



Teaching Community

A Pedagogy of Hope

bell hooks

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It is imperative that we maintain hope even when the
harshness of reality may suggest the opposite.

—Paulo Freire

Preface

Teaching and Living in Hope

Ten years ago I began writing a collection of essays on teaching—the end result was *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. In the early stages of discussing this project with my beloved white male editor Bill Germano, many questions were raised about the possible audience for this book. Was there really an audience of teachers and students wanting to engage the discussions about difference and struggle in the classroom that were the core of this text? Would college professors want to read this work? Were the topics broad enough? I was confident then that there were many educators out there who, like myself, wanted to engage in a dialogue about all these issues. Once the questions were answered we forged ahead with publication. Immediate response from readers let the publishers know that the work was timely, that its conversational tone made it an easy read, offering readers an opportunity to return to chapters, work with ideas they found new,

difficult, disturbing or just plain ideas that they disagreed with and wanted to think through. More than any other book I have written, *Teaching to Transgress* has reached the diverse audiences I imagined would be its readers. Bridging the gap between public school teachers and those of us who do most if not all of our teaching at colleges and universities, these essays focused on common issues teachers confront irrespective of the type of classroom we work in.

Certainly it was the publication of *Teaching to Transgress* that created a space where I was dialoguing more and more with teachers and students in public schools, talking with teachers training to be teachers, listening to them talk to me about teaching. The incredible success of *Teaching to Transgress* motivated my editor to urge me to write another book on teaching shortly after the publication of this first book. I was adamant that I would not write another book about teaching unless I felt that sense of organic necessity that often drives me to passionate writing.

In these past ten years I have spent more time teaching teachers and students about teaching than I have spent in the usual English Department, Feminist Studies, or African-American Studies classroom. It was not simply the power of *Teaching to Transgress* that opened up these new spaces for dialogue. It was also that as I went out into the public world I endeavored to bring as a teacher, passion, skill, and absolute grace to the art of teaching: It was clear to audiences that I practiced what I preached. That union of theory and praxis was a dynamic example for teachers seeking practical wisdom. I do not mean to be immodest in openly evaluating the quality of my teaching and writing about teaching, my intent is to bear witness so as to challenge the prevailing notion that it is simply too difficult to make connections—this is not so. Those of us who want to make connections who want to cross boundaries, do. I want all passionate teachers to revel in a job well done to inspire students training to be teachers.

There are certainly moments in the classroom where I do not excel in the art of teaching. However, it is crucial that we challenge any feeling of shame or embarrassment that teachers who do their job well might be tempted to indulge when praising ourselves or being praised by others for excellent teaching. For when we hide our light we collude in the overall cultural devaluation of our teaching vocation. A big basketball fan, I often tell audiences, “Do you really think Michael Jordan does not know that he is an incredible ball player? That throughout his career he has been gifted with a level of skill and magnificence which sets him apart?”

In the past ten years I have spent many hours teaching away from the normal college classroom. Publishing children’s books, I have spent more time than I ever thought I would teaching and talking with children, especially children between the ages of three and six. This teaching takes place in various settings—churches, bookstores, homes where folks gather, and in diverse classrooms in public schools and at colleges and universities. 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.

When I first began writing feminist theory, always talking through ideas with other feminist thinkers, one of our primary concerns was not to collude with the formation of a new elite group of women, those college-educated women who would benefit the most from feminist thinking and practice. We believed then and now that the most important measure of the success of feminist movement would be the extent to which the feminist thinking and practice that was transforming our consciousness and our lives would have the same impact on ordinary folks. With this political hope we made commitments to seek to write theory that would speak directly to an inclusive

audience. With the academization of feminism, the loss of a mass-based political movement, this agenda was difficult to achieve in a work setting where writing acceptable theory for promotion and tenure often meant using inaccessible language and/or academic jargon. Many amazing feminist ideas never reach an audience outside the academic world because the work is simply not accessible. Ironically, this often happens in those fields like sociology and psychology where the subject matter is organically linked with choices people make in everyday life. One example concerns feminist work on parenting, particularly writing on the value of male parenting. Yet much of this work is written in arcane academic jargon. Even dense books, which are not terribly full of jargon, are hard for tired working people to plough through, selecting the parts that could contain meaningful material.

