



[reseñas educativas \(Spanish\)](#)
[resenhas educativas \(Portuguese\)](#)

This review has been accessed **1943** times since December 5, 2005

hooks, bell. (2003). *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. New York: Routledge

Pp. xvi + 200

\$17.95 ISBN 0-415-96818-6

**Reviewed by Jennifer Adair
Arizona State University**

December 5, 2005

bell hooks's latest contribution to education and pedagogy, *Teaching Community* offers a group of essays aimed at explaining how to achieve a pedagogy that creates a genuine community of people who feel free and hopeful about the future. She insists that such a community must be centered on anti-racist, critical- thinking oriented pedagogy that asserts the world can change for the better, as it has in the past. Reading *Teaching Community* is an intellectual exercise that can yield beneficial self-critique as well as pedagogical corrections. While some of the chapters seem like journal entries that distract from the larger picture, others should be internalized, even embodied, by teachers and teacher educators as well as by all those who seek social justice elsewhere.

Author hooks presents her essays as "practical wisdom," and the

essays taken together appear to center on three principles. First, that racism is a conscious choice, not something embedded in culture or biology. Because racism is a choice, it can be unlearned, overturned, repented of, and dismissed. Viewing racism as a choice, instead of an inevitable societal phenomenon leaves room for people to change. The second principle is that pedagogy has the power to promote critical thinking among students, to help them see their own lives openly and to assure them that they can make responsible and compassionate choices. The third principle maintains that teachers teach the way they live outside the classroom and that their commitment to social justice and racial equity can be measured by those with whom they spend the most time.

In “Race and Racism,” hooks argues that fighting racism means enlarging one’s social sphere. She explains: “Rather than simply accept that class power often situates me in a world where I have little or no contact with other black people, especially individuals from underprivileged classes, I as a black person with class privilege can actively seek out these relationships. More often than not to do this work, I must make an effort to expand my social world.”(p. 36). She then observes that many of her white peers, when trying to unlearn white supremacy, realize that they have little or no meaningful contact with non-white people. So, she insists, teachers and teacher educators need to “open their eyes” and see the non-white people around them and bring them into their personal world in a respectful and meaningful way. This is a concrete way to challenge the dominant hierarchy that insists on class and racial boundaries between people and ideas. In the chapter, “Race and Racism,” hooks also comments on the holistic nature of teaching; a teacher’s life is made up mostly of decisions made outside the classroom and that racism cannot be hidden in the classroom if one practices it by omission outside their teaching context. She recounts a class exercise that creates a genealogical map of students’ first recollection of race. Such an exercise could be quite thought-provoking in a number of different circumstances.

In the subsequent and equally important essay, “What Happens When White People Change,” hooks insists that all people (not just whites) have to resist the domination of white privilege in their lives. People who make genuine efforts are courageous and need recognition so they can serve as examples to others. Focusing on those who are racist while ignoring those who sacrifice and work hard for social justice only reinforces the inevitability of racism and inequality. When society acts as though white people cannot change, white supremacy continues. Seeing racism and the lack of social mobility as a matter of coincidence, instead of as sexist and racist policies that white (and black) people can work to correct, frustrates the work of equality and obstructs freedom and hope.

Maybe hooks's argument is too simple but the idea is worth pursuing. As hooks explains, when white people do nothing, the idea is perpetuated that racism is coincidence, "merely existing" instead of being the result of something that is consciously created and therefore can be consciously destroyed. Another key point is that white people can and do change their ways but they also make mistakes. In her chapter, "Standards," hooks uses the example of a group of female black colleagues who judge a close white friend based on one mistake, while discounting all she has done and sacrificed for racial and gender equality. Hooks believes those black women gave into the idea that all white people are racist. Such a mentality only reinforces the normalization and inescapability of racism in America. White people should use these types of misunderstandings and other suffering, not as a ruler by which to judge others but as a bridge to understand other types of suffering, those that come because of a racist society, or even more specifically, a racist education system.

In several chapters, hooks discusses the obstacles academia poses to a pedagogy of community centered on hope and freedom. She challenges higher education to be less hypocritical in their "official" efforts to be engaged in gender and racial and economic equity. Those who claim to work for gender and racial equality in admissions and in hiring but happen to work among a largely white faculty are merely assisting the white privileged patriarchy to continue. It is hypocritical, she maintains, to teach that racism is a problem while actively benefiting (without resistance) from policies and practices that make it so.

