bell hooks and the enactment of emotion in teaching and learning across boundaries: A pedagogy of hope?

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Abstract  
The notion of pedagogy of hope has been conceptualised and symbolised as a significant conciliatory and propelling vision for the University of Stellenbosch. Yet few representations of hope engage with the historical and theoretical roots of this notion. These perspectives are crucial to understand in order to provide a foundation on which to build a vision for an institution such as Stellenbosch University, given its past racialised history. This article uses bell hooks’ writings on the pedagogy of hope to examine a curriculum project across the Universities of Stellenbosch and the Western Cape. hooks, like Freire, emphasises action through dialogue but also encourages acts that disrupt privilege. Her emphasis on emotional connections with the act of teaching by her creative use of autobiography in education, is another positive contribution to the Freirian conception of a pedagogy of hope. This article uses these understandings of a pedagogy of hope by bell hooks to analyse the methodology used in an inter-institutional, interdisciplinary project entitled Community, Self and Identity (CSI). A range of participatory techniques, blended learning, critical reading, theatre, art, film, workshops and presentations were used to support students to explore their own, and their colleagues’ personal, social and professional identities. A specific focus will be placed on autobiography and what guest lecturers who were central to the project, were able to contribute in terms of bell hooks’ notions of a pedagogy of hope.
INTRODUCTION

This special edition focuses on the pedagogy of hope with the aim of exploring the multiplicities of meaning and varied approaches to pedagogy of hope in the South African higher education context.

The pedagogy of hope has been historically grounded in the work of Paulo Freire (particularly in South African education) and has emerged as a core approach to pedagogies when considering transformation in higher education (Waghid 2008a). In this article we explore the concept of pedagogy of hope as reflected in the work of bell hooks (2003). Her contribution to critical pedagogy remains under-explored in South African educational contexts despite the views of leading critical theorist, Apple (2009, ix), who sees her work as ‘taking on part of the role of Paulo Freire in the United States’. We will briefly highlight bell hooks’ views on pedagogy of hope and use these ideas to examine how invited guest speakers that we included in a collaborative, inter-institutional module contributed to the pedagogy of hope.

hooks, citing Freire as one of her influences, produced a trilogy on education (1994; 2003; 2010) that highlights mechanisms that perpetuate systems of oppression and how to mobilize educators and students to build ‘just’ communities. She uses autobiographical narrative to offer a critical analysis of experiences of marginalization, particularly of race and gender. This narrative technique is powerful because it allows insight into the content and process of particular experiences of marginalization and also illustrates how the personal is fundamentally political. More importantly, when she uses autobiography, it provides a space for identification because different aspects of people’s lives are reflected in her use of voice (i.e. of and for them). This creates opportunities for recognition and affirmation that are important in social justice education. Recognition, (the valuing of attributes), along with the redistribution of resources, is one of the necessary conditions for participatory parity to occur in education (Fraser 1997; Fraser and Honneth 2003). This means that when students (and educators) come from backgrounds that disadvantage them in an educational system geared to valorize the experiences of the privileged, it is important to implement curricular approaches which value all student (and educator) experiences at both status (recognition in terms of valuing attributes) and structural (redistribution of resources) levels.

In her book entitled Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope (2003) hooks argues that building inclusive communities is one of the ways in which hope may be generated through pedagogy. A successful pedagogy of hope is built on students’ and teachers’ awareness of themselves as practitioners and human beings if the latter wish to teach in non-threatening and anti-oppressive ways. Interpersonal relationships and conversations that facilitate reflexivity, dialogue and criticality, between students and teachers, and among students, are deemed crucial. This in turn allows students to recognize their own and others’ humanity and assists them to become critical citizens who may effect both change in themselves and their own communities. Essentially hooks speaks here of how a classroom context and curriculum, when used creatively, can generate hope and action.
Fraser’s (1997) idea of recognition is perhaps further embodied in hooks’ assertion that teaching requires love, a view that challenges traditional perspectives that teachers should keep their emotional distance from students. The notion of love in teaching, for hooks, refers to the fact that teaching should be a practice that validates the whole person and not only that which they can produce on a test. This view is similar to some South African views about the importance of love and friendship between students and teachers in facilitating trust that enhances democratic citizenship in South African education (Waghid 2008b). In this approach to teaching, courage and radical openness are viewed as core components for change. These views about teaching imply that the educator is a reflexive being who is confident, authentic and committed to making herself vulnerable and embracing otherness in and outside the classroom. This approach to generating pedagogy of hope embodies the use of emotion in the classroom, an approach which has gained increasing attention over the past decade (Boler 1999; Boler and Zembylas 2003; Zembylas 2005).