As my academic career advanced, my yearning to take my intellectual work and find forums where the practical wisdom it contained could be shared across class, race, etc., intensified. I have written theory that many people outside the academy find difficult to read, but what they do understand often compels them to work with the difficulties. Concurrently, I have completed a body of popular writing that speaks to many different people at the level of their diverse learning skills. Not only do I find this exciting, it affirms that the mass-based goals of feminist politics that many of us hold can be realized. Indeed, we can do work that can be shared with everyone. And this work can serve to expand all our communities of resistance so that they are not just composed of college teachers, students, or well-educated politicians.

In recent years mass media have told the public that feminist movement did not work, that affirmative action was a mistake, that combined with cultural studies all alternative programs and departments are failing to educate students. To counter these public narratives it is vital that we challenge all this misinformation. That challenge cannot be simply to call

attention to the fact that it is false; we also must give an honest and thorough account of the constructive interventions that have occurred as a consequence of all our efforts to create justice in education. We must highlight all the positive, life-transforming rewards that have been the outcome of collective efforts to change our society, especially education, so that it is not a site for the enactment of domination in any form.

We need mass-based political movements calling citizens of this nation to uphold democracy and the rights of everyone to be educated, and to work on behalf of ending domination in all its forms—to work for justice, changing our educational system so that schooling is not the site where students are indoctrinated to support imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy or any ideology, but rather where they learn to open their minds, to engage in rigorous study and to think critically. Those of us who have worked both as teachers and students to transform academia so that the classroom is not a site where domination (on the basis of race, class, gender, nationality, sexual preference, religion) is perpetuated have witnessed positive evolutions in thought and actions. We have witnessed widespread interrogation of white supremacy, race-based colonialism, and sexism xenophobia.

An incredible body of texts has emerged that stands as the concrete documentation that individual scholars have dared, not only to revise work that once was biased, but have courageously created new work to help us all understand better the ways diverse systems of domination operate both independently and interdependently to perpetuate and uphold exploitation and oppression. By making the personal political, many individuals have experienced major transformations in thought that have led to changing their lives: the white people who worked to become anti-racist, the men who worked to challenge sexism and patriarchy, heterosexuals who begin to truly champion sexual freedom. There have been many quiet moments of incredible shifts in thought and action that are

radical and revolutionary. To honor and value these moments rightly we must name them even as we continue rigorous critique. Both exercises in recognition, naming the problem but also fully and deeply articulating what we do that works to address and resolve issues, are needed to generate anew and inspire a spirit of ongoing resistance. When we only name the problem, when we state complaint without a constructive focus on resolution, we take away hope. In this way critique can become merely an expression of profound cynicism, which then works to sustain dominator culture.

In the last twenty years, educators who have dared to study and learn new ways of thinking and teaching so that the work we do does not reinforce systems of domination, of imperialism, racism, sexism or class elitism have created a pedagogy of hope. Speaking of the necessity to cultivate hope, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire reminds us: “The struggle for hope means the denunciation, in no uncertain terms of all abuses . . . As we denounce them, we awaken in others and ourselves the need, and also the taste, for hope.” Hopefulness empowers us to continue our work for justice even as the forces of injustice may gain greater power for a time. As teachers we enter the classroom with hope. Freire contends: “Whatever the perspective through which we appreciate authentic educational practice—its process implies hope.”

My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them. Educating is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness. As teachers we believe that learning is possible, that nothing can keep an open mind from seeking after knowledge and finding a way to know. In *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope: Prophetic Dreams for the Twenty-First Century* Mary Grey reminds us that we live by hope. She declares: “Hope stretches the limits of what is possible. It is linked with that basic trust in life without which we could not get from one day to the next . . . To live by hope is to believe that it is worth taking the next

step: that our actions, our families, and cultures and society have meaning, are worth living and dying for. Living in hope says to us, ‘There is a way out,’ even from the most dangerous and desperate situations . . .” One of the dangers we face in our educational systems is the loss of a feeling of community, not just the loss of closeness among those with whom we work and with our students, but also the loss of a feeling of connection and closeness with the world beyond the academy.

Progressive education, education as the practice of freedom, enables us to confront feelings of loss and restore our sense of connection. It teaches us how to create community. In this book I identify much that stands in the way of connectedness even as I identify all the work we do that builds and sustains community. *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* offers practical wisdom about what we do and can continue to do to make the classroom a place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership. Whether writing about love and justice, about white people who transform their lives so they are fundamentally anti-racist at the core of their being, or about the issue of sex and power between teachers and students, or the way we can use the knowledge of death and dying to strengthen our learning process, these pages are meant to stand as a testament of hope. In them I work to recover our collective awareness of the spirit of community that is always present when we are truly teaching and learning.

