

USING ENGLISH CURRICULUM TO EXPAND EMPATHY, WORLDVIEWS, AND
ENGAGEMENT IN SECONDARY STUDENTS

by

Katrina Dawn Venters

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Drs. William Fassbender and Christine Rogers Stanton

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DEDICATION

Without my students, this project would not be possible, so my gratitude goes out to them for their patience, their grace, and their eagerness to learn with me.

My family, especially my husband Paul, also provided invaluable support to me throughout the process of being a graduate student, full-time teacher, and full-time mom.

This work is dedicated to all of them.

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ABSTRACT

Recently, many researchers have explored the relationship between pedagogical practices in secondary English classrooms such as youth participatory action research (Stanton, 2014; Mirra & Garcia, 2015) and mindful text selections (Diaz, 2023; McLean Davies & Buzacott, 2022) and how students develop empathy (Griffin & Schenck, 2023; McLean Davies & Buzacott, 2022; Mirra, 2018; Yates, 2024). Though these studies emphasize helping students with perspective taking, especially trying to take on another's perspective, it seems like there is little research on helping students understand the worldviews that establish their own perspectives before moving onto exploring worldviews that differ from their own. My study responded to this gap and sought to understand how teaching students explicitly about worldviews—how they form and how they can interact with each other in peoples' lives—might change the ways students empathize with each other and with people they don't know. It also considered ways that studying worldviews explicitly may affect the ways students engage with their learning. I used teacher action research in the school where I teach as well as group interviews to study this problem. My results showed that inviting students to explore and share parts of themselves—whether through writing, reading, or projects—also allowed them to see and take on the perspectives of others, demonstrating the power of English curriculum and the ways we implement it. Additionally, student empathy and engagement levels increased over the course of the study. In conclusion, adapting the curriculum in the way that I did had profound effects on my teaching and students, and I plan to continue to use the methods I tested as I continue my teaching career.

Introduction

A common lament across our country comes from teachers and parents who wonder why our kids just do not care anymore. Many seem to not care about their education; they struggle to care about their peers. Factors such as COVID safety restrictions like social distancing, an increased reliance on smartphones and social media, and national media that emphasizes division rather than unity may all contribute to our kids' lack of empathy and engagement.

While I may not be able to alleviate national problems like depression linked to smartphones or hate-filled rhetoric filling up social media pages, I can control what I teach my students in my classroom, and one thing they need to learn is empathy. Empathy allows us to see people who are different from ourselves as fully human and respond to their situations with more insight, patience, compassion, and, ultimately, love. Unfortunately, American society is fraught with divisions across ideological, political, and religious lines, and social media platforms make it all too easy to dehumanize people who are different from us. In keeping with controlling what I can, I set out to alter my curriculum to consistently incorporate explicit work with worldviews. By teaching students about how worldviews form, what shapes their own worldviews, and what factors may shape worldviews different from theirs, I hoped that they would develop their ability and willingness to empathize with each other and with people they may not know.

My research grows out of where I teach: Lakeview High School¹ on an Indian reservation in the Mountain West region of the United States. Although Lakeview is centrally located on this reservation, it looks and feels more like a reservation border town. According to demographic data provided by the district, 36% of students identify as American Indian or Alaska Native,

¹ All names of places and students are pseudonyms.

58.5% of students identify as white, with Asian American, Hispanic/Latino, Black, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander making up the remainder of the student population. In a school centrally located on a reservation, only a little over a third of the students identify as Indigenous, illustrating how Lakeview is somewhat of an anomaly. Students and adults from both racial groups struggle against stereotypes that can restrict our abilities to empathize with each other.

In a national context, the rise of divisive social media has exacerbated the rift that exists among people of different backgrounds, not just on the reservation where I live. The ways students interact with each other (or fail to do so) after the schools shut down during COVID indicates a further need for bridge building. For example, the first year we were back in school full time, I had to set a timer and tell my students they had to just talk to each other the entire time the timer ran. If I asked them to discuss ideas without the timer, they would sit in silence avoiding eye contact with each other.

All of this existed—and continues to live—in my mind as I began to think about ways to help my students develop empathy at Lakeview High School. Breaking down stereotypes by studying worldviews will hopefully lead to greater empathy among my students. My project aimed to give students ways to talk about worldviews—their own and those of other people—with understanding and respect, to help students see others with different worldviews as fellow humans rather than opponents to be bullied online or in the hallways of our school.

Research Questions

1. How can teachers leverage curriculum to help their students explore and articulate their understanding of their own world views and then consider and explore the worldviews of others?

2. How might a curriculum based on worldviews shape students' empathy?
3. How might such a shift in curriculum affect the ways students (re)engage with and/or care about their own and others' learning?

Positionality Statement

On my first day teaching at Lakeview High School, I introduced myself as a native to my state, meaning, of course, that I was born and raised in this state. I did not even think about the fact that “native” had different connotations on a reservation, and several students, noting my blonde hair and blue eyes, did a double take that I still remember fourteen years later. As a white woman from a stable, middle-class family, my life looks very different from many of my students' lives. I recognize that the two-parent family that raised me and enabled me to attend college and form my own two-parent family has offered me advantages that many people do not experience. In my seventeen years as an educator, I have worked to better understand the ways my biases—being raised in a Western, Christian worldview and all the advantages that accompany that upbringing—influence the way I teach and the way I interact with others. This is an ever-evolving work in progress, and I learn more from my students than any other source of wisdom and knowledge.

When students engage in my classroom, I want them to reach a deeper understanding of the world around them—this goal has always driven my teaching practice. To me, literature has always offered ways to better see myself and the rest of the world, qualities that are especially important growing up in a rural area with limited access to people and lives unlike my own. I try to help students see this as the value of literature, opening their eyes to why other peoples' stories matter.

Limitations

Three key factors limit this study: timeline, sample size, and location. Ideally, I could have spent an entire school year studying the impact of the shifts in curriculum and even follow up with students as they finish high school next year, but my working timeline did not allow for that. Theoretically, I carried out this research with 36 students, an already small sample size, made smaller by attendance issues—two students consistently did not attend class. Finally, the curricular shifts I made as part of this project relate in some ways very specifically to where I teach. Were someone to apply my research in their own location, I would advise choosing texts that have connections to their student population and where they live.

Literature Review

Introduction

Initially, I set out to study ways that teachers can use the English curriculum in the secondary classroom to increase student empathy. I found that many people have already researched this topic, so the first section of my literature review, “Empathy,” will focus on the theme of empathy and English education. As I continued my research, I found that trauma-informed pedagogy connects to teaching empathy, as the second section of this literature review, “Trauma, Education, & Empathy,” will explore. As my project evolved, I shifted to worldviews, incorporating the words "perspective," "perspective-taking," and "worldview" into my search term repertoire as my research continued. This led to the final section of this literature review, “Perspective Taking,” which examines some specific ways that students can be taught the first step of empathy, entering another person’s point of view.

Empathy

Researchers including Nicole Mirra and Elizabeth Dutton have explored ways that secondary English curriculum can build empathy, and these researchers tend to follow two routes: empathy as developing some kind of emotional connection with others with the goal of feeling what those others feel or “critical civic empathy,” a term coined by Mirra (2018). In the practice of critical civic empathy, trying to get students to understand another’s perspective is not going far enough; students should be motivated to take some sort of political or social action to demonstrate their empathy because of the “historical, economic, and political ramifications” of things like race and class (Mirra 2018). Other researchers use literature to help students take the initial step of “moving beyond oneself and *into* the perspective of another person” (Mirra, 2018, p. 4). One example of this philosophy comes from Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop’s “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors” (1990), in which she writes, “Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience.” Countless teachers and researchers have taken up Dr. Sims Bishop’s call to offer all students literature that can serve as a window, mirror, or a sliding glass door. For instance, when teaching multicultural literature to 8th grade ESL students, Dias (2023) noted that students expressed the desire for authentic knowledge about complex situations and that they were genuinely more curious about the world around them as a result of studying diverse literature. To help cultivate empathy in his students, Dias (2023) had them carry out a number of creative tasks: they “created artwork, poems, and wrote letters” to the characters in the stories, which helped students develop relationships with the characters and become “keenly invested in their fictional lives” (p. 122). To move from this type of empathy to

critical civic empathy, students would need to become invested in the lives of people around them to the extent that they take on some sort of action to improve others' lives.

Trauma, Education, and Empathy

One challenge that teachers and students face with regards to developing empathy is working through trauma, the lasting adverse effects on an individual's or group's mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual well-being caused by an event or situation that results in physical or emotional harm (SAMHSA 2024). It is important to note that some schools do not respond to trauma in significant, systemic ways. If schools respond to trauma, they do so at varying levels: trauma-informed, trauma-responsive, and trauma-healing. Trauma-informed practices emphasize educator awareness of and sensitivity to ways that trauma affects students' behaviors, learning, and interactions at school. Stepping up a level in terms of educator engagement and challenge, trauma responsive practices emphasize educators' ability to employ specific practices that can address the effects of trauma more directly. Finally, trauma-healing practices seek to help students and educators build relationships that will empower students to gain the tools they need to process trauma.

When writing about "trauma reducing education," Petrone and Stanton (2021) urge educators to rethink what they think they know about trauma in school systems, especially when considering historical trauma caused and perpetuated by school systems such as boarding schools for Indigenous students. Petrone and Stanton (2021) ask educators and researchers to reframe their thinking about trauma: "a sociohistorical trauma-reducing framework reverses the taken-for-granted 'problem' and 'solution' in trauma-informed scholarship" (p. 542). Rather than thinking of a school's response to trauma as students dragging problems to school and the school

experts declaring the right solution, educators should turn to the students and community to seek deeper understanding because solutions “may actually be found with/in the students and communities” (Petroni and Stanton, 2021, p. 542). Rather than assuming their own expertise, researchers and educators must be open to listening to individualized, local people in order to avoid doing more harm. This requires a willingness to step into others’ perspectives and value their experiences.

Dutro (2019) explores trauma-informed practices that invite teachers and students into the roles of offering testimony to their experiences and serving as critical witnesses for each other and explains the benefits of such pedagogical practices for both students and teachers. Dutro (2019) critiques pedagogical practices that establish teachers as the healers of traumatized children because “no matter how positive the intention, an emphasis on how trauma damages children makes it difficult to see the whole child, including the knowledge, empathy, and wisdom about life that children bring to their learning” (p. 18). Educators must keep sight of the whole child, not adopting a deficit view of any individual due to the trauma he or she experienced.

Echoing Petroni and Stanton, Dutro (2019) offers a metaphor that separates individuals from trauma and emphasizes student agency. Often, especially coming from a trauma-informed approach, children with trauma are positioned as a fragile baby chick that teachers must cradle gently in our hands. Instead, Dutro (2019) argues that “the chick is the difficult experiences that anyone in the classroom community carries into that shared space” and that “the children, and the teacher, are the hands that gently, but without trepidation, cradle the stories in their classroom” (p. 10). Reshaping our thinking about trauma in our classrooms around this metaphor “emphasize[s] children as active subjects” with agency in their classroom and lives (2019). A

common thread in this research on trauma as it relates to classrooms is that teachers need to shift their mindsets about the causes of trauma and how they can respond to it within their classrooms.

