Transforming higher education through trickster-style teaching

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1. Introduction

As a result of the ecological crisis that we now face and the growing list of related problems (Rockstrom et al., 2009; Huutoniemi and Tapio, 2014) it has become necessary to challenge dominant educational paradigms (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015). Contemporary approaches to higher education are failing to equip students to respond to the constellation of ecological, social, and economic issues that come with trying to sustainably solve world issues such as climate change, rapid loss of biodiversity, extreme poverty, and water shortages (Rockstrom et al., 2009; Jones, 2013). As Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2015) observe, “[T]here is agreement that sustainability requires a reorientation of education and training, including higher education” (p. 73). Society has “confronted and produced large amounts of knowledge of numerous complex global environmental challenges [yet] it lacks the capacity to respond to these challenges” (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015, p. 73). Discipline-specific knowledge and awareness of environmental issues is important, but alone is not adequate to respond to the seemingly intractable ecological, social, and economic challenges associated with sustainability. Thus, transdisciplinary inquiry and collective action is essential. The need for transdisciplinary inquiry is a call to promote pluralistic ways of knowing.

According to Patricia Leavy (2011), “transdisciplinarity has emerged in order to meet the promise of transcending disciplinary knowledge production in order to more effectively address real-world issues and problems” (p. 24). Enabling current and future generations to tackle real world issues is central to education for sustainability. Transdisciplinarity needs to be embraced by educational scholars and practitioners to promote the tackling of complex problems. Leavy (2011) observes that “transdisciplinarity is generally understood as an approach to research that involves the integration of multiple disciplines in a project aimed at a social, human or ‘life-world’ purpose” (p. 24). Furthermore, transdisciplinarity “presupposes that contemporary social/human issues and problems can only be understood and solved if viewed holistically and not artificially broken down into narrow research purposes that suit different disciplinary lenses” (Leavy, 2011, p. 25).

One way to promote transdisciplinary thinking and action within an educational context is through the incongruity and transgressive approaches associated with the figure of a trickster.

A trickster is “one whose very nature is polytropic, allusive, and elusive” (Garrison, 2009, p. 67). Teachers who embrace trickster techniques can revolutionize the sustainability movement by doing the unexpected, thereby generating the necessary education-related changes which facilitate transdisciplinary thinking and eventually advance a sustainable lifestyle. Tricksters are pragmatic and are able to make quick and smooth transitions from one discipline to the next. They are practical and are able to make quick and smooth transitions from one discipline to the next. Thus, trickster-teachers help facilitate pluralistic modes of inquiry. Jim Garrison (2009) says that tricksters are “devious shape shifters that carry out some of the profoundest cultural work possible” (p. 67).
Tricksters recognize the capacity for human agency and rupture quotidian dialogue by challenging customary ideals, transgressing norms (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015) and re-evaluating customs. Tricksters combine awareness and action to transform, transgress, and reveal the concealed aspects of inequitable power structures (Granada, 2004).

Within the educational arena, tricksters can alter existing agendas (McLaren, 2000). Altering existing education trajectories is necessary because education is currently in the midst of tumultuous times and in need of transformation (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985; Freire, 1970, 1992; Giroux, 2004; McLaren, 2000, 2005; Orr, 1994; Pinar, 2004). Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2015) note that there “has been [much] discussion on transformation of higher education and how universities should respond to sustainability concerns” (p. 73). Radical changes need to take place to guide the reorientation of curriculum and pedagogy (including the realm of higher education) towards sustainability (Jones, 2013; O’Brien and Sarkis, 2014). Patterned after industrial efficiency models, university programs are becoming more fragmented (Waeraas and Solbakk, 2009; Holley, 2017) and less humanized (Jones, 2013; Readings, 1996).

