

# Teaching Critical Thinking

bell hooks

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ESSAY TOPICS

## Summary

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*Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* by bell hooks is an exploration of education and best practices for promoting engagement and critical thinking. In each chapter, hooks responds to essential questions about educational practices and how other concepts intersect with teaching, including spirituality, feminism, touch, and sexuality. She examines the way dominator culture influences how and what educators teach, and she carefully dismantles these practices to expose their problems and to replace them with more meaningful and engaging strategies. hooks views critical thinking as a form of radical openness that can be encouraged through a shared community of learning in the classroom. By inviting teachers and students to share in a process of discussion, mutuality, and love, the classroom community becomes a space of wonder, discovery, and self-actualization. hooks was a prominent culture critic and educator whose work focused on the intersectionality of sexuality, gender, race, class, and culture.

This guide uses the 2010 paperback edition by Routledge.

### Summary

*Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* is a collection of short essays on various topics relating to education. hooks, a renowned cultural critic and educator, uses the work to explore how teachers and students engage in the process of learning. She presents engaged pedagogy as a form of teaching that requires students and educators to participate in a shared community and to acknowledge the innate power disparity of modern education. hooks believes that teachers and students can build a future together through mutuality, active listening, and love. The work centers on engaged pedagogy, a methodology that invites students to bring their personal stories and backgrounds to the material. hooks centers her work on three major themes: **Learning as Liberation, Engaged Pedagogy and a Community of Learning**, and **Critical Thinking as Radical Openness**. Each essay, or chapter, is referred to as a “teaching.”

In Introduction-Teaching 6, hooks defines critical thinking and describes how students are taught to fear it. Young children soon learn to abandon their penchant for innovative thinking and imagination to embrace conformity. As a child, hooks was influenced by teachers who instilled in her the value of a democratic education and the importance of thinking. They saw

education as a pathway to freedom. When she entered university, she encountered educators who saw her as less than human and who undermined her intelligence and contributions. hooks advocates for engaged pedagogy and promotes the power of educators to build shared communities of learning. She believes engaged pedagogy will help to dismantle the colonization of education and the colonization of the mind. In doing so, educators can restore integrity to the profession.

Teachings 7-12 expand upon the idea that teachers have a responsibility to develop a shared commitment to learning in the classroom. Teachers must hold themselves accountable by defining their purpose as educators and seeking out others with whom they can collaborate and grow. In the classroom, students learn best from discussion and sharing their stories with one another. hooks invites her students to bring their imagination and personal backgrounds to the material, and she encourages them to participate in a reciprocal relationship of learning.

In Teachings 13-18, hooks examines the history of the feminist and civil rights movements in education. The feminist movement changed the dynamic of the classroom and shifted curricular focus from patriarchal expressions of power and intellectual superiority. As a Black educator, hooks highlights the unique challenges that Black teachers, particularly Black female teachers, face while navigating educational systems upheld by dominator culture. She reveals ways teachers can fight back against these systems and how to handle the conflict that arises as a result. She also exposes the innate power hierarchy of the classroom and how teachers can use mutuality and love while maintaining boundaries and integrity.

Teachings 20-26 seek to restore practices and ideas that have been stripped from education. hooks asserts that reverence must be returned to the teaching profession and the intellectual life, and that teachers can assist in this process by developing mutuality in the classroom and embracing their own commitment to thinking and learning. The joy of reading, self-esteem, and spirituality are important considerations for teachers who hope to foster the development of students' inner lives.

In Teachings 27-32, hooks asserts that love plays a significant role in the classroom. She dismisses educators' fears about incorporating love into their teaching and challenges feminist thinkers to emphasize love as a part of their practice. In doing so, hooks suggests that writers and thinkers can transcend the criticism and disparity they face. hooks views teaching as a vocation that emphasizes a positive and liberating future. She encourages

educators to teach to this future, and she suggests that critical thinking is the roadmap for students to achieve freedom. When students engage in critical thinking, they experience radical openness that has the power to transform their lives.

## Background

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### Philosophical Context: Defining Critical Thinking: A History

American philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey was the first to explore the idea of critical thinking, referred to as “reflective thinking” in his 1910 work *How We Think*. Dewey describes critical thinking as a consideration of one’s beliefs and the ideas that support them. For Dewey, this was the foundation of scientific thinking. He believed that all children were born with an innate ability to think critically. Their thoughts are malleable, and they are more willing to abandon previous beliefs in favor of new ones. bell hooks reiterates this idea in *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*. She argues that children are born with openness and a sense of wonder that is later abandoned. The social pressure of conformity causes children to let go of their ability to engage in reflective thinking. The work of Dewey, hooks, and other educators seeks to extend the life of critical thinking beyond childhood years.

