bell hooks, renowned author and teacher, describes herself as an intellectual, feminist theorist, cultural critic, artist, and writer. Addressing the need for what she calls "transformative pedagogy rooted in respect for multiculturalism," her work in a variety of media consistently challenges us to question how our attitudes, ideas, and practices may contribute to systems of oppression or, conversely, to possibilities of liberation. For hooks, teaching is a potentially transformative act that can develop critical consciousness among students by encouraging them to examine issues at the intersection of race, class, and gender. Here, as elsewhere, she discusses not only her theory of engaged pedagogy, but what this means practically in the classroom based on her own experience.

Compiled here are four chapters selected from bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010). pp. 7-11, 19-22, 43-47, 59-62.

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bell hooks

Teaching 1 – Critical Thinking
Teaching 3 – Engaged Pedagogy
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Teaching 1 – Critical Thinking

On the cover of my memoir *Bone Black* there is a snapshot of me taken when I was three or four. I am holding a toy made in vacation Bible school, a book shaped like a dove. I often joke that this picture could be called "a portrait of the intellectual as a young girl," my version of *The Thinker*. The girl in the snapshot is looking intensely at the object in her hands; her brow a study in intense concentration. Staring at this picture, I can see her thinking. I can see her mind at work.

Thinking is an action. For all aspiring intellectuals, thoughts are the laboratory where one goes to pose questions and find answers, and the place where visions of theory and praxis come together. The heartbeat of critical thinking is the longing to know—to understand how life works. Children are organically predisposed to be critical thinkers. Across the boundaries of race, class, gender, and circumstance, children come into the world of wonder and language consumed with a desire for knowledge. Sometimes they are so eager for knowledge that they become relentless interrogators – demanding to know the who, what, when, where, and why of life. Searching for answers, they learn almost instinctively how to think.

Sadly, children's passion for thinking often ends when they encounter a world that seeks to educate them for conformity and obedience only. Most children are taught early on that thinking is dangerous. Sadly, these children stop enjoying the process of thinking and start fearing the thinking mind. Whether in homes with parents who teach via a model of discipline and punish that it is better to choose obedience over self-awareness and self-determination, or in schools where independent thinking is not acceptable behavior, most children in our nation learn to suppress the memory of thinking as a passionate, pleasurable activity.

By the time most students enter college classrooms, they have come to dread thinking. Those students who do not dread thinking often come to classes assuming that thinking will not be necessary, that all they will need to do is consume information and regurgitate it at the appropriate moments. In traditional higher education settings, students find themselves yet again in a world where independent thinking is not encouraged. Fortunately, there are some classrooms in which individual professors aim to educate as the practice of freedom. In these settings, thinking, and most especially critical thinking, is what matters.

Students do not become critical thinkers overnight. First, they must learn to embrace the joy and power of thinking itself. Engaged pedagogy is a teaching strategy that aims to restore students' will to think, and their will to be fully self-actualized. The central focus of engaged pedagogy is to enable students to think critically. In his essay "Critical Thinking: Why Is It So Hard to Teach?" Daniel Willingham says critical thinking consists

> of seeing both sides of an issue, being open to new evidence that disconfirms young ideas, reasoning dispassionately, demanding that claims be backed by evidence, deducing and inferring conclusions from available facts, solving problems, and so forth.

In simpler terms, critical thinking involves first discovering the who, what, when, where, and how of things—finding the answers to those eternal questions of the inquisitive child—and then utilizing that knowledge in a manner that enables you to determine what matters most. Educator Dennis Rader, author of *Teaching Redefined,* considers the capacity to determine "what is significant" central to the process of critical thinking. In their book *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools,* Richard Paul and Linda Elder define critical thinking as "the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it." They further define critical thinking as "self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored and self corrective." Thinking about thinking, or mindful thinking about ideas, is a necessary component of critical thinking. Paul and Elder remind us:

> Critical thinkers are clear as to the purpose at hand and the question at issue. They question information, conclusions and point of view. They strive to be clear, accurate, precise, and relevant. They seek to think beneath the surface, to be logical and fair. They apply these skills to their reading and writing as well as to their speaking and listening.

Critical thinking is an interactive process, one that demands participation on the part of teacher and students alike.

