

TEACHING TO
TRANSGRESS:
EDUCATION AS
THE PRACTICE OF
FREEDOM

by bell hooks

INSIGHTS BY:

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ABOUT:

This is a comprehensive summary of the book Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom by bell hooks. Covering the key ideas and proposing practical ways for achieving what's mentioned in the text. Written by book fanatic and online librarian Ivaylo Durmonski. (Printable available only for supporting members.)

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Professors treat students as passive consumers, careless of their thoughts on the subject.
- Encouraging critical thinking happens by creating a safe environment where everyone feels welcome to share.
- Education should be approached not as an obligation, but as a tool to reach freedom.

ABSTRACT:

A collection of essays on teaching and education by the one and only bell hooks. An author devoted her life towards encouraging students to open their minds and hearts so they can see past the limiting boundaries set by society. Teaching to Transgress offers refreshing concepts that reveal what really happens in the classroom - how students are taught obedience, not encouraged to think critically. And most importantly, what can be done by teachers so youngsters, regardless of race and gender, can find their path and “transgress”.

THE CORE IDEA:

Education should be enabling. It should provide us with the means to fulfill our intellectual destiny. To find freedom. To uplift ourselves and others. Not reinforce racist stereotypes. The work of bell hooks is heavily influenced by the thinker Paulo Freire. The current volume uses Freire’s work to battle the so-called banking model of education. A concept stating that students are viewed as empty containers into which educators must put knowledge. Hooks uses critical pedagogy to free students from the created school prison, so they can view the other side of knowledge. Namely, that learning could be liberatory.

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KEY LESSONS FROM TEACHING TO TRANSGRESS:

- LESSON #1: TEACHING SHOULD ENCOURAGE
- LESSON #2: EDUCATORS ARE ROLE MODELS
- LESSON #3: EDUCATION AS THE PRACTICE OF FREEDOM
- LESSON #4: IT'S NOT ONLY ABOUT LEARNING. IT'S ABOUT THRIVING
- LESSON #5: DON'T REMOVE THE BODY FROM THE MIND

LESSON #1:

TEACHING SHOULD ENCOURAGE

Teachers are not stage performers. You won't see a crowd of screaming fans following their every move and begging for autographs. Yet, they are more important than the most famous rock bands in the world.

The book opens with a personal story of the life of bell hooks.

The author shares how her relationship with the classroom decayed. Transformed from exciting to, in her own words, "feel more like a prison."

The reason for this drastic change of heart was her realization that schools, and teachers for that matter, treat students as objects.

They don't try to build relationships with their students. They primarily exist to "throw" information at them. Careless of the

opinion of students and what they think about the discussed subject.

Quite normally, this creates a place of firm boundaries. The teacher is this authority figure whose views cannot be questioned and the receiving party is simply there to consume, not to think.

Despite this crippling realization, bell hooks graduated and kept her beliefs on how education should approach.

As she writes:

“I graduated from school still believing that education was enabling, that it enhanced our capacity to be free.” bell hooks

Her passion for the subject led her to extraordinary realization.

She adopted the theory of critical pedagogy. A view where the classroom is not this dull place where only one person speaks. But an exciting place where students are obligated to participate in the conversation, to share their views and comment. Not remain silent.

While other professors thought that creating “excitement” in the class will disturb the subject matter. Bell hooks believed otherwise. That by creating a safe environment where everyone feels welcome to share enables students to learn and leads to intellectual and spiritual growth.

The presence of everyone in the classroom should be valued.

And when people are encouraged to speak. They find pleasure in learning. Students become active participants. Not passive consumers.

“To begin, the professor must genuinely value every one’s presence. There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes. These contributions are resources. Used constructively they enhance the capacity of any class to create an open learning community.” bell hooks

LESSON #2:

EDUCATORS ARE ROLE MODELS

Teachers are not simply there to share facts. To be praised for their intellectual capacity. For the number of books they've read. When teachers are in front of a class. Except sharing insights about a particular subject. They promote a specific behavior.

However, this is not how most professors see themselves. And this is not what universities care for.

Bell hooks writes that there is a separation between what the teacher shares as material and who the teacher really is as a person. Academia is careless of what type of person you are – good or bad. It only cares how you present your lectures. As mentioned in the book:

“This meant that whether academics were drug addicts, alcoholics, batterers, or sexual abusers, the only important aspect of our identity was whether or not our minds functioned, whether

we were able to do our jobs in the classroom.” bell hooks

But this kind of forced separation between the public and private life sends an agnostic message to students. It promotes intellect over being a well-grounded person. A person whose words are in line with his behavior outside the classroom.

