

Decolonizing the Teaching of Native American Oral Tradition via Indigenous Storywork and Apprenticeship Pedagogies

LAND AND WATER ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

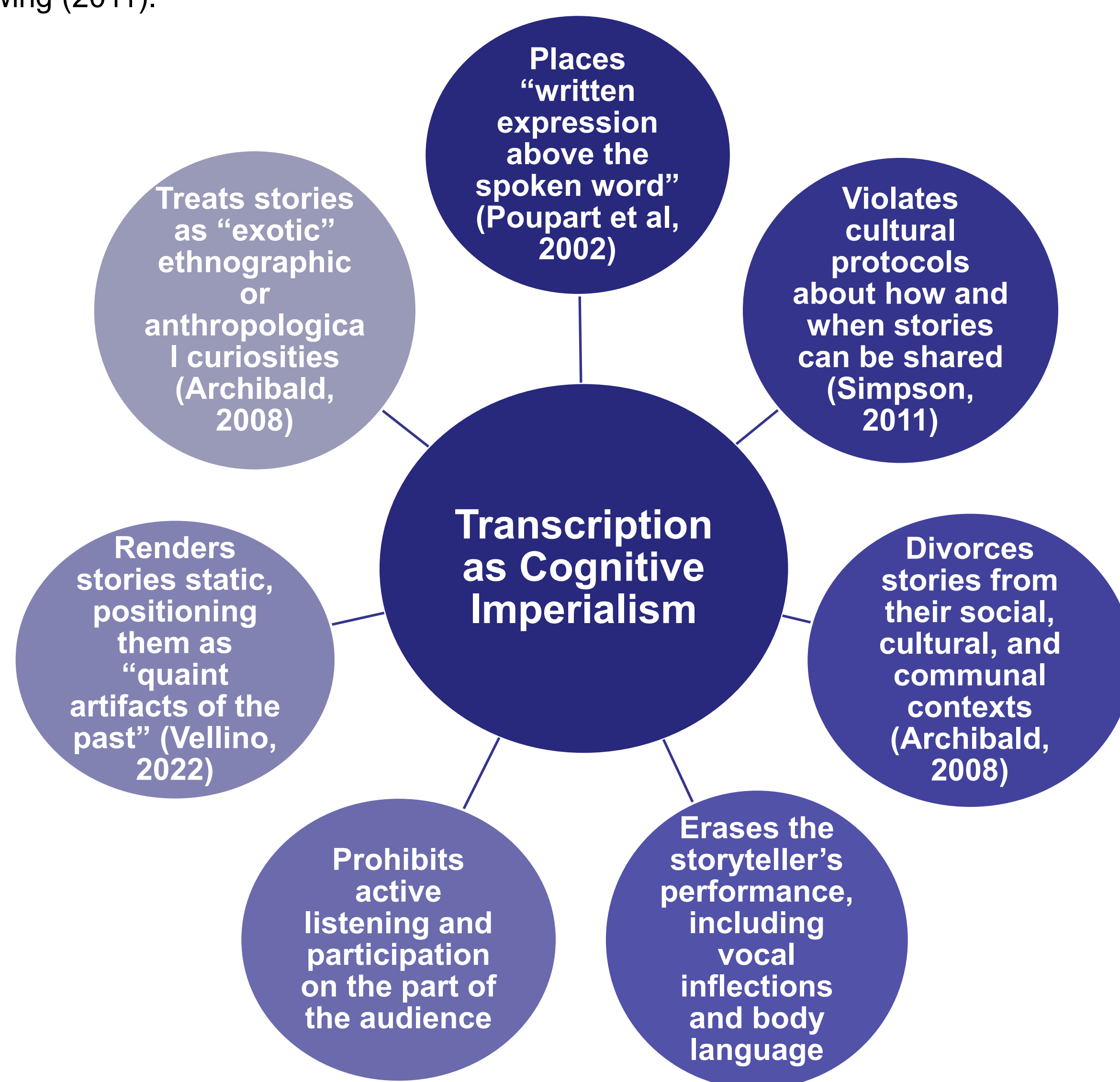
The University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point occupies lands and waters belonging to the Omāēgnomenēwak (People of the Wild Rice), known today as the Menominee, and the Ho-chungra (People of the Sacred Voice), known today as the Ho-Chunk. The Anishinaabeg (True People), known today as the Ojibwe, and the Bodwe'wadmi (Keepers of the Fire) known today as the Potawatomi, also have inextricable ties to the lands and waters occupied by our university. We must honor the sovereignty of these peoples, whose knowledges and stories shape the past, present, and future of the place the Menominee call Pasipahkñnen ("point of land"). (Adapted from UWSP and Indian Community School land acknowledgments)

