

The Continued Relevance Of ‘Teaching To Transgress: Education As The Practice Of Freedom’

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ABSTRACT

In 1994, bell hooks’ work, Teaching to Transgress - Education as the Practice of Freedom was first published and this work re-examines it for its intent to counter the devaluation of teaching and on the basis that it addresses the urgent need for changes in teaching practices. Because of the intransience of racism and the various “isms” that are part of our everyday culture, hooks’ work remains relevant, particularly for those who find themselves in the position of the lone soldier in the war to effect equitable system change – forever conspiring and scheming in order to accomplish equity in education. This re-examination of hooks’ work is also offered to those who face “disempowered collective backlash” (p.31) - backtracking, ostracization and belittlement designed to dissuade paradigm shifts. It is offered to individuals who are seeking ‘freedom’ – individuals who are seeking to define and contextualize their experiences, their struggle, and to those trying to cope with a society eager to return to an age of narrow nationalism, isolationisms and xenophobia (p.28). And finally, this work is for those who are seeking to teach their children, their students, how to transgress - how to confront a culture of domination with a “lack of meaningful access to truth” (p.29) and which “necessarily promotes an addiction to lying and denial” (p.29).

“Teaching to Transgress” is a strategy that suggests revolution and speaks to ones determination, strength and commitment. It is a strategy that casts the ‘teacher’ and the student recipient of the teachings, in the role of revolutionaries - agents of change. “Education as the Practice of Freedom” speaks to the need to pursue, as a ‘professional business’, the job of freeing oneself from oppression - one should ‘practice’ or ‘work at’ critically examining our world and our experiences on a local and global level.

Keywords: Social Antagonisms; Social Amnesia; Pedagogy of Resistance; Self-Actualization

INTRODUCTION

Born, Gloria Watkins, bell hooks, author of the book, “Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom” developed her ‘practice’ at various private colleges in the United States. hooks comes from what she refers to as a non-materially privileged background - the working poor - and attended Stanford University where she felt objectified and devalued by individuals who would ask her repeatedly whether she were there “on scholarship”. This question of whether she attended the university due to a scholarship implied for her a desire to know her as poor, unworthy and underachieving. In order to address such racist, stereotypical and oppressive views, hooks outlines, from a Black radical feminist standpoint, a theory of action that empowers and transforms and says (as paraphrased below):

1. Understand the reality you seek to transform.
2. Let the act of helping become free from the distortion in which the helper dominates the helped.
3. Our lives, our work must be an example of critical reflections, changes in thought, and a willingness to face shortcomings.

4. Embrace contradictions as part of what one struggles to change - it is a protracted struggle.
5. Recognize the fact that there could never be an absolute set agenda governing teaching practices. Agendas have to be flexible.
6. Excitement can co-exist with, and even stimulate, serious intellectual and/or academic engagement.
7. Excitement is generated through collective effort.
8. Teaching in a 'diverse' community requires not only a shift in paradigms, but also in the way we think, write and speak.
9. The engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute, but always changing - evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself.
10. Speak differently to diverse audiences. Choose the way of speaking that is informed by the particularity and uniqueness of to and with whom we are speaking.
11. Teaching is a performative act that calls everyone to become more engaged; individuals are called to be active participants, not to be a spectacle or a show.
12. Our strategies as teachers must constantly be changed, invented and reconceptualized.
13. Approach students with the will and desire to respond to their unique beings, even if the situation does not allow the full emergence of a relationship based on mutual recognition.
14. Believe that to teach is to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students.
15. Acknowledge that we are living in a culture of domination and ask yourself what values and habits of being most reflect a commitment to freedom. Also, ask what public and private rituals do we engage in, which help maintain the culture of domination and an 'unfree' world.
16. Link confessional narratives to academic discussions so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material.
17. Acknowledge that the education most of us received and are giving is not and is never politically neutral.
18. Surrender the need for 'immediate affirmation' and accept that students may not appreciate the value of a certain standpoint or process straight away.
19. Realize that in the classroom where there is respect for individual voices, there is infinitely more critical feedback because students do feel free to talk and to 'talk back'.
20. Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives, but who are themselves unwilling to share, are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive. Sharing eliminates the possibility of functioning as all-knowing, silent interrogators.
21. Remember there will be many 'resisting' students who will not want the classroom to differ in any way from the 'norm'.
22. The politics of racism, sexism, and heterosexism, inform our actions - inform how we teach.
23. Some folks think that everyone who supports cultural diversity wants to replace one dictatorship of knowing with another.
24. Examine critically the way you, as a teacher, conceptualize what the space for learning should be like.
25. Allow for shifts in relations where we won't necessarily see the 'comforting melting pot' idea of cultural diversity - the rainbow coalition.
26. Note that when we try to make culture an undisturbed space of harmony and agreement, where social relations exist within cultural forms of uninterrupted accords, we subscribe to a form of social amnesia in which we forget that all knowledge is forged in histories that are played out in the field of social antagonisms.

