

The Space Between Self and School: Exploring Relevance, Identity, and Engagement
in English Language Arts

by

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We acknowledge and respect the Ləkʷəŋən (Songhees and Xʷsepsəm/ Esquimalt)
Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Ləkʷəŋən and Ƶ SÁNEĆ
Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

This self-study investigates how a focus on relevance within the English Language Arts classroom can support student engagement and identity development. Grounded in the intersecting frameworks of Identity Theory (Burke & Stryker, 2000), Self-determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), and the First Peoples Principles of Learning (FNESC, 2008), the research explores the conditions under which adolescents connect personally and meaningfully to their learning.

Drawing on classroom field notes, reflective journaling, and interpretive interviews with two secondary teachers, the study situates teaching as a relational and identity-involved practice. Findings reveal that when students are offered authentic choice, guided reflection, and opportunities to express who they are, their motivation, confidence, and sense of belonging increase.

Through narrative analysis, the thesis illustrates how teacher reflection, relational pedagogy, and student voice transform ELA classrooms into spaces of personal relevance. The study concludes that learning deepens when relevance, autonomy, and belonging are treated as essentials rather than extras. For educators, this means designing learning environments that honour both curriculum and identity, allowing students to see themselves as evolving authors of their own stories.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I come to this work as both a practicing secondary-school English and Creative Writing teacher in School District 61 (Greater Victoria, British Columbia) and as a graduate researcher committed to exploring how identity and relevance can transform learning. My professional life has been shaped by my experiences as a student in the system, the BC Ministry of Education's redesigned curriculum, and by the First Peoples Principles of Learning, which emphasize that education is holistic, experiential, and relational. These values resonate deeply with my own practice: I design courses where students are invited to bring their whole selves into the classroom, whether through creative writing, personal narrative, or critical dialogue, so that literature and language become mirrors for their own developing identities.

My path to this research began in the daily realities of my teaching. Over years of guiding students through English First Peoples 12, Creative Writing, and other English Language Arts (ELA) courses, I witnessed both the power and the challenge of helping adolescents see their lives reflected in what they read and write. I have seen students' engagement ignite when course themes of identity, voice, truth, and harmony connect with their own questions about who they are and how they belong. These experiences convinced me that relevance and identity development are not "extras," but essential to authentic learning.

At the same time, I have felt the tension of an educational culture that often privileges standardized outcomes over personal meaning. This culture manifests in many forms: departmental pressures to align with assessment frameworks that privilege uniformity, and parental expectations shaped by postsecondary requirements and job-market concerns. In my classroom, this can look like students asking, "Is this on the test?" rather than "What does this mean to me?" Professionally, I sometimes feel

pressure to move quickly through content to keep my class aligned with the reporting schedule, or previous iterations of the same course. Even well-intentional efforts to maintain consistency and accountability can unintentionally narrow the space for creativity, reflection, and identity exploration. These competing pressures reveal how difficult it can be for both students and teachers to prioritize relevance and self-understandings in a system designed around compliance and quantifiable outcomes.

As a researcher I am equally shaped by these tensions and by the classroom practices that inspire resistance to them. The constraints of standardization have pushed me to look for theoretical frameworks that help explain and counterbalance the forces shaping student engagement and identity development. Identity Theory (Burke & Stryker, 2000), Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), and the work of scholars such as Faircloth (2012), Côté (2006), and Flum & Kaplan (2006), offer language for what I have long observed: that adolescents seek both belonging and autonomy, and that when classrooms honour these needs, engagement deepens and identities flourish. My inquiry is therefore both personal and professional—an attempt to document and analyze the ways relevance and identity development can shape not only students' learning but also my own growth as an educator.

English Language Arts (ELA) is a core subject in the K to 12 curriculum because the skills it develops, such as reading, writing, speaking, and critical thinking, are essential for every student long after graduation. Yet, despite its centrality, not all students engage deeply with the course, and when engagement falters, their learning and growth are limited. In the final semester of high school, students often face the dual pressures of meeting academic expectations and preparing for an uncertain future. For ELA teachers, this juncture offers a powerful opportunity for teachers to help students explore their identities and reflect on their place in the world. This thesis explores how

focusing on relevance in an ELA classroom supports student engagement and identity development. Grounded in the belief that relevance, autonomy, and belonging are central to meaningful learning, the study examines the conditions under which students feel connected to their learning and how those conditions support both academic growth and personal development.

Research Question

This inquiry is guided by the central question:

How does a focus on relevance in the English Language Arts classroom support the identity development and engagement of high school students?

Sub-questions include:

- *What role do autonomy and choice play in student engagement?*
- *How does engaging in reflective self-study influence my own understanding and practice as a teacher?*

Rationale and Significance

Across North American education systems, a push toward standardization has resulted in an emphasis on content coverage, assessment outcomes, and externally defined benchmarks (Au, 2011; Pinar, 2012). This often leads to a curriculum that is disconnected from students' lived experiences, particularly for those whose cultural, linguistic, or socio-economic backgrounds are underrepresented in dominant narratives (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2010). When students are not invited to see themselves in what they read or write, or to bring their values and questions to the classroom, their sense of belonging and motivation can suffer (Paris & Alim, 2017).

A focus on relevance in education, and to the perceived meaningfulness of learning in relation to students' own lives, values, or goals, is foundational to engagement, particularly for adolescents who are actively forming identities and seeking

agency (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Flum & Kaplan, 2006). As Newmann, Wehlage, and Lamborn (1992) note, students often describe disengagement when schoolwork feels “irrelevant; that is, unrelated to issues, competencies, or concerns of the real world” (p. 26). Relevance involves aligning learning with students’ interests, fostering their sense of ownership, and highlighting the ways schoolwork connects to the broader contexts of their lives.

Closely tied to relevance is engagement, which research has shown to be a multidimensional concept. According to Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), student engagement includes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components. Behavioral engagement refers to participation and effort; emotional engagement includes interest, belonging, and positive attitude; and cognitive engagement involves investment in learning and willingness to exert mental effort. All three dimensions interact to shape how and why students commit to school activities.

In ELA classrooms, these elements can be activated through culturally sustaining pedagogies, inclusive text selection, student voice, and assignment design that allows for personal and creative expression (Paris, 2012). These practices invite students not only to respond to texts but to shape their own narratives. When students explore literature alongside their own identity work, the classroom becomes more than a place of instruction, but of transformation also (Biesta, 2009).

Identity, meanwhile, is not a fixed trait but a developmental and dialogic process. Flum and Kaplan (2006) describe identity development as “a meaning-making process aimed at understanding oneself and one’s place in the world, particularly in relation to significant choices and commitments” (p. 101). Similarly, Faircloth (2012) argues that “students who engage in identity-relevant learning experiences are more likely to experience a sense of belonging and authentic engagement” (p. 186). These

perspectives position identity development as a central mechanism of learning, a continuous process embedded within meaningful classroom experiences.

This thesis emerges from my experiences as a student, farmer, and as a teacher teaching Grade 12 English in British Columbia's SD61 and my observation that when students are offered authentic choice, encouraged to reflect on their values, and given space to speak from their own lived experiences, their engagement increases and their learning deepens. It also aligns with the aims of British Columbia's redesigned curriculum, which emphasizes personalized learning, competency development, and the integration of Indigenous knowledge systems (BC Ministry of Education, 2019).

Grounding this inquiry in the First Peoples Principles of Learning, particularly the understanding that "learning is holistic, reflexive, experiential, and relational" and that "learning involves identity", I approach this work with a commitment to creating classroom environments where all learners are invited to develop both academic and personal literacy (First Nations Education Steering Committee [FNESC], 2008).

Theoretical Framework

To understand how relevance supports engagement and identity development, this study draws on several intersecting theoretical lenses. Each framework contributes a distinct perspective, and taken together they reveal how learning environments can foster both motivation and the construction of self.

Identity Theory (Burke & Stryker, 2000). Identity is positioned as socially constructed, with behaviour and motivation shaped by the roles individuals internalize. When students perceive a match between their actions and their valued identities, their motivation and persistence increase. This theory provides a foundation for examining how classroom experiences can affirm or challenge the roles adolescents claim for themselves.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Self-Determination Theory suggests that three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, are essential for intrinsic motivation. Classrooms that honour student voice and provide authentic choices meet these needs and foster engagement. Self-Determination Theory complements Identity Theory by explaining why alignment between roles and actions sustains learning: when students experience autonomy and connection, they are more willing to invest effort in identity-relevant tasks.

Engagement and Identity Development (Faircloth, 2012). Faircloth highlights that meaningful engagement in learning is deeply tied to students' sense of self. When students see themselves as "the kind of person who does this work," their commitment increases. Her research bridges Identity Theory and Self-Determination Theory by showing that belonging and agency are not separate constructs but mutually reinforcing conditions for learning.

Choice and Democratic Education (Côté, 2009). Côté emphasizes that identity formation in adolescence requires opportunities for exploration, reflection, and decision-making—conditions best supported by democratic and relational pedagogies. His work deepens Self-Determination Theory’s emphasis on autonomy and underscores the need for structures that give students authentic influence over their learning, linking personal agency to collective, democratic practice.

Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Learning is understood as socially mediated, with identity shaped through dialogue, cultural tools, and participation in shared meaning-making. This perspective situates the motivational processes described by Self-Determination Theory within the relational contexts described by Identity Theory, showing how identity grows through interaction and cultural participation.

Experiential Education (Dewey, 1938). Dewey frames education as a process of growth rooted in experience. For him, relevance arises when learning connects to students’ lives and future possibilities. Dewey’s insistence that education must be meaningful to the learner provides historical grounding for contemporary theories of identity-based engagement.

These perspectives converge with the First Peoples Principles of Learning (FPPL), which stress that learning is holistic, relational, and identity-involving. FPPL’s emphasis on reciprocity and connection to community echoes Vygotsky’s sociocultural lens and reinforces Dewey’s experiential vision, while also aligning with Self-Determination Theory’s call for relatedness and with Côté’s advocacy of democratic, student-centered practice.

Taken together, these theoretical conceptions form a coherent framework for this study. They show that identity development and motivation are inseparable: when students' learning environments affirm their evolving selves, provide real choices, and invite participation in meaningful social and cultural practices, engagement deepens and relevance emerges. This synthesis directly supports the purpose of this research to investigate how an English classroom can become a space where relevance and identity formation are central to both pedagogy and student learning.

Methodology Overview

This research employed a self-study methodology supported by interpretive interviews with other teachers. Self-study provided a means to systematically reflect on my pedagogical choices, my assumptions, and the relational dynamics of the classroom. It also offered a way to center ethical reflexivity and acknowledge how my positionality, as a white, male educator trained in Eurocentric traditions, shapes both what I teach and how I teach it.

This methodology aligns with calls for research that is relational, situated, and context-responsive (Kitchen, 2009; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). It also reflects the values of the FPPL, particularly the emphasis on learning as relational and identity-involved.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In an era of increasing curricular standardization and measurable outcomes, educators face the persistent challenge of engaging students who perceive little relevance in their schooling. Consistent with prior research, many adolescents experience coursework as lacking personal or real-world relevance: large-scale surveys report that 39% of bored students attribute their boredom to material ‘not relevant to me,’ dropout interviews describe schoolwork they will ‘never use in life,’ and national reviews note that much high school content lacks obvious relevance to everyday settings (HSSSE, 2006; Bridgeland et al., 2006; NRC, 2004; Willms et al., 2009; Newman et al., 1992).

A growing body of research suggests that one crucial avenue for fostering deeper engagement and sustained motivation is through attention to student identity. Scholars across disciplines have argued that learning is not merely a cognitive activity but a fundamentally social and personal one, deeply entangled with how students see themselves and how they are seen by others (Faircloth, 2012; Côté, 2006; Dewey, 1902). When students are given opportunities to explore, express, and develop their identities within the classroom, they are more likely to experience a sense of belonging, agency, and meaningful connection to learning (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Burke & Stryker, 2000).

This literature review explores the intersection between identity development and student learning by drawing on several key theoretical frameworks: identity theory (Burke & Stryker, 2000), self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and sociocultural perspectives on education (Faircloth, 2012; Flum & Kaplan, 2006; Dewey, 1902). These theories offer complementary insights into how students’ sense of self,

shaped by their social roles, cultural contexts, and personal histories, interacts with their motivation, engagement, and academic success.

Given that adolescence is a critical time for identity formation (Marcia, 1980; Verhoeven et al., 2019), and that schools are among the most powerful social institutions shaping that development (Côté, 2006), there is a strong imperative to consider how classroom environments, curricula, and pedagogical choices support or hinder this process. This literature review begins with a detailed exploration of identity theory, followed by its intersections with self-determination theory and sociocultural views of education, to build a framework that underscores the necessity of integrating identity development into teaching practice.

Identity Theory

“I contain multitudes” - Walt Whitman

For educators, working with apathetic students can be a great challenge. So much of the learning process falls on student shoulders, and if they are not interested, so much is lost. Several theories related to identity development coalesce to aid educators in this matter. These theories provide a framework to position identity development as a central mechanism for learning. Two main theories: identity theory (Burke and Stryker, 2000) and self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 1985), when synthesized and placed in-practice, lead to self-actualized students: motivated, engaged, and confident, with a sense of belonging in the classroom that honours their uniqueness. The mechanism at play is identity development, and learners benefit from having time and space for this crucial work.

Identity has varying definitions dependent on the discipline and context in which it is being used. Burke and Stryker (2000) use the definition “parts of a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly

differentiated contemporary societies” (p.284). This definition honours the complexity of identity — its fluidity and dependence on context and experience. Likewise, Faircloth (2012) sums the work of several theorists with a definition of identity as “the pattern of practices and choices that emerge (and potentially shift) within the interaction of person and context. Identity can be seen therefore as a type of ongoing negotiation of participation, shaped by, and shaping in response, the context(s) in which it occurs” (p.186). The dynamics of identity are highlighted in this definition as student experience is considered — moving from subject to subject, cohort to cohort. It is clear from both of these definitions that identity is not fixed and is subject to both internal and external influence.

Burke and Stryker (2000) worked “to understand and explain how social structures affect self and how self affects social behaviours” (p.285). They articulate identity theory by linking external social structure to the structure of self. The complexity of identity begins to be revealed when they define society:

as a mosaic of relatively durable patterned interactions and relationships, differentiated yet organized, embedded in an array of groups, organizations, communities, and institutions, and intersected by crosscutting boundaries of class, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, and other variables. (Burke and Stryker, 2000, p.285)

The crosscutting of boundaries creates multiple identities in us all. Burke and Stryker (2000) go on to describe people living “in relatively small and specialized networks of social relationships, through roles that support their participation in such networks” (p.285). The influence and boundaries of larger social structures are apparent to Burke and Stryker and are foundational to their arguments which explain the “patterned interactions and relationships” (p.285). As schools are ripe with patterns,

interactions, intersectionalities and relationships, considering how identities are influenced by schools is critical to shaping learning experiences that account for the dynamics in play between social groups, the institution, and the self.

Further, these patterns help to answer the question of why people prioritize one identity over another when given choices that align with multiple role expectations. For example, a student may be offered a place in two other groups of students to work on an assignment together. One group might be working on a topic of great interest to the student, while the other group is comprised of their friends. The student's decision ultimately decides which role (student or friend) was more important at the time. This implies self is "multi-faceted, made up of interdependent and independent, mutual reinforcing and conflicting parts" (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p.286). In fact, identity theory accepts William James' (1890) "vision of persons possessing as many selves as groups of persons with which they interact" (as cited in Stryker & Burke, 2000, p.286). Thus, each group-based self is an 'identity' built to respond to the person or group a person is engaged with. Each identity has a different role to play, based on the expectations of the other.

