

TEACHING & LEARNING JOURNAL - EDITION 4

The Classroom: A Radical Space

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A review and practical reflection of *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* by Bell Hooks.

'I add my voice to the collective call for renewal and rejuvenation in our teaching practices. Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions - a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom.'

Bell Hooks, 1994, page 12

Why did I choose this book?

My identity has many facets. Although I am an English teacher, I also majored in Women's Studies and Drama at university. Because of this, I spend a lot of my spare time reading feminist literature. When the opportunity for educational reading arose as part of CPD (Book Club), I felt it was the perfect time to broaden my feminist literature to educational feminist literature. In doing so, I chose to read *Teaching to Transgress: Education and the Practice of Freedom* written by Bell Hooks. Hooks is a woman of colour, who is a teacher, a writer, a feminist, and a social activist. I am a proud feminist, who fights for equity for those in all minority groups, not just my own. In doing so, I believe it paramount to listen to those groups, and apply the practices they think best. This is why I chose to read a book about the educational sphere written by a woman of colour.

A safe space for differences

I like to believe that I encourage free thinking in my classroom. Before lockdown, my Year 7's and Year 8's were preparing to present persuasive speeches on their own choice of topic. We brainstormed topic ideas, and I made it clear that I was happy for any topic that was appropriate, as long as they were passionate about it. I began by putting a topic I was passionate about, 'racism', on the board. The students brainstormed ideas about transgender rights, homophobia, women's rights, toxic masculinity and boys' inability to express emotions without negative consequences, religion and its involvement in politics, and so many more excellent topics. It is not what I expected from them - what I thought I would get was 'why we shouldn't have to wear a uniform', but I was blown away.

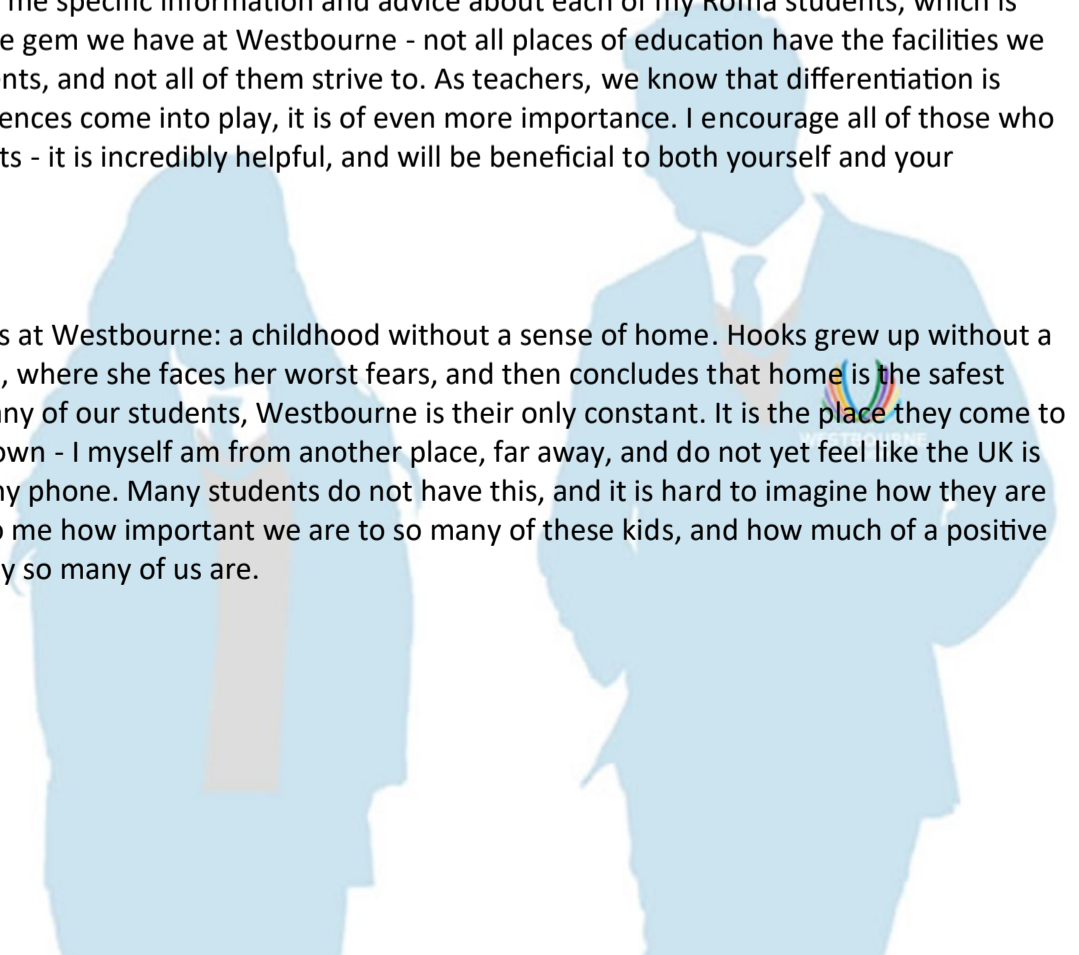
Hooks believes that teachers who 'embrace the challenge of self-actualization will be better able to create pedagogical practices that engage students, providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply' (pg. 22). I believe that the students were able to brainstorm these ideas openly, and felt safe to do so, because I make it clear that no form of discrimination will be tolerated in my classroom, and I encourage the critique of class, sexism, racism, and queerphobia in the texts we read, while acknowledging my privilege as a white woman as well. I have quotes up in my classroom that reinforce these ideas, and I have a wall of people who have made positive changes in terms of racism, feminism, class issues, and queer issues. It was fantastic to see this, and I felt proud to have created a safe space where they could express what they were passionate about.

