



Cultivating Critique, Hope, and Action

The Cordel as a Multimodal Invitation to Environmental Education Topics

Lauren Fletcher, California State University-Stanislaus, Stanislaus, California, United States
Erica Holyoke, University of Colorado-Denver, Denver, Colorado, United States

Abstract

The *cordel* is a multimodal, interactive instructional strategy that invites students to engage with environmental education topics by exploring a variety of curated artifacts displayed along a string. Rooted in a traditional Brazilian practice, the *cordel* has been adapted for use in classrooms to activate students' background knowledge and foster critical thinking. It offers multiple entry points to ecological justice and collectively builds background knowledge. The *cordel* invites a critical and intersectional view of environmentalism and justice, fostering stances of reciprocity, shared knowledge building, and action.

Keywords

Environmental education, multimodality, community reflection, critical literacy, environmental action

Introduction

The *cordel* is a multimodal instructional strategy that invites students into a topic, such as environmental justice or water rights. This approach activates and builds students' individual and collective background knowledge by presenting a variety of related artifacts along a string or *cordel*. The roots of this practice trace back to northeastern Brazil, where vendors would hang chapters or passages from books in marketplaces to attract potential buyers. These vendors often drew crowds by performing these snippets. The *cordel* allowed artists to directly work with the community, bypassing traditional gatekeepers like publishers and reviewers. Over time, this simple yet effective method of displaying narratives and artifacts has been adapted for use in the classroom (Landay & Wootton, 2012; Slater, 1982).

In the classroom, the *cordel* serves as a powerful tool to frame a unit. Before beginning a topic, educators curate a collection of materials related to the subject such as photographs, maps, timelines, infographics, book excerpts, artwork, and even QR codes linking to songs. These artifacts are hung along a string, allowing students to explore them at their own pace and in any order. As Whitmore and colleagues (2020) noted, this creates a museum-like experience that encourages curiosity and personal engagement. Students then reflect on the artifacts, sharing their insights, personal connections, or questions, either in small groups or as a class. An extension to the *cordel* can be once students have explored a topic over a number of days or weeks; the *cordel* can be rehung, this time showcasing students' own work (i.e. artifacts, ideas, and reflections) alongside the original materials. This second iteration positions students' contributions within the broader field of study, fostering a sense of ownership and accomplishment. The *cordel* can be shared with the class or even extended to the broader school community, such as other grades, administrators, or local community members, creating an opportunity to celebrate and share students' learning.

As educators and researchers working outside of Brazil, we approach the *cordel* with deep respect for its cultural and historical roots in northeastern Brazil, where it has long served as a grassroots medium for sharing stories, poetry, and political commentary. We recognize that *cordel literatura* is not simply a teaching tool, but a rich social and cultural practice with deep ties to community identity, resistance, and oral tradition (Slater, 1982). While we are not part of the communities that created or sustained this tradition, we engage with the *cordel* as a model of community-centered storytelling and multimodal expression. In adapting it for classroom use, we do so with care, aiming to honor its participatory spirit and to invite students into similarly reflective, justice-oriented engagements with text, image, and voice.



Figure 1. An image of the cordel set up in Erica's literacy methods course.

Instructional Sequence

Over the past four years, Lauren and Erica have used the *cordel* to introduce preservice teachers to the concept of being a good ancestor, encouraging them to explore literacy learning through the lens of environmental justice and land stewardship. In addition to using this practice with preservice teachers, Lauren has also applied it with elementary students on a variety of topics related to environmental education. The image below (Figure 2) provides an overview of how Lauren has used the *cordel* in her course to introduce the topic of being a good ancestor.

Instructional Sequence: The Launch



Start with Student Stories

Quick Write:
Students reflect on a core memory about being in, thinking about, or engaging with nature or the environment. Students then share their personal narratives in small groups.



Interactive Read Aloud

Introduce Unit Theme:
Using the story *Be A Good Ancestor* (Prince & Prince, 2022), Lauren introduces the unit's main inquiry how can we be good ancestors to our earth, pulling on Indigenous perspectives of stewardship.



Cordel

Build Background:
Students then view the cordel at their own pace. Local newspaper articles, book excerpts (previews of what they'll read) and infographics are hung along a string for students to explore and find connections.



Class or Small Group Discussion

Connect:
In small groups, students discuss artifacts that stuck out to them or surprised them. At times, students go up to the cordel and removes pieces to look at more closely with their peers. This discussion adds to building communal understanding.

Figure 2. An illustrated diagram of Lauren's instructional sequence in her Reading Methods course.

Creating A Cordel

When creating the *cordel*, there is no formula or one way of selecting artifacts. As we have curated materials over the years, we have always considered which pieces will invite critique, hope, and action. We aim for a balanced selection, ensuring that students leave feeling hopeful while also recognizing opportunities for real change. The process of creating a *cordel* is both creative and investigative. Figure 3 provides tips and a QR code that links to a handout to help you curate your *cordel*.

Tips For Your Creation of a Cordel

Brainstorm. Make a web or list of various themes, perspectives, voices, items, and places.

Get Local. Investigate local connections

Hope. Ensure there is a mix of optimism & hope in addition to places that foster critique.

Read & Select Passages from your larger text set.

