



LESSON

On Individuality

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students explore the concept of individuality and how people manifest and then sustain the uniqueness of who they are. After viewing clips from the documentary *Iris*, students delve into what makes them unique individuals.

The video clips provided with this lesson are from *Iris*, a film that pairs the late documentarian Albert Maysles (*Grey Gardens*, *Gimme Shelter*), then 87, with Iris Apfel, the quick-witted, flamboyantly dressed then-93-year-old style maven who has been an outsized presence on the New York fashion scene for decades. More than a fashion film, the documentary is a story about creativity and how a soaring free spirit continues to inspire. *Iris* portrays a singular woman whose enthusiasm for fashion, art and people are her sustenance. She reminds us that dressing—and indeed, life—is nothing but a grand experiment. “If you’re lucky enough to do something you love, everything else follows.”

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 be able to:

- Define individuality and how it is exhibited
- Explain how individuality is developed and sustained
- Describe potential challenges to maintaining individuality
- Recognize the unique qualities and characteristics that contribute to their own individuality

GRADE LEVELS: 6-8, 9-12

SUBJECT AREAS

Arts
Language Arts
Social Studies

MATERIALS

- Film clips from *Iris* and equipment on which to show them
- Chart paper and markers
- Masking tape
- Copies of Song Excerpts handout (see below) either as one full set of songs or separated into individual songs (the other option is to transfer each song excerpt to a sheet of chart paper to be posted in the classroom)

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED

One 50-minute class period (plus homework assignment and review during class)

FILM CLIPS

Film clips provided with this lesson are from *Iris*.

Clip 1: “Individuality: Breaking Rules” (2:42 min.)

The clip starts at 00:16 with Iris looking into a mirror and saying, “I like to improvise.” It ends at 02:58 with Iris trying on bracelets and saying, “I don’t have any rules because I would only be breaking them, so it’s a waste of time.”

Clip 2: “An Artist” (2:26 min.)

The clip starts at 07:21 with photos of Iris, and a man’s voice in the background saying, “Iris is an artist.” The clip ends at 09:47 with Iris showing a newspaper clipping and saying, “That’s what I looked like then.”

Clip 3: “Clothing as Art” (7:45 min.)

The clip starts at 21:26 with an image of a sign that reads “digital.” It ends at 29:11 with Iris saying, “The jacket is made of barnyard feathers.”

Clip 4: “Big & Bold & Pizazz” (3:54 min.)

The clip starts at 42:09 with Iris being pushed in a wheelchair through a hallway and music in the background. It ends at 46:03 with Iris saying, “I can’t remember that far back.”

Clip 5: Rare Bird of Fashion (2:53 min.)

The clip starts 48:52 with David asking, “Iris, can I tell you what we set up?” It ends at 51:45 with Linda saying, “Gee, I wonder who this is.”

ACTIVITY

Step 1: Distribute or post the lyrics of the songs/spoken-word listed below for students to analyze. (If distributed, small groups can receive one set of lyrics to read and discuss; if posted around the classroom, small groups can walk to each set to read and discuss). Ask students what the essence of the lyrics seems to be (i.e., being yourself, not following the crowd, uniqueness, individuality).

Do My Thing

Estelle/feat. Janelle Monáe

Source: <http://feelgoodsongs.info/song/do-my-thing-estelle>

Am I Wrong

Nico and Vinz

Source: <http://feelgoodsongs.info/song/am-i-wrong>

Spoken word by Kendrick Lamar

Source:

<http://theboombox.com/kendrick-lamar-expresses-individuality-new-reeboks-classic-leather-campaign/?trackback=tsmclip>

Note that this is a commercial for Reebok. Students should focus on the spoken word, not on the commercial itself.

Whatever

Oasis

Source: <http://feelgoodsongs.info/song/whatever-oasis>

Everybody Got Their Something

Nikka Costa

Source: <http://feelgoodsongs.info/song/everybody-got-their-something>

Believe In Me

Demi Lovato

Source: <http://feelgoodsongs.info/song/believe-in-me>

If You Want to Sing Out, Sing Out

Cat Stevens

Source: <http://feelgoodsongs.info/song/if-you-want-to-sing-out-sing-out>

Step 2: Write *INDIVIDUALITY* on chart paper or on a whiteboard/Smart Board. Ask students to reflect on the song lyrics and, using their understanding of individuality, to define the term. (OPTIONAL: The cooperative “popcorn” method can be used here: After students have reflected for a bit, the instructor says “popcorn,” inviting students to “pop up” voluntarily and quickly to offer responses. Seated students write down these responses.) Drawing on the various definitions, students come to consensus on one.

