



***Who Am I, and Who Do I Hope to Become:  
Identity through an English Classroom***

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This curriculum unit is recommended for:  
English Classrooms, 8-12

**Keywords:** Identity, arts infusion, characterization, writing, intrinsic motivation, self-concept, self-discovery, engagement,

**Teaching Standards:** See [Appendix 1](#) for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

**Synopsis:** This unit is designed as an arts infused exploration of student's identity through the conduit of a high school English course. This unit features research about identity, arts infusion, and authentic curriculum. This unit contains stand-alone lesson plans geared around writing, and speaking/listening standards for the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> grade classroom. These lessons are fun and challenging activities that develop students' self-concept as well and giving them practice in writing.

*I plan to teach this unit during the coming year to 75 students in Honors English I.*

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## **Who Am I, and Who Do I Hope to Become? Identity through an English Classroom**

*Andy Wertz*

### **Introduction**

#### Rationale

The idea for this unit came as my class was reading *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. In this novel, the protagonist, Junior, struggles to find his identity because he doesn't fit in with the people at his home on the Spokane Indian Reservation, nor does he fit in with the white kids at his high school, Reardon. Like any bildungsroman, Junior has an internal conflict of trying to find himself while dealing with external forces pressuring him to conform. In the novel, there is a quote – “Life is a constant struggle between being an individual and a member of the community.”<sup>i</sup> As I found my students and myself grappling with this theme, many of my students felt personally connected to the idea. Many of my students found themselves relating to the sense of isolation, confusion, and push and pull between being their truest selves and representing their communities. As ninth graders deal with puberty, acclimating to high school dynamics, and their growing independence, a teacher would ignore at their own peril this emotional baggage students bring to class.

This unit was created to give students a better understanding of how they fit into the world while also aiding their development in reading and writing. From a character education standpoint, this unit will teach students valuable, authentic lessons about their own identity. Since ninth grade, and high school in general, is a crucial developmental time towards one's identity, teachers cannot ignore this crucial crisis in the learner's life. Understanding this helps teacher emotionally connect to their students which then prompts greater gains in content mastery.

This unit is not a standalone unit that would be a typical lens through which a novel is taught, but rather acts a not-so-hidden curriculum spanning the course. At the beginning of the semester, even before the idea of this unit came about, students are told: know thyself. This idea was first introduced to me through my Liberal Studies Class at Queens University of Charlotte, but has rung true for students for millennia. If one is able to grasp this idea better, one may better navigate through the world and that is when we become self-actualized. This is my goal for students beyond advancing their writing composition skills, and making them proficient readers. Therefore, this unit is designed to consist of many mini lessons, activities paired with texts, and writing components that will challenge students as well as grow their emotional intelligence. While the unit will use many familiar teaching strategies, they will be paired with topics that are explicitly engaged in students discovering their own identities and challenging their beliefs about how they fit into the world so they can grow.

## School/Student Demographics

I teach Honors English I at a magnet school for STEM in Charlotte, NC. I have taught there for four years. I have taught AP English Language and Composition, English III, and Literature and Film as well as English I. Overall the school is filled with motivated students who are engaged and invested in their own learning. Students from all over Mecklenburg county enter a lottery to occupy a seat at our school. Since the school was founded in 2002, it has served mostly low-income, racial and ethnic minority students. There are 1662 currently enrolled students with 67.4% being African-American, 21.3% being Hispanic, 4.6% being Asian, and 3.7% being white. In the past students must have been on grade level with reading and math End-of-Grade assessments from middle school, but this year, that entry requirement has been removed.

Our school requires students to opt-in to one of three different academies focusing on Information Technology, Biomedical Health Sciences, or Engineering, and they must pass their Career and Technical Education courses to continue at our school. This has led to students doing wonderful things with robotics, and forensics to highlight a couple courses. My classroom ranges in sizes from 22-29 students, and is designed to be a welcoming space where students are challenged with rigor but supported with a safety net. The freshman who come represent a variety of middle school experiences, and a good portion of the beginning of my semester is bringing everyone to the same page and reviewing middle school concepts some students were never taught. By the end of the semester, students engage with three to four longer texts as a class and one self-selected novel completed in literature circle groups. I was motivated to create this unit to supplement this reading rigor with more writing across the semester, and unite that with a theme that would engage students.

## Unit Goals

The broad goal of this unit are to help students to grow as writers. Students will be challenged to write in typical and novel ways to practice their writing. This unit asks students to understand through writing how author's employ characterization, develop and support their main ideas with key details, make deliberate decisions about word choice, and structure their events in the novels. They need to do this all while using textual evidence to support their answers. When students are asked about their own identities they should be more engaged causing them to perform better in the writing assignments.

The connection between NC Common Core Standards and this unit deal with the writing standards for ninth through tenth grade ELA standards as well as reading literature standards 3 and 8, understanding characterization and cultural representations respectively. Since author's choice of characterization is essentially the identity of characters, this will allow students a safe way to analyze identity in texts before looking inward. In the essential question of how we represent and fit into groups while also being ourselves, students will need to understand group dynamics and cultures. Over the course of the unit, students will encounter many different cultures and be asked to identify different ways groups allow individuality. As they see the differences in *Romeo and Juliet* contrasted against group dynamics in *Night* they will begin to apply that knowledge into looking at the groups they identify with. Though these novels are not

explicitly taught as part of the unit, they accompany the lessons contained. This unit can easily be adapted to work with any longer texts the teacher has in their curriculum.

