

The Dinner Party Curriculum Project

Encounter 4: Mapping Gender Identity



Grade Levels: Upper Elementary, Middle and High School

In this Encounter, students are asked to pay careful attention to the way gender roles function in their daily lives. They consider their membership in what can be called “shared-interest” communities—geographical, family, ethnic/racial, religious, and recreational communities, for example—and write about the part that gender plays in each. Students are provided a handout with a series of prompts and a worksheet in which they “map” their gender identity.

In order to comprehend the social context in which *The Dinner Party* was created and understood, it is important for students to understand the pervasive and restrictive power of gender roles and stereotypes. Students need to recognize how such socially constructed ideas have functioned to keep girls and boys and women and men from exercising their full human potential. If students reflect upon the way gender roles impact their own personal lives, they will be better able to understand how the achievements of women in history could be ignored or erased. With this new recognition, they will be better prepared to understand the historical significance of *The Dinner Party*. *The Dinner Party* reminds us to be vigilant—to be on the watch for attempts to undervalue contributions of those who step outside the roles prescribed for them.

Because it is generally important for students to be in touch with the influences that shape their experiences, it is valuable for students to reflect on the ways that gender impacts their identity and the way they and others experience life.

Investigation

The teacher will:

1. Introduce the Encounter by asking students for examples of behaviors or traits that they have learned to associate with girls/boys, women/men. For example, many people learn that boys are “tough” and shouldn’t cry, while girls are “soft” and it is all right for them to cry.
2. Ask students for examples of careers or jobs that are thought to be associated with males or females. For example, many people consider construction work to be a job for males.
3. Explain that these are what we call gender roles or stereotypes. They are ideas about how one’s gender determines appropriate behavior and acceptable personality traits.
4. Suggest that in almost every aspect of daily life, we come upon these kinds of ideas.
5. Tell students that in this Encounter, they will have an opportunity to explore how ideas about gender enter into their own personal lives. With a worksheet designed for this purpose, they will reflect on ideas about gender in relationship to their participation in recreational activities, family, school, and other aspects of their lives.

6. Provide students with the worksheet for mapping their gender identity. This exercise is best completed alone, perhaps as a homework assignment. However, gender mapping might also be completed in pairs or small groups.

7. To reflect on this Encounter with the entire class, create two columns—one marked, “What We Always Knew about Gender,” and the other marked, “What Surprised Us about Gender.” After they have completed mapping their gender identities, hold a discussion in which students report some of their findings that did not surprise them at all—things that “they always knew.” Have them also report findings that they had never thought about prior to the mapping exercise. This discussion will probably be lively, as students compare and contrast their own experiences and ideas about gender roles.

8. Finally, ask students how they believe gender roles and stereotypes are connected to the meaning and purpose of *The Dinner Party*.

The students will:

1. Apply an understanding of gender roles to aspects of their own personal lives.
2. Reflect on their individual gender identity.

Continuing Exploration:

Hold a discussion about the gender roles, the media, and society by asking students to consider the following: How does the media function to promote or limit gender roles? Do you see yourself as a “victim” or does media representation help you in some way? What do you understand about the media now that you didn’t before you engaged in this activity? How can gender stereotypes be challenged? What can individuals do to reject stereotypes promoted by the media and other societal institutions? What questions do you have about gender roles in our society?

Classroom Connections:

Art teacher Dolores Eaton created a high school lesson, “What Keeps You in Your Place?” with a single worksheet for mapping gender identity. This lesson is part of a larger unit entitled *Silence and Voice*. As preparation for student creation of content-based artwork Eaton created eight areas—family, recreational activities, media, aesthetic choices, school, religion/spiritual path, age, and traditions/ceremonial events—and asked students to reflect upon their place in these given areas in relationship to their gender. Eaton’s worksheet states, “These reflections can be celebrations or frustrations, realizations or questions.” After students complete the spaces on the worksheet, they are to use the center space to write an overall perception of themselves in relation to their gender.

Materials:

1. *Mapping Gender Identity* worksheets

Resources:

This activity has been adapted from K. Congdon, M. Stewart, and J. White, “Mapping Identity,” in Gaudelius, Y. & Speirs, P. (2002). *Contemporary issues in art education*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

The women grouped around Natalie Barney represent both the salon tradition and the efforts women have made to exercise their sexual preference. For centuries, women exerted power and influence through their positions as salonieres. Originally the salons (developed by women) allowed them the opportunity to shape social and cultural values through men. Later the all-female salon emerged, providing women with an environment of support and validation.