

Perpetuating Justice: Transformative and Emancipatory Pedagogies

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The opening of this new school year marks the beginning of my twenty-fourth year in formal classrooms. As my love of learning birthed a love of education, I pay particular attention to the ways and means of teaching. Over these many years a low-grade notion has become full conscientization that, except in the rare case of a courageous educator, the classroom methodologies of professors remain the same from generation to generation. The proliferation of books on the topics of pedagogical practice and models for educating, as well as courses taught in most every institution of higher learning regarding the science and art of teaching, raise questions as to why these archaic patterns of explication are sustained and who benefits from their maintenance?

bell hooks presents these engaging questions in her books *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* and *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* that offer alternatives to status-quo educating. hooks posits that traditional modes of instruction reflect societal norms of hierarchical structures that value white male epistemological assumptions and realities. For instance, in educational settings when “controversial” subjects are considered, it is often in the form of a “panel” discussion where the “experts” on either side of an issue make a presentation and discussion among themselves with very little time left for conversation with and among the assigned learners. Even times of “question and answer” are postured as a novice asking the expert his or her opinion and very little real possibility of change is assumed in the ensuing exchange. Moreover, sources of knowledge are ranked in accordance of validity with the “personal,” either in terms of experience or anecdotal, often devalued to the point of derision. These configurations of proclamation and direct instructional methodology reinforce the Subject/Object relationship between church professionals and laity, and stand in opposition to the espoused theology of the Reformed Tradition.

With the English publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1973, the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, dramatically influenced discussions concerning education and pedagogy. He proposed that the “traditional” system of teaching substantiated the Teacher as “Subject” and the Learner as “Object.” A Subject possesses agency and the ability to describe his or her own reality. The Object is acted upon and viewed as a passive recipient of the content that the Subject deems worthy of learning. Freire names this unequal relationship between Subject and Object the “Banking Model” whereby information, deemed appropriate and necessary by the Subject is deposited into the awaiting Object. Freire proposed a new methodology of conscientization whereby the unequal relationship between the subject and object is replaced by co-teachers and learners who together become critically conscious of the world in which they live, its social, political and economic realities and implications.

hooks employs Freire’s theory as the foundation for her work of engaged pedagogy. She seeks to create a classroom that is as egalitarian as possible, that honors and respects the students lived experience and innate wisdom, and values their contribution. While she never overtly references Freire’s strong emphasis on the essential ontological foundation at the core of each person (which reflects both Paul Tillich’s reciprocal recognition of human being-ness in one

another and Martin Buber's "I-Thou" relationship¹), hooks does operate from an ontological assumption of mutual humanity. The heart and soul of her pedagogy is praxis – the critical reflection on the relevant intersection of theory and experience.

Writing from the perspective of an African-American woman holding a Ph.D. in English, bell hooks uses experience to emphasize the difficulties in our classrooms and in the interrelations between students and teachers and critical theory to show the connection between what happens in institutions of learning and everyday living. One of the strengths of her writing is her insistence that theory and practice be inexorably linked and that relevancy for life is evidenced in any academic exercise.

In *Teaching Community* hooks continues to draw heavily on Freire but adds the work of Parker Palmer as a primary source particularly as she considers the vocation of teaching and commitment to excellence in the field. Palmer is quoted extensively from his relatively recent work *The Courage to Teach* and an earlier book *The Active Life*. hooks is less prescriptive in *Teaching Community* and more contemplative as she considers the meaning of teaching – although no less critically conscious in her exegesis of society and classroom.

hooks addresses the art and science of teaching throughout these two texts, enhancing the conversation around transformative and emancipatory pedagogy through the educational concepts I define as *teaching as service*, *context as agenda* and *pedagogy as the practice of freedom*.

Teaching as Service is the understanding that we, as educators, contribute our vocational talents for the welfare of our students by communicating the vitality of learning so that teachers and learners become mutual participants in the pursuit of wisdom. hooks calls teachers to a new level of respect and affection for their students. Her message is clear and to the point: value learners above institutions. This elevates the role of students in the learning process and creates an environment where we “recognize one another, are interested in one another and value everyone’s presence and experience.”²

This ontological recognition is primarily mediated through the teacher whose persona and approach exudes the vitality resonate when passion and excitement for context, content and educational sojourner merge. Communicating a devotion to the art of teaching, and attention to its craft or science, expresses esteem for those who have gathered to seek understanding. Determining, together, the subject matter for consideration and teaching in a manner that conveys a vision for learning that is compelling and contagious to students engenders willingness to risk engaging in this endeavor of erudition.