Investigate Supplemental Materials. Look for primary sources, statistics, maps, headlines, photographs, ect.

Lay It Out. look at the artifacts collectively.

Scan Me For A Handout



Figure 3. Tips for how to create the cordel

In a time marked by digital misinformation, algorithm-driven content, and the erasure of climate truths from public discourse, the tactile, community-oriented nature of the *cordel* offers learners an analogue form of storytelling grounded in relationality, care, and critical engagement. Returning to print-based, participatory texts like the *cordel* invites students to slow down, reflect, and co-construct meaning in ways that resist the speed and disposability of much digital content.

At a Glance

Title	<i>Cordel</i> as a Multimodal Launch for Environmental Action
Unit Time	30 - 45 minutes
Grade Level(s)	ECE to adult
Core Text	<i>Be A Good Ancestor</i> , by Gabriella & Leona Prince
Supporting Texts	Other multimodal texts that support the goals of the unit (linked to climate literacy)
Climate Literacy Terms	Will be based on the subject of the <i>cordel</i>
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build and activate prior knowledge through an arts-based shared experience around environmental stewardship.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer a breadth of knowledge and entry points and foster rich discussions and future collective action.
Materials and Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a clothesline cord (15–25 feet); • clothespins (about two per artifact) • selected artifacts printed on lightweight paper for easy hanging (~20-50)

Adaptations for Different Spaces

The *cordel* is a highly engaging experience that supports students in learning expansively about a topic in an interactive way. The above steps were delineated in planning and implementing a *cordel*. We also provide a frame for considering how to make a *cordel* work in various learning contexts and learning spaces, such as online and hybrid learning, as well as adaptations for young learners (Figure 4).

Digital Adpatations

The *cordel* is a highly interactive experience. However, depending on learning spaces, it can also be adapted for online and hybrid classrooms to ensure high engagement and participation while accommodating the learning environment. We have done this in higher education with hybrid and asynchronous learning formats. The figure below provides initial guidance on how to make this work in a digital space. One key to highlight in any adaptations is how learners are encouraged to engage with one another in the learning and how they are invited to connect with and talk with and to the content in the *cordel*. The emphasis on multimodality can be elevated in the digital learning space. The interactions can and should also be multimodal and include audio responses, annotations, digital stickies, and the utilization of various digital tools and platforms.

Adapting Cordel for Digital Learning

- **Accessibility and Preparation:**
 - Provide multimodal resources from the Cordel in both print and digital formats to support learners' engagement with the learning structure.
 - Record a short video for online or asynchronous students and highlight what Cordel looks like in person. This is also beneficial for envisioning the collaborative nature and prompting their experience with the digital Cordel as a collective resource.
- **Utilize Interactive Digital Tools:**
 - Use platforms like Padlet and/or Canva for a collaborative cordel across contexts, promoting real-time engagement and inclusivity across modalities.
 - Promote multiple ways to engage with the digital data during viewing.
 - As learners make comments and asides while viewing, creating space for easy notes/annotations while viewing online is also helpful in promoting community.
- **Facilitate Structured Breakout Sessions:**
 - Dependent on the connectivity and sound, connect both in-person and online students in breakout groups to encourage blended collaboration, with clear instructions to guide group work.
 - This allows learners to focus on their multimodal experiences and blend the learning community.
- **Offer Multimodal Feedback Options:**
 - Incorporate live feedback and asynchronous discussions to accommodate different participation styles and enhance reflective learning.
- **Encourage Real-World Reflection:**
 - Use digital journals or discussion boards for students to reflect on how the cordel can be applied to teaching critical topics like environmental justice.

Figure 4. Tips for using a cordel in a digital or hybrid learning environment

Adaptations for Young Learners

Young learners may not yet access conventional print and require adaptations for the *cordel* content and interactive responses. Before you begin, consider the purpose and focus of your *cordel*. What responses do you hope to elicit? Plan with these in mind. In planning for young children, you can begin by reflecting on their strengths and drawing on genres/modes that suit their strengths. For example, if young children are highly engaged in songs and rhymes, have audio experiences playing while they engage in the *cordel* print materials. Or, if students are drawn to art, seek out representations of art across modalities that can be shown in images to communicate various perspectives and voices. It is also strongly encouraged to use text formats familiar to young people, such as picturebooks and environmental print. It is also highly recommended that young learners have interactive elements of the *cordel*. For example, use sensory resources, lift the flap content, and other strategies that help children engage holistically and across their senses with the content. The engagement should also be more scaffolded and be broken into multiple passes. For responses, have students pick their favorite piece and why, use stickers to ‘annotate’ the various pieces, and follow up by creating their class *cordel* with multimodal materials, oral stories, and drama.

References

- Landay, E., & Wootton, K. (2012). *A reason to read: Linking literacy and the arts*. Harvard Education Press.
- Prince, L., & Prince, G. (2022). *Be a good ancestor* (Illus. Carla Joseph). Orca Book Publishers.
- Slater, C. (1982). *Stories on a string: The Brazilian literatura de cordel*. University of California Press.
- Whitmore, K. F., Chisholm, J. S., & Fletcher, L. (2020). Fostering, activating, and curating: Approaching books about social injustices with the arts. *Language Arts*, 98(1), 7-18.