Critical thinking, put simply, is *thinking about thinking*. Dewey’s use of the word “reflective” refers to the practice of turning evaluation *inward* and dismantling ideas from within. Between 1933 and 1941, 300 colleges participated in an 8-year study developed by the Progressive Education Association in the United States to explore how incorporating Dewey’s ideas about critical thinking into the classroom might alter education. These colleges agreed to accept students from experimental secondary schools who did not align with the curricular standards of the time. These secondary schools operated on the belief that students learn when they engage in material that is meaningful to them and when they solve problems using critical thinking. In the study’s 18 measures of success, students from these experimental schools outperformed their peers who grew up in traditional educational settings.

In 1956, a group of researchers developed Bloom’s Taxonomy, which defined hierarchies of thinking called “cognitive domains” and is still used by educators today. The modern version of Bloom’s Taxonomy identifies six domains: remembering, understanding, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The final domain is identified as the most complex cognitive function. In the 1970s and 1980s, education saw an increased focus on thinking, and standards were revised to include thinking skills. In 1997, Norman Webb constructed Webb’s Depths of Knowledge to categorize thinking constructs. These four tiers included

recall and reproduction, skills and concepts, strategic thinking, and extended thinking. Webb's DOK model synthesizes Bloom's Taxonomy into a simple four-tier system. State standards for curriculum now include indicators that reveal the cognitive depth expected for each skill.

Critics of education argue that teachers rely too heavily on the lower cognitive domains. Traditional models of education in which the teacher is the gatekeeper of knowledge and students are passive recipients of material relies heavily on the first tiers of knowledge and comprehension. Students are rarely asked to apply the material, let alone analyze it, in a presentation-style pedagogy. Instead, they receive the information and take an assessment that proves they have retained it. However, as the 8-year study revealed, meaningful engagement with the material leads to deeper understanding and better retention.

hooks revitalized research in critical thinking by connecting it to class, race, gender, sexuality, and culture. She revealed how dominator culture contributes to the cognitive conformity of students. hooks showed that teachers can take measured steps to engage their students in deep and meaningful connection to material and to recapture the wonder of critical thinking of their childhoods. In doing so, students learn to dismantle harmful thoughts and ideas and begin to heal from the damage caused by the colonization of the mind.



## Chapter Summaries & Analyses

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### Introduction-Teaching 6

#### Introduction Summary: “Teaching: Introduction”

As a child, bell hooks attended segregated schools in Kentucky in the 1950s. Her teachers cared about their students and the quality of their education. hooks was inspired by their example. Her teachers modeled the belief that education was a pathway to freedom, and they expected their students to continue their education after graduation. hooks attended Stanford University to become an educator but was shocked to find the teachers there did not share the same educational attitude as those from her childhood. She was confronted with educators who exercised authoritarian power and dehumanized their students: “Imagine what it is like to be taught by a teacher who does not believe you are fully human” (2). hooks’s professors were outwardly racist and sexist, entrapping their students in a cycle of fear.

hooks was determined to reject their example and become a teacher like the ones she had as a child. She learned to love teaching, and she wanted to write about the type of education she aspired to provide. She wrote two books about teaching before *Teaching Critical Thinking*, each exploring education as a form of liberation. This final installment serves as a response to the topics that emerged during her conversations with students and other educators.

#### Teaching 1 Summary: “Critical Thinking”

In this chapter, hooks defines critical thinking and explains its function in the classroom. Children are born with a sense of wonder and a desire to obtain knowledge. However, they soon lose their passion for thinking as the world and their schooling teaches them that thinking is a dangerous practice: “Sadly, children’s passion for thinking often ends when they encounter a world that seeks to educate them for conformity and obedience only” (8). Teachers who want their students to think critically become frustrated, because students fear thinking and choose to avoid it.

Critical thinking is an active and interactive process in which the individual uses discernment and mindfulness to deconstruct ideas and see things from the others’ viewpoints. It requires openness. hooks asserts that engaged pedagogy requires participation and openness from both the student and the educator. This creates a community of learning.

## Teaching 2 Summary: “Democratic Education”

hooks describes what it was like to grow up in the fifties and to live in a country that boasts its commitment to freedom and democracy while denying civil rights to many. While she was in school, her teachers advocated for democracy and taught their students to engage with social justice. Conservative culture attacked, and continues to undermine, democratic values in education by challenging affirmative action, cutting funding, and promoting private over public schools. By the 1990s, conservative culture had succeeded in deradicalizing education, and teachers who continued to provide democratic education were marginalized or forced to leave education. hooks encourages educators to continue their commitment to social justice and democratic education.

## Teaching 3 Summary: “Engaged Pedagogy”

In this chapter, hooks defines “engaged pedagogy.” She suggests that engaged pedagogy is founded upon the belief that teachers and students learn best when they share in the learning together and view education as a practice of community. hooks quickly learned in her teaching career that students learned best when they were given the opportunity to bring their stories to the classroom. Simple writing exercises in which students are asked to write about themselves or their experiences lead to richer conversations and more meaningful learning. hooks also explains that she participates in these tasks: “I never ask students to do an in class writing assignment that I am not willing to do” (21). These tasks encourage wholeness and vulnerability.