BACKGROUND

The University of Wisconsin System American Indian Studies Consortium standards for instruction stipulate that:

Instructors must be acutely aware of the importance of Oral Tradition to American Indian cultures and integrate that approach into the curriculum throughout the academic year so that students come to appreciate and respect that tradition. (Poupart et al, 2002)

My own field of English literary studies has primarily engaged with Native American orature in the form of written transcriptions. This approach reinforces what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls "cognitive imperialism," which devalues Indigenous ways of thinking and knowing (2011).



OBJECTIVES

My Native American literature survey course is required for UWSP's Native American and Indigenous Studies certificate. To adhere to the curricular standards established by Poupart et al, I needed to de-colonize the class and center oral tradition.

As a white instructor raised in settler culture and trained in a field that privileges the written word, my challenge lay in achieving this objective without replicating the "extractivist tendencies of Western scholarship" about Native peoples or making false claims of "mastery" over Indigenous stories (Vellino, 2022).

APPRENTICESHIP AND STORYWORK

To achieve my goals, I adopted Brenda Vellino's "apprenticeship pedagogy." She advises settler teachers to:

1. Acknowledge one's status as a non-expert and model "not knowing" as an ethical standpoint
2. Develop a "predominantly Indigenous citational community" and draw on "Indigenous-led teaching resources"
3. Seek "experiential learning from diverse Indigenous knowledge-holders"
4. Respect the right of Native people to withhold knowledge from non-Indigenous audiences (Vellino, 2022)

I also drew on Stó:lō scholar Jo-Ann Archibald's concept of "Indigenous storywork," which frames oral tradition as a complex, holistic, and rigorous pedagogical practice guided by seven core principles. She provides guidelines for becoming "story ready"—meaning that one is properly prepared to receive stories, make meaning from them, and use them to educate ethically and effectively (Archibald, 2008).

