
Bookworm's Corner

Book Review

Hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress - Education as The Practice of Freedom*. NY: Routledge. Reviewed by Carolyn S Gentle-Genitty, MSW, ABD

Gastil (2004) writes that by engaging learners in the classroom, in daily political conversations, there is the potential for understanding and critical assessment in daily life. The challenge, no doubt, is how to engage the learners to the point that they value critical

assessment? Self and worldly criticism is what truly transcends the four walls of academia, to learning that enables learners to be ready and equip to participate as active citizens in the real world. This real world becomes reality in and outside the classroom, particularly for social work educators, as the classroom is the microcosm of the world (Giroux, 2004). It is the playground of policy, political dialogue of justice and injustice, and the place for societal review, fault-finding, and engaged dialogue. As such, there must be as much emphasis in what is taught as well as how the material is imparted and conceptualized within the classroom.

Social work educators must be aware of their role and the role of the learner (Campbell, Masters, & Goolsby, 2004) in engendering a culture of understanding and critical assessment that does not harm or negate the experiences of the clients they serve. Undoubtedly, this is the ultimate quest of most educators however; the classroom is not often structured to mimic this real world. It becomes a sterile four wall room where learners are educated on dominant culture concepts, values, and practices. Learners are rarely taught how to think and evaluate for themselves but to regurgitate only what have been taught to them. An assumption for this is that educators too are cognizant of their positions within the dominant culture and fear losing that status. Not teaching students to think for themselves shackles the educator. They then teach in fear of losing control and power in the classroom and not from a liberatory stance of freedom. This stance of freedom is what hooks bring to the classroom. She warns that the current methods do not free us but enslave us to living lives that are not of our choosing but lives of fear. Thus there is need for change. There is a need for educators to teach learners to think and to revolutionize the classroom from one of pure teaching to one that values learning (Gastil, 2004); a learning that results from freeing the educator to enabling them to teach-to liberate. Yet, it is obvious that when one teaches, it is rare that the thought of forging a revolution in thinking is the aim. This review looks at the process of the classroom revolution through the eyes of bell hook's 1994 book *Teaching to Transgress - Education as the Practice of Freedom*

Overview of the book

A post positivist teaching philosophy with constructivist underpinning is often oxymoronic. It is a philosophy that believes there is some fundamental information that educators must impart, maybe not as truths but in search for some truths, to students. If Adams' (2004) assertions are correct, that students resort to knowledge gained from foundation courses in practice to guide them, then we must be willing to *Teach to transgress* (hooks, 1994). We must be willing, as educators, to go beyond the ordinary in what feels comfortable to teach. The book "Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom" speaks to this oxymoronic nature of teaching. (See author's journey in Appendix I) The book is a teaching tool, a poem, a call for change, a call for a paradigmical shift and a chilling call for educators to stage a revolution in transforming the classroom and themselves. It speaks to all readers but never the same message. The message is different from where you stand in the dialogue and the position you hold in the present society. The book is a 216 page paperback. It has fourteen chapters of which three are discussed herein - Engaged pedagogy, A revolution of values, and Embracing change.

Chapter Reviews - Key points of application

Engaged pedagogy. In this chapter hooks discusses teaching and what the process of teaching ought to be for social work educators. Teaching for hooks' is a process of freeing oneself. A freeing mechanism, that allows the social work educator to be empowered, feels

empowered, and thus empowers their students beyond regurgitation. Such processes move the study of teaching from educating a classroom of passive learners to one rich with engaged active learners. The learners then long for the acquisition of knowledge and openly question their lives and their interactions within society. They seek their educators as one source of their learning and education. With the same token, the educator views the learners as a team of potential knowledge bearers who bring to light diverse realities, understandings, and discussions about apparent real-life misfits and inconsistencies. The classroom then becomes one that transcends a disjointed pedagogy – to a call for something more. A call for a revolution as such, from disjointed to an engaged pedagogy because the time is ripe and there is a sense of immediacy.

Quite a tall order some may say because it moves the educator from a place of comfort to one of discomfort. It pits the educator against the system, against the Holy Grail or ivory towers of education. It suggests that the methods of educating from years gone are no longer effective. Hooks has a point. An underlying assumption is that the pain the educator endures in this transformation - from staging a one-person war without support from departments, colleagues, or even students - is the step to self-actualization, to freedom, to the engaged pedagogy. It calls into question the maintenance of current personal, societal, and political values and questions whether we let go of the power educators hold in the classroom and embrace shared knowledge and power. It is a shared power where both students and educators are key actors in the learning. This creates a values upheaval for the social work educator often resulting in living separate public and private lives – living one life that values freedom and one that freedom stifles it in the name of education.

A revolution of values. This chapter was riveting. It questioned educators and the lay person's value of freedom which is in direct contradiction to the dual lives they live. In one life they value and enjoy freedom but in another they shackle themselves and others; they institutionalize daily patterns, in their public lives enforcing the dominant culture. The education system is part of this public life that deviates from the private life that values freedom. If one is unaware of the intricacies of this reality in education hooks calls us to critically dissect 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.27).

She has a valued premise that many can agree with however, is there a simple answer to what must be done to remain committed to freedom in both our public and private lives? Simple, we need to be cognizant of what needs to be done and embrace the change, despite the feeling of discomfort. We must instigate a revolution that brings about a transformation of our classrooms, our teaching and the content of what we teach (hooks, 1994). Despite the anticipated pain, alienation, and deviation from what we have come to know as truth in our classrooms. In doing so we embrace a plethora of realities different from ours, allowing ourselves and others to be free and embrace the complexity of a multicultural teaching and learning academia – one in which there are multiple truths and multiple realities.

Embracing change: Teaching in a multicultural world. Teaching and learning can no longer be a one size fits all dialogue in four wall boxes. This is especially true for social work educators and practitioners as the faces of our students and clients are changing. This is one reason hooks' work is so timely. If we stage the revolution for change and bring harmony

between our public and private struggles of freedom, it becomes less of a challenge to embrace diversity. Embracing diversity of cultures, persons, views, and understandings moves us closer to accepting others that look, sound, and value things very different from us. It moves us closer from positions of comfort to the acknowledgment of the need for change, to embracing change. A change that is hell bent on moving towards freedom and self-actualization where thinking, teaching, and interaction openly embrace classrooms of diverse knowledge bearers. A change that recognizes this adjustment does not jeopardize power in the classroom but enriches the learning experience creating multiple ways of knowing through multiple learning styles.

Closing

This review gives only a glimpse of the wealth of knowledge and insight with which hooks's write. Each page moves you to value the learning environment, the position of power educators hold in the classroom and their ability to bring change. It teaches educators to value their position in the classroom as experts and to complement their knowledge with that of their learners. It urges us to build a teaching community, celebrate differences, and engage in critical dialogue in search for freedom for self and others. It is a book for all educators. It is a must read for social work educators. However, if educators are fearful of using their power in academia to move from disjointed to an engaged pedagogy, then the debate over change and transformation in the classroom may never begin – to the detriment of the clients we serve.

References

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