Dutro's (2019) pedagogy of testimony and critical witness can help educators and students alike as they negotiate the emotions and responses that come with working through trauma. In this case, teachers model a willingness to share their own experiences that have informed their perspectives and worldviews and by that willingness invite their students to do the same. Thus, "testimony and witness are reciprocal" and teachers engage in emotional risk taking before asking their students to do the same (Dutro, 2019, p. 24). Dutro's pedagogy of testimony and critical witness offers a route for teachers to model metacognitive practice and encourage their students to do the same. This shares some parallels with McLean Davies & Buzacott's (2022) "relational literacy paradigm" which asks students and teachers to consider and comprehend how individuals' stories are shaped by their experiences of texts and language as well as how stories intersect and interact with each other (p.377). The common thread between these two works is the emphasis on sharing and thinking deeply about stories.

McLean Davies and Buzacott (2022) underscore the importance of this work, saying, "This step of individual students and teachers developing a metacognitive understanding of their own textual practices supports 'cognitive justice' (Sousa Santos 2014)" (p.378). Like Mirra (2018), McLean Davies and Buzacott advocate for students doing more than seeking to understand the experiences and perspectives of people different from them. Students need to explore why they think the way they do to develop that metacognitive understanding of their stories. This indicates that exploring and understanding where your own world view originates as

well as the underpinnings of others' worldviews leads to something akin to what Mirra would define as critical empathy.

Perspective-Taking

So how can we go about doing this necessary work? Transformational dialogues (Hicks & Kaplowitz, 2024), Listening Arguments (VanDerHeide, Beaton, & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021), argumentation exercises like Four Corners (Horner, Petrone, & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021), and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) (Mirra, Filipiak, & Garcia 2015) can all help teachers invite students into considering multiple perspectives or ways of seeing the world. Hicks & Kaplowitz (2024) focus on intergroup dialogue (IGD) pedagogy, a practice that has some limitations in a secondary classroom, especially since adolescents process cognitive dissonance differently than young adults. Teens' desire to fit in with their friends and family can "represent a formidable set of risk factors for youth in exploring both incongruent facts and participant narratives related to the values, beliefs, and narrative they have always assumed to be true" (Hicks and Kaplowitz, 2024, p. 72). Asking students to think about and analyze why they believe what they believe can be uncomfortable. For this reason, teachers may need to offer their own examples of this metacognition through the process of introspection, a practice that echoes Dutro's (2019) recommendation that teachers share first when asking students to share their vulnerabilities.

Incorporating Listening Arguments may alleviate some of that cognitive dissonance or help students process it. VanDerHeide et al. (2021) define Listening Argument as "an argument that listens to and explores multiple perspectives on an issue, including one's own multiple perspectives, in order to come to a decision or new understanding" (p. 87). To teach students how

to form listening arguments in a culture and educational system that tends to privilege arguing to win rather than to understand, the authors developed a set of guiding principles shaped in part by concepts such as invitational rhetoric. These guiding principles include “interrogating one’s dialogical selves on aspects of an issue” (VanDerHeide et al., 2021, p. 88). Both transformational dialogues and listening arguments bolster students’ ability to move into the perspective of another person by helping them understand their own ways of thinking and then giving them structures to enter into another’s way of thinking (Mirra, 2018)

Though this is a heavy lift for secondary students and teachers, researchers have developed practical teaching strategies to address and help students through this intrapersonal conflict in addition to interpersonal conflict that will occur during dialogue sessions. These include “building a human presence with the ‘heads sheet,’” a note-taking scaffold which asks students to “read the source from two different perspectives: their own and someone who would disagree with them” (VanDerHeide et al., 2021, p.89). The Four Corners argumentation exercise works similarly: students are assigned a position on an argument and then tasked with “developing a robust argument for their assigned perspective” (Horner, Petrone, & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 62). These two strategies make perspective taking a requirement of an assignment, an academic endeavor or philosophical exercise, but one that translates into deeper understanding, a prerequisite for empathy.

When it comes to dialogues, Chesler & Fisher (2024) offer strategies such as sample group norms as well as a list of “various ways resistance may surface” and ways to prevent or reduce resistance, all of which are fairly common sense (“creating ground rules,” make sure that students know “they will not be evaluated based on their perspectives and beliefs,” etc.). Though

this chapter is broken into three parts, all of them echo Dutro's emphasis on teachers (or facilitators) sharing their own stories and being vulnerable with students (or participants). Later authors state, "vulnerability and story sharing is critical for the process of understanding our collective historical social reality, the implications it has on our present social reality, and identifying the considerations that need to be prioritized as we move into the future as a society" (Morton and Vargas-Leon, 2024, p. 44). Morton and Vargas-Leon go on to offer some guidelines for facilitators to use when considering which stories to share. In this way, they echo Dutro: teachers/facilitators should not share just any random story; the stories we share need to be real, relevant to the topic at hand, and useful to our students in some ways. Of course, this also seems very common sense and practical, but it is good to have reminders in place to avoid over-sharing or sharing irrelevant information. Intentionality is key, and students need a model to show them how to do this hard work.

Altogether, this research has equipped me with a deeper understanding of empathy and ways to respond to trauma in my classroom as well as specific strategies that I can use during the course of my research project. As my students progress through the lessons I have planned, they will carry out activities that will connect them with real people; some activities ask them to connect with individuals in our community, while others connect them with historical figures. I hope that these real-life connections will help students care more about their learning as well as develop more empathy. I hope these connections help them see why their learning can matter.

Theoretical Framework

Two key concepts form the theoretical underpinning for my work: critical civic empathy and decolonizing curriculum, concepts that have evolved in my teaching over time, as the next two paragraphs will explore.

Through the course of my teaching and graduate school experiences, I've come to find that de-colonial theory guides much of my work. I began my approach to teaching literature guided by theory best described as New Historicism, which has been a key part of my teaching practice long before I knew to call it that. I have always taught literature situated within its historical context, an easy fit when teaching American literature for most of my career. As I have progressed through my coursework at MSU, I have gained additional critical lenses that have guided me to this research project, including de-colonizing curriculum (LeClair Diaz & Stanton, 2024). In his 2021 essay "Decolonial? Postcolonial? What does it mean to 'decolonise ourselves'?" Michael Tsang explains that traditionally, post-colonial and decolonial theories have been expressed as nouns, but "the word we are using now, however, is a verb form that suggests action - 'decolonise/decolonising.'" He goes on to propose "three main guiding actions for the project of decolonising ourselves" – to act, to reflect, and to learn (Tsang, 2021). My project aligns with Tsang's discussion of decolonizing curriculum, and much of my work has been informed by decolonizing scholars including Robert Petrone, Christine Rogers Stanton, and Melissa Horner.

Particularly, Stanton's work emphasizes the value and necessity of learning from and drawing on Indigenous practices, texts, and local people to better reach Indigenous students. Le Clair-Diaz and Stanton (2024) write, "As all education occurs on Indigenous lands...curriculum decision makers have a responsibility to collaborate in meaningful ways with Indigenous

Nations, community partners, and other stakeholders throughout the development, implementation, and evaluation of the curriculum.” Rather than privileging a Western way of thinking about concepts such as trauma and literacy, educators find ways to incorporate authentic and relevant Indigenous understandings into their classrooms. My project centers Indigenous wisdom, as expressed in *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer, and asks students to reflect on and learn from the worldview Wall Kimmerer expresses in her text.

From the start of my teaching career, I have operated on the understanding that we teach literature as a way to experience what others have experienced and thereby develop a deeper and wider understanding of the world around us through what Kelly Gallagher (2009) in *Readicide* calls “imaginative rehearsals for the real world” (p. 93). This is how I initially conceived of empathy in the secondary English classroom. My research project asks students to do more than this, though, moving into the realm of critical civic empathy, a term coined by Nicole Mirra (2018). For Mirra, trying to get students to understand another’s perspective is not going far enough; students should be motivated to take some sort of political or social action to demonstrate their empathy. In *Educating for Empathy*, Mirra (2018) states, “I advocate for a model of critical civic empathy that is grounded in recognition of these constructs [like race and class] and uses them as the starting point for transformative social dialogue and action” (p. 13). Mirra’s goal of recognizing past (and present) injustices that lead to inequitable elements of society, both past and present, is a key element of the curriculum I develop.

I began my pre-service teaching experiences and early career as a teacher with the understanding that a teacher’s goal was to remain a neutral arbiter of content within the classroom. I learned this expectation in my undergraduate classes and from the school policies

and warnings of veteran teachers early in my career. However, Mirra (2018) argues that academic learning is not politically neutral. She goes on to assert, “Taking a critical perspective on empathy encourages us to interrogate what we each bring to the table when we seek to empathize with others and to acknowledge the fact that the ways in which we are privileged (or marginalized) in public life inevitably influence how we interpret the experiences of others” (p. 7). This view of academic learning and empathy informed much of the design of my project.

Ultimately, my project applies decolonizing theory with a critical civic empathy lens, as critical civic empathy also emphasizes moving from learning to action.

Research Methods

In the course of my study, I examined three main concepts: (1) how curriculum in secondary English classroom can be redesigned to explicitly teach and explore worldviews, (2) how students articulate their understanding of worldviews—both what a worldview is and what the essential components of their worldviews are, and (3) if learning ways to articulate their thoughts about worldviews while studying the worldviews of others can lead to greater empathy and engagement in secondary English classrooms.

To carry out my study, I relied on two primary methods: teacher action research and interviews with my students. Action research and teacher research are ways for practicing teachers to build on existing knowledge and add to their fields, both of education and their specific subject areas. In *Theorizing and Contextualizing Practitioner Research*, Cochran-Smith and Lytle define action research as “altering curriculum, challenging common school practices, and working for social change by engaging in a continuous process of problem posing, data gathering, analysis, and action” (2009, p. 40). This is exactly what my project did. Furthermore,

they define teacher research by saying, “teacher researchers work in inquiry communities to examine their own assumptions, develop local knowledge by posing questions and gathering data, and—in many versions of teacher research—work for social justice by using inquiry to ensure educational opportunity, access, and equity for all students” (2009, p. 40). Preparing the curriculum I used and completing some of the same assignments as my students led me to examine my own assumptions and develop local knowledge as I found resources to connect *Braiding Sweetgrass* to situations specifically relevant to the reservation where I live and teach.

Although I collected a lot of data about what was happening in my classroom—ranging from observations to survey results to journal entries to assessment data—I wanted to hear more directly from my students about their experience, so I decided on interviewing as a second form of methodology. In *Research Methods for English Studies*, Gabrielle Griffin (2009) writes, “Researchers need to understand how the methods they choose – and that includes interviewing – impact on the results they obtain” (p. 179). Taking her advice seriously, I decided to conduct semi-structured group interviews because “the less structured an interview is, the more participatory it can become for both interviewer and interviewee” (Griffin, 2009, p. 186). Interviewing seemed like the best way to hear from students their authentic responses. In later discussion, I will explain how I applied Griffin’s principles about selecting interviewees, transcribing the interviews, and analyzing the interviews.

When considering how I put these two methodologies, teacher action research and interviewing, into practice, the following elements play key roles: the research site, participants, unit of study, the context of the unit, and bodies of data, accompanied by discussion of my data collection and analysis process.