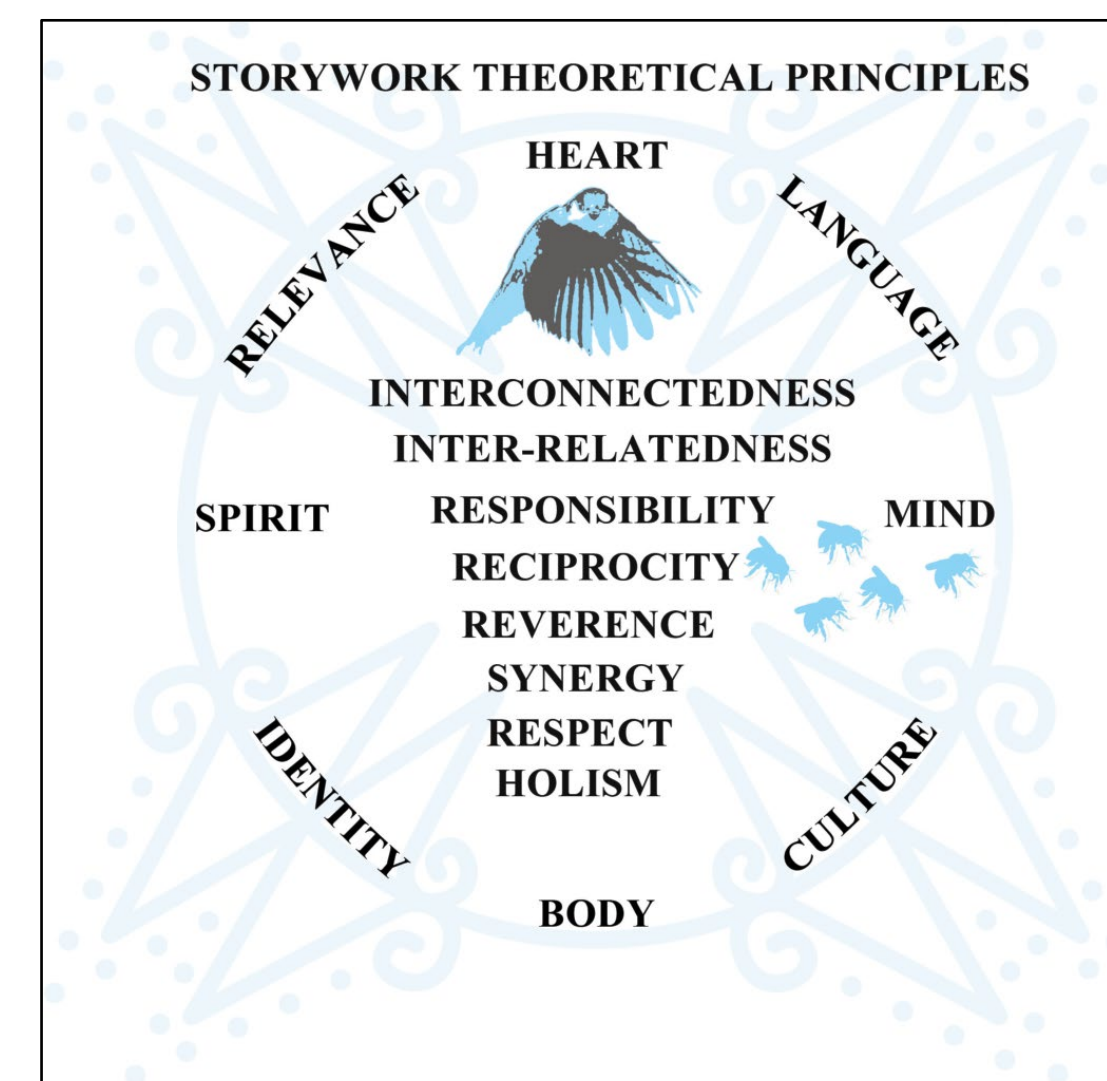


Figure 1: Storywork's holistic framework and seven core principles.

PEDAGOGICAL INTERVENTIONS

Storywork became my framework for the entire class. Each unit centered storytelling and emphasized that Indigenous oral tradition must "be taken seriously" (Archibald, 2008). A sampling of pedagogical interventions inspired by this approach includes:

1. Exposing students to multiple Indigenous thinkers' understandings of the practice and importance of oral tradition.
2. Only using stories that were recorded or transcribed with the teller's permission.
3. Facilitating experiential learning with Indigenous guest speaker Dr. Marcus Lewis, who shared stories of Ho-chunk removal and return.
4. Collaborating with students on our own set of storytelling protocols for Dr. Lewis's visit, such as asking how he'd prefer to be addressed, asking his permission to take notes, thanking him for his stories, and offering tobacco.
5. Offering oral assignments as well written ones, thus giving "greater prominence and awareness to the oral tradition in student evaluation and assessment" (Poupart et al, 2002).
6. Using storywork as a lens for examining how fiction and poetry by Indigenous authors engages with oral tradition and storytelling practices.