For the writing standards ELA.9-10.W.2-4, students will be assessed and practice with various modes of writing, all through the central focus of identity. For example, I always assign as the first essay of the semester a prompt that asks students to respond about who they are as a person. After assessing the essays, one can notice the student authors need help in both writing stylistics as well as in going in depth in the content. Some examples of prompts are “In what ways has life been the perfect teacher for you,” or “Who are you, and who do you hope to become?” Students often begin the year by giving facile responses to who they want to become by giving jobs, but not exploring the full theme of identity. It is likely they have never been asked to explore and write about their dislikes, hobbies, or passions. Because they are not able to dig deep with the question they often find themselves stretching in the writing, and that leads to repetitiveness, an overload of simple syntaxes, and underdeveloped evidence. While this unit is not going to address all areas of writing composition, it will help students develop their content in a meaningful way so that they are giving deep, relevant, and personal responses.

In terms of character education, a valuable but left out section of the Common Core standards, another goal of this unit would be to have students to be able to grow in their understandings of their own and other’s identities. This should aid them in being able to learn how to respect each other so they aren’t using a one-size-fits-all approach to treating other people, rather they will be able to understand that they should adapt their behaviors to fit people and situations better. The unit will also provide a lot of vocabulary to students so they can better express their truest selves.

## **Content Research**

### **Identity**

In this industry-centered culture of the United States of America, work is intrinsically tied to identity. It’s why one of the first questions we ask someone new is “What do you do for work?” and not “Who is your family” or “What do you value?” My identity as a teacher has informed the way I perceive the world so far as to even shaping my vocabulary to include certain jargon and buzzwords. One of the reasons this CTI seminar has been so informative is because it has pushed my understanding out of this box into not only learning about myself fully, but also in expressing that complete part. How often do we even get asked about the story of our names for instance?

That is but one example of the great prompts this seminar has provided to help develop my own introspection. Over the course of the seminar, these topics have been better explored in my own identity, and this has been done by approaching the big idea of identity and breaking it into manageable chunks. Mainly these chunks are subcategories such as gender, sexuality, name, death but also by asking questions such as “How does identity change,” “Do I always have to have you around,” or “What are your fears?” These questions are not those that required a fixed answer, but rather prompt the answerer to think about how their answers have changed and developed over time. The person I once was will never answer the way I do now, and surely next

year, I will look back at this and say the same thing about this point in time. Thus this unit can be seen as breaking down these larger issues of identity similarly so that students will not be overwhelmed by the content. Students in the ninth grade are just starting to develop their independence, and may not have considered many of the prompts contained in this unit. They will surely have many questions and need a considerable time to reflect. This post structural approach is the prevalent way this unit will tackle the big idea of identity.<sup>ii</sup>

Imperatively, the teacher of this unit must have a firm grasp on their own identity before introducing the ideas to their students. A teacher is the utmost model in the classroom, and they will have to model many of the self-reflections. This also helps students get to know their instructor better and allows them to build more of an emotional connection which has been proven to grow students. After teachers introduce the concept, they should have fun completing these activities for examples for their students and also being able to better explain the metacognitive strategy needed for students to do this kind of introspection. This should inevitably lead to the aforementioned goal: what the Ancient Greek philosophers sought at the root of their understanding of the world – to know thyself. We are all students of this maxim for our entire lives; student, teacher, and anyone must grapple with their understanding of themselves and how they fit into the world for their entire lives. It is from this knowledge that wisdom springs forth, and then we can grow into Maslow's vision of self-actualized self. This idea is inherent to this unit's central goals, rationale, and implementation of this unit.

### Identity through Art

Particularly insightful were the different artistic exercises that accompany the lessons. Through different arts, one is given a medium to explore oneself. Art presents a delightful challenge to explore at once the medium and idea contained therein. Many of the activities from the seminar have been adapted to fit inside this curriculum unit. A particular example is a name story exercise at the beginning of the semester designed to give students a welcome to claim the curriculum as their own by interjecting personal details in creating a welcome environment.<sup>iii</sup> Central to this seminar is the idea of art as the canvas to exploring identity, and indubitably many literacy/English teachers will have reticence to implementing full art lessons in this classroom. This unit will not ask teachers to provide explicit instructions about elements of line, color, and shape, but will ask students to draw on prior knowledge of these concepts. Students may not be graded on these ideas, but will in some situations be graded on effort, organization, and clarity and presentation. But for the sake of simplicity, it should be presupposed that writing is one of the highest art forms there is.

Literary critic and poet, W.H. Auden, proposed that writing is perhaps the hardest medium for excellence in art because it is a medium used by everyone around the globe, and anyone can be an expert at the tool, unlike sculpture, where a few have the expertise needed to wield the tools to convey an idea. He claims that it is the job of the author to take words that are every day and arrange them in a fashion that is enlightening and surprising, and I add, clear enough to make the reader question why they were never that way to begin with.<sup>iv</sup> Yet also in film, portraiture, opera, and ballet, it is easy to see how central the idea of identity is to the artist. The art is an expression of that artist's identity. In this seminar, the class has examined different artists who self-express not just as a means to an end, but for the sake of self-expression itself.<sup>v</sup>