Engaged pedagogy gives every student a voice, but it does not assume that every voice should be given equal time or should dominate the conversation. Instead, engaged pedagogy recognizes that each student brings unique abilities that contribute to the community, including those students who excel at active listening or those who speak only when they have something of great depth to offer.

## Teaching 4 Summary: “Decolonization”

The civil rights and feminist movements drew attention to the ways education reinforced colonizer ideologies and white supremacy. hooks explains that education functions as a tool for colonization. For example, the lesson of Christopher Columbus’s discovery of America ignores the presence of a vast population of Indigenous cultures. Feminist challenges to

education exposed the dominance of male thinkers and artists in curriculum and instruction. Radical and vigilant criticism deconstructs the role of education in maintaining systems of control.

Passive acceptance of these systems leads to colonization of mind: “Without a decolonizing mentality, smart students from disenfranchised backgrounds often find it difficult to succeed in the educational institutions of dominator culture” (26). These students do not have the skills they need to deconstruct daily messages of colonization. One challenge educators face is confronting students who believe a decolonized and unbiased education is a threat of corruption. hooks responds to these students by explaining that she does not intend to mold students in her own image. Instead, she hopes to give them what they need to think critically and decide their own perspectives.

### Teaching 5 Summary: “Integrity

Since the beginning of American education, colonizer culture has shaped the type of information presented to students and how it is presented. Curriculum and instruction rooted in white supremacy ensure that Black students internalize self-hatred. Furthermore, patriarchal values and rules actively teach that women have little to contribute to the academic and cultural conversation. hooks explains that these systems of domination strip education of its integrity. However, there have always been teachers who actively challenge hegemonic practices. These teachers restore integrity to the classroom.

### Teaching 6 Summary: “Purpose”

Although society at large is preoccupied with determining purpose and meaning in life, teachers do not often think about their purpose as educators. Many teachers view their work through the lens of their own experiences in education: “To a grave extent, my understanding of a teacher’s role was defined by knowledge received from the teachers I had observed as a student” (33). hooks divides teachers into three categories: those who teach because they saw it as an easy career, those who teach to disseminate information, and those who teach to help students grow and learn. hooks understood her purpose clearly, but she did not have the skills she needed at the start of her career to combat the negative perceptions of her colleagues or the ingrained colonizer mentality of her students. She worried that her position would be threatened by her challenges to educational norms. However, she saw individual successes with her students, which encouraged her to continue striving toward education as a practice of freedom.

## Introduction-Teaching 6 Analysis

Each chapter in this collection responds to a question or challenge hooks has faced as an educator. In these first six chapters, hooks explores her own history as both a learner and an educator, and she discusses how her experiences in these roles influenced her approach to pedagogy. She argues that educators tend to view their roles as extensions of the teachers they had as young people.

hooks had two types of teachers: those who saw education as a practice of freedom and those who used education to maintain structures of dominance and white hegemony. She was inspired by both types to discover a practice of teaching that emphasized self-directed learning and critical thinking. **Learning as Liberation** is a challenge to a system of American education that hooks argues was flawed from the beginning. Since its inception, American education functioned to uphold white supremacy and entrap students in marginalized groups in a cycle of self-hatred and submission. Many educators unwittingly contribute to this purpose by adhering to traditional teaching methods that indoctrinate children into believing that thinking is dangerous and alienating.

All children are born with powerful and enthusiastic modes of thinking grounded in wonder and creativity, but their education and culture quickly force them into submission:

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 (8).

hooks explains that educators must help children relearn critical thinking, and that this process takes time, patience, and courage. In her own practice, hooks worried in the past that she would be dismissed for rejecting traditional methods of teaching, and she frequently encounters students who view her decolonized pedagogy as a threat to their beliefs and conservative ideologies. However, hooks maintains that she is not interested in forcing students to mimic her own ideas. Instead, she wants them to learn to examine the world with a critical lens and decide for themselves what they believe, independent of what the world has told them they should support. Doing so requires discernment and humility, two principles of

## Critical Thinking as Radical Openness.

hooks suggests that it is important for educators to remember that critical thinking does not happen overnight. It takes practice and intention. **Engaged Pedagogy and a Community of Learning** is a way of arriving at critical thinking. In engaged pedagogy, teachers are active participants in the learning. They are vulnerable and willing to own when they are wrong. Engaged classrooms invite students to bring themselves and their personal experiences to the learning. hooks explains that she did not always understand engaged pedagogy; at the beginning of her teaching career, she was obsessed with ensuring that her classwork was rigorous and robust. Over time, she realized that it was more important that her students engaged with the material in a deep, personal, and meaningful way.