Step 3: Share one definition of individuality from a trusted source (e.g., <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/individuality>) that will resonate with students. Probe with students how individuality comes to be.

Step 4: Explain that the class will have an opportunity to become familiar with a very unique individual, Iris Apfel. (Some students might recognize her from a photo.) Offer background on Iris and show the clips.

As students watch, have them jot down qualities and sayings that illustrate Iris’s individuality.

Step 5: After viewing the clips, pose some or all of the following discussion questions:

- How does Iris demonstrate her individuality?
- In what ways does Iris defy or ignore what others expect of her or what society identifies as acceptable behavior?
- Is it difficult to develop and then hold on to individuality? What might be some of the obstacles to establishing one’s individuality? What might be some of the difficulties people face when they are “different” from the norm (they do not conform or follow the crowd)?
- Does everyone develop individuality? Discuss. What can prevent people from expressing their individuality?

- Do you consider yourself a unique individual? Explain. (Prompts can include the way people think, how they dress, activities in which they participate, the way they interact with other people and so on.)
- Why does being an individual matter? What are the benefits of expressing one's individuality?

Step 6: Tell students they will share personal qualities they believe best demonstrate their individuality. Each student can choose a preferred format for self-expression. For example, students might:

- Do a self-portrait in any style
- Take a “selfie” in certain attire, at a specific venue and/or participating in an activity that best represents their uniqueness
- Write song lyrics, a poem, an essay or otherwise express those qualities in writing
- Create a schematic map that highlights the qualities/characteristics that make them unique

In their work, students should illustrate how they maintain their individuality despite what is “expected” of them. Encourage students to think about a variety of qualities, behaviors, characteristics and so on that illustrate what makes them stand out as unique individuals. NOTE: It might be useful to focus on a specific category in order for students to avoid overly personal concepts and/or cross certain boundaries. If a class can negotiate what might be beyond its comfort zone, then any category would work.

ASSIGNMENT: Students can work on their presentations. Consider giving students a few days to complete them and then assign a due date. Students can post their projects in class. (If projects are media-based, see if a computer can be made available for showing videos or slideshows.)

MODIFICATION: To modify the lesson not to include an assignment, give students time in-class to write short poems, songs or responses. The forms, lengths and styles of the pieces can demonstrate their individuality and the qualities brainstormed earlier in the lesson.

OPTIONAL: If the lesson can be extended, conduct a “gallery walk” that has students look at all of the projects and share what emerges about individuality. Probe with them what they thus conclude about the role of individuality in their lives, in the lives of others and in society at large.

EXTENSIONS

1. Re-envisioning Beauty (*High school*)

Have students work in small groups to define beauty (include qualifiers such as physical and intellectual attributes). As a class, students apply each group's definitions to come to a group understanding of what beauty is.

Ask students how Iris redefines what standard views of beauty are (in the United States), and in that context, what it means for people to be “beautiful” as they age. What is the common view about aging and beauty? How does Iris contradict that perspective? And why is this contradiction an important statement?

Ask students to revisit their reflections to assess whether their perceptions of beauty are representative of the many ways people are “beautiful” across age ranges. Brainstorm ways to alter current standards of beauty, outlining a campaign they can undertake in school that jumpstarts this re-envisioning.

2. **Clothes As Art?** (*Middle and high school*)

The film points to Iris’s style of dress as the intersection between fashion, interior design and art. Iris is identified as a “rare bird of fashion.” Might she also be a rare bird of art? Students explore the idea of whether sporting a certain type of clothing—worn in specific ways—is possibly also an art form.

Have students discuss how or whether Iris’s clothing can be considered art. In small groups, students can look at clothing from different cultures, clothing exhibitions (such as the exhibition of outfits from Iris’s collection at the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art), people wearing non-traditional clothing, models wearing designers’ creations, the outfits of performers like Lady Gaga and so on to determine whether clothing, under certain circumstances, is less about style and fashion and more about art. Each group presents its perspective in a format/style of its choice. In the presentation, students must explain whether worn clothing can be art, using evidence to support their perspectives.

Questions to be considered:

- If clothing that people wear (sometimes referred to as wearable art) can be art, what does/can it represent?
- Why wouldn’t someone consider clothing art?
- Why might a person use his or her clothing as an artistic form of individuality?
- What statements—artistic, political, social, cultural—can a person make with his or her clothing?