## Arts Infusion to Create Authentic Curriculum

For my students in particular it is important to use this art based approach because it allows them to engage in authentic curriculum, and allows them opportunity to engage in the arts where they might not. At Phillip O Berry, we have one art teacher for nearly 1,700 students and that is nowhere near enough, but it is all we can staff with such an emphasis and diversity of career and technical education courses. Many of my colleagues in this seminar are one of five art teachers at similarly sized schools. Most students at Phillip O. Berry do not get to take art until they are seniors and that is to their loss. Gormley and McDermott found where arts were once present, many have excluded them for current curriculum because of the stress of common core standards, and however they also found that most teachers and parents would agree “the creative arts are essential for children's education and development.”<sup>vi</sup> Carney, et al. found that students when exposed to curriculum in a literacy classroom that was infused with arts-based strategies “scored dramatically higher on standardized tests for language skills.”<sup>vii</sup> Carney, et al. found schools with underserved populations, particularly relevant for my school, needed this arts infusion because it was a powerful learning tool. Beyond the sake of art, these “methodologies woven into teachers' classroom instruction use art to help students who may be struggling with learning access information in a more tangible way.”<sup>viii</sup> This data to support test scores creates a sound argument for the arts infusion in this unit towards parents and administration who may question why such an approach is warranted in a literacy centered classroom.

Engaging students in an authentic curriculum is key to their mastery, and arts infusion is a great way to achieve this. Authentic curriculum is culturally responsive to the needs of students so it must be extremely relevant and what is more relevant to students than themselves?<sup>ix</sup> An example of this would be to have students write an autobiography instead of biography on someone else. Pitts found that this become a “model for discovery and creation of a self through the writing process.”<sup>x</sup> If the goal is to teach students the writing process and developing a main idea with adequate support, there is no reason why this prompt wouldn't be extremely successful in engaging students. Pitts also implemented an identity centered curriculum to her classroom study in 1988 and found that by having students read and write multiple fragments about their own identity led to eventually “creating an identity from the textual fragments.”<sup>xi</sup> Further supporting this argument of identity as authentic curriculum, Kristina Scharp thought this subject “foster[s] engagement with course concepts that would be practically useful to students.”<sup>xii</sup> These literacy activities have children invest “creates a space for them to construct their identity.”<sup>xiii</sup> This unit tries to successfully integrate this concept of authentic curriculum as important to develop their identity as artists and reader/writers.

## Personal Milieu as a Response to Literature

Reader's response theory grew out of opposition to traditionalist New Criticism which focused analysis solely on the text.<sup>xiv</sup> This movement of literary criticism posits that readers “are not passive spectators; rather, they are actively engaged” in the process of reading.<sup>xv</sup> This leads directly into what teachers know about active reading when students are not merely skimming. When teachers get students to invest themselves in the reading, therefore their comprehension should improve. Reader's response theory has found its way into the high school classroom

through questions like “What would you do if you were the protagonist,” or “Does the protagonist value the same things as you?” These higher level thinking questions on Bloom’s Taxonomy not only ask students to analyze what the protagonist is doing or what the protagonist values, but also to place a value judgment on them and relate the story back to themselves. It is this kind of teaching that we should strive for where we have the rigor in place.

Part of this work on having students respond to the text in a meaningful, authentic way in a Reader’s Response classroom means that student’s identities will inherently be a part of their discussion. Roscoe and Al-Marooqi found in their studies that “students’ identities marked their interpretations, predictions, associations, and judgments.”<sup>xvi</sup> This finding exemplifies “the importance of using students’ cultural knowledge in literature classes to facilitate interaction and the meaning-making process.”<sup>xvii</sup> Therefore, one can conclude that it is rather inevitable student’s identities will be an unseen factor in developing their critical responses. One may also conclude a teacher needs to acknowledge and grow student’s understandings of their own personal milieu and how that subtly effects their response.

This means in the classroom that teachers need to grow their student’s awareness of their own personal values, biases, and experiences, and how those things indeed effect their reading. This may not mean that teachers are asking students to place themselves in the shoes of every character nor to focus solely on what the reader feels rather than a textual analysis, but like all things in life, a balance is needed. Here, the balance must exist between textual analysis and reader’s response. When these two things are balanced, students will be able to understand “clearly that students’ identity was inextricably intertwined with their reading comprehension of the story.”<sup>xviii</sup>

However, teachers must then recognize how a diversity of cultural experiences need to be reflected in the texts that students read. It is so fundamental that deconstructing stereotypes, and displaying a wide berth of cultures is a part of the evaluation tool for NC teachers. As a male, white and Hispanic teacher in a predominantly ethnic minority school, do I not have an ethical responsibility to choose readings that reflect the cultural experience of my students? Deconstructing the canon is a very trendy matter in post-structural theory for English students at the college level, but can that same conversation not be had in a ninth grade classroom? Coming from different middle schools, it is safe to assume my students have a breadth of experience with the matter. Some may have had very culturally responsive teachers, while some may have teachers who mostly choose from the canon of old, straight, white men. Jeanne Dyches found that “diverse curricula grants students an opportunity to see their own experiences (mirrors) and the experiences of others (windows) reflected in literature.”<sup>xix</sup> In this windows and metaphors discussion of teaching curriculum, it seems obvious to want to select novels featuring people of color, or with LGBTQIA characters, but what is one to do when the district or school prescribes canonical readings or even forbids it?

That is why teachers of this unit must see the vital human connections between us all in the context of identity. I have found myself in characters that are completely opposite of me in terms of demographics: Edna from *The Awakening*, Hamlet, Pi Patel from *the Life of Pi*, and Anna Karenina. It’s not that I am prevented from seeing parts of myself in the situation of an upper class, straight Russian woman, but that I was able to see those intangible qualities that are

at the heart of every great character. However I have had the exact opposite experience when I read a character who is completely illustrative of being a gay, white, cis-gendered male such as that of Elio in *Call Me by Your Name*, or the poetry of Walt Whitman. At the risk of being repetitive, a balance of reading is needed coupled with explicit instruction on the matter of identity. After the mini-lessons included in this unit plan, students should begin to grasp how they can see themselves in any character.

