

***Braiding Sweetgrass* Lesson Plan 3**
Ways of Knowing: “The Teachings of Grass”
Created by Emily Pearson

Overview:

This lesson is designed to highlight the different forms and origins of knowledge in *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Students will discuss the relationship between formal, scientific knowledge in the academic system and the traditional knowledge passed down in Indigenous communities. This lesson will focus on the chapter “The Teachings of Grass,” but students will be encouraged to discuss examples from other sections of *Braiding Sweetgrass*. This lesson is well-suited for the third or fourth day of discussion.

Objectives:

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

1. Identify and locate passages in *Braiding Sweetgrass* that demonstrate the tension between scientific and Indigenous knowledge.
2. Explain how scientific and Indigenous knowledge differ in how they originate and what they value.
3. Discuss the way chapter organization influences the way we understand and approach reading each chapter

Class Structure (50 minutes):

5 minutes: Framing Activity

- Ask students to think about the scientific method. What elements should a scientific experiment include (e.g. hypothesis, control group, measurable results, etc.)? Keep track of student answers on a board or slide.
- Ask students what the benefits of such methodology might be.

15 minutes: Close reading “The Teachings of Grass”

- Have students quickly review this chapter, or ask them to come in expecting to discuss this chapter in particular. After students have reviewed the section, ask the class the following questions:
 - How does Laurie’s experiment differ from what the faculty board expected? How does it differ from the Indigenous practice, as demonstrated by Lena?
 - Why does Kimmerer use the format of an academic article to write this chapter? If she had written it in the same way as the rest of the chapters, what difference would that have made?
 - Kimmerer posits that “science and traditional knowledge may ask different questions and speak different languages, but they may converge when both truly listen to the plants” (165).
 - How does traditional Indigenous knowledge explain the relationship between sweetgrass and humans (see pp. 165-166)? How is that knowledge gained?
 - How does science explain the relationship between sweetgrass and humans (see pp. 163-165)? How is that knowledge gained?
 - What can we gain by learning both of these explanations?

20 minutes: Group activity

- Place students into groups of 3-4. Ask each group to find a moment in *Braiding Sweetgrass* where scientific knowledge seems at odds with Indigenous wisdom. In their groups, students should answer the following questions:
 - Briefly summarize the chapter and describe the tension you found.
 - How does traditional Indigenous knowledge view the issue? How is that knowledge gained?
 - How does science explain the relationship between sweetgrass and humans? How is that knowledge gained?
 - What are the benefits of blending these often-opposed ways of thinking? Do you see any potential downsides?
 - How does Kimmerer organize the chapter you've chosen [e.g. Is there a frame narrative? Are there multiple intertwined stories? Is it a straightforward narrative? Is it written like a scientific paper?] How does the organization influence the way you read this chapter?
- *Some suggestions for chapters that groups might consider include: "Asters and Goldenrods," "Wisgaak Gokpenagen: A Black Ash Basket," "The Sound of Silverbells," "Sitting in a Circle," "Putting Down Roots," "The Sacred and the Superfund," and "People of Corn, People of Light"
- After a few minutes, bring the class back together and have each group share what they discussed.

10 minutes: Class Discussion

- After each group has shared, ask the class to consider all of the examples as a whole. What does *Braiding Sweetgrass* suggest about the relationship between scientific and Indigenous knowledge? How much are the two at odds? What similarities do they have?
 - Where does scientific understanding come from? What does it value most?
 - Where does Indigenous understanding come from? What does it value most?
- Does *Braiding Sweetgrass* present other similar tensions between Indigenous knowledge and Western ways of viewing human-environment interaction?

Sources:

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