The fragmentation of higher education is a product of the emphasis on disciplinary specialization. Karri Holley (2017) observes that “[s]tudent-oriented curriculum is commonly structured by academic disciplines, and faculty are socialized to their respective disciplinary norms. Interdisciplinarity is a complex endeavor for colleges and universities” (n.p.). In higher education and other settings, the “formal learning process” alienates students as they experience a rift between self-actualization, humanization, and product-oriented curriculum (Palmer et al., 2013; Pinar et al., 1995; Jones, 2013).

Parker Palmer, Arthur Zajonc, and Megan Scribner (2013) explain that many students go to college seeking knowledge and a sense of meaning and purpose for their lives but then realize that the disciplinary silos in higher education “[obscure] as much as they [reveal] about the nature of reality and how to inhabit it as whole human beings” (p. 2). Thus, higher education perpetuates a disconnect between how students perceive the natural world and their place in it. Inhabiting this planet as whole human beings, with meaningful lives and a strong sense of purpose, should be a goal of the higher education curriculum. Harry Lewis observes that in higher education, “universities have forgotten their main purpose, which is to help students ‘learn who they are, to search for a larger purpose for their lives, and to leave college as better human beings’” (As cited in Palmer et al., 2013, p. 3). For students, leaving college as better human beings is a crucial purpose of higher education that has virtually disappeared.

Wendell Berry maintains that universities have a mandate to “make or to help to make … human beings in the fullest sense of those words—not just trained workers or knowledgeable citizens but responsible heirs and members of human culture” (In Palmer et al., 2013, p. 1). Thus, there is a call for higher education to transform the overemphasis on disciplinary specialization and the transmission of knowledge into transformative educative experiences, which emphasize transdisciplinary understanding and the sense of self, which is necessary for each citizen-student to develop a rich sense of purpose for his life.

Higher education emphasizes training students for future jobs rather than drawing out the intrinsic motivation that comes with seeking one’s passion or calling (Palmer et al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Pinar, 2004; Orr, 1994). In this article, I set out to explore various aspects of deep learning and to identify how the current educational model does not promote transdisciplinary thinking. I also argue that the trickster archetype and incongruity are effective educationally grounded change agents to advance the sustainability movement and transgress inadequate epistemological paradigms commonly associated with higher education.

1. Overview of paper

The initial section of this paper focuses on education and transformation in the context of equipping the next generation to become interested in life-long learning and participating in the sustainability movement (Palmer et al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015). More specifically, it focuses on the value of educating in a way that is both relevant to students and transformative. Also, in this section I offer a critique of contemporary higher education structures.

The next section focuses on educational change and the importance of shifting dominant educational approaches and epistemologies to address the urgency of the ecological crisis (Jones, 2013). Also, I explore the impact and possibilities of the trickster archetype in transgressing existing educational paradigms and embracing incongruity as a mode of shifting dominant meta-narratives of hyper-consumption and materialism. Additionally, the importance of promoting transdisciplinary thinking is explored with recognition of the trickster’s potentiality to promote transdisciplinarity.

There are multiple ways that higher education can advance sustainability. The value of embracing a trickster-like approach to transgress educational paradigms is highlighted. Within the framework of curriculum theory, I address the possibilities to advance education for sustainability.

2. Methodology

Theoretically oriented, this paper synthesizes existing literature pertaining to tricksters while constructing an argument for the value of the trickster archetype within an educational setting. The narrative pulls from texts that analyze the current educational system, describe the trickster archetype, and discuss the future of sustainability education. Accordingly, the methodology utilized is a literature-based theoretical analysis involving the selection and discussion of multiple perspectives grounded in the broad field of educational studies.

As Short and Grove (1991) argue, the purpose of theoretical inquiry in curriculum is “to create and critique conceptual schemes” which helps “curriculum practitioners and researchers to continue to clarify the essential nature of curriculum” (p. 211). Clarifying the essential nature of curriculum while creating and critiquing conceptual schemata is a common thread woven throughout this work. Thus, one approach utilized in the literature review involves identifying themes pertaining to higher education pedagogy and critiquing these approaches from a sustainability-oriented perspective. Additionally, I explore the theme of disrupting the educational status quo with an emphasis on trickster-style pedagogy as a way to subvert conventional educational approaches that are not sustainable.

