



Confronting Coyote: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in an Era of Standardization

Author: Christine Rogers Stanton

This is the final version of record of an article that originally appeared in [Democracy & Education](#) in 2008.

Rogers, C. (2008). Confronting Coyote: Culturally responsive pedagogy in an era of standardization. *Democracy & Education*, 17(3), 46-50.

Made available through Montana State University's [ScholarWorks](#)
scholarworks.montana.edu

Confronting Coyote

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in an Era of Standardization

Christine Rogers

THE TRICKSTER, a crucial character in many cultural histories, often slips into our lives without warning. In the western United States, the trickster frequently manifests himself as Coyote, and he is central in the oral traditions of tribal people, ranching families, and outdoor adventurers alike. Coyote is responsible for some missing turkey sandwiches. You won't believe this, but Coyote snatched my left hiking boot from right outside my tent. Coyote tricked a man out of his best horse. No luck hunting today? Coyote scared away the game. Coyote stole grain from a shed, and then locked the door behind him when he left. Coyote is a complex character that teaches and teases: One moment he shares painful lessons with us and the next he makes us laugh at our ridiculous flaws.

In today's world of educational standardization, Coyote the Trickster lurks in the shadows of every classroom. He has crept among the masses in schools under the guise of a democratic model of education. He is so cunning that many educators actually ponder his suggestions associated with No Child Left Behind, despite our simultaneous suspicion of his promises. Sometimes Coyote's claims are alluring: If we offer the same opportunities—through the same curriculum, instruction, and assessment—it seems we are promoting equity in the classroom. Despite the bitter taste of it all, Coyote presents an enticing case.

As a proponent of socially just teaching, I defined “a good education” as one that is centered upon the interweaving of new understanding and previous experiences. Even in an era of standardization and the ever-expanding emphasis on high-stakes testing, I genuinely believed that I supported each learner in my classroom.

And then, I realized that Coyote had tricked me.

Whenever I taught 11th grade language arts, I incorporated literature from various cultural backgrounds to supplement the primarily Euro-American textbook selections. One of the fundamental novels in my course, James Welch's *Fools Crow* (1986), was a work that engaged all of my students, including American Indian students from the neighboring reservation. Several weeks into the spring 2006 semester, I revisited my plans and discovered that my juniors would need more than five weeks to complete the upcoming barrage of state and local tests (two weeks for the state assessment and three additional weeks for the district common assessments). Considering the tragic

CHRISTINE ROGERS is currently a Ph.D. student at the University of Wyoming, where she is focusing on the advancement of culturally responsive education through indigenous epistemologies. She has learned from diverse children and communities for over 10 years through her work as a teacher, instructional facilitator, and coach.

reality that the history shared in *Fools Crow* is not the same “history” described in most high school textbooks, my planned unit hinged upon the extensive time needed to build background knowledge and cultivate new understanding of the experiences of the Blackfeet people as described by Welch. If I wanted to go even farther and include community-based inquiry, comparative literature “talking circles,” or a project-based assessment as I had in the past, I realized we would probably not even finish part one of the novel before the end of the school year. I was unwilling to expedite the process or to leave the novel unfinished. That, I believed, would be unjust, disrespectful, and counterproductive.

So, under Coyote’s sly gaze, I calmly switched novels at the final, critical moment, opting for another work that was both familiar and available: *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925/2004). While I admire Fitzgerald’s work for its symbolic clarity and extended metaphors, it was—simply put—a tragic choice. A novel centering upon White, upper-class ennui during the 1920s does not effortlessly resonate with teenagers living in a rural community on the fringe of an Indian reservation in 2006. Despite this knowledge, I chose the easy way out, settling for accessible materials and content that fit conveniently into the skeletal remains of the semester after standardized testing had plundered instructional time. I had been tricked into facilitating an education that did not promote an expanded consciousness in terms of the real histories of my students.

This realization was devastating. I had always deliberately worked to incorporate content and instruction that would encourage students to think critically and to question the “history” they had been customarily taught. Suddenly, I realized that I had fallen prey to the trickster: I was teaching what had always been taught. My students, ever resilient, politely tackled *Gatsby* on a superficial level. They struggled, however, to identify anything honorable in the impoverished lives of the Wilsons or to question Tom Buchanan’s “brutishness” toward his wife. None of my students suggested that the problems shared by *Gatsby* and his pals had anything in common with the

experiences of people in our community, some of whom trudged miles through snow every morning to check livestock or searched bare kitchen cabinets for a breakfast bite.

