

Lesson Plan: Psychological Testing at Ellis Island

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Lesson Summary

This lesson supports Stan Hywet’s *Meet the Staff* program for Akron Public Schools. It can be completed before or after the onsite visit to Stan Hywet. The lesson addresses some of the intelligence and psychological testing administered to immigrants at Ellis Island when they landed in America after travelling by boat from their homelands. The tests were all designed to be administered even if the Examiner and Alien did not speak the same language.

Lesson Goals

During this lesson, students will

- learn about psychological testing administered to immigrants a hundred years ago upon entrance to the United States at Ellis Island, and question measurement of traits across cultures;
- act as the Examiner and the Alien to complete three tests administered to new immigrants at Ellis Island, and form a sense of immigrant empathy.

Lesson Time

45-60 minutes

Lesson Support

Teachers can check out an Ellis Island Test Kit, which includes 3D facsimiles of original tests plus a class-set of paper versions for every student. Or, teachers can contact the Cummings Center to have an archivist or historian to do a class visit and complete the lesson with your class. When Cummings Center staff visits, we will bring original artifacts for your class to see, in addition to the Ellis Island Test Kit.

Contact either of the following Cummings Center staff for questions, reservations, and requests.

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Standards Addressed

ALA 21st Century Learner –1.1.6 Read, view, and listen for information presented in any format in order to make inferences and gather meaning; 1.19 Collaborate with others to broaden and deepen understanding; 2.3.3 Consider diverse and global perspectives in drawing conclusions.

APA HS Psych – Intelligence 2.1: Discuss the history of intelligence testing, including historical use and misuse in the context of fairness; 3.1 Discuss issues related to the consequences of intelligence testing.

ODE CCSS-6 Geography/Human Systems: The growth, distribution and movements of people are driving forces behind human and physical events. History/Historical Thinking and Skills: Historical thinking includes skills such as locating, researching, analyzing and interpreting primary and secondary sources so that students can begin to understand the relationships among events and draw conclusions.

Materials Needed

Ellis Island Test Kit (box holding Cube Imitation Test, Form Board Test, and Feature Profile Test; 30 paper version of the three tests)

Scissors, pencils, timers (not included in Test Kit)

Instructional Plan

1. Before the lesson, the teacher should read the Content Overview to understand the history of psychological testing at Ellis Island. This overview also provides details about three tests, how they were administered, and how they were scored. Those tests are Knox Cube Imitation Test, Seguin Form Board, and Feature Profile Test.
2. Check your Ellis Island Test Kit to be certain it includes fabricated versions of these three tests for students to use. Additionally, there is a class set of paper versions of these tests, with the test on one side and instructions for administering and scoring on the reverse side.
3. In whatever detail is appropriate for your students, explain the history of psychological testing at Ellis Island, and explain that they will have a chance to be both the Examiner and the Alien while they explore the three intelligence tests.
4. Demonstrate the 3D tests at the front of the class with a volunteer Alien while you act as the Examiner.
5. Distribute the paper copies of three tests. Every student receives one copy of each test.
6. Ask them to alternate being Examiner and Alien and follow the instructions on the handouts. Many of these tests were designed to test intelligence even when the Examiner and Alien did not speak the same language. For an added challenge, encourage students to communicate the instructions without speaking.
7. After the students have completed testing each other and taking the tests, ask for their reactions. Some questions you might ask to prompt students to think critically about intelligence testing on immigrants are
 - a. What do you think would happen if an immigrant could not pass these tests?
 - b. Are the tests fair?
 - c. What do you think the experience was like for immigrants receiving these tests?
 - d. How would you define intelligence? Do these tests measure intelligence? What kinds of tests would you use to measure it?
 - e. Do you think tests can be created to measure intelligence across all different cultures?