2.1. Theoretical foundations

Education needs to transform students, not just transmit information (Palmer et al., 2013). The current mode of education, with its focus on standardization and surveillance, does not promote deep learning (Taubman, 2009). According to Kevin Warburton (2003), deep learning is associated with a student’s “intention to understand, rather than to simply pass an assessment task” (p. 46). Warburton (2003) observes that when comparing the sciences to the arts, studies show “[d]eep learning scores are typically lower in undergraduate science streams than in the arts” (p. 47). Unfortunately, traditional teaching approaches tend to “push students
towards superficial levels of engagement with material, even as it hopes to do the opposite” (Warburton, 2003, p. 47). In higher education, knowledge is commonly treated as an object to be transmitted from the expert to the student. Jones (2013) observes that the objectification of knowledge is pervasive throughout higher education and asserts that higher education must “break free of what is conceptualized as the dominant performative, instrumental sustainability agendas and discourses within universities” (p. 148). Commonly treated as a factory-like process, higher education has a major focus on the outcome and minimal focus on the process (Berg and Seeber, 2017). Sterling (2001) adds that the traditional model of education is transmissive (p. 38) which involves transmitting information to the student and not drawing out knowledge through experience or inquiry. Thus, contemporary education is product-oriented (emphasizing “upward mobility”), rigidly implemented, and skill driven, with the ultimate focus being efficiency, both in the forms of getting the most students through the system as quickly as possible while using the least amount of resources (Jones, 2013; Hensley, 2012, 2015; Berg and Seeber, 2017).

Structured around the factory model, public schools perpetuate educational efficiency (Pinar, 2004). Students, considered products on a conveyor belt, are treated as products on a multi-component assembly line. Administrators in schools, as they would in a factory, must make sure that satisfactory products are emerging. If standards are not met in a school, it is commonly considered a “failure” (Bets, 1998). Therefore, a majority of instructors in higher education are not concerned with individual students or their particular needs, but rather with meeting expectations set by outside, and widely removed, sources (Berg and Seeber, 2017).

2.2. Wicked problems and sustainability education

Sustainability challenges are often described as wicked problems—which are “issues characterized by high levels of complexity, ambiguity, controversy and uncertainty” (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015, p. 73). Since sustainability issues are considered wicked problems, they demand a systemic approach that emphasizes interdependencies and interconnectedness. If sustainability issues are not viewed as wicked problems, then they will not be adequately addressed. To stay on pace with the rapidly changing landscape of sustainability, the traditional educational paradigm must be challenged (Hensley, 2011; Freire, 1970).

Education needs to equip future generations to face wicked problems in ways that are transgressive and transdisciplinary (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015; Huutoniemi and Tapio, 2014). Focusing solely on the “technical” aspects of education, and not wicked problems, can lead to negative impacts on student learning experiences. In contrast to wicked problems are technical problems (also referred to as “tame problems”) defined by Heifetz et al. as problems that have known solutions that can be implemented through current know-how (in Jager et al., 2011) and are “well-defined, stable and liable to have occurred before” (Scoffham, 2016, p. 294). An over-emphasis on tame or technical problems is not tenable within the realm of sustainable education. According to Jill Jager et al. (2011),

Most [educational] approaches treat the challenge for education and capacity building as a technical problem that requires adjustments in current practices. To move beyond this particular type of circular revolution, it may be necessary to identify an alternative approach. … [for example] questioning current beliefs and assumptions regarding the delivery of education (p. 22).

A technical-based education approach stifles students’ creative capacities and compromises adaptive mechanisms (Goleman, 1995). Jager et al. (2011) indicate that “it is becoming clear that ‘business as usual’ or ‘more of the same’ will no longer be suitable, and that nothing less than a ‘revolution’ in education and capacity building is needed to confront the challenges posed by global environmental change” (p. 21). A transformative approach to education must be adopted to counter the negative effects of transmissive and technical approaches that mostly cultivate a student mindset that can only respond to tame problems, not wicked problems.

