Teaching To Transgress Book Summary, by bell hooks

by Allen Cheng


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Full Summary of Teaching To Transgress

Overall Summary

Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom is a collection of essays on how multicultural classrooms can be more inclusive. Gloria Jean Watkins, who writes under her pen name bell hooks, has written over 30 books that examine American culture and race relations. She was born in 1952 and grew up in Kentucky. She earned degrees from Stanford University (BA) and Duke University (MA). Teaching to Transgress was published by Routledge in 1994.

In this book, the author focuses on education and how it can be used to bridge gaps. She uses her personal experiences as a student and teacher to explain how students can be marginalized in schools. The author grew up in the South, where she saw black men have power while women were oppressed. In her segregated school, however, she found hope because of her teachers who nurtured and loved her but also pushed her to think critically about society. They showed that classrooms could become transgressive spaces for change.

When schools were integrated, hooks was forced to leave her school and the teachers she loved. She had to go to a different school with mostly white students. This caused her identity as a black woman and student to be marginalized in an alienating environment full of racism from some teachers and classmates.

As an undergraduate, she felt isolated in the classroom until discovering the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. His work on liberatory pedagogy gave her a way to connect with others who were marginalized and oppressed around the world. Chapters 1-5 focus on engaged pedagogy, which is important for fighting oppression and working toward freedom.

The next few chapters discuss how feminist pedagogical strategies have contributed to this engaged pedagogy. In addition to Freire's work, hooks' feminism gave her a way as an undergraduate to examine systems of oppression and ways they can be dismantled. However, she criticizes the fact that many white feminists focus on the white female experience but ignore or refuse to acknowledge issues black women face in society. As a result, there is tension between black and white feminists because their experiences are so different. Ultimately, she sees the need for these two groups of people to come together for a broader solidarity and understanding of each other's struggles against oppression in society.
In the last three chapters, we discussed how issues of language and class are often overlooked in discussions about classroom privilege. Students who come from working-class backgrounds or Black English speaking homes might hide those markers to fit into the dominant bourgeois classroom values. Desire has also been suppressed by the academy’s focus on a mind-body split that prioritizes the mind above all else. To counter this suppression, bell hooks wants students and teachers to embrace their entire identity, bringing diverse experiences into classroom dialogue.

It's not easy to work hard and commit yourself to something, but it is necessary. It was for bell hooks. She had a difficult time in school because she felt alienated from the curriculum. Her book calls on teachers to confront bias so that they can make classrooms more inclusive and supportive of all students.

Introduction: “Teaching to Transgress”

Teaching to Transgress begins with the author's childhood experience in a black segregated school. She describes how her teachers were loving and nurturing, while also encouraging students to question what they had been taught. The classroom was an environment of joy as well as learning. Later on, she would realize that these teachers had influenced her thinking about education greatly.

After the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was illegal, her experience of learning changed. She had to go to a school with mainly white teachers and students. The racist attitudes in the classroom made it difficult for her to learn there.

When she attended Stanford University as an undergraduate, one of the things that surprised her was how joyless the classroom environment was. She also noticed that professors had trouble communicating and often used their power in a negative way to control their students. The classroom remained a joyless place where she struggled to be independent and think critically about what was being taught.

hooks was inspired by her teachers in elementary school and wanted to make sure that all students felt valued. She created a new way of teaching called "Teaching to Transgress" which she was influenced by three factors: the black women who taught her, Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire's ideas about education as a practice of freedom, and radical feminists who didn't include black female voices but did provide hooks with a method for questioning pedagogy.

In her book, Henry Louis Gates Jr. has collected essays that he wrote at different times for different audiences. He was aware of the overlap between some of those essays, and he is also aware that his emphasis on teaching may surprise people who know him as a radical academic writer: "This surprise is a sad reminder of the way teaching is seen as less important than research in academia." The common perception is that professors focus more on their research rather than teaching, and Gates laments this neglect of the importance of education.

Chapter 1: “Engaged Pedagogy”

Education is based on the banking model, where students memorize and store knowledge. This is in direct opposition to bell hooks's ideas of education, which are about dialogue and shared understanding. In order for teachers to effectively teach their students they must be self-actualized first.
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The author shares her experience with education, which made her feel alienated from the system. But she discovered Paulo Freire's ideas about liberation and used it to inspire students in her classroom. She also learned a lot from Thich Nhat Hanh, who emphasized on "wholeness" by focusing on body and spirit as well as mind.

One exception to the mind/body split was in feminist classrooms, where professors were striving for more participatory learning. While hooks has seen some decline in this commitment among feminists, she still acknowledges the importance of these feminist spaces for many students.