The most common critique of hooks’ work is that it provides a vision but little detail of how to achieve that vision of hope in terms of actual classroom practice (Velez 2004). This theme of how to achieve hope in practice has been explored elsewhere in South African writing (Fataar 2010) but not specifically in relation to the work of hooks. It is precisely this challenge that we respond to when we use hooks’ ideas to consider what guest speakers contributed to the Community, Self and Identity (CSI) module.

THE CSI PROJECT

The CSI project is a collaborative, inter-institutional, interdisciplinary teaching and research project between the University of Stellenbosch psychology department and Centre for Teaching and Learning and the University of the Western Cape social work and occupational therapy departments. The project has been described in full elsewhere (Rohleder et al. 2008); and will therefore be described partially here. It was implemented from 2006 to 2008 and aimed to engage students across boundaries of universities, professions, race, gender and class to allow them to critically examine their assumptions about their disciplines through engagement with ‘the other’. The project ran for seven weeks during each iteration. Students engaged in three face-to-face workshops at the beginning, middle and end of this period. In addition, students were required to complete structured on-line assignments during the other intervening weeks of the module. At the initial workshop, the combined group of approximately 95 students was divided into groups of five or six members, each small group having representatives from the different professions. The students completed drawings of their communities and discussed these in their small groups. The discussions were continued online where students could comment on each other’s drawings/communities and engage with selected literature to enhance their experiential discussions. During the second workshops during each iteration, guest speakers were invited to talk about community, self and identity and during the third workshops students presented a
group project on their experiences and understanding of community. Their final assignment for the course was an integrative individual essay.

Thus blended learning, participatory learning and action (PLA) techniques such as community maps (see Bozalek and Biersteker 2010), guest speakers, group presentations and on-line individual assignments, as well as selected literature, were all used as an approach to learning that was embedded in a relational understanding of self, identity and the notion of community.

In much of our writing to date we have analysed a number of artefacts such as essays, online discussions and drawings to consider what both students and course facilitators contributed to and learnt from the project. In this article, we reflect on the importance of introducing guest speakers into the CSI course, in relation to the notion of pedagogy of hope.

**THE GUEST SPEAKERS**

Over the three years, seven guest speakers addressed our students. We will discuss each guest speaker’s contribution and the impact it had on students.

One of the guest speakers, Leswin Laubscher, had been an academic at the University of the Western Cape during the 1990s. He now lives and works in the United States and is an associate professor of psychology at Duquesne University. It was during a sabbatical period (2008) in the psychology department at Stellenbosch University that he joined the project as a guest speaker. His talk to the students was entitled ‘Where is my home?’ and he raised issues about the fluidity, embodiment and transitionality of identities and the distinctions between identity and identification. He captivated the students with his own biographical details and oratory style which included his relating intensely personal aspects about growing up in Paarl under Apartheid, his marriage to a white Jewish woman and how his racial markers shift from colouredness or blackness in South Africa to being Latino in certain parts of the United States. Leswin enacted his approach to teaching about difference by invoking the narratives of his own experiences at both cognitive and emotional levels (Laubscher and Powell 2003). All students identified deeply with his vulnerability, humility and the simplicity with which he spoke about community, self and identity. Many students felt some of their experiences of marginalization echoed in his narratives and thus implicitly were given permission to trust the educational space and engage with their own and others’ experiences in this course.

