

# Pedagogical Study Circle: Building Community & Capacity Using bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*

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## 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 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting, we shared passages from *Teaching to 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. 19)

"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 'melting 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, strategy, intent than in the 'norm' setting." (p. 42)

#### Authentic Classroom Communities

"As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence...Used constructively they enhance the capacity of any class to create an open learning community." (p. 8)

"It is apparent that one of the primary reasons we have not experienced a revolution of values is that a culture of domination necessarily promotes addiction to lying and denial. That lying takes the presumable innocent form of many white people (and even some black folks) suggesting that racism does not exist anymore, and that conditions of social equality are solidly in place that would enable any black person who works hard to achieve economic self-sufficiency." (p. 28)

"And I saw for the first time that there can be, and usually is, some degree of pain involved in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches. I respect that pain. And I include recognition of it now when I teach, that is to say, I teach about shifting paradigms and talk about the discomfort it can cause." (p. 43)

#### Facing 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 educational institutions – and society – so that the way we live, teach, and work can reflect our joy in cultural diversity, our passion for justice, and our love of freedom." (p. 34)

### Resources

- **hooks, bell. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge.**
- **Baker, Kelly. (2016). *Teaching as liberation*. <https://chroniclevitae.com/news/1256-teaching-as-liberation>**

### Artifacts

On the first day of the study circle, we had a moving conversation about what brought each of us to the table. Below is a graphic representation of the common themes that emerged from this conversation.

teaching  
discussion  
hopeful courage Freire  
collaboration ideology dilemmas  
engage people  
expertise transformational  
hooks dije  
relationship  
read learn  
opportunity

### 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.

Finally, the group wants more time together, so I plan to engage them in a conversation about how to further this burgeoning community.

### Participants



From top row, L to R: Hyman Bass, Michelle Bellino, Maria Coolican, Maisie Gholson, Simona Goldin, Kendra Hearn, Debi Khasnabis, Carla O'Connor, Maren Oberman, Annemarie Palincsar, Deborah Rivas-Drake, Awilda Rodriguez, Enid Rosario-Ramos, Mary Schleppegrell