

Advising to Transgress: Reflecting on the Language of bell hooks

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bell hooks & *Teaching to Transgress*

bell hooks (Gloria Watkins) is a celebrated scholar, feminist and social justice activist who has had a prolific academic career. While we will concentrate on the applications of her words to academic advising, we also encourage you to explore more of her works.

hooks, b., 1994, *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*, Routledge, New York.

Advising to Transgress

Praxis - Combination of “action and reflection upon the world in order to change it.” (hooks, 1994, p. 14).

- How do we change the world as advisors?
- How do we empower our students to change the world?

Reflection Exercise

What do these mean to you personally, professionally, or for advising students?

Gr. 1	Feminist Classroom “Student frustration is directed against the inability of methodology, analysis, and abstract writing (usually blamed on the material and justifiably so) to make the work connect to their efforts to live more fully, to transform society, to live the politics of feminism.” (hooks, 1994, p. 88)
Gr. 2	The Privileged Act of Naming “the privileged act of naming often affords those in power access to modes of communication and enables them to project an interpretation, a definition, a description of their work and actions that may not be accurate, that may obscure what is really taking place.” (hooks, 1994, p. 62)
Gr. 3	Deconstruction / Transformation The call for a recognition of cultural diversity, a rethinking of the ways of knowing, a deconstruction of old epistemologies, and the concomitant demand that there be a transformation in our classrooms, in how we teach and what we teach, has been a necessary revolution--one that seeks to restore life to a corrupt and dying academy” (hooks, 1994, pp. 29-30)
Gr. 4	Need for Commitment “I thought of him [Ken] when meeting and interacting with liberal white folks who believed that having a black friend meant that they were not racist, who sincerely believed that they were doing us a favor by extending offers of friendly contact for which they felt they should be rewarded. I thought of him during years of watching white folks play at unlearning racism, but walking away when they encountered obstacles, rejection, conflict, pain.” (hooks, 1994, p. 25)

Quotes from *Teaching to Transgress* to Reflect Upon

Ecstasy, Risk & Danger

“School was the place of ecstasy--pleasure and danger. To be changed by ideas was pure pleasure. But to learn ideas that ran counter to values and beliefs learned at home was to place oneself at risk, to enter the danger zone” (hooks, 1994, p. 3).

Transgressing Boundaries

“To enter classroom settings in colleges and universities with the will to share the desire to encourage excitement, was to transgress. Not only did it require movement beyond accepted boundaries, but excitement could not be generated without full recognition of the fact that there could never be an absolute set agenda governing teaching practices. Agendas had to be flexible, had to allow for spontaneous shifts in direction. Students had to be seen in their particularity as individuals...” (hooks, 1994, p. 7).

Everyone Contributes

“There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes. These contributions are resources. Used constructively they enhance the capacity of any class to create an open learning community. Often before this process can begin there has to be some deconstruction of the traditional notion that only the professor is responsible for classroom dynamics.” (hooks, 1994, p. 8).

Shifting Paradigms

“To teach in varied communities not only our paradigms must shift but also the way we think, write, speak. The engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute, but always changing, always evolving in dialog with a world beyond itself.” (hooks, 1994, p. 11).

Demanding Nature of Engaged Pedagogy

“Progressive, holistic education, ‘engaged pedagogy’ is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (hooks, 1994, p. 15).

Power & Sharing

“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. In my classrooms, I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share.

Where & Upon Whom Do We Place Burdens

“The burden of this transition [desegregation] was placed on us” (hooks, 1994, p. 24).

Biases

“If we examine critically the traditional role of the university in the pursuit of truth and the sharing of knowledge and information it is painfully clear that biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom” (hooks, 1994, p 29-30).

Limits of Training & Knowledge

Many of our colleagues were initially reluctant participants in this change. Many folks found that as they tried to respect ‘cultural diversity’ they had to confront the limitations of their training and knowledge, as well as a possible loss of ‘authority.’ Indeed, exposing certain truths and biases in the classroom often created chaos and confusion. The idea that the classroom should always be a ‘safe,’ harmonious place was challenged. It was hard for individuals to fully grasp the idea that recognition of difference might also require of us a willingness to see the classroom change, to allow for shifts in relations between students” (hooks, 1994, p 32).

Don’t Fear Mistakes

"In all cultural revolutions there are periods of chaos and confusion, times where grave mistakes are made. If we fear mistakes, doing things wrongly, constantly evaluating ourselves, we will never make the academy a culturally diverse place where scholars and the curricula address every dimension of that difference" (hooks, 1994, p 33).

Theory as Liberatory Healing

"I found a place of sanctuary in 'theorizing,' in making sense out of what was happening. I found a place where I could imagine possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently" (hooks, 1994, p 61).