All of these definitions encompass the understanding that critical thinking requires discernment. It is a way of approaching ideas that aims to understand core, underlying truths, not simply that superficial truth that may be most obviously visible. One of the reasons deconstruction became such a rage in academic circles is that it urged people to think long, hard, and critically; to unpack; to move beneath the surface; to work for knowledge. While many critical thinkers may find intellectual or academic fulfillment doing this work, that does not mean that students have universally and

unequivocally embraced learning to think critically.

In fact, most students resist the critical thinking process; they are more comfortable with learning that allows them to remain passive. Critical thinking requires all participants in the classroom process to be engaged. Professors who work diligently to teach critical thinking often become discouraged when students resist. Yet when the student does learn the skill of critical thinking (and it is usually the few and not the many who do learn) it is a truly rewarding experience for both parties. When I teach students to be critical thinkers, I hope to share by my example the pleasure of working with ideas, of thinking as an action.

Keeping an open mind is an essential requirement of critical thinking. I often talk about radical openness because it became clear to me, after years in academic settings, that it was far too easy to become attached to and protective of one's viewpoint, and to rule out other perspectives. So much academic training encourages teachers to assume that they must be "right" at all times. Instead, I propose that teachers must be open at all times, and we must be willing to acknowledge what we do not know. A radical commitment to openness maintains the integrity of the critical thinking process and its central role in education. This commitment requires much courage and imagination. In *From Critical Thinking to Argument* authors Sylvan Barnet and Hugo Bedau emphasize that, "Critical thinking requires us to use our imagination, seeing things from perspectives other than our own and envisioning the likely consequences of our position." Therefore, critical thinking does not simply place demands on students, it also requires teachers to show by example that learning in action means that not all of us can be right all the time, and that the shape of knowledge is constantly changing.

The most exciting aspect of critical thinking in the class- room is that it calls for initiative from everyone, actively inviting all students to think passionately and to share ideas in a passionate, open manner. When everyone in the classroom, teacher and students, recognizes that they are responsible for creating a learning community together, learning is at its most meaningful and useful. In such a community of learning there is no failure. Everyone is participating and sharing whatever resource is needed at a given moment in time to ensure that we leave the classroom knowing that critical thinking empowers us.

Teaching 3 – Engaged Pedagogy

Engaged 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 aware- ness 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.

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 every- one 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 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.

Teaching 8 – Conversation

Engaged pedagogy produces self-directed learners, teachers, and students who are able to participate fully in the production of ideas. As teachers, our role is to take our students on the ad- venture of critical thinking. Learning and. talking together, we break with the notion that our experience of gaining knowledge is private, individualistic, and competitive. By choosing and fostering dialogue, we engage mutually in a learning partnership. In most classrooms, teachers present the material and students passively receive it. They either commit to memory what the teacher says or take notes to remind them. Most students rarely read these notes once a class has ended. Having successfully regurgitated the material, they feel no need to hold onto the knowledge once it has been used to meet the material demands of the course. In retrospect, when I consider my undergraduate years what I remember most is not the energy and content of presentations, but rather the conversations generated by class discussion.

Much knowledge acquisition comes to us in daily life through conversations. *As* a teaching tool, both in and outside the classroom, conversation is awesomely democratic. Everyone talks, everyone engages in conversation. In *Learning Redefined,* Dennis Rader extols the power of conversation: "Conversation contains dialogue, the exchange of understandings and meanings in the endeavor to construct between information. Conversation is always inclusive; it encourages and nourishes individual voice as it strives to develop a community of vision." Across race, class, and gender, everyone engages in conversation. And everyone remembers a good conversation where the back-and-forth sharing of ideas enhanced our understanding, the sharing of wit and wisdom stimulated our capacity to think critically and al- lowed us to engage in dialectical exchange.

Much of the teaching that I currently do begins with the large lecture. Even though I agree to give lectures, I see the monologue as the least useful tool for the transmission of ideas. Since most audiences lack the skills of active listening, much

information offered in lectures is missed. And I often find that what is not missed is misunderstood. The future of learning lies with the cultivation of conversations, of dialogue. I agree with Rader that "conversations bring out the wit in others while presentations merely display the wit, or lack of it, of the presenters." Most importantly, talking with teachers and students about how and when the most ecstatic moments of learning occur, I hear again and again the primacy of conversation.

