A Critical Analysis of bell hooks’ “Engaged Pedagogy”

In *Teaching to Transgress*, social theorist and critic, bell hooks, opposes conventional educational practices and argues that instead, education should be a source of liberation. Hooks expresses her conviction that learning should excite and engage the whole person: mind, body and soul; It connects the, "...will to know with the will to become" (hooks, 1994, p. 19). Hooks reflects on her educational career, comparing her time as a student in a predominantly black school to her transition with racial integration. She found her learning experience shifted from being personally relevant to one that focused only on retaining material. During graduate school, hooks discovered the pedagogy of Paulo Freire and Thich Nhat Hahn. Their holistic approach to learning provided the inspiration for Hooks to develop her “Engaged Pedagogy” which, pushes students to transgress biases within traditional educational institutions that obstruct ones journey towards self-actualization. Teaching methods require being in a state of constant reevaluation reassessment of the strategies being implemented for effective engagement and learning. Hooks believes that excitement and pleasure are essential to learning. This model fosters a classroom environment that encourages and values the input of all students. Her “Engaged Pedagogy” suggests that, “learning should be exciting sometimes even fun” (hooks, 1994, p. 7), and turn students into active participants in their schooling. The educator must work to nurture curiosity and
eagerness by noticing the individuals who are interested in learning and provide them with a secure environment in which they feel comfortable communicating their ideas and opinions. In generating excitement, the teacher must engage with the student and the material. “Engaged Pedagogy” recognizes understanding material as being a way of life and not simply an act of acquiring information. It works to combine educational curricula with one’s outside life.

hooks was born and raised in Hopkinsville, Kentucky in the 1950s. This was a time in history when black Americans faced oppression and racism. This environment became the basis on which hooks developed her philosophy on education. Her teachers were very influential and had personal connections with students inside and outside of the classroom versus, “bourgeois educational structures…[that] encourag[es] teachers and students to see no connection between life practices [and] habits of being…” (hooks, 1994, p. 16). Her teachers were ones that dedicated themselves to, “…nurturing intellect so that [students] could become scholars, thinkers and cultural workers” (hooks, 1994, p. 2). Their mission was to empower the black community. Education was, “…political [and] rooted in [the] antiracist struggle. […] all [hooks’] black grade schools became the location where [she] experienced learning as revolution” (hooks, 1994, p. 3). In school, hooks learned to challenge ideas that were instilled in her at home, and view the world in new and different ways. It, “…was the place of ecstasy—pleasure and danger. To be changed by ideas was pure pleasure” (hooks, 1994, p. 3). This approach to learning disappeared when schools became desegregated. She was,
“Bussed to all white schools, [and] soon learned that obedience and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected of [students]. Too much eagerness to learn could easily be seen as a threat to white authority” (hooks, 1994, p. 3). The curriculum and educational experience no longer fostered personal relationships with students, and instead placed importance on the regurgitation of information.

hooks proposes a new pedagogical model that transforms the educational experience for both students and instructors, where education becomes the practice of freedom. “Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process” (Hooks, 1994, p. 21). The resulting classroom environment is one that encourages the participation of all students and supports their quest for knowledge. Hooks draws on Paolo Freire’s "The Banking Concept of Education". Freire’s pedagogy revolved around an anti-authoritarian and collaborative approach. It was designed to redefine the power dynamic between student and teacher. The basic idea was for social and political critiques of everyday life become the focus of the curriculum. Hooks’ approach rejects the traditional academic pedagogy where a professor’s authority over the student is embraced, and the student’s only function is to ingest material; instead, learning should be “fun”. She believes student and teacher are equally responsible for cultivating this dynamic. In doing so, however, hooks’ model essentially ends up reflecting the educational framework she objects.

Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Buddhist, peace activist and spiritual leader who continues to influence many, including author bell hooks, in regards to his theories on
mindfulness and peace. Hanh believes that, “…through mindfulness, we can learn to live happily in the present moment—the only way to truly develop peace, both in one’s self and in the world” (). hooks believes that in order for a teacher to empower students one must be self-actualized. This idea of self-actualization developed after becoming familiarized with the work of Hahn. She notes that, “…Hahn offered a way of thinking about pedagogy which emphasized a union of the body, and spirit.” (). She was inspired by Hahn’s emphasis that, “…the practice of a healer, therapist, teacher, or any helping professional should be directed toward his or herself first, because if the healer is unhappy, he or she cannot help many people. […] It is rare that anyone talks about teachers … as healers […] or to suggest that teachers have any responsibility to be self-actualized individuals” (hooks, 1994, p. 15/16). The teacher must accomplish this transformation prior to having the ability to shape young minds, another instance in which more work is required of teachers than of students. The educator is also expected to be mindful of his/her own place in a historic sense as well as contemporary society. If the teacher must arrive to class having reached this self-actualization in what sense is he/she an equal next to the student? How does the teacher find a way to, “…grow and [become] empowered by the process,” if he/she is supposed to have already reached this form of enlightenment? (hooks, 1994, p. 21).