Furthermore, this carelessness of wholeness is what really creates the crisis in education. Professors don't really believe what they are lecturing. They can be talking about a subject that can lead to intellectual growth. To self-actualization. But by the way they present the information, you can sense that they are not self-actualized themselves. They simply share, they don't actually believe the words coming out of their mouth. Comments and discussions in such classes are often rare because professors instill fear in the class. They view themselves as kings of their mini-kingdoms, and questioning their views is unthinkable.

That's not the way educators should educate, explains bell hooks.

Professors shouldn't be viewed as teachers alone. But as whole individuals. People who encourage discussions and are in front of the class to enhance the minds of the students. But this shouldn't happen only by the shared material. But also by the behavior of the lecturer inside and outside the classroom.

“Professors who embrace the challenge of self-actualization will be better able to create pedagogical practices that engage students, providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply.” bell hooks

LESSON #3:

EDUCATION AS THE PRACTICE OF FREEDOM

Despite intensely negative experiences around the school system, bell hooks graduated. Her thirst for knowledge and her desire to transform the broken education system inspired her to enter the academic circle. Strongly holding her belief that education is a tool that can lead to freedom.

Her continuous exploration to find an alternative way of teaching led her to the work of Paulo Freire. A Brazilian thinker who professed a better teaching model.

Freire viewed education as a way to enhance humanity. Not simply to transfer knowledge from one person to another.

It's about constantly reflecting on the world and finding ways to change it for the better.

And this happens with the help of students.

Using the work of Paulo Freire, bell hooks started to experiment in her classes. The first thing was to create the classroom a neutral, safe place. A place where everyone feels welcome to share. People are to be treated as people, not as empty containers who should be filled with information.

Or more precisely, she was building a community of people thirsty for knowledge.

Students should contribute to the conversation. They should express their opinion. As hooks shares, “make their presence felt.”

For many professors, however, the idea of a “safe” place is quite conflicting with how bell hooks and Paulo Freire viewed it. A safe place for such professors is lecturing to a group of quiet students who only speak when they are called on.

Sadly, this type of setting doesn't lead to any meaningful change in students. Even if they are thirsty for knowledge, the only thing they find is mud water. A professor who is careless of their opinion.

The opposite practice, bell hooks calls the theory of liberatory practice.

When people are engaged in open discussions. This leads to reflection. And reflection leads to change in thinking, which leads to change in behavior.

Students are prompted to share. To comment. Not to keep their opinion to themselves. When personal experiences are expressed. This helps everyone in the classroom to make sense of everyday life. This invites critical thinking. Reflection and therefore positive change.

This type of teaching works for many reasons. But a useful metaphor the author uses to explain this is a recipe for baking bread.

If you have all ingredients for baking bread but no flour. The most important component is flour, even though flour alone won't be enough. When all the students share, each one of them contributes with an ingredient. The collective efforts of all of them lead to a fully baked bread.

Viewed from this angle, suddenly, sharing personal experiences is not wasteful to the class. Quite the opposite. It's the thing that enables everyone in the classroom to reach the top of the mountain.

That's how education should be approached. Through sharing and collective thinking. By doing this, the whole class reaches freedom.

“In the classroom, I share as much as possible the need for critical thinkers to engage multiple locations, to address diverse stand points, to allow us to gather knowledge fully and inclusively.”
bell hooks

LESSON #4:

IT'S NOT ONLY ABOUT LEARNING. IT'S ABOUT THRIVING

Learning can help you survive in the world. You can get a job. You can do OK. But aren't we interested in more than surviving?

Bell hooks wanted more for her students. She wanted them to thrive.

That's why she positioned herself as a learner in the class. This was an important differentiation.

A teacher, in the traditional sense, is a person who is focused on teaching. He is the authority and everything he says should be viewed as accurate. He doesn't think that he can learn anything new from students. Therefore, he's not encouraging others to voice their opinion. Even if he does, the teacher is instilling a damaging concept in the fragile minds of the students. That they don't have anything valuable to contribute to the lecture. Therefore, students can't take themselves seriously.