Worse still, my colleagues encouraged me to adopt that model of convenience. One of my fellow instructors actually patted me on the back and stated, “It’s good to hear you are teaching a classic.” Another handed me a scripted guide to teaching the novel. Some of my colleagues have resisted education that is culturally responsive and socially just because they misunderstand it: They believe that holding high expectations for all students means presenting elitist content—the canonical texts—like an exotic sweet on a silver platter, to all students, even if it perpetuates an inaccurate perspective of real-life challenges that, in turn, fails to resonate with most students today. For those teachers, the

Coyote the Trickster lurks in the shadows of every classroom.

injustice lies with *not* teaching the “classics.” Here is the essence of Coyote’s trick: I now know it is possible to teach *The Great Gatsby* to students who are underserved by a mainstream education. I also know that, as I taught the novel, it did not easily ignite conversations about social change in our reservation border town, which is often strained by racial tensions. We addressed the curricular expectations, but we did not uncover any deeper understandings about society or history, or each other.

In my role as an instructional facilitator, I often witnessed Coyote’s craftiness. From the enthusiastic new teacher who abandoned project-based lessons midway through a unit and shifted to presenting notes using an overhead because “it is so much easier,” to the veteran teacher who confided in me that “I can tell the kids benefit from hands-on activities, but I have to keep marching straight through the textbook because you can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” it

is clear that practicing teachers wrestle with Coyote regularly. While we know we can teach better, it is easy to find ourselves swimming in fast, turbulent, and often murky whitewater. When we break the surface, flustered and breathless, we discover that it is April. Amid the chaos, we construct and deconstruct our philosophies impulsively, and some of us trade in the pedagogy of teaching for social justice for a pedagogy of self-preservation. Sometimes we blame Coyote himself: “I simply don’t cover multicultural literature any more because the district curriculum doesn’t include it,” or “My classes used to all be problem-based, but now there isn’t time.” We justify these decisions, noting our periodic successes with conventional texts or teacher-centered instructional methods.

Amid the chaos...
some of us trade in the
pedagogy of teaching
for social justice for
a pedagogy of self-
preservation.

Despite the fact that our students rise to meet our watered-down, standardized expectations again and again, we teachers know there are ways to encourage our students to rise above our expectations. We talk about a socially just education, but instead of walking that talk, we choose to stand still, paralyzed in Coyote’s gaze.

During the fall of 2007, I taught a practicum course for preservice teachers. At first, I believed I had stumbled upon the ideal environment for teaching about social justice; maybe I could warn the fledgling teachers about the trickster before they found themselves ensnared in the wildness of teaching. Maybe they would be able to sustain responsive teaching without slipping under the surface or following the path of least resistance.

Early in the semester, my students were practically bursting with optimism. When we

discussed “good teaching,” they described an education capable of meeting the needs of each and every child. Encapsulating this nebulous idea was more challenging, however. It became evident to me that the students had not *practically* considered how to promote responsive education for individual learners within standardized programs. I observed the emerging discomfort among my students: for them, the education honeymoon was over. At what point do new teachers throw up their hands and say, “Why try to innovate today when tomorrow we’ll have to follow the script?” While teaching for social justice should take precedence in the classroom, my experiences as an educator demonstrate how easily teachers can be tricked into turning their backs on responsive education. To deny the influence of the system—and of Coyote’s teachings—would be naïve and irresponsible.

While a standards-based education can support all learners, especially if culturally responsive standards are included, *standardized* education promotes a different message. It suggests that all students, regardless of their unique experiences, must meet the standards through a common approach often mandated by external sources. To address the tension between standardized education and teaching for social justice, I encourage my college students to consider three instrumental components of responsive education: confidence in student potential, visibility in the school and community, and professional empowerment.

One of the most basic ways to support social justice in a classroom affected by standardized education is to show confidence in the abilities of all students. Teachers who are frustrated with the system potentially send a message that they believe certain students cannot excel within that system. This perception, whether it aligns with actual views or not, endangers socially just education. The paradox is that, while maintaining high expectations for all students, educators must respect distinct cultural values regarding the expression of those expectations. For example, an administrator in my district believed that posting state assessment results disaggregated by ethnicity would encourage minority students to “pull themselves up by their

bootstraps” in order to prove their ability to achieve. Instead, the tactic discouraged and embarrassed students. One of my students captured the perception when she stated, “Why should we even try? Maybe we’re not as smart as the White kids...”

