Curriculum Unit Plan: *Of Mice and Men: An Exploration of Identity Development*

I. **Title and brief description:**

*Who are we? And how did we get here?: An Exploration of Identity Development*

This unit will guide students through Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* by looking at the novella through a variety of lenses, such as Naturalism, Realism, and Fatalism. Each lens will be scaffolded appropriately and will magnify a different aspect of Steinbeck’s work that specifically reflects upon the concept of identity. The unit will explore how various forces presented in Steinbeck’s novella shape the identity of his characters, and we will then relate our findings to the average human experience and to ourselves.

II. **Big Idea/Essential Question:**

*To what extent are we shaped by our environment?*

*Does our background determine who we are or what we become of in life?*

*What factors in life help to form our identities?*

By using this essential question as a framework for understanding Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, students will reflect deeply upon the concept of identity development in both Steinbeck’s characters and in themselves. Through the lens of this question, students will reflect upon their own identities and how their own environment (main south) does or does not shape who they are.

III. **Learning Goals:**

a. **Development of content understanding (key concepts and ideas):**

At the conclusion of this unit students will be able to express an understanding of Naturalism; a literary movement that uses detailed realism to suggest that social conditions, heredity, and environment have inescapable force in shaping human character. Students will be able to explain, through a variety of examples, how naturalism plays out within Steinbeck’s novella, as well as if naturalism does or does not play out in their own lives. We will study the land, economics, and social construction of where and when *Of Mice and Men* takes place, and through this, we will be able to better understand the development of Steinbeck’s characters and their various representations of the human condition. We will uncover particularly how influential realism is in Steinbeck’s work. Students will also examine universal archetypes such as, the hero, the loyal companion, the fool, the protector, the seductress, and the tyrant, that individuals take on and authors draw upon in the formation of powerful characters.

b. **Development of habits of mind and work, including habits of independent or collaborative thinking and doing typical of readers, writers, speakers, creators, researchers and thinkers in the discipline (ways of knowing):**

This unit will work to better develop student’s independent reading skills as students will start reading sections and chapters of Steinbeck’s novella at home. Prior to this unit, students have worked to improve their out loud reading skills in class and now we will
transition towards developing a reading voice that students can hear inside their own minds as they silently read. Students will also hone their visualization skills for independent reading as we spend time examining the land, setting, and secondary sources that visually reflect the time period of *Of Mice and Men*. Having struggled with verbal expression in our prior unit, students will also practice the ability to listen, reflect, and respond out-loud in whole class discussions and Socratic seminars.

**c. Literacy development, including capabilities of proficient readers, writers, and speakers:**
As students explore identity development in Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, we will consistently use writing to learn as a means to better develop idea generating and prompt responding. Through mini lessons, students will grow in their ability to “talk with the text” through annotation and visualization. Through connected chapter response guides students will further develop inquiry skills and the ability to pull out main ideas from the text. Students will also work to understand the readability of images, signs, films, and art as mediums that can be unpacked similarly to literature.

**d. Development of the classroom as a learning community:**
So far, this class has been particularly reticent to the idea of sharing out-loud. Because of this, a goal for this unit is to promote and stress the importance and necessity of discussion and full class participation. Throughout this unit we will develop our way of out-loud thought sharing from low stakes partner “think-pair-shares,” to small group discussions, and finally to larger, more developed, means of out-loud responding by way of Socratic seminars and debates. This gradual release of responding will hopefully work to shed the self-consciousness and anxiety that holds my students back. We will work to develop and practice proper academic language and phrases for stating opinions and responding to others. We will work to remember that our class is a class of voices and that everyone’s opinion and experience is valid and necessary for the success of our collective learning.

**IV. Rationale:**

- **Learning goals:** Explain why your big idea/essential question and your learning goals are important for your discipline and meaningful for your students:
  Exploring the factors that contribute to identity formation is relevant to every individual. Particularly in high school, students are navigating their own perceptions of self and working to define who they are. By studying Steinbeck’s canonical text *Of Mice and Men* through this lens, we will be collectively working to better understand where we come from, who we are, and will thus gain insight into the human experience. Our exploration of naturalism, realism, and common archetypes will also inform my students about some of the significant concepts in the study of literature and therefore will have relevance for future reading.

- **Curriculum standards:** Explain how the big idea/essential question connects to the Guiding Principles in the MA curriculum frameworks. Identify which learning standards are addressed and how:
W.9-10.3 “Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.” We will write personal narratives that reflect how we feel that our environments have shaped us.

