



Monkeywrenching the Curriculum: Curricular Subversion as an Act of Care

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Abstract

In the era of education dominated by high stakes testing and accountability, homogenized and scripted pedagogy, and narrowed academic standards, achieving curricular relevance for particular students and classrooms is increasingly difficult for educators. This conceptual analysis suggests that the practice of monkeywrenching, borrowed from environmental activism, can serve as an action by teachers to address this challenge. Monkeywrenching consists of direct action subversion, applied to curricula for the sake of specific students, and is constituted as an act of care as described by Nel Noddings. Specific consideration of sustainability education indicates that curriculum subversion through monkeywrenching can be a powerful tool in demonstrating care for place and students.

Keywords: *action, agency, environmental curriculum, sustainability curriculum, curriculum implementation, curriculum theory, place-based education*

There comes a time in a man's life when he has to pull up stakes. Has to light out. Has to stop straddling, and start cutting, fence
(Abbey, 2006 p. 99).

Edward Abbey offered this phrase in his iconic work *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. *The Monkey Wrench Gang* has served as inspiration for many environmental activist groups for nearly half a century (Irvine, 2018). Although influential for organizations such as the Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front (Joosse, 2014), the concept of monkeywrenching has not been utilized as an educational or a curricular lens. Thinking about the times within an educator's classroom experience when it is time for them to *pull up stakes* from high stakes testing and accountability, homogenized and scripted pedagogy, and narrowed academic standards has been explored by critical educational scholars from multiple perspectives. The challenge for contemporary teachers involves when and how to *light out* and *stop straddling and start cutting* curricular fences.

Within the institutions of education, we currently find society placing demands on teachers and students that are out of alignment with traditional expectations. The cultural scripts that have traditionally been available to educators are being replaced by more “efficient” and automated scripts. These scripts are the mechanisms used to sustain hegemonic conditions and contexts. The professional ideals within this institutional framing are fidelity of implementation and instructional

alignment. Issues within schooling like effective teacher rubrics, high impact/leverage practices, and the accountability mechanisms of standardized testing illustrate the framing and foreclosing of potential that educators face. This institutional framing disrupts the project of justice and liberation. Also, as Santiago Rincon-Gallardo (2019) argues, the demands of standardized testing and employability limit how learning is valued for its own sake. He states, “Learning is rarely seen as an intrinsic value, a liberating act, a deliberate practice with larger societal implications” (p. 4). Liberating learning from the acquiescence of historic political-economic expectations and hegemonic standards and outcomes will require the recognition of the impact of systems of oppression tied to neoliberalism, white supremacy, and colonialism. As a society, we have failed to consider the relationships involved in justice and liberation as a concern central to the purpose, process, and mission of schooling. Educators need to recognize when, how, and why it is time to *pull up stakes* and *start cutting fences*.

In his text *Scripted Bodies: Corporate Power, Smart Technologies, and the Undoing of Public Education* (2017), Kenneth Saltman provides an insightful analysis of the ringfencing of education that has occurred. The need for a strategy like monkeywrenching to counter the repressive enclosure of schooling becomes evident if we intentionally consider the immediate, local context of education. As Saltman writes:

In a society theoretically committed to democracy, all schools should be teaching youth to not only engage in dialogue, debate, and questioning but also to relate knowledge to lived experience, broader social realities, and the material and symbolic contests that structure it. Repressive pedagogies succeed in isolating knowledge from the subjective and objective conditions that give rise to it. (p. 11)

Cutting fences will require the reacquaintance of curriculum with the local. The place and the immediate students that occupy the classroom deserve prioritization and the intentional consideration of educators.

Paulo Paraskeva’s text *Curriculum and the Generation of Utopia: Interrogating the Current State of Critical Curriculum Theory* (2021) provides those interested in transgressing and overthrowing the hegemony, of *pulling up stakes* and *lighting out*, with a map of obstacles and pitfalls that have prevented success. Emphasizing the failure of critical curriculum studies to unseat the neoliberal hegemony despite its significant disruption of the common modes of being and doing within school, Paraskeva gestures toward the epistemicide that has decimated education and continues to foreclose and oppress through the epistemic privilege of the coloniality matrix of power. Monkeywrenching provides educators with an immediate and intention-driven intervention strategy to disrupt the hegemony as enacted within classrooms.