In this example, she talks about a student who joined a fraternity despite her advice against it. She says that while teachers can influence their students, they cannot control them. The student in question continued to discuss the issue with his teacher and ultimately made an informed decision based on what he learned from her.

Hooks says that both professors and students must become vulnerable in the classroom. If professors can share their stories, then students will also feel free to do so as well.

**Chapter 2: “A Revolution of Values: The Promise of Multicultural Change”**

hooks begins with a story about her last-minute decision to attend her 20th high school reunion. She remembers the pain of desegregation, when she had to leave her beloved black school and go to the white school where students endured racism from their classmates and teachers. Her friend Ken helped her through that time by being nice to hooks despite other people's taunts and terror towards them. One day, some men tried driving hooks off the road because they didn't like Ken taking a ride with a young black woman. When Ken invited hooks over for dinner in his family home, it was the first time she ever sat down at a table with whites. The experience inspired them both because they believed in social justice together.

After high school, she failed to find white friends who shared the same passion for social change as Ken and his family. She realized that many people say they're committed to change but aren't actually willing to make sacrifices.

She also notes that the push for multicultural diversity in the classroom, which is committed to ending racism, sexism, classism and colonialism has encountered not only a resistance to change but also a strong backlash against the movement for freedom. Because equality threatens those who have thrived due to white capitalist patriarchy, they have an eagerness to hold on their authority.

People are afraid of change and diversity. They want to go back to the way things were. This is why some people don't like it when a professor teaches from Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon, even though there's nothing wrong with that book. People fear that they'll have to deal with chaos in their lives if they accept this diversity, but change will be worth it because we can transform society for the better by embracing these new ideas and values.

**Chapter 3: “Embracing Change: Teaching in a Multicultural World”**
When hooks was an untenured professor, she and Chandra Mohanty teamed up to lead seminars for the faculty in order to transform their pedagogical practices. They began by focusing on their experiences as professors at Oberlin. hooks shared her early experiences when black students were valued and respected in the classroom; however, after desegregation, she noticed that her experience became marginalized because it didn't fit into what white teachers thought was appropriate.

In an effort to promote diversity, a group of professors hosted a conference on the topic. They invited speakers who were able to talk about their strategies for including more diverse viewpoints in the classroom.

Both hooks and Mohanty were disappointed with the seminar. They saw that professors were willing to include writers of color in the Western canon, but these professors did not give them equal treatment. Hooks describes a professor who boasted about including Toni Morrison's work, but she didn't discuss race in her classroom.

Hooks realized that professors are reluctant to discuss race in the classroom because they fear confrontation and tension. She disagrees with this approach, saying that creating a safe space for students means allowing them to voice their opinions, even if it leads to conflict or confrontation.

Hooks then explains how she uses strategies to give every student a chance to speak, such as having students write responses that they share with the class. She recognizes that it can be intimidating for teachers who were taught in traditional ways and repeats those cycles.

She also recognizes that students can sometimes be resistant to learning in different ways, and she has had to deal with complaints from students. hooks realized that she had to let go of her need for immediate affirmation of successful teaching, even though some reward is immediate. She says even negative feedback is still feedback, and it's important to encourage students to give feedback so they can shift paradigms of learning effectively (even if such shifts are not immediate).

Hooks realized that learning sometimes involves pain. It forces people to acknowledge suffering and empathize with others. She encourages students to share their experiences, which helps build a community of people who typically have been left on the margins.

The author recognizes that it is difficult to create a truly multicultural classroom because both teachers and students will have to change their perspectives.

**Chapter 4: “Paulo Freire”**

In this essay, the author uses a playful self-interview. She asks herself questions about Paulo Freire and answers them in her own voice.

Educator bell hooks states that she found Paulo Freire's work to be very influential in her life. She wrote Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center while attending college because she felt alienated from the classroom setting.
After her negative experiences with desegregated education, reading Freire empowered her. Reading about the marginalized poor in his books Pedagogy of the Oppressed as well as Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau gave her a way to connect her struggle to the broader global struggle of those without power. When “Watkins” critiques Freire’s sexism in his book, “hooks” responds that she recognizes the sexism in the book but doesn’t dismiss it just because of these flaws. She finds flaws within feminism itself and points out how white bourgeois women have dominated feminism for years. She felt more connected with peasants than white feminists did because she grew up poor and rural herself. His books gave her an understanding into not only what was happening around him but also what was happening around here, even though he was writing about people from other countries.

hook’s work is based on Freire's work, as well as her experiences with black teachers who taught her to resist racism and white supremacy. She credits these teachers for the examples of their lives dedicated to freedom through praxis (the practice of freedom). Even though they would probably not label themselves feminists, hook says that their focus on academic excellence and open critical thought was an anti-sexist practice.

