

A Teaching Reflection in Appreciation of bell hooks

Dear Colleagues,

I was reading the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and came across an [appreciation of bell hooks](#), the author, educator and artist who died in December. I first encountered her work in graduate school as I was beginning to unpack my own philosophical stance towards teaching and the production of knowledge. Her work was unlike anything I had seen before, both radical and compassionate. Radical in that she does not mince words about how racism and systematic oppression have marginalized women and minorities. She was also insistent that love, generosity and humility were the most effective tools in the arsenal for those interested in creating social change and seeking equity.

The article I read focused on hooks' work on teaching: "Whether or not you have read, or even heard of bell hooks, you've likely sat in a classroom that has been shaped by her ideas. Maybe you've had a teacher who involved students in the learning process, asking what they'd like to read and discuss. Perhaps you had a teacher who was genuinely concerned for you – as a person, not just a line on their grade book, and who nurtured your intellectual and spiritual growth." ([Savonick, D. \(2021, December 22\) The Pedagogical Legacy of bell hooks. *Chronicle of Higher Education.*](#))

In addition to focusing on learning as a personally relevant activity, hooks also argued that teaching opens powerful radical possibilities in the academy, writing that "the classroom remains the most radical site of possibility in the academy." This reflection and hooks' work remind me of three critical things:

1. Teaching is one of the most powerful professional activities.

It can be easy for the power of teaching to be eclipsed by the focus on the production of new knowledge and press to contribute to the research mission of the University. While those two things are ideally linked when we can involve our students in the research enterprise, teaching alone is an incredibly powerful and transformative journey of discovery for both the learner and the teacher.

2. As teachers we are at our best when we meaningfully connect with students.

Students do not want to be a line in a grade book (any more than faculty want to a line on a budget spreadsheet), and a plethora of research shows that students learn more and better when they feel seen and known as people in our classrooms. As the most recent [Teaching Tip](#) on engaged teaching notes, you may already be employing some of the best practices to build inclusive and supportive classroom communities that nurture meaningful connectedness and potentially life-changing moments for your students.

3. Joy and pleasure are the bedrock of intellectual enterprise.

As the *Chronicle* article noted, hooks was adamant that liberation, social change and intellectual engagement are mutually reinforced by the joy, humor and pleasure we take

in these pursuits. This is likely the most important reminder she offers us. As we all are suffering from the constant stress of the pandemic and the added pressure it has forced into our professional and personal lives, we must not forget the joy and pleasure that can still be found in our profession and the opportunity we have each day to share our own deep joy of discovery.

I hope as we enter week five of the quarter that you are managing through this latest wave of the pandemic, that your family is safe and that you are able to find moments of joy in your daily life and work. Like the slowly increasing hours of sunlight in the cold of winter that promise spring's annual return, these moments of pleasure and meaning remind me that I am indeed fortunate to work in an environment where the exchange of ideas and the joy of discovery are at the heart of what we do. I was inspired to write this email as a recommitment to sharing this joy in a personal way with colleagues and plan to periodically share other reflections in the coming months.

Thank you for your continued commitment to our students and Drexel's mission to improve their lives and the lives of those around us.

Warm Regards,

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