## Teachings 7-12

### Teaching 7 Summary: “Collaboration: (Written with Ron Scapp)”

Collaborating with others plays an essential role in deconstructing the ways class, race, and gender infuse structural systems and modes of thinking. hooks advocates for developing meaningful, collaborative relationships with colleagues. Doing so serves as a model for what should happen in the classroom. hooks and her colleague Ron Scapp use dialogue to challenge and prompt one another to grow as learners. Both Scapp and hooks engage in rigorous self-critique, but they also hold one another accountable. hooks emphasizes that this type of relationship can only take place when trust has been established and is continuously fostered: “Trust is not static, that it must be constantly re-enforced by the actions we are willing to take both to own the importance of our bond and to protect it” (39). hooks feels that her collaboration with Ron has contributed to her personal and professional growth.

### Teaching 8 Summary: “Conversation”

Conversation is key to critical thinking. As an educator, hooks quickly learned that her students retain little of what she presents in a lecture. Most of what they retain comes from the rich conversations they have with their peers: “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” (44). This shifts them from passive consumers to active participants in learning. Conversation-based models of education give room for all voices to be heard and work well in classes in which the students are diverse. Many educators worry about discussions in class veering too far away from assigned material, but conversations

lead to deeper understanding of content. It is important that these conversations are positive and affirming because conflict-based conversations impede learning. These negative conversations lead to students trying to win an argument rather than participate in an exchange of ideas.

### Teaching 9 Summary: "Telling the Story"

When hooks first started teaching, she was hesitant to incorporate stories into her instruction. She had internalized the belief that stories were less intellectual than hard facts and that using stories to flesh out ideas was unscientific. hooks asserts that stories are an important part of the process of building community in a classroom. An individual's story always lacks absolute truth, but it provides information about personal perspective. Sharing stories is a form of soul retrieval and leads to healing. hooks's students are more engaged in one another's stories than they are in lecture, and active listening helps build a community of critical thinking: "It is a ritual of communion that opens our minds and hearts" (52).

Humans are in constant conflict between the parts of themselves that want to be well and the parts of them that are damaged. hooks suggests that the winning self is determined by how much the individual feeds either side. Stories help people feed the side that wants to be well by opening the mind.

### Teaching 10 Summary: "Sharing the Story"

hooks credits the feminist movement for increasing the emphasis placed on the value of personal experience in education. Educators who are critical of the incorporation of stories in the classroom believe that the practice decreases academic and intellectual rigor. Others worry that students may speak about topics or concerns that the teacher cannot address in the classroom. However, hooks asserts that stories are a powerful tool for building community and knowledge. Students are more diverse than ever, and stories help them to bridge gaps in understanding.

Asking students to write a short paragraph and then share what they have written is an uncomplicated way for teachers to give students a voice. The teacher, too, should be vulnerable and participate in story sharing. Doing so helps to alleviate some of the unequal power distribution between educators and students.

### Teaching 11 Summary: “Imagination”

Teachers in higher education rarely talk about imagination and the role it plays in learning. Children engage their imaginations often through art and play, but older students are often required to conform to ways of thinking presented by dominator culture: “The killing off of the imagination serves as a way to repress and contain everyone within the limits of the status quo” (60). hooks suggests that this is an example of how dominator culture engages in the colonization of the mind. Imagination is a form of resistance: Oppressed individuals utilize imagination to engage with personal power and to consider different possibilities and futures. Teachers can encourage students to use their imaginations by continuously seeking new strategies to engage students and providing them with tasks that allow them to experience their work in a variety of ways.

### Teaching 12 Summary: “To Lecture or Not”

hooks asserts that education is moving away from lecture-style presentation. In her own teaching, she thinks of the lecture as a kind of appetizer. Authentic learning takes place after the lecture when participants can exchange ideas through dialogue. She acknowledges that many teachers feel nervous about this portion of the lesson. The unstructured time may present educators with questions for which they feel unprepared. However, learning is mutual and requires participation from everyone. The pressure is not on the educator alone to discover answers.

Lecture-style presentation encourages listeners to become passive. They do not need to participate in the learning or thinking, and they often lose engagement after a mere 20 minutes. Educators who depend on lengthy speeches are usually motivated by either a desire to show off their knowledge or fear and anxiety. hooks manages her time by preparing notes and keeping them in front of her while speaking. She also emphasizes the importance of not allowing students or listeners to monopolize time. When the learning is shared, it is more likely to be retained and to have more meaning.

### Teachings 7-12 Analysis

Much of hooks’s advice in *Teaching Critical Thinking* has informed the foundation of modern teaching practices. In Teaching 6, hooks suggests that teachers spend little time considering their purpose as educators. Now, future teachers rarely leave their training without developing

a personal philosophy of teaching. They are encouraged to think deeply about their role as educators and the influence they want to have. In Teaching 7, she encourages teachers to find others with whom they can collaborate, a practice that has been proven to be highly effective in helping educators achieve self-efficacy. Collaboration now serves as one of the pillars of many educational reform movements. Many who tout the benefits of these restorative practices do not understand their ties to **Learning as Liberation** or their open defiance of strategies belonging to dominator culture and the colonization of the mind.