As a consequence of this experience, I reconsidered the messages I sent students in my own classroom. Since change moves slowly in schools, reacting negatively to current policy rarely benefits the students that are already part of that system. Students must believe they can succeed, and educators can cultivate confidence by helping students connect standardized material to their own experiences. In my classes, students choose supplemental titles to read in addition to textbook selections. For example, students might select an excerpt from Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* (1984/1998) or Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) to compare with the short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1892/1998). After reading, students compare and contrast the readings in small groups, discuss personal reactions, and extend understanding regarding social justice through conversation. Thematic connections within and beyond the standardized program can bolster student confidence in terms of their own experiences and identities. Additionally, teachers should collaborate with others to extend those connections into interdisciplinary realms, especially if instructional time is limited due to highly scripted curriculum programs while “electives” like art and music, and courses with cultural themes, are compromised.

In addition to connecting content to learner experience, teachers can demonstrate confidence in their students through adaptations of standardized approaches. Using standardized models, like the 6 + 1 writing model (NWREL, 2007)—which provides a framework for writing based on ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation—combined with culturally responsive prompts, such as “Students who speak a tribal language should be exempt from ‘foreign’ language requirements,” can validate learner experiences and encourage conversations regarding social justice while addressing the expectations of standardized programs.

Effective educators adapt standardized mandates to meet the needs of their specific students. Better teachers *expand* on the standardized programs; they demonstrate that their lives are visibly intertwined with the experiences and successes of their students. These teachers attend local events, invite elders into their classrooms to connect learning to cultural experiences, and honor the identities of their students through community-based applications. For these educators, the relationships developed between teachers and students are not severed when the bell rings or when summer vacation rolls around. They remain invested in the development of their students beyond the minimal expectations highlighted by mainstream educational models.

One of the most basic ways to support social justice in a classroom is to show confidence in the abilities of all students.

Teachers should provide a supportive, culturally rich environment visible to all students. In other words, if the dictated curriculum or instructional approach eliminates or minimizes the voices of minorities, teachers should display materials to demonstrate the importance of those voices. For example, in my own classroom, I displayed images of influential chiefs, created a poster quoting writers from diverse backgrounds, exhibited examples of “cowboy poetry,” posted a map of Native lands, and arranged newspaper clippings on a bulletin board showing my students excelling in activities and community projects. However, the quiet visibility of “others” in the classroom alone is not enough; teachers should be visible in the communities of their students. Educators who attend competitions, cultural events, and

political gatherings—even if they do not say anything—promote social justice more than those who stay home and remain invisible and separate from the worlds of their students. Teachers who promote social justice draw no boundaries.

The very best teachers go even further. They educate and empower themselves professionally, and they understand the various curriculum programs that exist. Many practicing teachers do not recognize that there are options, and that some options are potentially more culturally responsive than others. For example, hundreds of alternatives meet the Reading First program guidelines (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). While Reading First requires some basic elements, such as phonemic awareness, the programs vary extensively in terms of their specific instructional approaches, curricular materials, and reputability with regard to minority education. Due to the extensive challenges associated with Reading First, teachers should take a proactive stance, reviewing and critiquing the research involved with the various programs. The results should then be shared with the school's decision makers, parents, and teachers, as well as with state legislators. The best teachers do more than complain about the systemic limitations. They fight for change.

While canned curriculum programs are inherently limited in terms of cultural responsiveness since they are not designed with individual students in mind, teachers should not use political mandates as an excuse for inaction. Advocating for the program that, of all the curriculum programs, best fits the needs of specific students is simply a first step. Promoting true systemic change through political lobbying, active involvement in education organizations, and participation in high-quality research projects can serve as additional avenues for teachers who strive to improve educational opportunities for all students.

Great teachers become experts in terms of the policy, and they fight for the changes that will enhance success in their classrooms and beyond. Educators who promote social justice and quality education do not limit themselves to mere self-preservation. These teachers are dedicated to their past, present, and future students as individuals, as opposed to within the context of the system as a whole. They are not only keenly aware of Coyote's presence and intentions—these teachers walk the socially just talk, they remain calm amid the whitewater, and they employ the system itself to outwit the trickster. Coyote never sees them coming.

References

- Erdich, L. (1998). *Love medicine*. New York: HarperFlamingo. (Original work published 1984)
- Fitzgerald, F. S. (2004). *The great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner. (Original work published 1925)
- Gilman, C. P. (1998). The yellow wallpaper. In J. H. Pickering (Ed.), *Fiction 100: An anthology of short stories* (8th ed., pp. 488–499). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Morrison, T. (1987). *Beloved*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL). (2007). *6+1 Trait® writing*. Retrieved April 10, 2008 from www.nwrel.org/assessment/about.php
- U.S. Department of Education. (2002, January 8). Subpart 1—Reading first. In *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (§ 1201–1208). 107th Cong., 1st sess. Retrieved April 15, 2008, from <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg4.html>
- Welch, J. (1986). *Fool's crow*. New York: Penguin.

Copyright of Democracy & Education is the property of Democracy & Education and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.