



Theme: Who Do You Think You Are? – Identity

Section 2: How are identities formed and maintained?

What makes us who and what we are? For a large part, it's our past, or to be more exact, it's what we remember of it. Our memories are key ingredients in the creation of our identities. It's true that we don't remember everything and very often we don't wish to remember everything! The following activities will help students realise that remembering is an active and ongoing process, and that memory is fundamentally subjective and selective. Starting from the individual level, this section of work then looks into the challenges related to collective memory and identity through the lens of history.

Warning: Note that this unit contains links to websites such as YouTube. Content on external sites is subject to change and should be monitored to ensure suitability for students.

Learning outcomes of this section

Your students will be able to:

- Understand how memory is crucial in creating and maintaining a sense of identity
- Assess the significance of the way people present and preserve or alternatively deny and even destroy the past
- Be aware of the presence and influence of the past in the present through various tangible and intangible means

Resources provided

Resource 5	Pictures of slave trade memorial monuments
Resource 6	Quotes from politicians on World War One commemorations
Resource 7	Videos showing destruction of heritage
Resource 8	Testimonies from genocide survivors

Class activity 1: Creating a memory table

This activity assists your students in transforming the difficult concept of memory into something real and tangible through the use of personal items, and then allows them to discuss their memory selections. Ask your students to choose one specific object, place or moment that's connected to a personal memory of significance for them today. Get them to bring to class either an object or image/photo of their chosen memory.

Distribute sticky notes of 3 different colours where they have to write down short answers to the following questions:

- Is this memory personal to me? Or is it also remembered by other people, and who are they?



- Is this object connected to a happy or a sad memory?
- Am I happy to share the story related to this object or do I prefer to keep it secret?

Write out the following concepts on individual large sheets of paper and place them on a table in your classroom:

Concept A: personal/collective

Concept B: positive/negative

Concept C: public/private

Now ask the students to place their image/object and accompanying answers on the relevant sheet of paper under the memory concept most relevant to them. Get them to make connections, should they exist, between the different memory types by drawing lines between their images/objects and notes. As they do so, get them to talk about how these memories might have contributed to who they are today as people and how these memories have affected them.

Group activity 1: Inscribing memory in the landscape

Memories (both good and bad) are often made real or tangible through public monuments which help capture meaning and hold a strong symbolic significance for people.

Distribute Resource 5 to your students and get them to analyse the images of the slave trade memorial monuments and answer the following questions which also feature in the resource:

- In your opinion, what is the architect/artist trying to express visually and emotionally with this monument?
- Do you think he/she succeeded?
- Which monument do you think best conveys its message, and why?

Divide your students into small groups and ask them to create their own slave trade memorial monument. What important elements around the history of slavery would they like to include? In which locations would they like to erect their memorial and why?

Another idea for this activity is to ask your students what types of memories or memorials they would inscribe on their local landscapes. To get thinking about this, watch the following 'Memory Walk' video – created by young people as part of an initiative by the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam – with your class, and discuss the issues it raises.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTGtviX4Ces>

Source: You Tube Channel [Memory Walk | Anne Frank House](#) © Anna Frank House

Divide your students into small groups and ask them to prepare a scenario for one 'memory walk' about a monument they know of, preferably in their local environment. You could also decide for



HOUSE OF EUROPEAN HISTORY

them which one(s) they should work with. Make sure they consider key criteria such as which monument, what questions to ask, which people to ask questions to, places to film, etc.

Class Activity 2: Creating and preserving identities: the role of museums and school textbooks



https://www.google.be/search?q=British+museum+exterior&biw=2025&bih=985&source=lms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0CAYQ_AUoAWoVChMI5luy8_P6xgIVTATbCh0ucgiA#imgrc=y_3lXCi5ZP5EZM%3A

Source: Wikipedia

Nations and societies use the past to create a collective memory or even a common identity that binds all citizens together. Over the past two hundred years or so, two things that are quite familiar to us today have been used as ‘tools’ or building blocks to create national collective identities – history museums and school textbooks.

