

Transgressions: Teaching According to 'bell hooks'

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Joel Haack, and Scharron Clayton

bell hooks (always written in lower-case) is the pseudonym—or, perhaps more correctly, the writing persona—of Gloria Watkins, Distinguished Professor of English at City College in New York. hooks is a prolific and eclectic writer of a number of books on feminism, racism, pedagogy, Black intellectual life and popular culture. She has also published two autobiographical works.

The work of bell hooks is informed by her experience as a young, Southern girl whose early education was seen as a political act. hooks notes that, for her early teachers, instructing young Black children in an all Black school was about the struggle against racism; it was the practice of freedom. School integration, she discovered, moved her away from education as emancipation and into education as the amassing of information.

hooks decries education that merely amasses facts and figures. Her critique continually challenges

us to think about the political effects of education. What, she asks, does it mean to participate in a real democratic culture, in which different voices and opinions struggle together to create justice and equality?

In one of her books, *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks notes: "To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries."¹

Taking hooks' suggestion seriously, the four of us, faculty from three colleges on the University of Northern Iowa campus, engaged in a dialogue about whether and in what ways the critical pedagogy proposed by hooks was at work in our own classrooms.

Despite the differences in our disciplinary training and professional experience—Susan Hill in religion, Scharron Clayton, philosophy and religion, Linda Fitzgerald, education, Joel Haack, mathematics—we discovered that hooks'

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understanding of education was relevant. Indeed, we were all struck by her analysis of the traditional role of the teacher and her critiques of traditional teaching methods that suggest that the student task is to memorize and regurgitate information.²

Such insights lead hooks to speak often—and eloquently—about diversity, multiculturalism, gender, race and class, those issues given much lip-service in recent years, and all too simply dismissed as “politically correct.”

Her views on multiculturalism and diversity provide the key to understanding why hooks can speak to all of us who are learners—whether we are teachers or students.

hooks doesn't advocate a simple multiculturalism—add women and color and stir—but, rather, speaks passionately for the creation of communities that struggle to understand the effects of power, the social construction of knowledge and identity, the meaning of education, and the need for social and cultural change.

She challenges her readers, perhaps uncomfortably so, to question and challenge authority.

Questioning authority gets at the heart of a liberatory, democratic education. The only way that teachers can think about making the world a better place, says hooks, is

to fully understand the kinds of authority—both good and bad—that we wield with our students.

One of the issues that hooks' work raised for us was the question of who we are in the classroom.

In this essay, we reflect on our own pedagogical practices, and consider the ways in which hooks' work informs our understanding of teaching and learning. What we have come to believe is that, while teaching to transgress sometimes leads to discomfort for both teachers and students, in that uneasiness lies the comfort of knowing that the transgressive classroom is one in which everyone learns.

For Susan Hill, hooks' idea about teaching dovetailed with many theological issues.

For instance, if we remember that the event that precipitated Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden was eating the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, then challenging students to cross boundaries—to sin in order to learn—is unsettling, at best.

Certainly, this is true in a religious studies context, where exploring the ways religion shapes individual and cultural attitudes and practices can conflict with religious commitments.

Also unsettling is hooks' con-

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tention that the traditional model of the teacher as authority figure is based on a mind/body dualism, where the teacher is a disembodied mind in the classroom. Thinking of ourselves only as mind, notes hooks, is precisely what blocks the possibility of challenging the existing structures of education.

She writes:

The traditional arrangement of the body we are talking about deemphasizes the reality that professors are in the classroom to offer something of ourselves to the students. The erasure of the body encourages us to think that we are listening to neutral, objective facts, facts that are not particular to who is sharing the information. We are invited to teach information as though it does not emerge from bodies.

Significantly, those of us who are trying to critique biases in the classroom have been compelled to return to the body to speak about ourselves as subjects in history. We are all subjects in history.

We must return ourselves to a state of embodiment in order to deconstruct the way power has been traditionally orchestrated in the classroom, denying subjectivity to some groups and according it to others. By recognizing subjectivity and the limits

of identity, we disrupt that objectification that is so necessary in a culture of domination.³

For hooks, creating a classroom where the students know they are learning a particular story coming from a real person opens up the possibility for critical thinking. This approach allows students to question professors and encourages professors to join their students in the learning process.