Themes of Monkeywrenching

The Monkey Wrench Gang tells the story of a group of environmental vigilantes, including the legendary George Hayduke, the fictional character in Edward Abbey’s novel. Hayduke represents a brand of individualism that valorizes working independently yet he works through his skeptical hesitation to collaborate with co-conspirators. Hayduke works with the monkey wrench gang to impede the process of industrial development through the destruction and sabotage of bulldozers, power plants, trains, technology, and infrastructure. Although the characters in the book turn

toward destruction and violence, as have some groups who claim the work as inspiration, the concept of monkeywrenching itself does not equate to wanton destruction or sabotage (Lemke, 2017). Within critical theory when we cite “violence” the intent is anything that prevents individuals from achieving or recognizing their authentic potentiality, or living their identity with integrity. Anti-violence seeks to recognize, limit, and, when possible, remediate when trauma, pain, hurt, and harm occur due to the actions of agents within shared systems. This violence occurs intentionally and unintentionally as systems become more entrenched and hegemonic. Within the current hegemony, the system consistently inflicts violence, fencing in stakeholders and limiting their/our agency.

Stakeholders (students, teachers, parents, community members, and citizens) are challenged to find a language, an action, through which to register dissent. As is evident in the prominent, though politically and ideologically charged, call for increased parental and student rights, the system has been designed to limit stakeholder agency. Attempts to protest tend to lodge complaints in the language of academic standards and standardized test scores. As stakeholders advocate for the sanctity of local education in opposition to homogenized and standardized schooling, they are ensnared in a debate that devolves into the mundane and banal. This is a captured narrative. Hegemony is totalizing. It captures not only the language, the metrics, and structures of the institutional system, but the ontology, epistemology, and axiology through which we attempt to make sense of it.

The voice of the powerless needs to speak a different language in order to fracture the hegemony of the system. By continuing to speak the language of the system, the language of standards, fidelity, test scores, and accountability, dissent only serves to support the system. The ideology requires and embeds the resistance that takes the form of alternative narrative. When stakeholders speak of competing systems, transgressive, fugitive, or abolitionist alternatives, the ideology of competition can be implicitly legitimized. When educators compare test scores and academic outcomes, they legitimize the ideology of standardization. Within education there are multiple, diverse, and generative experiences that can form a counter-narrative that fractures and disrupts the hegemonic ideology (Parkison, 2013).

Table 1 helps illustrate the ways in which different theoretical traditions emphasize teacher agency and social justice.

Table 1: Theoretical Traditions Emphasizing Critical Teacher Agency

Theoretical Tradition	Key Concepts	Key Thinkers	Teacher Agency Focus	Goals	Social Justice Emphasis
Critical Pedagogy	Education as liberation-Critical consciousness (consciência-Dialogical learning- Oppression and power dynamics	Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Henry Giroux	Teachers as facilitators of critical dialogue, challenging oppression	Transforming educational structures to promote equity and empowerment	Challenging oppressive power structures (class, race, gender)

