



# Engaged Pedagogy

By bell hooks

**E**ngaged pedagogy begins with the assumption that we learn best when there is an interactive relationship between student and teacher. As leaders and facilitators, teachers must discover what the students know and what they need to know. This discovery happens only if teachers are willing to engage students beyond a surface level. As teachers, we can create a climate for optimal learning if we understand the level of emotional awareness and emotional intelligence in the classroom. That means we need to take time to assess who we are teaching. When I first began work in the classroom, like many teachers I was most concerned, if not a bit obsessed, with whether or not a substantive amount of information and assigned material was covered. To make sure we had time in the classroom to cover the material that I believed really mattered, I did not take the time to ask students to introduce themselves or to share a bit of information about where they were coming from and what their hopes and dreams might be. I noticed, though, that when I did make time for everyone to get acquainted, the classroom energy was more positive and more conducive to learning.

Knowing all that I know now after more than thirty years in classrooms, I do not begin to teach in any setting without first laying the foundation for building community in the classroom. To do this it is essential that teacher and students take time to get to know one another. That process can begin by simply hearing each person's voice as they state their name. When I first encountered Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh I was awed by his insistence that when a student is in the presence of a powerful, insightful teacher much can be learned even before words are spoken. He explains: "The Chinese say, 'when a sage is born, the water in the river and in the plants and trees on the mountains nearby became clearer and more green.'" Even though Thay (Nhat Hanh) is speaking about a spiritual teacher, those of us who have been in classrooms with incredible professors know that their presence illuminates.

bell hooks, "Engaged Pedagogy," *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*, pp. 19–22. Copyright © 2010 by Taylor & Francis Group LLC. Reprinted with permission.

When we see the classroom as a place where teacher and students can share their “inner light” then we have a way to glimpse who we are and how we might learn together. I like to engage the minds and hearts of students by doing simple writing exercises, sentence completions. We might all write a spontaneous paragraph beginning with a phrase like “my most courageous moment happened when...” Or we might bring a small object to class and all write a short paragraph about its value and importance. Reading these short paragraphs aloud to one another, we have the opportunity to see and hear each unique voice. Most professors know what it is like to sit in a classroom of twenty or more students, where you wish for scintillating dialogue and only the same two or three students talk. Writing and reading paragraphs together acknowledges the power of each student’s voice and creates the space for everyone to speak when they have meaningful comments to make. I never ask students to do an in class writing assignment that I am not willing to do. My willingness to share, to put my thoughts and ideas out there, attests to the importance of putting thoughts out there, of moving past fear or shame. When we all take risks, we participate mutually in the work of creating a learning community. We discover together that we can be vulnerable in the space of shared learning, that we can take risks. Engaged pedagogy emphasizes mutual participation because it is the movement of ideas, exchanged by everyone, that forges a meaningful working relationship between everyone in the classroom. This process helps establish the integrity of the teacher, while simultaneously encouraging students to work with integrity.

The root meaning of the word “integrity” is wholeness. Hence, engaged pedagogy makes the classroom a place where wholeness is welcomed and students can be honest, even radically open. They can name their fears, voice their resistance to thinking, speak, out, and they can also fully celebrate the moments where everything clicks and collective learning is taking place. Whenever genuine learning is happening the conditions for self-actualization are in place, even when that is not a goal of our teaching process. Because engaged pedagogy highlights the importance of independent thinking and each student finding his or her unique voice, this recognition is usually empowering for students. This is especially important for students who otherwise may not have felt that they were “worthy,” that they had anything of value to contribute.

Engaged pedagogy assumes that every student has a valuable contribution to make to the learning process. However, it does not assume that all voices should be heard all the time or that all voices should occupy the same amount of time. Early on in my graduate career and in the first years of teaching, I had been a student in classes where teachers were almost obsessively concerned with “fairness.” To them, this meant that every student should be given the same amount of time to speak and that every voice should have equal substantive weight. Often, this led to circumstances where students who were not prepared would talk on and on. In the engaged classroom students learn the value of speaking and of dialogue, and they also learn to speak when they have something meaningful to contribute. Understanding that every student has a valuable contribution to offer to a learning community means that we honor all capabilities, not

solely the ability to speak. Students who excel in active listening also contribute much to the formation of community. This is also true of students who may not speak often but when they speak (sometimes only when reading required writing) the significance of what they have to say far exceeds those of other students who may always openly discuss ideas. And of course there are times when an active silence, one that includes pausing to think before one speaks, adds much to classroom dynamics.

When students are fully engaged, professors no longer assume the sole leadership role in the classroom. Instead, the classroom functions more like a cooperative where everyone contributes to make sure all resources are being used, to ensure the optimal learning well-being of everyone. Ultimately, all professors want students to learn, and to see education as a means of self-development and self-actualization. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, I state: “To educate for freedom, then, we have to challenge and change the way everyone thinks about pedagogical process. This is especially true for students.” Engaged pedagogy is vital to any rethinking of education because it holds the promise of full participation on the part of students. Engaged pedagogy establishes a mutual relationship between teacher and students that nurtures the growth of both parties, creating an atmosphere of trust and commitment that is always present when genuine learning happens. Expanding both heart and mind, engaged pedagogy I makes us better learners because it asks us to embrace and explore the practice of knowing together, to see intelligence as a resource that can strengthen our common good. [...]