Have you visited a history museum with your class? Or are you preparing to visit one soon? Perhaps your students have visited with family members outside of school hours. Get your students to consider how museums in the past and present have been used as places where national identity is created. Watch the following video clip with your students, and then discuss with them how it might be that museums came to be seen as places where identities could be created and promoted.



<http://ed.ted.com/lessons/why-do-we-have-museums-j-v-maranto>

Source: [TEDEd](https://www.ted.com)



Consider the following:

- Museums as places that tell us about the past
- Museums as places that store and display ancient artefacts of nations and peoples
- Museums as places of knowledge
- Museums as places that educate young and old

In the case of national (history) museums, do they really tell everyone's story? Do they really represent all of society? Who is included? Who might be left out?

School textbooks have been and still are important tools in how countries try to create 'collective identities'. History school books in particular have been important tools in the formation of national and regional identities through telling the stories of national heroes, great battles or struggles of the population. Ask your students to look at their textbooks with this question in mind – how is our collective identity defined and talked about within the pages? Who is it about? Who is left out? Are there people and groups in your country who have not made it into the textbooks? As an activity, get your students to create an art collage of stories and individuals from their school books that illustrates how the nation remembers - and celebrates some, and often forgets to mention others.

Group activity 2: The politics of memory

What we remember, along with how and why, varies between people, places and periods. The way the past is memorialised and remembered serves a certain purpose in the present. The actual act of remembering is therefore often debated, and sometimes fiercely contested within societies.

Break your class into equal groups and distribute Resource 6. The students should read the quotes from politicians and institutional sources concerning the centenary of World War One in 2014, and should answer the following questions, which also feature in the resource:

- How do these statements link the past to the present?
- Which of the four statements is conveying a notably different message?
- What makes this message different in purpose from the other three?

Then ask students to invent one or two more sentences to add at the end of each quote as a credible continuation of the speech. Organise a class discussion to share the results.

Group activity 3: Why does the destruction of heritage represent an attack on identity?

In Resource 7 you will find video reports about the destruction of cultural heritage. Break your class into groups of roughly equal size giving one example to each group. Ask them to answer the following questions, which also feature in the resource, within their group, and then share and compare their answers in a class discussion at the end:

- What might be the intentions of the people behind such destruction?
- What are the reactions of people witnessing the destruction?
- What might the objects and buildings being destroyed represent or mean for opposing groups?

Class activity 3: Remembering or forgetting?



HOUSE OF EUROPEAN HISTORY

The saying 'Never Forget' is something we often hear in relation to tragic historical events ranging from genocide to wars and terrorist attacks. Yet the act of remembering is very different in nature for those people who have first-hand experience of these events and those who don't. People who go through such physical, emotional and psychological traumas sometimes actively need to remember in order to make sense of what happened and rebuild their lives. Others however, actively need to forget in order to personally heal and in some instances attempt to rebuild lives amongst communities formerly in conflict with one another.

Distribute Resource 8 to your students, and as a class activity read the personal experiences of two survivors from the Srebrenica genocide of 1995 and the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Get your students to respond to the different ways in which these survivors have chosen to remember these events and the reasons for their choices.

Beyond the choices made by the survivors themselves, preserving the memory of a painful past is crucial for their descendants and for society at large. Ask your students to look at the image in Resource 9 and help them reflect on the significance of this object from the House of European History permanent exhibition, using the following questions which also feature in the Resource:

- The artists who created the 'Josef's Coat' art work have incorporated images and written memories from Josef into a garment, and themselves speak of it as 'a coat which has become a biographical map': what do you think was their intention?
- Josef was the only person in his family who survived the Holocaust: why do you think it was particularly important for his daughter and her husband to protect and preserve his memories?
- The artists created this piece for it to be exhibited: why in your opinion should such a personal object related to a family story be seen by many people? Why do you think it is relevant to include it in an exhibition on European history?

