Cultivating Belonging in Higher Education through 'Where I am From' Poems

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Abstract
This study shares an arts-based, narrative-centered project designed to foster belonging, relational awareness, and culturally responsive pedagogy in higher education. Inspired by Lyon's (n.d.) "Where I'm From" poem, the project invited 62 undergraduate and 19 graduate students across two northeastern U.S. private universities to explore identity, memory, culture, and lived experiences through poetry, visual media, and peer sharing. Guided by humanizing and reflexive frameworks, the study addressed how the project cultivated belonging in art and education courses and improved student-professor relationships. Participants engaged in instructor modeling, guided brainstorming, and flexible poetic structures before sharing their work aloud, in discussions, or via video. Post-activity anonymous surveys evaluated the impact on student identity, peer connections, classroom belonging, and pedagogical implications. This project offers an adaptable model for educators seeking to honor students' funds of knowledge and foster inclusive, relational learning environments.

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According to Cornell University (2023), belonging can be defined as "...the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group." Maslow (1968) has defined belonging as one of the basic human needs, and in higher education, a feeling of belonging is critical in student retention efforts (Kahu et al., 2022). Currently, the discourse on belonging has been brought to light with a political climate which brings equality and equity into question, creating a sense of insecurity for many marginalized students. Recent research has shown "when students feel like they belong, they tend to stay enrolled, earn higher grades and report better outcomes overall" (Johnson, 2026, p. 3). Through story sharing of real-life experiences, a sense of connection, engagement, and belonging among classmates and educators can occur (Rhodes, 2019). Helping students get to know each other builds trust, improves social and academic interactions, and allows for perspective-taking (Goering, 2023).

According to Bell Hooks (1994), education is always political. Engaged pedagogy requires educators to teach *whole people* and to acknowledge the connection between knowledge, lived experience, and well-being. As educators, we are responsible for either reproducing the systems of dominance or fostering the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994). In teacher education programs, there is a sense of responsibility to model classroom spaces in which a sense of community fosters feelings of connection and belonging. It is crucial for teacher educators to show future teachers how to cultivate spaces of learning that allow students to use their own stories as agents for change and connection (Rhodes, 2019). Creating an environment where students of similar areas of study (education, art education, special education) can connect helps foster networks of peers with shared interests (Kahu et al., 2022). Hernandez Juarez (2017) posits that through learning about our own identity as well as our students' identities, educators can create spaces where "awareness, appreciation and sensitivity can be transmitted and practiced" (p. 52).

Recognizing the importance of critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2021), we, as teacher educators who identify as White women, sought to discover, during in-class opportunities, how our students, across demographics, race, and culture, interpret texts, experiences, and the world around them. Initially inspired by George Ella Lyon's (n.d.) "*Where I am From*" poem format, we developed an activity to be utilized across both institutions, both in teacher education and within education and/or art departments, including a wider student audience, to learn more about the histories and backgrounds of our undergraduate and graduate students. Our intention, with each course we teach, is to foster communities of belonging in our higher education classrooms.

As this project progressed, for each of us, the urgency intensified to develop a space that is safe for identity discourse. Higher education communities are experiencing a critical shift as the political climate becomes more divisive. Our project took on a deeper, more urgent need to intentionally facilitate connections, regardless of how simple they may seem, among students and between faculty and students.

Problem Statement/Research Questions

We discovered a connection and similarity between our teaching philosophies and the paradigm by which we see education. We intend to deeply understand the learners we serve to better understand the relationship they have with their story and education. Our goal is to avoid cultural hegemony (Gay, 2018), and we designed this assignment to understand our students' worldviews, intending to inform instruction and foster belonging in our classrooms.

We seek to understand the following through our research:

- How does the use of Where I am From poems cultivate a sense of belonging in art and education courses?
- How does the use of Where I am From poems improve relationships between students and their professors?

Literature Review

Arts-integrated inquiry can allow students the freedom to explore and share their identity through familiar imagery as a method of cultivating belonging and connection in shared classroom spaces. Through the use of poetic inquiry as a methodology, educators can

help students bear witness to themselves and their peers, as well as step into ownership of their own stories (Phelps & Na, 2025). Szabo (2008) asserted that teacher educators need to use various forms of prose and poetry with preservice and in-service teachers to help them connect with their own identities and consider the identities of their future students. Cibils and Marlatt (2019) posited that the use of poetry in teacher education classrooms directly contributes to the development of agency in preservice and inservice teachers, thus encouraging the use of culturally sustaining pedagogy.

In our classrooms, arts-based inquiry is embedded and essential for developing a shared understanding that learning can be joyful, connective, and personal. Phelps and Na (2025) reflect on the use of poetry to reinforce the "shared belief that teaching is not just instruction—it is a radical act of love, liberation, and presence" (p. 42). We engage students in poetry as an arts-integrated methodology (Kennedy Center, n.d.), employing the use of poetry for its less formal structure, while providing students with a template to allow for creativity within the structure. This balance is aligned with the philosophy that "tools become catalysts—sparks that ignite voice, memory, and resistance" (Phelps & Na, 2025, p. 42).