Theoretical Tradition	Key Concepts	Key Thinkers	Teacher Agency Focus	Goals	Social Justice Emphasis
Abolitionist Pedagogy	Abolition of punitive systems, Restorative justice, Reimagining education as a liberatory space, Radical imagination	Bettina Love, Angela Davis, Mumia Abu-Jamal	Teachers as agents of resistance to punishment, creating restorative, community-centered learning environments	Dismantling punitive and oppressive educational practices; creating alternative, equitable models	Dismantling school-to-prison pipeline, advocating for restorative justice
Transformative Learning Theory	Critical reflection, Transformation of perspectives, Personal and social change	Jack Mezirow, Paulo Freire (influential)	Teachers as facilitators of transformative learning, promoting critical reflection	Encouraging deep, transformative shifts in thinking, identity, and action	Empowerment through critical reflection and challenging societal norms
Post-structural and Feminist Theories	Power and discourse, Identity and agency. Intersectionality	Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, bell hooks	Teachers as agents of change who deconstruct norms and challenge power structures	Transforming education through critical engagement with power, identity, and representation	Addressing gender, race, class inequalities and subverting hegemonic structures
Critical Race Theory (CRT)	Racism as central to societal structures, Intersectionality, Counter-storytelling	Kimberlé Crenshaw, Derrick Bell, Gloria Ladson-Billings	Teachers as agents who disrupt racial inequities in education, promote racial justice	Understanding and dismantling racism in education and society	Advocating for racial justice, decolonizing curricula, empowering marginalized students
Restorative Justice Education	Healing, accountability, and repairing harm, Building community and relationships	Howard Zehr, John Braithwaite	Teachers as facilitators of restorative processes, creating safe and supportive environments	Replacing punitive measures with restorative practices for conflict resolution	Promoting healing, reconciliation, and justice in educational settings

While each theory may have a unique focus, they share common goals of promoting equity, challenging oppression, and fostering transformative educational practices. Teacher agency in these contexts is not just about individual action but is deeply intertwined with intentional efforts to create more just and inclusive educational systems. Each tradition emphasizes teacher agency in different ways.

Monkeywrenching, from this perspective, is distinctly counter-hegemonic and counter-violent. It is best to identify monkeywrenching as direct action, motivated by care, and intentionally symbolic in nature. Direct action in the case of monkeywrenching refers to actions which do not use official or policy channels to enact change, but instead work to cause the change directly without asking for permission. These actions are intentional attempts to disrupt the system, to *pull up stakes*. Tree sitting is an example within environmental contexts. In the case of tree sitting, individuals directly stop logging in an area by occupying trees themselves as opposed to writing letters to policymakers. Several theories of teacher agency emphasize a critical stance and direct action, particularly those rooted in critical pedagogy, transformative learning, and sociocultural theories. These frameworks view teacher agency not just as the capacity to act within existing structures, but as the ability to critically evaluate and transform those structures in the pursuit of justice, equity, and empowerment.

Understanding the potential of monkeywrenching, or subversion, in education involves the recognition of Care as the intentional grounding of educator actions and agency. Nel Noddings' pedagogy of Care (Noddings, 2002; 2013) emphasizes the importance of fostering caring relationships within the educational process. It challenges traditional views of teaching by promoting the idea that education should be a holistic practice that nurtures not just intellectual growth but also emotional, moral, and social development. Through Care, educators can create a learning environment that empowers students to become compassionate, engaged, and responsible individuals. In actions motivated by Care, educator intention is foundational to how the relationship between teacher and student develops and how curriculum subversions are integrated into the learning environment. Educators must have the intention to create an atmosphere of Care where students feel safe, valued, and respected. Educators' actions are guided by their commitment to prioritize the well-being of students. Educators must intentionally foster relationships, showing genuine interest in students' personal lives, concerns, and emotions. Educators must intentionally listen, empathize, and be responsive to students' needs. By acting with intention, educators set an example for students, teaching them not only academic content but also how to care for others and respond to different emotional and social situations. Educators must reflect on their intentions to ensure they are creating an environment that truly supports student well-being. If intentions are misaligned with the needs of the students, reflection helps adjust practices. The intentionality with which educators approach their role is what makes Care central to monkeywrenching and specific curriculum subversions in education (hooks, 1994). Without intentionality, care may become passive or superficial rather than a transformative element in the learning process.

