

Identity

Age Range: 4 years +

Subjects: PSHE/personal development, citizenship, science, early years

Stage One: Identify the concept

What makes me, me? What are the most important aspects of me: my body, my thoughts, my feelings, my memory, my values? Is my identity most influenced by my genetic makeup, my family, my role in society or what other people think of me? Can I become the person I want to become? Answers to all these questions depend on, and influence, the way I create the concept of 'me' -- ways I give a sense of unity to my diverse experiences.

These questions have perplexed philosophers for centuries, and children are just as fascinated. In fact, in one sense, the question of identity is the most fundamental question children can wonder about.

In brief, there are four categories that we might argue makes me, me:

- My self awareness
- Other's perception of me
- My body/spatial positioning
- My genetics, experiences and personal variations/preferences

Like 'real', the question of 'me' is one of the few concepts that even very young children (4+) can happily engage in. As they begin to talk about themselves, they will soon realise that their own identity is inextricably linked with the identity of others. In other words, how I view myself is linked to how others view themselves and, in turn, how we view each other.

Perhaps the best starting point is asking your students who they are, how they know who they are and whether who they are stays the same over time.

Stage Two: Problematising the concept

Starting activities for 3 – 7 year olds

1. Give the children a mirror each, or pass one around the circle. Ask them what they see, followed by:
 - How do you know that that's you?
 - If you were to change your appearance, would you become a different 'you'?
2. Using an interactive whiteboard, import a picture of yourself into a paint programme. Ask the children who they can see and how they know that that is you. (they will say "because it

looks like you”) Using the paint programme, change your features, beginning with the colour of your hair, then the size of your ears, then nose, mouth etc. After each change, ask them whether that it still you or not.

3. Ask the children to each make a poster (or collage) of what makes them, ‘them’. Encourage them to include pictures of people, animals and objects that are important to them. These could then form the basis for a very nice inquiry into important things, identity and being someone (rather than no-one)

Activities for primary children (3 – 11)

Ask your children to bring in 3 or 4 photographs of themselves, each at different stages of life. For example, one of them as a baby, a toddler, a reception child and then one that is very recent. Ask them to refer to the pictures when answering the following questions:

- Which one best represents you?
- If they are all you, does that mean looks/appearance are unimportant?
- Presumably you thought different things and had different memories when each of these photographs was taken, so how can they all represent ‘you’?
- What things about you have not changed and perhaps will never change?
- Are you a different person when you smile, compared to when you frown?

3 weeks old



2 years old



4 years old



Adult



All these photos are of the author, James Nottingham but is it the *same* person in every

Deepening the learning pit

Further questions for young children (3 – 7)

- What makes you, you?
- If you had a different name, would you be a different you?
- If you looked different, would you still be you?
- When you play make-believe, are you still you?

- If you had been born someone else, would you still be you?
- Are you the same you that you were when you were a baby? (see photos exercise)
- If you had a bump on the head and suddenly starting saying funny things, would you still be you?
- If you forgot everything you know, would you still be you?
- Will you ever be a different you? If so, why?

Additional questions to ask juniors (7 – 11)

- Is there just one of you?
- Is it possible that a person exactly the same as you could be born with different parents?
- Is it possible that a person exactly the same as you could be born in another country?
- Would you still be you if you had different grandparents?
- Would you still be you if you changed your fingerprints?
- Would you still be you if everyone in the world thought you were someone else?
- How is it that you're so sure you're you?
- Would you like to be your friend?
- Are you the person you see in the mirror or the person other people see when they look at you?
- Do experiences make you, change you or both?

Additional questions to ask adolescents (11 – 14)

- Do you know yourself better than other people know you?
- Are you a different you in different circumstances?
- What helps you to be 'yourself'?
- Would you like to be a different you?
- If you lost all your memories, would you cease to be you?
- If you were to live as a hermit for the rest of your life, would you become a different you?
- If you swapped brains with someone else, what would happen to 'you'?
- Which are you: the person you were, the person you are, or the person you will be?
- If you had different beliefs or opinions, would you be a different person?

Further questions to ask older students (14 – 18)

- If everyone in the world mistook you for someone else, who would you be?

- Which part of you has remained constant throughout your life?
- Which bit of you do you suppose will never change?
- If you were to witness an atrocity, would you still be the same person afterwards?
- Do you think everyone who gets caught up in war, becomes a different person?
- If you read a so-called 'life-changing' book, do you think you'd become a different you?
- Do you suppose people go through counselling to improve themselves or to change themselves completely? Why?

Stage Three: Construct understanding

The following exercise should help your students to piece together a characterisation of what makes them, them

Who are you? (an activity for 9 – 16 year olds)

Are you ...	Yes	No	?	Reason
your body?				
all the things you've done in life?				
your mind?				
your personality?				
the sum of all your feelings?				
who your family think you are?				
who your best friend thinks you are?				
who God thinks you are?				
who you think you are?				
the person you always were?				
the person you'll always be?				
...				

What makes Bob, Bob?

This is a really nice activity to do with students between the ages of 9 and 18. You may well recognise it as a modern (and somewhat tongue-in-cheek) update of the Greek legend of Theseus's ship.

After introducing each new scenario, ask your students: "Is Bob still the same person?" Take a vote, using the options yes, no, not sure

Scenario 10

In the year 2050, Bob's mind is downloaded into a new body/brain

Scenario 9

Bob pays millions to have his mind transferred to a virtual world

Scenario 8

At last, Bob's luck changes and he wins the lottery

Scenario 7

After everything that's happened to him, Bob decides there can't be a God and so also rejects the idea of a soul

Scenario 6

To make matters worse, Bob needs a heart transplant. The heart donor is a Mexican man called Graeme



Scenario 1

Bob is fed up of his name so changes by deed poll to 'Kevin'

Scenario 2

'Kevin' looks so different after a long holiday that no-one recognises him

Scenario 3

Still unhappy with his name, he changes it again to 'Susan'

Scenario 4

Sadly, Bob-who's-now-called-Susan has a bad accident and loses both legs, so has artificial legs fitted

Scenario 5

Poor old Bob-who's-now-called-Susan burns him/her-self and has to have a full body skin graft

Please note: the later scenarios may not be suitable for all age groups

Stage Four: Reviewing the learning journey

Possible metacognition questions

- What makes you, you?
- How do you know that this makes you, you?
- Is it true there is only one of you? Explain
- Will you always be you?
- How many different identities will you have in your lifetime?
- How does your idea of identity differ from the beginning of the lesson?
- What questions about identity are you left with?

Notes