This book does not belong to me alone. It is the culmination of many hours spent talking with comrades, students, colleagues, strangers. It is the outcome of life-transforming dialogues that take place in the context of community-building. Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh teaches: “In a true dialogue, both sides are willing to change. We have to appreciate that truth can be received from outside of—not only within—our own group . . . We have to believe that by engaging in dialogue with another person, we have the possibility of making a change

within ourselves, that we can become deeper.” Openly and honestly talking about the ways we work for change and are changed in these essays, I hope to illuminate the space of the possible where we can work to sustain our hope and create community with justice as the core foundation.

Parker Palmer believes that enlightened teaching evokes and invites community. Many of us know this is so because we teach and live within the life-enhancing vibrancy of diverse communities of resistance. They are the source of our hope, the place where our passion to connect and to learn is constantly fulfilled. Palmer states: “This community goes far beyond our face-to-face relationship with each other as human beings. In education especially, this community connects us with the . . . ‘great things’ of the world, and with ‘the grace of great things.’ . . . We are in community with all of these great things, and great teaching is about knowing that community, feeling that community, sensing that community, and then drawing your students into it.” Hopefully, *Teaching Community* will draw you in and renew your spirit.

Teach 4

Democratic Education

Teachers who have a vision of democratic education assume that learning is never confined solely to an institutionalized classroom. Rather than embodying the conventional false assumption that the university setting is not the “real world” and teaching accordingly, the democratic educator breaks through the false construction of the corporate university as set apart from real life and seeks to re-envision schooling as always a part of our real world experience, and our real life. Embracing the concept of a democratic education we see teaching and learning as taking place constantly. We share the knowledge gleaned in classrooms beyond those settings thereby working to challenge the construction of certain forms of knowledge as always and only available to the elite.

When teachers support democratic education we automatically support widespread literacy. Ensuring literacy is the vital link between the public school system and university settings.

It is the public school that is the required schooling for everyone, that has the task of teaching students to read and write and hopefully to engage in some form of critical thinking. Everyone then who knows how to read and write has the tools needed to access higher learning even if that learning cannot and does not take place in a university setting. Our government mandates attendance at public school, thereby upholding public policy supporting democratic education. But the politics of class elitism ensure that biases in the way knowledge is taught often teach students in these settings that they are not deemed sophisticated learners if they do not attend college. This means that many students stop the practice of learning because they feel learning is no longer relevant to their lives once they graduate from high school unless they plan to attend college. They have often learned in public school both that college is not the “real” world and that the book learning offered there has no relevance in the world outside university walls. Even though all the knowledge coming from books in colleges is accessible to any reader/thinker whether they attend classes or not, tightly constructed class boundaries keep most high school graduates who are not enrolled in colleges from continued study. Even college students who receive undergraduate degrees leave college settings to enter the world of everyday work and tend to cease studying, basing their actions on the false assumption that book-based learning has little relevance in their new lives as workers. It is amazing how many college graduates never read a book again once they graduate. And if they read, they no longer study.

To bring a spirit of study to learning that takes place both in and beyond classroom settings, learning must be understood as an experience that enriches life in its entirety. Quoting from T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King*, Parker Palmer celebrates the wisdom Merlin the magician offers when he declares: “The best thing for being sad is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails . . . Learn why the world

wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you.” Parker adds to this declaration his own vital understanding that: “education at its best—this profound human transaction called teaching and learning—is not just about getting information or getting a job. Education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life. It is about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world.” Since our place in the world is constantly changing, we must be constantly learning to be fully present in the now. If we are not fully engaged in the present we get stuck in the past and our capacity to learn is diminished.

Educators who challenge themselves to teach beyond the classroom setting, to move into the world sharing knowledge, learn a diversity of styles to convey information. This is one of the most valuable skills any teacher can acquire. Through vigilant practice we learn to use the language that can speak to the heart of the matter in whatever teaching setting we may find ourselves in. When college professors who are democratic educators share knowledge outside the classroom, the work we do dispels the notion that academic workers are out of touch with a world outside the hallowed halls of academe. We do the work of opening up the space of learning so that it can be more inclusive, and challenge ourselves constantly to strengthen our teaching skills. These progressive practices are vital to maintaining democratic education, both in the classroom and out.