W.9-10.4 “Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.” Students will accomplish this as we emphasize the process of writing.

W.9-10.5 “Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.”

RL.9-10.1 “Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.” A final essay centered around a thesis will prompt students deeply engage in the text and pull out specific quotes to further support their argument.

RL.9-10.2 “Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.”

RL.9-10.3 “Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.” We will examine each of Steinbeck’s individual characters as we assess how each of them were, or were not, shaped by their environment. We will take a look at the various roles each character takes on that works to create and define their identity.

SL.9-10.7
Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person’s life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

SL.9-10.1 “Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.” Students will accomplish this as we work on gradually increasing talking and responding opportunities from low to higher stakes. In an effort to support student participation we will work on discussing the themes and characters of Of Mice and Men in a variety of ways including small and whole class discussions as well as a debate at the end of the novel.

SL.9-10.2 “Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats.” In an effort to better understand the historical context of Steinbeck’s novella students will analyze movie clips and images.

L.9-10.6 “Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or
phrase important to the comprehension or expression.” Students will hopefully grow their vocabulary and gain ownership over words such as, naturalism, realism, archetype and novella.

c. **Students’ background and readiness:** What strengths and interests, in terms of their content understanding (prior knowledge), academic and literacy development, personal and cultural abilities, and development as a learning community, are you taking into account in planning this unit?

Because of my student’s lack in background knowledge regarding the Great Depression and Dust Bowl Era, this unit will explore the historical context and time of the 1930s. Students will be exposed to plenty of background information pertaining to the Dustbowl, and the Great Depression. We will also work on understanding the rural atmosphere that Steinbeck uses as his backdrop for *Of Mice and Men.*

d. **Student needs:** What particular needs of your students—academic, social, personal, language (ELLS)—have you taken into account in planning the unit?

What will they need to be able to do in order to meet the learning goals?

Many of my students struggle with feeling confident enough to speak out in class. Therefore I will use writing to learn activities and gradually build the stakes of speaking out loud. We will focus on practicing the words and phrases specific to expressing thought, propelling discussion, and responding to others. For my ELLs I will provide word banks and focus on difficult vocabulary, as well era-specific vocabulary.

e. **Research- and evidence-based best practice ideas:** Explain how research and best practice ideas have informed your plan.

My unit will be student centered and focus on collaborative activities that hold relevance to their lives. We will work in groups where students are challenged and supported as they deeply delve into a text and work to connect that text to the understanding of their own identities.

V. **Assessments:** It is essential for both you and your students that your formative and culminating assessments clearly show the extent to which students have achieved learning goals.

a. **Explain your main assessments and why they are appropriate for your learning goals.**

Students will be assessed by three major assignments. The first is based off of student’s participation in their daily journals. This low-stakes writing will demonstrate the success and power in low-stakes writing as students have opportunities to garner deep analytical thoughts about *Of Mice and Men.* The second major assessment will be student’s participation in a debate regarding Euthanasia and if George should or should not have killed Lennie. Students will be assessed primarily on their ability to engage in the discussion and add to the debate vocally. This final assessment acts at the final culmination of our work in gradually building student’s confidence to vocally participate in the classroom. The final assessment of this unit is a multi-genre portfolio project in which students are asked to develop at least three original pieces of work that are meant to tell and illuminate certain truths conveyed in *Of Mice and Men* in a creative way that demonstrate deep analytical knowledge of the text and the lenses we
examined. This portfolio project will also require a one page artist statement that more
transparently demonstrates student understanding of the lenses and themes of the
novella.

b. How will students know what to expect and the criteria for good work?
Students will be aware of what to expect and the criteria for good work by extensive
teacher modeling, demonstrations of teacher examples, a showing of the writing
process, as extensive rubrics and checklists. Students will also be required, as stated on
the rubric, to meet with me in a brief conference to discuss how the multi-genre project
is going, where they are headed, and what they still need to do to complete the task.

c. Attach a draft of your culminating assignment and corresponding assessment
criteria/rubric.

d. How will students and parents learn about students’ overall academic progress
from these assessments?
Parents will learn about students overall academic progress through the progress
reports given halfway through the quarter. Students will be able to see their progress by
comparing their work to previous creative assignments completed in the previous unit.
Students will be able to reflect upon their vocal participation throughout the unit, and
compare their participation in the debate to their participation in the Socratic seminar in
the previous unit.

VI. Unit Calendar

a. Provide a calendar of key learning activities, learning strategies, and
assessments for your anticipated timeframe for the unit.