Learning Meets Identity

Every decision teachers make in their classrooms creates different situations for students. Knowing which identity will be 'triggered' by any given situation positions identity as a cognitive schema, wherein "internally stored information and meanings serve as frameworks for interpreting experience" (Burke and Stryker, 2000, p.286). This is where learning meets identity.

According to the BC Ministry of Education (2021), the purpose of education is "to develop [students'] individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy."

If this information and meaning develop over the course of a child's education and become their framework for interpreting experience as Burke and Stryker (2000) suggest, teachers must account for student identities as this process occurs.

The First Peoples Principle of Learning: "learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self" (FNESC, 2008), manifests at this point. As Chrona writes, "We need to remind ourselves to come to this work with the whole of ourselves. To do otherwise diminishes the work and diminishes us. In coming to know each other, we learn about how we each approach our work and frame the knowledge that we share." (Chrona, 2022, p. 217). Thus, students need time to reflect on how their identity influences their learning, and on how their learning influences their sense of self.

Marcia (1980) found that the more people developed their identity, "the more aware individuals appear to be aware of their own uniqueness and similarity to others and of their own strengths and weaknesses in making their way in the world" (p. 159). Self awareness and thoughtful introspection lead to confident and honest self-knowledge, which leads to meaningful learning for students. When learners recognize their values, interests, and capabilities, they can engage more purposefully with learning tasks that align with their goals and sense of self. This alignment increases intrinsic motivation, persistence, and the ability to make meaningful connections between new information and prior experience (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

In a classroom context, this self-understanding also extends outward, shaping how students interact with peers who hold different experiences and perspectives. When students know who they are, they are better equipped to listen with empathy, communicate respectfully, and appreciate both shared and differing identities. These capacities strengthen collaboration, an essential component of the Communication, Personal, and Social core competencies in British Columbia's curriculum (BC Ministry of

Education, 2019). Through group dialogue, peer feedback, and co-created projects, students learn that their developing sense of self is interwoven with the stories and identities of others. As Vygotsky (1978) argued, learning is inherently social and mediated through interaction, and identity grows through these relationships. Faircloth (2012) similarly observed that belonging and engagement are reinforced when classrooms honour both individuality and interdependence. In this way, identity development not only supports individual engagement but also cultivates the relational conditions (trust, openness, and belonging), necessary for learning communities to thrive.

When students understand who they are as learners, they can approach challenges with resilience and agency, making learning more relevant and transformative.

While Burke and Stryker (2000) emphasize identity as a collection of roles shaped by social interaction, Marcia (1980) frames identity through stages of exploration and commitment. The sociologist Côté (2006) builds on these perspectives by highlighting the role of agency, suggesting that identity is not only socially defined but also actively negotiated.

The Power of Choice

Côté (2006) saw identity as a product of choice. He found that “modern democracies have developed and continue to support institutions that directly and deliberately affect people’s choices in their identity formation — most notably, educational systems” (p. 18). Unfortunately, he went on to say that “we have not developed the educational means by which to teach choice making on a mass scale, even as the ideology of free choice has spread throughout societies around the world” (p. 19).

Positioned in the privileged north, Côté suggested that it is only recently that people have had as many choices as they do in the 21st century, and argued that “modern democracies require a level of functioning not required in previous societies, and there is ample evidence that most people have a long way to go to reach this level of functioning” (p. 16). To elaborate on this challenge, Côté wrote that “ostensibly unconstrained choice can be paradoxically constraining, as in situations of having too many choices with too little information, living with the consequences of poor choices, and experiencing the various negative psychological consequences routinely associated with facing numerous choices on a daily basis” (p. 18). For students to navigate the myriad of choices presented to them, identity development, through reflection, community building, and other strategies mentioned later, is key to their making choices confidently while honouring who they are. Côté continues, “making choices is perhaps the most important activity in people’s lives in these societies - many of life’s consequences result from our choices - yet it is one of the least understood or prepared-for activities” (p. 18). Following a review of the pertinent literature, Côté found:

The identity benefits of learning appear to include greater satisfaction with the course of one’s life and success in one’s life projects, as well as better self-understanding, independent thought, and an enhanced sense of one’s place in the world, but work in this area has just begun. (p. 19)

Côté believed there was room in curricula to experiment and innovate in ways that would move education beyond “perfunctory occupational training, [by] including their identity formation” (p. 19). Similar to other researchers reviewed by Côté, he calls for education to “have some sort of storage of experiences and habituated thoughts in memory (in the person), and... to be actualized in behaviours and social activities (in interaction)” (p. 9). Many other theorists (Dewey (1902), Moll (1990), Flum & Kaplan

(2006, 2012), Lee (2007), Faircloth (2012)) have pointed to themes of experience, engagement, and interaction as being crucial points of intersection between learning and identity. These ideas are further supported by the First Peoples Principles of Learning, where community well-being, responsibility, reciprocal relationships, and interconnectedness (FNESC, 2008) are all paramount. The importance of choice to Côté meshes well with the theory of self-determination introduced by Deci and Ryan in 1985. Later, in 2000, they would write: “When people experience choice, they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated because the locus of causality for their behavior is internal” (p. 233). Traditionally in a classroom that locus of causality is external — the teacher decides the text being studied and the format for the assignment.

Côté (2006) situates identity as a product of choice, foregrounding the individual’s agency in constructing selfhood. This aligns with Deci and Ryan’s (1985) emphasis on autonomy within Self-Determination Theory, suggesting that both identity and motivation are strengthened when learners perceive themselves as active agents.

Based on earlier work by Deci (1971), self-determination refers to a person’s ability to make confident choices and think on their own. Motivation and personality are two factors determined by a person’s level of self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Deci and Ryan’s framework clarifies how autonomy, competence, and relatedness energize learners. Faircloth (2012) extends this logic into classroom contexts, showing how relatedness and belonging translate these needs into observable engagement. Likewise, Flum and Kaplan (2006) connect motivational needs to ongoing identity exploration, linking Self-Determination Theory with identity development.

Aligned with this idea is the work of Faircloth (2012), who determined that identity development is directly tied to engagement in learning. Citing Dewey (1902), Faircloth (2012) defined “genuine interest in learning as actually an identification of the self with a

concept or object, an identification that leads to self-initiated exploration (i.e., energized engagement) of that concept or object” (p.186). After analyzing two studies in classrooms that intentionally connected identity development to learning, Faircloth (2012) concluded that “this emerging understanding of students’ connection to learning contributes a valuable resource for individuals invested in supporting student motivation and achievement across all student groups” (p.193), highlighting the enduring importance of fostering identity as a pathway to deeper engagement and sustained academic growth.

Centering Student Experience

John Dewey, who wanted to reform education into a model that honoured the intersection between experience and learning over a hundred years ago, noted that “the child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process. Just as two points define a straight line, so the present standpoint of the child and the facts and truths of studies define instruction” (Dewey, 1902, p.16). That ‘present standpoint’ of a student is essential to their education. Dewey continued to assert that “it is the student and not the subject-matter which determines both quality and quantity of learning” (pp. 13–14), and lamented that:

instead of seeing the educative steadily and as a whole, we see conflicting terms. We get the case of the child vs the curriculum; of the individual nature vs social culture. Below all other divisions in pedagogic opinion lies this opposition. The studies as classified are the product, in a word, of the science of the ages, not of the experience of the child. (Dewey, 1902, p.8)

Dewey’s emphasis on experience and relevance sets the groundwork for contemporary relational accounts of learning; later scholars such as Kitchen (2009)

underscore how identity work unfolds in context and relationship, extending Dewey's insight into today's classroom realities.

This tension is still seen in contemporary education (Klos, 2006), and for Dewey resulting pedagogies meant that "the lack of any organic connection with what the child has already seen and felt and loved makes the material purely formal and symbolic" (p.16). Faircloth (2012) also identified this gap between course content and student experience, and cited its closure as being crucial for student success: "often it is this gap, rather than students' intelligence, skills, or abilities, that must be reconciled in order for them to succeed in school" (p.187). Bridging this gap by intentionally connecting curriculum to students' lived experiences not only honours Dewey's vision but also affirms Faircloth's finding that relevance is a decisive factor in unlocking students' potential for genuine engagement and achievement.

To close the gulf between student experience and education, Flum and Kaplan (2006) suggest that teachers could dialogue with students about the meaning of school, relate material to self-knowledge, and encourage students' sense-of-self as it relates to content and experience. In 2012 Flum and Kaplan went on to describe school experiences as fundamental in the development of student identity components such as "self-concept, personal values, interests, and career goals" (p.172). In agreement several years prior, and approaching the issue from a design standpoint, Lee (2007) argued that schools must design learning experiences in ways that balance curricular expectations with students' prior knowledge. Education that honours student identities is not idealistic, it is instead crucial, as Faircloth (2012), citing Moll, warned that failure to construct learning environments that are meaningful to students "silences student voices and alienates students from educational experiences" (p.187). This

demonstrates the benefit to learning that arises when students see themselves in their coursework.

Faircloth (2012) positioned identity as a mechanism for student engagement. She described how students negotiate their participation in a classroom based on their identities, harkening to Burke and Stryker's (2000) assertions regarding roles and expectations mentioned earlier. Faircloth pinned this idea to the concept of "figured worlds" (p.187). This term positions the various contexts encountered as "figured or socially constructed with distinguishable, institutionally endorsed perspectives regarding expected/accepted types of characters, tasks, values, and styles of interacting" (p.187), which accounts for the influence on an identity from an institution, group, or individual, mentioned by Burke & Stryker (2000). Faircloth offered that by negotiating membership within a classroom, "students are practicing a particular identity in that context (reflecting and/or refracting who they are expected to be, to match who they think they are or want to be in that particular setting)" (p.187). This practice has value according to Faircloth (2012), who asserted that "the ability to craft such connections (i.e., develop a sense of belonging) wields a powerful, possibly essential influence on engagement" (p.187). This reveals that engagement is inhibited if students do not participate in identity development. Faircloth (2012) found that "identity may therefore be manifested and engagement empowered as students craft an identity-in-practice in the classroom" (p.187). Faircloth positions students as the agents of their own learning, as long as what they had to offer was valued. Faircloth (2012) surmised that for students, learning was about gaining a space in the classroom that matched what they believed they had to offer. The non-commodified (i.e., not traditionally valued) funds-of-knowledge inherent in their backgrounds were used to

author new identities-in-practice that elevated their engagement in learning. (p.188)

Faircloth's findings have two consequences for schools that coincide with two innate needs from Deci and Ryan's (1985) theory of self-determination. Students need to feel a sense-of-belonging in class if they are to reap the benefits of the empowered engagement Faircloth (2012) mentions. And students need autonomy (Deci and Ryan, 1985) if they are to author these new identities in practice and carve out a space in the classroom that is uniquely their own — a space to be themselves and learn.

The researchers in Faircloth's 2012 study looked at teachers who were intentionally crafting lessons and activities to be relevant and important to their students, who found that this helped their students create hybrid identities "that disrupted the negative patterns of academic motivation generated by the marginalization students experience in traditional school settings" (p188). Students in this study "preferred, enjoyed, or needed classroom connections to things that were foundational to them" (p.192). These students also expressed that as they learned to 'speak' about their identities, their sense of self "seemed to clarify and their connection to learning practices strengthen[ed]" (p.192), further solidifying the apparent relationship between identity development and learning. Faircloth's study concludes by calling for "broader investigation of the relevance of student identity to their learning, as well as investigation of additional pedagogical practices that support these connections" (p.193). This study hopes to contribute to this investigation.

Robert and Patricia Whannell (2015) looked to identity theory to provide a theoretical framework for students transitioning into University. The framework they proposed has three components: identity, emotional commitment to the identity, and its associated role. They found that "the process of positive identity formation is proposed

as following a cyclical path where ongoing successful academic engagement, particularly with assessment and academic staff, progressively strengthens the university student identity” (Whannel and Whannel, 2015, p.46). The recursive nature of identity development and learning seen here demands pedagogy that continually gives students opportunities to check in with themselves, make decisions about how to proceed, and feel their classroom activities honour their uniqueness and path of self-discovery.

The meeting place of these theories is clear: learning opportunities that give students the time, space, and skills for introspection, so they learn to make choices that reflect who they are. The resulting confidence, sense of belonging, and engagement are how they become ready to learn. The implications of this move beyond the classroom and into their adult lives. Developmentally, adolescents are in school at a unique time to have their identities interfered with (Flum & Kaplan, 2006). It is crucial this interference is committed thoughtfully, and with this purpose in mind (Verhoeven et al, 2019). To reduce a student’s education to the mere accumulation of facts does a disservice not only to their education, but to their sense of self. If the BC Ministry of Education (2021) wants students to live up to their potential, students need classrooms that let them discover for themselves what that potential might be.

Conclusion

Giving students who might normally find English class a boring or irrelevant space a ‘way in’ to the learning is imperative. Most schools place language arts as a core subject because students learn skills that will help them in all walks of life. If students fail to acquire that learning, society ends up with citizens unable to understand others, or be understood themselves.

Many researchers have shown the connection between identity development, engagement, and learning, but the practical application of this knowledge has yet to be formulated. My self-study allowed me to add my story and experience to the conversation — and hopefully encourage other teachers to make time and space in their courses for identity development.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This study explored the question: What is the effect on learning for Grade 12 English students in School District 61 when we encourage students to personally connect with content? To answer this, I used a self-study approach supported and supplemented by an interpretive interview methodology. The personal lens provided by the self-study honoured my holistic and experiential account, while interviews with other teachers engaged in similar work allowed for reflexive meaning-making based on the intersections and divergences of our experiences.

The study focused on my experience teaching an English course in a new way, centred on student identity and relevance. Through notes and narration, I aimed to reveal the benefits to learning that can emerge when students are given time and space to further develop and define their identities. Interviewing other teachers working with student-identities in their own practice provided additional perspectives that informed pedagogical decisions and broadened the context of this study.

Self-study

As the study emerged and developed, my own beliefs as a teacher and researcher inevitably influenced the resulting narrative and data analysis. I conducted an ongoing self-study to better understand the relationship between my beliefs, teaching, and research. Berry & Crowe (2009) describe self-study in an education context as “a framework for inquiry into one’s beliefs and practices as an educator with a focus on better understanding the interaction between beliefs and practices for the improvement of teaching and learning” (p. 85).

In addition to increasing my understanding, I found that openly discussing my self-study during interviews and conversations with teacher-participants increased the

transparency of my teaching practice. Current research outlines the benefits of such conversations. Speaking of colleagues engaged in communities of practice, Boschman et al. (2021) describe how

after coming together around a common goal, members discovered much common ground between their experiences. They participated in meaningful conversations which validated their teaching practices. As people shared more, they trusted each other more, and meaningful bonds between members formed. (p.312)

The shared goals, solidarity, and camaraderie gave members “more confidence to try new things, and share experiences” (Trust & Horricks, 2017, p.110). The benefits of my transparency reflected the First Peoples Principles of Learning (FPPL), particularly the principle of intergenerational responsibility. I aimed to model life-long learner behaviour and demonstrate how adults can work together towards deeper understanding.

It was important to me that this research contributed meaningfully to students’ classroom experience, and the self-study indeed supported and improved my teaching practice. As Hawley (2010) notes, “engaging in self-study research forces teacher educators to confront their moral and ethical obligations to students and to the larger teacher education community” (p. 61). My self-study served as a form of accountability — to myself, my students, and my colleagues.