Understanding teaching as service is essential to transformative and emancipatory pedagogies. It creates a climate in which there is mutuality between teacher and student, an environment that cultivates the transgression between the accumulation of knowledge and the surfacing of wisdom. More critically, for religious education, is that it is grounded in the theological understanding of the Imago Dei. We who live and teach within the realm of faith believe that each person is created in the image of God. Our interactions with one another, in classroom, community and congregation, are to reflect that conviction. When we disregard the intrinsic equality resonate within one another, regardless of the role and function each plays in

¹ See Paul Tillich's discussion *Love, Power and Justice*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1954) and Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, (New York: Free Press, 1971).

² hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 8.

the process of teaching and learning, we perpetuate an imbalance that is inconsistent with God's intention for human relation.

Context as Agenda presupposes a credo of flexibility that is achieved through the dialogical nature of teaching so that the relevance of learning to life is central. With a foundation of honoring students, the credo of flexibility means that we as teachers will look beyond the walls of the classroom for the text of our coursework. The very lives of those we serve provide fodder for our intellectual and axiological pursuits. The syllabus becomes dynamic as students contribute to its formation and reformation through their experiences, insight and questions. The political, social and cultural stages of the world supply the content for a framework of contextual consideration. This adaptability allows for the in-breaking of life into the lesson plan and extends an invitation for deeper understanding.

Flexibility requires careful attention to the dialogical nature of teaching, a temperament which has at its core the expectation of transformation that only comes when open minds and honest exchange meet. hooks, quoting Ich Nhat Hanh, states, "In a true dialogue, both sides are willing to change."³ The pedagogical prospect is that we will no longer be the same as we were before once we listen to another's reality and put it in conversation with our own. Praxis, the intentional practice of connecting action in the world and with reflection on its meaning, for the reorientation of our humankind is a tenet of this credo. The engagement of the mind of the student, teaching them to think critically about life and lesson, modeling that behavior in classroom and community, is critical for consequential conversation.

The goal is relevancy. hooks writes, "The most exciting aspect of teaching outside conventional structures and/or college classrooms has been sharing the theory we write in academia with non-academic audiences and, most importantly, seeing their hunger to learn new ways of knowing, their desire to use this knowledge in meaningful ways to enrich their daily lives."⁴ It is not only the "non-academic" who seeks to make germane intellectual theory. Academic discourse without experience runs the risk of becoming no more than a scholarly exercise. Conversely, experience without intellectual consideration makes us susceptible to the enticement of an eloquent speech. This connectional learning, bridging theory and practice, teaches the value of wholeness. No longer must we compartmentalize our lives to the point of disassociation, as if our head were severed from our body. It is this disconnect that too often allows injustice to seed. When we are able to view ourselves as unrelated to our fellow human, when we disengage from our God given call to solidarity with the plight of the disadvantaged and disenfranchised it is because we have been lured into disengagement - a model that is too frequently seen in the binary orientation of the classroom – and no longer see the relevancy of what we are studying to our every day living and societal interactions.

Pedagogy as Freedom is an approach to teaching that builds community through an engaged voice by communicating in a compelling manner the hope of transcendence. We can, through our choice of instructional methodologies and the tone with which we communicate with students, create environments for learning that perpetuate injustice and those that dismantle it. hooks, in *Teaching Community*, seeks to manifest a "classroom that is life sustaining."⁵ It is a place where everyone present feels a sense of responsibility for contributing to the community of

³ hooks, bell. *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. (New York Routledge, 2004), xv.

⁴ Ibid., xi.

⁵ Ibid., xv.

learning.⁶ This authentic endeavor generates a kinship of understanding, an intimacy of community that does not ignore differences yet refuses to allow them to keep us apart.

The engaged voice is not a fixed voice of absolutes but rather one of invitation to ponder and explore. The teacher is not the “subject” and the learner the “object.” It advances the intentional creation of a condition in which free expression can occur without fear of shaming behavior. hooks reminds us that “it is possible to learn liberating ideas in a context that was established to socialize us to accept domination, to accept one’s place.”⁷ Hence it is absolutely essential that we discover ways to teach that propel us toward liberation in both practice and purpose as we “find ways to teach and share knowledge in a manner that does not reinforce existing structures of dominations (those of race, gender, class and religious hierarchies.)”⁸

It is in community, when we are surrounded by kindred, that we can begin to hope...to believe in the compelling vision of transcendence. The prospect of dismantling standards that devalue human beings so that new possibilities can emerge becomes more than a whimsical idea. There is an expectation, in community, that we are able to name our losses and mourn the tear in our souls. When pedagogy is the practice of freedom it bids us to transgress the boundaries instituted and concretized by society.

