



Connectedness Across Cultures: The Key to Indigenous Resilience

Grades 7-12

Knowledge Holder

This lesson was created by Jacy Bowles (Xicana and Diné).



Materials

- Large drawing surface, like a piece of butcher paper, the back of a brown paper bag, or a dry-erase board
- Markers, Colored Pencils, or crayons
- *Optional:* magazines to cut images to create collage

Standards

This lesson aligns with national visual arts, social studies, and geography frameworks by:

- Exploring how Indigenous concepts of relation and ancestral wisdom build community resilience.
- Using community mapping to look closely at local environmental impacts, like flooding and extreme heat.
- Encouraging students to design visionary, decolonial futures centered on food sovereignty and ecological health.

Objective

The goal of this activity is to explore the theme of interconnectedness across Native cultures and how the importance of connectedness is wisdom passed down from our ancestors, pre-dating Western scientific approaches that aim to separate and categorize us based on our differences. We can lean on these teachings to first imagine and then begin working towards communities that better serve us, our people, and all the relatives in the natural world.

Survivance Message

Watch: [NASA Engineer Reflects on The Navajo Spider Woman and Life in Our Universe | Native America | PBS](#)

It is said that the first Navajo woman that learned to weave had been exiled from the community. She was walking through Canyon de Chelly when she met Spider Woman, who taught her to weave. She was able to take that teaching back to her people and be of service in a good way to the community. This is a reminder that no matter how far away from your people or traditions you get, you have a sacred purpose and a place. Don't get down on yourself if you feel like you're not where you want to be yet - there will be twists and turns in your journey, but your ancestors are looking out for you, holding that space and protection, so keep going and trust in that sacred purpose. It is important to note that you can never go so far that you are disconnected from your people, but we need each other and our teachings to do the work needed for change in a good way.

The Climate Web and the Weaver: Western systems often try to separate human choices from environmental impacts. Indigenous wisdom teaches us the opposite. Our environment is a web, much like the ones Spider Woman weaves. When drought, wildfire, or pollution damages one single thread, the whole web feels the vibration. Remembering how to stay connected to the land and each other isn't just a nice idea, it's how our communities survive a changing climate. By mapping and repairing our relationships with our neighbors, our local plants, and our water systems, we weave a tighter, more resilient community that can withstand the environmental shifts of a changing planet.

Activities

15 Min: Feel! (Part 1: Mapping Your Points of Connection) Ask students to break into pairs or small groups. Give each group their drawing surface and coloring materials.



Braiding Knowledge: Curriculum Standards

This lesson is part of a broader framework that weaves together the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) and Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ITECK). We teach Western science through a localized, relational lens to honor the history and sovereignty of the land and its caretakers. For a detailed breakdown of how this lesson aligns with specific NGSS benchmarks, ITECK guidelines, and UNESCO climate action goals, please visit our [story map](#).

Indigenous Vocabulary

Terms for Connectedness to Others:

- K'e (Diné)
- Mitakuye Oyasin (Lakota)
- Nda-nwentlaaganag (Anishinaabe)
- In Lak'ech (Maya)
- Ubuntu (Nguni of Africa)

Terms for Our Responsibility to Live in Harmony with the Natural World:

- Hózhó (Diné)
- Sumak Kawsay (Quechua)
- Medicine Wheel (Varies by region, but present for most Native peoples)
- Assata Chant (Black Liberation Movement)

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"Look at the blank surface before you and begin to visualize your daily paths. Map out the physical places in your community by drawing them. Consider these prompts as your markers touch the paper: What places and people do you feel connected to? Where do you eat, play, exercise, or work? Where do people gather? Are there important plants, animals, or sacred places you know of? Where are the places that get too hot in the summer, or flood when it rains heavy? Where does the water flow when it leaves your neighborhood? What are the things or places you don't feel connected to in your community? Let your drawings reflect your honest, lived relationship with the space around you."

Invite each group to share out some of the key places they drew.

20 Min: Connect! (Part 2: Building Towards a Decolonial Future)

Give each group a second paper or drawing surface. Now, challenge them to look beyond what *is* and draw what *can be*, shifting their focus toward ancestral wisdom and collective care.

"Now, draw the changes you wish you saw in your communities. Think beyond the limitations of current systems. In addition to the places and people you love, what would you add to your community? What are some things the people you love would benefit from? What makes your community feel safe or peaceful? What would create space for more community joy? How can we design our neighborhoods to take care of the land—like planting native trees for shade, creating community gardens for food sovereignty, or designing spaces that harvest rainwater safely? What resources or projects would you be excited to see or be involved in? Draw a landscape where our relationships with one another and the natural world are fully supported."

Invite each group to share out some of the key places they drew on their visionary maps.

10 Min: Play! (Reflecting and Weaving it Together) Bring the whole room together to look at the collective visions drawn by the youth.

"Look across the room at the futures you have all drawn. Were there common themes shared among the different groups? Is there anything else you would add to your maps after hearing your peers share out? Most importantly, look at these designs and ask yourselves: Could you and the class bring any of these ideas to reality? How can we take these imagined connections and begin building them in our communities today?"

Resources

[GrownUp Navajo: K'e, Kinship, and Responsibility](#)

[Ricky Gray Grass: Mitakuye Oyasin](#)

[Angun Gualinga on Sumak Kawsay](#)

[Four Directions Teachings: Interactive Medicine Wheel Content](#)

[What We Can Learn from the Philosophy of Ubuntu](#)

[A Brief Take on Assata's Teachings](#)

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Reciprocity through Stewardship

Western systems and climate change have broken apart a lot of our natural landscapes and cut off communities from their roots. To heal that harm, we have to show up for the land and the people who take care of us. We can practice true reciprocity by turning our visionary maps into real, everyday care. To honor this responsibility, students can practice an act of reciprocity by taking the visionary ideas from their decolonial maps and turning them into real-world care.

Have youth pick one specific person or place that they named as a positive connection in their life during the mapping activity. Encourage the youth to identify one tangible need they can fill for that person or place—whether it is bringing over food, hauling water, pruning a plant, offering a prayer for them, or simply being with them to talk and listen.

By dedicating your time, presence, and physical labor to a relative or a space, you participate in the reciprocal cycle of taking care of one another to become stronger and more abundant in life. The natural world and our elders provide us with clean air, water, wisdom, and the foundational materials to create. By offering our direct protection, help, and thoughtful design back to the earth and our community members, we ensure that our relatives are well taken care of, strengthening our collective climate resilience and continuing the sacred cycle of reciprocity.