Research Site

Lakeview High School (LHS) is centrally located on an Indian reservation in the Mountain West region of the United States. Lakeview, population 5610, rests on the southern shores of a large freshwater lake, a beautiful natural resource that supports Lakeview's biggest industry: tourism. Many students work at seasonal jobs, such as boat rental companies or food trucks. Most students also recreate on the lake whose cool waters make the smoky August days more bearable. As a community, Lakeview has much to offer in addition to the natural resources that abound around us: several grocery stores, successful local businesses, a wide variety of churches within the Christian tradition, a recently remodeled library, and several businesses and organizations operated by the local tribes. Amidst the visible prosperity that exists here, some Lakeview residents also experience extreme poverty, and it is not uncommon for LHS students to be caught in a cycle of couch-surfing homelessness.

Although situated in nearly the exact middle of the reservation, the school's population is predominantly white, as noted in my introduction (36% of students identify as American Indian or Alaska Native, while 58.5% of students identify as white). LHS typically begins each year with over 500 students enrolled, but by the spring our numbers drop by at least 25 as students turn sixteen and drop out or transfer to other schools. Both the student attrition rate and the racial mix of students influenced the way I formed my research project.

Participants

One benefit of being a teacher-mom is that I have gained a more in-depth view of my current students and research participants since I have volunteered in their classrooms and

attended their school events since first grade, when my oldest son joined them. Watching this group of students specifically motivated me to explore ways to expand empathy because they seemed to me to lack that trait. Throughout the day, I teach English 11, LHS's standard junior English class, twice a day; it is the only class I teach twice. The combination of these two factors led me to make big changes to my curriculum with my first and second period English 11 classes, carrying out teacher action research for the entire school year.

Currently, first period has 19 students enrolled (with 17 attending mostly regularly) and second period has 15 students enrolled (with 14 attending mostly regularly). First period has six female students and 13 male students; eight students identify as "American Indian," ten as "White," and one as "Hispanic Latino." Second period has eight female and seven male students; eight students identify as "American Indian," six as "White," and one as "Hispanic Latino." Neither class matches the school averages, either in terms of female-male ratio (48.4% to 51.6%) or racial demographics.

Fitting with human research guidelines, I followed the IRB protocol, receiving approval through Salish Kootenai College, the local tribal college, as well as MSU. Though I encouraged students to participate in the research process, they received neither award nor punishment for completing their forms or not doing so. All students enrolled in my classes received the same instruction and level of support regardless of their official participation.

Unit of Study & Context of Unit

Our state requires all public schools and grade levels to teach Indigenous knowledge, a mandate built into the state's constitution. This year, instead of following pretty typical practice and teaching one big unit that meets that requirement, I decided to try something radically

different: we would read chapters from *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer (adapted for young adults by Monique Gray Smith) as an anchor text in every unit throughout the year. This shift in curriculum and measuring my students' responses to both the text and style became the basis of my teacher action research (Cochrane-Smith and Lytle, 2009). Though *Braiding Sweetgrass* is a powerful text, I felt like my students would blanch at reading so much science-based nonfiction if we read it all in one unit. I have also come to feel that doing one Indigenous unit that follows the letter of the law—and checks the required boxes—does a disservice to our students and the overall spirit of the constitution requirement. This unit of study began at the end of September when my IRB approval arrived and is ongoing throughout the school year. For the purposes of this paper, I stopped collecting data on March 13, 2025.

In every unit we complete, students read at least one selection from *Braiding Sweetgrass*. For example, when we studied the American Revolution, we also read a chapter called “Allegiance to Gratitude.” When we studied *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, we read a chapter called “Windigo Thinking” (for the complete unit plan weaving *Braiding Sweetgrass* into LHS's English 11 curriculum, see Appendix A). With each reading, I ask students to form connections between Wall Kimmerer's worldview and ideas, the other text(s) we are reading, and their own perspectives.

Data Collection and Analysis

From September to March, I collected a wide variety of data, ranging from student projects to journal entries to completion data to group interviews. For the purposes of this paper, I focused on three main sources of data: completion data from students' *Braiding Sweetgrass*

journals, students' Unreserved Projects (described in detail in the following pages) and related content, and group interviews completed with four students from each of my classes.

Braiding Sweetgrass Journals

As I planned this addition to our curriculum, I structured the work students would complete with every reading to follow the same pattern: start with a reading purpose, annotate for that purpose, complete three discussion questions, and conclude with a personal reflection. I felt the consistent structure would add some continuity to the non-linear nature of our reading. Students carry out these tasks in a designated notebook, their *Braiding Sweetgrass* journals. As students interacted with Wall Kimmerer's text, I recorded their completion data: how well they scored on their annotations and how often they completed all three parts. I also noted some element of each entry, typically their reflection based on personal response, to ascertain their attitudes, feelings, or general responses to Wall Kimmerer's ideas, which helped me adjust future reading tasks as needed.

Unreserved Project & Related Materials

The Unreserved Project, a statewide initiative in where I live, asks students to tell the story of their lives through four themes: heritage, hurdle, happiness, and hope. Students use a format based on the medicine wheel, choose or create images that portray each of those themes—one in each quadrant of the circle—and then share their stories with a small group of their peers. This is the first year I have taught this project, though a now-retired teacher used to teach it at LHS. We started semester two with this project, and I followed the project's protocol of two days to introduce the project exactly. When it came to creating individual projects, my

students became very invested (and we had a snow delay), so I gave them more than the typically allotted two days to create their projects; they ended up having essentially 3.5 days to design and prepare to share their work. Teachers can choose to have students self-select their sharing groups or assign them, and I chose to assign groups, explaining to my students that part of the point of the project is to get to know their peers better, so working with a less familiar group would help meet that goal. After they shared their projects, they wrote notes to each member of their small group, and then they wrote about their experiences in their *Braiding Sweetgrass* journals. I drew data from the projects themselves but also the students' responses to each other and to the project as a whole.

Group Interviews

Initially, I planned to use a survey or inventory regarding worldviews and sense of belonging as a quantitative set of data for my project. However, when I had students complete the second iteration of the survey in January, I found that their responses had not changed very much. Although various elements of this data does tell me some things, it did not provide the kind of support I needed for what I was seeing happen in my classroom. For this reason, I decided to invite a small group of students from each of my classes to participate in group interviews.

I decided on four students per class because that number felt like the right size: big enough that everyone would feel comfortable, small enough that their responses would be manageable. I held the interviews in my classroom during my prep period, the last period of the day. I chose to interview students in my classroom because it was the most practical option, but my students generally feel comfortable there—I have spent the year making it a safe space—so I

also felt that my students would not be intimidated or overly influenced by any power dynamics if we met there. We met during the school day so that students would not have to come in outside of school time, but several participants have no class seventh period and elected to participate even though they were not getting out of a class to do so.

To select students, I began with how they responded to the texts we have been reading, including *Braiding Sweetgrass* and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Essentially, if their journal entries or other work indicated some sort of shift in perspective or thinking, that was one criteria I used to select them. My reasoning for this was that I wanted to know what about the changes I made to my curriculum led to their growth over the course of the year. Another criteria was their general willingness to speak up during class discussions; I needed to interview students I knew would be comfortable talking out loud. I also tried to have each group represent their class's racial dynamics as much as possible. My first period group ended up consisting of four students who all identify as "White," however. My second period group was supposed to have three students who identify as "American Indian" and one as "White," but one student forgot, and his replacement was a student who identified as "White." Both groups had two female and two male students, a choice I made to help the students be more comfortable.

After reviewing my research questions and reflections on student journal entries, I wrote interview questions (Appendix B), using the same open-ended questions for each group, though follow-up questions or methods varied, following a semi-structured interview format (Griffin 2013). I used Otter.ai to record and transcribe both interviews. I reviewed the recordings and made corrections to Otter's transcription errors and added notes for when students laughed or offered a non-verbal response (I processed them quickly after so I would remember key non-

verbal moments), creating full transcriptions that sought to capture more than just the words in the interview (Griffin 2013). I added to my research journal throughout this process.

Next, I reviewed the transcripts and coded the interviews looking for overarching themes that would connect to student work samples and completion data (Griffin 2013). I did this by highlighting repeated words or their synonyms in each transcript, changing colors each time I found a new word/phrase. Finally, I used ChatGPT to code the interviews in order to get a different, non-human read on the data. Appendix C contains excerpts of the interviews in tables based on my coding while appendix D includes ChatGPT's coding as well as the prompt I provided ChatGPT just for clarity. Initially, I identified eight different themes, and I decided to keep those themes rather than consolidate them. I coded both interviews using the same themes for the sake of unity. I had ChatGPT code the two transcripts separately due to data upload limits, asking it to identify four to six themes, hoping to simplify the number of themes. It flagged six different themes, with considerable overlap between the two transcripts, though the themes were not identical. Upon comparing my work with ChatGPT's, we flagged similar passages and noted similar themes.

Findings

Considering all my data and consolidating my interview themes in light of my other data, my findings break down into four main themes: (1) student engagement with the curriculum and their learning, (2) student development of self-awareness and identity, (3) student connection to others' perspectives, and (4) increased empathy for student peers and others. As I develop discussion of each of these themes, I will incorporate data from student interviews, *Braiding Sweetgrass* journals, and Unreserved Project materials.

Student Engagement with the Curriculum and their Learning

As students read each chapter of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, they kept a journal that asked them to annotate the text (five points), answer three discussion questions (three points), and write a brief reflection (two points), making each journal entry worth ten points. As the year progressed, one pattern I saw was an increase in engagement and a decrease in resistance to Wall Kimmerer's ideas.

One way to measure engagement is by examining journal completion data throughout the course of study. Students performed well on the first journal, which we completed with a lot of scaffolding to help with what annotations should look like. First period's average score was 9.42 while second's was 8.38. On subsequent journal entries, student average scores dipped across both classes, with first period beginning a slow rise in December and second period seeing an eventual rise in January that continued into February and March, with later scores consistently surpassing the original scores (see Table 1).

Table 1: Class Average Journal Scores (out of 10)

Journal:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Date:	10/10	10/11	10/15	10/21	11/8	12/13	1/6	1/15	1/28	2/6	2/7	3/13
1 st Per.												
Avg. Score	9.42	7.94	7.11	8.32	8.73	9.17	9.43	8.4	9.18	9.93	9.93	9.9
2 nd Per.												
Avg. Score	8.38	8.5	8.54	9.16	7.6	8.46	8.88	8.27	7.69	9.64	9.84	9.1

This data suggests that as our study of *Braiding Sweetgrass* progressed, students became more engaged in the text. Student interview responses correlate with this finding. During the group interviews, students from both classes expressed some hesitation about reading *Braiding Sweetgrass*, with two students using the word “disagree” to express their response to the text at first. However, students went on to add how their engagement with the text increased as we continued reading it.

Perhaps the most powerful student interview contribution came from Matt, a student in my second period class who historically struggles with English. He passed freshman and sophomore English with a lot of one-on-one support from his teachers and our librarian, who literally would sit right next to him in the library while he completed assignments; if she left his side, he checked out. Matt, who belongs to the same tribe as Wall Kimmerer, reported being comfortable with Wall Kimmerer’s ideas from the start, saying, “I agreed with [Wall Kimmerer’s ideas] more...because some of it was...close to how mine is. So I just felt like I connected more to it.” This connection led Matt to engage with his school work more than before. He explained, “At the beginning of the year, I was not, like, that focused on school, but reading *Braiding Sweetgrass*, it like helped me with me notes, and I have been doing, or trying to do, better in all my classes. And I just feel like since it was something I was interested in, it just helped me focus more.” Although Matt still struggles with focusing in class and completing assignments, especially if they require work outside of class time, he now participates actively in small group discussions and recently has been willing to speak during whole-class discussions.