This is transgression at its best: sinning to cross traditional boundaries, sinning to learn. Transgressing these boundaries has challenged Hill to take more personal risks in her teaching. She notes:

I try very hard in my humanities class to encourage us all to think about the connections between history and real life, constantly to bring home to my students that there are a myriad of possible stories they could be learning and that they are learning the story I wish to tell. In the best of all possible teaching worlds, they would create their own stories, too.

In my 'Women and Christianity' class, the first assignment is to sketch out what we think about and what we've been taught about Eve, the Virgin

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Mary, and Mary Magdalen, the three most important women in the Christian tradition.

Every semester, I complete this assignment—and others—with my students, so that I reflect on my own relationship to Christianity as a woman. Sharing my experiences with my students encourages them to reflect on their own experiences in a way that listening to a lecture simply cannot.

Scharron Clayton is also concerned with the mind/body split in the traditional classroom.

As an African-American professor teaching, for the most part, white students, the constant challenge is to engage students in learning about a subject which most of them would prefer just to observe: African-American life.

The fact that most of these students know very little about African-American life doesn't necessarily mean that they lack opinions, experiences, and attitudes toward the subject of African Americans.

The challenge for Clayton is "to liberate the elite and privileged among us."

Notes Clayton:

As I am centered in my life, I invite students to join me in the center of the content and look

outward through different lenses. This cannot be accomplished if they view me or African-Americans as an object of study.

Rather, I first have to allow time for them to view themselves as subjects and realize that they are subjects ... that they are a subjective part of a privileged group of people—white America. And that I, too, am a subject, a subject who is of African heritage and black.

For Clayton, recognizing the subjectiveness of the positions taken on various issues by her and her students allows for a free and open exploration of the course content. She notes:

I am challenged by students who are uncertain of their voices. Some have never used them in an ethnically diverse environment, or even among their families. I am constantly aware of the newness of the information that students are reading, and I am encouraged by the inquiry which forces us to reflect on contemporary issues.

And, I am sincerely encouraged by the fact that students select the course and become more aware and conscious of the relationship of history to struc-

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tures and attitudes in today's society.

For Clayton, hooks' work provides a radical pedagogy that insists that everyone's presence is recognized and valued. These ideas speak to her longing for a learning community in the academy in which voices are heard and bodies are recognized.

As students become engaged, they begin to question the structures of social reality and their assumptions about it. Once this occurs, the professor is no longer seen as the beginning or end of students' learning, but rather as a catalyst for their continued reflection and questioning of the phenomena around them. Clayton's behavior in the classroom reflects her desire to learn more and share—always with an open mind—even though she has political beliefs and social realities that differ from most of her students.

Being willing to push students into difficult reflection, even to the point of discomfort, also characterizes Linda Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald uses hooks' insights about teaching to prepare early childhood educators for child care and education settings that are increasingly diverse. This diversity manifests itself not only in class, ethnicity, and gender but also in the special

needs that children have in classrooms, such as different rates of development and different ways of knowing and learning.

Taking literally a professional development statement—"Students and professionals should be involved in the planning and design of their professional development program"⁴—she began a new position by radically changing her own practice.

I came to class on the first day with a one-page syllabus and invited the students to join me in constructing the rest of the syllabus. But I soon discovered that giving that much freedom so fast was like releasing a deep sea diver from the pressure of the depths of the ocean—the students got the bends, and some thought they were going to die for sure.

My commitment to dialogue allowed me to hear their suggestions for providing more structure. My anthropological training helped me discover that I needed to start with and respect the cultural mores of my new university in order to build a base of trust.

The students needed this base of familiar ways before they would risk departing from the unauthentic models of education

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they were used to and comfortable with.

New teachers, Fitzgerald, notes, need to learn how to cross boundaries and set up two-way communication with many different types of families: same-sex parents, substance-abusing parents, homeless and low-income and teen parents, parents who speak a different language or dialect.

Fitzgerald hopes to help preservice teachers discover ways across these boundaries, before having to enter their own classrooms.

Students must become passionate constructors of their own knowledge and creators of their own communities. Building community is recognizing the value of each individual voice and letting go of the instructor's privileged position in the classroom. And when each voice can be raised, there will be conflict. As bell hooks points out, the classroom may not be safe and harmonious.

In many teacher education classrooms, powerful mores work against passionate engagement that might lead to conflict. But when truly engaged minds wrestle, the clash of views and cultures can inspire a solution more powerful than any one viewpoint alone.