Though this Care is a *periphery politics*, excluded by the system's ideology, it is essentially an intentional manifestation of concern for the immediate stakeholders. It is on this periphery that concrete causes (relationships, community, sustainability, wellness, and justice) gain access to the political realm and create fractures and potential openings to authentic politics and thus education. As Vaclav Havel writes in "Disturbing the Peace:"

We introduced a new model of behavior: don't get involved in diffuse general ideological polemics with the center, to whom numerous concrete causes are always being sacrificed;

fight “only” for those concrete causes, and be prepared to fight for them unswervingly, to the end. In other words, don’t get mixed up in backroom wheeling and dealing, but play an open game. (Havel, 1990, p. 83)

By playing in the open, the concrete issues can stand as an example of the domination that an ideology maintains over the human element of the world. Monkeywrenching provides teachers with an authentic pathway to participate in shaping curriculum that is foreclosed by standardization, commodified curriculum content, and high-stakes accountability systems. Guided by the intention of Care, subversion becomes intentionally symbolic by playing in the open, when educators stop straddling, and start cutting, fence. Teachers gain agency in their monkeywrenching subversion.

Referring to monkeywrenching as intentionally symbolic actions is not to imply that they are superficial or vain, but rather that they are actions which are meant to be seen, actions which embody local meanings and significance. Monkeywrenching is a way of demonstrating the presence of latent values or marginalized voices where it is perceived that official curricula and systems are inadequate, too slow, or contributing to the marginalization of those voices. In the more extreme examples of monkeywrenching, such as organizations like the Earth Liberation Front, organizations actively claim their actions, even when illegal. Monkeywrenching is not just about reaching a particular outcome, it involves making visible the process necessary to reach outcomes, sanctioned and unsanctioned. Intentionality on the part of the educator is the crucial element. Awareness and a willingness to make public the subversive actions being taken for and with stakeholders is crucial.

Education Monkeywrenching: Curriculum Subversion

In applying the themes of monkeywrenching to classroom settings, it is important to start with emphasizing that all three elements 1) direct action, 2) motivated by care, 3) done in an intentionally symbolic manner must be present. With respect to curriculum subversion, it is helpful to refer back to Abbey’s quote which started the article. In many ways, the structures and intentions of curricula, particularly commercial standardized curricula, can be thought of as fences. Curricula restrict or constrain what is taught, how it is taught, and how learning is represented. As with physical fences, some of these restrictions are necessary, but “There comes a time in a man’s life when he has to pull up stakes.” For example, elementary science curricula should restrict topics such as molecular genetics or quantum mechanics as those are not developmentally appropriate nor likely to contribute toward students developing a cohesive understanding of life or physical science. Although some of these curricular fences are necessary and useful, others are not (hooks, 1994). The first action in educational monkeywrenching is to not banally accept without intentional consideration a fence which bounds a curriculum (Parkison, 2019). There is the necessity of recognizing the potential that the fence inappropriately constrains a curriculum in a particular way, for specific students, within specific geographic settings and educational contexts.

In the spirit of monkeywrenching, educators who identify fences that ought naught exist for their particular students should take direct action to move or remove those barriers: “Has to light out. Has to stop straddling, and start cutting, fence.” This direct action is different from submitting a request to curriculum review committees or administrators, but instead, within the daily practice of teaching the teacher makes the change (Gay, 2000; Sleeter, 2004; hooks, 1994). In the instructional arc (McConnell, Conrad, & Uhrmacher, 2020), these are changes which are made in

the operational curriculum. Although curricular materials and resources may contain many fences, it is only in the operationalization of that curriculum that students are made to experience those fences.

Monkeywrenching: A Curriculum Subversion Strategy for Educators

The obvious question to ask in considering educational monkeywrenching is why would a teacher utilize a curriculum which needs to be subverted? In fact, there are many alternatives to curricular structures, such as a fluid curriculum (Conrad et al., 2023), which would better serve educators and their students and make monkeywrenching unnecessary. However, in the era of education dominated by high stakes testing and accountability, homogenized and scripted pedagogy, and narrowed academic standards, decisions about what curriculum is to be used are made further and further from educators and local communities (Sleeter, 2004). Those decisions are often made with little consideration or specificity toward a particular educational setting. As a result, curriculum subversion in the current education era is an intentional action, guided by Care, and performed with the awareness of stakeholders for the purpose of making changes necessary to serve particular students in specific classrooms.