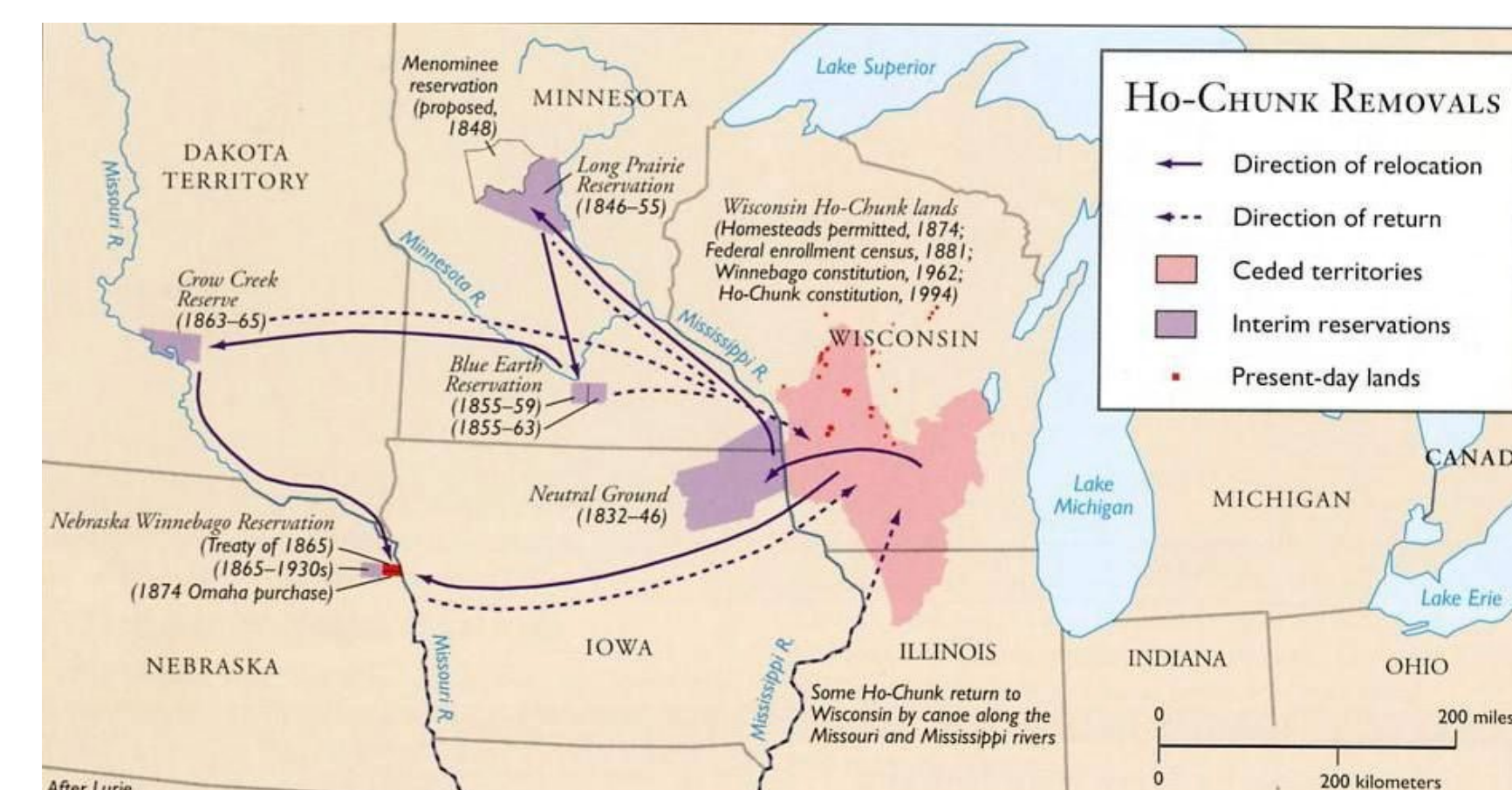