Authoritarian practices, promoted and encouraged by many institutions, undermines democratic education in the classroom. By undermining education as the practice of freedom, authoritarianism in the classroom dehumanizes and thus shuts down the “magic” that is always present when individuals are active learners. It takes the “fun out of study” and makes it repressive and oppressive. Authoritarian professors often

invest in the notion that they are the only “serious” teachers, whereas democratic educators are often stereotyped by their more conservative counterparts as not as rigorous or as without standards. This is especially the case when the democratic educator attempts to create a spirit of joyful practice in the classroom. In *Pedagogy of the Heart*, Paulo Freire contends that democratic educators “must do everything to ensure an atmosphere in the classroom where teaching, learning, and studying are serious acts, but also ones that generate happiness.” Explaining further he states: “Only to an authoritarian mind can the act of educating be seen as a dull task. Democratic educators can only see the acts of teaching, of learning, of studying as serious, demanding tasks that not only generate satisfaction but are pleasurable in and of themselves. The satisfaction with which they stand before the students, the confidence with which they speak, the openness with which they listen, and the justice with which they address the student’s problems make the democratic educator a model. Their authority is affirmed without disrespect of freedom. . . . Because they respect freedom, they are respected.” Democratic educators show by their habits of being that they do not engage in forms of socially acceptable psychological splitting wherein someone teaches only in the classroom and then acts as though knowledge is not meaningful in every other settings. When students are taught this, they can experience learning as a whole process rather than a restrictive practice that disconnects and alienates them from the world.

Conversation is the central location of pedagogy for the democratic educator. Talking to share information, to exchange ideas is the practice both inside and outside academic settings that affirms to listeners that learning can take place in varied time frames (we can share and learn a lot in five minutes) and that knowledge can be shared in diverse modes of speech. Whereas vernacular speech may seldom be used in the classroom by teachers it may be the preferred way to share

knowledge in other settings. When educational settings become places that have as their central goal the teaching of bourgeois manners, vernacular speech and languages other than standard English are not valued. Indeed, they are blatantly devalued. While acknowledging the value of standard English the democratic educator also values diversity in language. Students who speak standard English, but for whom English is a second language, are strengthened in their bi-lingual self-esteem when their primary language is validated in the classroom. This valuation can occur as teachers incorporate teaching practices that honor diversity, resisting the conventional tendency to maintain dominator values in higher education.

Certainly as democratic educators we have to work to find ways to teach and share knowledge in a manner that does not reinforce existing structures of domination (those of race, gender, class, and religious hierarchies). Diversity in speech and presence can be fully appreciated as a resource enhancing any learning experience. In recent years we have all been challenged as educators to examine the ways in which we support, either consciously or unconsciously, existing structures of domination. And we have all been encouraged by democratic educators to become more aware, to make more conscious choices. We may unwittingly collude with structures of domination because of the way learning is organized in institutions. Or we may gather material to teach that is non-biased and yet present it in a manner that is biased, thus reinforcing existing oppressive hierarchies.

Without ongoing movements for social justice in our nation, progressive education becomes all the more important since it may be the only location where individuals can experience support for acquiring a critical consciousness, for any commitment to end domination. The two movements for social justice that have had the most transformative impact on our culture are anti-racist struggle and feminist movement. Understanding that the movement for activism often slows down once civil rights

are won, both these movements worked to create locations for academic study precisely so that an unbiased approach to scholarship and learning would not only be legitimized in school and university settings, but would act as a catalyst to transform every academic discipline. Learning would then serve to educate students for the practice of freedom rather than the maintenance of existing structures of domination.

All the progressive study of race and gender taking place in university settings has had meaningful impact way beyond the academic classroom. Democratic educators who championed bringing an end to biased ways of teaching bridged the gap between the academic and the so called “real” world. Long before progressive scholars became interested in race or gender and diversity or multiculturalism, big business recognized the need to teach workers—particularly the deal makers, whose task was to create new markets around the world—about difference, about other cultures. Of course the foundation of this approach was not teaching to end domination but rather teaching to further the interests of the marketplace, but conservatives and liberals alike clearly recognized the necessity of teaching students in this nation perspectives that included a recognition of different ways of knowing. In the wake of this shift, generated by capitalist concerns to maintain power in a global marketplace, anti-racist and anti-sexist advocates were able to lobby successfully for challenging the ways imperialist notions of white supremacy, of nationalism, had created biases in educational material and in the teaching styles and strategies of educators.