It is here that connection to one another is restored and the hope that we can move beyond the constructs of a biased social order and into the fullness of what God created us to be is both vision and purpose.

Overall, hooks’ work in both *Teaching to Transgress* and *Teaching Community* has compelled me to consider the ways in which our teaching in classroom and congregation perpetuates patterns of domination. New teachers, even those who take the required Graduate Teaching Seminar at Union-PSCE whose purpose is purportedly to acquaint aspiring professors with positive teaching methodologies, more often teach as they were taught. The power of formation by repeated exposure is witnessed in the continued replication of their own educational experience. When these behaviors and practices represent binary constructs of privilege and oppression in the classroom they reinforce blueprints of prejudice in the world. hooks’ work provides a window through which to see what is possible through transformative and emancipatory educational habits.

The church’s Story begins with the ontological assumption that all of humanity is created in the image of God⁹. In that act of Divine creation we are linked as brothers and sisters by a common Creator whose impression is engraved in our being. Practicing transformative pedagogies that honor students and value their experiences dissolve the Subject/Object relationship. Progressive education with its emphasis on restoring community more faithfully reflects these theological foundations.

This genesis story is strongly linked with the faith affirmation that God is the Lord of *all* creation. There is no duality of a “godly” realm and an “earthly” realm. All of life is governed by a sovereign God and available for responsible engagement by humanity. Therefore, transgressing church walls and boundaries to glean context for critical reflection in matters of faith and life is not only acceptable but an expression of fidelity to God.

⁶ hooks, *Transgress*, 39.

⁷ hooks, *Community*, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹ Genesis 1.26-31

Through the Exodus story and its theological interpretation in Deuteronomy¹⁰, we find a God whose core reflects an abhorrence of oppression and injustice. Liberation is the cry to which God responds over and over again. The church is called to mirror that loathing in a world which participates in propagating it throughout the ages. A curriculum and pedagogy whose guiding principle is liberation is more faithful to God's higher standards.

John Calvin's teaches that our minds were created and gifted to us by YHWH¹¹. The life of the mind is in service to God. The Reformed expectation is that we will analytically interact with the world around us, searching out new meaning and understandings as they teach us about God and ourselves. Creating learning environments and curricula that encourage and teaches people to think critically about their life, faith and world, or in Calvin's words – to know what we believe and why we believe it – form disciples who are less willing to accept generational devaluation.

Building on hooks' prime directive of the matrix of theory and experience, church curriculum built upon transformative pedagogy and emancipatory methodologies makes faith relevant for living in new and fresh ways each day and models new paradigms of possibility. It empowers disciples to go into the world confident of their ability to discern God's will and to resist messages that would denounce the goodness of all God's creation. When we stand firm against the powers, in classroom, congregation and community, that denigrate and degrade our brothers and sisters regardless of social, racial, class and economic standing we dismantle patterns of domination which perpetuate injustice.

This is not an easy undertaking. It will require giving up control by those considered experts, teaching laity to believe in the validity of their own voice, claiming and living into their space of liberation, without adopting the modeled behavior of the previous authorities. It means retooling for teachers, preachers, learners. It will also be necessary to reconceptualize the classroom and curriculum according to a theory that has not been clearly articulated in "church" language. These are but a few of the hindrances resonate within this radical reorientation.

However, people are searching for meaning and hungry for faith to become relevant to their lived experience. We are at the intersection of faith and possibility with a company of the gathered waiting and ready to step into a new way of being that resonates out their souls. These will ultimately be helps in conscientization. If the church is to be faithful to the essence of who God is and how God calls us to be in and for the world, we must not simply be bystanders in the continuation of injustice we must become agents and leaders in creating paradigms of possibility that reflect God's best intention. Making our educational practices consistent with our espoused theology and theory is central to our ability to create a world of integrity for all God's creation.

¹⁰ See Exodus 1-15, 23:1-13 and Deuteronomy 6:1-9, 15:7-11, 16:18-20, 24:17-18 and 27:19,

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Edited by John. T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 273-274.