

Spring 2007

Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope

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Recommended Citation

Mercadal-Sabbagh, T. "Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2007, pp. 107–10, doi:10.25148/clj.1.2.009524.

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Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope. bell hooks. NY: Routledge, 2003. 216 pp. ISBN: 0415968178. \$17.95.

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Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope is a collection of essays, testimonials and interviews that strive to bring about a holistic union of theory and praxis for teachers and activists seeking practical wisdom. In *Teaching Community*, African American feminist scholar bell hooks continues the project she began in her 1994 book, *Teaching to Transgress* (NY: Routledge). Her writing reflects the constant struggle to achieve an effective integration of educational theory and practice. Inspired by Paulo Freire's philosophy of radical pedagogical praxis for consciousness-raising and spiritual growth, both books are written from a standpoint of genuine engagement with the pain, love, and hope of the communities served. Although hooks does not provide a specific definition of community in *Teaching Community*, she relies on the vision of activists and humanists such as Paulo Freire, Henri Nouwen, and Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., who conceptualized community "as a world who would bond on the basis of shared humanness" and impel us to reach out to others (35). This caring for each other, then, is a critical element in creating community. Moreover, in *Teaching Community*, hooks insists that building community requires from us "a vigilant awareness we must continually do to undermine all [...] the socialization that lead us to behave in ways that perpetuate domination" (36). The process of unlearning behaviors of domination such as racism and sexism is difficult and often painful, but it is, as well, an affirmation of the essential goodness and humanity in all of us.

Although she is a rigorous scholar, hooks is known for the absence of citations in most of her work. She explains in *Teaching to Transgress* that this practice is "motivated by the desire [...] to reach as many readers as possible in as many locations" (71). There are other ways in which hooks challenges traditional academia with her vision. *Teaching Community* challenges the oppression inherent in a "banking system of education." Building upon Freire's vision, hooks challenges the teacher-centered system that posi-



tions students as passive recipients of knowledge rather than engaged learners. hooks explains that zero-sum games among students (e.g., competition for strictly rationed grades) promote a “competition rooted in dehumanizing practices of shaming, of sado-masochistic rituals of power” which “stand in the way of community” (131).

Instead, hooks offers an alternative vision. In order to create a learning community that fosters mutual recognition and respect, we must begin by envisioning a common goal of building foundations that cultivate openness and trust. hooks explains that when teaching critical skills, shared underpinnings of respect and trust allow students to learn the difference between “trashing” other individuals or subject matters and offering a careful critique (136). In other words, community-building allows students to engage in a mutual commitment to listen, recognize differences, argue, and make peace. Furthermore, hooks argues that working to de-center power is primordial in a democratic classroom and that this “dislocation is the perfect context for free-flowing thought that lets us move beyond the restricted confines of a familiar social order” (21).

The hierarchical structure of most universities rewards students’ obedience and makes them fear questioning the system. In her prior work, hooks explains that she requires her students to make verbal contributions in the classroom and recognize the value of each individual voice. In *Teaching Community*, hooks expands on that notion. Relying on lessons learned in the civil rights activism of her youth, she calls for a transition from a dominator model to a partnership model, declaring that “conversation is the central location of pedagogy for the democratic educator” (44). Thus students might speak openly, engaging as responsible partners in their own learning process. hooks recounts the experience of having white male students who were afraid of accepting challenges to the white patriarchal supremacist models they had always known. Yet the voicing of fears accompanied their growing willingness to challenge and transform these dominating structures (48).

Though acknowledging that authoritarian practices in institutions create fear and self-censorship that often silence the teacher, hooks reminds educators of the ethical imperative of teaching for a practice of freedom. In struggling against an ideology of domination, then, students and teacher become partners in the project of building community. Throughout *Teaching Community* hooks remains adamant, however, of the necessity of maintaining high academic standards for her students, and she calls for the teachers to serve students by helping them to achieve their potential as well as helping them understand and overcome their limitations.