2.3. Tricksters and sustainability education

To more effectively reach students and build a participative worldview, teachers must learn to jump over disciplinary fences. Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2015) state that in order to:

... transform for the sustainability turn or transition, people everywhere will need to learn how to cross disciplinary boundaries, expand epistemological horizons, transgress stubborn research and education routines and hegemonic powers, and transcend mono-cultural practices in order to create new forms of human activity and new social systems that are more sustainable and socially just. (p. 74)

To enhance student sustainability competencies with the goal of transforming human activity and developing new social systems involves a great deal of well-focused and systematic effort. A trickster-teacher is well-positioned to cultivate this kind of transformation because he or she mobilizes metacognitive restructuring which leads to an integrative world view. When considering these possibilities, it is helpful to better understand what a trickster is.

Among the most entertaining characters in mythology, tricksters can bring valuable education-oriented perspectives to light (Garrison, 2009). A trickster is a being, usually male, who takes glee and satisfaction in breaking rules and playing tricks on people. Commonly found in the mythology of Native Americans and Africans, tricksters are also seen in certain myths of Europeans, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and the Australian Aborigines (Tricksters, 2016). Tricksters use a combination of tricks and humor to liberate insight and their tactics can increase awareness and enhance balance (Garrison, 2009).

Carl Jung identified the trickster figure as a transforming archetype. Transforming archetypes “emerge when the personality is moving for change and particularly [towards] that [equalizing] change which will result in [wholeness]” (Lundquist, 1991, pp. 25–26). The trickster deploys the mechanism of opposition, which is helpful when trying to determine what something truly is. Lundquist (1991) insists that “one cannot know what something is or should be without contrasting it with what it is not or should not be” (p. 31). The ability to span the ideological gap presented by dualisms is exhibited by tricksters. The trickster casts light on the backdrop of dogmatic rigidity, which sometimes reveals a tumultuous terrain. It is this cross-over habitat where transformation emerges and the beginner’s mind is catalyzed.

2.4. Tricksters transform perspectives

Shunryu Suzuki (2010) declares that “[i]f your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind there are few” (p. 2). When looking to transform education, one must stop rigidly adhering to what has been the educational norm. Educators must adopt a “beginner’s mind” and create the space to see the possibilities that exist in a newly formed educational model that is geared towards embracing transdisciplinary thinking. Leavy (2011) notes that transdisciplinarity can be “understood as an
attempt to bridge the academic world and the needs of different social bodies to address real-world issues and problems” (p. 26). A trickster approach to teaching promotes transdisciplinarity because it displays the possibilities for crossing disciplinary borders by embracing the unexpected and other tools of transformation.

Tricksters utilize many modes of transformation. According to James Conroy (n.d.) the trickster is situated to “[move] between symbolic categories of being and action, changing shape and identity in order to expose and redress various deep-seated human follies” (p. 112). Conroy (n.d.) observes the trickster as a “special kind of teacher ... uniquely located on the threshold of inside/ outside, hegemony and heteronomy” promoting a “scurrilous distaste for the operations of authority” (n.p.). Lewis Hyde adds that the “trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox” (As cited in Davis and Weeden, 2009, p. 76). Tricksters are situated well to cross disciplinary borders and boundaries through contradiction, paradox, and ambiguity.

Tricksters encourage the formation of new perspectives and the transformation of old perspectives, ideally into more accurate ways of seeing the world in which we live. Among the multiple roles that the trickster can take on, Nancy Hathaway tells us that tricksters “perform the essential task of bringing culture to humanity as they teach us to tell stories” (Hathaway in Davis and Weeden, 2009, p. 76). Tricksters assist in the human transformation process by disrupting conformity, creating and sharing new narratives, and salvaging space for self-awareness and social solidarity.