In this section, hooks outlines how **Engaged Pedagogy and a Community of Learning** challenge this colonization. She advocates for imagination in the classroom, a piece of learning that she feels is missing from contemporary education. hooks argues that imagination has always been a tool for those who are oppressed and marginalized to construct new lives for themselves and to connect with possibility. This is what makes imagination so dangerous to a culture that seeks to maintain a tradition of oppression: “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” (60). Educators who foster imagination in their students actively fight against the maintenance of dominator culture.

hooks explains that this is also true for educators who incorporate stories and conversation into their pedagogical practices. Many academics are afraid to use stories in the classroom for a variety of reasons. For example, they may worry that doing so might delegitimize the scientific and scholarly nature of the work. Educators who veer away from lecture-style presentation to embrace discussion-based practices may feel concerned that students will take the class away from the material or into areas that the educator feels unqualified to explore. hooks’s experience as a teacher showed her the power of stories and discussion: She feels that they enable critical thinking and deep learning in ways that traditional methods do not.

In a traditional model, the teacher is the disseminator of knowledge. Educators present material through lectures and reading. Students are passive consumers of that knowledge, never connecting the material to their own lives. In this model, the content disappears once the exam is over, because students feel that it has no relevance to their individual experiences. Stories and discussion make learning personal and invite students to enter a process of **Critical Thinking as Radical Openness**. Exploring individuals’ stories contributes to an understanding that there is no absolute truth and that experience is subjective. Understanding this is the beginning of critical thinking. hooks emphasizes that this only



works if the teacher shares personal experiences as well. This can be daunting for many educators, but hooks assures the reader that a teacher who is vulnerable in the classroom fosters an authentic community of learning.

## Teachings 13-19

### Teaching 13 Summary: “Humor in the Classroom”

hooks highlights the importance of humor in the classroom and in academic circles. As a child, hooks felt pressured to remain serious. Both her home and school left little room for humor. In college, she felt the pressure increase as she faced male-dominated academia. Slowly, she learned the power of wit and how it could be used in the classroom and in intellectual discussion. hooks saw the same seriousness of her youth in her students. She wanted them to be able to develop their community, and she knew that humor was a key component. She tried being witty in class, but only a few students laughed. One day, she showed up to class late and found one of her students standing at the front of the room, acting out an impression of her. Instead of becoming angry or indignant, hooks laughed, and her students laughed with her. hooks realized then how humor could help students cope with the intensity of critical thinking in the classroom.

hooks shares another story of the time she invited Ron Scapp to engage in a public dialogue with her at her university. Since she teaches at a Christian college that focuses on social justice, hooks finds it difficult to engage in humor with her students and colleagues. At the event, Scapp dominated the conversation and delivered an hour-long monologue. hooks interrupted him by making a witty comment. Her use of humor reminded Scapp of their purpose while avoiding public tension. However, hooks’s colleagues later reprimanded her for mistreating her guest. Scapp and hooks unpacked the experience later. When they were finished exploring their feelings, they laughed together.

### Teaching 14 Summary: “Crying Time”

Teachers often find it difficult to navigate intense emotions in the classroom. Many female teachers are fearful of crying in the classroom because they do not want to affirm stereotypes of weakness or irrationality that pervade academic culture. Like her colleagues in academia, hooks believed that tears had no place in the classroom. She both heard stories of, and experienced firsthand, the ways students could use tears to manipulate discussions and outcomes in the classroom. This technique was used most often by white female students.

hooks explains that white female students often have difficulty confronting the shame and guilt that emerge during difficult discussions about race. hooks learned to alter her reaction to these emotions when she began to reflect on her teenage years and her reputation for emotionality in class.

When hooks was young, her siblings made fun of her for crying so often, and her teachers and classmates often ignored her tears in class. No one was willing to confront her grief or recognize its source as being one of a few Black students in a predominantly white and recently desegregated school. As an educator, hooks makes a judgment call about how to handle student emotions based upon her knowledge of, and relationship with, her students. Teachers must decide whether a student's tears can become a teaching moment or if it is best to ignore them. hooks also discovered the power of allowing her own emotions to show. While speaking about a recently deceased colleague with whom she had a difficult relationship, hooks began to cry. Her display of emotions brought the community of the room closer together and enriched the discussion.