Bridging the Gap

"When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two--that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other" (hooks, 1994, p. 61).

Who Defines the Standards / Norms

"common efforts to formulate and impose standards of critical evaluation that would be used to define what is theoretical and what is not. These standards often led to appropriation and/or devaluation of work that did not 'fit,' that was suddenly deemed not theoretical--or not theoretical enough" (hooks, 1994, p. 63).

Intersectionality & Black Feminism

"Gender is not the sole determinant of women's identity" (hooks, 1994, p. 77).

Connection & the Politics of Feminism

"Student frustration is directed against the inability of methodology, analysis, and abstract writing (usually blamed on the material and justifiably so) to make the work connect to their efforts to live more fully, to transform society, to live the politics of feminism" (hooks, 1994, p 88).

Separation of Race & Gender

"White Feminists looking at "difference and diversity do not make white women's lives, works, and experiences the subject of their analysis of 'race'" (hooks, 1994, p. 103).

Black & White Feminism

"Now black women are placed in the position of serving white female desire to know more about race and racism, to 'master' the subject. Curiously, most white women writing feminist theory that looks at 'difference' and 'diversity' do not make white women's lives, works, and experiences the subject of their analysis of 'race,' but rather focus on black women or women of color." (hooks, 1994, pp. 103-104).

Social Justice as Learning

"Confronting one another across differences means that we must change ideas about how we learn; rather than fearing conflict we have to find ways to use it as a catalyst for new thinking, for growth" (hooks, 1994, p. 113)

Male Development on Feminist Issues

"Most everyone agreed that the men they knew who were grappling with feminist issues were either gay or involved with women who were 'pushing them'" (hooks, 1994, p 116)

Black Men & Feminism

"I've tried to understand but then I'm a man. Sometimes I don't understand and it hurts, 'cause I think I am the epitome of everything that's oppressed" (hooks, 1994, p 116)

Isolation & Criticism

"Are you strong enough to handle the isolation, the criticism?" (hooks, 1994, p. 117)

Critical Consciousness

"once you learn to look at yourself critically, you look at everything around you with new eyes" (hooks, 1994, p. 117).

Identity Development & Liberation

“Everyone agreed... that black women who ‘get it together,’ who deal with sexism and racism, develop important strategies for survival and resistance that need to be shared within black communities, especially since (as they put it) the black woman who gets past all this and discovers herself ‘holds the key to liberation’” (hooks, 1994, p 118).

Feminist Politics

“It seemed that individual black women active in feminist politics were often caught between a rock and a hard place. The vast majority of white feminists did not welcome our questioning of feminist paradigms that they were seeking to institutionalize; so too, many black people simply saw our involvement with feminist politics as a gesture of betrayal, and dismissed our work” (hooks, 1994, p. 122).

Talking & Collaborating Critically

“it is crucial that critical thinkers who want to change our teaching practices talk to one another, collaborate in a discussion that crosses boundaries and creates a space for intervention.” (hooks, 1994, p. 129)

Risk of Engagement

“In recent years, many white male scholars become critically engaged with my writing. It troubles me that this engagement has been viewed suspiciously or seen merely as an act of appropriation meant to enhance opportunistic agendas. If we really want to create a cultural climate where biases can be challenged and changed, all border crossings must be seen as valid and legitimate.” Still risk involved (hooks, 1994, page 131).

Sense of Self

“I have benefited a lot from not being attached to myself as an academic or professor. It’s made me willing to be critical of my own pedagogy and to accept criticism from my students and other people without feeling that to question how I teach is somehow to question my right to exist on the planet. I feel that one of the things blocking a lot of professors from interrogating their own pedagogical practices is the fear that “this is my identity and I can’t question that identity” (hooks, 1994, p 134-5).

The body and the Classroom

“Liberatory pedagogy really demands that one work in the classroom, and that one work with the limits of the body, work both with and through and against those limits: teachers may insist that it doesn’t matter whether you stand behind the podium or the desk, but it does” (hooks, 1994, p. 138)

The body

“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 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.” (hooks, 1994, p. 139).

Deconstruction & Perpetuation

“Deconstruction is also really important to acknowledge that professors may attempt to deconstruct traditional biases while sharing that information through body posture, tone, word choice, and so on that perpetuate those very hierarchies and biases they are critiquing” (hooks, 1994, p. 141).

Liberatory Practice

“Education as the practice of freedom is not just about liberatory knowledge, it’s about a liberatory practice in the classroom. So many of us have critiqued individual white male scholars who push critical pedagogy yet do not alter the classroom practices, who assert race, class, and gender privilege without interrogating their conduct” (hooks, 1994, p. 147).

