

Unit 2 - Meritocracy

Exploring how people come to believe certain things about how and why people succeed.

NGSS connections: **Practices:** Asking Questions and Defining Problems; Analyzing and Interpreting Data; Engaging in Argument from Evidence; **CCCs:** Patterns; Cause and Effect, Systems and System Models.

Starting point for instructors

- Do [Unit 0 - Setting the Stage](#) before this, and review norms if needed. Pay attention to some of the new discussion techniques, such as the [Manual Thermometer](#) and the use of [Anonymous Polls](#).
- *Conversation Facilitation:* For many instructors, this is the first lesson where conversations become charged. Remind students of the value in learning about these concepts together, and that we will all benefit from open and honest conversations. We encourage instructors to consider their students' level of comfort, choosing the activity that involves the most risk (because talking openly is the ultimate goal) that students can handle without retreating (because pushing students farther than they're ready to go limits open conversation). Comfort depends on many things - the culture of your school, the age of your students, the make-up of your class, the time of day, the time of year and how well this group knows one another, the culture of mistake-making in your class, etc. - and so there is no "correct" level of risk/intimacy. Rather, you need to be attentive and responsive as a facilitator.
- Some instructors combine this lesson with [Unit 1 - Data Analysis & Underrepresentation](#). Students can then form and analyze hypotheses for underrepresentation at the same time that they consider how people come to believe certain ideas.

Pre-Lesson Student Exploration / Bell-Ringer

Before coming to class/at the start of class, students need to:

Introductory writing activity:

- One Minute Reflection: What will help you participate bravely in the upcoming discussions?

In-Class Investigations

How Do People Become Who They Are? [15-20 minutes] "The Myth of Meritocracy" [30-45 minutes]

The goal is for students to explore how external and internal factors influence one another and are intertwined. In this activity, students work through a series of questions which build on each other. Students will be asked to participate in various ways: individual reflections, manual thermometers to gauge the opinions of the class as a whole, think/pair/share with those around them, and large group discussions. Here are the questions with a suggested sequence for varying the activities:

- a. Do you think your life has been more shaped by internal factors (what's inside you) or external



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- (the people/contexts around you)?
- Write → [Manual Thermometer](#) → [Pair/Share discussion](#), Group Discussion
- b. Do expectations for individuals influence them? Do expectations for groups?
- Write → [Manual Thermometer](#) → [Pair/Share discussion](#), Group Discussion
- c. Define *meritocracy*: “a society where get what their individual abilities deserve” and ask, Are we raised to believe The United States of America is a meritocracy?
- [Manual Thermometer](#)
- d. Do you believe America is a meritocracy?
- [Manual Thermometer](#)
- e. What did you notice? Is there a difference?
- [Pair/Share discussion](#), Group Discussion
- f. Most people are taught America is a land where achievement is available to all. What are the advantages of believing this (or not)?
- Group Discussion
 - Write: *which norms/agreements are you following and which can you pay attention to more during this conversation?*
- g. Tell students: “Research shows that [various aspects of one’s identity impact their trajectories](#) far more than one’s unique talents ([America is not a meritocracy](#)). You do not have to agree with this, but you at least need to be able to consider this possibility.”
- Ask students: How might the myth of meritocracy relate to the [underrepresentation we see](#)?
- Write

Wrap Up. [10-15 minutes]

- [Anonymous Poll](#): What’s a thought/idea that you haven’t felt comfortable sharing?
 - Writing: respond to one classmate’s idea
 - Discussion: sharing out of writing, discussion
- Share Resources (below) for those interested to continue reading

Post-Lesson Homework

Option 1: Meritocracy, video games, and the USA

1. Read [this blog post](#) that explains meritocracy from the perspective of video games. Write a paragraph reflecting on various aspects of your identity which may contribute or detract from your relative privilege.
2. In [this video](#), comedian John Oliver notes that:
 - a. 60% of people in the USA feel that the economic system unfairly favors the wealthy. (The USA is a meritocracy.)
 - b. 60% of people in the USA also believe that most people who want to get ahead can make it if they’re willing to work hard. (The USA is a meritocracy.)Write a paragraph answering this question: how are these two beliefs in conflict with each other?
3. Write a paragraph answering this question: how have the previous questions affected (or not) your perspective about your own hard work and unearned advantages (or disadvantages)?



Option 2: Implications of the myth of meritocracy

Write 1-2 paragraph responses to each of the following questions:

If people believe in meritocracy:

1. What does meritocracy say about differences between people who are successful in physics and those who are not?
 2. What other factors might explain why some people succeed in physics and others do not?
 3. How might your responses to questions 1 & 2 impact future change? That is to say, If people believe in meritocracy, is the under-representation likely to resolve itself simply given more time? Why or why not?
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Option 3: Investigate the history of the notion of meritocracy

Listen to ['Meritocracy' Doesn't Mean What You Think It Means](#) (On The Media, March 15, 2019 - 10 minute video). Write 1-2 paragraph responses to each of the following questions:

1. What is the origin of the term “meritocracy”?
2. What does the sociologist Michael Young mean when meritocracy is a new form of aristocracy? Where do you see this society today?
3. What are some challenges to equal access to higher education in American Higher education?

Homework Debrief: Implications of meritocracy

When students come to class, put them in small groups to consider the following:

- What, if any, insights did you come to while completing this assignment?
- Map various aspects of your identity on the [Wheel of Privilege and Oppression](#). Pick one or two of the options in which you feel comfortable sharing with your small group - describe how you see yourself having “easy” or “hard” settings in a context of your choosing (school, family, culture, the USA). .

Resources

- [Lesson Plan Resources](#)

Notes from the Author

1. This lesson is the first of a couple in which a specific viewpoint that may not be held by all students is expressed (that the United States of America as a meritocracy is more myth than fact) and are more personal. We believe strongly that it is important for this lesson to be presented initially as an idea for them to consider to give space for reactions and growth on students’ own time. Consider the parallel between the teaching of anthropogenic global warming and the ideas presented in this lesson and others:
 - these ideas are accepted by the majority who study them
 - many people do not accept these ideas



- we as science instructors can ask our students to be informed and make wise choices without forcing them to believe one thing or another
 - though these ideas are political, they are scientific as well (supported by research, relevant to the community and practice of science) and, as such, are reasonable to include in a science curriculum
2. Remember, too, that this makes many adults uncomfortable. In our experience, the culture of science teaching suggests that instructors need to have the answers, and a conversation like this feels very different. Some advice:
- You won't get it right the first time, but the more you do this, the better you'll become. In this way, it's exactly like everything else we've learned as instructors.
 - Don't let your fears (if you have them) dissuade you. Acknowledge them, they're perfectly natural, but be brave and willing to grow. You've got this, and you've got a community of science instructors doing this work ready to support you.