When bell hooks met Paulo Freire, she was surprised to find out that he wasn't sexist in his works. She questioned him about this and he listened to her with an open mind. He didn't dismiss her or get angry at all. Instead, he exemplified the principles of his work by listening to what she had to say. When hooks realized how great a teacher Freire was, she started practicing that kind of teaching herself when working with students.

**Chapter 5: “Theory as Liberatory Practice”**

The author discusses how theory has been an important part of her life. She was a child who questioned the status quo, and she quotes literary critic Terry Eagleton to show that children are natural theorists because they wonder about everything around them. The author felt like she had no home when her parents punished her for asking questions, but theorizing allowed her to understand difference and feel at home with herself.

Cheryl L.T. Lewis, a professor of English at the University of Maryland, also notes that some people have an incorrect understanding of theory. She has seen how academics who are both white and male have forced their interpretations on what should be considered theoretical work, which favors written pieces with technical language that few can understand or access.

Some people think that theory has no relevance to their lives. They view intellectuals as irrelevant, and they reject the incorporation of theory in their lives. However, Alice Walker does not want to have such an anti-intellectual reaction because she knows how much power theory can have on one's life. She has seen what it can do for her own life by allowing her to analyze social and political systems so she could understand the underlying forces that impacted her daily life. She wants others to see the necessity of incorporating theory in one’s life so they can heal themselves from past wounds and move forward with their lives:

She wants to combine theory and practice so that they can be used together.
She doesn't use conventional academic formats because she wants her work to be accessible to everyone. Although some academics may not think it's scholarly enough, she thinks that if people can understand and incorporate the ideas into their lives, then they're learning something valuable.

She acknowledges that she has received letters from people who have read her work and been inspired by it. She mentions one letter in particular from a prisoner, who said he had made her name “a household word around that prison”. Another discussion took place in a black-owned Southern restaurant where the participants discussed how they could relate to what Butler was saying about the pain of living as an oppressed person. Her goal is to connect those who are suffering so they can find their common cause, which will lead them to create mass-based feminist resistance against oppression and inequality.

Chapter 6: “Essentialism and Experience”

In this chapter, bell hooks criticizes a book called Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference. She says that she enjoyed the first half of Diana Fuss's book but became frustrated with it when it began to make sweeping statements about African American literary criticism. According to Fuss, black feminist criticism is limited by its reliance on essentialist critical positions. hooks resents that Fuss used a few black feminist critics to stereotype all black feminist criticism without doing adequate research or considering key works in the field.

According to Fuss, marginalized students in the classroom often rely on identity politics and claim that their lived experiences are valid ways of learning. They believe that only they can understand the experience of being a woman or an African American. hooks agrees with Fuss's argument in some aspects, but she believes that it is important for all students to bring their experiences into the classroom because everyone has something interesting and valuable to share. She says that white men have also relied on their own authority of experience by claiming they know best about certain things without knowing what others may know as well from personal experience. hooks argues against this attitude by saying it is unfair to deny people knowledge simply because they don't fit into one category or another; rather than denying people knowledge based on stereotypes, we should embrace diversity and learn from each other's unique perspectives.

In her classroom, she encourages students to share their experiences in order to make the classroom environment more open and lively. She believes that if people are all given a chance to speak up, they won't feel the need to compete with one another for authority. Morrison's method of having everyone read aloud from Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye ensures that each student will have a chance to be heard. hooks also believes that by encouraging students' personal experiences in class, it would help them learn better because they can relate what they're learning about literature or history or anything else directly back into their own lives, which gives them a greater appreciation for the subject matter being taught.

Chapter 7: “Holding My Sister’s Hand: Feminist Solidarity”

This chapter discusses the obstacles that stand in the way of solidarity between black women and white women. hooks points to how slavery created a domestic space where white female masters were jealous of their slaves, who they often saw as sexual partners with their husbands. This jealousy led to abuse against these slaves by both men and women. Despite this potential for empathy due to similar situations
or feelings of motherhood, instead there was bitterness on both sides.

After slavery, the white women in America continued to feel bitter about black people's freedom. They felt that they were now at a disadvantage and wanted to maintain their dominance by creating racial stereotypes of black girls. Since there was segregation due to Jim Crow laws, there wasn't much interaction between blacks and whites so it was hard for them to form friendships with each other.