TEACHING TO TRANSGRESS BEFORE AND AFTER DESEGREGATION

hooks shares her experiences at her all-Black grade school and reflects that before desegregation, teaching was fundamentally political and rooted in antiracist struggle. Indeed there appeared to be a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance that was profoundly anti-colonial and teachers demonstrated a 'messianic zeal' that is sadly lacking in many of today's teachers - a zeal to know and transform young minds (p.2, 3). hooks notes, as do various researchers in the field of education, that when this 'zeal' is shown in our schools, students who feel alienated and excluded gain a sense of purpose and determination. hooks talks of hearing echoes of her parents through her teachers' voices as they tell her that she deserves to do well; that academic success is achievable, but that it will be necessary for her to try three times harder than her white counterparts. Research has shown that racialized and

minoritized students respond to this type of encouragement and politicizing with an increased sense of self. When individuals from historically marginalized and oppressed groups attend schools where they are regarded as objects of scorn and ridicule and not subjects with unique perspectives and promise, they cannot or rarely excel. hooks identifies many racially integrated schools as “places where too much eagerness to learn could easily be seen as a threat to white authority”. As a consequence, underachieving Black youth could then be said to be reacting to such a stance as they employ a culture of resistance that rejects the definitions of success imposed on them by a dominant minority culture. Oppositional behaviors, such as “acting out”, adopting styles of dress which conflict with dominant cultural norms, use of language, and sometimes violence, may be interpreted as practices of resistance. Although such actions may contribute to further marginalization and victimization they can be attributed to attempts to assert the marginalized perspective and subvert dominant norms and values.

Today it remains that most students are taught in classrooms where styles of teachings still reflect (despite antiracist workshops and programs) the notion of a single norm of thought and experience, which is encouraged to be viewed and accepted as universal. “Obedience and not a zealous will to learn” (p.3) appears to be what is expected in classrooms where diversity is viewed as a threat and where students are being trained to enter the service sector of the economy. In various research reports on the streamed advanced, general and basic level classrooms, discipline and order seem to be the focus rather than the independence and creativity that is encouraged in the ‘enriched’, ‘gifted’ or “honors’ classes. Many lessons by predominantly white staff still reinforce racist stereotypes and have no relation to the lives of individuals outside that group. hooks tells us that students from marginal groups are made to feel that they must prove themselves to be the equal of whites – and thus become “clones” or “carbon copies”, yet they hope that the knowledge they receive will enrich and enhance them. They want an education that is healing to the uninformed, unknowing spirit. They want knowledge that is meaningful.

SELF-ACTUALIZATION AND THE BANKING SYSTEM OF EDUCATION

As an undergraduate and graduate student, bell hooks says that the vast majority of her professors lacked basic communication skills and were not self-actualized. She writes that, “the objectification of the teacher within bourgeois educational structures seemed to denigrate notions of wholeness and uphold the idea of a mind/body split, one that promotes and supports compartmentalization” (p.16). In fact, there appears to be a mind/body split as emotionally unstable individuals, threatened by students who seek processes that help them in their struggle for self-actualization, complain that students want classes to be “encounter groups” (p.19). Educators are often unable to “conceptualize how the classroom will look when they are confronted with the demographics which indicate that “whiteness” may cease to be the norm ethnicity in classroom settings on all levels (p.41). Educators may be poorly prepared to actually confront diversity but cannot deny, though many try, that students have experiences that are relevant to the learning process. Educators may evaluate student experiences as limited, raw, unfruitful or worse, but varied experiences cannot be denied. Professors or teachers (and hooks uses these terms interchangeably) cannot empower students to embrace diversities of experience, standpoint, behavior or style if their training has empowered or socialized them, to only cope effectively with a single mode of interaction based on middle-class values (p.187). As teachers strive to be self-actualized, rather than attempting to use the classroom as a “platform for opportunistic concerns” (p.12), they are better able to see the reciprocal nature of teaching and learning. They are also more likely to seek to infuse a potentially disruptive excitement into the atmosphere of seriousness - especially in higher education.

Education as the practice of freedom allows “educulturalists” – those who are “conditioned but conscious of the conditioning” (Bullen, 2008, p.223) - to contemplate, explore, manipulate and critically analyze our world; it is an ever-changing process. bell hooks points out that many of the issues of “low self-esteem, intensified nihilism and despair, repressed rage and violence that destroys physical and psychological well-being cannot be addressed by survival strategies that have worked in the past” (p.67). Educators and other school officials must address the pain that all forms of domination (homophobia, class exploitation, racism, sexism, and imperialism) engender before individual complaints are lodged (p.74). hooks admits that the work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator, brought her to the recognition of the subject position of those most disenfranchised - those who suffer the gravest weight of oppressive forces (p.53). Freire challenges the “banking system” of education or approach to learning that is rooted in the notion that all students need to do is consume information, memorize, store it, and not question it. In this way, oppressed individuals learn to adapt to the structure of domination in which they are immersed. They become

resigned and inhibited from engaging in the struggle for freedom, truth and/or justice, incapable of taking risks and afraid of repression against themselves and possibly their families. These attitudes are all too often evident in parents who do not advocate for their children because of feelings of powerlessness and fear of increased repression. They are also evident in students who are leery of complaining or filing grievances against an educator for fear that if the individual or her/his colleagues find out, they would be further downgraded and/or abused. Unfortunately, systemic change will only come about if and when individuals recognize the need to work and fight for it.