Arts-Based Inquiry

Arts-based inquiry extends these ideas by positioning artistic processes as legitimate forms of research and knowledge production (Barone & Eisner, 2012). Arts-based methods employ self-reflection and imagination to let participants develop layered meanings that may not emerge through conventional assignments. Within this framework, creative practice becomes both epistemological and relational and is a means of knowing oneself and others. Identity exploration that happens through artmaking operates as inquiry, reflection, and relationship building.

Narrative identity theory suggests that individuals construct meaning and coherence in their lives by organizing experiences into evolving internal stories (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Identity, in this view, is not fixed but continuously authored through reflection and reinterpretation. This aligns closely with constructivist learning theory, which positions knowledge as actively built through experience rather than passively received (Bruner, 1996). In arts-based educational experiences, learners may interpret past experiences, assign meaning, and situate themselves within cultural and social worlds.

When students compose identity poetry and visual narratives, they represent identity and reconstruct it. Learning occurs through the iterative process of writing, revising, and interpreting one's own story. Scholarship on positionality emphasizes that educators' identities, shaped by race, gender, culture, and experience, influence classroom dynamics and curricular decisions (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Critical self-awareness allows teachers to act intentionally rather than implicitly reproducing dominant narratives. Positioning the teacher as a relational agent reframes instruction as co-construction rather than delivery. The educator becomes a facilitator, witness, and participant in identity work. Relational agency supports belonging by foregrounding care, responsiveness, and shared meaning-making.

Belonging in Higher Education

Belonging is increasingly recognized as a critical predictor of academic engagement and well-being. The Cornell University definition frames belonging as the feeling of being accepted, valued, and included in a community. Research on psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018) similarly suggests that individuals are more likely to take intellectual and creative risks when they perceive an environment as non-punitive and supportive. Relational pedagogies rooted in trust and affirmation operationalize these conditions. The principles articulated in Fred Rogers' Six Fundamentals, particularly a sense of self-worth, trust, and curiosity, align closely with contemporary belonging research. Rogers emphasized deeply attuned listening, and he encouraged the integration of the arts as a vehicle for emotional expression. Within classroom contexts, practices that center student voice, reflective dialogue, and creative exploration cultivate psychological safety (Fred Rogers Institute, n.d.).

Cultivating a sense of belonging in higher education classrooms emerged as an indicator of successful college experiences, especially for students who are traditionally marginalized (Tinto, 1975). Verbree et al

(2025) assert that when a student feels a lack of authenticity, connection and belonging in learning spaces within higher education, they experience a weaker sense of connection to the campus community and their academic performance can be diminished. Today, many institutions of higher education will implement diversity, equity and inclusion programs and form committees to address students' ever-growing need for a sense of belonging and community, yet most fail to consider the systems and policies they currently have in place that can lead to student dropout or failures (Covarrubias, 2024; Johnson, 2022). Similarly, many professors and practitioners in higher education have had limited exposure to or training for culturally relevant pedagogies which may foster belonging, connectedness, and authenticity in classroom spaces, as their degrees readied them for expertise in their subject, not in teaching technique and pedagogical approaches for inclusive learning. Gilani and Thomas (2025) identified several ways professors and practitioners could improve students' sense of belonging in their learning space including interactive pedagogies, faculty/student relationship building, building connections with peers in classroom activities, developing a growth mindset through reflective exercises, a welcoming and inclusive classroom culture, feedback that is continuous and positive, access to multiple avenues of support, clear communication and an understanding of life experiences outside of the classroom.

Synthesis

This study is grounded in interdisciplinary scholarship on teacher identity, empathy, and belonging. Together, these frameworks situate arts-based, narrative-centered pedagogy within broader conversations about relational learning to position narrative arts pedagogy as an intersection of identity construction, empathic development, belonging, and teacher formation. Narrative identity theory and constructivism explain how learners build meaning. Arts-based inquiry explains why creative processes matter epistemologically. SEL and culturally responsive teaching explain why perspective-taking and equity are essential. Belonging and psychological safety explain the conditions necessary for risk-taking and engagement. Reflective practice and positionality explain the teacher's role within this relational ecosystem. This intellectual grounding situates arts-based, narrative-centered classrooms as more than enrichment practices. Rather, they are rigorous relational pedagogies that cultivate identity coherence, empathic understanding, and community belonging.

Method

Participants

The research participants included 62 undergraduate students and 19 graduate students enrolled in education or art courses at a small private institution and a mid-sized private institution located in the northeastern United States. The demographic profile of the students was predominantly White (67%), with Hispanic/Latinx individuals constituting 10.87%, and Black/African American individuals 21.74%. A significant majority of the participants identified as female (71%), with 29% identifying as male. Nearly half of the undergraduate students (45%) identified as first-generation college students.