Self-study allowed me to capture a unique, professional perspective. Because I was studying the dynamic and co-constructed process of learning, the research remained responsive to emergent themes and change. This reflected the way my students and pedagogy also had to reflect, respond, and adapt to the transdisciplinary activities involved in identity development. As Dewey (1938) argued, education is a

lived, transactional experience, shaped as much by the dispositions and needs of learners as by the intentions of the teacher. Similarly, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory positions learning as inherently social and mediated through dialogue, making adaptability a necessity rather than a choice. To record, interpret, and analyze our progress through these activities from my perspective, I used field notes and reflections, which were informed and synthesized with conversational teacher interviews. These interviews were coded using thematic analysis, and the results informed the evolving self-study. Maintaining focus on the dynamic human element meant that the study prioritized lived experience, emotional context, and reciprocal influence between teacher and learners. These factors are essential to understanding how identity development can be supported in real classrooms. 'Dynamic human element' refers to the unpredictable, relational, and evolving qualities of teaching and learning that arise from interactions between individuals, their histories, and the learning context.

Reflections on Self-Study as Method

Engaging in self-study not only provided a methodological framework but also became a form of learning in itself. Through journaling, iterative analysis, and dialogue with colleagues, I came to understand self-study as a living practice rather than a discrete research design. It demanded sustained reflexivity, requiring me to confront my assumptions about teaching, power, and relevance. As Loughran and Northfield (1998) note, self-study "reshapes the nature of the reflective processes" (p. 15), and I experienced this firsthand as my reflection moved from descriptive recounting to critical self-inquiry. Similarly, Bilous et al. (2018) emphasize the "messy, co-creative" nature of self-study (p. 290), and acknowledging this complexity helped me accept uncertainty as productive rather than problematic. In this sense, I came to understand self-study by

doing self-study, as an ethical and relational stance that keeps teaching and research inseparable, each informing the other in an ongoing cycle of learning.

Methods

Rather than following a prescriptive model, this inquiry was rooted in discovery. Laverty (2003) suggests that qualitative methodologies emphasizing meaning-making are best approached through transparent judgement and principled reflection. Following this orientation, I used three interconnected methods in the self-study: field notes, reflection, and semi-structured interviews.

Field Notes & Reflection

My observations were recorded as field notes. Johnson and Christensen (2020) describe qualitative observation as involving the researcher in observing “all potentially relevant phenomena,” requiring extensive notes without specifying in advance what should be observed (p. 197). This presented challenges in the classroom, and I prioritized recording notes promptly to avoid losing details essential to documenting phenomenological experience. This often meant recording notes between classes, or immediately after school.

I took a diary-style approach to these notes, creating an active, living document throughout the study. Entries were made both at school and at home, reflecting on teaching and observing students. My professional judgement guided how I interpreted these observations and how they aligned, or didn't, with my hopes about the positive effects of identity development in the classroom.

Reflection was an ongoing process. Loughran and Northfield (1998) describe reflection as “a personal process of thinking, refining, reframing and developing actions.” (p.15) In this study, reflection helped ensure responsiveness to findings and

observations. Loughran and Northfield further state that self-study “builds on reflection as the study begins to reshape the nature of the reflective processes” (p.15) Reflection recognizes the “assumptions, frameworks and patterns of thought and behaviour that shape thinking and action” (Bilous et al., 2018), and thus allows for the “complexity, fluidity and messy nature of the cocreation experience” to emerge (p.290).

While reflecting on my field notes, I compared student behaviours and learning to prior years when identity development had not been a focus and to my experience teaching Career and Life Education, the British Columbia curriculum that combines career exploration with personal identity development and goal setting. These comparisons formed key data explored in chapters 5 and 6. I asked: *Was I seeing the improvement in engagement and learning I had hoped for? What could I change next time?* Loughran and Northfield (1998) emphasize that “reflection can be a catalyst for the exploration of the personal knowledge of practice,” (p.16) and this was certainly true in my experience. Reflection happened both during planned writing and spontaneously, on commutes or even while walking to the photocopier.

Semi-structured Interviews

Harvey (2015) proposes a dialogic model of qualitative interviews that emphasizes co-constructed meaning. My interviews with teachers followed this model. Conducted one-on-one throughout the study, the interviews began with guiding questions (reprinted in [Appendix A](#)) but evolved freely based on the flow of conversation. As Harvey (2015) notes, “meaning is co-created through the utterances of each speaker,” (p. 3) and this shaped my approach to each conversation. These interviews generated socially negotiated narratives that reflected the diversity and nuance of teacher perspectives and informed my evolving self-study.

I remained flexible with how narratives were shared, in keeping with Kennelly et al. (2017), who note the importance of allowing participants to tell their stories in ways most comfortable to them. For my interview with Michelle Cunningham, we met for a coffee and a stroll through a scenic park. For Caleb Hein's interview, we met after school in my classroom. While I had my pre-written questions ready, and used them to make sure I had covered the topics I was interested in, I encouraged Michelle and Caleb to let the conversation drift where it needed to go. Our conversations went in directions I was not expecting, from Michelle's connections to indigenous cultures, her knowledge of the psychology of metaphorical 'masks' people wear, and the impact of her ADHD on her teaching. Caleb's interview struck me for how candid he is about his teaching practice. He opened up about learning with the students, talking things out, making mistakes, and how these actions encourage identity development in his students. All of these insights were borne of the environment we were in, the informality of the interviews, and our pre-existing friendships. This flexibility, characterized by a willingness to follow conversational tangents, adapt questions in the moment, and prioritize participant comfort, aligns with principles of narrative inquiry that value co-constructed meaning and relational ethics (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), ultimately honouring Michelle and Caleb's voices and creating the conditions for richer, more authentic insights than might have emerged in a rigid, formal interview setting.

Data Sources/Collection

As both researcher and participant, I was a central source of data. My assumptions and biases informed lesson design and the research itself. Field notes included observations of my conduct, comparisons to previous years, and reflections on whether expectations were met or challenged. I also documented my own contributions during interviews, noting where professional and research interests overlapped.

Research participants consisted of two secondary teachers from districts 61 and 63 on southern Vancouver Island, both known to be engaged in student-identity work. I conducted one interview with each teacher over the course of the study and asked about their reasons for focusing on identity and their observations regarding its effect on student learning. As interviews progressed, emerging themes informed subsequent questions. I did not collect any student-identifying information.

In addition to interviews and field notes, I also included course materials I had created as part of the data set. These materials, project instructions and question lists, captured some of the structure, content, and pedagogical choices underpinning my approach. Analyzing these artifacts provided insight into how theoretical commitments to relevance, identity development, and student autonomy were embedded in classroom practice, and allowed for comparison between my intended curriculum and the lived classroom experience. As Bowen (2009) notes, document analysis can serve as a valuable method for corroborating evidence from other sources, offering a more nuanced and triangulated understanding of the research context.

Data Analysis

Given the emergent and reflective nature of the study, data analysis was carried out alongside data collection, in line with Merriam's (1998) claim that "the right way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it simultaneously with data collection" (p. 162).

Analysis involved distilling personal, contextual, and interpreted accounts of teacher experience through a narrative inquiry lens. This lens enabled exploration of both unique and shared elements in the stories collected (Kramp, 2004).

Narrative Analysis

The field notes, reflections, and interviews resulted in multiple, interwoven stories. These included:

- My professional narrative, shaped by a desire to better serve students and grounded in the logistical and systemic realities of teaching in BC.
- My personal story as a former student, with memories of ‘pointless busywork’ and unrelatable content.
- My personal story as a farm intern and then educator in rural Ontario.
- My researcher narrative, motivated by curiosity and the hope that my inquiry held merit.
- Stories from other teachers I interviewed.

As Polkinghorne (1995) notes, a paradigmatic analysis of narrative “uncovers the commonalities that exist across the stories” (p. 14). This reciprocal movement between personal stories and shared themes helped identify patterns and meaning across the various narratives examined in the study.

Chapter 4: Discovering Deep Learning

Introduction

I did not become a teacher by following a straight line; instead, my path wound through classrooms that alternately inspired and frustrated me. There were moments when traditional schooling left me disconnected, and others when a spark of relevance born from experience, reflection, or community, made learning matter. This chapter traces that journey from student to teacher, highlighting the formative moments that shaped my philosophy of education. By revisiting these experiences, I explore how they informed my understanding of relevance, reflection, and community as essential components of meaningful learning.

The dual purpose of this chapter is to provide an autobiographical context for my pedagogical choices and to model, through my own trajectory, the kind of learning I now strive to create for my students — learning that is deep, personal, and connected to lived experience. In doing so, it aligns with Dewey's (1938) assertion that education is most powerful when rooted in the continuity of personal experience, and with the First Peoples Principles of Learning (FNESC, 2008), which emphasize the interconnection between learning, identity, and community. My development as an educator mirrors the process I aim to foster in my classroom: a continual, reflective engagement with the world that shapes both self and understanding.

Discovering Deep Learning

I became a teacher because in my last year of public education I met teachers who seemed to enjoy their work, and I noticed their work primarily involved helping people. I decided then that this combination of joy and helping others made teaching a worthy career goal.

The teachers I admired shared qualities that inform my proposed research. Tim Storm was my Geography teacher and had an obvious love for the subject that he would demonstrate in various ways. I had a keen interest in some of the natural processes Geography helped to describe, fostered by a father at home who would describe landforms and geologic processes while driving around the province, while Mr Storm would often stay after class to discuss more examples of glacial movements or erosion patterns. Through these one-on-one conversations, he served as a node between my personal interests and the learning expectations of the course. He was enthusiastic and valued what I brought to these conversations, and found ways to take what I had seen on trips with my dad and connect it to what we were learning in class.

He connected me to those learning expectations by being an open-minded teacher sincerely interested in the subject matter, and thus able to connect my own experiences and interest to the course. My English teacher, Mr Syme, had a similar passion for the course he taught, and he seemed to take a personal interest in my progress. He complimented my abilities and offered ways to make my writing stronger and more effective. I felt like a writer in his class, and subsequently sought out additional essay topics from him, which we would then discuss.

Both Mr Storm and Mr Syme embodied principles of learning I would later encounter in the First People's Principles of Learning (FPPL), during my teacher education. The connections they helped me forge reflect ideas in the FPPL about learning being dependent on responsibility, reciprocal relationships, connections to the land, and identity. In many ways, they served as early mentors in an informal apprenticeship, modeling curiosity, patience, and genuine care while inviting my into deeper participation in the subjects we studied. Their mentorship anticipated what I would later recognize in the Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training

(CRAFT) program's approach to learning: understanding developed through guided experience within a community of practice.

This apprenticeship-like relationship aligns closely with the FPPL's (2008) teaching that "learning involves generational roles and responsibilities", where knowledge is shared in ways that honour both learner and teacher. It also resonates with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development, where growth occurs through interaction with a more experienced other who provides both support and challenge. My teachers created the conditions for this kind of learning: they trusted me with ideas slightly beyond my reach, and encouraged me to test, question, and connect them to my own life. These experiences later shaped my own pedagogy, where I now strive to create similarly safe yet stimulating environments where students feel supported to explore who they are, while being gently challenged to extend their understanding through dialogue, feedback, and authentic engagement.

Unfortunately, prior to grade 12, I didn't feel a strong connection to many teachers at school. My impression of teachers was based primarily on the work they assigned. Terms and formulae to memorize and apply, concepts to understand, skills to practice. The end goal, in my mind, was to earn a good grade, and graduate successfully. In earlier grades, the main driving force behind my efforts to get work done was to not be embarrassed by not having it done. I wanted to follow the rules and not be noticed. Learning from grades one to eleven seemed to be disconnected from my interests and goals, unlike my experience in Geography and English in grade 12.

In social studies we learned of Canada's history and struggles, in science — the minutiae of the body and the world around us. I could not see how I would use this learning in my future, and I did not see how it connected to who I was at the time. Looking back, not knowing who I was at the time was a large contributor to this

disconnect. Since then, I have developed a healthy interest in history, politics, and science — astronomy and physics in particular. While these interests may not have ever surfaced while I was in school due to my values and priorities being different at that time, I can't help but think that the structure and delivery of the courses played a significant role in limiting my engagement with those learning opportunities.

If science and social studies were unfamiliar and challenging courses, could there not have been a way to spark my latent interests in the subject matter? The relationship between relevance, engagement, and learning is well-documented in the literature (Faircloth, 2012). If there had been time to look for ways for me to connect with the material on a personal level, by reflecting on my experiences, considering my goals, and discussing the material with other students and my teachers, might the unfamiliarity diminish? Could the challenge have seemed less intimidating?

I believe research demonstrates that when students are given opportunities to describe and define themselves, this identity development work benefits their learning later in the course when coursework may initially seem confusing or pointless.

Learning Everywhere

I had a fifteen-year gap between my high school experience and the beginning of my formal teacher education, and during that time I saw education in many different forms. I experienced a traditional lecture, discussion, project, and test-based pedagogy in various courses during my undergraduate course work at the University of Calgary. I farmed in Ontario for several years and was part of CRAFT, the Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training, a farmer training program focused on community supported education, mentorship, and hands-on experiences.

As an intern in this program I learned to value trust and initiative in the learning process. At the farm I interned at, we were often given brand-new tasks to complete,

with only an overworked farmer to guide us through. Many tasks seemed intimidating or had multiple possible paths to 'completion.' For example, if one looks up 'how to grow squash' online, the results can be varied, dependent on dozens of variables, and often sources will contradict each other. But I believed in the goals of the farm as a whole, and my farmer trusted me to make the best choices I could if they weren't around to help with a decision. And when failure occurred (unripe squash at harvest time), the consequence was no squash, and a discussion about strategies to try next time. The consequence mattered to us all, as we believed in the goals of the farm and sincerely wanted to learn all we could to grow food and feed our community. This learning mattered to me because I had shared goals with my fellow interns: a stronger connection to the land, and a desire to feed communities in a sustainable way.

Later, as a farmer with my own interns as part of that same program, I learned to value the communal aspects of education. My interns who already knew about soil health could inform the ones who did not. Physical techniques, hoeing posture, seeding routines, or harvesting best practices, were also disseminated in a communal way. Some interns arrived with strong skills and knowledge, and I could use those to the farm's benefit, as well as to enhance the educational aspects of their internships. I encouraged interns who arrived with fewer skills and less experience to ask lots of questions and take their time. This approach honoured who those interns were, and encouraged their growth as farmers.

When I arrived in the post-degree program at UVic, I fully expected to learn what to teach, and when and how to deliver my lessons. I thought teachers used a template, an assumption borne from my experiences with the majority of teachers I had in high school. I was delighted to find this wasn't the case. Instead, I found much of what I was

told in my program to align with what I had seen of education in-between high school and my time at UVic.

Most notably at UVic, we learned of the First People's Principles of Learning (FPPL). These principles made so much sense to me I thought that through them I could see a clear path to a teaching practice that would truly honour my students' unique individualities and needs. The Principles provide respect and accountability to learners, while at the same time give them time and space to be themselves. This reflected my experience with my grade 12 Geography teacher, leaning into my experiences on road trips through BC to find more examples of what we were learning in class. This was my experience in grade 12 English, wanting more opportunities to write, feeling like a writer, and discussing writing. In the principles I could also see the community I found in the CRAFT program: the trust and accountability, the shared goals, the community of learners and mentors working towards a common goal.

The First People's Principles of Learning directly inform this research. Jo Chrona writes that "when educators honour the FPPL in the work we do, we ensure that we create access points into learning for all learners in our care" (Chrona, 2022, p. 119). The principle, "learning requires exploration of one's identity" (FNESC, 2008), is most relevant to this research, as it sums up my own learning about education as described earlier and points to the core of what I want for my own students: time and space to explore who they are, so they can use that identity development work to inform and guide their learning in (and out of) class. Chrona (2022) writes that:

In education, the sharing of who and where we are helps define how we will approach the work we do and the knowledge or ideas we share. The exploration of identity connects to what is considered relevant to learn.

