

Teaching Critical Thinking

Practical Wisdom

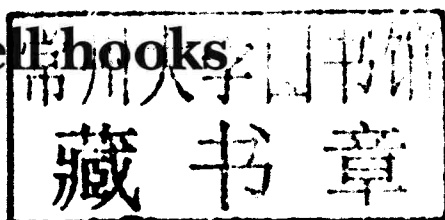
bell hooks



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“Human existence, because it came into being through asking questions, is at the root of change in the world. There is a radical element to existence, which is the radical act of asking questions... At root human existence involves surprise, questioning and risk. And because of all this, it involves actions and change.”

—Paulo Freire

*Learning to Question:
A Pedagogy of Liberation*

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Teaching: Introduction

When I began my schooling in the all-black, segregated schools of Kentucky in the fifties I was lucky to be taught by African American teachers who were genuinely concerned that I, along with all their other pupils, acquired a “good education.” To those teachers, a “good education” was not just one that would give us knowledge and prepare us for a vocation, it was also an education that would encourage an ongoing commitment to social justice, particularly to the struggle for racial equality. It was their strong belief that a teacher must always be humane. Their embodiment of both a superior intellect and an ethical morality shaped my sense of school as a place where the longing to know could be nurtured and grow. Teachers in our segregated schools expected us to attend college. They were infused with the spirit of W.E.B. DuBois, who proclaimed when writing about higher learning for black folk in 1933,

We hold the possible future in our hands but not by wish and will, only by thought, plan, knowledge and organization. If the college can pour into the coming age an American Negro who knows himself and his plight and how to protect himself and fight race prejudice, then the world of our dream will come and not otherwise.

We were taught that education was the surest route to freedom. The teachers were there to guide us, and show us the way to freedom.

When I made my way to college, I was truly astonished to find teachers who appeared to derive their primary pleasure in the classroom by exercising their authoritarian power over my fellow students, crushing our spirits, and dehumanizing our minds and bodies. I had chosen to attend Stanford University, a predominantly white college (primarily because the financial aid packages were better than those offered by black institutions), but I never once considered what it would be like to study with teachers who were racist. Even though I had attended a high school with outspokenly racist teachers who were contemptuous and unkind, I had romanticized college. I believed it would be a paradise of learning where we would all be so busy studying that we'd never have time for the petty things of this world, especially not racism.

We need more autobiographical accounts of the first generation of black students to enter predominantly white schools, colleges, and universities. Imagine what it is like to be taught by a teacher who does not believe you are fully human. Imagine what it is like to be taught by teachers who do believe that they are racially superior, and who feel that they should not have to lower themselves by teaching students whom they really believe are incapable of learning.

Usually, we knew which white professors overtly hated us, and we stayed away from their classes unless they were absolutely required. Since most of us came to college in the wake of a power-

ful anti-racist civil rights struggle, we knew we would find allies in the struggle, and we did. Remarkably, the outspoken sexism of my undergraduate male professors was even harsher than their covert racism.

Going to school in this strange new climate of racial change was both exhilarating and frightening. In those days, almost everyone was proclaiming the rise of a new age of equality and democratic education, but in reality the old hierarchies of race, class, and gender remained intact. And newly constructed rituals ensured they would be maintained. Trying to negotiate these two worlds—the one where we were free to study and learn like everyone else and the one where we were continually made aware that we were not like everyone else—made me a bit schizophrenic. I wanted to learn and I enjoyed learning, but I feared most of my teachers.

I went to college to become a teacher. Yet I had no desire to teach. I wanted to be a writer. I soon learned that working menial jobs for long hours did not a writer make and came to accept that teaching was the best profession a writer could have. By the time I finished graduate school I had encountered all types of teachers. Even though progressive teachers who educated for the practice of freedom were the exception, their presence inspired me. I knew that I wanted to follow their example and become a teacher who would help students become self-directed learners. That is the kind of teacher I became, influenced by the progressive women and men (black and white) who had shown me again and again, from grade school on into college, the power of knowledge. These teachers showed me that one could choose to educate for the practice of freedom.

Nurturing the self-development and self-actualization of students in the classroom, I soon learned to love teaching. I loved the students. I loved the classroom. I also found it profoundly disturbing that many of the abuses of power that I had experienced during my education were still commonplace, and I wanted to write about it.

When I first told my longtime editor at Routledge, Bill Germano, that I wanted to write a book of essays about teaching, he expressed concern. He said then that there may not be an audience for such a book, calling attention to the fact that I was not an education professor; my published work to date had focused on feminist theory and cultural criticism. I explained that in this new book I wanted to explore the connections between engaged pedagogy and issues of race, gender, and class, as well as the impact of Paulo Freire's work on my thinking. As he listened to me, which he always did, Germano was persuaded. And *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* was published to much success in 1994.

Ten years later, I published *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, the "sequel" to *Teaching to Transgress* that continued to explore issues of engaged pedagogy. In the introduction, titled "Teaching and Living in Hope," I talk about the fact that the first teaching book reached an amazingly diverse audience, that it created a space for me to dialogue with teachers and students about education. I shared:

In these past 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.

