Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom

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Author: bell hooks  
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Abstract: In this book, the author shares her philosophy of the classroom, offering ideas about teaching that fundamentally rethink democratic participation. She writes about a new kind of education, education as the practice of freedom. She advocates the process of teaching students to think critically and raises many concerns central to the field of critical pedagogy, linking them to feminist thought. In the process, these essays face squarely the problems of teachers who do not want to teach, of students who do not want to learn, of racism and sexism in the classroom. Teaching students to "transgress" against racial, sexual, and class boundaries in order to achieve the gift of freedom is, for the author, the teacher's most important goal. -- From back cover  
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Notes:
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Teaching to Transgress

Week #5

(1) 5 Significant Quotes

“... [student of hooks] told the group that she considers it misguided for black women to act as though we have the luxury to take feminism or leave it, especially if it is rejected because peers respond negatively: I don’t think we really have that choice. That’s like saying I don’t want to have race consciousness because the rest of society doesn’t want you to. I mean, let’s get real.” (hooks, p. 115) Hook’s student understands and conveys that there is no choice in the matter of taking up a feminist viewpoint, it is necessary. When taking up the work of a feminist, it is important not to shy away from sharing said work with others. Even if they have a negative reaction to said work.

“By recognizing subjectivity and the limits of identity, we disrupt that objectification that is so necessary in a culture of domination” (hooks, p. 139) This quote speaks to bell hooks and Ron Scapps discussion about how liberatory pedagogy demands that a teacher is aware and accepting that they are bodies within the classroom. That to move around, give information and teach from a their own perspectives with taking into account that they must be accountable for their own subjectivity within the classroom is crucial.

“Education as the practice of freedom is not just about liberatory knowledge, it’s about a liberatory practice in the classroom.” (hooks, p. 147) There must be steps taken within a classroom to allow for the theory to be actualized. One such way is using personal experiences within the classroom. hooks argues that strategically using voice by connecting it to other issues with a new openness. Also to affirm the student voice as well.

“I answered that to me “critical thinking” was the primary element allowing the possibility of change.” (hooks, p. 202) The only way to change our patterns of history and make a difference is through critical thinking. There must be openness to new ideas within learning to move forward in thought. This is necessary for so many situations including the feminist movement.
“My commitment to engaged pedagogy is an expression of political activism..” (hooks, p. 203)

To take a stand that is not always popular and not politically neutral can be hard. There are often unintended results that can be negative when you choose to travel this route. However there is a need for those teachers to be in the schools to potentially change the very structures in place that make the work so incredibly hard in the first place.

(2) List of Key Terms and Definitions:

Engaged Pedagogy- teaching practice that emphasizes well being through the process of self-actualization that promotes a teachers well being if they are able to empower students.

Theory as Liberatory Practice- Use of theory to liberate students usually comes from a place of hurt.

Essentialism- A belief that for something there is a set of attributes that defines it.

Feminism- movement that defends women as equal on cultural and economic issues.

Critical pedagogy- teaching style that involves putting critical thinking into action.

(3) Author’s main argument

In Teaching to Transgress, bell hooks argues that through an engaged pedagogy teachers will be able to utilize critical thinking to move past boundaries of race, class, and gender to be liberated and gain freedom within ones own life. Through the intentional way a teacher takes up the work, will they be able to liberate students from the oppressive society that we live in and allow them to know who they truly are.

(4) Author’s stance on roles and responsibilities of teaching

(a) It is a responsibility for a teacher to take on a critical pedagogy and “educate as the practice of freedom” through the use of critical thought. It is a teacher's responsibility to create habits of using education as a practice of freedom, “...is not just about liberatory knowledge, its about liberatory practice in the classroom.” (hook, p. 147) It is not just about including liberal, alternate views of literature in the classroom, it's also about actually using those practices. It is a teacher's responsibility to give students the ability and a safe place to practice using their voice in a strategic manner. Teachers must have the ability to affirm the value of the students voice in the classroom. It is the responsibility of a teacher to
understand there are many structures in play in every classroom that are influenced by racism, sexism and class elitism. These structures will have an influence on discussions, and class dynamics. Teachers must take note of these structures and how they can create mistrust in those students that are typically on the margin.

(b) Maxine Greene would agree with bell hooks that we must use critical thinking to liberate us from the boundaries that constrain us as people. Greene states that “...let his consciousness take over, to enable him -- in the face of mechanization and controls -- to create himself as a human being, as a teacher capable of freeing other human beings to choose themselves.” (p. 21) In her book bell hooks talks about radical openness that would allow one to see different viewpoints and to realize that there is more than what meets the surface. Greene would argue it is a teacher's responsibility to look through all those viewpoints, in which hooks agrees that through that process of critical thinking will the students be on the way to being liberated.

One point of contention between bell hooks and Costa & Kallick would be their use of language within the school setting. Costa & Kallick believe that a key disposition is thinking and communicating with clarity and precision. They argue that it is important to use clear language and standard english when communicating in an educational setting. “Thinking and communicating with clarity and precision: Striving for accurate communication in both written and oral form; Be clear!” (Costa & Kallick, p. 23) They argue that this disposition is necessary for success within school and beyond. While hooks believes that through the use of Black vernacular language there is power in the use of it even if it is not clear to all in an educational setting. Allowing those that are oppressed to “take the oppressor’s language and turn it against itself.” (p.175) She sees the use of Black vernacular language as a way to liberate herself within it.

(5) What did you learn about yourself?

I have learned that a lot of the way I was raised was from a feminist perspective even though it was never attached to that label. My mother was the decision maker within our nuclear family and I believe to have taken on that role with my own family. I also learned a lot about how class has shaped my understanding of the world. I grew up in an upper, lower class society. I describe it as such because while
I grew up in a poor trailer park, I was given many opportunities and cultural tools that my neighbor friends were not. My parents placed high value on education and enriching my life with meaningful experiences. It was an eye opener to understand that the academic excellence and open critical thought was not expected of other girls in my socio-economic background. This class has really opened my eyes to the opportunities that my family gave me even coming from a background that would not typically grant.