### Teaching 15 Summary: "Conflict"

In this chapter, hooks responds to a growing trend among educators to develop "safe" classrooms that avoid conflict and tension. As a student, hooks disliked professors who adhered to this practice, because she felt it was an indicator of the educator's insecurity and disabled meaningful discussion. As classrooms become increasingly diverse, students find it more difficult to connect with one another across boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Good dialogue often devolves into anger or sadness. hooks argues that it is a mistake to respond to this conflict by trying to develop a non-combative atmosphere. Doing so imposes silence upon teachers and students.

hooks understands why teachers may feel a need to create these types of classroom environments. She has many students who feel so strongly about conventional ideas that they are disruptive to the learning and destructive toward their peers. hooks suggests that it is important to see safety as knowing how to *cope with* risk rather than *avoiding* risk altogether. She likens this to a romantic relationship. Once the honeymoon period wanes, a couple may enter periods of conflict. However, in most cases, individuals do not feel that conflict in a romantic relationship is a threat to personal safety. Conflict is an important part of growth and learning, but it must be built upon a foundation of trust.

### Teaching 16 Summary: “Feminist Revolution”

Prior to the feminist movement, patriarchal notions of male domination pervaded educational systems. Sexist thought was delivered as hard truth. hooks argues that this form of education stripped academia of its integrity, but the feminist movement has helped to endow the profession with honor. Women in academia contributed to the evolution of the feminist movement. Their work, alongside their male colleagues, proved the value they had to offer to various intellectual fields. Beyond representation, the feminist movement also altered patriarchal knowledge and classroom expectations. Anti-feminist movements actively work against these important strides by arguing that feminism is a threat to the white male canon. Teachers must remain vigilant to ensure that education continues to evolve.

### Teaching 17 Summary: “Black, Female, and Academic”

hooks highlights the racial disparity that continues to persist in education. Schools remain largely segregated, and Black educators—especially Black female educators—are underrepresented in academia. Many Black teachers work in predominantly white schools where they must constantly stake claim to their authority and position. hooks explains that Black female teachers face challenges different from those Black male teachers face. They are subject to racist and sexist stereotypes, and their students and colleagues often fail to see them through a lens outside of their own personal biases.

White supremacy is at the core of this dynamic. Individuals internalize the messages of dominator culture that Black people are intellectually inferior. They feel threatened when their assumptions are challenged. hooks’s students have accused her of being racist for asking her classes to confront points of view that may conflict with their personal biases. For Black educators, pushing back against racist and disruptive behaviors comes with its own unique set of stereotypes: “to assert power while deflecting negative projects that would deem all these assertions as evidence of bitchiness” (100). Educators have a responsibility to teach students to examine and understand different perspectives and to challenge these racist stereotypes.

### Teaching 18 Summary: “Learning Past the Hate”

As a young girl, hooks’s favorite card game was called “Authors.” The deck included an all-white cast of literary giants, but it did not occur to her to question its lack of representation. As a teenager, hooks sought books by Black writers, but her teachers assured her that Black

writers had little to contribute to the canon. By the time hooks entered college, the landscape had changed, and educators were beginning to understand how biases had shaped their curriculum and instruction. Students took classes with professors who were willing to challenge racist and sexist hierarchies in class, and those professors who were unwilling to evolve were left behind.

Backlash to the civil rights and feminist movements spread false media messages asserting that colleges were abandoning white writers and thinkers. hooks explains that no feminist educator would discourage students from reading white authors. Instead, feminism asks students to read while using critical thinking. Some of hooks's favorite authors—including William Faulkner and Wendell Berry—have racist and sexist elements in their works. hooks asserts that one can read works from authors who utilize prejudicial thinking by remembering that a writer always has multiple intentions.

### Teaching 19 Summary: “Honoring Teachers”

Young children come to school with reverence for their teachers. hooks suggests that this reverence comes from the respect and trust of parents for elementary school teachers. As students get older, that reverence disappears. Many public-school teachers acknowledge a severe lack of respect from students and parents. hooks cites several reasons for this attitude, including the conflict of a teacher's promotion of self-actualization and the values of dominator culture at home and the notion of education as a commodity and teachers as low-level workers.

The classroom will always have an unequal distribution of power. While teachers may like their students, they are responsible for holding their students responsible for intellectual work. Students struggle to revere teachers when they feel this exercise of authority, especially when dominator culture has taught them to view people like their educators as inferior. A classroom is not equal, and teachers can abuse the power they are given. Mutuality in the classroom shows students that positive regard can be paired with accountability.

### Teachings 13-19 Analysis

As hooks explores the power of critical thinking to transform the lives of individuals and society, she examines the day-to-day practices that teachers can utilize to promote higher order thinking in the classroom. **Critical Thinking as Radical Openness** does not come easily

to students who have been conditioned to conform. These students arrive in hooks's classes expecting to consume information passively that they will later regurgitate on an assessment. This conformity presents unique challenges for educators who want students to achieve self-actualization. hooks suggests that **Engaged Pedagogy and a Community of Learning** combats the internalized lessons of dominator culture. Engaged pedagogy often asks teachers to move beyond their comfort zone and to dismantle the accepted practices of traditional educational models.

