yeboah*  
by Laurie Ann Thompson

*Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez* by Kathleen Krull

*Jacob's New Dress* by Sarah and Ian Hoffman

*Malala, a Brave Girl from Pakistan and Iqbal, a Brave Boy from Pakistan: Two Stories of Bravery* by Jeanette Winter

*Manfish: A Story of Jacques Cousteau* by Jennifer Berne

*Stella Brings the Family* by Miriam Schiffer

*Sunday Chutney* by Aaron Blabey

*The Librarian of Basra* by Jeanette Winter

*The Youngest Marcher* by Cynthia Levinson

**Poetry**

*Bravo! Poems About Amazing Hispanics* by Margarita Engle

*Out of Wonder: Poems Celebrating Poets* by Kwame Alexander  
with Chris Colderley and Marjory Wentworth

*Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou

**Essay**

"Little Things Are Big" by Jesus Colon

"Orientation Day" by Jennifer Wang

**Short Story Anthologies**

*America Street: A Multicultural Anthology of Stories* edited by Anne Mazer

*First Crossings: Stories About Teen Immigrants* by Donald R. Gallo

*Flying Lessons* edited by Ellen Oh

*The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories* by Ken Liu (particularly the title story)

*When I Was Your Age: Original Stories About Growing Up, Volumes I and II,*  
edited by Amy Ehrlich

**STEP 2: INVITE STUDENTS TO THINK, WRITE, PAIR, SHARE**

Because it is so early in the year, we want kids to have a little breathing room before we push them into talks with new peers. First I give them a direction that ignites their personal schema:

*We are going to kick off the year with an idea that we will revisit tons: identity. I want you to stop and think for a minute: What comes to mind when you hear or see the word identity? (I always write it on the board for all learners.) Use that inner voice first, the voice that is bringing all of your prior experience to the front of your mind. Then, write your ideas.*

Everyone has a shiny, clean, new notebook and a pencil they are excited about using (and that they have not yet lost) on the first day, so writing is welcomed. The hands of some of your ready-to-share-anywhere learners will go up right away (a great formative assessment of who is ready to share in whole-group work). Remind them to just give everyone some thinking time. Then have them share with a partner:

Thanks for putting your thinking on paper. I think we can get smarter together on this one, so I am going to ask that in a minute— when I say “go!”—you turn to a partner near you and share what you wrote down. Think about what has to happen for that to work: you need to notice and identify who is near you, be aware of who is included and who isn't, and maybe even say hi before you engage. Think you can handle it? (Here, I am really looking for the kids who are observing whether everyone has a partner.) You'll know it is time to come back together when I say 3, 2, 1 . . . OK? Go!

Try leaning into the pairs, looking for two things: One, did the kids have enough time to write some thoughts on identity? Two, how are they doing as they talk? Are they sharing airtime with their partners? Being active listeners (making eye contact, asking for clarification, writing down what their partner wrote as a form of celebrating their thinking)? You may want to record social behaviors to inform your instruction: all of the behaviors of active listening can be taught in mini-lessons. You may also find yourself jumping in to listen, talk, smile, and greet them again on this first day. Give

them about thirty seconds to a minute depending on the energy. Bring them back with a 3, 2, 1, noticing how they come back together.

OK, you have thought on your own, written down your thinking, and gotten smarter with a partner. Let's hear from some partnerships on your conversation. What does identity mean to you or to you and your partner?

By now, I typically find that a few more kids than before raise their hands. This is a direct result of the self-confidence they have built in their conversations with their peers. As the kids talk, scribe their contributions on an anchor chart labeled “Identity.” Invite them to do the same in their journals.

One idea will lead to another. Honor the kids' responses by adding them to the chart, but don't worry about trying to form an exhaustive list at this point. Once the initial flurry of

