Trickster Teachers

It takes a thoughtful dance to ensure that environmental education is as just and inclusive as it needs to be.

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PUTTING DOWN my well-worn copy of *Green Grass, Running Water*, my whole being tingles from the mix of magic, reality, comedy and tragedy that spirals through Thomas King's narratives. I start to plan my upcoming courses. Applying lessons from King, I hope to make room for many bodies, voices and perspectives. My goal is to help these students – soon-to-be teachers – learn to reflect on their assumptions so that they can make room in their classrooms too.

On the picnic table sit copies of *Silent Spring*, *The Last Child in the Woods*, and a DVD of *An Inconvenient Truth*. Popular and instructive yes, but are they too mainstream? Too white? In their popularity and certainty do they silence other voices? Probably, maybe, depends … I exhale for a moment and notice the bees buzzing hypnotically around my coneflowers. Butterflies flit among the milkweeds that cover my tiny front yard. As my mind drifts, a rustle in the bushes catches my attention. I realize I'm not at all alone.

Alison: Er, hello? Coyote? What are you doing in the city? In my garden?

Wannabe Coyote: Humpf. I've been here a long time. Can't you see I'm stalking my lunch? And why are you calling me by *that* name?

A: Sorry to disturb, but I'm happy to see you. I need help with my teachers. And don't you wannabe Coyote?

WC: Me? No, you're the student. Are you Wannabe Coyote?

A: Me? Well, no. I'm talking about students learning to be teachers: student-teachers.

WC: Student-teacher, teacher-student? Confusing. Let me help. I love to fix things. The teacher is the one who makes everyone speak English. Oops, no, that's not right, Coyote. Yes, Coyote. They must only speak Coyote – just like their white, heterosexual, able-bodied English-speaking teacher. And by the way, you can call me Nanabush.

A: What? Well, the problem is that wealthier children and the ones with better schooling, white-er skin, able-er bodies, errr … and yes, English-er language skills – live near bigger parks, have cleaner air and water. Toxic dumps and uranium mines are near First Nations communities, not my neighbourhood. Yes, Coy-errr … Nanabush, I know – but how can I teach people to see the things they don't want to see?

WC: Whoa! Trying to get people to see is my job. Hee-hee! Look at me dance. And stop labelling me "Coyote." Maybe I wannabe Loki. Maybe you should just

dance with me.

A: Okay, Loki … What do you mean? Shouldn't I teach about Africville or Kanesatake, or the Chipko Movement in India, or the work of the South Riverdale Community Health Centre or the Bus Riders Union or the Afri-Can Foodbasket?

WC: Yes, no. Questions, questions, questions. Listen, just follow my feet. Let's hear from the people who get stuck living near the Sydney Tar Ponds or the folks next to Grassy Narrows.

A: I am trying to listen. By the way, I thought by calling you "Coyote" I was respecting indigenous knowledge. Hey!

WC: Oops, sorry about knocking over your books. My balance is a bit off. Oh, I don't feel so good – I think I swallowed the idea of "wilderness." I'm dizzy – too much genocide. Hey, you're a doctor; got any pills? Maybe I need a dentist. Don't all those missing Indians get stuck in your teeth too? Wait, I know how to cure this. Just change my name. How's Uzume or Anansi? Exotic, eh? How about calling me Nasreddin? Hee-hee! Yeah, I'll look real "diverse." I'm starting to feel much better.

A: Serious issues, yes: violence, environmental injustice and cognitive imperialism. Some people only get lousy dandelions and don't hear the call of loons or see the Milky Way. And it is unfair that my words, ideas and language are the ones that define "nature" and "environment." Can't I use my unfair share of power for good?

WC: Hmm, tough question. I didn't know you had sheriff powers – coool. And by the way, I like dandelions; they tickle my toes and are tasty.

A: What? Errr … I'm sorry. I didn't mean to insult how you connect to the environment. Dandelions are swell. This is the problem: how can I be certain that I help students learn about "environmental education" without getting myself in the way?

WC: You have a lot of problems. It's tiring listening to you – "cognitive imperialism" - holy moly, how many syllables is that? Relax, chew on a dandelion leaf. Maybe I'll just listen to my iPod for a while.

A: I'm not certain if I've gotten out of the way. Have these words successfully disrupted hidden assumptions? I'm bound to steal ideas from different cultures in trying this, but I want to reveal how one culture dominates the words used and the way we learn about words in school.

WC: Hmmm, how about trying Irish Spring deodorant? – "Strong enough for a man, made for a woman." Coyotes don't need deodorant; we smell beautiful.

A: I'm not so certain about that …

WC: Good. Don't doubt that there are more things you don't know than things you know. You are the teacher-student after all. It's all about you, but not you alone. I'm glad you can smell it too.