Learning needs to connect to who the learner is. (p. 167)

Another First People's Principle of Learning informs me as to how identity development work should manifest in my classes. "Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)" (FNESC, 2008). This principle aligns with my own experiences with what I consider to be my deepest learning (the learning that has been the most formative and transformative), as described earlier, my time in English 12 and Geography 12, and my work with the CRAFT program. When I consider how to help students develop their identities in my classroom today, I keep this principle close at hand.

As I redesigned my English First Peoples course (a provincially approved Grade 10–12 English curriculum in British Columbia that foregrounds Indigenous authors, perspectives, and pedagogies as part of the province's commitment to reconciliation), I structured the early-semester work to help students define and describe who they are in ways that are reflective, grounded in experience, and centered on their connections to each other, to the school, and to their friends, families, and communities. Students discovered how complex and interconnected the different aspects of their lives are, and had time and space to reflect on these connections and answer questions about why they do the things they do — questions about their influences, beliefs, and goals. They discovered and defined their sources of joy and the moments when they felt most truly like themselves.

As we moved further into the course, students considered how the unfamiliar and challenging requirements of the course relate to their discovered and defined identity. They were encouraged to find 'their own way in' to a place of understanding through text and project choices, and co-constructed rubrics. For example, after listening to the podcast *Who Killed Alberta Williams?*, my students are tasked to devise a project based

on their personal response to the show. Using Thomas King's notions around our responsibility to the stories we know, the assignment asks students to consider what their responsibility is to the story of Alberta Williams, one of Canada's many Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. Some students choose to educate others about the story in the podcast through the creation of interactive maps or websites. Some decide to put up posters in the school. Some look at other cases the main investigative journalist from the show, Connie Walker, has pursued, while others explore other cases related to MMIW or the Highway of Tears. For each of these choices, I guide students through the process of determining appropriate criteria for their success. The resulting projects are passionate and professional, and I see students taking responsibility for, and investing deeply in their learning throughout this project.

Chapter 5: Career Education in BC: A Personal and Professional Timeline of Reflection

Introduction

As part of this self-study, I have reflected on my own experiences with Career Education in British Columbia, both as a student navigating Career and Personal Planning (CAPP) in the 1990s and as a teacher delivering Planning 10 and [Career Life Education](#) (CLE). This section uses a timeline approach to examine how these experiences shaped my understanding of relevance, identity development, and the persistent tension between curriculum goals and classroom realities.

Although this study focuses on English instruction, reflecting on my Careers teaching is valuable because Careers is inherently concerned with identity development, self-reflection, and future planning. Insights from this work can illuminate approaches that support the goals of my English classroom, particularly in fostering relevance and personal connection to learning. This connection is consistent with the First Peoples Principles of Learning, which emphasize that “learning involves exploration of one’s identity” (FNESC, 2008) and that it should be “holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational.” As Flum and Kaplan (2012) note, career-related learning is a “privileged context for promoting identity formation,” making it particularly well-suited for examining the interplay between self-concept, motivation, and engagement (p. 240).

1996 – Career & Personal Planning (CAPP): A Student Perspective

My introduction to Career Education came in the form of CAPP, delivered twice a week in 15-minute homeroom sessions. Our teacher distributed worksheets on topics ranging from boat safety to personality tests. With such limited time, these activities felt rushed, superficial, and disconnected from anything meaningful. While the topics in

CAPP were important, the way the content was delivered did not work. Most students didn't take it seriously. Assignments were often incomplete and there were no real consequences. I remember thinking of it as busywork — harried and brief contemplations of a future I felt no stake in.

If I could go back in time, I'd want to ask my teenage self what, specifically, I loved about Geography. Was it the content? The projects? The sense of place? None of these questions were explored in CAPP. There was no structured opportunity to reflect on why these interests mattered, or how my love of reading and writing could translate into real life paths.

The entire approach to careers education felt discordant and incomplete. Its reliance on worksheets and short class times offered no authentic way to connect who I was with who I might become.

2018 – Planning 10: My Early Teaching Experience

Years later, as a teacher, I found myself tasked with delivering Planning 10, the evolved version of CAPP and now a required, timetabled course. This format provided more time and structure, which I saw as an opportunity to dig deeper than I had when I was a student in CAPP. I organized the course around the mandated areas: Graduation Program, Education and Careers, Health, and Finances. While these themes were expansive, I deliberately sought wiggle room among them — spaces between the prescribed topics where authentic dialogue could emerge, allowing students to connect course content to their own experiences, raise questions that mattered to them, and explore perspectives not explicitly outlined in the curriculum. Unfortunately, the breadth of the course combined with our allotted time frame made opportunities for exploration limited.

We used MyBlueprint, a software platform where students can take aptitude tests, plan out their high school credits and explore post-secondary programs and careers. I invited guest speakers to share their real journeys and challenges, and read materials critical of the traditional links between money and happiness. I introduced wellness wheels and the Japanese concept of ikigai, meaning “reason for being,” to help students imagine broader definitions of success.

One powerful teaching moment involved a student whose post-secondary Plan A was to attend veterinary school, a choice made logically but without much passion. This student loved manga and art but felt those interests didn’t fit into any kind of post-secondary plan. Through conversation, online research, and exploring upcoming comic conventions, we discovered entire industries built around cosplay makeup, film sets, and design work. The student’s enthusiasm was transformative and soon they had a Plan B that they were truly excited about.

This experience illustrated that given the time, space, and guidance, students could envision exciting, personal futures beyond conventional expectations. But even with these efforts, many students still saw Planning 10 as “hoop-jumping.” The systemic framing remained focused on checking boxes over fostering genuine, personal exploration. I didn’t know it at the time, but the missing component was community building. My assigned work into identity development (MyBlueprint, ikigai, and others) needed to serve as the foundation for the rest of our work in Planning 10, rather than being treated as a separate task.

2019 – Career Life Education (CLE): The Promise and Challenge of Reform

Planning 10 was retired the following year and replaced with Career Life Education (CLE). CLE offered schools significantly more flexibility in delivery. At my

school, CLE ran outside the timetable in large-group weekly sessions, supported digitally through the use of Google Classroom and MyBlueprint.

The CLE curriculum is, on paper, a marked improvement over CAPP and Planning 10. Its goals are ambitious and holistic, acknowledging the fluid, lifelong nature of planning. One aim stands out to me in particular: “Students are expected to develop awareness of their personal strengths, competencies, values, and passions, and use this self-knowledge to inform career-life choices” (British Columbia Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2018). This is a profound goal, and the curriculum document articulates an impressive, far-ranging list of expectations, from understanding labour market trends, post-secondary program research, to communal participation and ongoing reflection. It recognizes that students are preparing for an adult life beyond the confines of K–12, in an ever-changing world of choices, consequences, and definitions of success.

But this ambition runs into significant challenges in practice. In our implementation, much of my time was spent chasing students for incomplete assignments in MyBlueprint. Many students struggled to see the relevance of researching university programs they couldn’t apply to for years, especially while balancing full class schedules and extracurriculars.

The flexibility built into CLE has incredible potential, but realizing that promise requires a shift in delivery. From my experience, too often the course becomes another instance of hoop-jumping: students filling out forms without deeply considering their own values, interests, and possible futures.

The Challenge of Teaching Identity

Reading the CLE curriculum’s goals gave me chills, as the scale of what it proposes is genuinely epic. Asking a young person to seriously ponder their future existence is a monumental task.

Mezirow (1997) emphasizes that teaching for self-awareness requires more than the delivery of information; it demands the creation of conditions that foster transformative learning through reflection, dialogue, and critical questioning. Building on this foundation, London (2023) highlights that self-awareness develops when learners engage in structured reflection, receive and process feedback, and connect experiences to personal and professional growth. This approach aligns closely with the First Peoples Principles of Learning, which state that “learning involves exploration of one’s identity” (FNESC, 2008), and emphasize holistic, reflective, and relational learning processes. Together, these perspectives suggest that fostering self-awareness in students involves:

- Providing time for students to reflect on their own experiences
- Offering meaningful experiences from which insights can be drawn
- Facilitating conversations that challenge and expand thinking
- Cultivating the skills to critically question and interpret those experiences

For instance, I fell in love with BC’s forests on family drives through PKOLS. But I only considered myself an environmentalist once I reflected on why that connection mattered to me and how this feeling connected to other aspects of my life. It was the process of remembering, questioning, and interpreting that made the experience meaningful.

Similarly, students need guidance to explore not just what they like but why they like it. If a student enjoys soccer, do they love teamwork, strategy, physicality, or competition? Asking them to articulate this can uncover entirely new paths and interests they may never have considered. But in practice, career education often reduces these questions to binary choices: “Are you this or that?” Online software may compute

responses and offer career suggestions, but these tools cannot replace the relational work of guided reflection.

To address this gap, I incorporated class discussions, reflective writing prompts, and open-ended projects that asked students to connect their interests to underlying values and strengths, fostering the kind of self-exploration central to identity development (Marcia, 1980). In this way, the activities aimed not only to guide career thinking, but to strengthen students' self-concept, which is an essential driver of motivation and engagement in learning (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Faircloth, 2012).

This approach also aligns with the FPPL, which state that "learning involves exploration of one's identity" (FNESC, 2008). Prior to teaching English First Peoples my school district offered several professional development days to dig deep into the FPPL. That training reinforced the importance of relational, reflective, and holistic pedagogies that recognize identity as both a starting point and an evolving outcome of the learning process. The FPPL are central to my teaching philosophy as they are inherently humanized as they advocate for a holistic view of students and teachers, which meshes well with the very human goals of an English class (communication and understanding).

Teaching the Messy Middle

In my own classes, I value the 'lag time' that occurs after instructions are given, but before students act. During this time, students conduct the important work of interpreting, processing, deciding, and planning. It is invisible work, but it requires guidance from the teacher nonetheless. In Planning 10 or CLE, this lag time felt anxious. When I ask students about their lives, many freeze, and without immediate answers, some disengage.

Simply offering space for reflection isn't enough. Students need preparation to even begin these explorations. They need to know it's okay not to have clear answers.

They need help learning how to think about these questions in nuanced, evolving ways. This preparation can take many forms: modeling reflection aloud so students hear how ideas can be unpacked over time; offering smaller, low-stakes questions that warm them up to deeper ones; providing sentence starters or graphic organizers to scaffold their thinking; and using peer or small-group discussions to normalize uncertainty and show how others wrestle with similar questions. Journaling routines, visual mapping of interests, and revisiting earlier reflections after a few weeks can also help students see that their thinking is fluid, not fixed.

Our job is not just to help students produce a Plan A and Plan B but to help them understand why these plans matter to them. Helping them learn to sit comfortably with ambiguity and explore their feelings and values is essential if we want students to develop a confident, evolving definition of themselves.

Once they leave our classrooms, they will need to know how to guide themselves. Our role is to help them learn how to ask meaningful questions of themselves and recognize that identity-development is a lifelong practice.

Interpretive Commentary

This timeline of reflections from my time as a disengaged CAPP student to my efforts as a Planning 10 and CLE teacher, highlights the persistent gap between career education's ambitious goals and its practical realities. It underscores the need for intentional, relational, and reflective approaches to identity development in education.

These reflections align closely with my theoretical framework:

- Identity Theory highlights that identity is complex, contextual, and socially negotiated, shaped by the multiple roles individuals occupy and the meanings attached to them (Burke & Stryker, 2000). Teaching practices must therefore create space for students to explore, articulate, and

negotiate these complexities in ways that are authentic to their lived experiences.

- Self-Determination Theory emphasizes that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential psychological needs that drive motivation and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Fostering authentic self-awareness supports these needs by helping students understand their own strengths, values, and aspirations.
- The First Peoples Principles of Learning call for learning that is holistic, experiential, and relational, recognizing the centrality of identity exploration and personal growth as part of the learning process (First Nations Education Steering Committee [FNESC], 2008).

These insights inform my commitment to designing English 12 learning experiences that prioritize relevance, choice, and meaningful connections to students' evolving identities.

Chapter 6: A Classroom of Stories - Building Relevance and Belonging

Introduction

This chapter is based on extensive field notes and reflections written between September 2023 and June 2024. Here, the focus is on my own classroom practice as a case study within the broader scope of this research. As both researcher and teacher, my classroom offered a living laboratory where ideas about identity development, relevance, and engagement could be tested, refined, and observed in real time. Including this chapter serves two purposes: it provides a concrete example of how the theoretical frameworks outlined earlier: Identity Theory (Burke & Stryker, 2000), Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and the First Peoples Principles of Learning (FNESC, 2008), translate into day-to-day practice, and it illustrates the interplay between my pedagogical choices and the goals of fostering student self-awareness and motivation.

My Teaching Context & Approach

I teach English at Lambrick Park Secondary school, in the Greater Victoria School district in British Columbia. The semester during this study, my English First Peoples course had 24 grade 12 students, ranging in ages between 16 & 18. About a third of these students were English Language Learners. Several students had Individualized Education Plans.

I arranged our desks in a U-shape to facilitate eye contact and conversation, and to make room for our circle talks. We have a projector with a screen and access to the internet, whiteboards and crafting supplies. I keep a small library of books at the back of the room, and have some indigenous artwork on the walls, as well as 'anchor charts' for key terms and concepts that come up often in our class.

My approach to teaching is relational. I want to 'meet students where they are'. I firmly believe that learning requires an amount of vulnerability on the part of students as they need to feel brave to engage with new and unfamiliar concepts, to express themselves honestly, and to be willing to take a risk and possibly make a mistake. Vygotsky describes this as the "zone of proximal development," but it may equally be called a "zone of proximal discomfort" as learning and growth require some uncertainty and self-challenge. The First Peoples Principles of Learning remind us that "learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational," and that it "requires exploration of one's identity" (FNESC, 2008).

My role, then, is to create a context where the inevitable discomfort of growth is balanced by safety, trust, and community. I worked towards this through policy (rules about respecting others), accountability (cultivating a community of learners who feel responsible for one another's success), time for reflection and introspection, and my own presence in the classroom.

Throughout the semester, I promoted discussion and questioning, I listened intently to students, and offered as many choices as I could to promote their autonomy in the classroom. I shared stories from my own life so students can see me as a person, not just a teacher, and understand the journey that brought me to teaching. I used humour, questioning, patience, and attentive listening to foster warmth and openness. The culture I aim for is transparent (we discuss what is happening in our class and the reasoning behind decisions), accountable (using clear rubrics, consistent assessment, and natural consequences for harmful behaviours), and inclusive (everyone is welcome and supported to learn). I am deliberate in shutting down behaviours that harm the shared space in order to protect the conditions for everyone's voice to be heard. The resulting community-building discussions reveal the range of needs, talents, and

preferences in the room, and the way we conduct our class becomes a negotiated compromise: sometimes we need quiet focus, sometimes lively collaboration. As another example, sometimes students sit through a song they do not enjoy, but in a few days they will have an opportunity to suggest a different song for us to listen to.

This approach reflects Dewey's (1902) view that education must begin with the learner's lived experience, while also integrating Vygotsky's insights into the role of challenge in development (as cited in Moll, 1990). It also aligns with Faircloth's (2012) finding that classrooms can either encourage students to mask their identities or provide space for them to bring their full selves into learning. Guided by these theories and the FPPL, my practice seeks to ensure the latter: a learning space that is academically challenging, socially supportive, and deeply connected to students' identities and experiences.

Learning about my Students

In addition to class discussions about the classroom environment and policies, students received a questionnaire to fill out at the beginning of the semester. On it, I ask them questions about their interests, both in and out of school, and their history with English classes. From their interests I get ideas about future text choices, and from their experiences in previous English classes I get a sense of how the class will respond to projects, presentations, group work, and any deep-dives we may do into the more technical side of English. It is remarkable how effective referencing one of their favourite songs or movies can be to generate engagement and enthusiasm in the classroom.