Similarly Sherine van Wyk, a lecturer in the Psychology Department at Stellenbosch University, facilitated a session with the group during 2008 on the silences across variations or degrees of blackness. Our analyses of the CSI project up until this point focused on racial differences between black and white students and did not, to the same extent, include comments on racial difference between coloured and African students in the Western Cape. This is important in this region because racial tensions between blacks and coloureds in the Western Cape were historically engineered as Western Cape labour policies were preferential to
coloureds. Coloured people, as a group, were therefore historically relatively more privileged than black people and this social dynamic remains challenging for many black people. Although largely unresearched, popular talk from students suggests that universities like UWC, which draw large numbers of black and coloured students, becomes a microcosm of race dynamics between black and coloured students.

It is thus possible that when students write that ‘religion was a much safer topic to discuss than racial differences’, it does not only refer to differences between black and white students but also racial differences between black and coloured students. In the Western Cape, the race dynamic between black students is also more complex as a result of religious difference between black Muslim and Christian students. There are common perceptions or stereotypes of Muslim, coloured students as more privileged than black and Christian coloured students. These sentiments are often reflected in students’ informal naming of spaces in university cafeterias. For example, according to students at UWC, there is a section in the students union, occupied largely by Indian Muslim students, which is known (somewhat derogatorily) as ‘Bollywood’. These everyday tensions were suppressed in talk emanating from students in the CSI course. We wondered if this dynamic was more obvious because there was a predominance of white lecturers and facilitators (especially during 2006 and 2007) and black students were placed in a learning situation with white students. We suggest that this structural dynamic led black students to enact the implicit code of not ‘washing our dirty linen in (the white) public’. During 2008, Sherine’s session, by using her own experience of racism within the coloured and black communities of South Africa, encouraged students to reflect more actively on differences between themselves as black and coloured students.

In Sherine’s work, they also highlighted ways in which the adolescent daughters of farm workers talk about blackness (i.e. ‘colouredness’ and ‘Black Africanness’). Sherine gave each small group of the CSI students an extract from their research with these ‘farm’ girls to discuss in their groups. The UWC students, particularly, enjoyed this exercise. We wondered if the fact that UWC students are the poorest students in the country (Breier 2010) enabled many of them to identify with the daughters of the farm workers. Again, this guest speaker used voice (her and the ‘farm’ girls) in a creative way that not only allowed for more open discussion but simultaneously valorized experiences of marginalized students in the CSI groups. Her humorous and forthright manner, furthermore, allowed students to trust her and this connection with the students was strengthened when she brought the ‘farm’ girls’ voices into the room.

In 2007 we invited Berni Searle, an internationally acclaimed South African artist to talk about her work in relation to community, self and identity. Her graphic visual work often uses her body as a palette on which her experiences are imprinted. In this manner she offers a commentary on the ways in which political events and systems impact on the personal in terms of race, gender, class and other axes of difference. Her work also represents an ongoing commentary on the fluidity of
identities and she showed the students some of her video installations and talked about the process of producing the work.

All the students were entranced by Berni’s presentation and this was reflected in an unusually animated question and answer session and with the continued reference to her work in final student integrative essays. Berni Searle’s work is striking, but we think that the students were also affected by the humility and authority with which she spoke. She exhibited a deep sense of authenticity and vulnerability in discussing her work as the presence of her body (as palette) was projected onto a screen. She also demonstrated caring for students by answering all their many questions with patient thoughtfulness. This presentation, in particular, appears to have been a deeply moving and affirming experience for all students.

In contrast the Remix Theatre Group, invited during 2006, used dance to perform identity. This group includes dancing sequences performed by both able-bodied and disabled dancers in wheelchairs. Many of the CSI students did not engage with this guest performance and seemed bored. Perhaps the more abstract music felt foreign to students and/or physical disability was also not a core experience of difference for them at that time.