A: Well, I'm just attempting …

WC: Shh, you're not going to hear anyone else while you're talking … and I'm trying to catch your fat milk-fed house cat. Yummy …

… a small bee lands on my nose. I cross my eyes. Unable to focus on its delicate features, I nonetheless marvel at this momentary encounter and wonder how long it will be before the wind, or even my breathing sends the creature on its way. The coming school year also promises fleeting but powerful interactions. Students are going to look to me for answers, so will they embrace the ambiguity and list of questions I hope to provoke in their place?

In a 2006 report, *Environmental Education in Canada*, the Canadian Environmental Grantmakers' Network indicates that environmental education in elementary and secondary schools in Canada lacks perspectives from First Nations and diverse cultural groups. Teachers also have trouble dealing with controversial issues. But there are no easy instructions for how to overcome a system troubled by the injustices that plague Canadian society.

Provincial curriculum for environmental education can be *about* ecosystems and human society. It can be *for* solving environmental problems like the collapse of cod populations. It can focus on outdoor experience, and being *in* or *with* the outdoors or our inner or spiritual environments. Or it can be all of these things. Regardless of the approved curriculum outlined in the official documents, however, it is the teacher who will leave the strongest impression. Teachers bring with them ideas and assumptions crafted by who they are and how they have experienced "the environment." The way in which we speak will be influenced by these ideas and assumptions, and will contain all the same elements of race, gender, sexuality, ableism, culture, politics and other influences that we don't always acknowledge or understand.

Even by evoking Coyote, I'm still using assumptions that I cannot see. Using dialogue, I invite readers to bring out the subtle variations in their voices. Such participation may not overcome the tendency to teach one's own view of the world, but I hope it will provoke questions about whose knowledge and voices are normally recognized and accepted, and whose are routinely excluded or stolen.

Questioning myself, I invite students to look for what I cannot see in order to weaken my power. In turn, I hope, this

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"anthropolatry," the worship of human accomplishments, history, and mastery over nature. As anthropolatry, the study of nature is mostly intended to fathom how the world works so as to permit a more complete human mastery and a finer level of manipulation extending down into genes and atoms.

My experience at Meadowcreek opened the door to the different possibility that education somehow ought to be more of a dialogue requiring the capacity to listen in silence to wind, water, animals, the sky, nighttime sounds, and what a Native American once described as earthsong – the sort of things dismissed by anthropolators as romantic nonsense.

Confronted by the mysteries of a place I did not know and slightly bookish by nature, I turned to all of those writers on education that I had avoided in my earlier years as a college teacher, including John Dewey, Albert Schweitzer, Maria Montessori, J. Glenn Gray, and Alfred North Whitehead. There is, I discovered, a useful criticism of the foundations of contemporary education in their writings that emphasizes the importance of place, individual creativity, our implicatedness in the world, reverence, and the stultifying effects of "secondhand learning," as Whitehead once put it.

From a variety of sources, we know that the things most deeply embedded in us are formed by the combination of experience and doing with the practice of reflection and articulation. And we know, too, that what Rachel Carson called "the sense of wonder" requires childhood experience in nature and constant practice as well as early validation by adults. The cultivation of the sense of wonder, however, takes us to the edge, where language loses its power to describe and where analysis, the taking apart of things, goes limp before the mystery of creation, where the only appropriate response is prayerful silence.

Best known for his pioneering work on environmental literacy in higher education and his recent work in ecological design, David Orr is the author of North America's seminal book on environmental education: ***Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect****. He is currently the chair of the Environmental Studies Program at Oberlin College. This excerpt from* ***Design on the Edge*** *was slightly modified and reprinted with permission from David Orr and MIT Press.*

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Teachers bring with them ideas and assumptions crafted by who they are and how they have experienced "the environment."

helps them find ways to invite their students to make the hidden visible as well. Much like ecological systems, time and space for classroom lessons, written handouts and walks in the woods have limits. Unspoken or "hidden" assumptions from dominant ways of knowing are too powerful and take up much too much space. In my classes, I use storytelling, illustrations, poetry and other creative prose to question the very ideas I think need to be "taught." I try also to remember to look for resistance, forget myself once in a while, and make space to listen to others.

Alison Neilson teaches at the University of Toronto and Queen's University. Her latest book ***Disrupting Privilege, Identity, and Meaning: A Reflexive Dance of Environmental Education*** *will be out this fall.*

What's your reaction to Wannabe Coyote? Visit our blog and share your thoughts: **www.alternativesjournal.ca/blog**

To learn about cognitive imperialism read M. Battiste, "You Can't Be the Global Doctor if You're the Colonial Disease," in **Teaching as Activism: Equity Meets Environmentalism**, P. Tripp and L. Muzzin, eds. (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), pp. 121-33.