Pedagogical Study Circle: Building Community & Capacity Using bell hooks’
Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom
Maren Oberman
Faculty Communities for Inclusive Teaching, 2016

Project Overview
The aim of this project is to establish a professional learning community (a study circle) through shared examination of a foundational text on critical pedagogy, with ample opportunities for dialogue about inclusive teaching practices. Our study circle supports faculty in exploring pedagogical choices and reflecting on how we create inclusive spaces and brave dialogue in our courses and interactions with students. The book Teaching to Transgress provides empirical evidence, offers strategies, and poses questions to assist teachers in making their pedagogy more inclusive. In the introduction, hooks writes, “I intend these essays to be an intervention – countering the devaluation of teaching even as they address the urgent need for changes in teaching practices” (p. 10). The study circle provides a space wherein faculty members can explore their own perspectives, deepen their understanding of their colleagues’ practice, and build their capacity to utilize what hooks calls “engaged pedagogy.” We are meeting as a group 5 times during the fall 2016 semester over lunch.

Prompting Our Thinking
In our 2nd meeting, we shared passages from Teaching in Transgress that struck a particular chord and used these quotations to spark conversations about a range of topics:

Responding to Students
“They rightfully expect that my colleagues and I will not offer them information without addressing the connection between what they are learning and their overall life experiences.” (p. 10)

“The idea that the classroom should always be a ‘safe,’ harmonious place was challenged. It was hard for individuals to fully grasp the idea that recognition of difference might also require of us a willingness to see the classroom change, to allow for shifts in relations between students. A lot of people panicked. What they saw happening was not the comforting ‘building pot’ idea of cultural diversity, the rainbow coalition, where we would all be grouped together in our difference, but everyone wearing the same have-a-nice-day smile. This was the stuff of colonizing fantasy, a perversion of the progressive vision of cultural diversity.” (p. 30)

“Teaching in a traditional discipline from the perspective of critical pedagogy means that I often encounter students who make complaints like, ‘I thought this was supposed to be an English class, why are we talking so much about feminism?’ (Or, they might add, race or class.) In the transformed classroom there is often a much greater need to explain philosophy, strategies, intent than in the ‘norm’ setting.” (p. 42)

Faces Ourselves
“You never wanted to be a teacher. Since you were little, all you ever wanted to do was write.” (p. 1)

“That means teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students.” (p. 14)

“If we fear mistakes, doing things wrongly, constantly evaluating ourselves, we will never make the academy a culturally diverse place where scholars and the curricula address every dimension of that difference.” (p. 33)

“‘All of us in the academy and in the culture as a whole are called to renew our minds if we are to transform our practices’” (p. 10). The study circle emphasizes that empirical evidence, offers strategies, and poses questions to assist teachers in making their pedagogy more inclusive. In the introduction, hooks writes, “I intend these essays to be an intervention – countering the devaluation of teaching even as they address the urgent need for changes in teaching practices” (p. 10). The study circle provides a space wherein faculty members can explore their own perspectives, deepen their understanding of their colleagues’ practice, and build their capacity to utilize what hooks calls “engaged pedagogy.” We are meeting as a group 5 times during the fall 2016 semester over lunch.

Resources

Next Steps
We still have three meetings left this fall. We will continue reading the text and discussing our pedagogy.

At the end of the sessions, I will gather data from the participants about their experience in the group, impacts they have already seen on their pedagogy, impacts they anticipate, and desired next steps.

I remain interested in co-designing a course geared towards Graduate Student Instructors (GSIs). In the last year, GSIs who work with pre-service teachers in the field have reached out to faculty for support in their efforts to facilitate brave conversations and navigate challenging topics that come up in class. I am hopeful that an outgrowth of the study circle will be a subset of faculty who feel interested in and empowered to design a teaching course using hooks’ text (and others) as the foundation.

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