### Discovering Identity through Writing

Each individual carries with them the baggage of representing a group of people in this world, and that directly informs the lens through which we see the world. In the microcosm of the classroom, student's perceptions of literature is directly impacted by their personal group dynamics. This is also true for their writing. The personal narrative aforementioned in the goals and rationale section is one of the three major essays students will have to write in their ninth grade English class, including an objective research paper, and explanatory text revolving around a novel read in class. The skill to be able to write about one's self is important for interviews, college applications, and life. It is important that these are not the student's first foray into writing about their identity; it is necessary as a ninth grade teacher to begin to scrape the subject of writing about identity so that when the time comes to write an entrance essay for college, the student has already had practice with the issue.

Successful writing instruction teaches students about the process of identifying their purpose and audience, and modifying their writing to fit the subject.<sup>xx</sup> Mary Ryan argues that this is how students should be taught. She argues that writing is “a performance whereby writers shape and represent their identities as they mediate social structures and personal considerations.”<sup>xxi</sup> It's true that examining one's writing is a window into the way their brain operates and processes language. Students in my classroom are taught that people will judge them based on their writing because it serves as a first impression in many paramount circumstances. If we consider art as the expression of the self, then naturally we must teach our young writers to modify the way want to be perceived.

### **Instructional Implementation –**

#### Teaching Strategies

Many adolescent students find themselves asking the questions of who they are, how they fit in, and what they want to be. However, these questions can be so foreboding that students won't be able to answer them. The lessons in this unit are designed to give students chances to grapple with the titular question in manageable chunks so they are not stumped when it comes time to write the culminating letter describing who they are. These lessons also give chances to have students address these topics through their writing.

While not directly mentioned in the following activities, direct instruction covering the big writing topics: grammar; including evidence; organization; and stylistics should accompany the writer's workshop model. See the resources at the end for guides on this direct instruction. Peer editing is also an extremely helpful tool, but many students will find their work too personal



to be readily shared with their peers. The teacher will have to gauge their students individually to be able to address these needs.

Related directly to the goals of this unit and to work with the arts-deprived population at Phillip O. Berry Academy, these lessons all work with some art based medium whether visual art, or creative writing. Arts infusion is not a new teaching strategy, but is a research driven approach that allows students a chance to grapple with concepts on the higher end of Maslow's hierarchy.

### Classroom Lessons

The following classroom lessons are designed to engage students in discovering their self-concept while also being challenged through rigorous, standards-aligned activities. Most of these activities can be implemented during instructional time, or assigned as homework. Almost all of the lessons include a student presentation component to strengthen student's speaking and listening skills. Most of these lessons infuse art into the student's study, and should have thorough modeling of the finished product to support students with transferring their ideas from a conceptual framework.

#### *Name Stories*

This lesson was adapted from a presentation by Adriana Medina.<sup>xxii</sup> Further resources can be found through the Rethinking Schools publication,<sup>xxiii</sup> and through a reusable, public presentation by Teresa Tyra<sup>xxiv</sup>

**Rationale:** Students need to read engaging literary texts as well as be able to write narrative about their own lives (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2). This activity will help the teacher and students learn each other's names and build a positive classroom culture.

#### Procedure:

1. Divide the class into groups of four and supply each group member with a different text about names; the texts are an excerpt from the *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, "Sam Austin" by Sam Austin, "Untitled" by Bakari Chavanu, "If I had been called Sabrina or Ann, she said" by Marge Piercy.
2. Each member should read the story independently and write down in their journals how each author chose to write about their names considering the following:
  - Memories
  - Meaning
  - Anecdotes
  - Feelings
  - Nickname, first name, last name, changing a name
  - Poetry
  - Prose
  - How and why it was chosen
  - If he/she could change it

3. Have students rotate and complete the analysis three more times until each student has read each text.
4. Have group members report out to each other and come to a consensus about how each author chose to write about their name.
5. Begin a class-wide discussion about each author and differences across cultures about naming conventions, and instances when names were denied to groups of people.
6. Students will write out their own name story anyway they want. The only boundary is that students must write about their names.
7. Students will read drafts of their writing.
8. Students should complete an exit ticket that asks
  - What were commonalities you noted?
  - What were differences you noted?

### *Identity Boxes*

A variation of this activity would be for students to make an identity box for a character in a text they are reading.

Rationale: Identity boxes is a lesson that asks students to strengthen their skills with symbolic meaning, nuances of language, and their writing skills while offering an enriching activity about their own identity. Students are expected to be able to write about complex ideas, explain, and defend their thinking (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1).

### Procedure:

1. Students will take a small, empty box, and decorate it to show who they are. On the outside of the box, students will cover it with words that represent who they are. In the inside of the box students should put three words that people might not be able to notice about them from the inside as to have students explore the idea about how people perceive them.
2. Students should also place a few meaningful objects in the box that represent something about who they are.
3. Students then present the boxes, either in small groups or whole class.

### *Word Clouds*

A variation of this activity would be to have students enter their letters to themselves (the pre-assessment) and see what words are most magnified through repetition on the word cloud services.

