

BOOK REVIEW

Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom by bell hooks

New York: Routledge 1994 (224 pages)

ISBN: 978-0-415-90808-5

Sophia Abbot, Collaborative for Learning and Teaching, Trinity University, San Antonio, USA
Contact: sabbot@trinity.edu

I first read bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994) in my first semester as a first-year undergraduate student six years ago. Her writing inspired me to pursue education as a field of study and deeply impacted my focus when I began partnership work. I began to question my voice, space, privilege, and power in higher education through the ways I saw hooks describing her own often quite different experience of the classroom. I have had the pleasure of returning to her work more recently as I've struggled to find language to capture the level of mutual trust, reciprocity, and care so integral to the partnerships I had as an undergraduate student and the partnerships I continue to foster now as an educational developer with colleagues, mentors, students, and faculty. hooks's chapters range in style from reflection to theory to critical dialogue, and this genre switching has helped me examine topics like power in multiple ways and from multiple perspectives. hooks takes readers through a diverse exploration of values, theories, and practices on the topics of feminism, freedom, and teaching, centering her perspective as a black woman in a patriarchal and predominantly white US higher educational context. I focus in this review on the insights she has to offer on power, engaged pedagogy, and institutional transformation to highlight the ways each are integral to partnership.

Partnership is a process of mutual empowerment. In hooks's dialogue with philosopher Ron Scapp (Chapter 10), hooks describes the ideal classroom as "a space where we're all in power in different ways . . . We professors should be *empowered by* [emphasis added] our interactions with students" (p. 152). Language about power in partnership is too often worded as a process of giving power to or sharing power with students. But my partnerships have never been one-way relationships and, when I was a student in partnership with others, I never felt I was the object of those relationships. My partnerships instead have always been about students and faculty/staff mutually empowering each other.

hooks's key concept of engaged pedagogy is closely related to this mutual empowerment. hooks defines engaged pedagogy as a reciprocal and vulnerable-making process for students and the professor, led by many voices, involving shared risk-taking and responsibility, and embracing the whole individual. Reading *Teaching to Transgress* through this partnership lens has called me to be radical, challenging, empowering, supportive, and revolutionary in the way I engage in my own partnership practices.

Partnership is about transforming the academy. hooks reminds us that "the work of transforming the academy" requires us to "embrace struggle and sacrifice. We cannot be easily discouraged. We cannot despair when there is conflict" (p. 33). Partnership leads to transgression: teaching in revolutionary ways, rethinking the source of expertise, upending traditional hierarchies—all of which is difficult and risky, especially in university contexts where large classes and sage-on-the-stage teaching methods are common. The words that hooks uses to describe transformation are ones of emotion—and partnership takes emotional energy. It was far easier for me to write off the efforts of my professors when I didn't fully empathize with them; partnership made this lack of empathy impossible and continues to affect the way I work with faculty in and out of partnerships today.

Partnership must be attentive to the role identity plays in shaping power within the relationship. Overt and covert aspects of our identities inform the way we interact with each other, as well as how easily (or not) we develop trust and reciprocity in our partnership. hooks calls us to be continually conscious of the "politics of domination" (p. 39), or the assumptions we make based on shared and disparate identities which lead us to privilege the voices of middle- and upper-class straight white cis men—the hegemonic class in the United States and much of the world. As a white, upper-middle class, queer cis woman, my partnership with my cis white male mentor is negotiated differently than my former partnership with my South Asian male faculty partner was, and those differ still from my partnership with my East Asian female student. Partnership has always been complicated by these politics of domination, but higher education's increasing diversification continues to raise new and different tensions. What is exciting—what I have begun to see in each of my partnerships and what hooks helps us to imagine—is that partnership also opens the possibility of radical transformation through these connections across difference.

Teaching to Transgress is a necessary read for anyone engaged in or seeking to engage in partnership because it encourages us to embrace the full potential that exists in this work. Partners will find ideas and language that reflect the ideals of partnership and push partnership to be its most revolutionary self. We learn from hooks that partnership must be aware of identity and power, and with awareness partnership can be about mutual empowerment, transgression, and the transformation of the academy. We can, with partnership, make the academy a more radical and equitable space.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

Sophia Abbot is a Fellow in the Collaborative for Learning and Teaching at Trinity University. She leads a student-faculty partnership program and writes on partnership, equity, and academic development.