Academic discourse, both written and spoken, on the subject of race and racism, on gender and feminism, made a major intervention, linking struggles for justice outside the academy with ways of knowing within the academy. This was really revolutionary. Educational institutions that had been founded on principles of exclusion—the assumption that the values that uphold and maintain imperialist white-supremacist

capitalist patriarchy were truth, began to consider the reality of biases, and to discuss the value of inclusion. Yet many people supported inclusion only when diverse ways of knowing were taught as subordinate and inferior to the superior ways of knowing informed by Western metaphysical dualism and dominator culture. To counter this distorted approach to inclusion and diversity, democratic educators have stressed the value of pluralism. In the essay “Commitment and Openness: A Contemplative Approach to Pluralism,” Judith Simmer-Brown explains: “pluralism is not diversity. Diversity is a fact of modern life—especially in America. There are tremendous differences in our communities—ethnically, racially, religiously. Diversity suggests the fact of such differences. Pluralism, on the other hand, is a response to the fact of diversity. In pluralism, we commit to engage with the other person or the other community. Pluralism is a commitment to communicate with and relate to the larger world—with a very different neighbor, or a distant community.” Many educators embrace the notion of diversity while resisting pluralism or any other thinking that suggests that they should no longer uphold dominator culture.

Affirmative action was aimed at creating greater diversity and it was, at least in theory, a positive practice of reparations, providing access to those groups who had previously been denied education and other rights because of group-based oppression. Despite its many flaws, affirmative action successfully broke barriers to gender and racial inclusion, benefitting white women especially. As our schools became more diverse, professors were often challenged to the core of their being. Old ideas of studying and learning other people’s work in order to find our own theories and defend them were and are being constantly challenged. Judith Simmer-Brown offers the useful insight that this mode of learning does not allow us to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty. She contends: “As educators, one of the best things that we can do for our students is to not force them into holding theories and solid concepts but

rather to actually encourage the process, the inquiry involved, and the times of not knowing—with all of the uncertainties that go along with that. This is really what supports going deep. This is openness.” While I was working with professors at a leading liberal arts college to help them unlearn dominator models of education, I heard white males voice their feelings of fear and uncertainty about giving up models they knew. The males were willing to accept the challenge to transform and yet were fearful because they simply did not know what would be the source of their power if they were no longer relying on a racialized gendered notion of authority to maintain that power. Their honesty helped all of us imagine and articulate what the positive outcomes of a pluralist approach to learning might be.

One of the most positive outcomes is a commitment to “radical openness,” the will to explore different perspectives and change one’s mind as new information is presented. Throughout my career as a democratic educator I have known many brilliant students who seek education, who dream of service in the cause of freedom, who despair or become fundamentally dismayed because colleges and universities are structured in ways that dehumanize, that lead them away from the spirit of community in which they long to live their lives. More often than not, these students, especially gifted students of color from diverse class backgrounds, give up hope. They do poorly in their studies. They take on the mantle of victimhood. They fail. They drop out. Most of them have had no guides to teach them how to find their way in educational systems that, though structured to maintain domination, are not closed systems and therefore have within them subcultures of resistance where education as the practice of freedom still happens. Way too many gifted students never find these subcultures, never encounter the democratic educators who could help them find their way. They lose heart.

For more than thirty years I have witnessed students who do not want to be educated to be oppressors come close to graduation—and then sabotage themselves. They are the students who turn away from school with just one semester or one course to finish before they graduate. Sometimes they are brilliant graduate students who just never write their dissertations. Afraid that they will not be able to keep the faith, to become democratic educators, afraid that they will enter the system and *become* it, they turn away. Competitive education rarely works for students who have been socialized to value working for the good of the community. It rends them, tearing them apart. They experience levels of disconnection and fragmentation that destroy all pleasure in learning. These are the students who most need the guiding influence of democratic educators.

Forging a learning community that values wholeness over division, disassociation, splitting, the democratic educator works to create closeness. Palmer calls it the “intimacy that does not annihilate difference.” As a student who came to undergraduate and graduate education by way of the radical movements for social justice that had opened space that had been closed, I learned to take community where I found it, bonding across race, gender, class, religious experience in order to save and protect the part of myself that wanted to stay in an academic world, that wanted to choose an intellectual life. The bonds I forged were with the individuals who, like myself, valued learning as an end itself and not as a means to reach another end, class mobility, power, status. We were the folks who knew that whether we were in an academic setting or not, we would continue to study, to learn, to educate.