Procedure

Our research utilized an arts-based approach to embedded design methodology, with narrative inquiry being the primary source of data collected, and quantitative data collected through an online anonymous survey. Students were introduced to George Ella Lyon's (n.d.) Where I am From poem format through modeling and reading the instructor's Where I am From poem. These poems were selected as a pedagogical tool for building a sense of community after Jane discovered Lyon's (n.d.) poem framework during her pursuit of gaining further insight into her students' funds of knowledge. The poems serve as a way of understanding students' cultural frame of reference while simultaneously considering the cultural gaps in their classroom space.

Students were provided with a poem guide, seen in Appendix A, that included a brainstorming document for their poem, which included a fill-in-the-blank framework with details and sample poems written by their instructors. For the assignment, students were asked to reflect on their own details, which allowed them to create their own poems. All poems were submitted through learning management systems and were also shared with peers using two different methods. This is where the assignments differ between professors. In

Jane's class, students read their poems aloud in class; in MaryJo's class, students created a video in the style of a PechaKucha, using found and original images, combined with a voice-over, reading their poem aloud in the video. Following the full activity, students completed an anonymous online survey (see Appendix C) delivered via a Google form, within the learning management system. Students in Jane's courses completed this exercise in one three-hour class period, while students in MaryJo's course completed the full project over a four-week period.

Process and Researcher Positionality

Jane's Positionality

As a student, I was raised in the 80's and 90's in a lower-middle-class community; my K-5 school experience was in an elementary school with a primarily White student population, and my 6-12 school experience was in a mixed-race population of students. Though I had primarily White, female teachers in elementary school, I had more male teachers and some teachers of color in my secondary years. In my undergraduate work, my professors were all White, and in my graduate work, I had three Black women professors, and the rest were White women and men. I identify with my first-generation, working-class students, as my college experience was similar, having been raised by a single mother without a college education. However, my experience also differed since my deceased father held two higher education degrees. Therefore, I consider myself a pseudo-first-generation college student. I identify as a White ciswoman, hearing impaired, with Irish and English heritage, in the middle class, and in a mixed-race family.

I strive to be an accomplice for the undergraduate and graduate students I get to teach, as one who actively seeks to combat systemic racism through antiracist teaching and continuous self-reflection. Embracing womanist caring (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002) as a pedagogy of love, also known as othermothering, "mothering of the mind" (Collins, 2014, p. 215) for Black feminists has been transformative for me in listening to and creating alongside my students.

Jane's Process

My approach for the Where I am From project is through the lens of self-exploration and self-reflection as an educator or future educator seeking to make connections with their current and/or future students. The project for graduate students enrolled in an education research course is introduced to help them spend time reflecting as a precursor to writing their positionality statements for their action research papers. Positionality statements are included in their research papers to establish researcher transparency through a reflective lens of self in relation to the topic, as well as the students/subjects being investigated (Kennedy et al., 2024). All students were given ample time in class to create their poems, using the template from Appendix A, as well as an example text. Upon completing the poems, students were asked to share their poems aloud with their peers. Following this exercise, graduate students are directed to use this reflective process as a foundation for writing their positionality statements for their research projects. Graduate students are also asked to reflect on the poem activity in their exit tickets and are encouraged to include their poems in their teaching portfolios.

For undergraduate students enrolled in a special education literacy course, this project is introduced as a creative tool for building a classroom community as well as introducing students to poetic form in literacy-based lessons. The project is introduced to students upon completion of reading the text, Cultivating Genius by Goldy Muhammad (2020), which focuses on creating equitable learning environments for all students. Students are provided with the poetic structure prompts as seen in Appendix A, as well as my poem as an example text. After sharing their completed poems aloud with their peers, the undergraduate students are directed to reflect on the impact and use of this tool in their exit tickets. Students are also encouraged to include their poems in their teaching portfolios.

MaryJo's Positionality

I write from the perspective of a first-generation college graduate, born in the 1970s and raised in a predominantly white, suburban, middle-class community in New Jersey. I am the youngest of four children, from a blue-collar family. My history was shaped by the racial and economic shifts of the cities where my family lived in New Jersey. Although my parents valued education, the value stemmed from their lack of higher ed-

ucation and a strong desire that their children did not end up missing the opportunities they felt were missed without an education. Our family had limited means to support education, and I often navigated school independently; the contradiction of high expectations, coupled with limited guidance, instilled in me both self-reliance and a belief that struggling in school was a reflection of my personal inadequacy, and I resigned myself to the idea that barriers were a natural part of education.

I attended a small, suburban school district in New Jersey, where I was an average student by conventional measures, but I thrived with creative, hands-on, arts-based learning. Early affirming experiences in school shaped my emerging identity as an artist and helped me imagine a possible future in the arts. These moments stand in contrast to what Armstrong (2009) refers to as paralyzing school experiences that reinforced the feeling that I did not belong in an academic setting.