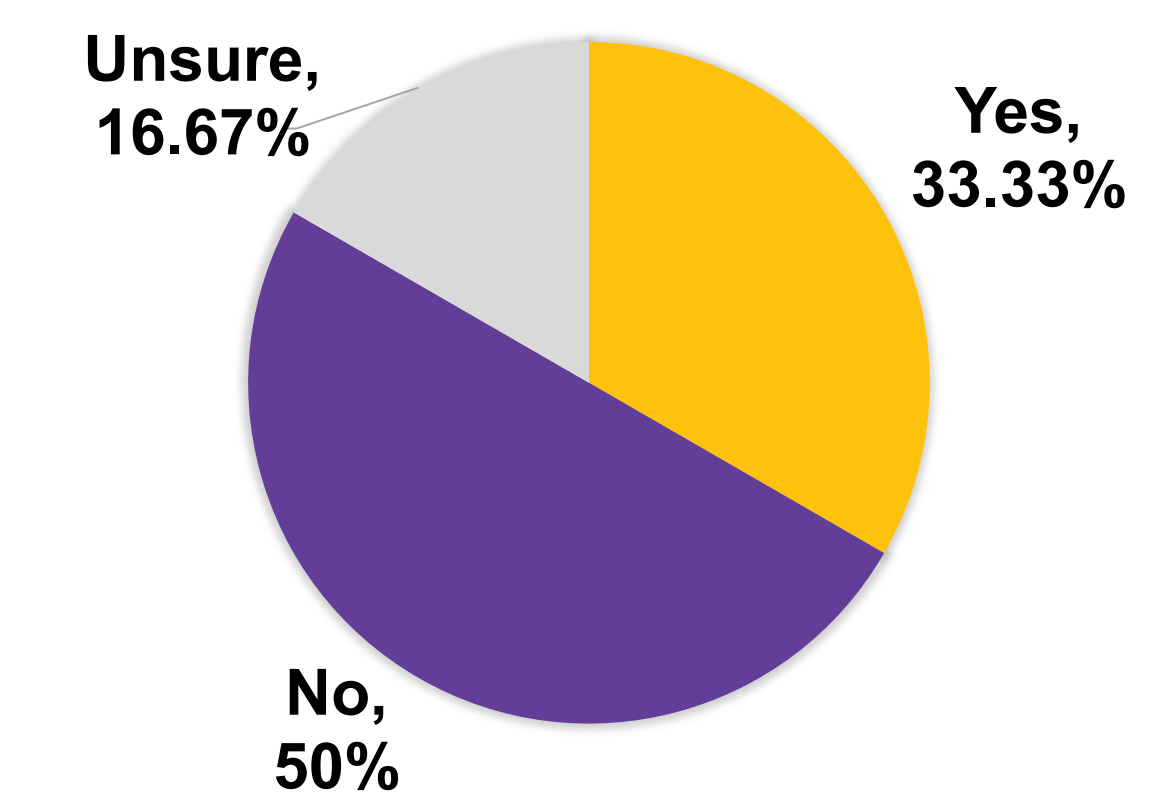