While many educators may hope to avoid tension in the classroom, hooks sees it as a necessary part of the learning process: "By teaching students to value dissent and to treasure critical exchange, we prepare them to face reality" (88). hooks argues that educators often mistake compliance for safety. To avoid conflict, they silence their students, preventing them from engaging in meaningful discussion about material. hooks suggests that students must learn to look at conflict in the classroom as similar to conflict in a romantic relationship. Partners can love and support one another while disagreeing, and they can even carry that love through conflict. The same is true in the classroom. This relates to hooks's later exploration of the role of love in the classroom. However, conflict in the classroom only has a positive function if it is built upon a foundation of trust.

In earlier chapters, hooks explores how incorporating stories from both teachers and students into the classroom can lead students toward critical thinking and help build trust. Another surprising way educators can foster a community of learning is through humor. hooks was resistant to humor for much of her life, viewing it as a sign of weakness and counter to the serious practices of academia. However, she quickly learned that humor could dispel the natural tension that arises during critical discussion. While tension is necessary, humor can help bring students back to the center and remind them of the love they have for one another. Acknowledging students' emotionality in the classroom also builds their trust. hooks argues that teachers no longer have the option to behave as though their students are independent of their experiences. Instead, she focuses on building relationships with students and understanding how emotionality can contribute to, and detract from, the educational experience.

In this section, hooks also examines **Learning as Liberation**. hooks places a tremendous weight of responsibility on the shoulders of educators, but she does so because she feels that education is the key to societal transformation. Teachers can contribute to the integrity of the profession by incorporating the voices of diverse writers and thinkers and asking students to

explore and challenge their own biases and beliefs. She argues that education is constantly being threatened by those who want to force teachers to submit to the messaging of dominator culture. When educators embrace engaged pedagogy and reject the oppressive narrative of dominator culture, they participate in a form of education that upholds transformation and liberation.

## Teachings 20-26

### Teaching 20 Summary: "Teachers Against Teaching"

When hooks encourages older individuals to attend college, she often hears the argument that school is boring. These individuals fail to recognize the classroom as a space of mutuality:

They do not think of the classroom and what happens there as created by the mutual interplay between professor and student. To them, the classroom "belongs" to the professor and she or he is the sole factor determining what takes place there (117).

hooks had many teachers who struggled to engage their students. Often, when their instruction failed to captivate her attention, she devoted herself to the reading material. Teachers must express to students the role they play in developing the dynamics of the classroom. When students talk to hooks about classes they do not find engaging, she asks them what they are contributing. Students are in a unique position to challenge teachers who are disengaged. hooks encourages them to write a letter to the teacher. Most educators do not want to be boring or fail to reach their students.

### Teaching 21 Summary: "Self-Esteem"

Unlike public school teachers, graduate students who will one day become university professors are not trained in pedagogy. Therefore, they never learn the nuances of how student self-esteem impacts thinking and learning. Although public schools try to instill in students a sense of self-esteem, many students are wounded by insufficient educational settings and home lives. When they reach the university level, they encounter educators who teach through humiliation and shame. This is especially true for students who were considered among the brightest in their earlier educational experiences. They find themselves dissolved into the college crowd, rendered invisible to their teachers.

hooks combats negative self-esteem by showing her students appreciation for their strengths and encouraging them to build their confidence. She teaches them how to monitor their progress so that they are setting personal goals rather than working to please a person in a position of authority.

### Teaching 22 Summary: “The Joy of Reading”

Both of hooks’s parents were avid readers and instilled in her the joy of reading. Her father saw reading as a pathway to obtaining civil rights, and he believed that learning to read and think critically took precedence over a college education. As a teacher, hooks encounters many students who do not enjoy reading, and she is often surprised when those same students try to dominate classroom conversations. The introduction of technology to education devalues and destroys reading and imaginative thinking in students.

hooks admonishes the American attitude toward reading as bookstores continue to close and books themselves are treated like trash: “Books are as disposable a commodity as toilet paper. A culture that does not value the book as artifact will not value reading” (130). The loss of independent bookstores and libraries is a threat to radical thought, creating space for others to gatekeep the availability of works. hooks upholds teachers as the promoters of reading and public libraries.

### Teaching 23 Summary: “Intellectual Life”

In this chapter, hooks reflects on her life as an intellectual. She knew from a young age that she wanted to be a writer, but she did not feel that she had the skills needed to be a teacher. However, she was told that there were only two career paths for Black women: teacher or service. In college, hooks discovered that she had a passion for critical thinking and reading. She fought back against the criticism of her students and colleagues and hoped she served as a model for her female students who were wary of academic work out of fear of being disliked. Early in her teaching career, hooks was bothered by the number of students who disliked her. Later, she learned that confronting bias and the colonization of the mind is an uncomfortable experience and that her students’ dislike was born out of this misdirected discomfort. Intellectual work is undervalued and isolated, yet hooks maintains that it is a meaningful and transformative livelihood.