My professional path has woven together art, teaching, and leadership in traditional and nontraditional ways. Teaching and leading within systems where the arts are undervalued caused me to cultivate a desire to push against these notions, to support educators and students who thrive in the arts, and to protect space for creativity and student-centered, arts-based learning. Understanding these tensions and frictions within the education system informs the way I approach power, voice, and belonging with the pre-service teachers I now work with.

MaryJo's Process

As I guided students through the Where I am From project, I approached it as both an artistic exploration and a reflective practice rooted in personal story and learner positionality. The course containing this assignment is built on Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2017) understanding that each student's perspective is shaped by their place in society, by culture, geography, migration, class, language, family structures, and lived experience. My role in the classroom is not simply to teach writing or art-making techniques, but to create classroom conditions where students feel that their stories are meaningful and worthy of artistic expression and interpretation. Our Where I am From project started with writing, originally using the poetic structure inspired by George Ella Lyon's (n.d.) "Where I'm From" poem (Appendix A). Lyon's (n.d.) structure gave students an accessible and evocative format for remembering sensory details, family sayings, objects, rituals, places, and people. As a learner, writer, and artist, I appreciate the use of guided prompts, brainstorming lists, and examples to help gather memories without worrying about form or polish. This stage is intentionally slow and reflective and is an opportunity for students to sit with their histories, presented in a new way, and notice what rises to the surface. Students share poem drafts with classmates in a non-graded discussion, where they are free to provide comments and feedback.

Because the assignment is situated within a visual art course, we then shift from written language to visual thinking. I model how to translate a poem into a storyboard for the students, by breaking lines and images into "scenes" on the storyboard. Students include personal photographs, re-appropriate family photos, images of symbolic objects, or artworks that capture emotion and atmosphere. On the storyboard, students sketch out their sequences, make choices about pacing, and consider how the visual cadence of the poem's structure can help them build rhythm, tension, and clarity. As students gather images and turn them into footage, we discuss representation, ethics, and aesthetics. In the course we draw on artists such as Amy Sherald (Art21, 2023) and Tanya Aguiñiga (Art21, 2021). The work of contemporary artists encourages students to think critically about how identity is framed, what choices they make in their own work, and how those choices reflect the stories they want to tell.

A critical step, often left for the end of the process, includes recording a voice-over of their poem. I invite students to experiment with sound, layering, and meaning. Students record their narration and, when appropriate, explore AI-generated voice options, not as a shortcut but as an accessibility tool. We look critically at issues of bias, access, and the digital divide when using technology to tell their stories. What does the use of AI leave out, flatten, or distort? Does the AI create a universality to the work, or does it take away the personal and expressive qualities of the piece? As a class, we also explore spoken word poets and the added dimension of hearing a poem read aloud.

Throughout the process, I emphasize that the assignment is not only about learning technical skill; it is about building confidence, belonging, and recognizing that their personal histories exist within a larger social, cultural, and global landscape. The goal is for each student to leave with a deeper understanding of themselves and a stronger appreciation for the rich diversity within our learning community. Students share their videos with the class and provide feedback using a structured peer feedback format.

Results

As we reviewed each of our students' poem submissions multiple times, we highlighted themes based on the research goals and found emergent themes within the data. While reviewing the poems related to the emergent themes, we also used in vivo coding, pulling specific phrases within the data/poems that illustrated and served as an example of the emergent themes. In Table 1, we have included sample phrases quoted directly from our students' poems that align with the emergent themes. The goal of the research was to understand if the use of an arts-integrated inquiry, such as poem writing and sharing, can cultivate a sense of belonging in higher education courses. We also aimed to discover how the use of the arts-integrated activity can build relationships between students and their professors. In our research, we highlighted deep reflection, empathy and connections, storytelling, creativity, celebrated identity, and emotionality as important elements of belonging in a learning environment. Our emergent themes aligned with these findings:

1. Deep Reflection and Self-Discovery
2. Empathy and Connection Through Shared Storytelling
3. Creative Expression as a Bridge to Belonging
4. Identity Work as a Foundation for Culturally Responsive Teaching
5. The Emotional Dimension of Artmaking and Storytelling

In Table 1 we have included lines, words, and phrases collected from poetry written by students in both groups selected as examples for each of the emergent themes.

Following the writing and sharing of the poems, students completed an online survey (Appendix C) about the whole experience. When asked if the experience of writing the poems changed their idea of how they think of themselves and their identity, sixty-four percent of the students indicated agreement. Students shared feelings of connection to their classmates, deeper self-reflection on their background, and wider perceptions of self-image. Students who did not feel the poem writing changed their idea of how they think of themselves made statements of already existing self-awareness and self-assuredness.

