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Locations of Possibility: Reengaging Embodied Pedagogy as an Act of Resistance

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Despite more than two years of managing a global pandemic, there is currently no policy change in the U.S. to navigate a humane way through education that acknowledges the various traumas humans are processing, especially Covid-19. Arguably, policies abound which discourage recognition of humanity (e.g., “Don’t Say Gay” bills; anti-critical race theory bills; the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*). With no macro-level policy, teachers are, once again, the changemakers at the micro, where we have more control: our own classrooms. I proffer bell hooks’ (1994) idea of engaged pedagogy, a sense of students and teachers as whole beings in the classroom, to call for pedagogues to recommit in this liminal time to embodied, engaged pedagogy. Engaging embodied knowledge together allows us to create a space where the classroom, despite limitations, “remains a location of possibility” (hooks, 1994, p. 207) for a better world.

hooks’ (1994) engaged pedagogy requires vulnerability of both teachers and students, requiring all be “wholly present in mind, body, and spirit” (p. 21). In this way, engaged pedagogy constitutes an act of love, which, for hooks (2000), “requires a conscious practice, a willingness to unite the way we think with the way we act” (p. 77). An embodied, engaged pedagogy works from a love ethic, which presumes freedom to live well and fully for all people (hooks, 2000, p. 87). This critical love seeks community “with a purpose, a goal, a hope, a vision of equality that trumps hate and division” (Warren, 2011, p. 30).

I came to hooks (1994) through engaged pedagogues (my professors) who drew upon her work. I was a bewildered new pedagogue in communication, and hooks (1994) gave me the language to become the kind of teacher I wanted to be, focused on critical love and care. After reading *Teaching to Transgress* in a graduate-level pedagogy seminar, I assigned “Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process” as the first reading in every class I taught. It was foundational for me, not only because I also struggled to understand what place eros might have in the classroom the first time I read it, but because it prompted students to consider their whole beings from day two in the class. While challenging for students, the chapter created a dialogue of possibility about what classrooms are/were and what they could be. It allowed us to talk about there being “a place for passion in the classroom,” one that allowed us to be “whole[hearted]” (hooks, 1994, p. 193).

As I moved into contingent jobs, my trust in my ability to guide students through the eros chapter faltered. I worried about job security in leading with eros, afraid student complaints might end any buy-in I had at the university. I justified the choice, claiming we didn’t have space or time to create a foundation on that text except in specific pedagogy classes. Moving away from embodied pedagogy resulted in me moving away from engaged and lively discussion and toward more lecture. My choice to avoid lecturing was because of how draining it felt trying to entertain my students awake rather than allowing us all to grapple with the nuances of effective communication in an increasingly complex world via discussion.

Throughout the twelve-plus years I’ve been teaching, I learned to remain aware of my body as I taught face-to-face. The shift online due to Covid-19 became a new and unusual learning experience. Teaching through a computer screen necessarily changed how I interact and engage with students, how our bodies can enact wholeness together. My experience wasn’t bad; it was an imperative adaptation. Rather than gritting my teeth to make it through the year, I tried to embrace the change. In March 2020, during the initial shift online, conducting class and office hours online meant bonding over the experience of the collective trauma we were navigating. By fall 2020, however, engaging online was more of a struggle. Internet, bandwidth, and/or access issues for my students meant I could not require cameras. I often taught to *one* face on camera or

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to only little circles/black windows. Still, students were active in the chat, a bonus of online teaching, regardless of the ways students seemed to be struggling with being present in class.

After a year online due to Covid, I returned to hooks (1994) because shifting back to in-person classes meant a re-learning and re-experiencing of the body in the classroom. Much has been written about the shift online in the last two-plus years. Little, so far, has been written about the shift back to the classroom. Navigating social distancing, hybrid classrooms, and in-person classes without mask or vaccine mandates at my university all became exercises in—a pandemic-favored word—*pivoting*. My students and I moved through new terrain, trying to respect one another's choices and boundaries, recognizing that these choices often butted up against one another. Re-reading "Eros" for a pedagogy specific class was like reading it for the first time; our discussion about our bodies was within new parameters of what education had been (both pre-Covid and within the last year online) and the terrain of a "new normal." Students and instructors once again had to consider how their whole bodies reacted, responded, and re-engaged education in-person. After a year back in-person, hooks (1994) was partially the impetus behind me taking a course through the Online Learning Consortium, an organization of educators and higher education leaders working to advance quality online education, about flipped classroom design as a possible way to re-engage students in the classroom. My goal was to add more in-class activities that engage students in the material in embodied ways.

As we move toward the elusive endemic stage of Covid, our classrooms again seem in flux. We recognize how tenuous in-person education can be. Thus, engaged pedagogy is about welcoming possibility, about recognizing the difficult work required in embracing the "pride and pain of humanness at the intersections of complex identities" and experiences (Griffin, 2012, p. 216). If we are to survive teaching and learning in this "new normal," we must make this true for the virtual classroom as well. Humphrey and Davis (2021) argue that teachers and students must bring "their full *selves*" (Humphrey & Davis, 2021, emphasis in original) to the online learning environment. As hooks (2000) reminds us, education is, in part, about love that moves against alienation; love is a "choice to connect" with others (p. 93). Re-centering engaged pedagogy means trying to create the classroom as a location of possibility, a "place where paradise can be created" despite the classroom's limitations (hooks, 1994, p. 207).

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