

## Teaching to Transgress in Secondary Classrooms

This is an investigative dialogue between myself, Christina, and Ms. Kompson, the aspiring engaged pedagogue. Before hearing the voices of John Dewey, Paolo Freire, Nell Noddings, or bell hooks, I was shown that students flourish when teachers care about the development of the student's mind, body, and spirit. Most recently, bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* offered a framework for understanding the political nature of this fundamental concept. In my attempt to form a coherent pedagogy, I struggled to connect the authentically student-centered educational ideals espoused by these great thinkers and the instructional methods common in secondary classrooms that often fall short of them. Giving voice to these struggles is a start toward teaching to transgress racist, classist, and sexist structures embedded in North American educational systems.

Christina:

You were shocked by the freshness of bell hooks' ideas and experiences in *Teaching to Transgress*, a book published twenty-three years ago. Can you speak to this surprise and illuminate its significance in your understanding of our contemporary assumptions about education?

Ms. Kompson:

Well, I do try to reflect on that which surprises since it tends to indicate a gap in understanding. I finished the book three months after receiving it in my Anti-Discrimination class: our professor passed around *Teaching to Transgress* as a supplementary reading but I was the only student interested taking the time to read it. I couldn't sleep once I finished because I felt that hooks had just explained to me the source of many of my frustrations with and criticisms of the current education system in the United States and Canada. hooks wrote *Teaching to Transgress* a year after I was born, yet the educational landscape remains relatively unchanged since that time.

While bell hooks' name is recognizable and influential in university classroom settings, her notions of the shared responsibility of "engaged pedagogy" do not seem to be well understood by practitioners or, indeed, by learners. She says her reaction to the "stress" of

conforming to academic traditions and elitism, coupled with “the ever-present boredom and apathy that pervaded [her] classes was to imagine ways that teaching and the learning experiences could be different” (5). In my Anti-Discrimination class, which is predicated on challenging the political, social, and economic assumptions we bring into the classroom, it became clear that individual teachers might not be open to “different” or “radical” teaching methods. However, I would argue hooks’ radical pedagogy is only deemed as such because it’s infused with explicitly building critical thinking, empathy, and communication skills aimed at challenging and changing the oppressive structures. It’s the change in thinking that is needed before a commitment to changing practice, a train I’m only starting on.

C: So your surprise came from knowing there was a discrepancy between theory and practice, specifically the learner-centered, systems-changing philosophical traditions and the realities informing teachers’ practices?

Ms. K: Right, but also that a language exists for making those connections. Ontario’s Ministry of Education has published a few excellent documents in the past 10 years that encourage equitable assessment and instructional practices in K-12 classrooms. There is a genuine shift in policy toward research-informed, student-centered teaching practices that move toward Dewey’s progressive education, specifically emphasizing student learning habits and interdisciplinary or transferable skills. *Growing Success*, the Ministry’s policy guide on new assessment and evaluation procedures, frames “assessment” and “evaluation” as tools to improve student learning, which is already an important step away from the banking model of education Freire is famous for articulating.

The writers of *Growing Success* argue that student success comes from “strong and energized professional learning communities” and “creative and judicious differentiation in instruction and assessment to meet the needs of all students,” essentially treating students equitably (2). These two descriptions of teacher practice seem to point teachers towards engaged and critical pedagogies by asking for their continued involvement in understanding the learning process. While I expected to find this ongoing engagement in the world of education, hooks’ insistence on the space for critical discussion of social systems is noticeably lacking from educational discourse outside of a few academic circles. She

mentions a similar experience with class and race based feminism in “Theory as Liberatory Practice,” where her engagement with the issue was hindered by a lack of collegial participation. For hooks, being an engaged teacher necessitates this continued dialogue with her students at the personal level and facilitating their development as a learning community. To the extent that teachers are questioning their own practice and actively working on incorporating student choice and voice, hooks’ views are certainly reflected in current assumptions on education. *Growing Success* includes clarifications from the literature on what transparency, fairness, and inclusivity means in an evaluative context, expressing an underlying concern with students’ abilities to demonstrate their learning “regardless of their socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender, geographic location, learning style, and/or need for special services” (8). At times, however, inclusivity in the classroom is limited to reading a poem by a Black or Aboriginal author without discussing the oppressive contexts the work exists in. There’s a tokenistic quality to the engagement rather than a radical one.