Those of us who recognize the value of conversation as a key to knowledge acquisition also know that we are living in a culture in which many people lack the basic skills of communication because they spend most of their time being passive consumers of information. Both television and computers help promote passive learning. Much feminist theory that critically examines constructions of masculinity shows that to make boys into patriarchal men, society trains them to value silence over speech. They may find themselves becoming people who either cannot talk or, when they talk, can only engage in a monologue. These are the people who talk at us, who by refusing to converse, promote and maintain a hierarchy of domination wherein with- holding gives one power over another person. Conversation is always about giving. Genuine conversation is about the sharing of power and knowledge; it is fundamentally a cooperative enterprise.

In a group conversation with Paulo Freire more than thirty years ago, I heard him state emphatically that "we cannot enter the struggle as objects in order to later become subjects." This statement resonated with my being. It affirmed for me the importance of finding and having a voice. To speak, to be able to name was a way to claim the subject position. Many students often feel that they have no voice, that they have nothing to say that is worthy of being heard. This is why conversation becomes such a vital intervention, for it not only makes room for every voice, it also presupposes that all voices can be heard.

A conversation-based model of learning is especially useful when a classroom is diverse. We have all been, to some extent, socialized to feel comfortable listening in on or talking in a conversational manner, so defensive barriers are less likely to be put up. In classroom discussions that are not conversations there is often a sense that argument and negative contestation are the only ways to address relevant issues. Negative conflict- based discussion almost always invites the mind to close, while conversation as a mode of interaction calls us to open our mind. All too often, professors have feared that if a conversation begins in the classroom that it will foreclose discussion of assigned reading material, of what matters, at least to them. However, mindful conversation, talking that is powerful and energetic, always spotlights what *really* matters. When conversations in the classroom lead to intense dialogue, students bring a heightened awareness to their engagement with assigned material. Rader believes that "Conversation -- true conversation -- is the way we cleanse poisons, such as false assumption, prejudices, ignorance, misinformation, lack of perspective, lack of imagination, and stubbornness from the system." While it is not productive to engage in negative dialogues when the intent is more to win an argument than to share ideas, conversations that teach us may be loud and energetic; they may be fierce. In her book *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Worn and in Life, One Conversation at a Time* author Susan Scott urges us to reconsider the word "fierce," explaining that "in Roget's Thesaurus... the word fierce has the following synonyms: robust, intense, strong, powerful, passionate, eager, unbridled, uncurbed, untamed." Such a conversation can be a learning experience and fun. It can be a location where knowledge acquired stays with us, empowering us to abandon fear and insecurity and find the place of compassion and connection. Compassion creates a spirit of tolerance; it intensifies the longing to communicate, to understand.

Rader insists that conversation promotes understanding, which he sees as a "different kind of knowing, one that is more aware of the whole and its interactive variables." Explaining further he shares this insight:

> Conversations are powerful. They can turn us toward different definitions and different pathways. They help us look at complicated matters from different perspectives as we turn them this way and that while striving to construct a new understanding.

Conversations are not one-dimensional; they always confront us with different ways of seeing and knowing. According to Rader, they generate "engagement and contribution."

Many of the ideas in this essay and in this book were talked about in conversations between me and educator Dennis Rader. When I felt my internal thought processes were not as energetic as I wanted them to be, I would talk with Dennis and feel renewed energy. Writing this short essay, I began to worry that it was impossible to discern where my thoughts ended and his began. This made me think again about the democratic nature of conversational learning. There is much obsession in academic circles about the ownership of ideas. Competition for academic regard leads individuals to have a desperate need to be seen as the "one" who first thought of an idea. In reality, ideas are always circulating. They are made new as we engage in internal critical reflection, internal conversations that give fresh expression to common thought.

In the workshops on teaching that I facilitate in classroom discussions, ways of knowing expressed in conversations are what draw listeners in and provide them with intellectual nourishment. Much of what we remember, what stays with us, emerged in conversations. It is my hope that future educators will talk more and more, together and with students, so that the model of conversation as a way to learn will have its rightful place as a genuine location for serious and rigorous thought.