Week of Oct. 14th – Oct. 17th:
-Students will engage in an introduction for Of Mice and Men and will participate in
background building activities that use visuals of Salinas, California.
-Students will begin to think about our essential question in relation to the text
through guided starters and low stakes writing prompts. These prompts will get
students to begin to explore the idea of naturalism and identity development in
relation to the text but also in relation to their own self.
-Students will begin reading Of Mice and Men together, using class discussion as a
guide.
-Students will compare opening scenes of the book to opening scenes of the movie
adaptations.

Week of Oct. 20th – Oct. 24th:
-Students will be introduced to their final assessment.
-Students will continue reading Of Mice and Men using a variety of activities to
scaffold their learning. Students will engage in double entry journals focused on
character development, a save the last word activity, small group discussions, and
guided reading worksheets.
-Students will “act out” sections of the text in order to better see Steinbeck’s work
as a visual phenomena that can be reproduced in their own minds and acted out on
a stage.
- Students will read and listen to Steinbeck’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech and participate in a close reading of text.
- Students will continue to participate in frequent starters written in their journals that continue to engage students in low-stakes, deep thinking about the text.
- Students will participate in mini-lessons that model possible entries for their final assessment.

Week of Oct. 27th – Oct. 31st:
- Students will continue reading Of Mice and Men using a variety of activities to scaffold their learning. Students will engage in double entry journals focused on character development, a save the last word activity, small group discussions, and guided reading worksheets.
- Students will begin to think about possible entries for their Multi-genre portfolios.
- Students will participate in more mini-lessons that model further possible entries for their final assessment.
- Students will watch film clips to further examine how certain scenes were depicted in the novel versus the movie.
- Students will finish the book.

Week of Nov. 20th - Oct.
- Students will have one to two work days to plan for the debate regarding euthanasia and the death of Lennie. Students will be given case study portfolios that they can use to help back up their claims.
- Students will participate in a debate.
- Students will have two to three work days for their multi-genre portfolios.

b. Explain your sequence of activities—why does this particular order make sense in light of your learning goals and rationale for the unit?

By sequencing the activities of this unit in this manner, students will gradually hold more and more responsibility for their own reading. We will begin by reading together as a whole class, and will do so throughout the unit to ensure comprehension of the text, but I will gradually release more of the reading responsibility onto the students through silent sustained reading, partner reading, or group reading partnered with a variety of paired activities that guide students reading towards better comprehension. Similarly, as we make our way through the text, the opportunities students have to speak out in class will gradually build from low-stakes to higher-stakes as we conclude the unit with a formal debate. Students will also have ample time to reflect and deeply think about the themes, symbols, and lenses we discussed as they work on their multi-genre portfolios.

VII. Resources:
   a. How will you work to actively involve parents in their child’s academic activities and performance, and communicate clearly with them?

While students will be given ample time in class to brainstorm, write, research, and revise the pieces in their multi-genre portfolio project, the expansiveness of this project
will require some work to be done at home. This will encourage students to introduce the project to their families while they work at home and include them, to some extent, in the process.

b. What resources—such as guest presenters, A/V, field trips, and material artifacts—from colleagues, families, and the community will you draw on to enhance learning?

In order to add audiovisual components to this unit we will compare and contrast both the 1992 and 1939 movie versions of *Of Mice and Men* to the book. In an effort to better understand some of Steinbeck’s own philosophy on life and the human condition we will watch him recite his 1962 Nobel Prize acceptance speech as we follow along on printed handouts. We will also use artifacts that represent the culture of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression as a way for students to gain background information about this time period. We will examine relevant photography, folk songs, slang, and work conditions of the time.

c. What legal or ethical issues are involved in your use of the Internet and other resources and how have you addressed them?

Students will engage in a whole class discussion about where our learning sources come, the importance in source checking to ensure reliability when examining content on the internet, and the seriousness of plagiarism.

VIII. Post-Teaching Reflection

a. Based on your culminating and other assessments of learning goals, analyze the extent to which students achieved your learning goals.

i. To what extent did different students achieve the learning goals?

As I look back on my first completed curriculum unit plan, I noticed that there were a lot of content related goals that I did not complete. At first, upon realizing how much my lessons diverged away from my original intent, I was worried that I had made a grave mistake. However, upon closer analysis, I have come to the conclusion that my lack of focus on the content goals stated in my CUP is not a reflection of creating poor lessons but is instead something that highlights the weaknesses and holes in my first CUP.