Many of the students indicated that reading and listening to the poems of their classmates impacted how they thought about others. Students expressed deeper insight into others, a better understanding of others, recognition of potential biases, and a more profound connection to their classmates. Many students shared specific examples of how a classmate's poem helped them relate to others. When asked if the experience cultivated a sense of belonging in them, seventy-one percent of the students said yes. Students were asked to provide three to five words that described their feelings of belonging. A word cloud of the most common terms used by students in both courses is shown in Figure 1. One student did not feel this experience cultivated a sense of belonging, citing their belief that belonging stems from actions, not words or written experiences.

Figure 1

Word Cloud of Words Used to Define Belonging



The students who were enrolled in teacher preparation courses all felt that using this exercise would help them understand the multiplicity of their students' identities. They felt that completing Where I am From poems with their students would help them understand their students' backgrounds and identities, allow for creative freedom in their classrooms, improve student-to-teacher connection, and increase overall classroom empathy. The teacher preparation students offered ideas of how they would build classroom belonging with suggestions such as using morning meetings, inclusive classroom images, and offering a variety of culturally inclusive texts. Students also shared how exploring their own identities as teachers was crucial in building student-teacher relationships, finding common ground, exploring shared interests, and cultivating classroom respect for others.

Discussion

Jane's Reflection

Introducing the use of Where I am From poems emerged as an implication for further teaching and research from my doctoral research as a method of creating connection within my classroom space. I have also come to recognize it as a powerful tool to utilize in understanding all my students' backgrounds and funds of knowledge from undergraduate students through graduate students. Through this research, I've gained a deeper appreciation of the importance of creating classroom community in higher education spaces, as well as the impact of using poetry to foster a creative spark in current and future educators. The current co-investigation of this tool with MaryJo gave me insight into the ways this project has significantly improved classroom community while also providing me with information on the limitations of my initial design of instruction.

In all my in-person classes, students are seated in a circle, so all information is disseminated in a shared, conversational, community-focused learning environment. This arrangement proved to be influential in this process, as I was able to watch the students work through their poems in real time. In each course, I found myself intrigued as I observed the different creative approaches students utilized in their writing. Some students used the fill-in-the-blank form to write the poem, some chose to handwrite their poem on lined paper, others chose to type their poem on their computers, and some elected to create a colorful poem using the in-class art cart (with colored paper and markers). The autonomy of their creative processes provided me with information on how each student approaches new tasks. Additionally, observing the students as they shared their poems, listened to the poems of their classmates, and asked questions of each other gave me insight into who they are as critical thinkers as well as who they are as listeners and reflective practitioners. After the lesson was over, I wrote notes on each student in a journal to help guide me through building relationships with each one. When reading and commenting on the individual students' exit tickets after class, I was able to give productive and connective feedback on what I observed as their strengths as community members.

Similarly, I discovered this project needed some shifts in its design. First, I came to realize, through student questions and personal reflection ("Do we have to write about the family we grew up with?"), it was important to suggest to the students that they could choose to write this poem about their family of origin or the family they have created. This reflection prompted me to create a second example poem about the family I created, which I now include in the examples for subsequent lessons. Additionally, I was able to share the second poem with the family I created, which was a source of joy and connection within my personal life, further proof of how our students impact our lives inside and outside of the classroom. Second, I recognized a missing prompt in the use of the poems as a foundation for the positionality statement. Initially, I had the graduate students share the poems and then just told them to use them as an inspiration for their positionality statement. This direction caused some confusion, and many students struggled to make the connections between the poems and the positionality statement assignment. Now, after the students have shared the poem, I ask them, "Tell me how your poem translates into who you are as a researcher and an educator?" This question typically opens up a critical thinking process for students, and more students are having success in using the poem as a highly effective reflection tool for a jumping-off point in writing their positionality statement.

Table 1

Emergent Themes and Phrases Found in Student Poems

Deep Reflection and Self Discovery	Empathy and Connection Through Shared Storytelling	Creative Expression as a Bridge to Belonging	Identity Work as a Foundation for Culturally Responsive Teaching	The Emotional Dimension of Artmaking and Storytelling
"...has told me about her childhood in Russian occupied Poland"	"...from the eerie silence when someone is mad"	"Playing soccer, running around the neighborhood with my best friends, dancing to Irish music."	"...countless stories my grandma has told me…"	"...from the eerie silence when someone is mad"
"I am from protestants, who claim to be more accepting."	"I am from the explosive anger and the emotionally distant."	"I am from rich red roses, but they're made out of legos cause they'll last longer and be more fun to have."	"...who I now think about when I see daughters smiling ear to ear around their moms."	"...loud on the inside, but calm on the outside…"
"I am the classic Puerto Rican food my grandpa, grandma, mom and aunts used to make…"	"...and my Grandpa who fought in the Vietnam war to become an American Citizen."	"Scattered tools, greasy hands, and laughs that still echo in the garage.	"...and never give up on what you believe."	"I am from the explosive anger and the emotionally distant."
"I am from Christian but also Catholic origins, like going to church every Sunday…"	"...laughter and joy in the backyard, and loud music when my dad is grilling."	"I am from baking cookies for holidays, and love."	"Born in Santiago, where the mountains kiss the sky…"	"...laughter and joy in the backyard, and loud music when my dad is grilling."
"I am from Bethlehem, rice and beans with a side of McDonalds."	"...and the story of my dad getting a wind up car stuck in his hair when he was young…"	"I am from my father's guitar, our after dinner dance parties to get our jitters out before bed."	"I am from a house kissed by the Caribbean sun, painted in pastel hues - blue, yellow, and coral and the heart of the island beats with every sign…"	"...Fridays as a family and long stories told by my mother and brother."
"I am from my mother's womb, a place where grandma's prayers are still keeping us safe."	"From burning my hand on the heater and not being able to go to the doctors for hours because my mom didn't want DHS to get involved."	"I am from church for people who don't like church, where I built my true family."	"I am from the generation raised in a culture of pornography, trying to respect women."	"From the photo albums in the living room under the coffee table, easily able to be grabbed and viewed holding all of our memories and good times in the center of the house."