I created a playlist of their favourite songs and we listened to it from time to time. I listen for lyrics that I can connect to other texts we are reading or our course themes (identity, truth, voice, and harmony), which are universal enough to be found in many places. Showing them these connections encourages them to find more texts on their

own, and often I get more song and show recommendations throughout the semester, in addition to headlines and commentary they find on TikTok or elsewhere in their lives. I can then leverage this enthusiasm by suggesting students describe or explore the connection further in an assignment or project.

These surveys are also how I learn about students who do not like English class, either because their reading and writing skills make it a challenge they don't want to face, or they simply are not interested in what they think the class will be, which is usually predicted to be 'boring' or have 'too many essays'. These responses are from the students that motivated this research, for every student will need reading and writing and understanding outside of school, so for them to dismiss the class is disheartening, and in a world of misinformation and endless, disengaged phone scrolling, it is a real concern.

This method is strongly supported by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which asserts that autonomy and relatedness are key components of motivation. By weaving students' media choices into our curriculum, I give them a sense of ownership and validate their cultural worlds. It is also an example of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Grier-Reed & Williams-Wengerd, 2018), in which learners' cultural knowledge becomes the foundation for academic engagement.

Low-stakes Practice

One feature of my EFP 12 class is that much of our work is 'low-stakes practice'. This means that students have time to try out skills and think about concepts without worrying that their inexperience will lead to a low grade. This often takes the form of students writing in a daily journal which is not marked, other than a completion grade to ensure everyone attempts to respond to the prompts. Students write about their own experiences while I tout the power of story to help them see how these reflections

matter since they are an expression of their identities and their truths. Reflective writing is slow and thoughtful, there are no word count goals here. I want students to write for themselves, and to hopefully continue the practice outside of school and reap the benefits of introspection, which has been linked to greater self-awareness, emotional regulation, and personal growth (Lyke, 2009). In the context of Identity Theory, such practices allow learners to explore and articulate the multiple roles and meanings that shape their self-concept, strengthening the connection between personal identity and engagement in learning (Burke & Stryker, 2000).

This reflective model echoes Flum and Kaplan's (2006) work on exploratory learning environments, which emphasize the value of curiosity and self-directed meaning-making in identity development. The daily journal, in its non-evaluative nature, also aligns with the narrative inquiry principles of Davis and Dwyer (2017), where personal storytelling becomes both method and meaning. Huber et al. (2013) remind us that when students engage in the telling and retelling of their experiences, they actively shape their identities — an inherently educational act.

These reflective and exploratory practices are supported by an assessment philosophy that values growth over grades. Assessment, in this classroom, is an integral part of the learning process, using structures that encourage risk-taking, reflection, and collaboration while signaling to students that their development matters more than compliance.

Practice to Mastery

My course assessment is designed to support identity development. Class work is divided into three main categories: Practice, Assignments, and Projects. This semester, students completed 16 practice activities, 9 assignments, and 3 projects, plus a portfolio and final reflection completed at the end of the semester. Practice activities

take up the bulk of my gradebook, and are marked on a completion basis. I just want to see that they have attempted the activity, which can be a journal check, a vocabulary exercise, or a research activity. Practice activities give students time and space to try out the skills we are talking about in class. Assignments are often multi-part activities that require a combination of skills, or collaboration, and they are marked in detail, giving students feedback that is useful for their projects. Projects give students a chance to dig deep into a text or relationship between texts, themselves, and the world at large, and then explain what they've learned in a format of their choosing that is appropriate for what they've learned and what they want to share about it (see [Appendix C](#) for a sample Project instruction sheet).

For grading purposes, the practice activities are worth 10%, the assignments are worth 20%, and the projects are worth 50%. The remaining 20% of their overall grade is split between their portfolio and final reflection (detailed later in this chapter). These percentages were chosen to support practice as a low-stakes endeavour. Research supports the idea that low-stakes assessment reduces performance anxiety, encourages risk-taking, and increases motivation by creating space for experimentation without fear of punitive grading (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Brookhart, 2013). Students need to feel free to try new things, to communicate in a new style or format, analyse a text more complex than they have worked with before, or collaborate in a digital workspace. For many students, grades feel like a threat, and their response is to play it safe (Kohn, 2011). As a result, they do not journey into the 'Zone of Proximal Development' (Vygotsky, 1978) until they must, and therefore they haven't tried out the new skill or technique yet, leading to disheartening results. Having many low-stakes opportunities to try out new things is a must in a student-centered classroom.

After submitting higher-stakes projects, students are encouraged to use the feedback I give them to improve and resubmit their work. Like any 'real-world' project, an iterative process is natural and can remove the pressure to submit a perfect project the first time. Formative assessment literature shows that this cycle of feedback and revision deepens learning by helping students see errors as opportunities rather than failures (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Few students take advantage of this offer, which I believe is the result of the way other classes work, where projects are completed and never seen again. I try to use inquisitive feedback on student projects to encourage their revisiting the project to try and improve it. For example, instead of commenting "word choice" in the margins of an essay to indicate a poorly chosen word, I instead ask: *Is there another word that could work here?* The question prompts a response, and for some students, my richest form of assessment comes out of the back-and-forth conversations we have about their work in the margins of a digital document. Students who engage with me in this manner have a more robust learning experience.

Course Themes

To help organize my English First Peoples 12 course, I chose four themes: identity, truth, voice, and harmony.

I like these themes because they build off each other, which resulted in a course that was cohesive, consisting of a series of interrelated activities. While students may select a wide range of texts to explore in the classroom, all are related to our course themes. While studying the first theme of identity, students learn about the wide variety of influences a person has that makes up who they are. We learn about the origins and importance of core values and beliefs to our own lives, but also as a primer for the other identities we will encounter throughout the course as we learn about creators and

characters and their motivations and choices. We talk about empathy, and the role communication has in building and sustaining a society.

Next we learn about the theme of Truth, which helps students see that people's varied identities lead to varied truths about events or how the world works or should work. Then we move to the theme of Voice where we consider how people express their truths, and which voices are accessible and which are subdued or missing. Finally we end with the theme of Harmony, where I share methods and examples of people working together to create beautiful things or affect change in the world, despite differences in truth and identity.

The connective tissue between these themes is essential, as it helps maintain the importance of the identity work (and the identities) of my students throughout the semester. This design not only gives the course cohesion and a sense of purpose, but also elevates the relevance and engagement with course content, even as we learn about unfamiliar or uncomfortable topics. Through those potentially challenging activities, the course themes helped to ground students, and keep the learning safe, accessible, and relevant.

This thematic arc reflects what Côté (2006) describes as the dynamic, context-sensitive process of identity formation. Each unit deepens students' understanding of themselves and others by layering complexity onto the foundational work of self-exploration. Verhoeven et al. (2019) reinforce this approach, suggesting that when schools create structured opportunities for identity reflection, especially when linked across contexts, students engage more deeply and construct more cohesive senses of self.

Identity

At the start of the course, I gave students a series of exercises to help me learn who they are as people and as students. On day one, we gathered in Circle and I asked students where they were from. I explained that perspective, often discussed in an English class when we consider bias and audience, was crucial to keep in mind as we communicated with each other. The places students were from were a key part of their identities, and often framed their experiences and responses to new ideas and situations.

The first week was filled with low-stakes questions about students' past experiences in and out of school. I wanted them to work towards a holistic view of who they were. Many initially had only one or two labels they used for themselves (for example: baseball player, anime nerd, artist), but my goal during that time was to help them see as many dimensions of their identities as possible. To that end, I had them complete three activities: Ikigai, the Wellness Wheel, and Living into Our Values.

For the Ikigai activity (found in [Appendix C](#)), based on the Japanese concept meaning "sweet spot", students worked with a Venn diagram featuring the circles What I love, What I can do, What does the world need?, and What I can be paid for. They filled in the sheet and discovered areas where the circles overlapped, sometimes identifying activities that fit in all four circles, their "ikigai." After completing the diagram, they reflected on what they had found and on activities they might want to work towards in the future. Many found a place on the sheet for interests they had previously thought of only as pastimes. For example, one student listed "baseball" under What I love and "doctors" under What the world needs, leading to a discussion about sports medicine as a possible career path. Later in the semester, when we researched Indigenous

influencers and their stories, I encouraged students to use their Ikigai ideas to help find someone whose story might resonate with them.

The Wellness Wheel (found in [Appendix B](#)) involved shading a circular diagram divided into aspects of life such as health, fun, relationships, finances, spirituality, and academics, with the shading indicating how satisfied they were with each area. I reminded them that no one shades their wheel completely; there are always ways to improve. Students often expressed surprise at their completed wheels. We discussed how we do not always think about all of these aspects equally, and that while it is normal to have differing priorities, it is valuable to reflect on all of them from time to time. Sections of the wheel not shaded in often became the subject of future assignments for students or a topic for their 'sense of self' projects.

The Living into Our Values exercise, developed by Brené Brown (2022), presented students with a list of around 100 values. They narrowed this list to two core values they felt were essential to who they were. I gave them time to work through this privately, grouping words or crossing off those they knew they would not choose. Once they had two, they reflected on these values and identified times when they had lived in alignment with them, as well as times when they had not. We discussed the reality that no one lives fully in alignment with their values 100% of the time, but that these values could serve as guideposts for making choices.

This first Identity unit culminated in a Sense of Self project, where students defined and described themselves while answering questions such as: *How have you changed over time? Do you behave differently in different contexts? What has influenced who you are? Are there parts of your identity that feel contradictory?* Many began to see connections between their lives and the characters in the stories we would later read, at moments in the story or article where people stood by their beliefs or set

them aside for one reason or another. Through this process, they began to see the humanity in those stories and to recognize that they, too, were living their own unfolding narratives.

So many stories we read in English class can be boiled down to exploring someone's values: the moments when people are brave and stand up for what they believe in, the moments when they feel fear or doubt, or when they set their values aside because of strong emotions or extraordinary circumstances. By exploring this theme, students began to recognize the humanity in these stories, and to see that they too were living out their own version of such a story in real time.

Truth

When we moved into the Truth unit, we explored bias and perspective, and how varied identities lead to varied "truths." This was when we discussed how history is often written by those in power, which can lead to misinformation. One of our key texts was Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk *The danger of a single story*, in which she described how stigma can form when we fail to seek out more information about a topic or an entire group of people. We asked ourselves the somewhat unanswerable question, *How do we know if we don't know enough about something?* These kinds of questions often lingered with students beyond the classroom, which was one of my goals. I wanted them to break away from the mindset that learning is simply about checking off boxes.

The focus became ongoing introspection and continuous learning. One of the key terms on our classroom wall was "triangulate," a reminder to find multiple sources of information, particularly when trying to understand different people. We discussed the value of primary sources, and I made sure our First Peoples English course included many First Peoples voices, rather than texts written about Indigenous people. I

reminded students that just as they were the authors of their own truths during their Sense of Self projects, we should listen to others speak their own truths directly, without having them filtered through someone else's perspective. Bias was not presented as inherently negative, but as something that is always present and important to recognize.

Another key text was Thomas King's 2003 Massey Lecture, *The Truth About Stories*. King argued that our identities are composed of stories, and therefore stories are powerful. He warned that "once a story is told, it cannot be called back" (p. 10), illustrating the idea through three narratives: a personal story about finding his estranged father, and two creation stories, one from the Haudenosaunee people and one from the Christian Bible. He pointed out how the Christian creation story often reinforces ideas of human supremacy, while the Haudenosaunee story encourages collaboration and reciprocity. King suggested that personal and cultural narratives are deeply intertwined, shaping our worldviews through the values and beliefs they share.

By the end of this unit, students were beginning to recognize that their individual stories were part of larger cultural narratives. This understanding became another way for them to see the relevance of what we studied. In their year-end reflections, many expressed appreciation for the power of story. I ended the year seeing students who felt more confident, not just in their academic skills, but in their ability to exist authentically. This perspective carried over into how they approached all of the texts we read, from Robin Wall Kimmerer's writing on nature as teacher to a Washington Post article on Occupy Wall Street. Students were now reading these as expressions of identity, and engaged with them on a personal level, thinking critically about why different people think differently.

Voice

After students had considered identity and truth, we turned to the idea of voice. We talked about how people use their voices to get what they need, whether in high-stakes situations involving social justice or in everyday conversations with friends, family, or employers. We examined the importance of audience and the format of communication, and we analyzed speeches to see how language can persuade and inspire.

One key text was music by, and an article about, the hip-hop duo Snotty Nose Rez Kids. The members of this BC-based group spoke candidly about the pressure to use their platform to address issues facing Indigenous communities, and their reluctance to adopt stereotypical hip-hop themes when people in their community were looking to them for inspiration. The article is very clear about connections between the SNRK's music, and their identities. Students responded with thoughtful reflections, and during discussions some began redefining what it meant to be a hip-hop artist. In this way, they avoided the "danger of a single story."

During this unit, students had many opportunities to use their voices. We held debates and Socratic seminars, and they practiced voicing opinions on issues that mattered to them. We continued to nurture the safe and brave space we had been building since the start of the semester through circle talks, check-ins, and think-pair-share activities. Students who found issues they cared about worked hard to demonstrate both understanding and expertise. Some used these moments to share aspects of their homelands and cultures that they were proud of.

On days when students spoke more than I did, I felt we had succeeded. Those were the moments when engagement and authentic learning were most visible. Students recognized that their voices had value, and many were surprised to learn that

the English First Peoples grade 12 curriculum had no set list of required texts, other than a focus on texts created by indigenous authors, which constituted the texts I brought it for their consideration. This freedom allowed students to bring in songs, films, and other materials they cared about, which in turn led to meaningful engagement.

Harmony

I introduced harmony as the idea of two or more elements coming together to create something greater than the sum of their parts. We discussed three types of harmony: collaboration to create something, collaboration to make a change, and harmony between different ideas. For the third, I asked students to consider examples like the benefits of artificial intelligence alongside its environmental costs, and to think about how we might reconcile such tensions. I reminded them to draw on their earlier identity work, particularly their core values, when deciding how to navigate such dilemmas.

A key text in this unit was a digital webcomic by Matthew Inman about “the backfire effect,” a psychological phenomenon where people react to new ideas as if they are a physical threat, becoming more attached to their existing beliefs even when those beliefs are disproven. Learning that this response is hardwired helped students see it as a universal human challenge. Many shared examples of people they knew who resisted changing their minds, and some wrote about their own efforts to “take a step back and listen” when faced with new perspectives.

We concluded this unit with a choice: students could complete a collaborative inquiry project, where the process of collaboration was as important as the final product, or a solo project exploring potential harmony between contrasting ideas. By this stage of the semester, students were confident in expressing themselves and in blending different formats and sources to show their understanding of harmony.

Portfolio

One challenge I encountered was keeping the identity work from the start of the course connected to the later units. While identity was present in most of the texts we studied, it still required intentional effort to help students link their earlier reflections to new material. I often reminded them to look back at their earlier work for connections and recurring ideas to develop further.

This semester, I addressed the challenge by using a portfolio. Students used Google Slides to collect and organize their work, reflecting on how it connected to our themes of identity, truth, voice, and harmony. I gave them dedicated “portfolio days” to review recent activities, choose items to include, and use hyperlinks to connect ideas between slides. Over time, the portfolio became a personal record of their learning journey, weaving together varied texts, reflections, and experiences. Many remarked on how cohesive the resulting slideshow felt, and how it told the story of the class from their perspective.

The portfolio embodied what Polkinghorne (1995) calls “narrative configuration,” the process of organizing experience into a coherent story. Students not only documented their work but also reinforced their identities across different contexts. In doing so, they began to internalize the roles and values they had explored earlier in the semester. The portfolio became a living artifact of their growth and identity development.