Teaching 11 – Imagination

Teachers rarely talk about the role imagination plays in helping to create and sustain the engaged classroom. Since much of the work in a given course is the sharing of facts and information it is easy to discount the role of imagination. And yet what we cannot imagine cannot come into being. We need imagination to illuminate those spaces not covered by data, facts, and proven information. In Dennis Rader's unpublished manuscript *Learn- ing Redefined* he argues that educators must shift their thinking about what constitutes learning, that it is vital for us to under- stand that cultivating the imagination depends on initiative. He calls attention to educators who remind us that facts are energized by the imagination. He quotes George David Miller who shares this insight in his work *Negotiating Toward Truth:*

> Educators who value imagination have little problem affirming creativity and dynamism. Imagination points us beyond routine and static possibilities. But more than throwing us toward such possibilities, imagination synthesizes. It connects those things that were previously disconnected. Syntheses are creative acts. They represent the creation or births of new pathways, new possibilities, new hopes, and new dreams.

And yet imagination receives so little attention.

Writer Toni Morrison made a visit to a school for gifted children and while she found them extremely technologically advanced (they knew everything about computers), she discovered in talking with them that they lacked imagination. Overall in our culture the hours spent gazing at the television set seems to stop creative processes. We live in a world where small children are encouraged to imagine, to draw, paint pictures, create imaginary friends, new identities, go wherever the mind takes them.

Then, as the child begins to grow, imagination is seen as dangerous, a force that could possibly impede knowledge acquisition. The higher one goes up the ladder of learning, the more one is asked to forget about imagination (unless a creative path has been chosen, the study of art, filmmaking, etc.) and focus on the information that really matters. J.B. Priestley contends:

> Because most children are highly imaginative, it is supposed by some that to reach maturity we ought to leave imagination behind, like the habit of smearing our faces with chocolate. But an adult in whom imagination has withered is mentally lame and lopsided, in danger of turning into a zombie or a murderer.

In dominator culture the killing off of the imagination serves as a way to repress and contain everyone within the limits of the status quo.

Listening to students talk about the myriad ways that they feel diminished when teachers refuse to acknowledge their presence or extend to them basic courtesy in the classroom, I am continually awed by our power as teachers to help or hurt our students, to bolster their spirits or break them. Movements for social justice (anti-racist, feminism, gay rights) all insisted on acknowledgment of the way in which the personal is political. In the ongoing critique of dominator culture, thinkers and/or activists dedicated to changing society so that everyone can have equal access to basic human rights called attention to the "colonization" of the mind and imagination. They emphasized the various ways individuals from oppressed and/or exploited groups had been socialized to be self-hating arid as a consequence could not begin to grow and become responsible citizens without first undergoing a shift in consciousness. This shift usually required folks to learn how to think outside the box. To think outside the box we have to engage our imaginations in new and different ways.

Imagination is one of the most powerful modes of resistance that oppressed and exploited folks can and do use. In traumatic circumstances, it is imagination that can provide a survival life- line. Children survive abuse often through imagining a world where they will find safety. Within white-supremacist culture, black folks began a "black is beautiful" movement to resist the continual onslaught of negative representations of blackness. Without the ability to imagine, people remain stuck, unable to move into a place of power and possibility. Although Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander do not use the word "imagination" often in their book, *The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life,* the expansive engaged pedagogies they describe can only happen when triggered by creative imagination. In their introduction "Launching the Journey" they claim:

> Our premise is that many of the circumstances that seem to block us in our daily lives may only appear to do so based on a framework of assumptions we carry with us. Draw a different frame around the same set of circumstances and new pathways come into view... Revolutionary shifts in the operational structures of our world seem to call for new definitions of who we are and what we are here for.

Essentially they are talking about thinking outside the box.

Although Zander and Zander do not use the word "imagination" that often, they do testify that without pressing concerns for survival "a person stands in the great space of possibility in a posture of openness, with an unfettered imagination for what can be."When a teacher lets loose an unfettered imagination in the classroom, the space for transformative learning is expanded. We bring imagination into our work by thinking of new and different ways to engage the particular group of students we are teaching at a given moment in time. When I

teach African American literature and give the students an assignment to go out into the world and read the poetry of Langston Hughes to strangers and then write about their impressions and responses, I am imagining that they will have a different experience reciting and/or reading a poem aloud and witnessing its impact on a listener than they would reading quietly to themselves in the safety of private rooms or libraries.

No matter the subject I am teaching, I always use the writing and reading of spontaneously written paragraphs to stir our collective imagination in the classroom. When we are free to let our minds roam it is far more likely that our imaginations will provide the creative energy that will lead us to new thought and more engaging ways of knowing.