

A Critical Analysis

Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope by bell hooks

Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope (hooks, 2003), offers insights that are easily transferable to the field of developmental education. bell hooks' (2003) rich descriptions of her experiences as an educator, both within and beyond the classroom, are valuable reading for educators seeking to expand their perspectives on their profession. I was disoriented by several of her provocative statements, but grateful for the realization that students enrolled in developmental education courses may likewise feel off-balance in our classrooms. This critical analysis addresses the first three chapters, or "teaches" introduced by hooks, and draws out connections between her text and developmental education practice.

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SETTING CONTEXT

As a developmental educator, I am committed to improving my teaching by enhancing my ability to relate to students in meaningful ways. To accomplish this, I strive to seek out fresh perspectives from within and beyond the field of developmental education. One excellent reference from outside of our field, *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope* (hooks, 2003), offers insights that are easily transferable to the practice of developmental educators. *Teaching community* is bold and blunt, weaving issues of race and dominance into many discussions. In this text, bell hooks aims to provide "practical wisdom about what we do and can continue to do to make the classroom a place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership" (p. xv). She approaches this task in a discrete series of "teaches" – concise chapters addressing a variety of issues affecting educators and their students. This critical analysis specifically addresses the first three teaches

introduced by hooks, and draws out connections between her text and developmental education practice.

Teach 1: *The will to learn* (hooks, 2003, p.1) brings to life the drive to learn and grow that is inherent in learners regardless of race, gender, or social class. Reflecting upon this reality is critical for developmental educators, who teach an amazingly diverse student body (Boylan, 1999). hooks asserts that this will persists against, but can be overwhelmed by, dominator classrooms. She describes complicated relationships in academe between the agendas of Black Studies and Women's Studies programs and dominant "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal values" (p.1). hooks structures her arguments around tangible examples such as the transnational literacy movement and domestic reactions to the events of September 11, 2001. Candid parallels exist between the academic relationships outlined by hooks and the historical, sometimes adversarial, relationships between developmental education programs and elitist higher education agendas.

Teach 2: *Time out* (hooks, 2003, p. 13) illustrates hooks' candid admission of burn-out among educators. She addresses not only the common urge for time away from teaching, but also the objective need. hooks (2003) connects the fatigue experienced by classroom educators to issues of race and class in "the corporate university classroom" (p. 21). To support her argument, she describes her own feelings of liberation teaching outside of the classroom.

Teach 3: *Talking race and racism* (hooks, 2003, p. 25) is the longest and most comprehensive of the first three teaches. hooks is blunt in her opening statement that "Teachers are often among the group most reluctant to acknowledge the extent to which white-supremacist thinking informs every aspect of our culture including the way we learn, the content of what we learn, and the manner in which we are taught" (2003, p. 25). She challenges how white people maneuver within white-supremacist culture, both knowingly and unwittingly. Her examples and analyses are provocative, and might spark meaningful in-service discussions among teams of developmental educators who may not always mirror the diversity of their students.

KEY IDEAS

Throughout *Teaching Community*, hooks (2003) develops several clear, well-supported arguments with which I, as the reader, could relate. hooks' description of the necessity of educators spending time away from their classrooms is clearly articulated in a manner with which many educators can likely relate. In addition, her explanation of the value to be gleaned from teaching beyond the classroom is captivating. hooks deftly portrays the experiences of educators that contribute to the need for sabbatical, and convincingly describes how sabbatical experiences later help educators teach "with excellence and grace" (p. 14).

I read with great interest hooks' (2003) statement that "teachers must be totally present in the moment, totally concentrated and focused. When we are not fully present...our teaching is diminished" (p. 14). Her statement triggered memories of the former president of my college making frequent public references to the need to be "fully present." Both of these well-known educators seem to understand the need for educators to take "time away from teaching at some point in their career" (p. 14). I laughed out loud at hooks' recollection of being told that a student needed to take all of her classes "on a Tuesday, and your class time was a perfect fit" (p. 16), because I have experienced this pseudo-compliment myself.

I found I could relate to hooks' (2003) desire to spend part of her teaching career working with students from "poor and working-class backgrounds similar to my own" (p. 17). In developmental education, this is often not a longing but a reality. I believe that my own background as a first-generation college graduate helps me relate to my students.

In comparing her sabbatical experiences with her university teaching, hooks (2003) demonstrates her ability to succinctly describe ideal and less-than-ideal teaching situations. As a teacher who thoroughly enjoys fast-paced summer courses, I can relate to her desire "to be immersed in short intense learning workshops where attention is concentrated and focused" (hooks, 2003, p. 21). In describing traditional teaching constraints, hooks (2003) is unfortunately accurate in her description

of “the corporate university classroom” (p. 21). As I read her pessimistic yet glaringly accurate account of the teaching and learning climate in higher education, I found myself reflecting upon how I might provide more concentrated, focused learning experiences for my students.

In addition to several well-developed arguments, *Teaching Community* (hooks, 2003) includes an underdeveloped assertion. As hooks herself explains, “When we only name the problem, when we only state complaint without a constructive focus on resolution, we take away hope” (p. xiv). hooks (2003) emphasizes that it is possible for critique to “become merely an expression of profound cynicism, which then works to sustain dominator culture” (p. xiv). I’m left wondering why her understanding of white people’s perceptions of race is presented in a cynical, passive voice.

Teach 3: Talking Race and Racism (hooks, 2003) opens optimistically, with great potential for fostering true dialogue over issues surrounding race. However, from my perspective, *Talking Race and Racism* seems to slip into a pattern of presenting provocative viewpoints and then moving on before these arguments are fully developed. I read with great interest hooks’ (2003) opinion that “individual white people, moving from denial of race to awareness, suddenly realize that white-supremacist culture encourages white folks to deny their understanding of race” (p. 26). I also see how it may be possible that “teachers are often among that group most reluctant to acknowledge the extent to which white-supremacist thinking informs every aspect of our culture” (hooks, 2003, p. 25). I believe this argument could serve as a fascinating starting point for a department in-service, especially given that a higher proportion of my colleagues than my students are Caucasian.

FINAL THOUGHTS

bell hooks’ (2003) rich descriptions of her experiences as an educator, both within and beyond the classroom, are valuable reading for educators seeking to expand their perspectives on their profession. Personally, I found great inspiration in her feeling “beloved” by her students (hooks, 2003, p. 19) and felt driven to work toward an understanding of her viewpoints. I respect her efforts to teach with “excellence and grace” (hooks, 2003, p. 14) and, as an educator

myself, feel compelled to try to learn from hooks as well as other accomplished teachers.

Deep learning was difficult for me to accomplish at times while reading *Teaching Community* (hooks, 2003), because I found myself trying to analyze arguments that were uncomfortable or incomplete. I was disoriented by several of her provocative statements, but grateful for the realization that students enrolled in developmental education courses may likewise feel off-balance in our classrooms. In *Teaching Race and Racism*, hooks (2003) herself states, “Anti-racist work requires of all of us vigilance about the ways we use language” (p. 37). In grappling with this truth, I came to see how *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* is truly a powerful book that can serve as a catalyst for my own further development as an educator.

REFERENCES

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