Deep Reflection and Self Discovery	Empathy and Connection Through Shared Storytelling	Creative Expression as a Bridge to Belonging	Identity Work as a Foundation for Culturally Responsive Teaching	The Emotional Dimension of Artmaking and Storytelling
"Where I am from in New Jersey, makes me who I am in Philadelphia."	"From the one stoplight town to the Susquehanna River and frog hunts in the morning."	"I am from family gatherings, where stories weave through the room."	"From brotherly love and southern hospitality."	"Handmade quilts and books read out loud."

MaryJo's Reflection

When sharing the Where I am From project with students, I wondered if the single poem template unintentionally placed limits on student voice, identity, and emotional safety. While structured prompts can support learners, they may also reinforce assumptions about family, memory, belonging, and stability that may not reflect students' lived realities. I considered how I could present a more inclusive and trauma-informed approach in this project, and I shifted away from a single narrative structure and toward reflective, multimodal, and choice-based forms of storytelling, while maintaining structure.

Influenced by reflective writing practices and the work of Mary Pipher (2006), I became interested in the idea that writing is not only an act of communication but may also be an act of witnessing the self. Reflective writing, particularly when paired with artmaking and imagery, allows students to construct a new meaning from their experience rather than simply reproducing expected narratives. This approach recognizes identity as constructed and relational rather than fixed, shaped through memory, culture, relationships, environment, and lived experience (Pipher, 2006).

Drawing on the work of art educators Graeme Sullivan (2005) and Julia Marshal (Marshal & D'Adamo, 2011), the writing and video narrative project utilized artmaking as a form of inquiry. Marshal and D'Adamo (2011) position creative practice as a way of investigating ideas, experiences, and ways of knowing and describe artmaking as "a form of inquiry, a kind of open-ended, artist/researcher-driven learning process in which new knowledge is discovered or constructed" (p. 12). Within this framework, reflective practice becomes a form of self-authorship in which students actively shape and reinterpret their own narratives rather than conforming to institutional expectations of what identity-based work should look like.

The reframing of artistic process as inquiry reinforces the idea that the Where I am From project is not about producing a polished autobiographical statement, but rather a process that allows space for curiosity, agency, memory, and self-definition. In the project, students communicated through their choice of imagery, sound, poetry, collage, video, and fragmented text, demonstrating the expanded accessibility and inclusivity of multimodal storytelling by recognizing that individuals process, remember, and communicate experiences in multiple ways and shifts the emphasis from correctness and disclosure to reflection, connection, and personal meaning-making.

Simultaneously, the project highlights an ongoing tension between traditional educational structures which rely on standardized formats and assessments and places these structures in direct opposition with the reflective, ambiguous, and flexible creative processes, used to achieve meaning, a personal connection to learning, and the development of a learner's authentic voice. Adding to the value of arts-based inquiry, the arts-based activities like the Where I am From project encourage and foster personal creativity and curiosity, and as a result they build confidence and self-worth in academic environments (Rogers, n.d.). To this end, arts-based learning is not seen as *extra*, but rather, it is an essential practice to cultivate belonging, empathy, and self-understanding. The Where I am From project becomes more than a literacy or art activity; it creates the relational and reflective space where students can safely explore who they are, how they are connected to others, and how they wish to represent themselves within a learning community.

Implications for further research

Jane's future implications

As I continue to use this poem in my teacher education courses, I will continue to self-reflect through journaling after the in-person classes and reading the students' exit tickets. This reflection will be continuous, as I recognize the need to be aware of student feedback, implications of positive and negative impact from this assignment, shifts in the assignment that need to occur based on reflection, and listening to and being aware of student needs and concerns. Similarly, I plan to engage in research with my future students that seeks to explore how this project has influenced my students' current and/or future classrooms over an extended period.