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### To Love Again

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Love in the classroom creates a foundation for learning that embraces and empowers everyone, I began to think about the relationship between the struggle to end domination and love in an effort to understand the elements that made for successful movements for social justice in the world. It was clear that the focus on a love ethic was a central factor in the movement’s success. In *All About Love: New Visions* I defined love as a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust. All these factors work interdependently. When these basic principles of love form the basis of teacher-student inter-action, the mutual pursuit of knowledge creates the conditions for optimal learning.

Teachers, then, are learning while teaching and students are learning and sharing knowledge. In *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* Parker Palmer contends that “the origin of knowledge is love,” declaring:

The goal of a knowledge arising from life is the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds. A knowledge of compassion aims not at exploiting and manipulating creation but at reconciling the world to itself. The mind motivated by compassion reaches out to know as the heart reaches

out to love. Hence, the act of knowing is an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own. In such knowing we know and are known as members of one community....

Essentially, then, love's place in the classroom is assured when there is any passionate pursuit of knowledge. Such thinking counters the tenets of those critics who believe love has nothing to do with our ability to teach and learn. Cynical about love, they raise the question of whether or not love in the class is disruptive, as it may serve as a distraction and create a lack of objectivity.

Contrary to the notion that love in the classroom makes teachers less objective, when we teach with love we are better able to respond to the unique concerns of individual students, while simultaneously integrating those concerns into the classroom community. When teachers work to affirm the emotional well-being of students, we are doing the work of love. Colleagues have shared with me that they do not want to be placed in the role of "therapist"; they do not want to respond to emotional feeling in the classroom. If we refuse to make a place for emotional feelings in the classroom it does not change the reality that the presence of emotional energy over-determines the conditions where learning can occur.

Teachers are not therapists. However, there are times when conscious teaching—teaching with love—brings us the insight that we will not be able to have a meaningful experience in the classroom without reading the emotional climate of our students and attending to it. In some cases it may require that we become more emotionally aware of psychological conflicts within a student that are blocking her or his capacity to learn. It may then be appropriate to steer a student in the direction of therapeutic care. Often, a large number of students who enter our classrooms have had or are receiving some therapeutic care, which makes them more resistant to learning in circumstances where their emotional intelligence is ignored or devalued.

Sometimes professors are fearful of engaging students with love because they worry about being engulfed. They worry they will become too enmeshed in a student's dilemmas. This fear is keenly felt by anyone who is unable to establish appropriate boundaries. Most of us, teachers and students, have been raised with a misguided understanding of love. We have been taught that love makes us crazy, makes us blind and foolish, that it renders us unable to set healthy boundaries. Actually, when we teach with love we are far more likely to have an enhanced understanding of our students' capabilities and their limitations and this knowledge ensures appropriate boundaries will be present in the classroom. It also helps to promote an atmosphere of safety wherein mistakes can be made, wherein students can learn to take full responsibility for gauging their learning skills so that they are not teacher-dependent.

When we teach with love, combining care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust, we are often able to enter the classroom and go straight to the heart of the matter. That means having the clarity to know what to do on any day to create the best climate for optimal learning. Teachers who are wedded to using the same

teaching style every day, who fear any digression from the concrete lesson plan, miss the opportunity for full engagement in the learning process. They are far more likely to have an orderly classroom where students obey authority. They are far more likely to feel satisfied because they have presented all the information that they wanted to cover. And yet they are missing the most powerful experience we can offer students, which is the opportunity to be fully and compassionately engaged with learning.

Often teachers want to ignore emotional feeling in the classroom because they fear the conflict that may arise. Much as everyone likes to imagine that the college campus is a place without censorship, where free speech prevails and students are encouraged to engage in debate and dialectical exchange, the opposite is a more accurate portrait of what really takes place in college classrooms. More often than not, students are afraid to talk for fear they will alienate teachers and other students. They are usually terrified of disagreeing if they think it will lead to conflict. Even though none of us would ever imagine that we could have a romantic relationship with someone where there is never any conflict, students and sometimes teachers, especially in the diverse classroom, tend to see the presence of conflict as threatening to the continuance of critical exchange and as an indication that community is not possible where there are differences of thought and opinion.

Many of us have not witnessed critical exchanges in our families of origin where different viewpoints are expressed and conflicts resolved constructively. Instead, we bring to classroom settings our unresolved fears and anxieties. The loving classroom is one in which students are taught, both by the presence and practice of the teacher, that critical exchange can take place without diminishing anyone's spirit, that conflict can be resolved constructively. While teachers in their leadership are in the best position to create a climate of love in the classroom, students have the power to share their love of learning in a manner that can ignite sparks in a teacher who may be emotionally disengaged. No matter the direction from which love emerges in the classroom, it transforms.

All meaningful love relations empower each person engaged in the mutual practice of partnership. Love between teacher and student makes recognition possible; it offers a place where the intersection of academic striving meets the overall striving on all our parts to be psychologically whole. Education will change for the better in our nation when all teachers learn to love both outside and inside the classroom. While I approach every teaching experience with a general spirit of love, a relationship of love often flourishes between a particular student and myself, one that abides through time. Students I love most intimately never seem to leave my life. As they have grown and become teachers or entered other professions, they still call on me to teach, guide, and direct them. That our teaching relationship formed and shaped by love extends beyond our time in the classroom is an affirmation of love's power. When I asked one of my students, now a law professor, if my love of her created an atmosphere of favoritism in the classroom, she laughed. She stated: "Are you kidding? The more you loved us, the harder we had to work." There can be no love without justice.

Love in the classroom prepares teachers and students to open our minds and hearts. It is the foundation on which every learning community can be created. Teachers need not fear that practicing love in the classroom will lead to favoritism or competition between students. Love will always move us away from domination in all its forms. Love will always challenge and change us.