

The logo features the text "DIVERSITY MEMO" in large, bold, white capital letters, with "for teachers" in a smaller, white, lowercase font below it. The background is a dark blue gradient with abstract, circular, concentric patterns in lighter shades of blue and green.

DIVERSITY MEMO

for teachers

DIVERSITY MEMO: THE SUSPICIOUS BRAIN : Our brains and our biases

Dear Teacher (and Leader),

Brain research is all the rage these days. It seems every day we hear of a new discovery about how behavior and emotions are linked to brain chemistry and development. Many traits and behaviors that were once attributed to character or upbringing can now be linked to specific sites and functions of the brain.

As teachers, we are particularly conscious of the advances in brain research as it reveals why some students excel in certain subjects while others struggle and how to differ teaching methods to capitalize on particular periods of brain development.

And what we have gained from brain research in the fields of mental health and education applies to issues of bias as well. We now understand that it “makes sense” for our brains to categorize those who differ from us and to assume that we are better than others.

But just because it is “natural” for our brains to work this way doesn’t mean that we have to accept prejudice and discrimination as a fact. Rather, knowing how our brains work allows us to move our focus from feeling guilt about our own biased thinking and judging our students’ prejudices to learning how to counteract what our brains do naturally and teaching our brains to work in new, egalitarian ways.

In this *RaceBridges Diversity Memo* you’ll find a classroom activity, some “lesson plan starters” to go deeper into the issue, further resources, and some ideas and thoughts to help inspire you on the journey. With a little knowledge we can remove some of the “heat” that attends most discussions about racism, stereotypes and prejudice and, instead, focus on solutions.

Classroom Activities

This brief lesson-starter suggests activities without being overly prescriptive so that you can adapt the activity to your classroom. A pledge or action item is included at the end.



There is evidence that our biases can be altered: we can be “primed” so that we tap into unconscious biases or so that we avoid those biases. For example, a study was done where some subjects were told a positive story about a person from an ethnic group while others were told a negative story. Afterwards, subjects were asked to interview a member of that same ethnic group for a job. The subjects’ attitudes towards the interviewee—who behaved the same with all subjects—corresponded to the story they were told before the interview. This is an easy experiment to try with your own class and then discuss. You can design your own lesson or follow the suggestion below.

Choose a bias you would like to address (gender, race, age, even another school). Create two slips of paper: one slip of paper says “Think of a [name of group] who frightened or angered you” while the other slip says “Think of a [name of group] who is a role model of leadership.” Give half of your class the “negative” slip of paper; give the other half the “positive” slip of paper. Don’t allow them to look at each other’s papers. Allow them a few minutes to write down their thoughts.

When students are finished, show a picture of an anonymous person from the group you are focused on. Do *not* use a picture of someone students know; this will skew the results. Ask students to write down 2-4 words to describe the person in the picture. Have a few students share their opinions.

When you have heard a variety of opinions, ask students to speculate about why they see the picture differently. Then ask students who see this person in a positive light to raise their hands; then ask students who see this person in a negative light to raise their hands. Finally, reveal that students were asked to think about the group in different ways before looking at the picture. Ask students if their opinion of the person in the picture corresponded to the slip of paper they were given. Discuss.

Action: Ask students to discuss how they might use this new knowledge to prevent biases from clouding their attitude and behavior in the future. Have students practice this strategy for a week and then report back to class.

Lesson Plan Ideas

How do you get your students involved, spark discussion or build this topic into your lesson plan?

Some great ideas to get started in the classroom.

For homework, assign one of the Implicit Association Tests at www.implicit.harvard.edu (you should take one first so you are familiar with how they work). Before assigning this, be sure to talk with students about how we all have biases about people and groups of people who differ from us. This is a natural way for our brains to protect our own self-concepts and to “categorize” the world. These biases usually are reinforced as we age because we spend time in homogenous groups that strengthen our sense of self-identity and suspicion of outsiders. After they have completed the homework, have students discuss what about the test and their results was surprises and/or difficult.



- Have students read or listen to one of the stories on the RaceBridges sites. (See the list below of lesson plans and videos under “Resources.” You will find short audio stories and video stories there.) Students should listen to the story of a person of a different ethnic background than themselves and with whom they don’t normally have a lot of interaction.
- Pair students together the next day or next class and have each briefly retell the story they listened to / read as if it was their own. After retelling the story, students should talk about how they feel about the teller. Discuss as a classroom the effect of knowing another’s story and trying to be empathetic to another are. Could those two things prevent our biases from taking over?
- Provide students with a scenario that casts someone in a negative light. You can make up examples (you might talk about someone being rude at a store, two people talking in another language while looking you over, someone running a red light, and so on).