Rationale: Students should be able to choose the best words and phrases that symbolically represent them (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.5). Students should be able to choose a visual symbol that represents them. Students should be able to understand the difference between how people see them and how they see themselves.

Activity:

1. Students should be directed to make a list of words that describe how they see themselves. Have them make this list by continuously writing, without stopping, for five minutes.
2. After students have made their lists, have them highlight the words that they feel best would represent them to someone they've never met.
3. Have students make another list of words that people would use to describe them. Have the lists be approximately equal in length.
4. Direct students to a website such as wordclouds.com or wordle.net. They should then enter the first list and choose a shape for their word cloud.
5. They should repeat step four, but this time for the list of words people would use to describe them.
6. Have students either print or share their electronic word clouds with the teacher.

*Our Bags, Their Stories*

Rationale: Students need to be able to write imagined narratives (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2). Having students characterize an object's identity will give them a fresh perspective to the ways people see other people.

Activity:

1. Have students empty the contents of their backpack and make a list of all the objects in their backpack or purse. Have them sort this list into two different categories: personal or academic.
2. Tell students that as they place the objects back in their bag to imagine what it is like to be their backpack. Ask the following questions for them to consider in their thinking:
  - Do you think your backpack is tired?
  - How useful is your bag to you?
  - What is its purpose for creation?
  - If your bag had a voice, what would it sound like?
  - If your bag had a haircut, what would it be?
  - If your bag could tell you anything, what would it be?
  - What does the design of your bag tell one about its personality?
3. Tell students we are now going to write "A Day in the Life" from the perspective of the bag. They will have to use first person pronouns and develop a characterization, voice, and style that represent the bag.
4. Have students write the story from waking up to going to sleep.
5. After students have finished, have them switch papers with a partner. Without seeing the bag, have students draw what they think the bag would like with anthropomorphized features.
6. Switch papers back to the original owners and have students present to someone wearing the same color shoes as them, but not sitting at their table/group.
7. Lead students to write down their answers and then discuss the questions:
  - What outside factors do people use to characterize us?

- Would the story be different if you could only see what is on the outside of the bag? The inside?
- What assumptions did you make about the bag's gender, socio-economic status, or other demographic factors?

### *Six-Room Poem*

This is adapted from “Awakening the Heart” by Georgia Heard<sup>xxv</sup>.

Rationale: Students should be able to engage in writing poetic texts to express complex ideas about their identity (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4). Breaking up a large poem into a foldable will make the material less intimidating for students.

### Procedure:

1. Have students grab a blank, white piece of paper and fold it down the middle, and then fold into thirds so that the page when unfolded has six equal sections. Have students use each section of the paper as “rooms” and complete the tasks below:
2. “Room Number 1: Think of something that you have seen outside that is amazing, beautiful, interesting, or that has just stayed in your mind. Close your eyes and try to see it as clearly as a photograph-notice all the details about it-and describe it as accurately as you can in room number one. Don't think about writing a poem, just try to describe your object as specifically as possible.
3. Room Number 2: In room number two, think about the same object/image, but focus on the quality of light. For example: Is the sun bright? Or is it a dull, flat day? Are there any shadows? If it's unclear what the light is like you might have to use some poetic license and make it up. You can also describe colors.
4. Room Number 3: Picture the same object/image and focus only on the sounds. Are there any voices? Rustling of leaves? Sound of rain? If it's silent-what kind of silence? Empty? Lonely? Peaceful?
5. Room Number 4: Write down any questions you have about the image. Is there anything you want to know more about? Or wonder about?
6. Room Number 5: Write down any feelings that you have about this same object/image.
7. Room Number 6: Look over the five rooms you have already created and select one word, or a few words, Q phrase, a line, or a sentence that feels important and repeat it three times.
8. Read over what you wrote in the six rooms, and then see if you can create a poem. You can rearrange the rooms in any order; eliminate rooms, words, or Sentences.”<sup>xxvi</sup>
9. Have students read their poems to each other or collect the work to assess.

### *Illuminated Letters*

Part of my class curriculum is assigning students pen pals with a local fifth grade class. The students write letters to each other to introduce themselves, describe their goals, discuss readings,

and answer students' questions about high school. The following lesson gives students a chance to practice friendly letter format which they will use for their summative assessment as well as practice writing about themselves. The illumination should be a fun way to have students be expressive. A variation if the class does not have pen pals would be to have students write to each other or write to the teacher.

Rationale: Students should be able to write in friendly letter format for college and career readiness (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4). This assignment gives students practice writing about themselves before their summative assessment.

Procedure:

1. Show students an example of a letter, such as a letter to a college admissions officer, or a cover letter for a job interview. Explain to students the necessity of being able to write a complete, well-wrought letter for their future interviews and for their college applications.
2. Model through the projector, document camera or on the board how to set up a letter including the header, date, addressee, from line and signature.
3. Have students practice on their paper following along. Students will have been assigned their pen pal so they will address it to them.
4. Go around and approve a few students' letters and deputize them to go around the room and make sure that everyone has written their letter in the correct format.
5. Have students answer the following questions in the body of their letter:
  - How old are you?
  - Where are you a student?
  - Who lives in your house with you?
  - What book are you currently reading?
  - What is your plan after you graduate high school?
6. Have students also ask their pen pal in the letter to describe themselves and what their goals are.
7. Add the illumination: show students examples of illuminated manuscripts by showing pictures from google.
8. Make students illuminate their letter by embellishing the first letter of the body, add images to the marginalia, and any other design elements to make it aesthetically pleasing.
9. Collect the letters and give students feedback so they know where to improve before the final letter. See Appendix 2 for rubric.