After examining the history of slavery and Jim Crow, hooks then examines how black women view white women. She is particularly concerned about how scholars have portrayed their relationship in historical terms. Some scholars have pointed to positive things that domestic workers (maids) said about working for white families during the Jim Crow era, but hooks points out that those maids probably didn't want to jeopardize their employment by speaking negatively about their employers. They may also have spoken positively because they were amongst themselves and could speak honestly with one another without fear of retribution from whites. When blacks spoke among themselves, they would criticize white people for being lazy and selfish, which was a common theme among them at the time.

Calls for solidarity from white women are met with suspicion by some black feminists because they feel that the calls aren't made in good faith. It's acknowledged that there is a legacy of hostility and distrust handed down to each generation, but she points out an essay by Adrienne Rich, "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, and Gynephobia" as groundbreaking in its willingness to confront relationships between black and white women honestly. Still, many black feminists have been worn down in the struggle against racism and don't want to engage.

She wants white women to confront their whiteness and acknowledge their complicity in racism. They should be willing to do the work of understanding blackness, rather than claiming that they can understand it on their own. She also calls for honest dialogue between black and white feminists about race and racism.

Chapter 8: “Feminist Thinking: In the Classroom Right Now”

hooks was a professor of women's studies at City College in New York. She taught classes on race and gender because there were not many programs that focused on both subjects at the time. Most of her students were black and didn't believe in feminism, so she wanted to prove to them how important it is for everyone to be treated equally regardless of their gender or race. She felt that the feminist movement needed to change so that it would be more inclusive, and she encouraged teachers who teach about feminism to prepare themselves for diverse classrooms where some students might have very different backgrounds from others.

She also mentions that she has taught black men. They often feel as if they are oppressed because of their race, but many have a difficult time seeing how sexism is hurting them.

Some black women in bell hooks' class worried about alienating themselves from the black community or being seen as "feminist" by some, but they still fight for feminist causes because it will ultimately help both genders. hooks and her students understand that there are specific strategies needed to survive and resist oppressive forces, which must be shared within the black community. Only then can people truly
find liberation.

Chapter 9: “Feminist Scholarship: Black Scholars”

In this passage, the author reflects on her childhood and how she observed black men having power in their lives. She also explains that even though they did not have as much power as white men, they still had a lot of it. The author then talks about how many feminist scholars ignored these observations because many black women worked outside the home.

The feminist movement gradually expanded to include black women. Black feminists, such as Celestine Ware and Toni Cade Bambara, wrote about the erasure of black female presence in feminism. Unfortunately, many white women and black people were suspicious of these early feminist efforts. Many black people viewed the feminist movement as focused solely on white women and any participation by black scholars was seen as a betrayal. In addition, many white feminists felt threatened by the work of black feminists that questioned their paradigms. This fear threatened to destroy broadening the feminist movement to include the experiences of African American women.

Recently, bell hooks has noticed a change in academia. There is more openness to discussing gender in a complex way. She also points out that fictional works by black women have generated literary criticism from the academic community when black scholars focus on issues of gender without placing their work within the feminist context. hooks feels that it's important to address the experiences of black females, but she believes such work should be placed within a feminist framework. Her essay ends with an appeal for education to instill critical consciousness.

Chapter 10: “Building a Teaching Community: A Dialogue”

This essay is an interview between bell hooks and Ron Scapp, a philosopher who worked at Queens College. They discuss their different backgrounds in terms of race, gender, and education. hooks mainly taught in private colleges while Scapp taught in state universities. Also, they had very different childhood experiences: hooks grew up on the South while Scapp grew up in the city. Because of these differences, it was hard for them to trust each other when they first met; however, through understanding one another's background and engaging in an honest dialogue about teaching philosophy courses together, they have built a strong relationship based on mutual respect.

While professors often become consumed with their identity as a professor, they can also forget to embrace the body. This is because some see themselves only in terms of the mind and deny that the body exists at all. By focusing on race, class, and gender issues through discussions about power, hooks and Scapp argue for embracing both the mind and body. They believe that when you focus on your own physicality instead of hiding behind a podium, it helps students connect with you more easily.

Professors and students need to discuss the issue of canon in higher education. Professors are reluctant to teach outside-the-box material, while students don't want to take control over their learning. This is because professors have a passive banking model for teaching, where they stand behind a podium and lecture at students who sit passively taking notes. Students also have this same passive attitude when it comes to classwork.
One way to incorporate more progressive teaching methods is to have students share their personal experiences. This allows them to express themselves and feel like they're contributing something valuable. Teachers must encourage every student to listen, so that everyone can learn from each other. bell hooks has learned a lot from her own students and what they've said in class; she's also incorporated some of their ideas into her writing.