There is excitement at learning a political language to articulate the need for resistance. For students there is enthusiasm that can be developed as a result of finding ones 'voice' within the classroom context, particularly for those who experience the privileged position, sometimes for the first time, of being accorded the "authority of experience". This unique mixture of experiential and analytical ways of knowing is a privileged standpoint that emerges from the "passion of experience" - a particular knowledge that comes from suffering - from feelings so heavy, at times, that it keeps us from "reaching the mountaintop" (p.92) and from achieving our goals. Indeed, sometimes we are forced to let go of these feelings in order to survive. Through the sharing of a "passion of remembrance", hooks credits fiction writers, like Alice Walker and Ntozake Shange, for stimulating fierce critical debate in diverse Black communities about gender and feminism (p.125) and thus assisting her growth in those areas. She is honest as she speaks about her own personal transitions and gives oppressed individuals opportunities to feel validated as she writes of the lack of institutional awards that may be accorded white professionals but denied individuals from racialized and minoritized groups. She acknowledges that historically, shared understanding of particular experiences do not necessarily "mediate" relations between individuals, e.g. Black women and white women, since the latter may receive more "currency" from upholding a position of white privilege.

LANGUAGE AS RESISTANCE

bell hooks speaks in a language that the average reader can understand and she tells us she does so deliberately. Her work has an appeal beyond the walls of academia and touches many at a grass roots level. For those who find aspects of her work 'too scholarly', she would, no doubt, say that the student should not expect or be expected to understand everything within a lesson. She expresses this well when she says, "we must think of the moment of not understanding what someone says as a 'space to learn'" (p.172), and this is particularly crucial in our diverse society which remains white supremacist and which uses standard English as a weapon to silence and censor. Language, she points out, can be claimed as a site of resistance as evidenced by the broken English, the Patois, amongst enslaved and colonized peoples, that created an intimate speech that could say far more than was permissible within the boundaries of 'standard' English. The subversive power of this speech today, however, can be undermined by those who imitate it in ways that suggest that it is the speech of those who are stupid or who are only interested in entertaining or being funny (p.171). Taking the oppressor's language and turning it against itself is truly an act of resistance and self-empowerment. As an individual born in the Caribbean and raised in Canada, this author, like bell hooks, knows the experience of giving passion to words by speaking in vernacular in order to do more than "simply mirror or address the dominant reality" (p.175). Most students are not comfortable exercising this right to free speech since bourgeois values create a censoring process that 'over determine' social behavior and undermine the democratic exchange of ideas. Such students become, or may be viewed as, 'elective mutes' and this silence (or rather, enforced silence) is often sanctioned and seen as appropriate. Indeed, it takes courage, as bell hooks points out, to "embrace a wholeness of being" that does not reinforce the capitalist viewpoint that suggests that one must always give something up to gain another (p.183).

CONCLUSION

"Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom" is work that challenges us by demonstrating the importance of engaged pedagogy, a revolution of values, embracing change, becoming familiar with the works of other revolutionary teachers, such as Paulo Freire, and thinkers, such as Abraham Maslow. It challenges us to examine theory as liberatory practice, to note the difference between essentialism and experience, to show solidarity with feminist female and male thinkers and Black scholars in order to build a teaching community with new words that confront class in the classroom, and finally, to acknowledge the eroticism and ecstasy which is derived from the process of teaching and learning without limits. Yet, there is much in this work by bell hooks that remains unexplored by this author and much that could be explored in more detail for years to come. Her

information about the historically rooted relationship between Black men and white women needs more exploration, as do ideas of patriarchal manhood and the notion of family and home as a place where sexist roles are upheld as a stabilizing tradition. Her ideas of the alienation suffered by the teacher who brings ‘excitement’ and the desire to transgress into the classroom needs more exploration as well as the professional jealousy directed toward the teacher who is often ‘loved’ by her/his students. This is a book with a wealth of information about inequality. It is also a book of hope and remains a “must have” for the personal libraries of would be or revolutionary thinkers and activist educators.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dr. Pauline E. Bullen currently holds the position of Assistant Professor, at Brooklyn College, City University of New York and is a contributing author in the 2004 work entitled, “Identifying Race and Transforming Whiteness in the Classroom” and the 2008 work, “Undoing Whiteness in the Classroom: Critical Educultural Approaches for Social Justice Activism”. Her book on *speaking about race and racism from within academia* has been accepted for publication by the University of Toronto, Canada, Press. Her research interests are race, class and gender studies with an emphasis on Black feminist, anti-racism and critical race theories. E-mail: pbullen@brooklyn.cuny.edu

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Notes

Black with a capital “B”: In this study I use the term Black with an initial capital letter “B” as it was used in the 1986 work by Bhagiyadatta and Brand entitled, “Rivers Have Sources, Trees Have Roots: Speaking of Racism”. Black is given an initial capital to stress a common heritage, a cultural and personal identity proudly claimed by Black people who assert their African origins (p. iii).

NOTES