Curriculum subversion is offered as an alternative to the often-preached fidelity of implementation within strict curriculum and pedagogical guidelines. The phrase fidelity of implementation implies that educators have a compliant obligation or responsibility to a mandated curriculum. Subversion implies that educators' responsibility is directed toward something else, ideally their students and community. An educator intentionally chooses to subvert a curriculum not because they personally disagree with it, but because in its standardized form it does not attend to the full needs and experiences of their particular students (hooks, 1994; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Parkison, 2008).

Typology of Curriculum Subversion: Recognizing Educator Agency

It would be difficult to find educators that do not express being motivated by Care for their students and that use Care in guiding instructional decisions. Monkeywrenching in the form of curricular subversion has the opportunity to be an act of Care, but only when done in a way that students, parents, or a community are able to see the way in which the educator is changing curriculum to better serve the needs of their specific students. In recognition of this act of Care there is also the potential for those individuals to see educators as not just deliverers of curriculum, but as intentional agents working on behalf of and with students and their communities.

Teacher agency refers to an educator's capacity to make informed, independent decisions, take initiative, and adapt teaching strategies to meet the needs of their students and the goals of the community *and* curriculum. It encompasses their ability to:

- Reflect on and refine their practices.
- Navigate constraints (e.g., policies, standardized testing).
- Advocate for and implement changes to improve educational outcomes.

Teacher agency is highly relevant in the context of educator intention because it represents the ability to act purposefully and autonomously within the constraints of their educational environ-

ment. Teacher agency influences how intentions are realized in practice and how effectively educators can adapt to and shape the curriculum structure. Educators with high agency can align their intentions (e.g., fostering critical thinking, nurturing holistic growth) with their instructional choices. Agency enables teachers to interpret and adapt curriculum guidelines to fit the classroom context.

In recognizing curriculum subversion as an intentional act of Care it becomes clear that not all curricular modification meets the criteria set forth here. There are many times that curricula are modified for logistical reasons, to fit different timelines, or even just to make things easier for the teacher. These types of modifications do not meet the criteria of curriculum subversion as they are not motivated by Care, but instead logistics or ease. In contrast to these types of modifications, educational monkeywrenching represents a more professional and political act as it consists of actions motivated by Care, not convenience.

Although these actions can be motivated by Care, they do not meet the criteria established by Noddings's (2002; 2013) work to say care is the motivation. Without the intentional, performative, and political element of monkeywrenching, for all the students know the tasks and resources they are presented are those designated within the mandated curriculum. Unless the teacher is vulnerable in the performance of their subversion, it is impossible for students to recognize the intentional act of Care.

Table 2 provides a taxonomy of educator agency which helps to frame the efforts of teachers as they monkeywrench the curriculum to meet the immediate needs of their students and community.

Table 2: Taxonomy of Educator Agency

Type	Common Features	Curriculum Structures	Teacher Intention	Examples
Knowledge and Content-Centered	Structured content delivery, mastery of essentials	Subject-centered, Core Curriculum, Outcomes-based	Deliver subject knowledge, ensure mastery of content, and meet predefined objectives	High school subject divisions (e.g., Biology, History); general education requirements in college.
Learner-Centered and Growth-Oriented	Focus on individual needs, holistic development	Learner-Centered, Humanistic, Activity-based	Facilitate exploration, foster personal growth, and empower students to take ownership of learning	Montessori schools; social-emotional learning programs; project-based learning activities.
Problem-Solving and Skills-Based	Real-world application, skill acquisition	Problem-centered, Competency-based	Develop critical thinking, real-world problem-solving skills, and ensure skill mastery	STEM projects like designing solar devices; vocational training programs for certification.

Type	Common Features	Curriculum Structures	Teacher Intention	Examples
Integrated and Progressive	Connecting ideas, building understanding progressively	Integrated/ Interdisciplinary, Spiral	Create interdisciplinary connections, deepen understanding over time, and reinforce core concepts	Thematic units integrating science, literature, and policy; progressively complex math topics.
Implicit and Hidden Influences	Indirect lessons, cultural or social norms	Hidden Curriculum	Model values, shape behaviors, and convey implicit lessons through environment and interactions	Emphasis on punctuality through attendance rules; modeling respect through teacher-student interactions.

