

## Education as a Practice of Freedom: Reflections on bell hooks

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### Abstract

This paper critically analyses the conceptions of bell hooks on education. It focuses on the relevance of hook's ideas to the classroom. It is a theoretical paper based on secondary data that seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge in education. The paper is a reflection of hook's reaction to education as a practice of freedom, the feminist theory, progressive holistic education and pedagogy of hope. Hook's ideologies also revolve around her philosophy of the classroom based on race, capitalism, gender, oppression, class domination, liberation, collaboration and praxis in teaching and learning. Freedom in education gives teaching a performative act that offers space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts and can serve as a catalyst drawing out the unique element in each classroom. The transformed and transformative classrooms are a testament to hook's vision of changing the way we think of pedagogy as liberatory for all involved in education, from the teacher to the student and institutions we teach and learn in everyday.

**Key words:** Freedom, education, liberation, gender, race, literacy, culture.

### Introduction

The paper focuses on the philosophy of bell hooks whose ideas have subsequently influenced many people across the world. Throughout her career, students; male and female, white or colored, queer and straight have responded beautifully to hook's call to become self-actualized through feminist practice. Through feminist education, students from all walks of life have had an explosion of freedom. As hooks would say, it is education as the practice of freedom. Students want to be assured so that they can contribute to it and make it their own.

Progressive holistic education and engaged pedagogy is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. This is because it emphasizes the well-being and a process of self-actualization. It is hook's belief in reflection and praxis or action that makes it possible for teachers to teach theoretically and then one day, students will act on such issues. Hooks has shaken young people's minds and hearts to care about themselves and their world.

In her book 'Teaching to Transgress,' hook's shares her, philosophy of the classroom by offering ideas about teaching that fundamentally rethink democratic participation. She writes about the new kind of education. She advocates the process of teaching students to think critically and raises many concerns central to the field of critical pedagogy, linking them to the feminist thought. In the process, her contribution face squarely the problems of teachers who do not want to teach, of students who do not want to learn of racism and sexism in the classroom. Teaching students to 'transgress' against racial, sexual and class boundaries in order to achieve the gift of freedom is for hooks, the teacher's most important goal (hooks, 1994).

This paper therefore analyses bell hook's major themes such as:

- a. Education as a practice of freedom. This is a new kind of education that advocates for the process of teaching students to think critically.
- b. Women's liberation around the themes of culture, gender, race and class.
- c. Progressive, holistic education in engaged pedagogy which is more demanding. These teaching practices emphasize on the well-being of students.
- d. Hook's thinking around the concept of literacy and consciousness were heavily influenced by Paulo Freire.
- e. The notion of praxis is recurring in her works.

### Education as a practice of freedom

Education as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. The learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach, who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred: who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. "To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin..." (hooks, 1994). Hooks goes on to stress the demands this freedom places upon educators in terms of authenticity and commitment. Teachers must be actively involved and committed to the process of self actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students (hooks, 1994). Teachers must be aware of themselves as practitioners and as human beings if they wish to teach students in a non-threatening, anti-discriminatory way. Self-actualization should be the goal of the teacher as well as students. Teaching students to 'transgress' against racial, sexual and class boundaries in order to achieve the gift of freedom, is for hook's the

teacher's most important goal. Hooks speaks to the heart of education today: how can we rethink of teaching practices in the age of multiculturalism?

How should we deal with racism and sexism in the classroom? Hooks investigated the classroom as a source of constraint but also a potential source of liberation. She advocated that universities should encourage students and teachers to transgress and sought ways to use collaboration to make learning more relaxing and exciting. Teaching is a catalyst that calls everyone to become more and more engaged.

For hooks, teaching is a performative act that offers the space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts, that can serve as a catalyst drawing out the unique element in each classroom (hooks, 1984). She makes the point that what is needed are mass-based political movements calling on citizens to uphold democracy and the rights of everyone to be educated, to work on behalf of ending domination in all of its forms– to work for justice, changing the educational system so that schooling is not the site where students are indoctrinated to support what she refers to as 'imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy' or any ideology, but rather where they learn to open their minds, to engage in rigorous study and to think critically.

Hers is a unique voice-and a hopeful one. The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom with all its limitations remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994). The above arguments were ideally influenced by John Dewey.

Freedom is the process that draws on the creative energy of the teachers, students and the school administration in developing a unique vision for the institution. It is an aspect that protects the rights of the free speech in a meaningful sense of term without coercion or hindrance. The purpose of the school is to facilitate learning and it must guard its environment from disturbing influences.

### **Liberation and feminism**

Bell hooks is an American scholar whose work examined the varied perceptions of black women and black women writers and the development of feminist identities. She is devoted to critical consciousness and awareness of oneself and society. She made her commitment to intellectual life in the segregated black world of her childhood. Hooks (1982) urges an end to the degradation and exploitation of black women arguing that this is an integral step in alleviating white supremacy. Part of her efforts was to bring the cultural concerns of African American women into the main stream feminist movement. Hooks had long been troubled by the absence of women of color in women's studies courses. The mainstream feminist movement had focused mostly on the plight of a group of white, college-educated, middle and upper class women who had little to no stake in the concerns of women of color (hooks, 1982).