Other students note similar increases in interest or work ethic. Jocelyn, another second period student and enrolled Salish tribal member, said, “I know with my notebook, it’s like the most effort I put into probably anything ever. I actually go into detail... Whenever I know we’re gonna be reading [*Braiding Sweetgrass*], I know I try to go to class, and I’m, like, excited. Even if English is second period really early I still look forward to it.” Josie, a white student in first period, now indicates excitement about reading from *Braiding Sweetgrass*, saying, “If we’re reading *Braiding Sweetgrass*, I know it relates to something that we’ve been practiced or reading. So I think it’s kind of cool, because I’m like *Okay if we’re learning about this, what does Wall Kimmerer have to say?*” Josie added that she always talks to her mom about the reading and what they learned, demonstrating how student engagement stretched beyond the classroom.

For some students, reading the chapters spread throughout the year led to increased engagement. Ben, a white student in my first period class, said, “I get tired of things really fast,” and went on to explain how breaking up the chapters helped: “It’s like a new thing, because it’s spread out enough where I’ll just naturally or unconsciously just be okay with it, like I’ll unconsciously want to learn it.” Katie, also white and in first period, echoed his sentiments, noting that she liked the opportunity to “learn it in a different way.” My first period students most appreciated the variety that integrating the *Braiding Sweetgrass* readings into the rest of the curriculum offered. Henry, also white and in first period, added, simply, “I feel like the chapters are kind of different enough to where it’s a different perspective on different things each time. So that helps with being willing to have an open mind when you’re reading it.” For these students, breaking up the reading of the same text led to an increase in overall interest levels and

willingness to engage with the materials. However, my second period students perceived returning to the text at different times as a steady presence. Leah, a white student, said, “I think it’s cool that we have one thing that stays the same as we always come back to it.” Regardless of why they like our reading of *Braiding Sweetgrass* being spread out, structuring the curriculum this way seems to have positive effects.

Furthermore, students from both classes expressed how the journal-style writing assignments helped them engage more deeply in all the texts we have read this year. An overarching sentiment was that the informal writing style and personal response nature of the questions led them to invest more thought into their work. Ted, a white student in second period, said, “Even though I hate taking notes, [my journal] is still somewhere you can write about yourself and expose yourself out there a little more.” Josie added, “This is the most I’ve written in a notebook ever,” referring to her English notebook, not her journal. Ben picked up her train of thought and elaborated, saying, “With Sweetgrass and like the writing we have to do, I just like it because then you get to use your voice and your opinions.” Josie continued, saying, “It’s kind of nice to just WRITE if that makes sense.” As I designed the curriculum for *Braiding Sweetgrass*, I endeavored to include personal response reflections that would help students connect to both this text and whichever other text(s) we were studying at that time. Student interview responses and their journal completion data both support that this move helps students buy into their learning more.

Ultimately, adding *Braiding Sweetgrass* to LHS’s junior English curriculum and presenting it to students over the course of the school year with an emphasis on personal

response and journaling has led to greater engagement in the reading and writing process, with some effects branching out beyond the English classroom.

Student Development of Self-Awareness & Identity

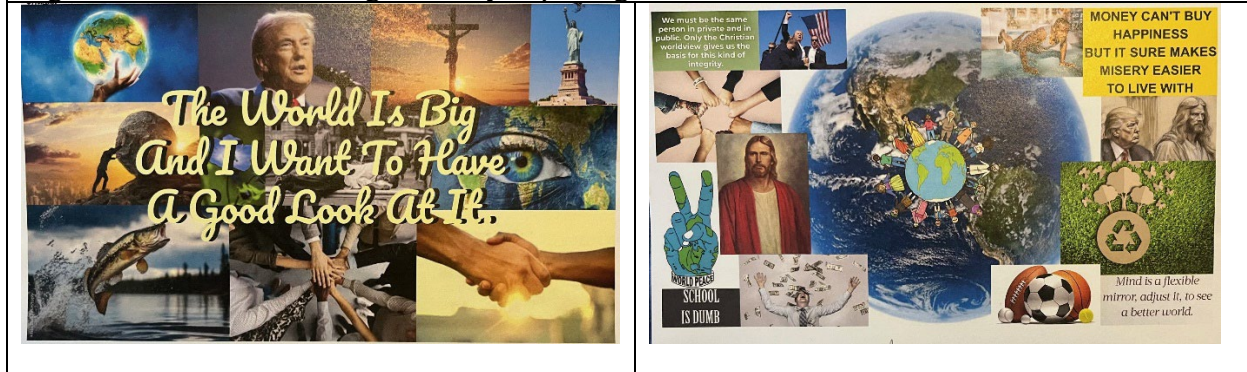
Changing the curriculum I teach to include explicit instruction about worldviews and assignments and activities designed to foster reflection helped students develop a better sense of their individual identities. I began the class with identity-based writing, asking students to create “from” poems using George Ella Lyon’s classic “Where I’m From” as a model. Students also created a slide with an image of a place that they felt was sacred, which we defined as “too important or valuable to be changed,” and explained why they felt that place was sacred. From there, students created collages to express their worldviews after several lessons defining “worldview” and after reading the first two chapters of *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

These collages, completed near the end of September, primarily indicated to me that most of my students could not easily articulate elements of their own worldviews, a task I myself found challenging when I completed my own collage to use as a model. Most of their collages consisted simply of pictures of family, friends, or pets (see Figure A). Two students did express religious, political, or social views in their collages (see Figure B).

Figure A: Worldview collages depicting favorite quotes and pets



Figure B: Worldview collages clearly depicting elements of worldview



However, during the group interviews, I asked students to return to their collages and think about them with fresh eyes. Of her collage, Jocelyn observed, “I think I mainly just did my cats. I didn’t really understand.” She went on to add, “*Braiding Sweetgrass*, kind of like, helped me develop my own opinion on stuff like nature, the loss of culture, you know, like with, the sweet grass fields.” Her response indicates that she would change her collage to reflect the deeper understanding she has gained over the course of this class. Leah echoed her sentiment,

saying, “This is just kind of like from like, my favorite movies and favorite quotes. But like, I feel like, like this class has kind of helped me, like, develop some more of my like, beliefs and stuff. So I'd probably like go more into depth with that.” These students’ responses aligned with my initial perception of their inability to articulate their worldviews at the start of the year, but because of their work on these collages, I taught additional explicit lessons defining and providing examples of worldview, incorporating language the students brainstormed and I kept on sticky notes into my instruction consistently through December.

As October drew to an end we began a research unit on local topics. On November 4, we completed an in-class reflection on worldviews. As part of their written reflection, I asked students to think about the elements of worldview that we focused on in class; these included religion, economic systems, political systems, culture, belief systems, and values (all words we had brainstormed as a class). Students then selected two specific elements of their worldview and wrote about how or why each influences the way they see the world. Table 2 tallies their responses.

Table 2: Element of Worldview & Number of Students Writing about It

Element of Worldview	Number of Students Writing about It
Religion	10
Values	16
Culture	11
Belief Systems	9
Indigenous	1
Settler	1

Economic Systems	2
Political Systems	6
Tribal Elders	1
Scientists	1

By November, students acquired vocabulary to talk and write about worldviews with more precision, and we continued to use personal response journals as we explored the worldviews Wall Kimmerer expresses in *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Student responses during the group interviews indicate that this type of writing helped them develop increased self-awareness. For example, Ted noted, “When we do like *Braiding Sweetgrass*, I like the questions we get asked, or like the objectives we have and like it makes you feel like, it makes us like, like, what's the word expose us more and like, describe ourselves a lot better.” All of the students echoed this sentiment during the interviews.

The work my students put in building a better sense of their identities benefited them as we began Project Unreserved, described on its website as “One unique project making students the subject in school & strengthening social structures.” This project, a statewide enrichment initiative in my state, supports social and emotional learning, helps students expand their perspectives, and builds empathy and confidence (*Unreserved* 2025). In later sections I will speak more to these effects of Unreserved on my students. During the group interviews, students pointed out another way Unreserved benefited them, which was by deepening their understanding of their own identities.

For the project, students are asked to represent their life through four themes—heritage, hurdle, happiness, and hope—that they express using images, words, and art. They present these

four themes on quadrants of a circle, using an Indigenous medicine wheel format. Of the project, Josie said, “I actually like doing that one a lot, because it like, helped me, like, understand, like, where exactly I came from, and, like, what something that, like, I was, like, a hurdle to me, or something that just, like, there were things that, like, really meant a lot to me.” Katie added, “It was good to kind of, like challenge myself to really, like, deep dive into what I think.” While students worked on the project, I could see them taking that deep dive. The project organizers call for 1-2 days spent creating the project, but I expanded that into three and half days, with the half day being a snow delay, because I could see how intently students focused in on their work, selecting and eliminating and re-selecting photos from their camera rolls and deciding how and what artistic elements and words they wanted to add. I also completed the project myself and felt like the benefits justified the additional time.

Providing time, space, and assignments geared toward self-reflection and identity exploration have benefitted my students by providing them the vocabulary they need to articulate their identities more clearly. The approach I have taken with greater emphasis on personal response writing gave them a learning environment with enough structure to explore their thinking without overly restricting it.

Student Connection to Others’ Perspectives and Consequent Shifts in their Thinking

As we started reading *Braiding Sweetgrass*, many students expressed discomfort with Wall Kimmerer’s worldviews. We spent a whole class period reading and discussing “An Invitation to Remember,” the first chapter in the book. In this chapter, Wall Kimmerer lays out some key elements of her Indigenous worldview, including what she describes as the “grammar

of animacy”: “English is the language of capitalism. It’s the language of objects. And subtly, or maybe not so subtly, it gives us permission to think about the world as our own property...In Potawatomi and many Indigenous languages, it is not possible to speak of living beings as it” (Wall Kimmerer 2022). Wall Kimmerer (2022) goes on to propose two new pronouns to bring “animacy to the English language,” suggesting the word “ki” for singular, living beings and “kin” for the plural form. Right away, her use of language clarifies her ways of thinking about the world and critiques a Western, settler-colonial worldview.

Reviewing my journal from that day, three notes jump out at me. A first period student described himself as being “mad at” the text and offered many counterarguments regarding Wall Kimmerer’s grammar concepts. My farm students in second period expressed loud disagreement with Wall Kimmerer’s definition of “it” as being anything man-made, with one student exclaiming, “My truck is a she!” in a serious kind of way; he loves his truck. Finally, along the side of my notes, I wrote, “In both classes, I told kids that they could feel their feelings regarding any text but need to always speak with respect.” The combination of these notes remind me that although some students enjoyed the book from the start, many started their reading with some hesitation or even hostility.

However, as the class progressed, students became more open to Wall Kimmerer’s ideas. Reviewing my counts of their responses, initially students wavered between showing more agreement or more tension. For example, 19 students expressed agreement with the ideas in “An Invitation to Remember” while 11 expressed tension and two expressed confusion (see appendix E for a complete list). However, by the time we reached our later readings—one on the value of story reciprocity published by Unreserved and one a chapter from *Braiding Sweetgrass* called

“The Three Sisters,” most students expressed agreement with the ideas in the texts, with 19 expressing agreement with “Reciprocity” and only two tension and no one expressing disagreement with “The Three Sisters.” Seven students offered a qualified agreement while 17 offered full agreement.