Another popular guest speaker was Ariella Friedman, an Israeli social psychologist. She has worked in the field of peace psychology and specialized in working with Israeli and Arab women to facilitate dialogue across boundaries (Halabi 2004). She spoke about power differentials in and between groups in relation to her work in Israel. Her lecture was situated immediately after a session where a Psychology student had mentioned that psychologists do the research and social workers implement the findings. In the context of interprofessional stereotyping and rivalry among health care professionals (Barnes, Carpenter and Dickinson 2000) such a statement evoked much anger. Ariella also used the group dynamics that captured power differentials in the room to illustrate how social workers and psychologists reproduced power relations by reinforcing stereotypes. These comments legitimated social work student feelings of anger and diffused the palpable tension in the room. She had a strong compassionate and caring presence which connected her to all students and allowed her to make an intervention which was accepted by all students.

Kgamadi Kometsi, a Witwatersrand Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER) fellow at the time, was completing his doctoral work on coloured identity. In 2006, he spoke about the history of coloured identity in the Western Cape and many of the coloured students disengaged from his talk and reported afterwards that they did ‘not like it’. Some members of our research group thought that the coloured students may have disengaged because of their unconscious internalized racism in relation to someone (Kgamadi) who was socially labelled as black African. Yet, we think that the student dynamic extended beyond this. He was not viewed as having authority or legitimacy to speak about colouredness when he, in fact, was viewed as black African. This unspoken and silent dynamic about who has permission to speak in relation to race, culture and community has been explored elsewhere.
bell hooks and the enactment of emotion in teaching and learning across boundaries ...

(Carolissen 2008; Eagle 2005). Perhaps what was absent in his talk was the personal connection to what he was studying and how he had entered this field of research. By not sufficiently positioning himself reflexively, he missed an opportunity to connect with the audience and alienated them from hearing his important contribution.

Lindsey Nicholls, a member of the core research and teaching team, was asked to use a guest speaker slot in both 2007 and 2008 as she had used film and poetry creatively in other teaching contexts at UWC to elicit reflexivity about identity and community, which did not remain at a cerebral level only but also evoked emotion (Zembylas 2005).

In 2007 and 2008 she used a short film clip from the film *Secrets and Lies* (1996) that depicts an interaction between a social worker (Jenny) and a client (Hortense). The seven minute film clip focused on Hortense, a young black professional woman, who approached a white social worker at an adoption agency to establish details of her birth mother. Hortense is left alone with the file and at the end of the interview discovers that her mother was white. When she asks Jenny if it is a mistake, Jenny says that she doubts it is a mistake. In this course and other courses where Lindsey used this clip, when asked what they felt about this clip, students highlighted themes of the pain of rejection and the fear of further humiliation based on race. She suggests (Nicholls and Wright 2006) that these are perhaps some of dynamics that lie beneath the surface of young South African students who want to ‘move on’ and ‘not talk about our race’ (McKinney 2004; Swartz et al. 2009) and our collective histories.

At another guest lecture during 2007 Lindsey used a poem by Gabeba Baderoon entitled ‘The country after midnight’. She explains her rationale for doing this as introducing creative material for students to think about their selves in the context of community and identity. In some ways we were trying to reduce the rhetoric that we felt students used as a first response to a question such as, ‘how do you feel about where you live, who you are etc.’. We also wanted the facilitators to express their thoughts and so we invited three facilitators to ‘free associate’ to the poem ‘The country after midnight’ and we invited the students to do the same.

It was a stimulating discussion; students saw images in the poem that they identified with in their own lives and related it to being citizens of South Africa. The discussion was facilitated by Leslie Swartz, who supported students’ views without imposing his own; allowing for multiple voices to be heard. The poem (Baderoon 2005: 35) reads:

the country after midnight
your throat is scorched
but if you take a sip of water
the glass could break between your teeth

a dream is a physical thing
when you are afraid
your muscles run
Freud imagined we plot
our cities and our adorations
on an unconscious map

is it any wonder the country after midnight
feels uncanny
foreign but familiar

unheimlich, the Germans name it
home but not home
home like the cellar or dark stairwell