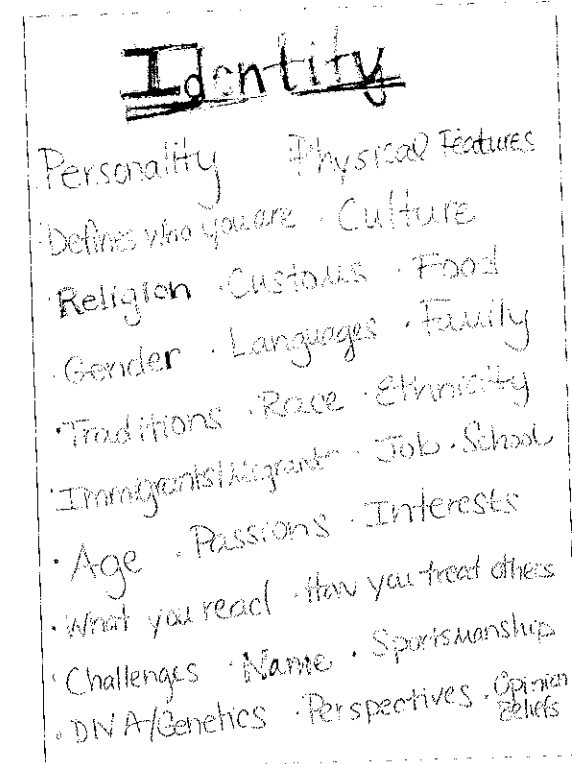


Figure 1.1. A kid-generated list from a middle-school class.

ideas is over, you can keep the momentum of the lesson going during the read-aloud by asking kids to suggest more items for the chart as the story uncovers them. For example, if age doesn't show up on our chart at first, it may come up in the story. This is a working document and a definition that you will build together.

### **STEP 3: MODEL AN IDENTITY WEB DURING READ-ALoud**

When introducing the read-aloud, prime kids with the idea that you are going to look into the *identity* of this character. Let them know that you are going to create something called a web in order to map the identity of the character. Ask them to follow your lead as you draw a circle and write the name of the character in the middle.

*Can you guys follow my lead and draw this circle in your notebook right after that list of identity characteristics we just built together? Write the character's name in the middle. As we read, we are going to investigate any clues the author gives us into the identity of \_\_\_\_\_.*

*I will do the first couple for you and I'll look to you to help me as well.*

Begin reading. There is usually one helpfully glaring piece of identity introduced in the first page(s) of these texts that gives you a little teaching alley-oop. Think aloud for the kids and add this bit to the web. After you do this one or two more times, the kids usually begin noticing on their own, so you can gradually release the bulk of the work over to them. Stop a couple times during the reading to have them turn and talk, sharing what they have as you grow the web together. Finish the book and check in one last time.

### **STEP 4: ESTABLISHING RAPPORT: KIDS MAKE THEIR OWN IDENTITY WEBS**

To transition kids into making their own webs, first model the start of your own. Look to the shared web you just created as a jumping-off point.

*There are so many things on this web that we were able to glean from this story. We were able to have a deeper look into this character's identity by creating this together. Now I want to turn our focus to ourselves.*

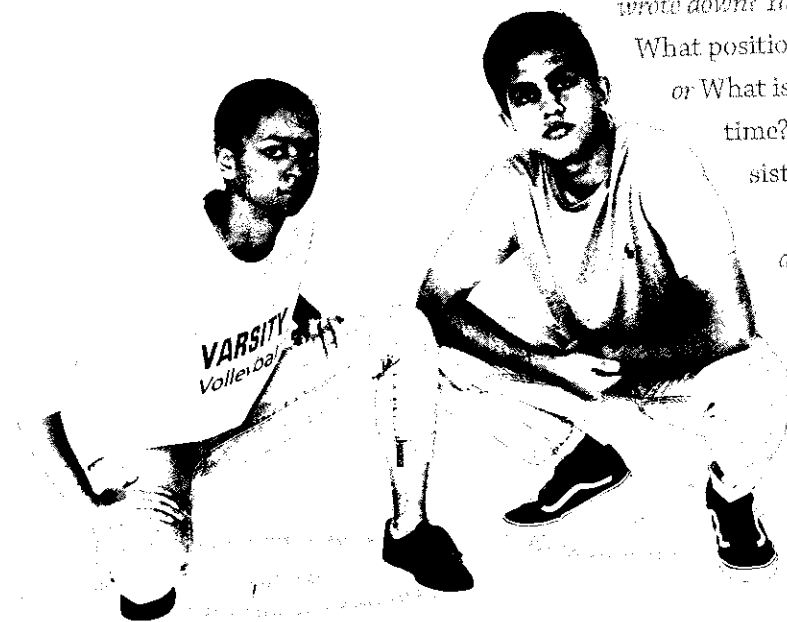
Begin your own identity web on new chart paper or by using the document camera. I begin with a think-aloud, listing various pieces of my identity that I know the kids will find a connection to as I go: soccer player, reader, sister. This is a moment of initial rapport building that also requires a little vulnerability for us as teachers as we open ourselves up to them. I promise you, a little self-disclosure goes a long way. If there are apparent connections to the web you and the class just made, look for those and think aloud. This models how the class will later build identity connections and practice asking personal questions.