2.5. Trickster as coyote

Historically, tricksters appear in many different forms and have many names. The trickster is also referred to as a coyote (Brown, 1983). Many authors use this term in the educational realm and discuss the significance of “coyote teaching strategies” (Conroy, n.d., Ball, 2001; Lundquist, 1991; Conroy, n.d.). Ball (2001) suggests that the “coyote teacher role is to inspire and trick students into looking more closely at their surroundings by answering questions with questions that push students to find the answer on their own” (p. 61). In this sense, the coyote/trickster instructor encourages students to pursue their own passions, by empowering students to discover their own answers. When students are encouraged to learn on their own, they break free from the traditional learning framework. Students are no longer just a “vessel to be filled” (Dewey, 1923). To further that claim, Ball describes coyote teaching as “a simple and continual process that shifts the responsibility of learning from the educator to the student” (Ball, 2001, p. 64). Tricksters, Hyde adds, help us “to cut the ties that bind us in social and spiritual life, leading to [what George Foster and Plato refer to as] a lucky find” (Davis and Weeden, 2009, p. 76). A lucky find, “reveals a larger view and helps us to realize that our conceptions of things are in our mind rather than out there” (Davis and Weeden, 2009, p. 77). In this sense, tricksters mobilize meta-cognitive restructuring which facilitates a clear perception of the world and our role(s) within it.

Tricksters also provide levity in places and situations that are typically very serious. Allan Chinen reports that among the Native American group, the Hopi, tricksters help others not to take life too seriously. “They usually appear,” Chinen comments, “by suddenly jumping down from high buildings, and then parody tribal priests and officials”; they also “poke fun at marriage and funerals and make light of love and death to prevent people from taking religious dogmas—or life itself—too seriously” (Chinen in Davis and Weeden, 2009, pp. 77–78). Tricksters help people to see these epochal events from the lens of levity and help to reduce and/or remove stress. The trickster’s approach of helping others not take situations too seriously is valuable within the realm of education as well, because it encourages cognitive flexibility.

Parks asserts that the “teacher as trickster can be a guide during [the higher education] experience” and the teacher as trickster “is open to improvising” and “threatening boundaries” while risking disorder (p. 135). Parks (1996) creates a strong argument for the possibilities of the trickster-as-teacher and provides a foundation for other applications.

2.6. Trickster’s role in humor and research

Laughter is a benefit of humor within and beyond the classroom. Shared laughter, according to Debra Korobkin (1988), “is a powerful way to reinforce learning, and it helps to make tasks less laborious and threatening” (p. 154). Anything that can help learning not feel as tedious or as boring as it sometimes does has a natural appeal to students and teachers. Korobkin adds that students and teachers with a sense of humor “are sought after for the ability to set people at ease, equalize situations and status relationships, find unexpected connections and insights, and increase group rapport” (1988, p. 154). The benefits of utilizing humor in educational situations is expansive. Avner Ziv, an educational humor researcher, states that humor facilitates the expression of a particular mode of thinking not bound to “right” and conventional answers .... Traditional education has been criticized often by many modern educators for its almost exclusive encouragement of the use of convergent thinking .... Divergent thinking can certainly be helpful in the educational process in such instances as problem solving and all types of activities including self expression (Ziv in Korobkin, 1988, p. 154).

Sustainability issues do not interface well with traditional convergent thinking (or tame/technical problems). Thusly, promoting divergent thinking is central to sustainability education. Divergent thinking is “thinking that develops in many directions.” This opens possibilities because it “leads you to look at options that aren’t necessarily apparent at first” (Bernhard, 2013, n.p.). When used well, humor emboldens divergent thinking and facilitates deeper understanding of the inherent interconnectivity and interdependence that exists within the living world.

Barbara Dray (2003) compares the role of the trickster with that of the researcher, suggesting they both employ similar tactics. She sees the trickster as transforming reality and simultaneously creating and destroying myth. Similarly, Dray posits that the researcher empowers people and gives a voice to voiceless beings. Dray’s association elucidates the critical agency of the trickster. She uses the previously unassociated roles of the trickster and the researcher to indicate the transformative capacity of each job. At the crux of her argument is the notion of incongruence. Dray illustrates the potency of incongruence by forging a link between the intellectual and the fool.