Content Overview

[Overview of Ellis Island Testing Program](#)

To be admitted to the United States in the early 1900s, immigrants had to be free from physical and mental illness, capable of earning a living, and possess adequate mental ability. US immigration officials were seeking a way to screen out “mental defectives” among the more than 5,000 immigrants that sought entry into the United States every single day. Congress had

passed laws that barred “lunatics,” “idiots,” “imbeciles,” and “the feeble-minded” from entering the United States. These labels, used today as insults, were at the time diagnostic categories, indicating varied levels of intelligence. For example, a “moron” was anyone who scored 70 or below on standard intelligence tests of the day.

The tests in this kit were designed by psychologists and physicians to test intelligence and mental capacity of immigrants as they passed through Ellis Island in the early 1900s. The tests were designed specifically to be used with individuals unfamiliar with the language and culture of the United States.

Approximately 88 in every 100,000 immigrants were deported because they were deemed feebleminded.

As mass immigration slowed in the 1920s, the large scale testing and inspection program also diminished. However, some of the tests used at Ellis Island are still in use today.

[About the Tests](#)

**Note: The paper versions of these tests included in your Ellis Island Test Kit are modified to fit the format. These descriptions describe the original tests.*

A. Knox Cube Imitation Test, ca. 1913

The Knox Cube Imitation Test was developed at Ellis Island by physician Howard Knox. He believed it was one of the most valuable tests used there. He argued it was one of the best tests for determining “whether an alien is defective or whether he is simply ignorant.”

Materials

- Wooden board with four cubes attached. Cubes are labelled 1 to 4
- One free cube
- Score Sheet

Administration

Examiner is seated across from examinee. Place the wooden board so that the numbers on the cubes are facing the examiner, hidden from the examinee. Examiner takes free cube in his/her hand and tells the examinee, “repeat after me.” Moving from left to right, tap the free cube on the secured cubes using the sequences included here.

Wait for the examinee to tap out the sequence. Mark the score sheet with a check mark if the sequence is completed correctly or an “x” if it is incorrect.

Move through each sequence, doing the same.

	Sequence
Trial 1	1,2,3,4
Trial 2	1,2,3,4,3
Trial 3	1,2,3,4,2
Trial 4	1,3,2,4
Trial 5	1,3,4,2,3,4

Scoring and Norms

To obtain total score, sum the number of sequences completed correctly. By age 4, most children can complete the first sequence; by age 6, the third sequence, and; by age 11, the last sequence. Immigrants were expected to complete the entire test correctly.

B. Seguin Form Board, ca. 1850

The Seguin Form Board is one of a number of different puzzle tasks used at Ellis Island. It was developed by Édouard Séguin in the 1850s, when he was setting up schools for children with developmental delays. It was altered over the years, but the basic task of fitting different shapes into a puzzle board was constant. Form boards are still used today, usually to test spatial abilities.

Materials

- Puzzle tray
- 10 puzzle pieces
- Score sheet
- Stop watch/timer

Administration

Examiner sits across from examinee. Puzzle tray is presented to examinee empty, with all puzzle pieces emptied on to table. Examiner points to puzzle pieces and tray and says “put this puzzle together as quickly as you can.” Examiner instructs the examinee to begin and starts the timer. The timer is stopped when the examinee has completed the puzzle. Note time in score sheet.

Scoring and Norms

The score for this test is the time taken to complete it. By age 5, most should complete it in 3 minutes. By age 9, they should complete it in 20 seconds.

C. Feature Profile Test, ca. 1914

Created by physician Howard Knox and surgeon Grover Andrew Kempf, the feature profile test was thought to be especially useful, since everyone—regardless of language, culture, or intelligence level—should be familiar with the shape and features of a face.

Materials

- Puzzle tray
- Seven puzzle pieces
- Stopwatch/timer

Administration

Examiner points to the puzzle pieces and says, “This is a head. Put this together as quickly as you can.” Examiner instructs the examinee to begin and starts the timer. The timer is stopped when the examinee has completed the puzzle. Note time in score sheet.

Scoring and Norms

The score for this test is the time taken to complete the puzzle. Every 13 year old should be able to complete this test in 5 minutes with no mistakes.