Lesson: Code Switching

OVERVIEW
In this lesson, students will practice writing, listening and discussion skills as they learn about “code switching”—who does it, when, where and why they do it and how it is problematic when it reinforces discrimination.

Video clips provided with this lesson are from the film *American Promise*.

POV offers a lending library of DVDs that you can borrow anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our Community Network.

OBJECTIVES
By the end of this lesson, students will:
- understand the meaning of the phrase “code switching”
- discuss the relationship between code switching, social and political power and discrimination
- write persuasive essays

GRADE LEVELS
10-12

SUBJECT AREAS
Multicultural Education
English/Language Arts
Sociology
Civics/U.S. History

MATERIALS
- Internet access and equipment to show the class online video

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED
One 50-minute class period, plus a writing assignment; add an extra 30 minutes if the option is included

FILM CLIPS
Clip 1: “Trailer” (approx. 02:30 min.)
This clip can be viewed at: www.pbs.org/pov/americanpromise/trailer.php
Clip 2: “Idris Code Switches” (01:26 min.)
The clip begins at 20:29 with a shot of a basketball court and ends at 21:55 with Idris saying, “I have a lot of friends at Dalton.”

**ACTIVITY**

1. Depending whether you want students to practice reading skills or listening skills, assign them to read either Heather Coffey’s description of code switching ([www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4558](http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4558)), skipping the section on “How to Move from Corrective to Contrastive,” or, to read aloud this description of Code Switching from NPR ([www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/04/08/176064688/how-code-switching-explains-the-world](http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/04/08/176064688/how-code-switching-explains-the-world)):

   So you’re at work one day and you’re talking to your colleagues in that professional, polite, kind of buttoned-up voice that people use when they’re doing professional work stuff.

   Your mom or your friend or your partner calls on the phone and you answer. And without thinking, you start talking to them in an entirely different voice—still distinctly your voice, but a certain kind of *your voice* less suited for the office. You drop the g’s at the end of your verbs. Your previously undetectable accent—your easy Southern drawl or your sing-songy Caribbean lilt or your Spanish-inflected vowels or your New Yawker—is suddenly turned way, way up. You rush your mom or whomever off the phone in some less formal syntax (“Yo, I’mma holler at you later”), hang up and get back to work.

   Then you look up and you see your co-workers looking at you and wondering who the hell you’d morphed into for the last few minutes. That right there? That’s what it means to code-switch.

   Have students write one-paragraph summaries of what they heard or read.

2. Engage students in a follow-up discussion that helps students see that they present themselves differently in different places and with different people. The name for this is “code switching.” Invite students to think about how, when and why they code switch. What do they switch besides language? Clothing? Body language? What do they gain by code switching? Conclude by noting that everyone code switches, but not all code switching is equal. To think more deeply about when code switching crosses the line from normal to detrimental, the class is going to watch a clip from a film called **American Promise**.

3. Rather than trying to describe the film, show the film’s trailer (Clip 1). This will provide context for the clip about code switching. Once everyone understands who Idris is and what the basic issues related to education and black boys in the film are, show Clip 2, in which Idris talks about code switching.
4. Invite students to share their reactions to the clip (either as a full class or in small groups). Ask if they have had similar experiences. Also ask about the notion of “talking white” or “talking black.” Have they encountered these labels? How does this version of code-switching hurt students? What role does racism play in code shifting? How is code shifting related to the issue of who holds power in a community or society?

Also ask students to think about their own school. Who has to code shift in order to succeed or be accepted at your school? What’s the difference between students who are code shifting between, say, being with parents and being with peers (which everyone does) and students whose code shifting requires them to hide parts of their cultures or identities? What is the relationship between code shifting and school success?

**As an option:** With advanced students, go deeper by asking students to think about how they react to people who speak the way Idris speaks on the basketball court. Contrast that with the way they react to people who speak the way Idris speaks off the court. What assumptions do they make about people based on the way they speak?

Continue the discussion by asking what assumptions they think people make about them when they speak, and invite them to share any examples of when they have been misjudged. Point out that their examples are evidence that people’s assumptions about others have consequences. Scholars describe assumptions tied to race that are negative as “implicit bias.”