hooks characterizes the classroom as a “communal place” (p. 8) where all members communally work to, “creat[e] and sustain a learning community” (hooks, 1994, p. 8). Hooks appears to place student and teacher on the same level, both sharing the
responsibility of creating a certain atmosphere in the class, however it is evident in her writing that this method actually demands more from the educator than the learner. Responsibility lay on the instructor to maintain a flexible curriculum to meet student’s needs, and for utilizing learning strategies to promote engagement. The instructor is required to recognize diversity and individuality within students. She/he should also be adaptable and account for accommodations the student may need. Additionally, the instructor must adopt approaches that arouse curiosity in the students and, “…embrace the performative aspect of teaching…” (hooks, 1994, p. 11). The teacher must constantly work to ensure students do not become withdrawn. With professors in charge of the classroom dynamic, the student assumes a passive role, conflicting with her “Engaged Pedagogy” wherein students are involved learners. What this model lacks, is an emphasis on intrinsic motivation. A lasting enthusiasm is more likely to be achieved if students relied less on the teacher, and found personal motives to be involved.

Pressure is placed on the professor for developing the aforementioned environment. Hooks credits this responsibility to the teachers “status” (p. 8). “…the professor will always be more responsible because the larger institutional structures will ensure accountability for what happens in the classroom rests with the teacher” (hooks, 1994, p. 8). The desire to excite individuals, and shape independent thinkers is regulated by what the school permits. This disrupts the dance between student and teacher in developing a critical thinking of subject, as they are forced to operate within the imposed
limitations. This statement proves that hooks’ method for “Engaged Pedagogy” continues to preserve the conventional boundaries enforced by traditional education.

With responsibilities assigned largely to the professor, the student becomes less involved in his/her learning experience. This pedagogy only expects basic student contribution to the classroom dynamic (hooks); it does not hold them accountable for the understanding of the material. Additionally, hooks does not hold students responsible for possessing any obligation to initiating a personal interest in the lessons. She also fails to discuss this learning approach as a way for students to develop original and unique critical ideas around matters being discussed. If this methodology is supposed to develop genuine open mindedness and free critical thinking in students one would expect hooks to stress the importance of students taking the proper steps to work through material learned, and form a unique assessment.

There is only so much a teacher can do for the learning environment; the student must be largely responsible for his/her own interest and excitement. Hooks places a huge emphasis on the importance of the classroom, but does not elaborate on ways in which a student can generate their own excitement. The student must have a desire to acquire new knowledge, a curiosity for the material (achievable via personal connections similar to hooks’ own experience that she mentions), and perhaps an insight into the practical application and value of the information. The learner can also be proactive and take the knowledge gained a step further by applying it to future experiences or schooling.
Using the framework and central ideas that bell hooks has presented in *Teaching to Transgress*, a slight reworking of the previously outlined issues would prove an effective pedagogy. The professor and student need to define a relationship that does not label the two as equals; The two will fail to meet this requirement every time if one aims to teach effectively. The student as an active participant must be fleshed out and explored more in depth. Albeit hooks does state that this book shares strategies, it is not intended to serve as a “blueprint” for “Engaged Pedagogy” (p. 10).

The teacher should acknowledge his/her role as an authoritative figure in the classroom, but refrain from outwardly displaying this power. He/she may embrace this and act as a mentor, while simultaneously connecting with students in personal ways. To achieve this, perhaps the teacher can have students create bios; the student can outline their background and interests and this will help establish a basic familiarity with the class before the course begins. The teacher can delegate tasks to students, for example one being class discussions. Students can come in with questions and thoughts, and then determine what direction they would like to continue with for the next reading or class etc.

Additionally, students should be required to make connections between the material and their lives outside of the classroom and then share these links in class to generate conversation and prove they are actively partaking in the class.

Furthermore, the teacher and student must discover a way to engage in a truly open critique of the material, and not let the boundaries of traditional pedagogy get in the way of that. How can one become a free thinker if certain thoughts must be censored or silenced? To reach this liberation in education Aristotle’s thoughts on schooling are an important
reference. According to the philosopher, the aim of education was the attainment of happiness, which is the merging of virtue and wisdom. He believed that to achieve this, “children should be trained in morally appropriate modes of conduct. [He] believed that the community should inculcate values in children and immerse them in supervised activities designed to develop relevant virtues” (Noddings, p. 11). By exposing children to moral reasoning at a young age they will learn through experience/habit and carry this into adulthood. Aristotle did not expect young children to fully comprehend what morality is, in fact he did not feel young people were, “ready for such reasoning until sometime in their twenties” (Noddings, p. 12). However, by conditioning young children in such a manner, it would lay the groundwork for reasoning skills later in life. The educator must connect a philosophy of life in his/her pedagogy and also be conscious of ethics and certain politics. These are some ingredients that yield fulfilled human beings, similar to hooks’ idea of self-actualization.

Bell hooks proposes an “Engaged Pedagogy” in which the dynamic of the classroom becomes more progressive; it requires the student be an active member within the community and also redefines the relationship between student and teacher by placing each on an equal level. A careful analysis concludes that this model she presents the reader with, contradicts itself numerous times. This theory finds itself mirroring certain aspects of traditional pedagogy, restricting freethinking and inadvertently elevating the teacher to a position of power leaving the student in a passive position. “Engaged Pedagogy” ends up
failing to reach its full potential, which promises to transgress the conventional ideologies traditional education practices.