Originally I had intended for students to share their portfolios or course highlights in a Gallery Walk style event, but I rescinded this course requirement after seeing the vulnerable, personal work students were completing. I felt my plan needed more safety measures in place to ensure students were only sharing what they were comfortable sharing. I look forward to pursuing this kind of culminating activity in the future so

students have the opportunity to share what they have learned in a more communal setting.

Final Reflection

To end the course, students wrote a final reflection, using their portfolios as a resource to help them answer questions. The questions (found in [Appendix D](#)) are designed to give me “behind the scenes” insights into student thinking about the course, our course themes, and why their work is important. For example, one question asks “How do the values you identified in your identity project (or in the ‘Living our Values’ in-class activity) relate to the work you completed in the Truth, Voice, and Harmony units?” In this question, parts of a student's identity (the values they chose) are connected to assignments completed later in the course. There were nine questions on their final reflection, and students completed four of them in three hours. Students did not have a word count target to reach, but I did suggest writing at least one paragraph for each question to give themselves enough room for detail.

This design serves multiple purposes. First, the reflection acts as a metacognitive exercise: students are not simply submitting assignments, but stepping back to evaluate how their learning unfolded across the course. This aligns with research on formative assessment and reflection as tools for deeper learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Brookhart, 2013). By anchoring their answers in their portfolios, students were encouraged to treat their work as evidence of growth and to see themselves as active participants in meaning-making, rather than passive recipients of instruction. In this way, the reflection linked back to the course’s emphasis on relevance and identity: just as we explored how texts engage with questions of self and belonging, students are now asked to consider how their own academic work carries personal significance.

The reflection also reinforces the dialogic nature of the classroom. Rather than positioning assessment as an external judgment, it becomes a continuation of our ongoing conversations about voice, perspective, and meaning. This is consistent with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which emphasizes autonomy and personal agency in fostering engagement, as well as identity theory (Burke & Stryker, 2000), which highlights the ways individuals interpret and perform roles. By asking students to articulate connections between themes and to justify why their work matters, I am inviting them to practice identity development in an academic context, to see themselves as learners with authority over their own interpretations.

Finally, ending the course with reflection creates coherence with earlier practices in the class. At the beginning of the term, students were asked to situate themselves by sharing who they are and where they come from, grounding our discussions in perspective and identity. The final reflection mirrors that opening: students close the loop by articulating who they have become as readers, writers, and thinkers, and how their identity has shaped their engagement with the course themes. In this sense, the reflection functions as both assessment and narrative closure, reinforcing that the work of English class is not only about texts, but about the people reading, writing, and interpreting them.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates how theory becomes lived practice when classrooms are intentionally structured around relevance, identity, and belonging. The daily routines, thematic design, and reflective opportunities described here show that students engage more deeply when their own stories are acknowledged as part of the curriculum. By foregrounding identity work, creating low-stakes opportunities for practice, and weaving students' cultural and personal references into academic inquiry,

the classroom became a site where learning involved students making meaning for themselves.

The cumulative effect of weaving these practices together is clear: students who might otherwise see English as irrelevant or alienating instead recognized themselves in the work, discovered the power of their voices, and experienced belonging in an academic community. Their portfolios, projects, and reflections reveal that identity development is a central mechanism of engagement. In turn, these findings affirm the value of pedagogies that prioritize relationships, autonomy, and cultural relevance.

Chapter 7: Teacher Conversation: Michelle Cunningham on Building Identity, Community, and Courage in the Classroom

As part of this study, I interviewed Michelle Cunningham, an experienced teacher at Stelly's Secondary School in SD63. Michelle teaches English, First Peoples English, Social Studies, and CLE. With over twenty years in the classroom, she shared a deeply reflective account of how she builds learning environments that center student identity development, foster authentic community, and cultivate the vulnerability and courage essential for real learning.

Centering Student Self-Knowledge and Decolonizing Education

Michelle framed her approach to teaching as fundamentally rooted in helping students know themselves:

A huge piece of our work has to be helping kids figure out who they are, what they need, what they're good at, what they need to work on, and how they're doing. We don't do a good enough job helping kids know who they are and where they want to go.

She argued that this work is central to decolonizing education: rejecting the notion that all students arrive with the same needs or should be shaped into the same product. Instead, she sees school as a place where students should practice self-awareness and goal-setting in ways that mirror authentic adult contexts: "When they leave school, they won't have a boss filling out an evaluation for them. They'll have to do it themselves and talk about their goals." This aligns with Identity Theory (Burke & Stryker, 2000), which highlights identity as dynamic, socially negotiated, and contextual. Michelle's approach intentionally creates space for students to examine and articulate their identities, a necessary foundation for meaningful learning.

Building Community and Trust Through Circle Practice

Michelle described “Community Circle” as the core practice supporting this work across all her classes:

We do Community Circle every Monday. In the first two weeks, it’s every day. Kids share names, pronouns, weekend stories, and what’s in their ‘backpack’ emotionally. We start with silly questions, then move to deeper, reflective ones. Over time, it becomes a space where they trust each other enough to put down their adolescent mask.

She emphasized that adolescents often perform socially acceptable “masks” to protect themselves from judgment, a barrier to authentic learning: “They can’t be vulnerable if they’re too busy performing who they think they need to be. We have to get them to take off that mask and be willing to fail in front of each other.”

She carefully structures Circle time to scaffold this vulnerability, starting with small-group sharing before whole-class, offering writing or drawing as alternatives, and modeling her own willingness to be wrong. “I’ll say, ‘I think it’s this but let’s look it up together.’ They see me being wrong and not afraid of it.” This practice resonates with the FPPL, especially that “Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational,” and that “Learning requires exploration of one’s identity” (FNESC, 2008).

Circle practice is not simply an activity but a pedagogy of relational accountability that supports identity development. This approach reflects Identity Theory, which emphasizes that identity is socially negotiated in interaction (Burke & Stets, 2009). Circles create the social conditions where students can safely take their “self” as an object for reflection.

Supporting International Students: Honouring Culture and Language

Michelle offered a powerful example of adapting her approach to support international students, who often experience an added layer of “masking” due to language and cultural expectations. She explains, “All international students are already wearing a mask because everything is in a different cultural expectation and language. To be able to remove that mask is really difficult.” She also described a Social Studies project where students could research and write in their own languages, as long as they could explain their learning in English. This approach grew out of a moment of learning from a past student who “included a poem published in Japan in her writing portfolio. She wrote, ‘I know this isn’t in English, but I wanted you to know I’m a good writer.’ That taught me a huge lesson about seeing the whole student.” Once Michelle removed that barrier for her students, the change was immediate and noticeable. Michelle says “It was so powerful, the light that came on for them, especially my more quiet students. They became the experts in the room instead of the last to cross the finish line.”

This is culturally responsive pedagogy and resonates with FPPL’s emphasis on learning being embedded in personal and cultural contexts. By validating students’ linguistic and cultural identities, Michelle supports authentic self-expression and reduces the alienation often felt by international students.

This practice also fosters relatedness and competence, two of the core psychological needs in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017). As Ryan and Deci explain, “feeling connected to others, caring for and being cared for by those others” underpins intrinsic motivation (p. 96). By lowering social risk, Michelle creates conditions for both authentic engagement and academic growth.

Values-Based Education: Courage, Vulnerability, and Respectful Dialogue

Michelle reflected on the post-COVID classroom climate, describing a rise in polarized, “soundbite” arguments and a decline in genuine conversation. To address this, she paused curriculum delivery for several days to focus on values work: “We spent four days identifying our values, the district values, the student code of conduct, and the core competencies. Then we built class expectations around those values.”

She shared a story of navigating conflict with a student who wore a MAGA hat: “We had to start with, ‘What are our values?’ He said, ‘Everyone has a right to live, and everyone should be who they are without fear.’ We realized our values were the same even if our paths to get there were different.” This focus on shared values created a foundation for honest, respectful disagreement. She continued, “He and I have such different angles, but we have great debates. He’s willing to be vulnerable and be wrong. That’s what I want.”

This approach models relational, values-based pedagogy. It aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) by supporting students’ autonomy (owning their ideas), competence (defending them thoughtfully), and relatedness (building respectful community despite disagreement).

Michelle’s practice dismantles the adolescent mask, and supports students being seen authentically. Faircloth (2012) documents a similar phenomenon, noting that when students feel safe to show vulnerability, their engagement deepens and their participation becomes more meaningful (p. 186). This reflects FPPL principles that learning is “embedded in memory, history, and story” and “requires exploration of one’s identity” (FNESC, 2008).

Embracing Improvisation, Humility, and Relationship

Humility and flexibility are also central to Michelle's teaching. "I don't have to get it right, but I have to get my intention right and my response to being wrong right," she explained. She likens her role to that of a coach or improviser, trusting in a collaborative process with students: "You don't know where it will go. You trust you're building it together. Sometimes it's terrible, but the process was still valuable."

Her ADHD, she noted, strengthens this improvisational stance: "I know what I want it to feel like, but I can't see all the steps. That makes it easier to let go and follow their enthusiasm." Michelle elaborated in her interview that ADHD has shaped her comfort with "speaking before I ascertain whether I'm right," and with modeling mistakes openly for students. She often tells them, "Oh gosh, I think it's this but I'm not sure—let's look it up together," and then celebrates the learning when she's proven wrong. She also points out to her students—many of whom have ADHD themselves, that neurodivergence is not a deficit but "a different operating system" that can bring creativity and flexibility to teaching and learning. This openness to risk and visible imperfection allows her to respond to students' interests in real time and to co-create meaningful learning experiences.

Voice, Choice, and Identity in Academic Work

Michelle described her English classes as designed around "voice and choice," a philosophy intended to foster student ownership and identity. She explained, "We never make a blanket in my class; we make a quilt. Every kid brings different materials and lenses. That strengthens our community of learning." This philosophy is reflected in her instructional choices, which include offering multiple novel options across genres and authors, integrating audiobooks and TV series alongside traditional texts, and inviting students to select topics that matter to them. She also adapts reading levels to meet

student needs without stigma, ensuring that all learners can access materials in ways that build confidence rather than shame.

Her approach has produced powerful results. Michelle noted that students who were previously disengaged began scoring 10–20 percent higher on the (now defunct) British Columbia English 10 provincial exam, a standardized assessment that traditionally privileges formal literary analysis and essay writing. For many of her students, especially those who had struggled with the rigidity of conventional English courses, this improvement was striking. The very practices that centered identity and personal connection also strengthened the analytical and writing skills the exam measures. Michelle explained that these gains came not from teaching to the test but from “giving students a reason to care about their writing,” and from repeatedly showing them that their own voices and stories were worth academic attention.

She also shared stories of students taking pride in personal projects, reading poetry aloud at baseball fields during special events and constructing Minecraft maps of local traditional territories. These projects demonstrated both creativity and personal connection to their work. Some students, once wary of English, began to “light up” during class discussions and later reported that the course had become their favourite subject. For Michelle, these transformations confirmed that relevance and identity-based pedagogy do more than boost engagement. These strategies build the confidence and skill that standardized assessments often fail to cultivate while also nurturing a lasting sense of ownership over learning.

Assessment as Relational and Individualized

Michelle acknowledged that assessing in a model centered on voice and choice poses unique challenges. “My assessment needs to match what the kids are showing me, not the other way around,” she explained. She employs strategies such as using

core competencies (the province-wide framework in British Columbia Education that outlines broad capabilities such as communication, critical and creative thinking, and personal and social responsibility) as flexible criteria, encouraging students to reflect on their own growth, and accepting a wide range of evidence for learning: poems, films, art, and more. As she put it, “You can’t compare a carpenter to a cook. You have to look at the same qualities in different forms.”

This approach also requires pushing back against systemic pressures. “I have to defend this approach. It doesn’t look like our checkbox colonial system of ranking who’s the best little soldier in the row,” she said. Her practice challenges the standardized, colonial model of schooling and aligns with the FPPL, which call for patience, time, and the recognition that learning may follow multiple pathways (FNESC, 2008). It also reflects Identity Theory, in which students take an active role in defining and evaluating their evolving selves (Burke & Stryker, 2000).

Conclusion: Implications for Identity Development

Michelle’s philosophy and practices reflect the First Peoples Principles of Learning, which recognize that learning is holistic and experiential, that it requires patience, and that it takes time. Her approach models a relational ethic in which teacher and student learn together, and mistakes are embraced as essential to growth.

Michelle’s narrative offers a compelling vision of teaching that centers student identity development through:

- Building trusting communities
- Validating cultural and linguistic identities
- Creating space for vulnerability and authentic expression
- Honouring voice, choice, and personal meaning
- Assessing growth in relational, individualized ways

Michelle's narrative offers a vivid demonstration of how theory can come alive in the classroom when teaching is rooted in relationships, student agency, and culturally responsive practice. Identity Theory (Burke & Stryker, 2000) suggests that students' self-concepts are formed and reshaped through their roles, relationships, and the meanings they attach to their experiences. Michelle's "quilt" metaphor is a living enactment of this principle: by allowing each student to contribute unique "materials and lenses," she validates their existing identities while creating opportunities for those identities to evolve through interaction with the class community. Her use of student-selected novels, multimedia, and differentiated reading levels ensures that each learner's academic journey reflects their personal strengths and contexts — an essential condition for identity growth.

From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), Michelle's work addresses the three core psychological needs that drive intrinsic motivation: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Offering choice in texts and formats builds autonomy; adapting materials without stigma fosters competence; and creating a community where personal projects are celebrated nurtures relatedness. The joy her students experience when sharing projects, such as poetry in public spaces or Minecraft maps of traditional territories, reflects the powerful engagement that arises when these needs are met.

Taken together, these practices illustrate that relevance in education is not found in rigid uniformity, but in the careful cultivation of spaces where students' identities, cultures, and voices are actively honoured. Michelle's classroom becomes a site where theoretical ideals are made tangible: identity is shaped in dialogue, motivation flourishes when needs are met, and learning deepens when rooted in relationships and lived experience. In such spaces, students are not preparing for the world beyond school

because they can see how they are already participating in it as valued, capable members of their communities.

Chapter 8: Teacher Conversation with Caleb Hein on Building Trust, Reflection, and Student Voice

Introduction

As part of this study, I interviewed Caleb Hein, a colleague teaching at Lambrick Park Secondary School. Caleb teaches English Language Arts in grades 9–12, and has developed a reputation among students for building safe, caring, and authentic classroom communities.

This narrative account offers insight into his relational approach to teaching, the importance he places on student introspection and journaling, and the ways he works to flatten power dynamics in the classroom to support identity development.

Prioritizing Relationships and Trust-Building

Caleb emphasized that relationship-building is the absolute foundation of his teaching practice. He described the first week of any new semester as devoted almost entirely to getting to know his students and helping them get to know each other:

I think the first week of a semester is so important for establishing trust. I basically don't do any curricular content at all for that week. It's all about learning names, playing name games, talking about our favorite movies and music, learning to listen to each other. It's about showing them that they're safe here.

He acknowledged that some students are skeptical at first, or reluctant to participate:

Some kids really hate it at first. They're like, 'Why are we doing this? Just tell us what to do.' But I've found if I keep going, they end up opening up. By the end of the week, they know everyone's name and they've heard people share personal things. It just lowers the barriers.

This reflects Identity Theory, which emphasizes that identity is relational and constructed in social settings (Burke & Stets, 2009). It also aligns with FPPL's assertion that "learning is relational," requiring safe and reciprocal connections as a foundation for meaningful exploration, as well as the idea in FPPL that "learning takes patience and time" (FNESC, 2008). Caleb's emphasis on foundational trust in the first week mirrors findings from Faircloth (2012), who found that early establishment of belonging and teacher–student recognition significantly supports student engagement: "students' negotiation of engaged patterns of participation" was shaped by these relational factors (p. 186). Caleb's practice deliberately cultivates the social context in which students can begin to articulate and explore who they are.