These journal observations correlate with what the students themselves had to say about their shifts in perspective while reading *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Some students just needed time to process Wall Kimmerer’s ideas, as Jocelyn points out: “At first, some points she made didn’t make sense to me... and then... it just kind of clicked into place.” For her, getting to know Wall Kimmerer’s ideas through the reading helped her understand them better and be more open towards them.

Other students experienced more dramatic shifts. Thinking about this text, Ted observed, “I used to be very like disagreeing, like, I didn't really think like, I think it was just like your worldview is what's gonna affect you and everything else. And then reading it more and more, it gave me a deeper understanding of, like, how everyone's worldview connects to each other and like it's gonna like their worldview can also affect yours to make it like a better outcome.” Here, I see Ted forming connections not just between himself and the text but also using those connections as a bridge to others. In a separate interview, Ben further developed this idea, saying, “I feel like, ever since we've been doing this, when I disagree with something someone says, instead of arguing, I'll just kind of like, listen, and I'll be like, I'll try to see where they're coming from. Because sometimes, right away, you're just, your just natural instinct is just to fight back and just defend yourself, defend your own opinion.” In some of his journal entries, Ben did express a rather combative attitude towards Wall Kimmerer’s ideas, such as when he suggested

that Wall Kimmerer and her daughter should be sent to the Middle East or North Korea for refusing to stand during the pledge of allegiance. However, in more recent entries Ben wrote with perception about the concepts in the text. In an entry from “The Gift of Strawberries,” a chapter that compares what Wall Kimmerer defines as a “gift economy” with a market economy, Ben noted, “Sweetgrass shouldn’t be bought or sold. Hard to grasp for people who use a market economy a lot.” Here, he paraphrased Wall Kimmerer’s text, but he doesn’t offer an argument against it.

Ultimately, deliberately exploring a worldview different from their own led many of my students to be more open towards that worldview and to learning about ideas that may be outside of their comfort zones.

Increased Empathy for Student Peers and Others

To start this research project, I asked students to complete an inventory that explored their worldviews, community connections, and culture. I provided statements about these topics, and students circled one of four responses: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree. The results indicated to me that my students started the year with higher levels of empathy and connectedness than I had anticipated given the behaviors and interactions of these students that I have witnessed for the past ten years. For example, in response to “I belong to a community where people care about me and my well-being,” 89.7% students selected “agree” or “strongly agree” on the first survey. In response to “I care about members of my own community and their well-being,” 87.9% of students selected “agree” or “strongly agree” (for a more complete list of results, see Appendix F). Though most of my students indicated some connection to community and others from the start, the projects, writing, and class conversations designed to build

empathy and explore different perspectives helped them build stronger connections with classmates and with others.

The clearest example of this was my classes' response to the Unreserved Project. All junior English teachers at LHS taught the Unreserved Project, and based on feedback from the other two members of my team, my students responded with the most positivity. In fact, one teacher said she would not teach this unit again based on how students responded to each other during both the creating and sharing portions of the project. Some of her students felt so uncomfortable during the creating part of the project that they asked to be excused from the room so their peers could not see their projects at all. Her students' levels of discomfort led to her preference to not teach it next year. The other teacher had a more positive outcome but expressed a lot of apprehension about the sharing day in conversations leading up to it. I felt no worry about my students' ability to do some emotional heavy lifting. Teachers have the option to allow students to self-select sharing groups or assign them. I was the only teacher who assigned students into groups for the sharing process, and my students did not resist or complain.

Following their sharing day, I asked students for a variety of feedback on the project. In their *Braiding Sweetgrass* journals, I asked students to reflect on how it felt to share their Unreserved projects and how it felt to listen to their classmates as they shared their projects. I classified their responses to each question as "positive," "mid," or "negative" and have tallied the results below (see Table 3).

Table 3: Student Response to Unreserved Project

	Sharing their Project			Listening to their Classmates' Projects		
Class	Positive	Mid	Negative	Positive	Mid	Negative

1 st Period	11	1	3	14	1	0
2 nd Period	8	5	1	14	0	0

With regards to sharing their projects, most of the “mid” reviews consisted of expressing nervousness at first and then feeling better as they started to share. One student wrote, “It felt a little bit scary since the people I was grouped with weren’t always the friendliest but they seemed very supportive and respectful. Once we started sharing, I got comfortable.” This student’s comment characterizes the “mid” reviews. The negative reviews consistently focused on fright or anxiety about putting themselves out there, with only one student saying that she would never do an assignment like this again because she did not like feeling so vulnerable. The following excerpt from a different student’s journal characterizes the positive reviews: “It was nice to share some of my life with people I don’t know very well. It gave them a chance to learn a little bit about me and gave me a chance to learn about them.”

Compellingly, none of the students had negative responses to hearing their classmates’ projects, and only one student offered this sharing element a mid review. One student’s response stands out to me the most; this is the same student I quoted earlier about sharing being initially scary. She wrote, “It was cool to listen to the people tell about themselves. Even though we’ve gone to school together for most of our lives, we didn’t know each other, and this made me realize they’re not bad people. They’re just people who have had struggles... We’re all just people with a past.” It rather boggles my mind that these kids feel like they do not know each other—there are only 118 students in their grade and many of them have been in classes together for most of their education—but other students echoed this sentiment. Reading their journal responses made me appreciate the value of this project even more.

One suggestion that Unreserved makes is to have students write notes of encouragement to each other after their group finishes sharing, and I followed this suggestion. Reading the students' words of encouragement to each other demonstrated their growth in empathy (see Figure C).

Figure C: Student Notes to Group Members

2 nd Period	1 st Period

These students interacted positively while sharing and afterwards as well. In his journal, one student noted, “It felt good to hear positive things about me and even better to write those positive things about my classmates.” Hearing them share, reading their notes to each other, and reviewing their journals all demonstrated to me that they developed more empathy for each other as they completed this project.

When asked if the project was worth the time it took us to complete it, 24 students said yes, two said yes but it took too long, and only two students said no. Getting 92% of high school students to agree that a project was worthwhile strongly indicates the positive impact it had on them.

Even a month after the project drew to a close, students continued to talk about it. In the group interviews, each student brought up this project as one that helped them develop empathy. Ted persisted in calling in the hurdle project, indicating to me that hearing about his classmates' struggles and challenges stayed with him the longest. He said,

“I'm not gonna lie, I used to be very...judgmental if they acted a certain way, and...I just never understood it and would judge in the back of my mind. But then, like, doing all this stuff, like, the hurdles and like, even recently truth justice one, like, everyone has, like, their story. It's not always like, their fault, like they things go on happen that isn't like, they can't control. So then sometimes that can affect how they act. And then, like, that's just like helped me now, like, I always give someone the benefit of a doubt.”

Here, he refers to both *Unreserved* and a mini-research project (“the truth justice one”) we completed about unjust trials in American history in the context of a unit on *The Crucible*. Ted expressed a significant change in his thinking and an increase in his ability to empathize with others. Ted himself has significant hurdles to overcome—his mother is fighting colorectal cancer, he just returned to the public school system after a homeschooling situation, he is responsible for his younger brother and foster sibling much of the time—and yet he found himself focusing more on the things in others' lives that they cannot control.

This growing empathy amongst my students showed up in other contexts as well. Before completing *Unreserved*, we read *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* by Frederick Douglass. Generally my students do not push back against reading this very loudly, but every year, some students grumble about having to learn more about slavery. This

year, I had students complete a pre- and post-reading inventory, again with answer options ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” The responses tallied in Table 4 were in response to this statement: “We should not have to read a book about slavery because we have already learned about it in US History.”

Table 4: Student Pre- and Post-Reading Inventory Responses

Class	Pre-Reading Inventory				Post-Reading Inventory			
	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD
1 st Per	2	3	10	0	2	3	7	3
2 nd Per	2	6	4	0	0	3	9	0
Total	4	9	14	0	2	6	16	3

Before reading Douglass’s narrative, 13 students disagreed with the text being required in the class, with only 14 thinking that reading the book would be worthwhile. By the time we finished, those numbers shifted significantly, with 19 students seeing value in reading the narrative and only eight continuing to think that they should not have to read it. Though these changes may seem small, they indicate fairly profound changes in some individuals, especially as several students moved more than one column over, shifting from “strongly agree” to “disagree,” for instance. Jacob, a second period student who does not usually read, wrote this on his pre-reading inventory: “It’s just another book we have to read for English.” His post-reading inventory reads, “One of the best books I’ve read in ELA.” The shift in numbers combined with comments like Jacob’s indicate that students’ understanding and even empathy increased after experiencing the text because they themselves changed their view on its value.

Furthermore, in group interviews, Henry, one student whose pre- and post-reading inventory responses differed, noted, “I’ve definitely had more empathy for the case for like slavery after reading like Frederick Douglass’s narrative because of the way that he talked about the horrors that happened while he was a slave and what he witnessed.” Josie agreed, adding, “Whites normally tell this story on, like slavery, and I feel like we don’t really hear enough about like, like African Americans, how like they were, and when we do, like, hear about it, we’re like, *oh, it couldn’t have been that bad*, even though, like, Frederick Douglass, like, wrote a narrative about his life.” In their post-reading inventories, several students echoed Josie’s observation about hearing a story of slavery from an authentic perspective. In both cases, students explicitly point out feeling more empathy and looking at a hard topic from a different point of view than they typically experience learning about that topic.

Together, this illustrates the ways that helping students see into the lives of others through literature can build their empathy.

Changing the curriculum I teach to explicitly explore students’ own worldviews and the worldviews of others has led my students to better understand themselves, their peers, and others who are different from them. They have become more open to hearing the viewpoints of others and seeking ways to understand and avoid judgement, building more empathy for their peers. Changing the curriculum I teach so that it consistently returns to an anchor text and so that it allows for consistent reflection time has led my students to care more about their learning, taking what we do in class and extending it beyond the classroom.

Discussion

As I considered the best way to write this section, it seemed that returning to my research questions made the most sense. I wanted to know how I would now answer them based on the work my students and I put in over these months, so that is the route I decided to take.

“How can teachers leverage curriculum to help their students explore and articulate their understanding of their own world views and then consider and explore the worldviews of others?”

Although I did not expect my students’ increased informal writing opportunities to have the impact that it did, my students’ responses made it clear to me that changing my curriculum to allow for more opinionative, journal-based writing offered them the opportunity to develop a more metacognitive understanding of their lives and identities, applying McLean Davies and Buzacott’s (2022) “relational literacy paradigm” by giving students the opportunity to explore first through writing how their understanding of the world interacts with someone else’s.

Connecting one consistent anchor text—*Braiding Sweetgrass*—to every unit we studied also helped students see how different narratives can intersect and interact with each other (McLean Davies & Buzacott, 2022). For many students, this opportunity led to greater open-mindedness both towards the views Wall Kimmerer expressed in *Braiding Sweetgrass* as well as to what their peers and classmates had to say during small group and whole class discussion. For some students, this open-mindedness extended into their perceptions of other texts we read, such as Douglass’s narrative, and even into conversations with their families outside of class.