In, "How Can We Serve," hooks asks educators to look at students as a call to service; to find ways to listen and assist students who are underrepresented and who resist the expectations the hierarchy assigns to them. It is important to listen carefully to multiple perspectives and to use the voice or silence of students' of color as a way to critique one's own pedagogy. If the classroom is not a safe space for some students to speak, then it is not a community. Instead it remains a space that tells students of color that they are exceptions or visitors instead of equal participants. "Keepers of Hope" is a dialogue with her white colleague and good friend, Ron Scrapp. The conversation centers on the values progressive educators bring to the classroom and the need to maintain and promote hope even while voicing opposition to dominant ideals that reproduce oppression. The chapter, "Heart to Heart," encourages teachers to connect with all of their students in an emotional, loving way. Other, less poignant chapters, focus on spirituality as well as the sexual conduct and orientation of teachers, namely in academia. These chapters seem disconnected from the themes central in the other chapters.

While much can be made of her somewhat dramatic and unapologetic tone when discussing the patriarchal nature of higher education, I think

the most important piece missing is hooks's own sense of "theoretical genealogy." For example, in her chapter "Standards," hooks argues that black students have been socialized to believe that education "will lead them away from blackness." However, it seems like this would be an important place to cite the work of scholars invested in such research, most notably Signithia Fordham (1986; 1996), an educational anthropologist whose work has led to a better understanding of the potential for black female resistance to white domination in high schools. Asking for a "theory trail," or a bibliography at the very least, seems appropriate considering some may read *Teaching Community*, feel empowered to make pedagogical changes, and need additional readings.

Arguably, hooks intended to stay far from academic verbiage and instead, chose to engage in public conversation. Her prominence as a public intellectual certainly justifies such a decision. Or perhaps she wanted to avoid being bound by a specific theoretical framework (e.g., feminism, structural-functionalism, Marxism, critical race theory). And we know that chapters and books with long citations and theoretical mapping can discourage students and practitioners from reading them, which in this case would be regrettable. Indeed, it may be hooks's sophisticated yet uncluttered explanations that have led to her public success.

It is obvious that hooks internalizes the world around her in a deeply observant way and that her experiences are critical to the ideas developed in *Teaching Community* and other works. But we are not privy to her intellectual encounters with current educational discourses and specific areas of research. As a compromise, perhaps chapter endnotes or appendices (in addition to some type of bibliography) could be offered as a way to understand what outside sources are mixing with the world she experiences.

My second and final critique is also a tribute to the impact of the book. Often the language seems dramatic and "over-the-top." Phrases like, "Imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy" can feel so harsh and aggressive that readers, especially university and college students, may turn off from hooks's larger points. However, there is a powerful teaching moment in such statements. The power of her writing for the education of pre-service teachers is the unavoidable discussion which begins "Why does this make you uncomfortable?" Talking openly about phrases and ideas asserted by hooks in *Teaching Community* can lead to rich and meaningful dialogue if the three main principles discussed earlier are in place; the acknowledgement that racism is a choice and can be changed, that pedagogy is pursuing critical thinking, and that teachers in the classrooms are reflections of themselves outside the classroom context. In other words, such important discussions are only possible in a community-based, anti-racist,

critically-thinking classroom.

References

Fordham, S. and Ogbu, J.U. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the "burden of 'Acting White.'" *The Urban Review*, 18, 176-206.

Fordham, S. (1996). *Blacked Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity, and Success at Capital High*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

About the Reviewer

Jennifer Adair is a Ph.D. student at Arizona State University, in the area of Education and Anthropology. Her interests include immigration and young children; the effects of educational policy on family relationships, and the intersection of culture, race, and class in teacher education.

Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*.



Editors: Gene V Glass, Kate Corby, Gustavo Fischman

~ [ER home](#) | [Reseñas Educativas](#) | [Resenhas Educativas](#) ~

~ [overview](#) | [reviews](#) | [editors](#) | [submit](#) | [guidelines](#) | [announcements](#) | [search](#) ~