A professor who views himself as a learner, on the other hand. Don't believe he knows everything. He encourages students to share, not only because this is helpful for others and for the topic. But for him, too. He wholeheartedly believes that he can learn from his students the same way they learn from him.

This type of thinking creates quite a change in the classroom. Students start to see that their opinions matter. That *they* matter. That teachers and students are equal. They are equally interested in expanding their intellectual horizons and thriving in the world, not simply surviving.

When people attending classes are not prevented from confronting the opinion of the teacher. When they are not encouraged to think the same thoughts as the teacher. They engage in critical thinking. The repeating theme in the book.

And it makes sense. Intellectual growth can't happen if you simply absorb what is being presented. It happens when you challenge the incoming ideas. Think about them differently. Play with them. Restructure them. This engages students. It provokes them. And this makes them want to thrive.

“Last semester, I had a class where when I finished I was walking on air. It had been a great class. The students left realizing that they didn't have to think like me, that I wasn't there to reproduce myself. They left with a sense of engagement, with a sense of themselves as critical thinkers, excited about intellectual activity.” bell hooks

LESSON #5:

DON'T REMOVE THE BODY FROM THE MIND

There are numerous books and scientific papers on how to teach. How to present a lecture. How to engage students. Even how to make learning pleasurable.

There is almost nothing on what a teacher should do when he/she needs to use the restroom.

That's an uncommon challenge you'll see placed in a book. But surely one you'll encounter.

In all types of settings, we try to remove the body from the mind. When we teach – or when we do business – we try to deny the needs of our body – as if those needs don't exist. But this, as the author writes, can wound students.

This happened to bell hooks. She was treating a student in a bad way because, it turned out, she was erotically drawn to him.

This wasn't initially obvious. She discovered her lustful thoughts after a deep talk with her therapist. Apparently, the student complained about her behavior in the class. And since bell hooks was trying to repress her body wants – without realizing this at all – the outcome was treating a person harshly.

Deflecting, repressing, and denying our body wants can lead to unwelcome behavior.

Not only that you can hurt a student – typically by being unnecessarily harsh. But it won't allow you to move forward as a person.

Repressing what the body wants will make things worse, not the opposite.

What the author shares as advice is to enter the classroom – or any setting for that matter – whole. Don't allow yourself to become a disembodied spirit. Acknowledge the needs of the body and deal with them.

This, of course, doesn't mean having a relationship with the student. But rather, to understand why your behavior towards a specific person is somehow different.

We usually tie the word erotic to its sexual meaning. But it's much more. Erotic, from the Greek word eros, is a source of creative impulse. It's part of ourselves. When embraced, it can help us know ourselves better and live in the world more fully.

“Understanding that eros is a force that enhances our overall effort to be self-actualizing, that it can provide an epistemological grounding informing how we know what we know, enables both professors and students to use such energy in a classroom setting in ways that invigorate discussion and excite the critical imagination.” bell hooks

ACTIONABLE NOTES:

- **Don't agree:** Traditionally, you should agree with the teacher and with any type of authority figure for that matter. That's how we are taught. But what if you don't? The author shares a story of confronting her professor in relation to how women are viewed. While her comment was not welcomed. It created a space for critical thinking, for an open conversation and elaboration on the subject. Everyone in the class started to re-think their initial conviction. Too often, we take a position of passivity – believing everything we're told. But how is this helping us grow? Don't aim to agree with what everyone is saying. Especially when the person saying it is observed as an authority figure. Do the opposite, actually. First consider, how what the other person is saying is not true. This simple exercise will help you see the argument from all sides. Allowing you to find new and exciting ideas.
- **Encourage critical thinking:** Few people care if you develop intellectually. Teachers primarily care about their own careers. About their own wants. That's why the classroom is so impressively dull. Similar things happen when we enter the corporate world later in life. No matter how caring others present themselves to be, they are usually not that interested in your progress. It's up to you to take care of your personal development. Bell hooks explain that critical thinking is the doorway to personal and professional development. But this is something you need to practice. Few will encourage you to think outside the box. Regardless, this should be part of your mental toolkit. To make it easier for you, and at the same time push

the boundaries of the people around you, encourage this way of thinking in others. Help others challenge the obvious so you can grow together.

