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How I Learned to Love Teaching: bell hooks and the Possibilities of the Feminist Classroom

Patti Duncan

I first read bell hooks' (1994) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* in the mid-1990s. I was a PhD student in women's and gender studies, teaching introductory courses. During this time, I also volunteered at an Asian community center in Atlanta, where I taught a weekend class to Asian immigrants to prepare them to take the test for United States (U.S.) citizenship. As a mixed-race woman of color and daughter of an Asian immigrant mother, I felt a responsibility to give back to my communities, even while the process of going to college and then working toward a PhD seemed to widen the gaps I felt in relation to my family, community, and upbringing. hooks' words helped me name and begin to critique and resist the isolation, alienation, and oppressive systems that had, up to that point, shaped my experience and the experience of so many others in the academy.

In those years, balancing the teaching of undergraduate students at an elite university with community organizing among Asian immigrants and refugees, I was struck by a sense of disjuncture which has characterized much of my experience in higher education. I would spend most of the week immersed within the conventions of U.S. higher education, structured around academic standards and hierarchies. As a first-generation scholar from a working-class background, I frequently felt like an outsider, constantly—and often unintentionally—transgressing the norms. On weekends, I would be greeted by immigrants from East and Southeast Asia, many of them elders in their 70s and 80s who spoke little English and survived on meager social security checks. While they referred to me as their teacher, I saw my role as one of assisting them with practical survival skills, helping them practice for the test, and navigate life in the U.S. Sometimes, our Saturdays included going grocery shopping, reviewing benefits guidelines, and drafting letters together to appeal denials of health insurance and food stamps. At times, they asked me for help with more personal matters, and a few of them introduced me to their families. The sense of disconnection I felt between these two spaces reminded me of my childhood in an immigrant, multiracial household, constantly moving between the worlds of home and school.

It was hooks' (1981, 1984, 1994) writings, which I first encountered during this time, that inspired me to try to bridge this gap—to acknowledge it and name it and make myself at home in it. *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) offered a framework to teach in ways that engage students as collaborators and co-creators of feminist knowledge production, to dismantle multiple interlocking systems of oppression. Furthermore, hooks based her feminist pedagogy on love and care, often grounded

in making personal connections with our students. While others had written about the impact of gender and race in the college classroom, hooks also explicitly addressed the way class privilege structures the practice of education. Class, hooks (1994) explains—intersecting with gender and race—“was more than just a question of money...it shaped values, attitudes, social relations, and the biases that informed the way knowledge would be given and received” (p. 178). The values and attitudes of those from materially privileged classes are imposed on us all through pedagogical strategies, hooks argued, often resulting in a profound sense of estrangement in university settings for those of us from working class and poor backgrounds. To fit in, many of us are expected to “betray our class origins” (hooks, 1994, p. 182). Rather than assimilate, or be seen as outsiders, hooks pointed to the necessary work of challenging and dismantling existing structures of oppression based on gender, race, and class. She named the chasm between community and the academy, for many of us, and in her writings, she consistently connected and even blurred the boundaries between the two.

Acknowledging students as “whole human beings with complex lives and experiences” (hooks, 1994, p. 15) felt like a given in my Saturday classes. I loved the interactions with these community members because in embracing them as whole human beings with complex lives, I was also able to bring my full self to our classes. In the process, we were able to care for one another, learn from each other, and create a sense of community and commitment to our shared space. We looked forward to seeing each other every week. hooks (1994) argued that this is the work we must do with *all* of our students, as a process of engaged pedagogy framed by love and care. It was in making this critical connection that I realized I could employ some of the same practices that were successful in my Saturday classes in the university setting as well. Doing so transformed my understanding of the possibilities of feminist pedagogy and enabled me to connect more fully with students in my university classes as well. Community and care became central to my teaching practices.

In *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed (2017) describes how feminism is at stake in how we write, who we cite, and how we generate knowledge. In this way, she writes, “feminist theory is world making” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 14). hooks made similar arguments, linking these stakes to both feminist pedagogy and processes of healing. In doing so, she created feminist worlds, and her theories live on in the ways she taught us that teaching, too, is a practice of world making, always linked to theory because “[w]hen our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to...collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice...one enables the other” (hooks, 1994, p. 61). In theory, hooks saw “a location for healing” (p. 59), a “sanctuary” (p. 61), and a way to “imagine possible futures” (p. 61).

I continue to reflect on the influence hooks has had on my pedagogy. Recently, in my courses, I've imagined what she would ask of students during such a difficult time, knowing that many of them have been experiencing grief and loss in their lives and communities. To put into practice some of the theories we read about collective care and mutual aid, I asked students to collaborate on writings that could have an impact beyond our class, allowing us to reflect on feminist movements for change. In doing so, we considered the politics of embodied knowledge and the potential for healing. Students drafted collective political statements of solidarity; they wrote personal narratives exploring their own lived experience in relation to one another; and they created arts-based activist tools for local organizations. I continue to learn from hooks' theories about education as interactive and transgressive, grounded in love, care, and community, always in the service of justice. bell hooks' writings helped me to reflect on and critique the pressure to assimilate I had internalized in my earlier years and compelled a sense of pride in claiming all the parts of myself, in all their nuance and complexity. Her theories taught me to love teaching itself as feminist practice, always in the service of healing and justice.

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