In her research, hooks found that historically, women of color often found themselves in a double-bind. By supporting the suffrage movement, they would have to ignore the racial aspect of womanhood and if they supported the Civil Rights Movement, they would be subjected to the same patriarchal order that dogged all women. Hooks philosophical work centres around the need to articulate and recognize a feminist theory of empowerment that was accessible to people of color. Hooks argues that feminists have not succeeded in creating political solidarity with women of different ethnicities or socio economic classes. She feels there is need to be a more transformative politics that is not rooted in Western ideology. She believes that intimate sentiments reinstate the ideology that feminism aims to change. Hooks states that if there is to be liberation for women, men must also play a role in the struggle to expose, confront, oppose and transform sexism (hooks, 1982). Her main concern was with black women, where their current situation in the social hierarchy necessarily comes to deal with race and class as well as gender. Hooks has always believed that silence is crucial to the ongoing practices of domination. She remains interested in bringing the gap between the public and the private.

In 1991, hooks collaborated with Cornel West with a primary concern on the notion of black intellectual life centered in the African American community. They believe that rigid lines of separation found in public intellectualism have compromised this intellectual life, hooks argues that black women in particular have been silenced as serious critical thinkers. For hooks, this invisibility is both due to institutionalized racism and sexism, which is reflected in black women's lives both inside and outside of the academy. Her focus on marginality inside and outside of the academy led her to study more closely the nuances of domination found within popular culture. In subsequent works, hooks has critiqued representations of blackness, focusing particularly on gender. She still believes that critical examination is key to gaining self-empowerment and overthrowing systems of domination

(hooks, 1989).

Hooks shows how the so-called 'new feminism' is being incorporated into the commodification of sexuality and is being brought to us as a product that works effectively to set women against one another, to engage us in competition wars over which brand of feminism is more effective. Hooks discusses her decision to participate in

a mainstream public dialogue about feminism and the consequent negative appropriation of her theory into a sexist and phallo-centric discourse.

Students through her contributions are inspired through feminist education to become activists, artists and even hotel managers with a conscience.

### **Literacy and consciousness**

Hooks regards literacy as more than being able to read and write. For her, it allows people particularly those who are marginalized and discriminated against in society to acquire a critical consciousness. Freire's concept of consciousness has been particularly important to her work. She acknowledges that within the teaching and learning relationship more often than not, the question of power and authority raises its head (hooks, 2003).

In a conversation she had with Gary Oslon, she said that what she tries to do is to acknowledge her authority and the limitations of it and then think of how both teachers and students can learn together in away that no one acquires the kind of power to use the classroom as a space of domination. She also makes the point that this domination is not restricted to the teacher / student relationship, but where there is diversity amongst the students particularly around the issues of race, gender and sexual practice. It is possible for everyone to engage in power struggles and infact for certain students to have potentially the power to coarse, dominate and silence.

In order to create a learning environment within the classroom, she aims to diffuse hierarchy and create a sense of community. Hooks maintains that the classroom should be a place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teachers and students work in partnership (hooks, 2003, p. xv).

In the integrated school, bell hooks was confronted with all-white teachers who she judged were not interested in transforming the minds of their pupils but simply transferring irrelevant bodies of knowledge. She writes that the knowledge they were supposed to soak up bore no relation to how they lived or behaved. Bussed to white schools bell hooks recalls "we soon learned that obedience and not zealous will to learn was what was expected of us" (hooks, 1996a & 1996b). Teachers should teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of their students and is essential if students are provided the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin (hooks 1994).

Bell hooks is heavily influenced by Paulo Freire, "it is in-practical that we maintain hope even when the harshness of reality may suggest the opposite" (hooks, 1994, p.13). She claims that she was like a person dying of thirst when she first encountered Freire and although she did not agree with everything he said, she maintains that, 'the fact that there was some mud in my water was not important? Freire had a profound effect on her thinking and on her practice particularly around the concepts of literacy and consciousness. For hooks, literacy is essential to the future of the feminist movement because lack of reading, writing and critical skills serves to exclude many women and men from feminist consciousness. Not only that, it excludes many from the political process and the labour market. She regards literacy as more than being able to read and write. For her, it allows people particularly those who are marginalized and discriminated against in society to acquire a critical consciousness (hooks, 2003).

She asserts that the ignorant, the uneducated and some educated people have always threatened intellectual freedom. They do not see clearly the precious nature of such freedom and the necessity of dialogue. They prize other values more such as national pride, conformity and state security' often retaining these values and letting the freedom go in the event of any conflict. A school community that aspires to foster intellectual freedom must encourage dialogue, for otherwise it will find itself with people who pay lip service to certain noble ideas and fail to develop in conduct.

She aspires for a democratic society whose moral premise is that each individual has a right to education that will permit him/her to achieve his/her maximum growth as a person. Our duty is to work for or support whatever measures of reconstruction we deem necessary to remove the social obstacle to freedom of learning. It is perfectly legitimate to expect the institution of higher learning to study these problems and propose solutions to them (hook, 1974).