MaryJo's future implications

Expanding the original Where I am From project, the next step will be to build this structure into other courses that I teach, across settings. The Where I am From poem format is easily adaptable and based on this research I have found that it presents the opportunity for participants to reveal multiple parts of their story. As an art educator, I am able to think about poem structure as material for creating and interpreting. Future research will include the continuation of the poem/writing structure as an arts-based methodology to interpret qualitative data. To do this, I intend to modify the poem format when necessary and allow students to develop their own structure, using the original research as a launch point for future inquiry.

Conclusion

The importance of cultivating belonging and fostering community in higher education classrooms continues to emerge as a crucial element in the success of educator and student relationships (Verbree et al., 2025). This research suggests that utilizing arts-based methodology and narrative-centered projects can contribute to cultivating and strengthening classroom communities while simultaneously helping students explore identity and become reflective creatives, scholars and practitioners (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Incorporating creativity and student autonomy into instruction can assist educators in their development of culturally inclusive and equitable assignments to foster a sense of belonging, such as the Where I am From poems, and projects for all learners across all levels of learning in higher education communities and classrooms.

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Appendix A
Original Where I am From poem template

Example of the original Where I am From poem template shared with students. This version was designed based on the work of George Ella Lyon (Lyon, n.d.)

Where I Am From - Poem Brainstorming List & Template
When thinking about the details that go in the poem, be sure to think about materials, objects, products, traditions, etc. particular to you. You may use a separate piece of paper for brainstorming before writing your poem, and keep it available when you start to build the poem.

There are no strict rules with this poem. Feel free to rearrange or write new items.

1. Ordinary item(s) (e.g., home remedies when you are sick, telenovelas, soap operas, etc.)
2. Product names (e.g., Adobo, Windex, brand name juices, etc..)
3. Home description (what was your home like, was it a religious/spiritual home [if so what religion], was it a quiet or busy home, etc.)
4. Adjectives and sensory details - these describe your home and go along with your home description
5. Plant/flower/ natural item (e.g., Ferns, Aloe Vera, cactus, etc.)
6. Description of plant/flower/natural item you chose in number 5
7. Family tradition (e.g., going to an event, cooking specific food for holidays, decorating for a specific holiday, etc.)
8. Family trait (tender-hearted, hard headed, etc.)
9. Name of two family members
10. Descriptions of family activities or routines (e.g., cleaning every weekend, baking once a week, etc.)
11. Sayings you were told as a child
12. Place of birth or where your family is from (e.g., area, hospital, or clinic name where you were born, where your parents or grandparents are from, where your family originated)
13. Food items that are important or commonly eaten in your family
14. Specific family story (usually stories that were told to you about how your grandparents migrated to where you and your family are now, or a funny story you were told about your mother, father, aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc. when they were children)
15. Location of family photo albums, memoirs, artifacts (e.g., cabinet, safe, basement)
16. Explanation of the importance of your family's items (e.g. "memories show us where we have been")

Where I Am From Poem Template

I am from _____ (specific ordinary item)

From _____ and _____
(product name) (product name)
I am from the _____(home description)

_____ , _____ , _____ .
(adjective) (adjective) (sensory detail)

I am from _____ _____
(plant, flower, natural item) (description of above item)

I am _____ and _____,
(family tradition) (family trait)
_____ and _____.
(name of family member) (another family name)

I'm from the _____ and _____,

(description of family tendency) (another one)
From _____ and _____.
(something you were told as a child) (another)
I am _____ , _____.
(representation of religion, spiritual practice, rituals, etc.) (further description)

I'm from _____,
(place of birth and family ancestry)

_____ , _____.
(a food item that represents your family) (another one)

and the _____.
(specific family story about a specific person and detail)

Where I am From Poem Examples

Where I am from
by J. Ammon

I am from untouchable antiques in the living room.
From Breyers mint chocolate chip ice cream and Twinkies.
I am from the colonial blue two-story cookie cutter house,
meticulously clean, nothing to be out of place, an illusion of perfect.
I am from the rock garden in the front yard, a magical place to pretend.
I am from “we trust no one” and board games on holidays.
From Marie and Tom.
I’m from we yell when we angry and forget I said that, later.
From you are hard to love and patience is a virtue.
I am from Catholic guilt, as nonpracticing ones.
I’m from Ireland, England, and Phalanx,
baked potatoes with mounds of butter and Entemann’s eclairs.
I am from the man everyone loved, who died too soon,
and left to grieve,
alone.

Where I am from
by MaryJo Rosania Harvie

I am from “The Price is Right” on sick days,
From Diet Coke and Brut cologne,
From the shared bedroom, unfinished renovations, chlorine in the pool, and barking dogs.
I am from birch trees too tall for the yard, and bees on the magnolia bush.
I am from chaos on Christmas morning and “we’ll talk about that later.”
From Franny and Alice, Anthony, and Michael,
from arcades in Seaside Heights, checking every parking meter for change, and the big “fancy” beach in Wildwood.
From “you’ll feel better when you get outside” and “don’t worry about it,”
and Newark, West Orange, Kearny, and Uncle Ralphie’s restaurant.
I am from meaty lasagna and chopped meat with noodles, from Grandma Alice on the beach and a station wagon covered in patio furniture, taking it all in one trip.
I am from dried out photo albums that fall apart when touched, and the glue that sticks memories back together.