As I decided how to support students in their exploration of their own worldviews, I opted to incorporate more personal projects that, as Katie said, allowed students to take a deep dive into their own ways of thinking. In some cases, I designed projects that I thought would

work to connect students' lives to both *Braiding Sweetgrass* and another text. In others, I took advantage of existing projects, specifically Unreserved, which tapped into the goal of developing better perspective-taking. Regardless, I took Dutro's (2019) advice on modeling vulnerability for my students. I created a worldview collage to share with them, explaining each element I chose even though sharing some parts of it, particularly my religious beliefs, felt awkward. This was probably due to the educational school of thought that I began my teaching practice in that positions teachers as neutral parties. The more sharing we did, the less discomfort I felt. I talked them through my creative process on my Unreserved Project, at a few points tearing up in front of my students—talking about one's hurdle is really hard!

Inviting students to explore and share parts of themselves—whether through writing, reading, or projects—also allowed them to see and take on the perspectives of others, demonstrating the power of English curriculum and the ways we implement it.

“How might a curriculum based on worldviews shape students' empathy?”

Changing the curriculum I teach so that it explicitly gives students vocabulary to articulate their own worldviews and those of others gave them the tools they needed to expand their ability to empathize. The opportunity to explore their own worldviews made my students more able to share their worldviews and consequently connect with their classmates' worldviews. Although my students likely have not reached Mirra's definition of critical civic empathy (2019), their empathy for their classmates did increase. Because my students have not expressed a desire to take political or social action on behalf of others, their empathy falls short of Mirra's definition. However, if I consider other elements of civic—what it means to be a citizen or have

good citizenship—it seems like a willingness to hear another’s side or opinions differing from one’s own are capabilities I would like citizens of our country to possess.

Furthermore, my project was partially motivated by starting small, with factors I have power to shape. Providing students with literacy experiences that help them explore what they “bring to the table when [they] seek to empathize with others” has at the very least helped some of them develop critical empathy (Mirra, 2018, p. 7). By “critical empathy” I mean students examine the way their experiences and stories influence the way they see and understand others’ experiences and stories. For me, the fact that they see their peers as humans with whom they share common stories shows how they have developed a greater capacity for empathy.

This empathy stretches into their readings of other texts, not just their interactions with each other. My findings align with other researchers (Dias, 2023, Dutro, 2019, Griffin & Schenk, 2023, and Sims Bishop, 1990) in that offering students literature that explores diverse, authentic perspectives and voices can increase their empathy. Making an Indigenous worldview central to the class underscored the value and importance of reading *Braiding Sweetgrass*—and exploring perspectives different from our own. Every assignment we completed in connection with *Braiding Sweetgrass* sent this message to students, and though many of them felt tension about encountering a worldview that might contradict or critique their own, they eventually opened their minds and hearts to hear what Wall Kimmerer and other authors have to say.

The shift in student responses to Wall Kimmerer over the course of the study as well as Douglass’s narrative demonstrate the ways that deliberately structured opportunities to interact with texts that explore worldviews different from students’ own can increase their willingness to move into the perspective of another (Mirra, 2019). This willingness has value today as social

media platforms increasingly silo consumers into hearing only the stories algorithms select for them based on previously liked content. This willingness has value today as our country becomes more divided along partisan lines, divisions that emphasize ad hominem attacks as the rule rather than the exception. Ideally, this willingness will eventually—for some students—possibly even lead to critical civic empathy.

How might such a shift in curriculum affect the ways students (re)engage with and/or care about their own and others' learning?

At the start of this research project, I predicted the responses to my first two questions with reasonable accuracy, but I made no guesses about this one. This was especially true when I saw my class rosters: my first period class consisted of mostly hardworking students who wanted to get As so they did not sign up for a more challenging AP class; my second period students consisted of several names I knew because they have been on intervention lists since they began their careers at LHS. In fact, Jacob spent about one day a week basically in time out with me during his freshman English class. I had prep, and his antics and energy overwhelmed his teacher, so I would take him off her hands and offer him a distraction-free zone. *What on earth was going to happen with these kids' engagement levels*, I wondered as the year began.

I should have had more faith in my students in both sections. My first impression of my first period students was that they mostly wanted to get the work done and get their grades. As student feedback demonstrates, though, they became much more involved in their learning due to the kinds of reading and writing assignments I designed for them, with several of them mentioning our informal writing practice during group interviews. Upon reflection, it seems like offering them the space to write what they felt gave them more agency to process their

challenges, experiences, and interactions with the texts and find solutions within themselves (Dutro, 2019, Petrone & Stanton, 2021).

Now, my second period class typically needed more reminders to stay on task and more scaffolding when it came to annotations and writing assignments, but once I provided those things, they dove in and have not stopped learning since. Students in this section also pointed out how much work they put into their notebooks, but I would like to consider Jacob's story a little bit more to serve as a demonstration of engagement.

Jacob was not eligible to play football this fall due to his grades from the spring term of 2024. This nearly led him to withdraw from school in the spring, but he returned this fall determined to get his grades up so that he could wrestle. He ended semester one with the highest grade he has ever gotten in English: he passed with a C-. Then he made a bad choice, got a DUI, and got kicked off the wrestling team; he almost dropped out. In fact, he took a few weeks off of coming to class regularly. He has been back every day for almost two weeks now, and he has come to my class twice a day to make up his missing work. He also took on the most challenging writing prompt for our literary analysis of *The Crucible*, choosing to connect the text to *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Though the connection I have with him undoubtedly encourages some of this behavior, he has indicated in conversations with his peers and with me that this is the first time he sees something valuable in English class. I am not convinced he would say that if I had not changed what and how I teach.

Conclusion

If I could change anything about this study, I would adjust the timeline of it so that I could draw on the entire school year's worth of students' responses to *Braiding Sweetgrass*. We will not reach one of the most challenging readings, "In the Footsteps of Nanabozho: Becoming Indigenous to a Place," for over a month. As I planned this unit in the summer of 2024, I felt very nervous about this reading assignment because it will certainly challenge some of my students' views on what it means to be native to a place, and many of them, whether Indigenous or not, see themselves as native to where we live. However, as I have grown alongside my students through the process of teaching, reading, and learning from *Braiding Sweetgrass*, I feel excited to hear their response to the text.

Taking a bigger-picture look at this study, its results call for further research on the impact of curriculum designed to explore worldviews and the effects it has on student engagement and empathy simply due to the small sample size and unusual elements of the school where I teach. I cannot help but wonder if other teachers would find similar results if they implemented similar strategies. However, I would say it is worth a try. Based on my experiences with students while we journeyed together through this research process, I can advise teachers to do two things: make space for reflective writing and choose an anchor text to return to throughout the year that offers students a completely different perspective on the world.

As a veteran English teacher, I know that there is nothing in the Common Core Writing Standards that includes reflective and informal writing. This is the only standard that kind of fits the type of writing my curriculum overhaul emphasized: "Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences." (Common Core State Standards,

2010). Mostly, the standards emphasize teaching students to maintain a formal tone and use specific writing techniques to better structure their writing. I am not advising stopping that practice! In fact, my students successfully wrote two formal essays that they took through the entire writing process, one a research paper and one a literary analysis on *The Crucible*, as well as an in-class essay on Douglass's narrative. We had time to do the writing expected by the standards as well as personal, reflective writing. Not one student mentioned their research paper during the group interviews, though they spoke at length about their personal writing in their journals and notebooks, making clear which writing matters more to them.

As I began planning how I would integrate *Braiding Sweetgrass* into the curriculum I teach, I felt pretty uncertain about it. Would students even remember the text if the chapters were so spread out? How could I possibly connect one book to every other unit we study in the class? Would students retain anything we learned from the reading if it was not concentrated into one unit? However, I knew something had to change, so I decided to make this big shift in my teaching. Based on my students' responses, my willingness to take a risk paid off in many ways. My students engaged more—not less—with the book because of how the readings have crossed units this year. The most challenging text to connect to *Braiding Sweetgrass* was *The Crucible*, but my students did really insightful work applying principles of reciprocity and mutual flourishing from “The Three Sisters” to analysis of a key character in the play, making strong arguments for how the play would have turned out differently had the character followed the principles Wall Kimmerer advocates for. One group even returned to a reading from early January, “Windigo Footprints,” in their analysis of John Proctor's character. Clearly, they remember concepts from the text.

Allowing students the opportunity to engage with perspectives different from their own—whether those perspectives come from published authors or their classmates—has helped my students develop a deeper understanding of themselves, a greater willingness to empathize with each other and with the authors we read, and a better sense of why their education matters. For these reasons, I urge teachers to incorporate more perspective-taking work into their coursework. In the past two years, my school has attempted various social and emotional learning (SEL) add-ons in a “flavor of the month” fashion. The flavor of this year consists of ten-minute lessons at the start of every second period class; last year’s flavor was CharacterStrong, a canned SEL curriculum. However, it seems like incorporating perspective-taking work into my curriculum accomplishes more in terms of teaching students SEL concepts than any of the add-ons we’ve tried. So, if your school and community laments your students’ inability to connect with each other in meaningful ways and you find systemic responses insufficient, control what you can—what you bring to your students in your classroom. And bring them more opportunities to engage with perspectives that vary from their own.

Perhaps my favorite benefit of adjusting the curriculum I teach has been the ways my students have grown together as a true learning community. Matt noted, “I like how the projects bring everyone closer in the class,” illustrating that the students can feel this growing sense of connection as well. I think it is safe to say that one thing that keeps teachers returning to their classrooms is seeing how their students grow, change, and mature. This project has helped me find new ways to help my students do all of those things, helping me return to my classroom despite the challenges facing so many educators right now.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

BRAIDING SWEETGRASS UNIT PLAN

Braiding Sweetgrass for Young Adults by Robin Wall Kimmerer, Adapted by Monique Gray Smith, Illustrated by Nicole Neidhardt

Objectives

- Clearly articulate (in writing and discussion) the worldview of a text or author.
- Engage respectfully with a variety of worldviews.
- Articulate (in writing, discussion, and multimedia modes) and refine your personal worldview.

Additionally, each reading selection will have objectives tied to the specific unit that houses the reading.

Essential Questions

- What does worldview mean?
- What factors influence an individual's worldview?
- How can differing worldviews interact, shift, and coexist?

Additionally, each reading selection will consider essential questions tied to the specific unit that houses the reading.

Description & Rationale

As students progress through the English 11 curriculum, they will explore readings from Monique Gray Smith's young adult adaptation of Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Each reading will connect thematically to other texts. Rather than confining Indigenous authors to one unit or segment of the curriculum, students will have the opportunity to continually check back in with "Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants" (the book's subtitle) throughout the year. Engaging with the text in this way will help teachers avoid tokenism, will help make the reading more manageable for students, and will help students draw more lasting connections.

MTCSS

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.11-12.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text, including those by and about American Indians, and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

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. (Include Shakespeare, works by American Indian authors, as well as other authors.)

W.11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

W.11-12.2.a Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information so that each new element builds on that which precedes it to create a unified whole; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

W.11-12.2.b Develop the topic thoroughly by selecting the most significant and relevant facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience’s knowledge of the topic.

IEFA Essential Understandings

3. The ideologies of Native traditional beliefs and spirituality persist into modern day life as tribal cultures, traditions, and languages are still practiced by many American Indian people and are incorporated into how tribes govern and manage their affairs.

Additionally, each tribe has its own oral histories, which are as valid as written histories. These histories predate the “discovery” of North America.