Kids will naturally hunt for connections to their own lives in your web, and they'll undoubtedly have questions as well. You might ask, "Does anyone have a connection to me? Do you see something in my web you may include in yours as well?" As kids make connections, remember that these are personal associations, not answers to be graded as correct or incorrect. It's OK to let yourself respond as you would in a social situation. Let your teacher guard down and humanize the moment—ask them a follow-up question to deepen the connection, smile, or say, "Wow, I can't wait to talk to you about that later!" Your responses are a model for how students might respond to one another when they answer others' questions later in the lesson.

If you are not comfortable with a particular question, say so. For example, I might say, "Thanks for being brave by asking that question. While it is important enough to include on my web, I am still figuring out how to talk about it. Can you be my person when I am ready?" Then I give that student another opportunity to find something else they are curious about. When you model this kind of response as positive yet honest, with respectful language that students can mirror later, you help kids let go of apprehensions they might have about asking questions. Try your best not to censor your web by deliberately omitting things you're uncomfortable sharing. This is an initial practice in sharing our whole vulnerable selves. We first have to get uncomfortable before we can become comfortable in difficult conversations.

Give kids guidance about how to frame their connections and questions in the same respectful way you'll expect them to converse with one another:

*As you look at my web, what are you wondering about me or things I wrote down? You might ask something like, "What position did you play in soccer?" or "What is your favorite book of all time?" or "How many brothers or sisters do you have?"*



*Of course, you might also have questions that are more personal. In our class, we'll be talking a lot about our identities, so it's important that we know how to respect what each of us is willing to talk about. So, if you have*

a personal question, you might phrase it this way: Are you comfortable answering a question about your parents, Ms. Almed? And, if I say I am, you can follow up with the question. So, what questions do you have?

Finally, give kids the green light to try their own webs:

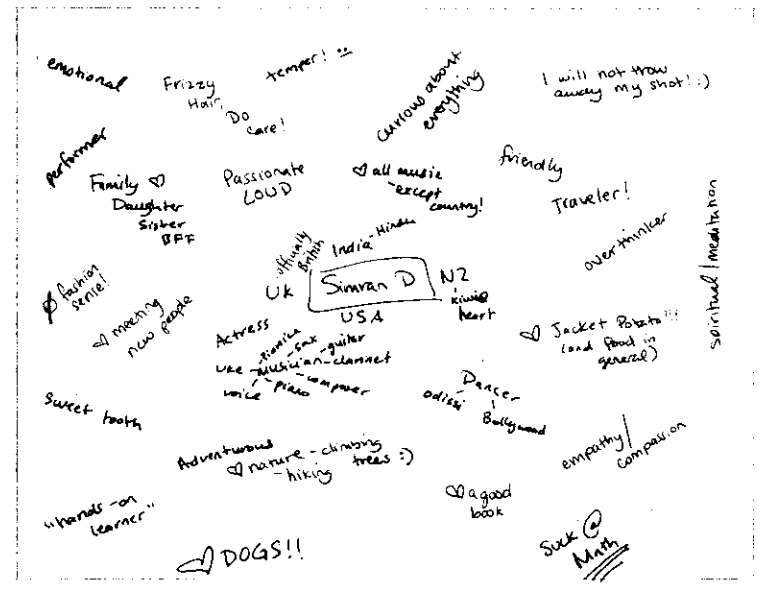
You have had a lot of practice reading and creating webs to have a deeper sense of what identity means to people. Now it is your turn. I would love you to go back to your seats and try your own webs. Turn back to the example from our story, the web from me, and the chart we made together if you feel stuck.