To jumpstart their exploration, they might read one or more of the following:

- *Cool Hunting*: “Art and Fashion: Between Skin and Clothing”
<http://www.coolhunting.com/culture/art-fashion-bet>
- *The Huffington Post*: “Artist Karolina Jonderko Wears Her Late Mother’s Clothing in Stunning Memorial Photos”
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/04/karolina-jonderko_n_7486586.html
- *The Muse Dialogue*: “Is Fashion Art?”
<https://musedialogue.org/articles-by-genre/visual-arts/costume-design/is-fashion-art/>
- *The Wall Street Journal*: “Art and Fashion: The Mutual Appreciation Society”
<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303725404579459503054211692>

3. **Individualism vs. Individuality: What’s the Difference?** (*High school*)

Students might think that individuality and individualism are the same. But they are distinctly different. They can explore these differences, and also familiarize themselves with the ideology of Individualism and debate whether it is valuable to society. The following are some of the many websites a teacher can use for background on the concept of Individualism:

- The Basics of Philosophy: Individualism
http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_individualism.html
- Boundless: Individualism

<https://www.boundless.com/political-science/textbooks/boundless-political-science-textbook/american-politics-1/the-tenets-of-american-democracy-22/individualism-129-1894/>

- *The Huffington Post*: “Is Individualism Good or Bad?”
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-koch/is-individualism-good-or-_b_4056305.html

RESOURCES

POV: *Iris*

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/iris/>

The film’s official POV site includes a discussion guide with additional activity ideas and resources.

Magnolia Pictures

<http://www.magpictures.com/iris/>

The Magnolia Pictures *Iris* website provides information on the film, special features, a press kit and photo gallery, plus additional clips.

Maysles Films Inc.

<http://mayslesfilms.com/film/iris/>

The Maysles Films, Inc. site for *Iris* includes a synopsis of the film and links to information on Albert Maysles, his filmography and other resources.

Maysles Documentary Center

<http://maysles.org/>

The Maysles Documentary Center is a non-profit organization promoting documentary films as a catalyst for dialogue and action. The website includes information on their educational programming, memberships and film screenings.

Peabody Essex Museum: “*Iris Apfel: All Dolled Up*”

<http://www.pem.org/sites/iris/>

An interactive feature from the Peabody Essex Museum allows users to create outfits with items from Iris’ collection. The Peabody Essex Museum website has additional information on their ‘Rare Bird of Sahion: The Irreverent Iris Apfel’ exhibition website:

http://www.pem.org/exhibitions/21-rare_bird_of_fashion_the_irreverent_iris_apfel

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

(<http://www.corestandards.org/read-the-standards/>)

[RL.6.1](#) Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

[RL.7.1](#) Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

[RL.8.1](#) Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

[RL.9-10.1](#) Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

[RL.11-12.1](#) Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

[RL.6.4](#) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.

[RL.7.4](#) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama.

[RL.8.4](#) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

[RL.9-10.4](#) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

[RL.11-12.4](#) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging or beautiful.

[SL.6.1](#) Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

- [SL.6.1.c](#) Pose and respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text or issue under discussion.
- [SL.6.1.d](#) Review the key ideas expressed and demonstrate understanding of multiple perspectives through reflection and paraphrasing.

[SL.6.2](#) Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how it contributes to a topic, text or issue under study.

[SL.7.1](#) Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

- [SL.7.1.c](#) Pose questions that elicit elaboration and respond to others' questions and comments with relevant observations and ideas that bring the discussion back on topic as needed.
- [SL.7.1.d](#) Acknowledge new information expressed by others and, when warranted, modify their own views.

[SL.7.2](#) Analyze the main ideas and supporting details presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how the ideas clarify a topic, text or issue under study.

[SL.8.1](#) Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

- [SL.8.1.c](#) Pose questions that connect the ideas of several speakers and respond to others' questions and comments with relevant evidence, observations and ideas.
- [SL.8.1.d](#) Acknowledge new information expressed by others and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views in light of the evidence presented.

[SL.8.2](#) Analyze the purpose of information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and evaluate the motives (e.g., social, commercial, political) behind its presentation.

[SL.9-10.1](#) Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

- [SL.9-10.1.c](#) Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify or challenge ideas and conclusions.
- [SL.9-10.1.d](#) Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

[SL.9-10.2](#) Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

[SL.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 grades 11-12 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

- [SL.11-12.1.c](#) Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.
- [SL.11-12.1.d](#) Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

[SL.11-12.2](#) Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

Content Knowledge (<http://www2.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Self-Regulation, Standard 5: Maintains a healthy self-concept.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michele Israel owns Educational Writing & Consulting (www.micheleisrael.com), where she works with large and small educational, nonprofit and media organizations to bolster products and programs. Her rich career spans more than 25 years of successful experience developing educational materials and resources, designing and facilitating training, generating communication materials and grant proposals and assisting in organizational and program development. Her long list of clients includes Tiffany & Co., Frost Valley YMCA, Teaching Tolerance, the Public Broadcasting Service, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, WETA Public Television, *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* and the Harm Reduction Coalition.