The story should be brief. Have students share their opinions of that person. Then ask students to imagine all the positive reasons why that person might have behaved badly. Be as imaginative as possible. Afterwards, discuss how opinions of another person can change when we try to understand them rather than judge them.

Resources to help you plan lessons about the topic

Lesson plans for your classroom that use personal stories and Resources to help you plan lessons about this topic.

Here are some useful links to lesson plans on the RaceBridgesStudio.com site.

See these lesson plans for your classroom that address our internal biases and encourage students to “out think” their own brains at the end of this document.

- We All Have A Race: Addressing Race and Racism
- Sticking Together: Sharing our Stories, Our Differences, Our Similarities
- What’s Racism Got To Do With Me?: How Our History and Context Shape Us and Others



See these lesson plans for your classroom that include “real life” stories from people of a variety of races and ethnic backgrounds at the end of this document. These stories and related lesson plans help students get to “know” people who differ from them, thus challenging stereotypes they might have of a particular group.

- Bittersweet: A Chinese American Daughter’s Legacy
- I Am Indopino: A Native American Looks at His Mixed Identities
- Looking for Papito
- A White Girl Looks at Race
- The Spirit Survives: The American Indian Boarding School Experience
- Hidden Memory: Japanese American Incarceration
- From Flint Michigan to Your Front Door: Tracing the Roots of Racism
- Nepantla: Caught Between Two Worlds

Further Recommended Resources

Resources to help you learn and plan lessons about this topic.

- Fine, Cordelia. *A Mind of Its Own: How Your Brain Distorts and Deceives*. New York: Norton, 2006. Chapter 8 “The Bigoted Brain” is especially helpful.
- Gilbert, Daniel. *Stumbling on Happiness*. New York: Vintage, 2005. On pages 178-87 and 191-2, Gilbert focuses specifically on bias and how we selectively choose information to support our own world view.
- Van Hecke, Madeleine L. *Blind Spots: Why Smart People Do Dumb Things*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007. The chapters on bias (chapter 6) and categorical thinking (chapter 7) clarify why our brain slants information to fit our biases and prefers to work in simple categories. Each chapter also offers ways to challenge these “blind spots.”
- [“Bet On It: Race Skews Referee Calls in the NBA.”](#) Story on National Public Radio. May 22, 2008. Read or listen to this story about a study that links the race of basketball referees to how they make calls during games; white referees favor white players, while black referees favor black players.
- [“Study Points to Emergency Room Bias Against Blacks.”](#) Story on National Public Radio. July 26, 2007. Read or listen to this story about a study about race-based bias in medical care. The authors of the study argue that these biases are unconscious and best identified by using a test like the “Implicit Association Test.”
- [“Test Yourself for Hidden Bias.”](#) *Teaching Tolerance*. Read more about the Implicit Association Test and what it reveals about unconscious bias.
- [Implicit Association Test](#). Because most people will not admit to or even recognize that they possess biases, this on-line survey was developed at Harvard to assess our unconscious biases. The focus of the test is on demonstrating that we often possess biases (even about our own “group”!) about which we are unaware.

Words to Remember

Some quotes and words that are lasting and provocative. For your reflection and use with your students.

Use these quotations at the beginning of the lesson or unit to spark student interest; try having students respond to them in writing or discuss them in small groups.



**Watch your thoughts, for they become words.
Watch your words, for they become actions.
Watch your actions, for they become habits.
Watch your habits, for they become character.
Watch you character, for it becomes your destiny.**

- Anonymous

What we think, we become.

- The Buddha

**If you keep on saying things are going
to be bad, you have a good chance
of becoming a prophet.**

- Isaac Bashevis Singer

Reflections:

Use these questions to inspire your own thinking and teaching about this topic.

- How do you counter your biases when you feel them arise?
- How do you feel about those who demonstrate bias or even racism?
- Do you believe people can “unlearn” their biases?
- Think of the students in your classroom: for whom will this be a difficult discussion? Who will need extra attention or care around this topic?
- Remember the best “difficult” conversation you’ve had in your classroom: what went well? What did you do to facilitate the conversation? What is your strongest skill as a conversation facilitator?