## Assessments

### *Pre-assessment*

Students' pre-assessment will be completed as part of their summer reading project. This will ensure that the big idea of identity will be noticed by students from the first day of the class. Even without a summer reading project, this essay could still be assigned to assess student's ability to write informative texts (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2). Thorough feedback should be provided to each student to accompany the rubric so they can learn the weak points of

their writing. Have students set goals for their writing with frequent checkpoints such as evaluations for the aforementioned lessons in writing.

Assignment: Select one of the choices and compose a personal essay in response. Your writing must be a typed, well-developed and organized piece of writing which demonstrates your command of the English language (no serious grammar errors). Your response should be 500 words minimum.

- In what ways has your life up to now been the perfect teacher for you?
- Discuss a mistake you have made and how it has helped you to grow.
- How do you want to improve yourself both academically and personally over the next year?
- Who are you and who do you hope to become?
- What does your education mean to you?

Rubric: See Appendix 3.

### *Summative Assessment*

Students will complete a letter to themselves as the summative assessment for the unit. The letters will be placed in an envelope addressed to themselves and will be kept until they graduate from school at which point the letters will be returned to the writer so they may reflect on how their identities have morphed over time. The process can be done by the teacher holding onto the envelope, or they may use an online program such as the website [Future Me](#).

One should note this assignment should be presented and facilitated in a way for students to deliver a meaningful response; only with an authentic response will the investment of the activity be delivered over time. Naturally, some students will be reticent to share such personal information with their peers or each other. To allow for their individual preference, students can opt in to peer edit each other's essay during a writer's workshop day or students can assess themselves using the rubric and then edit their own paper. Students may also be nervous to write and turn in the essay but students can be given a sticky note to cover up part of their letter so that it won't be read during the assessing process.

This letter will assess the same objective as the pre-assessment, the ability to write informative texts (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2). Though this is not the only standard reinforced throughout the unit, this writing is the way that students will be required to express what they have come to learn about their identity.

Assignment: You will write a letter to your future self that answers the questions: who are you and who do you hope to become? Your writing must be a typed, well-developed and organized piece of writing which demonstrates your command of the English language (no serious grammar errors). Ensure that your writing is detailed and follows the friendly letter format addressed to yourself. Your response should be 750 words minimum.

Rubric: See Appendix 3

### *Culminating Art Project*

Because this seminar and unit are arts-infused, students will need to complete a culminating project in an artistic medium. Since this unit is designed for the English classroom, students will not be assessed on their mastery of art skills, but on their effort to develop a creative presentation of ideas. This culminating project will therefore act as an extension of the student's learning and not be graded. However, to incentivize meaningful responses, students will know their work will be presented to the class.

Students will use the letter they write to themselves to complete an art project to culminate the unit. They will take their letters and physically morph them into the work of collage. Students could take important lines and make a collage using pictures from magazines, photographs, or other small physical items. While facilitating this assignment, it will be necessary to provide individualized feedback so students can develop their ideas. Some students who are artistically-minded will feel at home and know exactly what they want to create, but many students will feel overwhelmed. Have these students break down the assignment into chunks by first deciding a shape, secondly, deciding what words and phrases to use, thirdly, to decide what pictures to use, and finally, to mold these into a cohesive, unified expression.

Assignment: You will take the letters you have written to yourself and make a work of art out of them. Using a variety of media, make a collage that speaks to the subject of your letter. You can use pictures of yourself and friends, from magazines, or drawing. The words and phrases you cut out from your letter should vary in size and placement to create another layer of meaning. You can even arrange the words and phrases of your letter to make a self-portrait. This project is intentionally open-ended to allow you to express yourself in a unique way. For examples search the web for self-portrait collage or Dada collage.

Rubric: See Appendix 4 for assignment handout and rubric.

Supplies: See Resource List 1 after the appendices for a suggested list of supplies.

## **Appendix 1: Teaching Standards**

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1 – Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

The Identity Boxes lesson will give students practice defending their choices through writing. Though this standard is continuously used throughout the semester with students defending their answers to various prompts, the identity box lesson will focus this down.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2 – 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

This standard is the one that is assessed with the letter to themselves and their initial essay. Students will have the most trouble writing about this standard because the length will be a new challenge they may not have faced in previous grades. Students will be provided with support for this standard through the other lessons and direct instruction regarding writing.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 – Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

The Name Stories and Our Bags, Their Stories activities are designed to give students practice in this standard. Students will be familiar with writing creative stories from their previous school experience, but these activities will give them a direct way, with clear expectations and boundaries to focus their writing.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4 – Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

This standard asks students to be able to adapt their writing to fit the purpose of their assignment. Assigning students to write a poem for the Six Room Poem lesson will challenge them to turn what they already know about writing poetry into a form that fits the lesson. The same applies for students writing the Illuminated Letters, though this time they will have to meet the challenge of writing in friendly letter format.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.5 – Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

Students will be challenged to think about their word choice very carefully for this standard in their Word Clouds. Students will need to think about the various shades of meaning in their word choice to express themselves in the clearest way possible. For support, students should be directed to a thesaurus.