There are two aspects of curricula which can be subverted: the impacts and the structure. With regard to impacts, curricula are often presented as having purely academic intentions (i.e. to teach students to read or do math), however there are numerous implicit impacts which may be less obvious and not as objective as presented. In particular, all curricula have impacts related to the teaching of place (Clay, 2023). In many cases, the message about place is that it is irrelevant to academic success or perhaps that success can only be found by moving to particular places (i.e. areas with higher education institutions or greater economic opportunity). The implicit impacts of curricula in these cases are for students to not think about place. Related to the analogy of fences, the curricular fences restrict intentional teaching of place. In recognizing these impacts, a teacher might choose to subvert the apparent placelessness by including activities where students consider concepts within the context of their communities or activities which seek to foster engagement and connection with their surroundings.

Structures in curricula which teachers might choose to subvert include both organization and assessment. This is particularly true in curricula which use standardized assessment that rely only on particular types of questions. A teacher might recognize that some of their students will be better able to represent their understanding in other formats (Eisner, 1994). In that case, the subversion is in cutting the metaphorical fence which says 'learning can only be demonstrated this way.' Even in cases where there might be formal structures that allow for modifying assessments, such as students with Individualized Education Plans (IEP), the particulars of an assignment, topic, or even particular point in time may require a teacher to subvert an assessment beyond the formally approved modifications. This is particularly true when the changes need to be made on a timescale much faster than formal IEP writing and rewriting process.

Implications for Teacher Evaluation

In recognizing the potential for curricular monkeywrenching as an act of care, and more specifically an act of care in response to the needs of students or a community, it is important to

consider how current teacher evaluation practices recognize, or fail to recognize, this skill of educators as well as how evaluation structures may or may not encourage this practice. In the standardization era of education, teacher evaluation is often reduced to quantifiable metrics and rubrics (Schneider, 2017). Many of these evaluation measures focus on the elements which form ideas or images of what constitutes good teaching, but may not actually identify effective teaching itself (Gottlieb, 2015). As related to curricula, these metrics can be thought of as evaluating how effectively a teacher delivered the curriculum. However, in the case of standardized curricula, that metric would measure (or more fairly claim to measure) how effectively a teacher delivered a curriculum which was not designed for their students and not designed for their school.

As with most standardized elements of education, the focus in teacher evaluation is presented as evaluating teaching that would be ‘good’ in any school. However, the reality is that teachers need not be good for any school, they should be great for the particular students which are in front of them. In this light, we argue teacher evaluation should include points of evaluation specifically related to the ways in which teachers did *not* deliver the curriculum as intended. Whether modifications or additions of resources, experiences, or assessments, the true professional skill of an educator with a curriculum is not delivering it as intended by the curriculum writers, but instead actualizing a version that meets the needs of their students and community.

Additionally, if educators should be encouraged to subvert curricula as written to serve the needs of their students, it is important for administrators to create a culture in which they feel safe to do so. Administrators through demonstrated support have the opportunity to reduce the perceived risk for teachers. This could be through asking and encouraging teachers to change curricula and to clarify that as an administrator they understand that subversion of standardized curricula need not be perceived as subversion of themselves or their leadership.

Conclusion

Teaching as a craft has always consisted of creating meaningful and engaging experiences for the students in a particular classroom. Although that aim has not changed, with increasingly standardized curricula, the starting point for most teachers is now something that, by definition, was not designed for the students in front of them. By no means does this mean that impactful teaching is no longer possible, as there are numerous examples daily of educators doing amazing work. However, this change does demonstrate that creating meaningful and engaging experiences for a particular classroom of students requires a different skillset. Teachers must recognize the metaphorical fences in their curricula which might prevent students from having these types of experiences and, as Abbey suggested, start cutting.

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