As stated in Section III, part a, my big content goals were centered around naturalism, realism, and universal archetypes. While my students do now know what naturalism and realism are, I found it harder and harder to bring the unit back to these focuses as the unit progressed. We actually didn’t end up discussing archetypes at all. While I hope to find better ways to incorporate naturalism, realism, and archetypes into future teachings of *Of Mice and Men*, it felt unnatural to try to keep bring in these three specific topics over and over again. Had I stuck more stubbornly to these content goals, I am certain that we would not have gotten to other content that my students seemed much more interested in. While naturalism and realism are fascinating literary movements and can definitely be catered towards an authenticity for young students, it seemed much more authentic to engage my students in conversations about friendship, dreams, and loneliness. While I did not necessarily meet the content focused learning
goals I set for myself in this unit, I am not, at all, unsatisfied with the content that my students learned.

Apart from my content learning goals I was very happy with the skills, habits, and practices that my students were able to adopt. As stated in the rest of section III, my goals were for students to become better independent readers, better listeners, to adopt the practice of and to grow as writers by means of “writing to learn”, and to become more confident in oral expression and out-loud thought sharing. Having struggled with all of these things in our prior unit, I was pleased and impressed with my students’ improvements in all of these categories by the end of the unit. While of course my students still have far to go, on average, the entire class participates more readily and enthusiastically during group or whole class discussions, and I have seen students grow exponentially in their ability to consistently produce high quality, high quantity entries in their “writing to learn” journals.

ii. What do you learn from differences in performance, or puzzling student performances (hard for you to explain), about the particular challenges of learning in this unit?

Something that troubled me throughout some the unit was my students’ inability to find sympathy for many of the character in this book. While this set us up for some compelling arguments and fascinating discussions, I was shocked when I heard that students were happy that Curley’s wife was killed. In a similar vein, many of my students showed little sympathy for the loneliness of the men on the ranch. While I can chalk much of this up the to fact that it took a couple of lessons for my students to become invested in the characters and the storyline, it does not explain the laughter that erupted out of some of my students as we watched Lennie kill Curly’s wife. This did, however, create a really interesting space to open up discussions of sexism, patriarchy, and feminism.

An aspect of my practice that I struggled with throughout this entire unit was centered around reading and motivation. Throughout this unit I tried to include as many different reading strategies and activities as possible in order to motivate my students to read, and while this constant variety did work to instill excitement about the book, I was never successful in motivating my students to read at home. Some of my students did read ahead, would take the book home and come to class prepared, but the large majority of my students would not read at home despite how excited they seemed about the chapter in class. Because understanding the content, plot, and characters in this book is so crucial in order to practice deep, analytical thinking, I spent much class time in this unit reading during school hours. Why, despite the excitement in school, does that motivation not transfer over into their homework? And how can I make sure that my students understand the necessity of being able to read at home? While I was unable to succeed in getting my students to all take the book home, I know that for many of my students this was a book that they both enjoyed and feel like the “got”. My hope is for some of that positivity to transfer over into motivation for future books that we read.
iii. What do you learn from differences in performance about the effectiveness of your planning for the needs of different students?

I learned a lot during this unit about how necessary it is to give students options when working on cumulating final assessments. Each student understood, analyzed, discussed, and made sense of the text in their own way, therefore I realized how crucial it is for students to have an openness and flexibility in their assignments that allows them to present their knowledge in a way that makes sense to them. While this cannot always be accommodated for in every single assignment, giving students flexibility during lessons and assigned tasks almost always produces more valuable and higher quality content. While I was able to provide this with my multi-genre assessment, I was not always able to reach some of my students during particular lessons. In future units, now that I know my individual students strengths and weaknesses, I will be better able to accommodate and differentiate my instructions for each of my students.

b. What would you change to improve this plan and why?

If I were to improve this plan, I would definitely reconsider my content specific learning goals. While I am still happy that I introduced my students to the topics stated earlier, the further along into the unit I got, the more I realized that they were not the most important things to focus on. I would instead like focus much more perspective writing, following the development of characters, and the big ideas and themes of the book. These concepts are much more relatable for my students, and once I let go of trying to tie naturalism or realism into every few lessons, my students seemed to become much more engaged in the book.

Another thing I would change would be my schedule. I severely underestimated the amount of time it would take my students to get through this book. This mistake is closely tied with the fact that I was unable to get my students to read outside of class. Because it was so important to me that my students successfully got through and understood the entire book, I chose to sacrifice time to reap the benefits of close reading.