Circle Practice and Personal Questions

Caleb described his daily practice of beginning class in a circle or semi-circle, opening with personal questions designed to build connection and prompt self-reflection:

We always start in a circle if possible. It changes the whole dynamic. I ask questions that are really simple but personal: 'What's something that made you smile this week?' or 'Tell me about a place that feels safe.' It forces them to think about themselves, even if they don't want to.

He explained that over time, these daily questions build a culture where students expect to share and listen, making it easier to tackle deeper topics later in the semester: "It's amazing to see the shift. At first, they give one-word answers, but as we keep going, they start volunteering details about their lives. They want to share. I think they crave being heard."

Caleb's daily circle questions function as low-stakes invitations to identity work. They scaffold reflective practice, helping students become more comfortable articulating

personal experiences and values. This practice supports Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) by nurturing relatedness (feeling connected to peers and teacher) and autonomy (choosing what to share). This fosters identity literacy as students learn to articulate, reflect on, and eventually revise their sense of self. Burke and Stets (2009) note that “the self is reflexive” and requires opportunities to observe and evaluate itself (p. 4). This practice also aligns with FPPL’s call for holistic, reflexive, and experiential learning (FNESC, 2008).

Voice, Choice, and Student Ownership

Caleb emphasized that offering students meaningful autonomy over their work is central to fostering engagement and ownership. “I let them pick topics and formats,” he explained. “If they want to make art instead of an essay, that’s fine. I just want them to care about it.” This flexibility ensures that students can align projects with their personal interests, strengths, and modes of expression, inviting participation from learners who might otherwise disengage from standardized, one-size-fits-all tasks.

Offering voice and choice fosters autonomy, a core psychological need in Self-Determination Theory, which Ryan and Deci (2017) define as “acting with a sense of volition and having the experience of choice” (p. 74). Autonomy-supportive teaching has been shown to increase intrinsic motivation, persistence, and depth of learning because students perceive themselves as active agents in their education (Stefanou et al., 2004). By allowing students to shape not only the topics but also the formats of their projects, Caleb creates what Stefanou et al. (2004) call cognitive autonomy support, where students’ thinking, problem-solving, and meaning-making processes are truly their own.

This personalization of learning also increases relevance, which has been linked to higher engagement and achievement across diverse learning contexts (Assor,

Kaplan, & Roth, 2002). When students see a direct connection between their work and their identities, experiences, and aspirations, they are more willing to invest effort and take intellectual risks. In Caleb's class, a student producing a painting to interpret a novel, or designing a multimedia project to explore a theme, is integrating academic goals with personal meaning, a process that research in identity theory (Burke & Stryker, 2000) suggests strengthens both learning and self-concept.

Caleb's approach also resonates strongly with the First Peoples Principles of Learning (FPPL), particularly the recognition that learning is holistic, reflexive, experiential, and relational, and that it involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions. By encouraging students to pursue topics and formats that matter to them, he fosters learning experiences that integrate emotional, social, and cognitive growth. This mirrors the FPPL emphasis on multiple pathways to understanding, where no single method or product is privileged over another, and where identity and community connections are integral to the process. In Caleb's classroom, students are engaging in a form of self-discovery and personal storytelling that affirms their place in a broader community of learners.

In this way, Caleb's approach moves beyond simply accommodating student preferences. It systematically builds a learning environment where autonomy, identity development, cultural relevance, and authentic engagement intersect — conditions essential for fostering lifelong learners who can direct their own growth well beyond the classroom.

Journaling and Reflection: Building Emotional Literacy

Caleb described journaling as a key part of his classroom practice. "We journal almost every day," he explained. "I give them prompts that are really personal: 'What's something you're proud of?' or 'What do you want people to know about you?' I tell

them they can keep it private if they want, but they have to write something.” For him, journaling is a space where students can process emotions, build self-awareness, and recognize their own growth. “At first, they write ‘I don’t know’ or nothing. But over time, they get used to it. They realize it’s a place they can say things they might not say out loud. And for some, it’s the first time they’ve ever thought about how they feel.”

Over the course of a semester, this practice can become transformative. “I’ve had kids tell me at the end of the semester that journaling was their favorite part, even if they started off resisting it. They see themselves differently by the end.” In many ways, this approach aligns with Identity Theory, as journaling creates a private space where students can construct, test, and refine their sense of self. It also reflects the FPPL, which emphasize the role of identity exploration in learning. By offering consistent and structured opportunities for introspection, Caleb is equipping students with reflective skills that will serve them beyond school.

Creating Safe and Brave Spaces

Caleb also reflected on the relationship between safety and vulnerability in learning environments. “I think you can’t have brave spaces without safe spaces first. You can’t ask kids to be vulnerable if they don’t trust you and each other. So I spend a lot of time showing them they’re safe, that I’m not going to embarrass them or punish them for being honest.” This foundation of trust is built through consistency and modeling. “I always try to be the first one to share when we do a question. I share something real, not just surface-level. I want them to see I’m willing to do it too.”

Maintaining safety also requires addressing harm immediately. “If a kid crosses a line or says something hurtful, we address it immediately. We talk about why it matters. We have to protect each other.” These strategies align with Self-Determination Theory by meeting students’ needs for relatedness and competence, while also incorporating

the concept of “brave spaces” (Arao & Clemens, 2013), where learners are supported to engage with discomfort as part of meaningful growth.

Flattening Power Dynamics and Building Student Voice

To further empower his students, Caleb works intentionally to flatten the traditional teacher–student hierarchy. “I try not to stand at the front of the room and lecture. I sit with them, or in the circle. I lower my voice. I don’t want to be this authority figure barking orders. I want them to see me as part of the group.” Even subtle shifts in physical positioning can have a big effect. “When I’m at eye level with them, or lower, they talk more. They argue with me. They ask questions. It’s so different from when I’m standing over them.”

This approach extends to curriculum and assessment choices. “I try to give them as much choice as possible in projects. I let them choose topics, formats. If they want to make art instead of an essay, that’s fine. I want them to care about it.” These choices promote autonomy as outlined in Self-Determination Theory, and align with FPPL’s emphasis on respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility in learning relationships.

Inclusive and Responsive Project Work

Caleb’s flexibility is also evident in his project design. He described a class project on Indigenous literature and art displayed in the school library. “Some kids went really deep, reading books and writing reflections. Others made posters or did small write-ups. I tried to let them show their learning in ways that worked for them.” The goal was engagement and awareness rather than uniformity. “I’d rather they think about these issues in a way that’s meaningful to them rather than force them into an assignment they hate.” This student-centered approach supports individualized meaning-making (Identity Theory), promotes autonomy and competence (Self-Determination Theory), and honours FPPL’s call for personalized, experiential learning.

Embracing Uncertainty and Reflective Practice

Finally, Caleb acknowledged that his teaching is not about having all the answers or controlling every outcome. “I tell them I’m learning too. That I’m going to get things wrong. But I’ll own it. I’ll say sorry. I think that matters a lot.” Reflection is central to his identity as a teacher. “I think about what went well, what didn’t. I talk to my students about it. I ask them what they need from me. It’s not perfect, but it feels honest.” This stance mirrors the reflective practitioner approach and reflects FPPL’s emphasis on humility and reciprocity in learning. By being transparent about his own learning, Caleb shows that identity development is a lifelong, relational process.

Conclusion: Supporting Identity Development Through Relationship and Reflection

Caleb’s narrative offers a compelling vision of relationship-centered teaching that prioritizes trust, reflection, and student voice. His work demonstrates that identity development in the classroom emerges not from isolated activities, but from a coherent and sustained approach where relationality and student agency are at the center.

By intentionally building a foundation of safety and trust, Caleb creates the conditions for students to engage authentically with learning. This connects directly to Self-Determination Theory’s emphasis on relatedness as a driver of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Students are more likely to take risks and invest in their work when they feel secure and respected in the learning environment. His consistent use of daily personal reflection, through circle questions and journaling, supports the construction and negotiation of self-concept described in Identity Theory (Burke & Stryker, 2000). In these moments, students are not only practicing self-expression but also articulating and refining the meanings they attach to their roles, values, and relationships.

Flattening traditional power dynamics by sitting with students instead of lecturing from the front of the room fosters autonomy, another essential component of Self-Determination Theory. This physical and symbolic shift signals that knowledge is co-constructed rather than delivered from an authority figure, which invites students to take greater responsibility for their own contributions. When the teacher positions themselves as a participant in the circle, students experience what Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000) describe as autonomy support: they are free to initiate ideas, question, and negotiate meaning rather than merely comply with directions. Classrooms that provide such opportunities for student voice—through practices such as co-constructed rubrics and choice-driven projects—create conditions where learners perceive themselves as agents in their learning rather than passive recipients. This reduction of hierarchical distance therefore does more than create a warmer atmosphere; it enacts the First Peoples Principles of Learning, which describe learners as “active participants in the construction of knowledge” (FNESC, 2008), and exemplifies the Self-Determination Theory claim that autonomy grows when students feel their perspectives and decisions shape the learning process.

Caleb’s adaptation of assessment and project expectations to meet diverse needs further embodies the FPPL commitment to learning that is holistic, experiential, and responsive to the learner’s context. For example, allowing varied formats for projects on Indigenous themes respects different cultural and personal ways of knowing and communicating, while also promoting competence by enabling students to work from their strengths.

Taken together, these strategies illustrate how theory is lived out in practice. Identity Theory is visible in the way students are guided to explore and narrate their evolving selves; Self-Determination Theory is realized in the autonomy, competence,

and relatedness that frame classroom interactions; and the First Peoples Principles of Learning are embodied in the relational, reflective, and flexible nature of his teaching. Like Michelle's approach, Caleb's practice demonstrates that supporting student identity development requires a sustained commitment to meeting students where they are and helping them imagine and move toward who they want to become.

Chapter 9: Discussion on Points of Convergence and Contrast

Introduction

This chapter brings together the narratives of Michelle, Caleb, and myself to identify key points of comparison in our approaches to fostering student identity development. While each of our practices is shaped by unique experiences, contexts, and personal philosophies, there are notable areas of overlap in the values, strategies, and theoretical commitments that inform our teaching. By examining these intersections, the chapter aims to highlight how shared principles such as valuing student voice, providing meaningful choice, and building relationships grounded in trust, manifest differently in practice yet consistently work toward the same goal: creating learning environments where students can explore, articulate, and evolve their identities.

This comparative analysis also serves a dual purpose. First, it allows for a richer understanding of how Identity Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and the First Peoples Principles of Learning are enacted across varied teaching styles and settings. Second, it offers a reflective lens on my own practice, situating it alongside the work of two respected colleagues whose approaches challenge and affirm my own pedagogical choices. In doing so, this chapter illustrates how theory and practice inform each other across different classrooms, and how common commitments to relevance, autonomy, and belonging can take multiple, equally effective forms.

Shared Commitments: Building Trust and Relationship

All three educators, Michelle, Caleb, and I, identified relationship-building as the foundation for meaningful learning. Michelle described her “Community Circle” practice as a deliberate space where students learn each other’s names, share personal experiences, and build the trust needed to “take off the adolescent mask.” For her, the

regularity of Circle work allowed students to practice vulnerability and develop a sense of belonging that extended into other classroom activities.

Caleb emphasized the power of beginning class with connection, often opening with a personal question that invited students to speak from their own lives. This consistent practice created opportunities for students to learn about one another and to feel emotionally safe in the group, fostering the willingness to take interpersonal and academic risks.

In my own classroom, I intentionally cultivated trust by inviting students into collaborative discussions about our classroom norms. We revisited those expectations regularly in circle and framed them as a collective responsibility. Like Caleb, I modelled vulnerability through personal stories, and like Michelle, I treat the learning space as a shared community.

These shared efforts affirm Faircloth's (2012) finding that identities are negotiated and anchored in practice. Burke and Stets (2009) similarly describe identity as relational, meaning that it is shaped by how we are seen and treated by others. Each of our practices echoes the First Peoples Principles of Learning (FNESC, 2008), which emphasize that learning is relational and holistic.

Vulnerability, Safety, and Brave Spaces

All three of us emphasized the importance of creating safety before inviting vulnerability. Michelle structured her Circle practice to support gradual risk-taking, offering students options like whispering responses or sharing in pairs before speaking in front of the class. She explicitly modeled imperfection and acknowledged mistakes. Caleb described modeling vulnerability himself, sharing first and setting the tone for respectful listening. He addressed breaches of trust quickly to maintain a safe atmosphere.

In my practice, I view classroom vulnerability as necessary for growth. I try to mitigate the fear of failure by building community norms around respect, accountability, and support. These include my own presence as a co-participant in learning, someone who is fallible and still growing.

These approaches are supported by Self-Determination Theory, which highlights relatedness and emotional safety as prerequisites for risk-taking and motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). As Faircloth (2012) notes, students engage more deeply when emotional risks are minimized and their identities are affirmed by both peers and teachers.

Supporting Reflection and Introspection

Each of us found ways to prioritize reflection and introspection in our classrooms. Michelle used Circle prompts to guide students toward deeper self-awareness, blending light-hearted and profound questions. Over time, these routines built trust and prompted students to reflect on their personal identities. Caleb emphasized journaling and emotional literacy, with prompts designed to encourage students to write about their own experiences and internal lives, even when they were reluctant to do so at first.

I use a daily journal in my classes as a form of low-stakes reflective writing. Students write about their lives, thoughts, and values without fear of evaluation. I introduce story as a powerful medium of identity, encouraging students to view their own writing as a way of discovering who they are.

These practices support what Burke and Stets (2009) describe as the reflexivity of the self, the idea that identity develops through processes of self-observation and evaluation. Faircloth (2012) emphasizes that identity and learning are reciprocal tasks, and the First Peoples Principles of Learning call for education that is experiential, holistic, and reflective (FNESC, 2008).

Voice, Choice, and Personal Relevance

We all use student voice and choice to promote relevance and ownership of learning. Michelle referred to her English class as a “quilt,” allowing students to read different texts and demonstrate understanding in multiple ways, often rooted in cultural relevance. Caleb designed flexible projects and gave students autonomy to pursue topics aligned with their interests and identities. He worked to flatten power dynamics in the classroom, making space for student expertise.

In my classroom, I invite students to connect course texts with their own lives. Early in the semester, I ask them to share their favorite songs, and I create a playlist that we revisit throughout the course. These texts often become anchors for thematic discussions or creative projects. This allows students to see their culture and preferences reflected in the curriculum.

All three approaches align with Self-Determination Theory’s emphasis on autonomy as a motivator (Ryan & Deci, 2017). They also align with Côté’s (2002) concept of identity capital, in which students accumulate resources, like voice, agency, and self-knowledge, that help them navigate life transitions. Relevance emerges when students see their interests and values reflected in their academic experiences.

Assessment as Relational and Individualized

All three of us expressed skepticism toward standardized assessment models and described flexible, student-centered approaches. We each make room for reflective and creative outputs such as art, film, and poetry, guided by the province’s core competencies. We all emphasize that assessment should honour student voice and process as much as product. Michelle, for example, integrates a wide range of student-generated work and invites learners to identify their own evidence of growth. Caleb

adapts expectations to suit students' needs and starting points, particularly in group projects or when scaffolding complex tasks.

I use portfolios as a culminating project, allowing students to curate and reflect on their work across the semester. They select artifacts that demonstrate their growth in relation to our course themes of identity, truth, voice, and harmony. This process makes visible their unique learning paths and supports metacognitive reflection.

These individualized approaches challenge colonial, one-size-fits-all models of assessment and affirm the FPPL principle that learning takes time and must accommodate multiple ways of knowing (FPPL, 2008; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). They also reflect Burke and Stryker's (2000) understanding that identity becomes more stable when reinforced through meaningful social roles and recognized competence.