Figure 2: A map illustrating routes of Ho-Chunk removal and return.

THE STUDY

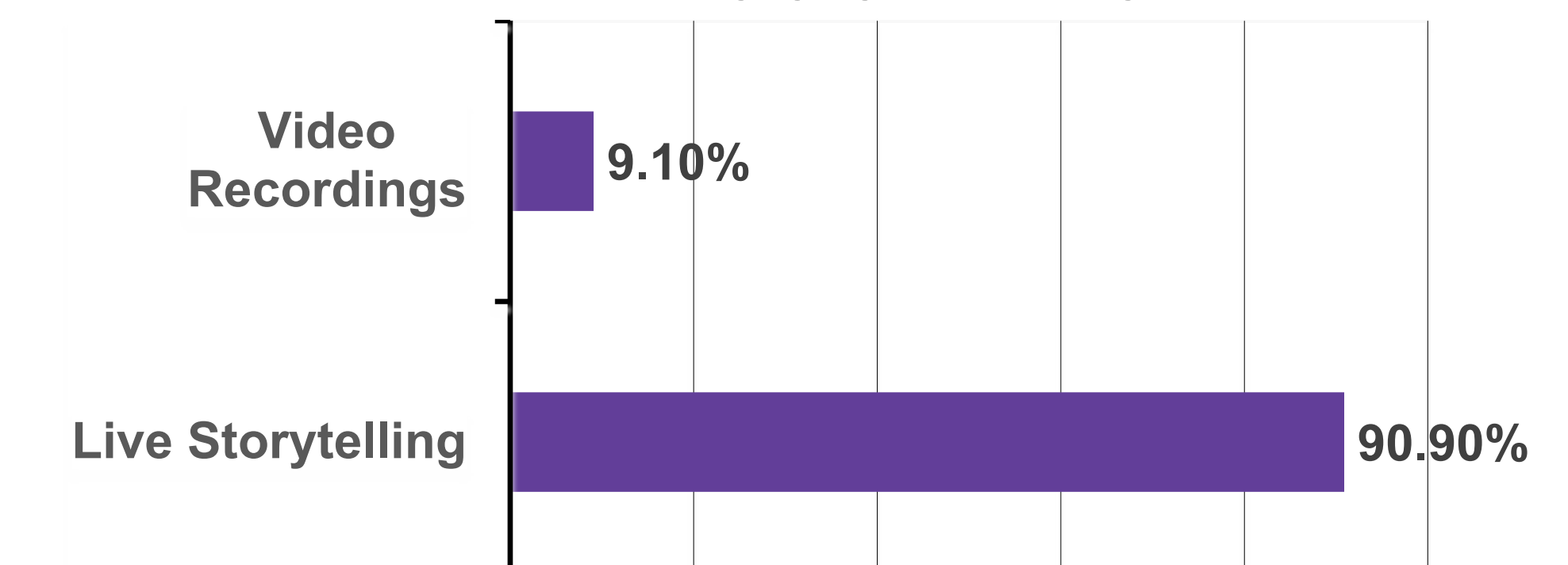
I evaluated the impact of my pedagogical strategies with three surveys administered over the course of the semester. The first survey, taken in week one, assessed students' exposure to and understanding of Indigenous oral tradition.

Figure 3: Survey 1 responses to the question "Do you have any familiarity with the oral traditions of Native American and/or Indigenous peoples?"



The second survey- was administered immediately after Dr. Lewis's visit in week three and gauged student preference for different storytelling mediums. Students overwhelmingly reported a preference for live storytelling.

Figure 4: Survey 2 responses to the question "You've now encountered live stories, video recordings of storytellers, and written transcriptions of stories. Which story format did you find most engaging, interesting, or powerful?"



The final survey was administered at the end of the semester and asked students to reflect on storywork as a lens for learning about Native American literature. A sampling of their responses:

"The concept of Indigenous storywork has influenced me . . . by emphasizing a holistic understanding that goes beyond the narrative itself. It has highlighted the importance of considering cultural, spiritual, and historical contexts, challenging a more linear or singular view of oral tradition and encouraging a richer appreciation for the interconnected elements within Indigenous storytelling."

"Prior to this class, I saw oral tradition similarly to how the general public must see it, as a[n] old form of storytelling that was replaced. But I can see its place in the culture and why it needs to be maintained now as I have continued to learn about it."

"Using Indigenous storywork is intertwined with Native American literature, so if you leave out the storywork, you aren't fully understanding the literature."

"I had an idea of how important oral tradition was previously, but after taking this class I have a wider understanding of the practice. It's a different experience to listen to a story rather than just reading it . . . It's an important experience and cultural practice that has a lot of layers to it."

THANKS

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REFERENCES:

Archibald, Jo-Ann. *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit*. UBC Press, 2008.
 Poupart, Lisa, et al. *University of Wisconsin American Indian Studies Consortium Standards*, 2002.
 Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and New Emergence*. Arbeiter Ring, 2011.
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Scan the QR code to visit Dr. Archibald's website if you'd like to learn more about Indigenous storywork!