The trickster uses incongruity to encourage transformation by bringing together ideas, thoughts, or actions that previously were not recognized as being connected, and then helping others to see the importance of their connectivity. Research does this same thing. Thusly, tricksters promote the unifying of previously disconnected thought matrices through anomaly and incongruity.

3. Higher education as transformative education

Within the realm of sustainability there is an urgency to find effective ways to educate about the ecological and social crises that we face. Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2015) state that “there is a need for more exploratory, transgressive forms of learning in our [higher
education] institutions” (p. 78). To promote transgressive forms of learning we need to explore how sustainability education can restore a mutually beneficial human-earth relationship and advance ecologically sensitive forms of stewardship (Hensley, 2011). Teachers can enhance the possibility for transformation within an educational context. Cultivating transformation may involve implementation of the trickster archetype in research and pedagogy (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015). Universities have the capacity to catalyze a great deal of change pertaining to advancing sustainability. This section looks at why advancing a holistic, integrated, and relevant higher education curriculum in the context of advancing incongruity and reflexivity is beneficial.

Because a great deal of the current ecological crisis is actually a crisis of mind and perception (Orr, 1994), we must aim towards transformative higher education. Heifetz et al. state that the revolution that is needed to meet the challenges of global environmental change through education and capacity building must be unconventional and daring. It must be unconventional, in that it cannot focus only on external changes in structures (e.g., institutional reforms, curriculum changes, new incentives for collaboration, etc.), but must also address interior shifts in consciousness among diverse actors involved in education and capacity building (e.g., identifying blind spots, questioning assumptions and beliefs, thinking differently about the future) (Italics added, in O’Brien et al., 2013, p. 10, p. 10)

To promulgate this revolution towards sustainability, Heifetz et al. call for unconventional and daring approaches to education and capacity building. They add that the revolution, [Must be daring, in that it should challenge leaders in research, education and capacity building to engage in reflexive processes, potentially disturbing their own “axes” and creating new ways of addressing the challenges posed by global environmental change. Rather than promoting one large and ideologically homogenous revolution in education and capacity building, there is a need for a revolution in the way that leaders working with education and capacity building look at systems and processes of change. From this perspective, transformative learning may not only be desirable, but critical in responding to the challenges posed by global environmental change. (Heifetz et al. in O’Brien et al., 2013, p. 10, p. 10)

A revolution in the way that leaders, working with education and capacity building, conduct their business must take place. Mobilizing this revolution will require more people to perceive the ecological crisis.

4. Conclusion

In the arena of higher education for sustainable development, the ultimate goal is to promote social justice, ecological integrity, and economic equality. Well-planned educational revolution can promote the humanization of students and teachers while developing a sustainable framework for transformation and deep learning. In the framework of sustainable education, teachers are encouraged to develop and endorse student agency to promote self-realization and prevent estrangement. It is critical to understand the profundity of the trickster within education to continue enhancing wholeness and promoting incongruity. Trickster-teachers are able to maintain the attention of their students, transform student perspectives, and enable students to look at complex challenges from multiple perspectives. Trickster teachers employ tactics such as humor and incongruity to empower students to tackle problems from an ecological perspective instead of the tunnel vision associated with convergent thinking. In this sense, trickster-teachers are pragmatic and versatile educators that effectively link unconventional inquiry with discovery while facilitating transdisciplinary thinking.

Ultimately, higher education can expand student capacity to take risks, and reconfigure their worldview. Also, a transformative education grounded in the principles of sustainability will facilitate transdisciplinary thinking. Embracing a pedagogical approach aligned with the trickster archetype is one way to enhance the impact of higher education. The trickster archetype promotes a shift in conventional educational practices that is aligned with the ways of thinking and being connected with the sustainability movement.

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