clothes over the back of the chair
fall like curtains

The students said that midnight was the turning point between one reality and another, a move between two states. They also thought that it reflected night time when the day’s defenses are loosened and the fear begins (as if moving between a conscious control of reality and a shift to the recognition of underlying fears). They used the concept of clothes falling off the back of the chair as a metaphor for the veil falling from one’s eyes. They linked this to the sense of un-home and the disquiet of the sleepless state of recognition. It was an interesting discussion because students started to talk about a post apartheid euphoria symbolised by the daylight hours – but it was lost at midnight when the unbidden fears and anxieties of the past and future came to haunt them. They felt that South Africa was both familiar and strange. A German student said that he thought the use of the German word (meaning unfamiliar, Unheimlich) reminded the South African students of another human rights tragedy, that of the Jews in Germany. It was a moving and ever deepening reflection of the hidden unsaid feelings that students had about themselves and those that were between them, black and white, men and women, teacher and students.

We chose Gabeba Baderoon because she is a South African poet and she writes about her experiences of difference; those of religion, race and gender, but she also speaks of being a foreigner in another country during her studies abroad. Her poems are accessible – modern, short and relevant. Baderoon talks about the importance of poetry as an evocative tool (and teaching medium) as follows:

Poetry eludes the guards at the gates of our minds. It gets us inside and outside boundaries that seem impermeable. As a result of poetry, I know more about myself through the words that run from the tip of my pen than I do from reflecting purposefully. (Interview with Gabeba Baderoon, Mail and Guardian, June 2, 2006).

Perhaps that is what her poem did for us all. It provided an escape for us (as facilitators) from the guards at the gates of our minds and we could know more about ourselves and each other. This teaching technique is not new. Azar Nafisi (2004) used novels in her classes to encourage students to relate their day to day experiences with work
that had moral complexity, allowing them to explore their own ambivalences and social defences. She says:

I told my students I wanted them in their readings to consider in what ways these works unsettled them, made them a little uneasy, made them look around and consider the world, like Alice in Wonderland, though different eyes. . . . “The highest form of morality is not to feel at home in one’s own home” (Nafisi 2004, 94).

We explained that most great works of the imagination were meant to make you feel like a stranger in your own home.

What we all struggled with, as facilitators on the CSI course, was asking students to feel unsafe and uncertain by speaking about what had affected them in the past, as it was experienced in the present. We often wondered if we had the ‘right’ to put students in a position where they were asked to talk about their lives, but we realised that to be silent about these things was worse. As Walker and Unterhalter (2004, 281), who have used Krog’s semi-autobiographical book ‘Country of my Skull’ in their teaching, have stated:

At issue is that if we are willing to listen and learn and be taught by the experience of others, to maybe go somewhere where we may be hurt, we may learn something of value to our shared humanity.

SOME CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The guest speakers brought to this course a multitude of opportunities for identification, for being unsettled and for feeling affirmed. Whether students ‘liked’ the sessions or not, all sessions provided students with strong emotive responses that they could discuss and learn more about themselves and others in their communities. The value of emotion, biographies and human connectedness that bell hooks emphasises as central to creating a pedagogy of hope was demonstrated by the teaching process and creative media used by guest speakers. Whether speakers used their own narratives or those of others as reflected in film, video installations or poetry, they displayed a vulnerability, humility and a consciousness of the power of relationality in teaching and learning. It is precisely this that made the classroom a place where trust could allow risk-taking and in so doing the classroom became a potentially transformative space for students and educators where they could engage in dialogue about intensely political issues through their lived experiences. hooks’ notion of community and its potential for inclusivity, reflexivity and dialogue was reflected in the blurred boundaries between learners and educators in the CSI module. All the educators talked about how much they themselves learnt about themselves and others from facilitating this module, an objective which initially was intended for those traditionally viewed as students. By focusing on guest speakers’ input in this article we also implicitly raise the question of who is the educator and suggest that educators may not only be those who are formally linked to a discipline. The creative
use of interdisciplinary guest speakers and voices of those who stand outside of the disciplines’ specific discourse may validate the multiplicities of experiences as teaching and learning opportunities.

**NOTE**

1. The authors do not intend to essentialise by using Apartheid generated categories of racial markers and acknowledge that Apartheid ethnicities are contested in contemporary South Africa. However, the guest speaker used this category himself to allude to one of his socially ascribed identity markers.

**REFERENCES**