Multiculturalism

One chapter of Hooks' text is 'Embracing Change: teaching in a multicultural world'. She states that there is not enough dialogue in the educational sphere about creating an inclusive classroom. Westbourne is a multicultural school, and I believe the school caters well to those who are of different cultural backgrounds. Maria does a great job as an EAL coordinator - she has given me specific information and advice about each of my Roma students, which is extremely beneficial for me in creating an inclusive classroom. This is a rare gem we have at Westbourne - not all places of education have the facilities we do to support their EAL or CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) students, and not all of them strive to. As teachers, we know that differentiation is monumental. Not everyone learns the same, and when EAL or CALD differences come into play, it is of even more importance. I encourage all of those who have not yet, to read the information Maria has collated about the students - it is incredibly helpful, and will be beneficial to both yourself and your students.

There is no place like home

Hooks discusses another pertinent factor that affects many of our students at Westbourne: a childhood without a sense of home. Hooks grew up without a sense of belonging, and discusses her envy of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, where she faces her worst fears, and then concludes that home is the safest place for her, where she has a constant and reassuring place to be. For many of our students, Westbourne is their only constant. It is the place they come to each day to feel safe. This is something I have struggled with during lockdown - I myself am from another place, far away, and do not yet feel like the UK is home for me. However, I have my family and friends at the other end of my phone. Many students do not have this, and it is hard to imagine how they are feeling without the stability of school right now. Reading this reinforced to me how important we are to so many of these kids, and how much of a positive impact we make in their lives; this is why I am a teacher, and hopefully why so many of us are.



A host of differences

At university, I took a class about the foundations on which education was built. It was here that we were informed of the systemic racism that is involved in the space. Pure and simple: education was created for white people, with middle to upper class backgrounds, to succeed. Although this is what education once was, it is not like that anymore; or at least, it should not be like that anymore. The UK is a multicultural place. Ipswich is a multicultural place. Westbourne is a multicultural place. We need to adapt our teaching practices to ensure that all of our students can succeed. Hooks believes that dialogue is the best way to build a teaching community that does this. She writes, 'to engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences' (pg. 130).

Teaching to transgress

Hooks wrote this book after having taught for twenty years. She has questioned her love for it, but come to the conclusion that it is the best place for her. I believe the same. The front of a classroom is the place I feel I can make a difference in the world.

'...I have sought teachers in all areas of my life who would challenge me beyond what I might select for myself, and in and through that challenge allow me a space of radical openness where I am truly free to choose- able to learn and grow without limits... this is education as the practice of freedom.'
Bell Hooks, 1994, p. 207.