**Appendix 2: Rubric for Illuminated Letters**

Criterion	1	2	3
Grammar	contains several major errors in Standard English grammar and usage that block meaning	uses Standard English grammar and usage but with several minor errors in Standard English	includes occasional minor errors in Standard English grammar and usage
Development	lacks discernible organization; ignores relevant development of ideas	organizes material with little relation to the point or purpose of the essay	organizes material clearly and develops ideas with generally insightful evidence
Overall Purpose/	attempts to identify but falls short of defining a clear purpose that addresses prompt	identifies and defines an appropriate purpose that addresses prompt	clearly establishes and cogently defines an insightful purpose that addresses question

**Appendix 3: Rubric for Pre-Assessment and Post-Assessment**

Criterion	1	2	3
Grammar	contains several major errors in Standard English grammar and usage that block meaning	uses Standard English grammar and usage but with several minor errors in Standard English	includes occasional minor errors in Standard English grammar and usage
Development	lacks discernible organization; ignores relevant development of ideas	organizes material with little relation to the point or purpose of the essay	organizes material clearly and develops ideas with generally insightful evidence
Sentence Structure	includes sentence errors that sometimes interfere with meaning	contains minor sentence errors and little sentence variety	uses clear sentences with appropriately varied structures to create interest
Language Usage	contains awkward word choice and frequent errors in diction or idiom	uses ordinary vocabulary with some errors in diction and idiom	contains vocabulary that clearly and accurately convey meaning
Overall Purpose/	attempts to identify but falls short of defining a clear purpose that addresses prompt	identifies and defines an appropriate purpose that addresses prompt	clearly establishes and cogently defines an insightful purpose that addresses question

## Appendix 4: Culminating Art Project Assignment and Rubric

**Assignment:** You will take the letters you have written to yourself and make a work of art out of them. Using a variety of media, make a collage that speaks to the subject of your letter. You can use pictures of yourself and friends, from magazines, or drawing. The words and phrases you cut out from your letter should vary in size and placement to create another layer of meaning. You can even arrange the words and phrases of your letter to make a self-portrait. This project is intentionally open-ended to allow you to express yourself in a unique way. For examples search the web for self-portrait collage or Dada collage.

### Rubric:

Criterion	1	2	3
Writing	Only uses a few lines from their letter	uses Standard English grammar and usage but with several minor errors in Standard English	Includes important lines from their letter, arranged in a meaningful way
Images	Only uses a few hand drawn images that appear sloppy or unfinished	Only uses a few images with a not-readily-apparent connection with the work as a whole	Includes important images from a variety of sources, arranged in a meaningful way
Collage	Images and words are slapped on the page in a slipshod manner	Work is seemingly arranged with purpose but unclear	Shape and arrangement of the collage is done purposefully to create a meaning that adds to the words and images.
Presentation	Work seems unfinished, tears, or stray lines evident	Work is presented to be not completely finished or shows signs of construction	Is presented in a quality, finished way with no distractions from the finished product
Overall Purpose/	attempts to identify but falls short of defining a clear purpose that addresses prompt	identifies and defines an appropriate purpose that addresses prompt	clearly establishes and cogently defines an insightful purpose that addresses question

## **Resource List 1: Materials for Classroom Use**

Teachers will not need to supply many materials for the lessons or assessments excepting students who need traditional supplies such as pencils, pens, notebook paper. A class set of markers, colored pencils, crayons, and other basic arts and craft supplies should be on hand for many of the art projects.

### Art Supplies for Culminating Project

- Modge Podge to glaze the final projects
- Glue
- Pencils
- Colored Pencils
- Scissors
- Magazines to be cut up
- Printed copies of the letter that can be cut up
- Cardstock or heavyweight paper for the background

## **Resource List 2: Resources for Students**

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie

A wonderful novel about a Native American, Junior, who leaves his reservation to go to a white high school. It deals with the struggle of betraying his people, conformity, and other identity issues.

UNC Writing Center Online

A website that is filled with helpful information regarding every step of the writing process.

### **Resource List 3: Resources for Teachers**

#### *Awakening the Heart* by Georgia Heard

A wonderful book filled with activities and lessons designed to get students engaging with poetry. While directed at elementary and middle schoolers, it can be adapted for high school.

#### The Bad Case of Stripes

A children's book that can be read to the class that deals with the central questions of this unit about identity, fitting in, and being who you truly are.

#### Echoes and Reflections

An online platform that offers unit plans based mostly around the Holocaust and other historical episodes. They have a unit that is centered on identity and has many good lessons. This website is particularly useful for teaching the novel *Night* by Elie Weisel.

#### NoRedInk

A helpful website that gives students in-context practice for a variety of writing subjects. Students will set up a free account that personalizes the sentences based on their preferences.

## **Annotated Bibliography**

Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2007). This is an excellent novel that would be perfect to teach alongside this unit. Here it is used to pull a quote that is the central idea to the unit.

“Arts Infusion and Literacy Achievement within Underserved Communities: A Matter of Equity.” Carney, Charles L.; Weltsek, Gustave J.; Hall, M. Lynne; Brinn, Ginger *Arts Education Policy Review*, v117 n4 p230-243 2016. This is a fantastic article about the need to integrate arts into everyday curriculum. This article also takes the approach of noting that underserved school communities are often the ones that lack art teachers and arts that the children so desperately need to explore.

Auden, *The Dyer’s Hand* (New York: Random House, 1962). This is an older book of respected literary criticism by the preeminent poet and critic, W. H. Auden. This book discusses what writing is in terms of art.

Christenssen, Linda. “To Say the Name” (*Rethinking Schools*). This is a great activity guide and research done about the place of names in teaching curriculum. It gives teacher a framework to talking to students about their own names and how to write and construct activities around the same concept.