Such interpersonal conflict may not be as germane to mathematics,

but the frustration and anxiety in learning math is a major concern for Joel Haack.

The body of hooks' work can indeed speak to an "apolitical" discipline like math, notes Haack, though addressing the issues she raises often requires a more conscious effort.

For Haack, mathematics is more of an art form with occasional scientific, business, or other practical applications. Many of the developments in modern mathematics, he points out, concern topics of no "practical" significance.

He notes:

My own area of research is noncommutative rings whose categories of modules admit a functorial duality. My ability to discover new theorems in this context contributed significantly to my promotions and tenure. It is amazing and I am privileged to live in a society in which I am valued for doing this.

Haack became interested in the application of hooks' thinking to mathematics because she seemed to recognize the politics involved in mathematics.

For example, some mathematics curricula include exercises that assume social knowledge some students simply do not have, or preclude alternative answers and approaches.

The reform movement in calculus encourages creative thinking, problem solving, and communication.

In other cases, disadvantaged youths can be shunted into educational tracks that neither encourage nor allow them to pursue algebra in high school, leaving them unprepared for further study or even entry-level jobs.

At a time when even factory workers need high school trigonometry, some high school graduates who haven't been taught this math are locked out of the jobs they expected to find.

There have been attempts to deal with these problems. The Algebra Project of Robert Moses, a program developed to encourage disadvantaged youth to persist in mathematics, is a response to a subtle form of discrimination in some school systems.⁶

Also relevant here is the reform in the teaching of calculus that has occurred over the past ten years. This new approach encourages creative thinking, problem solving, and communication on the part of the students. It uses available technology and motivates students via "real-life" problems from their own experiences.

Most critically, reform calculus includes an exploration of alternative teaching, learning, and assessment styles. More students can succeed in the study of calculus, because a variety of learning styles are being addressed. Learning occurs cooperatively, not just com-

petitively. The availability of technology also makes an allowance for those who would have been handicapped by a poor algebraic background.

Reform calculus gives students the responsibility for learning, but recognizes that this responsibility is legitimate only when combined with the teacher's responsibility for setting the stage for student learning.

Of course, adjusting to a new teaching style is difficult for both students and teachers. Students already have a concept of what is expected of them in a typical mathematics lesson even at grade 2.⁷

Change is even more difficult for instructors. We find that several years of encouragement, support and reflection are required to make permanent changes in classrooms, whether in primary grades or in college.

What hooks suggests in regard to multicultural education applies to mathematics as well: "Many teachers are disturbed by the political implications of a multicultural education because they fear losing control in a classroom where there is no one way to approach a subject—only multiple ways and multiple references."⁸

Mathematics teacher educators are well aware that change in the classroom is accompanied by the

discomfort of losing control. Mathematics classrooms taught in the context of open inquiry are unpredictable. Teachers cannot know in advance where student exploration will lead. Often students will ask questions that the teacher cannot answer authoritatively.

For Haack, it is precisely the risks that both teachers and students have to take that makes the mathematics classroom a dynamic place of learning.

As the experiences of all four of us have shown, the risks that bell hooks invites us to experience do take us out of our safety zones as teachers, and they will inevitably

challenge our students in ways that they may not—at least at the beginning—enjoy.

Taking those risks may mean the classroom is no longer an entirely comfortable place; it may even appear chaotic. But, if we have learned anything from discussing hooks' work and attempting to put her ideas into practice, it is that learning is sometimes messy. We have reconfirmed for ourselves that learning may be painful, but it can also be fun—both for us and our students.

May all our classrooms contain the kind of chaos in which learning occurs! ■

Endnotes

- ¹ bell hooks. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, (New York: Routledge, 1994): 130.
- ² *Ibid.*, 5, 40.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 139.
- ⁴ National Association for the Education of Young Children. "Early Childhood Professional Development: A Position Statement," *Young Children* 49, no. 3, (1993): 75.
- ⁵ V. Polakow. *Lives on the Edge: Single Mothers and Their Children in the Other America*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.)
- ⁶ M. Klonsky, "Math Reform=Changing Habits," *Catalyst* 2, no. 8, 5, 1991.
- ⁷ J.B. Lester. "Establishing a Community of Mathematics Learners," In *What's Happening in the Math Class? Envisioning New Practices through Teacher Narratives*, ed. D. Schifter. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996): 88-102.
- ⁸ hooks, 35.

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