6. History is a story most often related through the subjective experience of the teller. With the inclusion of more and varied voices, histories are being rediscovered and revised. History told from American Indian perspectives frequently conflicts with the stories mainstream historians tell.

7. American Indian tribal nations are inherent sovereign nations and they possess sovereign powers, separate and independent from the federal and state governments. However, under the American legal system, the extent and breadth of self-governing powers are not the same for each tribe.

Guiding Concepts

The lessons in this unit are designed to be taught over the course of the school year, integrated into the English 11 curriculum consistently. For each section & reading, students will be able to articulate / identify Wall Kimmerer’s worldview, another author’s worldview, and their own worldview and thoughtfully compare, contrast, and draw connections among all three.

As students read, discuss, and explore local issues and Kimmerer’s text, they may find some ideas or content hard to process. To help with this, we will make use of “meta-moments” to process new learning (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p. 68).

Section 1 - What’s a worldview?	Integrate with Loss & Restoration Unit EQ: What does it take to build community? To preserve community? EQ:What are some causes of cultural misunderstandings? How can we alleviate them?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open class with an anticipatory guide that helps students explore ideas related to community, culture and worldviews. • Read & annotate “An Invitation to Remember” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Reading Purpose: Articulate three key elements of Wall Kimmerer’s worldview as expressed in the text. 	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Reflection: Note points of agreement and tension with your own beliefs. • Invite students to begin a collage project that answers these two questions: What is your worldview? What three elements have shaped your worldview the most? • Read & Annotate “Wiingaashk” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Reading Purpose: Articulate three key elements of Wall Kimmerer’s worldview as expressed in the text, noting how Wall Kimmerer uses grammar and style to convey her worldview. ○ Reflection: Note points of agreement and tension with your own beliefs. • Share worldview collages in a gallery walk style (unless that doesn’t seem fitting with your students) 	
<p>Section 2 - How did & do boarding schools impact Indigenous individuals, families, cultures, and languages?</p>	<p>Integrate with Loss & Restoration Unit OBJ: Identify federal policies related to Native American peoples and analyze how those policies have affected their lives, their descendants’ lives, and our country today.</p>
<p>Read & Annotate “The Council of Pecans”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading Purpose: Identify assimilation policies and their effects in the chapter. • Reflection: What current issues do people in your neighborhood have? How might you take collective action so that all people in your community are flourishing? (Wall Kimmerer & Gray Smith, 2022, p. 38) <p>Read & Annotate “Putting Down Roots”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading Purpose: Identify ways that Carlisle (and other boarding schools) affected Indigenous people who attended them AND how they continue to affect their descendants. • Reflection: There are truths in this chapter that might be new learnings for you about the history of Indigenous people in the United States. What is one learning you want to understand more about, and how will you do that? (Wall Kimmerer & Gray Smith, 2022, p. 234) <p>Synthesis: How may Wall Kimmerer’s family’s experiences with boarding schools shape her worldview?</p> <p>Extension: How does your school experience shape your worldview?</p> <p>Invite a guest speaker (get recommendation from Amy Williams, IIP Coordinator) to discuss local impact.</p>	
<p>Section 3 - How can we restore and conserve natural resources?</p>	<p>Integrate with Local Research Project EQ: What makes a place sacred? Why and how do these places change over time? How can we preserve these places?</p>
<p>Read & Annotate “Burning Cascade Head”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading Purpose: Identify ways that humans have modified the land and the impact that modification has had on other species. 	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reflection: How have humans shaped the Mission Valley? 	
<p>Section 4 - What factors influence/d our system of government? How could government be different?</p>	<p>Integrate with America's Foundations *Collaborate with US History teachers*</p> <p>EQ: How did America's founders define freedom? OBJ: Analyze rhetorical elements of a text</p>
<p>Read & Annotate "Allegiance to Gratitude"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading Purpose: Identify the worldview that underlines the Thanksgiving Address and note how Kimmerer compares it to the Pledge of Allegiance, analyzing her rhetoric as you re-read. Reflection: Note points of agreement and tension with your own worldview. 	
<p>Section 5 - What is "Windigo thinking"? How do the various laws regarding slavery in antebellum America demonstrate this worldview?</p>	<p>Integrate with America's Foundations (Frederick Douglass's Narrative)</p> <p>EQ: Why is slavery incompatible with the ideals Jefferson establishes in the Declaration of Independence? EQ: What must a person understand in order to be free?</p>
<p>After chapter 6 of the narrative, read & annotate "Windigo Footprints"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading Purpose: Explain what "Windigo thinking" is and articulate Wall Kimmerer's argument regarding capitalism. Reflection: How do we see Windigo thinking reflected in Douglass's narrative? Extension: Where do you see evidence of Windigo thinking in our own community today? (Kimmerer & Smith, 2022, p. 254) <p>After finishing the narrative, read & annotate "People of Corn, People of Light"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading Purpose: Identify and analyze Wall Kimmerer's claim regarding gifts & responsibilities. Reflection: Wall Kimmerer writes, "Language is our gift and our responsibility" (p. 264). How does this align with Douglass's narrative? How can you use the gift of language responsibly? <p>Personal/Placed Connection: Person of Corn Project</p>	
<p>Section 6 - What happens when we don't use our gifts for good?</p>	<p>Integrate with <i>The Crucible</i></p> <p>EQ: How do our actions reveal our true character?</p>
<p>Read & Annotate "The Three Sisters"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading Purpose: Explain how reciprocity leads to flourishing for beans, corn, and squash in a garden. Reflection: How might the relationship between the three sisters serve as a metaphor for human relationships? 	

Text Connection: Identify three key moments where the play could have had a different outcome had the characters focused on each others' flourishing.	
Section 7 - How can relationships be healing?	Integrate with <i>The Great Gatsby</i> / <i>Cinderella Man</i> EQ: What can help give life purpose and meaning?
<p>Read & Annotate "Witch Hazel"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading Purpose: Articulate what this story says to you about relationships. • Reflection: Wall Kimmerer writes, "Their friendship was medicine for each other" (p. 82). Identify someone with whom you feel you share a comparable relationship. Write a reflection on how your friendship is medicine. If you feel so moved, write them a note expressing your gratitude for their friendship. <p>Text Connection: Complete a thematic analysis connecting "Witch Hazel" and either <i>Gatsby</i> or <i>Cinderella Man</i></p>	
Section 8 - What does it mean to be native to a place?	Integrate with Place Narrative / <i>A River Runs Through It</i> EQ: What is a good life? EQ: How does a place shape us? What can we learn from a place?
<p>Read & Annotate "In the Footsteps of Nanabozho: Becoming Indigenous to a Place"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading Purpose: Explain what the text is saying about what it means to be indigenous (non-capitalization here is deliberate and reflective of how Wall Kimmerer writes) to a place. • Reflection: Note points of agreement and tension between the worldview that underlies this chapter and your own worldview. <p>Placed Connection: The place narrative invites students to explore, reminisce about, and write about a specific place that matters to them.</p>	
Section 9 - How can/should we shift our worldviews?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read and annotate "Defeating Windigo" • Reading Purpose: Explain how Wall Kimmerer argues people can "defeat Windigo" and analyze her argument. • Reflection: Engage with Wall Kimmerer's argument - agree, disagree, some blend of the two. <p>Personal/Placed Connection: Gratitude Project</p>	

APPENDIX B

GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How has our study of Braiding Sweetgrass helped you understand what worldviews are?
 - a. Follow-up: Have other assignments or readings we have done helped you understand worldview more than Braiding Sweetgrass? Explain.
2. As we have read *Braiding Sweetgrass*, I frequently ask you to note points of agreement and tension with Wall Kimmerer's ideas. For our first two readings, back in September, there was about a 50-50 split between agreement & tension. Later readings indicate more agreement than tension when I look at both classes as a whole. How has your response to Wall Kimmerer's ideas in Braiding Sweetgrass shifted as the year has progressed?
 - a. Follow-up: What are some examples?
3. To what extent has the work we have done in this class helped you understand your own worldviews better?
 - a. Follow-up: Looking over your worldview collage, what are somethings you might add or remove based on your understanding of worldviews now? Explain.
4. To what extent has the work we have done in this class helped you to be more open to worldview that are less familiar to you?
5. Empathy can be defined as "moving beyond oneself and into the perspective of another person" (Mirra, 2018). Do you feel like you have empathy for your classmates?
 - a. Follow-up: If yes, explain what that looks/feels/sounds like in your day to day life.
6. Have any texts we have read or assignments/projects we have completed helped you to develop more empathy?

- a. Follow-up: If yes, which ones? Why do you think that helped your empathy increase?
7. To what extent have these texts, projects, or assignments affected you outside of this class? Explain.
8. To what extent has studying Braiding Sweetgrass all year affected how much energy or thought you put into your class work?
 - a. Follow-up: Explain, elaborate, or provide examples.
9. It seems like some of you are more involved in your education this year compared to your freshmen or sophomore years. What are some reasons for that?
10. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the class, the curriculum, or your experiences this year?

APPENDIX C

STUDENT INTERVIEW EXCERPTS CODED BY KATRINA VENTERS

Thematic Coding of Interview Transcripts with Excerpts Completed by Katrina Venters

Theme	First Period	Second Period
Culture	<p>“I just think it's like, pretty interesting how like cultures and like tribes and all that have like different like perspectives and stuff.” – Katie</p> <p>“I like when they use the word kin [Katie: and Windigo] because it's, like a very I never even heard that word...how she used it.” – Josie</p>	<p>“I like agreed with [Wall Kimmerer's ideas] more, just because some of it was, like, close to how mine is. So I just felt like I connected more to it.” – Matt</p>
Perspective-Taking/ Understanding	<p>“I feel like <i>Braiding Sweetgrass</i> kind of makes you see the world sort of in a different perspective than you're used to, because we grow up mostly in white culture, and we are more subject to just like wanting to buy things and being in our own little worlds of the economy and stuff.” – Henry</p> <p>“And it's cool to like even the smallest thing, like talking about discussion questions. We all have, like, different paths. And sometimes it'll, like, be close, but then one person will have a different, like, way different opinion.” – Josie</p>	<p>“At first, some points [Wall Kimmerer] made...didn't make sense to me. And then as she continued explaining, like all her like personal stories it was just like, kind of like clicked into place.” – Jocelyn</p>
Connection	<p>“Reading, like, <i>Braiding Sweetgrass</i> helped me realize, like, oh yeah. Like, that's how that person lived.” – Katie</p> <p>“we talk a lot like as, even in our like, our small groups, and even when we, like, had assigned seating, and like, talking to different people, it opens up like, a different like, even when I'm talking like the same girls I talk to every day, Ariana and Maddie, their answers are like, different than what mine are.” – Josie</p>	<p>“Some world views could connect in like, some weird ways.” – Jocelyn</p> <p>“Class discussions for sure, like, it's gotten me from like I did only, like, share, like, certain things where, like, I don't like, I can share anything. Anyone can share anything. And it just gets, it's like, gotten us more comfortable with sharing with each other” – Ted</p>