Strategic Voice

“Coming to voice is not just the act of telling one’s experience. It is using the telling strategically--to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects” (hooks, 1994, p. 148).

Responsible Action

“That’s the difference education as the practice of freedom makes. The bottom-line assumption has to be that everyone in the classroom is able to act responsibly. That has to be the starting point--that we are able to act responsibly together to create a learning environment. All too often we have been trained as professors to assume

students are not capable of acting responsibly, that if we don't exert control over them, then there is going to be mahem" (hooks, 1994, p. 152).

What Can We Do?

"Well then what can we do? How can we approach our subject to make it more interesting?' One of the most intense aspects of liberatory pedagogical practice is the challenge on the part of the professor to change the set agenda" (hooks, 1994, pp. 155-156).

Exhaustion

"Complicity often happens because professors and students alike are afraid to challenge, because that would mean more work. Engaging pedagogy is physically exhausting" (hooks, 1994, p. 160?).

Diversity & Teaching

"Fixed notions about teaching as a process are continually challenged in a learning context where students are really diverse, where they do not share the same assumptions about learning" (hooks, 1994, p. 162).

Language as a Culture of Resistance

"This is the oppressor's language yet I need it to talk to you" (hooks, 1994, p. 167)

Spirit of Rebellion

"For in the incorrect usage of words, in the incorrect placement of works, was a spirit of rebellion that claimed language as a site of resistance" (hooks, 1994, p. 170).

Contradiction & Discomfort

"We were encouraged, as many students are today, to betray our class origins. Rewards if we choose to assimilate, estranged in we chose to maintain those aspects of who were were, some were all too often seen as outsiders.... because the contradictions between the behavior necessary to 'make it' in the academy and those that allow them to be comfortable at home, with their family and friends are just too great" (hooks, 1994, p. 182).

Inhabiting Two Worlds

"I encourage students to reject the notion that they must choose between experiences. They must believe they can inhabit comfortably two different worlds, but they must make each space one of comfort. They must creatively invent ways to cross borders" (hooks, 1994, p. 182-183).

Voices

"the more complex recognition of the uniqueness of each voice and a willingness to create spaces in the classroom where all voices can be heard because all students are free to speak, knowing their presence will be recognized and valued" (hooks, 1994, p. 186).

Challenging Bias vs. Pedagogical Transformation

"Most progressive professors are more comfortable striving to challenge class biases through material studied than they are with interrogation how class biases shape conduct in the classroom and transforming their pedagogical process" (hooks, 1994, p. 187).

Holistic Education

"It is equally crucial that we learn to enter into the classroom 'whole' and not as 'disembodied spirit'" (hooks, 1994, p. 193).

Quest for Knowledge

"The quest for knowledge that enables us to unite theory and practice is one of passion. To the extent that professors bring this passion, which has to be fundamentally rooted in a love for ideas we are able to inspire, the classroom becomes a dynamic place where transformations in social relations are concretely actualized and the false dichotomy between the world outside and the inside world of the academy disappears" (hooks, 1994, p. 195).

Demand for Passion

"rarely is such passion institutionally affirmed. Professors are expected to publish, but no one really expects or demands of us that we really care about teaching in uniquely passionate and different ways" (hooks, 1994, p. 198).

Critical Thinking

“to me ‘critical thinking’ was the primary element allowing the possibility of change. Passionately insisting that no matter what one’s class, race, gender, or social standing, I shared my beliefs that without the capacity to think critically about ourselves and our lives, none of us would be able to move forward, to change, to grow” (hooks, 1994, p. 202).

Against the Grain

“The choice to work against the grain, to challenge the status quo, often has negative consequences. and that is part of what makes that choice one that is not politically neutral” (hooks, 1994, p. 203).

Diverse Center of Education

“Ideally, education should be a place where the need for diverse teaching methods and styles would be valued, encouraged, seen as essential to learning” (hooks, 1994, p. 203).

Creativity & Involvement

“Engaged pedagogy not only compels me to be constantly creative in the classroom, it also sanctions involvement with students beyond that setting. I journey with students as they progress in their lives beyond our classroom experience. In many ways, I continue to teach them, even as they become more capable of teaching me” (hooks, 1994, p. 203).

Mutual Responsibility

“When students see themselves as mutually responsible for the development of a learning community they offer constructive input” (hooks, 1994, p. 204).

Delayed Rewards

“It took time and experience for me to understand that the rewards of engaged pedagogy might not emerge during a course” (hooks, 1994, p. 204)

Influence of Professors

“Commitment to engaged pedagogy carries with it the willingness to be responsible, not to pretend that professors do not have the power to change the direction of our student’s lives” (hooks, 1994, p. 204).

The Possibilities

“The classroom, with all its limitations remains a location of possibility” (hooks, 1994, p. 205).