In the past twenty-plus years I have been asked to address many topics that were not covered specifically in the first two teaching books. I have been asked to comment on various is-

sues, to answer questions that were deemed especially pressing for an individual teacher.

In this final book of the teaching trilogy, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*, I have not followed the previous two books' pattern of writing a collection of essays. Instead, in this book, I have highlighted issues and concerns that teachers and students placed before me and responded to each issue with a short commentary that I've called a "teaching." The thirty-two teachings discuss a wide range of issues, some simple and others complex. Issues of race, sex, and class are addressed from diverse standpoints. I was excited to write these short commentaries; there are so many worthwhile issues surrounding teaching that are worth considering, even if they do not invite a longer essay. A black woman professor wanted me to address how she could maintain authority in the classroom without being viewed through the lens of racialized sexist stereotypes as an "angry black woman." One teacher wanted me to talk about tears in the classroom, while another wanted me to talk about humor. It was particularly challenging to address the question of whether we can learn from thinkers and writers who are racist and sexist. The power of story, the essential role of conversation in the learning process, and the place of imagination in the classroom are just a few of the other subjects addressed in this collection.

All of the topics discussed in this book emerge from my conversations with teachers and students. While the topics are not connected by a central theme, they all emerge from our collective desire to understand how to make the classroom a place of fierce engagement and intense learning.

Teaching I

Critical Thinking

On the cover of my memoir *Bone Black* there is a snapshot of me taken when I was three or four. I am holding a toy made in vacation Bible school, a book shaped like a dove. I often joke that this picture could be called “a portrait of the intellectual as a young girl”—my version of *The Thinker*. The girl in the snapshot is looking intensely at the object in her hands; her brow a study in intense concentration. Staring at this picture, I can see her thinking. I can see her mind at work.

Thinking is an action. For all aspiring intellectuals, thoughts are the laboratory where one goes to pose questions and find answers, and the place where visions of theory and praxis come together. The heartbeat of critical thinking is the longing to know—to understand how life works. Children are organically predisposed to be critical thinkers. Across the boundaries of race, class, gender, and circumstance, children come into the world of wonder and language consumed with a desire for

knowledge. Sometimes they are so eager for knowledge that they become relentless interrogators—demanding to know the who, what, when, where, and why of life. Searching for answers, they learn almost instinctively how to think.

Sadly, children's passion for thinking often ends when they encounter a world that seeks to educate them for conformity and obedience only. Most children are taught early on that thinking is dangerous. Sadly, these children stop enjoying the process of thinking and start fearing the thinking mind. Whether in homes with parents who teach via a model of discipline and punish that it is better to choose obedience over self-awareness and self-determination, or in schools where independent thinking is not acceptable behavior, most children in our nation learn to suppress the memory of thinking as a passionate, pleasurable activity.

By the time most students enter college classrooms, they have come to dread thinking. Those students who do not dread thinking often come to classes assuming that thinking will not be necessary, that all they will need to do is consume information and regurgitate it at the appropriate moments. In traditional higher education settings, students find themselves yet again in a world where independent thinking is not encouraged. Fortunately, there are some classrooms in which individual professors aim to educate as the practice of freedom. In these settings, thinking, and most especially critical thinking, is what matters.

Students do not become critical thinkers overnight. First, they must learn to embrace the joy and power of thinking itself. Engaged pedagogy is a teaching strategy that aims to restore students' will to think, and their will to be fully self-actualized. The central focus of engaged pedagogy is to enable students to think critically. In his essay "Critical Thinking: Why Is It So Hard to Teach?" Daniel Willingham says critical thinking consists

of seeing both sides of an issue, being open to new evidence that disconfirms young ideas, reasoning

dispassionately, demanding that claims be backed by evidence, deducing and inferring conclusions from available facts, solving problems, and so forth.

In simpler terms, critical thinking involves first discovering the who, what, when, where, and how of things—finding the answers to those eternal questions of the inquisitive child—and then utilizing that knowledge in a manner that enables you to determine what matters most. Educator Dennis Rader, author of *Teaching Redefined*, considers the capacity to determine “what is significant” central to the process of critical thinking. In their book *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools*, Richard Paul and Linda Elder define critical thinking as “the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it.” They further define critical thinking as “self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored and self corrective.” Thinking about thinking, or mindful thinking about ideas, is a necessary component of critical thinking. Paul and Elder remind us:

Critical thinkers are clear as to the purpose at hand and the question at issue. They question information, conclusions and point of view. They strive to be clear, accurate, precise, and relevant. They seek to think beneath the surface, to be logical and fair. They apply these skills to their reading and writing as well as to their speaking and listening.

Critical thinking is an interactive process, one that demands participation on the part of teacher and students alike.

All of these definitions encompass the understanding that critical thinking requires discernment. It is a way of approaching ideas that aims to understand core, underlying truths, not simply that superficial truth that may be most obviously visible. One of the reasons deconstruction became such a rage in academic circles is that it urged people to think long, hard, and