C: Can you be more specific about your understanding of the two? Some would argue that an attempt at inclusion isn’t “tokenistic,” but the first step at actualizing an ideal.

Ms. K: Sure, that word may have come off strongly to a teacher who does incorporate authors and ideas outside the Western canon, but what I’m pointing to is the difference between a teacher saying ‘There are diverse students in my class, and I know diverse voices to teach them through these specific texts’ and ‘There are diverse students in my class, so I will structure my class in such a way as to let them explore voices they are interested in and learn skills doing so.’ While both starting points for lesson design can show students a range of diverse voices, one of these methods allows for a more authentic engagement in the students’ development as individual, critical thinkers. Students in the latter class are asked to form their own opinion of an author’s voice, rather than merely reiterate the prescribed “academic” one. Engaged pedagogy, therefore, is about framing the learning process as an interaction between the student and the teacher, just as hooks describes. It’s about the power dynamic and the source of learning.

C: I was hoping you would bring up the power of the power dynamic between teacher and student hooks wove throughout *Teaching to Transgress*. Her discussion with Ron Scapp in “Building a Teaching Community” explores the physicality necessary for maintaining the power dynamic of both teacher-student and body-mind. What assumptions about learning does she take for granted that other educators might not?

Ms. K: It’s clear throughout the book that a teacher’s physical presence in the classroom, and the authoritative traditions associated with “professorship” manifesting themselves in confusing ways, influence student learning. hooks and Scapp discuss the “potential” for interdependent learning teachers offer students when they leave the podium and work with one another. hooks makes her point about the power of physicality in the classroom when she says:

The arrangement of the body we are talking about deemphasizes the reality that professors are in the classroom to offer something of our selves 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 inviting to teach information as though it does not emerge from bodies (139).

While “offering something of ourselves” is not written into curriculums or policy documents as teacher expectations, I think a “creative and judicious” teacher might take that leap, especially with hooks as a guide. Despite this, many classrooms function so as to privilege neutral, objective facts without questioning the biases or assumptions that underlie the supposed “objectivity.” The more a student can mirror the teacher’s understanding of good academic learning in the subject, the better the student does. What falls through the cracks, however, is precisely the grounding in the historical and personal realities of students that hooks points to as the start of progressive, antiracist pedagogies. If my aims in English and History classes are to teach the subjects as thoroughly as possible, then I’m going to ensure my students can see themselves as an *integral part* of those histories rather than passive observers. I can do “work” while still connecting content to those histories. So, to answer your question, hooks assumes that a teacher’s role involves more than transmitting adequate knowledge of content material. It involves transmitting a curiosity about the world and our

complacency in its creation, transmitting the skills needed to be critically engaged in their own lives.

C: In a secondary classroom setting, then, bell hooks and other educational philosophers she draws on might see their role as facilitator for student growth holistically, inspired by content?

Ms. K.: Exactly, and what I'm reading into her work is that this insistence on authority of the professor, on a predetermined outcome of learning, is a "blind spot" in mainstream educational policy and practice. Specifically, hooks for me challenges the assumption that the *direction* the class goes in is completely the work of the teacher. Student absorption of "neutral, objective facts" is not the aim of curricula, and facts can be learned through engaging discussions and activities. The reality of classrooms, however, is that teachers guide students through a set path of content without connecting that body of knowledge to *how* it came to be significant. How it came to be factual. In "Paulo Freire," this rang true when hooks addresses the "anguish" caused by sexist beliefs underlying Freire's work. She calls it "a blind spot in the vision of men who have profound insight" (49). We cannot account for the assumptions that we do not know we hold, and true growth comes from unpacking and understanding the source of the anguish. I did not know how to express the tangible discomfort I felt when teachers inadvertently limited their students' learning. Intervention can be short or long, direct or indirect, but if students can help direct their own learning, those real-world connections won't fall through the woodwork.

C: So for you that meant engaging with students in learning they can take outside of the book or the war they're studying?

Ms. K.: Yes, absolutely. I want to instill a love of learning above a lot else! hooks says in the book's final chapter that "feminist education for critical consciousness is rooted in the assumption that knowledge and critical thought done in the classroom should inform our habits of being and ways of living outside the classroom" (194). Teachers are asked to

assess student responsibility, collaboration, initiative, and self-regulation, but do not give them space to take risks developing those qualities. Engaged pedagogy insists on a commitment to student growth that goes beyond what is demonstrable on a report card.

#### References

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