Emphasis on Indigenous Ways of Knowing

Michelle's pedagogy was most explicitly shaped by Indigenous worldviews. She engaged students with land-based questions, treaty education, and cultural teachings. Her curriculum centered Indigenous voices and emphasized collective responsibility. Caleb included Indigenous themes and texts in his library and curriculum but approached decolonization more implicitly, encouraging students to interpret issues through their own lenses.

In my English First Peoples course, I chose identity, truth, voice, and harmony as the guiding themes, drawn from Indigenous frameworks grounded in interconnected worldviews. As Lorna Williams and Gloria Snively note, Indigenous worldview is "a set of assumptions and beliefs that form the basis of a people's comprehension of the world," in which humans are intricately connected to the natural world. In practice, I prioritized Indigenous authors and speakers in our text selections and foregrounded the

principle that truth and story are intimately connected as lived and relational experiences within community and place. However, I also recognize that my work could grow in alignment with land-based pedagogy and community-connected pedagogy. In the future, I aim to pursue:

- Land-based learning opportunities, such as outdoor circle discussions, visits with local knowledge holders, and storytelling rooted in place.
- Community partnerships, inviting Elders or cultural educators to share multiple perspectives on identity, voice, and harmony.
- Intergenerational learning, where students engage in knowledge-sharing projects that connect them to both youth and elder voices.

Together, these differences show the range of culturally responsive practice. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) reminds us, decolonizing education requires both content and process to shift.

Common Commitment to Humility and Shared Learning

All three of us expressed a strong commitment to humility, seeing ourselves as co-learners alongside students. Michelle described her role as one of accountability and responsiveness: “I don’t have to get it right, but I have to get my intention right and my response to being wrong right.” Caleb also acknowledged his fallibility and emphasized his responsibility to own mistakes in front of students.

In my own classroom, I often remind students that I am still learning. I invite feedback, share uncertainties, and try to model reflective practice. I see this as part of the relational contract of the classroom, that we are all still becoming, and that growth requires both courage and humility.

This shared stance echoes the First Peoples Principles of Learning, which emphasize reciprocal learning and mutual respect. It also aligns with narrative inquiry

frameworks, which see teaching as a relational and evolving story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Modeling vulnerability invites students to see identity formation not as something to master, but as something to explore continuously.

Conclusion: Implications for Supporting Student Identity Development

Across three distinct classrooms, these narratives show that supporting student identity development through relevance requires relational, reflective, and student-centered practice:

- Trust and community are foundational.
- Safe spaces precede brave spaces.
- Reflection supports identity literacy.
- Voice and choice increase ownership and engagement.
- Assessment must be adaptive and contextual.
- Humility invites co-learning.

Our combined practices: Michelle's decolonized structures, Caleb's emotional openness, and my theme-driven reflections, demonstrate that there is no single path to relevance. But there is a shared orientation: one that recognizes student identity as central to the work of learning. Supported by theory (Self-Determination Theory, Identity Theory, narrative inquiry) and guided by the First Peoples Principles of Learning, we each strive to create environments where students feel seen, heard, and empowered to grow.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

This inquiry, grounded in my own classroom practice and in interpretive interviews with colleagues, shows how a situated, reflective approach can enrich both research and pedagogy. Making my own positionality visible, as a white, male educator working on the traditional territories of the Lekwungen peoples and guided by the First Peoples Principles of Learning, hopefully invites others to consider how their own identities shape their teaching and research.

Engaging in this self-study reshaped my understanding of teaching and inquiry. The process showed that self-study is a form of professional growth that depends on reflection and honesty. As I documented classroom experiences and examined my choices, I began to see how reflection becomes a site of learning. Through this work I came to view my teaching identity as dynamic and evolving, shaped through reflection, dialogue, and lived experience. This understanding supports Berry and Crowe's (2009) idea that self-study holds teachers in a balance between personal insight and professional responsibility. I now understand self-study as both mirror and method, a practice that nurtures the curiosity, humility, and responsiveness I hope to encourage in my students.

The work also points toward promising avenues for continued exploration. Future studies could include student voices through interviews, artifacts, or long-term follow up to see how identity-focused learning influences life beyond high school. Research across subject areas or districts could illuminate how relevance and identity intersect in different educational settings, while investigations into professional development, timetabling, or other structural supports could reveal how schools can sustain pedagogy that centers autonomy and belonging.

Teenagers want to be heard, and to see themselves reflected in what they're asked to read, write, and speak. When given the opportunity to engage as whole people in the classroom, they rise to the occasion with surprising energy and honesty. Enthusiastic learning is what happens when relevance, identity, and belonging are treated as essentials rather than extras. These ideas formed the basis of this self-study: an experiment in placing identity at the center of English Language Arts, and in observing what happens when the classroom shifts to accommodate more than curriculum expectations.

Teachers can reflect on and adapt their practice to foster identity development by engaging in regular, intentional self-assessment and being open to change. Reflection involves considering whether lessons and materials affirm diverse identities, invite student voice, and connect meaningfully to learners' lives. This process benefits from collecting feedback from colleagues and, when possible, from students, to reveal blind spots and highlight opportunities for deeper engagement. Adapting practice requires flexibility: revising units to include more culturally relevant texts, incorporating assignments that allow personal expression, and creating classroom norms that value respect, curiosity, and belonging. Teachers who integrate identity work into curriculum and pedagogy help students connect academic content to their own experiences, values, and aspirations, making learning both more relevant and transformative.

I saw students in my class begin to reference their own values, tell stories only they could tell, and approach literature as a space where they might encounter both the world and themselves. I saw sticky notes, playlists, journal entries, hesitant conversations, and occasional moments of undeniable clarity: a student naming a core value for the first time, a debate that deepened instead of derailed, or a piece of writing that sounded more like a person than a product.

Teaching English through the lens of identity is not merely a pedagogical preference; it is a commitment to meeting students as whole human beings. Centering relevance, identity, and belonging transforms the classroom into a space where learners see themselves reflected in literature, where their own experiences become valid and valued sources of insight, and where risk-taking is met with encouragement rather than fear. We see Michelle's students naming values they had never articulated before, Caleb's students daring to share vulnerable truths, and my own students discovering the courage to tell stories only they could tell. This is the work that reaches beyond curriculum expectations, shaping not just academic skills but self-understanding, resilience, and the capacity for meaningful participation in community. In this way, the stories created in our classrooms become part of a larger human story, one that matters long after the last assignment is handed in.

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Appendix A: Interview questions for Teacher Participants

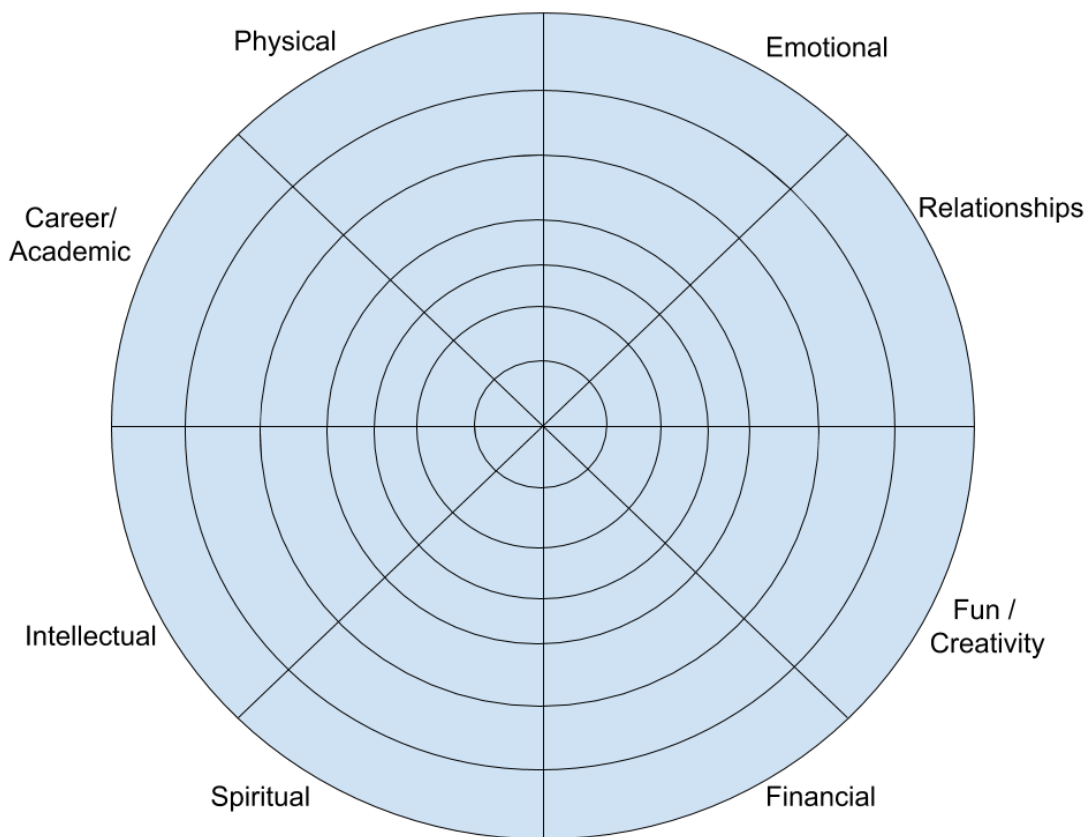
- Who are you and what do you teach?
- Describe the parts of your teaching practice that you believe help students get to know themselves better.
- Approach and assignments
- Why do you encourage students to reflect on and think about themselves?
- What benefits do you see from working with identity development in your classroom?
- What challenges do you face in guiding students through this work?
- What kinds of conversations do you have in class?
- What is being created in your class?
- What is your impression of student joy, confidence, and learning levels?
- How does your assessment feel?

Appendix B: Identity Development Handouts - Wellness Wheel

Wellness Wheel

Name: _____

- Use the wheel below to rank how you feel about each category in your life.
- Shading the section in completely means you derive great joy from that aspect of your life. A low ranking indicates this section of your life is one you are not satisfied with, and is even perhaps a source of stress or worry.
- Be honest, and understand that it's natural to have multiple parts of our life that are causing us to worry, or we know they aren't *there*. When we acknowledge this, it allows us to start making improvements towards a more balanced & happy life!



Complete the following reflection questions:

Were there any surprises while filling out your wellness wheel? Were the 'valleys' where you thought they would be? Which of these areas do you think about the most? The least? Why is that?

Appendix C: Identity Development Handouts - Ikigai

Ikigai!

Introduction:

Ikigai is a Japanese concept that represents the intersection of what you love, what you are good at, what the world needs, and what you can be paid for. Discovering your Ikigai can help you find purpose and fulfillment in your life. Follow the instructions below to discover your own Ikigai.

Instructions:

Reflect on **What You Love:**

- In the "What I Love" quadrant, list activities, hobbies, and things that genuinely bring you joy and fulfillment. Consider what you enjoy doing in your free time and what makes you lose track of time.

Identify **What You Are Good At:**

- In the "What I Am Good At" quadrant, write down your skills, talents, and strengths. Think about subjects or activities where you feel confident and perform well.

Explore **What the World Needs:**

- In the "What the World Needs" quadrant, identify the needs or problems in the world that resonate with you. Consider the ways you can contribute to making a positive impact on others or society.

Consider **What You Can Be Paid For:**

- In the "What I Can Be Paid For" quadrant, list potential professions or careers that align with your skills and passions. Think about how you can turn your talents into a sustainable source of income.

Find the Intersection:

- Look for the intersections between the quadrants. Where do your passion, skills, societal needs, and potential income overlap? Circle or highlight these areas.



Reflect on Your Ikigai:

- In the center of your handout, write down the common elements that emerged from the intersections. This is your Ikigai — your reason for being. Reflect on how these elements align with your values and aspirations. Set **Goals**: Based on your Ikigai, set short-term and long-term goals to guide your personal and professional development. Consider actionable steps you can take to move closer to your Ikigai. *Now, set a short-term and long-term goal to move towards your ikigai:*

Short-term goal:

Long-term goal:

Appendix D: Sense of Self Project Instruction Sheet

Sense of Self Identity Project - EFP 12

Goal: use text and images to represent your multi-dimensional identity.

Due date:

Instructions

Step 1 - Gather Inspiration

- Review example projects in the classroom slides.
- Look at the “Influence Ideas” list below to spark ideas about what shapes your identity.

Step 2 - Reflect on Your Identity

- Use at least one of the following tools to explore your identity:
 - Free-writing
 - The wellness wheel
 - Ikigai
 - Living into our Values
 - MyBlueprint review
- Consider how different factors influence your sense of self and how your identity changes over time or in different situations.

Step 3 - Organize Your Ideas

- Identify key aspects of your identity that you want to include. These may include:
 - How your identity is influenced (family, culture, experiences, etc.)
 - Ways your identity is fluid, multidimensional, or even contradictory
 - Other unique aspects that make you who you are (sports, interests, personality, goals, etc.)

Step 4 - Create Your Poster

- Design a **visual representation** of your identity that includes text and imagery.
- Ensure your poster clearly expresses the key aspects of your identity.

Project Checklist

Content:

- Influences on your identity (family, experiences, personal values, etc.)
- Explanation of how your identity changes in different contexts (fluid, multidimensional, contradictory)
- Reflective writing on identity work from class

Visual Design & Presentation:

- A creative and organized layout that visually represents your identity
- Thoughtful use of color, images, or symbols that enhance understanding
- Clear formatting that makes information easy to follow

Extending Your Thinking:

- Make connections between different aspects of your identity (e.g., how does your personality connect to your past or future goals?)
- Relate your identity to a text you've read (similarities and differences)
- Look at [this website](#), and see if you identify with an 'ism' listed there, and include this in your project.

Influence Ideas for Sense of Self Project

Family	Friends	Music	Clothes	Social Media
Sports	Food	Goals	History	Games
Hobbies	Activities	Jobs	Responsibilities	Luck/Chance

Marking Rubric

	Emerging	Developing	Proficient	Extending
Presentation of information (visual design & doc formatting)	1	2	3	4
Evidence of reflection (writing contains specific details or examples, and uses language from our identity unit)	1	2	3	4
Spelling, grammar, evidence of proofreading	1	2	3	4

Appendix E: Final Reflection Instructions and Questions

EFP 12 Final Reflection!

You know this! You got this!

Exam conditions please - let everyone focus. **No talking, no phones.** You can listen to music. Raise hands for a question. Take breaks when you need to. Finish by 3:30.

Use your portfolio, our Google Classroom, and your class work to answer the questions.

Answer the questions below in paragraph form - **one paragraph per question**. Say what you need to, but paragraphs of **around 5-9 sentences each** should work for these questions. Your paragraphs must each **include at least one quotation** from your own work or one of the texts we read in the library this semester.

You will be graded on your paragraph form, use of evidence (quoting your work, or other texts, and using that quote), and making connections between your work and our class themes. All of the questions are subjective. Make your case, provide reasonable evidence and **proofread your work**.

Unit 1: Identity

Answer one of the following questions:

How does your identity project reveal or explore the complexity of identity (identity in different contexts, changing over time, and/or contradicting itself)?

OR

How do the values you identified in your identity project (or in the 'Living our Values' in-class activity) relate to the work you completed in the Truth, Voice, and Harmony units?

Unit 2: Truth

Answer one of the following questions:

How does your work relate to ideas of bias and/or perspective?

OR

How do stories reveal and hide truth?

Unit 3: Voice

Answer one of the following questions:

How can our 'voices' affect change?

OR

How do we decide whether to appeal to our audience's sense of reason or their emotions?

OR

Discuss the importance of speaking up, and the role of listening to others in society.

Unit 4: Harmony

Answer one of the following questions:

Which factors enable harmony? What can prevent it?

OR

How did you engage with the idea of harmony this semester?