One of the ways in which she struggles to make theory more useful and inclusive is by integrating anecdotes, interviews, and testimonials into her writing and teaching practice. Throughout her career, hooks has fought to challenge uninspiring dominant teaching practices with an integration of feminist theory and student-participatory learning. *Teaching Community* is, above all, an attempt to open spaces for creative dialogue in the classroom. While such spaces may feel de-centering and “unsafe” for some students, insofar as their lifelong assumptions are challenged, a committed teacher recognizes the benefits of this approach. hooks advocates Mary Grey’s concept of prophetic imagination, which hooks describes as a commitment to “a fully public imagination” in which “what must be takes priority over what is” (195-196). An oppressive culture of domination has made us all afraid, and in hooks words, “we need to laugh together to make peace, to create and sustain community” (196). Although teaching for com-



munity should be a joyous undertaking, hooks still reflects on her painful experiences as a student of color in an integrated educational system that privileges a white identity. Her reflections draw attention to the ways in which white supremacist thinking is embedded in the language of every day life, harming the self-esteem of students of color and other minorities.

In *Teaching Community* we learn strategies for raising challenges and managing conflict in the classroom, since “part of maturing is learning how to cope with conflict” (152). In hooks’ interview with Ron Scapp, a progressive educator, Scapp describes strategies of dealing with classroom conflict. On the issue of white male supremacy, Scapp, a white male, argues that once trust is established in the classroom, dominant positions must be respectfully challenged—in his case, self-challenged—by “pausing,” a practice of respect that listens to and acknowledges other people’s feelings, demonstrating at the same time deference and vulnerability to rejection as a way of repudiating white male privilege (114). Not one to shy away from controversial topics, hooks also recognizes that there are often sexually-charged encounters between teachers and students—“[t]he erotic is always present—always with us” (155)—and urges us to acknowledge the erotic spark so that it can be used in constructive ways in the classroom.

In her preface bell hooks asks whether “there really is an audience of teachers and students wanting to engage the discussions about difference and struggle in the classroom. [...] Would college professors want to read this book?” (ix). I believe there is an audience: *Teaching for Community* is a wake-up call to the academic world, providing a realistic vision of integrating academia and civil society, community, and college. hooks’ vision is sorely needed in this area, as the academic world is increasingly attacked by ideologues who consider the university—especially the Humanities—as irrelevant. Many educational institutions are burdened with hierarchical structures that seem more often concerned with maintaining an entrenched status quo than with the quality of their education. In other words, academia is increasingly perceived by many outside its walls as alienated from the world that surrounds it, lacking an interest in reaching out to communities in need.

hooks addresses this lack of community feeling among students and teachers in our educational systems, and also decries “the loss of feeling of connection and closeness with the world beyond academy” (xv). Recognizing her teaching as a political project, hooks calls for teachers to create community and to “recover our collective awareness of the spirit of community that is always present when we are truly teaching and learning” (xv). Calling for action, hooks joins Peggy McIntosh in arguing that expressing disapproval of a system is not enough to change it (190). What else, then, can educators do? By heeding hooks’ call, academia and community activists can move beyond the walls that separate us and reach towards each other, finding ways in which we are connected through shared values. In other words, the world of academia can, in Ron Scapps words, “pause” and listen to the needs and concerns of the students and people around us. Teachers can be witnesses, advocates, and activists. Educators and educational institutions should find ways to serve the marginalized and the poor and to create partnerships with communities and community activists. This is the how we create community.

Besides arguing for the need to do more than engage our college students in critical thinking, hooks offers practical advice by calling for educators and activists to “talk



to people who do not think as we do,” to take teaching to “churches, bookstores, homes where folks gather” and never to lose sight of the transformative and emancipating powers of learning (xi). *Teaching Community* is largely autobiographical, making the personal political, but by making her work accessible to everyone, hooks’s work embodies the very ethos of intellectual flourishing and community-building that she champions, managing to reach ever broader and diverse audiences in order to create community and better disseminate her radical feminist theory.