Appendix B
The second "I Am From" Poem Template

The second "I Am From" poem template was adapted from Promising Practices (Hernandez Juarez, 2017) and developed after the first template was used.
"I Am From" by Mary Pipher is a written journey in search of past, present and future identity and individual culture.

Writing your own "I Am From" poem will help you remember past memories.
As you write your poem, start with I am from and then include references and descriptions about:

A specific or memorable place, details about that place.
Favorite weather
Your personality, describe how you are
Memories
a special birthday or occasion.
Special foods, meals, desserts, traditional foods, or candy.
Song lyrics, songs that family members sing.
Smells or tastes
Stories, poem verses, quotes.
Words, sayings, or phrases repeated often with your friends or family.
Household items or toys.
Something someone said to you that made you feel special.
Traditions and customs with family and friends.
Favorite color.
Favorite hobbies, sports, school subjects.
Dreams, feelings, values, experiences.
Hopes of who you want to be like in your future.
Pets.

"I Am From" sample questions:

I am from _____(nationality, country, city)
I am from _____(Describe home, a special place or room) I am from _____(Memory, special moment or occasion)
I am from _____(Describe personality)
I am from _____ (Holiday or tradition with family and friends)
I am from _____ and _____and _____ (Foods)
I am from _____ and _____ and _____ (Favorite toy or hobbies and color)
From _____(Things you enjoy doing)
From _____ (Favorite smell, flowers, plant, weather) I am from _____ and _____ (Family quotes or sayings)

I am from _____ (Experiences)
I am from _____and_____ and _____(Favorite sports, subjects, characters) From _____ (Something that makes you laugh)
I am from _____ (Lyrics to a song or inspirational quote)
From _____ (Feelings) and _____ (Something you are proud of)

I am from _____(Talent or something unique about yourself)
I am from _____ (pets) from _____ (Things you like)
I am from _____ (Story, books, quotes)
I am from _____(Something that someone said to you that made you feel special) From _____ ____ (A dream, something you want to accomplish) And _____ _____ (Hopes for the future, who you want to be when you become older)

Appendix C
Survey Questions asked of Student Participants

1. Did the experience of writing the "Where I am From" poem change the way you think about yourself and your identity and background?
2. You answered YES to Q1. In what ways did writing the "Where I am From" poem change the way you think about yourself and your identity? Provide at least one example. You may include as many as you wish.
3. You answered NO to Q1, why do you feel that writing the "Where I am From" poem did not change the way you think about yourself and your identity? Provide at least an example. You may include as many as you wish.
4. Did the experience of reading your classmate's "Where I am From" poem(s) change the way you think about others?
5. You answered YES to Q2. Please explain how the experience of reading your classmate's "Where I am From" poem(s) changed the way you think about others? Provide at least one example. You may include as many as you wish.
6. You answered NO to Q2. Please explain why the experience of reading your classmate's "Where I am From" poem(s) did not change the way you think about others? Provide at least one example. You may include as many as you wish.
7. According to Cornell University, Belonging can be defined as, "...the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group." Do you feel the act of writing and sharing "Where I am From" Poems can contribute to a community's sense of belonging, as outlined in this definition?
8. You answered YES, that you feel the act of writing and sharing "Where I am From" Poems can contribute to a community's sense of belonging, as outlined in this definition provided. Please provide three to five words that describe your experience of belonging as defined by Cornell University, "...the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group."
9. You answered NO, that you feel the act of writing and sharing "Where I am From" Poems cannot contribute to a community's sense of belonging, as outlined in the definition provided. Please provide three to five words that describe your experience of belonging as defined by Cornell University, "...the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group."
10. You answered that you were NOT SURE if the act of writing and sharing "Where I am From" Poems can or cannot contribute to a community's sense of belonging, as outlined in the definition provided. Please provide three to five words that describe your experience of belonging as defined by Cornell University, "...the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group."
11. Are you currently, or do you plan to major in education or seek education certification in the future?
12. As a future teacher, do you feel an exercise such as the "Where I am From" poem can help you to understand the multiplicity of your students' identities?
13. You answered YES, that as a future teacher, you feel an exercise such as the "Where I am From" poem can help you to understand the multiplicity of your students' identities? Please explain why you feel this way, and how this exercise can help you to understand the multiplicity of your students' identities?
14. You answered NO, that as a future teacher, you feel an exercise such as the "Where I am From" poem cannot help you to understand the multiplicity of your students' identities? Please explain why you feel that this exercise will not help you to understand the multiplicity of your students' identities?
15. As a future teacher, how can exploring your own identity enable you to better understand and relate to your students?
16. This is an optional bonus question: In what ways do you anticipate building a sense of belonging in your classroom?