Share this definition of “implicit bias” with students:

According to Rachel Godsil of the American Values Institute, “Implicit bias occurs when someone consciously rejects stereotypes and supports anti-discrimination efforts but also holds negative associations in his/her mind unconsciously.”

(www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/implicit-bias-and-social-justice)

Ask students if they noticed any examples of implicit bias in the film clips or in their own experiences. Discuss what they think the consequences of “implicit bias” are on students in their own school, especially as it relates to students who speak in ways associated with a minority culture, or students who are minorities but, like Idris, are accused of “talking white.” If time allows, ask students to brainstorm actions they might take to mitigate the negative consequences of implicit bias.

5. As an assessment, assign students to write persuasive essays supporting one of the following arguments:

   a) Code shifting is just a normal part of life; it’s no big deal.

   b) Code shifting reinforces inequity; it is inherently problematic.
Allow students to choose the positions they want to take. Require each to use at least one specific example to illustrate his or her argument, either from his or her own experience or from U.S. history (e.g., forced assimilation of Native Americans, the debate about Ebonics in Oakland, California schools, the NBA dress code). Students who do the optional activity may be required to include a discussion of implicit bias in their essays.

Consider facilitating students sharing their essays, perhaps on a class wiki or blog. Talk about whether or not the students think it is important to arrive at a consensus opinion on this topic and how agreement or disagreement about “code switching” affects school climate.

EXTENSIONS

1. Invite students to share their own stories involving code shifting using the media of their choice. Encourage them to decide whether or not it is important to share these stories with their entire school or community.

2. Assign students to do an online search of the phrase “code shifting” and report on what they find, including a detailed report about at least one of the sources they discover. Consider extending the practice of persuasive writing by asking students to defend or debunk one of the sources.

3. Refer to any writing assignment that students have completed and have them re-write the same content using a different “code.”

4. Watch American Promise in its entirety. Ask students to imagine traveling back in time with the knowledge they have now. What would they want to say to Idris’s and Seun’s parents when the parents were making the initial decision to send the boys to Dalton?

5. Explore code switching specific to black youth by reading posts, and perhaps responding to posts in a blog community, such as Black Youth Project (www.blackyouthproject.com).

RESOURCES

American Promise
www.AmericanPromise.org – The official website for the film includes action ideas and resources for youth, parents, and teachers.

POV
www.pbs.org/pov/americanpromise/ - The POV site for the film includes a more comprehensive discussion guide with additional discussion prompts and activity suggestions.
American Values Institute
www.americanvaluesinstitute.org/?page_id=14 – This consortium of researchers, educators and social justice advocates uses concepts such as implicit bias to examine and explain ways that racism is infused into U.S. society.

Colorlines
http://colorlines.com/archives/2013/10/american.promise.film.asks.what.does.it.take.to.get.a.black.boy.to.college.html - The news publication of Race Forward—a national racial justice organization focused on media, research and leadership development—offers an interview in which Idris talks about code switching

NPR Code Switch
www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/04/08/176064688/how-code-switching-explains-the-world - A group of National Public Radio reporters whose beat is race and culture in America explain why they named their blog Code Switch. Also check out this version of their explanation, which includes video clip examples of code switching from President Obama, Hillary Clinton and comedians Key and Peele: www.economist.com/blogs/johnson/2013/04/code-switching

POV: Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films
http://www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php
This list of questions provides a useful starting point for leading rich discussions that challenge students to think critically about documentaries.

STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects
(http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

W.9-10.1 & 11-12.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

W.9-10.2d, Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic.

W.11-12.2d Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary and techniques such as metaphor, simile and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic.

W.9-10.4, 11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.
SL.9-10.1, 11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade level topics, texts and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.11-12.3 Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis and tone used.

SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and a range of formal and informal tasks.

SL.11-12.5 Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning and evidence and to add interest.

SL.11-12.6 Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating a command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

McREL (www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning)

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.
Language Arts, Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.
Language Arts, Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.
Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.
Life Skills-Thinking and Reasoning, Standard 1. Understands and applies the basic principles of presenting an argument.
United States History, Standard 31: Understands economic, social and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Faith Rogow, Ph.D., is the co-author of The Teacher's Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World (Corwin, 2012) and past president of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. She has written discussion guides and lesson plans for more than 200 independent films.