Professors should also teach in different locations, so they could see the diversity of their students and learn how to better teach them. They should have opportunities outside the classroom to interact with students, such as by creating student support groups or independent studies. Finally, professors need time away from teaching to avoid burn-out.

**Chapter 11: “Language: Teaching New Worlds/ New Words”**

Rita Raley reflects on the history of English in America, particularly how it affected black slaves. She imagines what they thought when they were brought to a foreign country and tried to learn this new language. It was also a site of rebellion for them as they pieced together their own language that could resist power. They used their words to challenge the colonizers by making them rethink the meaning of certain words and phrases, which is similar today with Black vernacular English being stigmatized in schools.

As a solution, the author encourages students to use their first language and translate it so they won't feel alienated from their culture. However, some of her white students complained about this because they couldn't understand what the other speakers were saying. She encouraged them to embrace that feeling of confusion as an opportunity for learning how it feels to lose mastery over language.

English is rarely discussed in the context of multiculturalism, but it's worth noting that there are many languages and dialects. It can be helpful to experience confusion when learning a new language and resisting the need to master everything.

**Chapter 12: “Confronting Class in the Classroom”**

Class differences can be a barrier in the classroom if they aren't addressed. People often think that classrooms are equal spaces where everyone has access to the same education, but this isn't true. The traditional classroom favors middle- and upper-class values, so students must conform to those values if they want to succeed.

She explains that when she first went to college, class was defined as how much tuition you paid. She later realized that there was more to it than money: students were attuned to the biases of their classmates and adjusted their actions accordingly. If a student's background differed from those around them, they felt like outsiders who had been ostracized or stigmatized.

The teacher mentions that students often have to hide their lower class backgrounds and non-standard English if they want to succeed in the classroom. Since this is true, then it can be inferred that the students have to censor themselves in order for them to fit into the classroom environment.
Feminist classrooms are different from traditional academic settings in that they allow students to express themselves freely, which is something not usually done in a classroom setting. This freedom allows for more honest conversations about class and gender than would otherwise happen.

Hooks wants her African American students to be themselves in the classroom. She doesn't want them to conform too much, and she encourages them not to hide their culture. Instead, she says they should "invent ways" of making it work for everyone. They need to believe that they can change the class so that no one feels like an outsider; instead, there needs to be a more inclusive environment where everyone is respected and valued equally.

The author encourages professors to make changes in their classrooms, especially as classroom diversity increases. She understands the need for change and thinks that it will be beneficial if teachers are more aware of how class bias impacts their teaching style. Only by making these changes can we achieve the "democratic ideal" of education for everyone.

**Chapter 13: “Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process”**

Another issue that is rarely discussed in the classroom is how to deal with passion. hooks believes this stems from a traditional mind/body split, where the mind is highly valued and the body isn't as important. This results in denying students' desires, which can be problematic for their learning experience. A feminist pedagogy doesn't separate these two things; it brings them together and values eros (passion) as an important force that motivates people to learn more about what they're passionate about.

The problem with discussing desire in the classroom is that people often assume it's only about sexual love. Sam Keen, a writer, explains that eros originally referred to something else: "the moving force" that propels life forward. In other words, it's not just about sex. hooks argues that there are many types of love and no matter what type you're talking about, they can be powerful forces in the classroom.

Some may think that the passion professors have for their students, as well as their own passion for teaching and learning, would make them less objective in evaluating a student's work. But hooks argues that we need to move beyond the idea that education is equal and inclusive. She believes professors should acknowledge the value of having passion for what they teach, which will help ignite a true desire to learn from all students. This does not mean teachers shouldn't be rigorous when it comes to academic subjects; rather, it means they can use their passion to drive an even more rigorous examination of those subjects.

**Chapter 14: “Ecstasy”**

In the closing essay of her book, hooks emphasizes that there is a crisis in the classroom and educators must recognize the urgency of their work. She emphasizes that she has been teaching for 20 years and craves rest, but refuses to take a break from teaching when she sees how much students crave guidance from progressive professors.

Despite the importance of teaching, some professors don't think about it much. They're more focused on their research and writing than they are on teaching. Even though bell hooks has written a lot about
teaching, her work is often seen as secondary to her cultural criticism and feminist theory. She's frustrated with this lack of focus on education in academia, because she sees classroom interaction as having the greatest potential for changing lives. Although that responsibility is daunting, she's energized by the possibilities for learning both in class and outside of it.