Dyches, Jeanne. 2017. "Shaking off Shakespeare: A White Teacher, Urban Students, and the Mediating Powers of a Canonical Counter-Curriculum." *Urban Review: Issues And Ideas In Public Education* 49, no. 2: 300-325. ERIC, EBSCOhost (accessed September 22, 2017). This is a fantastic article that explores the power differential between students and teachers through the lens of teaching Shakespeare and canonical texts. This selection has great information for teachers at urban school trying to engage their students.

Gormley, Kathleen, and Peter McDermott. 2015. "Searching for Evidence--Teaching Students to Become Effective Readers by Visualizing Information in Texts". *Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*. 88 (6): 171-177. This study is useful to teachers who are trying to work with their struggling readers. In this case where engagement might be low, the two authors offer suggestions on how to increase engagement and active reading.

Heard, Georgia. *Awakening the Heart* (Pearson Education Canada, 1999). This is a book written by Heard aimed at middle school and elementary school teachers about approaching poetry, particularly crafting poetry, in fun and engaging ways. This book can be adapted for high school use creating a low intimidation for dealing with poetry when many students are closed off to the art form.

Lawing, Christopher and Adriana Medina. Presentation for Charlotte Teacher’s Institute, Charlotte, NC, 2017. This is a general note for the seminar as a whole this unit was created for. Presentations made by the two authors focused on identity, art, and teaching both of those two.

- Pitts, Mary Ellen. 1988. *Discovery of the Self through the Writing Process: Autobiography as a Heuristic of Identity*. n.p.: 1988. ERIC, EBSCOhost (accessed September 22, 2017). This is an older, respected article about the role writing in school can have towards a developing sense of self. Writing, she argues, can be a vehicle that we as teachers use to help students during the crisis of self-discovery.
- Risko, Victoria J. and Doris Walker-Dalhouse. "Best Practices to Change the Trajectory of Struggling Readers" in *Best Practices in Literacy Instruction*, eds. Linda B Grambrell and Lesley Mandel Morrow (New York: The Guilford Press, 2015). The chapter from this book is an exemplar about how to help struggling readers with research based practices. Particularly this ties into this curriculum unit by providing research backing into this unit.
- Roscoe, and Al-Mahrooqi, "Literacy, Literature and Identity," 2012 page 21. This is a perfect article to fit in with the subject of this curriculum unit with exploring how Reader's Response Theory is inextricably intertwined with student's perceptions of texts. Their identity clearly influences how they will interpret a text.
- Ryan, Mary. 2014. "Writers as Performers: Developing Reflexive and Creative Writing Identities". *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*. 13 (3): 130-148. This article is very similar to Seban, Tavsanli, and Faruk's article where they are discussing how to build students into writers.
- Scharp, Kristina M., and Clair Canfield. 2017. "Irreplaceable": Exploring Identity and Relationships through the Discussion of Invaluable Personal Objects." *Communication Teacher* 31, no. 2: 107-111. ERIC, EBSCOhost (accessed September 18, 2017). This article is a great analysis of how particular objects become intertwined with our identities. This leads to a couple of different lessons contained in this curriculum unit.
- Seban, Demet; Tavsanli, Ömer Faruk. *Children's Sense of Being a Writer: Identity Construction in Second Grade Writers Workshop*. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, v7 n2 p217-234 Mar 2015. Though this text has second grade at its core, it also has applicable lessons for teaching all ages through writer's workshop. This article mainly focuses on students building a self-concept of being a writer and how that influences their literacy skills.
- Tyra, Teresa. "To Say the Name is to Begin the Story." November 12, 2012. Accessed September 22, 2017. [https://prezi.com/ubrxna\\_uncyl/to-say-the-name-is-to-begin-the-story/?utm\\_campaign=share&utm\\_medium=copy](https://prezi.com/ubrxna_uncyl/to-say-the-name-is-to-begin-the-story/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy). This prezi presentation closely ties into Christensen's research about names and identity. It is useful because it is a pre-prepared delivery mechanism for the research article with student directions and more built in.
- Wagner, Christopher J. 2016. "Teaching Young Dual Language Learners to Be Writers: Rethinking Writing Instruction through the Lens of Identity." *Journal of Education* 196, no. 1: 31-40. ERIC, EBSCOhost (accessed September 22, 2017). This article has great



insight into teaching dual language learners, but also it has great insight into teaching all students through the lens of identity – the central idea to this unit.

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- <sup>iii</sup> Lawing, Christopher and Adriana Medina. Presentation for Charlotte Teacher's Institute, Charlotte, NC, 2017.
- <sup>iv</sup> Auden, *The Dyer's Hand* (New York: Random House, 1962).
- <sup>v</sup> Lawing, Christopher and Adriana Medina. Presentation for Charlotte Teacher's Institute, Charlotte, NC, 2017.
- <sup>vi</sup> Gormley, Kathleen, and Peter McDermott. 2015. "Searching for Evidence--Teaching Students to Become Effective Readers by Visualizing Information in Texts". *Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*. 88 (6): 171-177.
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- <sup>xii</sup> Scharp, Kristina M., and Clair Canfield. 2017. "Irreplaceable": Exploring Identity and Relationships through the Discussion of Invaluable Personal Objects." *Communication Teacher* 31, no. 2: 107-111. ERIC, EBSCOhost (accessed September 18, 2017).
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- <sup>xviii</sup> Roscoe, and Al-Mahrooqi, "Literacy, Literature and Identity," 2012 page 21.
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