Empathy	<p>“I've definitely had more empathy for the case for like slavery after reading like Frederick Douglass's narrative because of the way that he talked about the horrors that happened while he was a slave.” – Henry</p> <p>“And [Unreserved] was, like, really cool, like, learning about, like, other people, as I didn't really talk to, like, it was fun learning about... That was also fun, because you got to see like, every everybody's different lives [laughter] and stuff.” – Katie</p>	<p>“[The work in this class] helped me, like, understand [others' worldviews] more, for sure, because, like I said like before...when I first came here...I just cared about, like, what I thought... So I never really understood, like, when someone said something, I'd just be like, it'd be weird to me. But then, like, now it's like, I understand and I can relate.” – Ted</p> <p>“I like, how the projects, like, bring everyone closer, like, in the class.” – Matt</p>
Change	<p>“I feel like, ever since we've been doing this, when I disagree with something someone says, instead of arguing, I'll just kind of like, listen, and I'll be like, I'll try to see where they're coming from. Because sometimes, right away, you're just, your just natural instinct is just to fight back and just defend your self, defend your own opinion” – Ben</p> <p>“at first I was kind of just trying to stay, like, open minded...that's how some that's how somebody is, but like, that's probably not how, like, I would personally do it. And then later on, I was like, Oh, this is actually, like, kind of cool how, like they saw it.” – Katie</p>	<p>“I used to be very like disagreeing, like, I didn't really think like, I think it was just like your worldview is what's gonna affect you and everything else. And then reading it more and more, it gave me a deeper understanding of, like, how everyone's worldview connects to each other and like it's gonna like their worldview can also affect yours to make it like a better outcome.” – Ted</p> <p>“<i>Braiding Sweetgrass</i>, like, all of her like, like opinions and stuff is kind of like, made me, like, change my view of things, like nature and stuff.” – Leah</p>
Self-awareness	<p>“I actually like doing [Unreserved] a lot, because it like, helped me, like, understand, like, where exactly I came from, and, like, what something that, like, I was, like, a hurdle to me.” – Katie</p> <p>“I can write how, like, what I really want to say.” – Josie</p>	<p>“<i>Braiding Sweetgrass</i>, kind of like, helped me develop my own opinion on stuff like nature, the loss of culture” – Jocelyn</p> <p>“When we do like Braiding Sweetgrass, I like the questions we get asked, or like the objectives we have and like it makes you feel like, it makes us like, like, what's the</p>

		word expose us more and like, describe ourselves a lot better.” – Ted
Curriculum	<p>“I’m fine with this writing because it’s kind of like more opinionative, yes, because you’re asking, like, do you agree or disagree with Wall Kimmerer?” – Ben</p> <p>“So, like, with Braiding Sweetgrass, I like how you always like, find a way to, like connect it. Like with Frederick Douglass, like, there was, like, something that, like, kind of connected.” – Katie</p>	<p>“I think it’s cool though we have, like, one thing that stays the same as we always come back to just like reading this after, like, a big, huge project. That’s just cool.” – Leah</p> <p>“I also feel like this looks more into like, you personally, like it’s these projects. Aren’t just looking at like how you could do in school, and like how well you would do and like, like for like colleges and stuff. I feel like that’s just what the school is. They just want you in and out and just get into college just as soon as possible, I guess. And these projects feel like I looked into myself more, and I’m like, wow, this is, like, different, like, at first, it’s kind of hard.” – Jocelyn</p>
Engagement	<p>“I always talk to my mom every time we read <i>Braiding Sweetgrass</i>. I always go home and just, like, talk to her about, like, what we learned.” – Josie</p> <p>“I get tired of things really fast again...and if we keep doing the same thing in every single subject, like, yeah, this year math’s kind of been a little hard, [laughter] but...since we, like, space it out, because you’re spacing it out, go back to it not. I’m like, Oh, it’s this again. I feel like we haven’t done this in a little bit. And I’m not just like, when I open the book, I’m not just like, [exaggerated sigh] dang it, we have to do this again.” – Ben</p>	<p>“I know, with, like, my notebook, it’s like, it’s the most effort I put into, like, probably anything ever [laughter] like, I actually go into detail. It’s, I think it’s just something I’m kind of interested in.” – Jocelyn</p> <p>“At the beginning of the year, I, like, wasn’t that, like, focused on school, but like, reading, Braiding sweet grass, it like helped me, like, with my notes, and I’ve been doing, or trying to do, like better in all my classes.” – Matt</p>

APPENDIX D

STUDENT INTERVIEW EXCERPTS CODED BY CHAT GPT

Prompt: Good afternoon! I am a graduate student in Montana State University's Master of English Education program. I also teach high school English in a rural area and have done so for 14 years. As part of my capstone paper, I conducted group interviews with a group of four students from the class I teach and have been studying as part of my research process. I would like you to review the transcripts from that interview. I am KV. The other initials belong to students. Please try to identify 4-6 overarching or dominant themes within the students' responses to my questions. I have attached a PDF of the transcript to this query. Thank you!

Thematic Coding of 1st Period Interview Transcripts with Excerpts Completed by ChatGPT

First Period	
Expanded Understanding of Worldview and Culture	<p>"I probably would have never, like, known that. Like, oh, this is how they see this." – Katie</p> <p>"It helps us to see that." – Henry, referring to a land-based worldview.</p>
Increased Open-Mindedness and Perspective-Taking	<p>"At first I was kind of just trying to stay, like, open minded... later on, I was like, Oh, this is actually, like, kind of cool." – Katie</p> <p>"Even when you don't agree with her, you see the value in her points." – Katrina Venters, affirmed by students.</p>
Self-Reflection and Identity Exploration	<p>"It helped me, like, understand, like, where exactly I came from." – Katie</p> <p>"It was good to...deep dive into what I think." – Josie</p>
Growth in Empathy Through Literature and Community	<p>"I feel like that's adding to what Marshall said." – Josie, on Douglass and empathy</p> <p>"You got to see, like, other people's heritages and hurdles." – Katie</p>
Engagement through Student-Centered, Reflective Writing	<p>"It's kind of free, which means that I can write what I really want to say." – Josie</p> <p>"I'm fine with this writing because it's kind of like more opinionative." – Ben</p>
Enduring Impact and Transfer of Learning	<p>"I always talk to my mom every time we read Braiding Sweetgrass." – Josie</p> <p>"It's just kind of helped me open my perspective more." – Katie</p>

Thematic Coding of 2nd Period Interview Transcripts with Excerpts Completed by ChatGPT

Second Period

Expanded Understanding of Worldviews and Cultural Perspectives	<p>“I used to be very like disagreeing... then reading it more and more, it gave me a deeper understanding of, like, how everyone's worldview connects...” – Ted</p> <p>“I guess I didn’t really think about... how other cultures and other reservations are struggling.” – Jocelyn</p>
Shift Toward Open-Mindedness	<p>“I was more like my worldview... I just cared about, like, what I thought... But now... I understand and I can relate.” – Ted</p> <p>“At first, some points she made didn’t make sense to me... and then... it just kind of clicked into place.” – Jocelyn</p>
Personal Reflection and Identity Development	<p>“I did more things I liked, but I never went into depth... I would include more opinions too.” – Ted</p> <p>“These projects feel like I looked into myself more... I’m like, wow, this is different.” – Jocelyn</p>
Empathy and Respectful Dialogue	<p>“Even if you don’t agree... just like being respectful of that opinion.” – Leah</p> <p>“Everyone has their story... it’s not always their fault... so I always give someone the benefit of the doubt.” – Ted</p>
Deepened Engagement Through Relevance and Reflection	<p>“It’s the most effort I put into probably anything ever.” – Jocelyn</p> <p>“Even though I don’t... like taking notes... it helps you write about yourself and expose yourself.” – Ted</p>
Community and Connection Through Curriculum	<p>“The projects... bring everyone closer in the class.” – Mattt</p> <p>“All of it’s been very opinionated... not many teachers do that.” – Ted</p>

APPENDIX E

STUDENT SHIFTS IN AGREEMENT VS. TENSION

As we read *Braiding Sweetgrass*, I ask students as part of their reflection to note points of agreement or tension between themselves and the text if that style fit the chapter and the context of our reading. This table tracks how students responded to each reading.

Student Response to Early Readings

	10/10/2024 “An Invitation to Remember”			10/14/2024 “Wingaashk”		
	Agreement	Tension	Confusion	Agreement	Tension	Confusion
1st	10	8	1	5	9	1
2nd	9	3	1	7	2	1
Both	19	11	2	12	11	2

Student Response to Mid-Study Readings

	11/8/2024 “Burning Cascade Head”			12/13/2024 “Allegiance to Gratitude”		
	Agreement	Tension	Confusion	Agreement	Tension	Confusion
1st	6	5	1	4	8	
2nd	4	2	0	3	3	
Both	10	7	1	7	11	

Student Response to Later Readings

	2/7/2025 Story Reciprocity’s Value (Unreserved)			3/11/2025 “The Three Sisters”		
	Agreement	Tension	Mixed	Agreement	Qualified Agreement	Disagree
1st	11	1	4	9	5	0
2nd	8	1	2	8	2	
Both	19	2	6	17	7	0

APPENDIX F

STUDENT INVENTORY RESULTS

Students completed the same inventory twice: once in late September and once in mid-January.

The table below includes the inventory statements as well as student responses.

SA: Strongly Agree; A: Agree; D: Disagree; SD: Strongly Disagree

Student Inventory Responses

Inventory Statement	SA	A	D	SD
Our individual identities are shaped more by our communities than by our personal choices.				
Inventory 1 Totals	1	19	8	2
Inventory 2 Totals	5	16	12	1
Our worldviews are shaped not only by our personal experiences but also by the cultural and historical contexts we are part of.				
Inventory 1 Totals	14	15	2	0
Inventory 2 Totals	9	22	1	0
Communities are made up of people who are more or less the same.				
Inventory 1 Totals	1	16	10	4
Inventory 2 Totals	3	13	16	3
Diversity (differences in race, culture, religion, language, etc.) is important.				
Inventory 1 Totals	15	13	3	0
Inventory 2 Totals	17	12	4	0
Culture is a lens through which we view the world, and it influences our perceptions and actions.				
Inventory 1 Totals	5	20	5	1
Inventory 2 Totals	5	24	4	0
Joining a community means you have to give up some of your individual identity.				
Inventory 1 Totals	2	1	20	8
Inventory 2 Totals	0	6	19	9
A strong community can provide support and a sense of belonging, but it can also pressure individuals to conform.				
Inventory 1 Totals	9	19	2	0
Inventory 2 Totals	8	23	2	0
Communities have certain rules for membership. Not just anyone can belong.				
Inventory 1 Totals	4	11	11	4
Inventory 2 Totals	3	11	11	8
People who occupy the same space, such as a neighborhood, all belong to the same community.				
Inventory 1 Totals	1	14	11	4
Inventory 2 Totals	1	15	16	1
Understanding and respecting cultural differences is crucial for building a harmonious society.				

Inventory 1 Totals	11	18	2	0
Inventory 2 Totals	13	17	4	0
Engaging with diverse perspectives can challenge our assumptions and lead to deeper understanding.				
Inventory 1 Totals	9	22	0	0
Inventory 2 Totals	12	20	1	0
Dialogue and discussion about different worldviews can help bridge divides and build stronger communities.				
Inventory 1 Totals	8	23	0	0
Inventory 2 Totals	11	22	0	0
I belong to a community where people care about me and my well-being.				
Inventory 1 Totals	6	20	2	1
Inventory 2 Totals	8	22	0	3
I care about members of my own community and their well-being.				
Inventory 1 Totals	15	12	2	1
Inventory 2 Totals	14	17	2	0