

Braiding Sweetgrass Lesson Plan 2

Understanding the Gift Economy: “The Gift of Strawberries”

Created by C.J. Tenniswood

Overview: This lesson introduces students to the concept of the gift economy as presented in *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Students will explore how Indigenous worldviews consider nature as a system of gifts and reciprocal relationships rather than resources to be exploited. Students will explore how Kimmerer’s realization that “strawberries first shaped my view of a world full of gifts simply scattered at your feet” challenges conventional economic thinking. Through close reading and guided activities, students will examine how their chosen perspective transforms their relationship with the natural world.

Objectives:

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Define gift economy principles as illustrated through Kimmerer’s experiences with strawberries.
2. Analyze how different economic worldviews shape human-nature relationships.
3. Discuss the different human relationships fostered in a gift economy versus a market economy.

Class Structure (50 minutes):

5 minutes: Framing activity

- Students will each share one “gift” they have received from the natural world recently.
 - These gifts can encompass anything from fresh air to a sunset to food, but they are not limited to these alone.
- Record student answers on the board or a slide.
- When finished, ask students what made them feel that this was a gift as opposed to something earned or taken?

15 minutes: Introduction to Gift Economy

- Begin by discussing Kimmerer’s childhood relationship with wild strawberries: “In a way, I was raised by strawberries, fields of them” (Kimmerer 22); explain the cultural context: strawberries are considered “heart berries” (*ode min*) in Potawatomi tradition and their role in creation stories.
- Contrast Kimmerer’s perspective shift from unconscious receiving to conscious recognition of gifts:
 - “Strawberries first shaped my view of a world full of gifts simply scattered at your feet” (Kimmerer 23).
 - Definition of gifts: “A gift comes to you through no action of your own, free, having moved toward you without your beckoning” (Kimmerer 23); “Gifts exist

in a realm of humility and mystery—as with random acts of kindness, we do not know their source” (Kimmerer 24).

- Introduce Lewis Hyde’s concept: “It is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people” (Kimmerer 26).
 - Hyde argues that gifts vary from commodities primarily in how we receive them. “There are several distinct senses of ‘gift’... but common to each of them is the notion that a gift is a thing we do not get by our own efforts. We cannot buy it; we cannot acquire it through an act of will. It is bestowed upon us” (Hyde xxxii).
 - As Kimmerer and Hyde both posit, circulation rather than accumulation is the logic of a gift economy: “A gift that cannot be given away ceases to be a gift. The spirit of a gift is kept alive by its constant donation” (Hyde xxxv).

20 minutes: Close Reading and Analysis Activity

- Break students into small groups. Each group will focus on a different “transformation moment” from the chapter. Before they begin, remind students to find specific quotes from the text to support their analysis. Students should be prepared to share any key insights with the class.
 - **Group 1:** The Market Dream—analyze Kimmerer’s dream where the Andean market becomes a gift economy (Kimmerer 28-29).
 - What changes when gratitude becomes the only currency?
 - Why does she feel “self-restraint” when everything is free?
 - How do relationships change between vendors and customers?
 - **Group 2:** The Sweetgrass Teaching—examine the manner in which Wally “Bear” Meshigaud approaches ceremonial plants (Kimmerer 26-27)
 - Why can’t sweetgrass be sold and “still retain its essence for ceremony” (Kimmerer 27)?
 - What does it mean that sweetgrass “grow[s] richer as it is honored in every exchange (Kimmerer 27)?
 - How does this transformation story illustrate gift economy principles?
 - **Group 3:** Mrs. Crandall’s Farm vs. Wild Fields—comparing the two strawberry experiences (Kimmerer 23-25).
 - What makes wild strawberries gifts when compared to strawberries from the farm, which are regarded as commodities?
 - How do different relationships affect the value and meaning of the berries?
 - What does “the berries belonged to themselves” (Kimmerer 25) reveal?
 - **Group 4:** Store-bought socks vs. handmade socks (Kimmerer 26)
 - What makes socks knitted for you by your grandmother different from store-bought socks?
 - How do your feelings toward the socks change between the two?

- How do gifts change the relationship between the gift and the receiver?
And how do they affect the relationship between giver and recipient?

10 minutes: Synthesis and Discussion

- Have each group share its key insights with the class. When done, consider the following prompts:
 - How does gift-giving create obligations and relationships? What does Kimmerer mean when she states, “It is human perception that makes the world a gift” (Kimmerer 30)?
 - What elements must be present for a gift economy to continue functioning (see page 28)? How does this differ from the basic requirements of a market economy?
 - At the end of the chapter, Kimmerer posits to the reader: “If all the world is a commodity, how poor we grow. When all the world is a gift in motion, how wealthy we become” (Kimmerer 31)
 - This invites the reader to consider what values shape their relationship with the natural world. Consider how Kimmerer contrasts two different perspectives: one in which nature is treated as a collection of resources to be bought, sold, and used (i.e., market economy), and the other in which it is understood as a web of relationships grounded in reciprocity and gratitude (i.e., gift economy).

Sources:

Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World*. Third Vintage Books ed., Penguin, 2019

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Milkweed Editions, 2016.