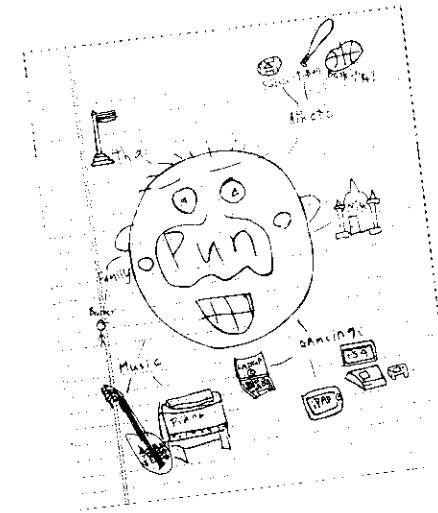
**STEP 5: INDEPENDENT CREATING**

This is the perfect time to move about the room and mingle with students one-on-one. Take time to notice what they are creating, where they are starting in terms of their identity, if they are relating to the character, if they are relating to you. Briefly confer with individual students, making connections and asking some questions just as you modeled with your own web. Take advantage of opportunities to build connections in these one-on-one moments. If the kids are working silently, invite them to turn and talk to share with their peers.

**Figure 1.2** Simran, a rising senior, gives a glimpse not only of her interests and heritage, but also her passions, her anxieties, and her hopes and dreams. In a quick conference, I might look for a connection between us by asking about her love of travel or of the *Hamilton* play soundtrack, and I will keep in

mind some of the other things she's shared—her bravery in her transparency, her descriptions of herself as an "overthinker," and her curiosity "about everything"—as I get to know her over the year. I will look for entry points to ask her questions (Tell me more about what makes you a "hands-on learner") and I will use her responses to think about books I can recommend to her ("love a good book") and pieces of writing she can launch from here ("officially British, Kiwi at heart"). Today, I smile when I look at Simran's web because I can hear her voice in it—"frizzy hair . . . do care."





**Figure 1.3** Pun, a fourth grader, chose a more visual route in sharing his identity. This tells me something right away about his preferred choice for communicating with the world and his talent! As Pun is working I am realizing I don't have a ton of connections with him (aside from soccer), so I look for opportunities to talk to him about what I am wondering. I am interested in talking to him more about his musical identity: Does he play both the piano and guitar? Does he have a preference? As someone who hasn't really touched a console since Super Nintendo and the original PlayStation myself, I wonder about his gaming: How are games different when played on all of these systems?

#### STEP 6: SHARING IDEAS

Sharing can be done in pairs, in small groups, or back at the rug. Prompt kids to share a few things that they included, what matters most to them, or connections they have to you or the character. Also allow kids to ask questions of one another, reminding them of the ways people can choose to answer or not. Let kids share without too much commentary from you once you get them going. In a big group share, I have given kids the challenge afterward to find one or two people with whom they had a connection and let them know. The conversation burbles in the room, springing from comments like, "Hey, we had a connection; I have read the entire Harry Potter series twice too."

Kids may want to continue adding to their own webs, especially after a share of good ideas. Let them know they can take the webs home to design them to their hearts' desire, but they must come back! I have also used webs to create an initial home-school connection by having kids interview an adult at home to see what they might include on their web, having the adult do a web along with them, or having parents make their own during Parent Open House.

#### FOLLOW-UP

Identity webs are always in the follow-up cycle. There are many things that can be done after they are created, but the most important one is to revisit them as a touchstone text for doing the work of social comprehension. Our identity comes with stories and experiences different from those of anyone else. Use these webs as a baseline to remind kids of the things they carry always, in meeting new people, in collaboration, in difficult conversations. They can be used for a gallery walk with their



classmates, or put up for a follow-up lesson that can include leaving connections or questions on sticky notes (similar to the connections and questions they practiced with you verbally). After these lessons, webs should be kept securely in their journals where they can be easily accessed for lessons to come.

### ADDRESSING TENSIONS

Identity can be messy and we have to take great care in supporting kids as they fight it out; we are right alongside them on this journey. I have provided a few tensions that have come up in my classes during this work.

#### **1. Students don't think they have anything to put down on their web.**

*(My class)* Some students will stop at only a few words and say they're "done." We can give them a nudge by noticing what is already on their web and asking some follow-up questions. We can also notice any items they have with them, on their person. Even writing utensils and backpacks tell a story. That may elicit some more writing.

#### **2. Students are including only surface elements of their identity.**

*(My class)* During the model, be extra thoughtful about addressing some pieces of your identity that may cause some personal tension for you, or that you just aren't sure how to articulate. I may share that my parents speak another language at home (Urdu) and that I don't, but it is part of who I am: I grew up hearing it and that is how my family communicates. (Language can be an area of tension for students who use a mother tongue other than English at home.) Sharing a small struggle for you may empower them to do the same.