Greene (1995) echoes the same feelings of literacy with a belief that education is supposed to be a means of giving every person access of discourse that the person preferred, that literacy is a personal achievement, a door to personal meaning. It therefore takes an effort to realize how deeply literacy is involved in relations to power and how it must be understood in context and in relation to the social world. She further asserts that people are born into culturally defined literacy that they came to acquire in the course of growing up.

### **Praxis**

Bell hooks also promotes this notion in a similar way to Freire's i.e. a combination of reflection and action and regards her notion of engaged pedagogy as one which require praxis on the part of not only students but also the teacher. Paulo Freire, whose perspective is derived from both Marxist and Existentialist thought, maintained that for the oppressed to become authentic selves they must fight not only for freedom from hunger, but for freedom to created and construct, wonder and venture.

True knowledge, Freire contended, emerges only through restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful, critical inquiry with other people about their relations to the world. Therefore, he advocated that instead of learners receiving, filling and storing deposits made by educators, learners should be allowed to develop praxis, an inventive way of life that encourages free, creative reflection and thoughtful action in order to change the world, even as the learners are transformed in the process (Encyclopedia of the social and cultural foundations of education, 2008). Freire put forward the notion that authoritarian forms of education such as banking education prevented learners from 'knowing' the world and seeing it as something which can be changed. He believed that authoritarian forms of education inhibited the liberation and freedom of the oppressed. Freire argued that change could come through a process of dialogue and reflection leading on to change through action or intervention and political change. Freire called this process praxis (Freire, 1973).

### **Transformation**

Education is a key instrument for the transformation of the society. Acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills by members of the society is what makes that particular society different from other societies. Dewey, just like hooks showed great interest in education of the child and left behind great ideas which form the kingpost of the practice of education in modern educational institutions. Dewey gave a framework of what he believed to be the ideal education in modern educational institutions. He tried to answer the question 'what is education?' He went ahead and addressed the issue of what the subject matter to be included in the curriculum of the child should reflect and the reason why proper selection of content to be included in course work is necessary.

The inclusion of transformation within the actions of transmission seems evident in Dewey's thinking. For Dewey, education was the means of both perpetuating and improving (transforming) society. To perpetuate and improve society, educators have to be very selective in determining and organizing the experiences of the learners. For Dewey, experience must be channeled properly, for it influences the formation of attitudes of desire and purpose. Thus, educators have an awesome responsibility to reflect and then determine, with the help of others in society, what content and activities (or what Dewey calls experiences) enhance individual personal and social growth and lead to the improvement of society (Dewey, In Reed & Johnson, 1996).

### **Implications for the Kenya curriculum**

In the Kenyan context the contributions of bell hooks tend to aim at vision 2030, Millennium Development Goals, free primary education and Education for All by advocating for literacy and feminism.

Education as the practice of freedom is realized by promoting individualized teaching and learning while putting into consideration children's individual differences. Freedom in education emanates by the adoption of cultural diversity in curriculum development. Advocacy for child-centered methods of learning helps to promote collaboration and minimizes domination and oppression in the classroom situation.

Hooks draws upon Freire's ideas to talk about the problem of race in the institution where she was teaching. She believes that the classroom can be made a democratic setting where everyone feels responsible to contribute to a central goal of transformative pedagogy. "As the classroom becomes more diverse, teachers are faced with the way the politics of domination are often reproduced with the educational setting. For example, white male students continue to be the most vocal in our classes. Students of color and some women express fear that they will be judged as intellectually inadequate by those peers..... some express the feeling that they are less likely to suffer any kind of assault if they simply do not assert their subjectivity" (hooks, 1994, p. 136). Students often fear to voice their feeling because of the created public discourse. This is identical with our ethnic problem in Kenya where minority group's voice is not heard in the public discourse. These are norms that had been set up in the past by those in power.

Liberation and feminism is realized in the Kenyan education system by advocating for gender parity. Both boys and girls at present receive equal opportunities for education. Progressive education is a curriculum theory that places emphasis on the child. The student centered curriculum is whereby learners are motivated and made interested in the learning task.

In a nutshell, hooks ideas have led to the revision of new courses and topics in the syllabus such as sex education, drug addiction, race relations and urban problems to suit the current situations. The extension of the curriculum beyond the school walls through such innovations as work-study programmes and external degree programmes to meet educational needs for all people. Finally, the relax of academic standards in relation to entries for further studies.

### **Conclusion**

Hooks concern with the interlacing dynamics of 'race', gender, culture and class and her overall orientation to the whole person and to their well-being when connected with her ability to engage with educational practice in a direct way set her apart from the vast bulk of her contemporaries. Hers is a unique voice - and a hopeful one. The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom with all its

limitations remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994). Hooks (2003) argues that it was imperative to maintain hope even when the harshness of reality may suggest the opposite.

Though she has often been accused of being confrontational, hooks never wavered in her belief that change is a painful and disconcerting process. She continues to believe in the transformative power of language and has become a master at turning private pain into public energy.

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