- **Share the negatives:** We become complicit by not telling others their bad sides. We don't want to make them feel bad because it will mean more work. The author tells a story of a professor who was coming drunk in a classroom and giving the same lecture a couple of times. The class didn't tell him because they didn't want to disrupt his authority – his image of himself. Personally, I think that we do this more often than we should. We see the flaws in the people who are closest to us, and we do nothing. We tell ourselves that is out of love. But is this the best for the person? Apparently not. It surely won't feel nice to shatter the self-created image of the person now. But in the long run, and if we serve our observations to our friends in a kind way, it will help them grow. Yes, it will be more work for us, and for the person. But work towards the right direction.
- **Exercise the right of free speech:** People from minorities. People who are not financially wealthy. Are not only underprivileged because of the just mentioned qualities. But because these qualities lead to additional regression – they shut their mouth and their mind. This is common in schools. Uncool kids are not comfortable exercising their right to free speech because they're afraid of being publically shamed by the cool kids. This further expands the gap between different genders and also different financial backgrounds. Free speech and free thoughts are invaluable for your intellectual improvement. Even if you don't feel like sharing your ideas with others. You should definitely share them. Even if this is only to yourself – by writing them down. Talking about your ideas can lead to more ideas and more

opportunities for positive change.

- **Education as the practice of freedom:** The two heroes in the book are critical thinking and reaching freedom through education. But they are not left unchallenged. The villain is the banking model of education. Namely, the broken system that treats students as objects. Careless of the passions and the desires of students. Professors are usually mere transmitters of information. They don't enter the classroom trying to understand others. To encourage them to grow. They stand behind the podium or the desk, and "teach" by reading a lecture. But learning is, and it should be, much more. As the author writes, education offers "ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress." Even if you're no longer part of a traditional class. Don't stop educating yourself. Learning should always be an inseparable part of our daily lives, as eating and sleeping.

COMMENTARY

Firstly, if you are wondering why bell hooks is with lower case. Let me say that it's not a grammar error. That is how she wanted her pen name to be spelled. She did that because she wanted readers to focus more on her works, not on her name. In her words, focus on the "substance of books, not who I am".

Teaching to Transgress is a rare blend. From a practical perspective, it offers strategies for teachers so they can create a more dynamic, inspiring atmosphere in the classroom.

Heavily influenced by the works of Paulo Freire, bell hooks showcases

how the method of critical pedagogy can uplift students. How you can stop treating the young souls sitting behind the desks like containers. And most importantly, how you can keep the spark for learning alive in the youngsters.

This happens mainly through:

- Acknowledging that students are not objects that should be filled with information. They are living creatures with personal desires and experiences. Desires that need to be acknowledged; Experiences that should be brought to light.
- Creating a welcoming environment in the classroom where everyone should make his/her presence felt. Everyone should feel welcome to share and take part in the conversation regardless of race, color, and gender.
- Viewing education as a way to thrive in the world. A tool that can lead to new ways of thinking and therefore help individuals progress in life.

Apart from the invaluable lessons, I see the book as a mighty sword that bell hook uses to tackle the obsolete ways educators think about teaching.

From every page, you can sense the commitment of bell hooks. How emotionally attached she was to the subject of pedagogy and teaching. She passionately shares her personal stories in relation to the classroom. This includes both good and bad memories that shaped her life as a teacher.

Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom is

more than a book on education and learning. It's a book that wants both educators and students to transgress above the limiting beliefs set by society. By doing so, encourage the development of new ideas and new ways of thinking.

Key takeaway:

The second-worst thing you can do in the classroom – the first being not listening to the teacher. Is agreeing with the teacher. Agreeing with everything he/she says. Not that you should confront every sentence. But challenging the ideas brought to light leads to new ideas. It invites critical thinking and discussions. Of course, this is not applicable only to classrooms. Blindly obeying authority figures is an unhealthy habit that won't help you progress.

NOTABLE QUOTES:

“Ideally, education should be a place where the need for diverse teaching methods and styles would be valued, encouraged, seen as essential to learning.” bell hooks

“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.” bell hooks

“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.” bell hooks

WORKSHEET

Reading alone won't help you understand the actionable notes. You need to engage with the content. Answer the question below to plan your next steps:

1/ What are the common convictions of the people around you? Challenge them:

2/ Practice critical thinking by discussing ideas on paper:

3/ List the flaws of your best friend. How can you present them without hurting him?

4/ To keep your mind thriving, share your ideas, don't hold them:

5/ What daily actions you're taking to continue your education?

THANKS FOR READING!

Ivaylo Durmonski