### Teaching 24 Summary: “Writing Books for Children”

When educators teach outside of the classroom, they expand the influence of learning. hooks explains that there are many ways to teach outside of the classroom; she found the writing of children’s books to be a restorative and meaningful practice. She began thinking about writing children’s books when parents approached her, asking for reading material for their young students that would introduce them to the decolonizing ideas hooks advocated for in her academic work.

One night, while thinking about her childhood, hooks remembered how her mother would spend one day a week washing and plaiting her five daughters’ hair. hooks wrote *Happy to be Nappy* to help young Black girls develop their self-esteem. Later, hooks wrote *Be Boy Buzz* to combat stereotypical representations of Black boys and to challenge patriarchal culture.

### Teaching 25 Summary: “Spirituality”

Since hooks teaches at a Christian college, the question of spirituality often emerges in her discussions with her colleagues. Some educators argue that spirituality has no place in the classroom, while others argue that it transforms learning into a profound experience. hooks explains that she thinks of spirituality as a practice of developing an inner life. She believes that learning is sacred, and that education and the inner life are intrinsically connected: “Teachers must have the courage to connect the inner work of becoming a self with the outer work of learning” (149). Critical thinking is one practice that cultivates the inner life and leads to both self-determination and self-actualization. hooks asserts that spirituality has the transformative power to lead students toward radical openness.

### Teaching 26 Summary: “Touch”

hooks examines the role of touch in the classroom. Teachers and students bring their bodies to the classroom and are often aware of one another’s bodies before words are ever spoken. However, they are not taught what to do with the inevitable passion and need that accompanies the presence of a body. hooks sees touch as a tool that can be harnessed to affirm students and make them comfortable. She describes a white colleague who teaches Black students who often ask her for a hug. She sees their request as a dismantling of a history of racist unwillingness for Black and white bodies to touch. Male teachers worry most about their touch being misinterpreted, and hooks argues that there needs to be more understanding about the difference between healing and sexual touch.



## Teachings 20-26 Analysis

Many educators become locked in cycles of traditional methods of teaching. Their reasons for adhering to these dominator models vary. They may fear that utilizing engaged pedagogy will increase the possibility of conflict or that they will encounter questions and topics that they are unprepared to address. They may fear the use of touch or stories in the classroom because they worry it makes them seem weak or vulnerable to their students. These fears pervade their instruction, and students are often left wishing that they could alter their educational experiences.

Students who complain about the failure of their teachers to engage them do not see themselves as active participants in their own education or as having a voice to combat the challenges they face. They see the teacher as a lone authority figure who functions with impunity, and they do not believe that they have a role to play in the educational environment or engagement with the material. hooks's advocacy for **Learning as Liberation** empowers students to see the mutuality of education. She encourages students to, first, recognize that they have something to bring to the classroom. If the class seems boring, it may be because the students are failing to participate in the discussion and bring their unique backgrounds and perspectives to the material. When she was a student, hooks fought back against boring teachers by throwing herself into the rich experience of reading. If she could not find fulfillment in the instruction, she sought learning in the coursework.

As a teacher, hooks encourages students to reach out and talk to their teachers whom they feel are not providing a robust opportunity to connect with the material. Few teachers want to be considered boring or unlikeable, and often they will change their practices when students bring attention to the strategies that will help them be more successful. When students confront their teachers' practices and dominator culture, they sharpen their sense of self-worth. Developing a student's self-esteem means helping them see the way they contribute to a collective community of learning and thinking.

Educators, too, have a responsibility of challenging dominator culture and the practices it promotes. Traditional educational models rely on shame and guilt to coerce students into participation and learning, further diminishing the self-esteem of students who have not been taught to develop a sense of self-worth outside of grades or the approval of authority figures. For students to share in **Critical Thinking as Radical Openness**, they must have the strength to confront their own beliefs and biases. Doing so requires a strong self-esteem that will not be

shattered when a fundamental belief is challenged. Educators can affirm students' self-esteem by recognizing their strengths and showing them how to develop a rich inner life, which hooks identifies as a form of spirituality.

While hooks devotes much of the work to the importance of discussion and collaboration, she also suggests that individuals need to spend time in solitude: "It takes hours of thought, study, and reflection, then it takes time to write (another solitary activity)" (139). This time should be spent reading, writing, and thinking. Both students and teachers benefit from these solitary activities. Individuals who do not cultivate their inner lives do not practice self-love or reflective thinking. Like her parents, hooks values reading above all other forms of education. She sees it as fundamental to developing a sense of self-worth and self-actualization. Spending time in solitude with one's own thoughts and questions is a form of freedom. In hooks's own life, uncovering her passion for thinking and working in solitude led her to anti-racist and feminist liberation.

## Teachings 27-32

### Teaching 27 Summary: "To Love Again"

In this chapter, hooks emphasizes that love is an important part of the classroom. She addresses those who feel that love has no place in the classroom. Their opinion may be driven by the belief that a love between teacher and students will cross necessary boundaries or that it will enable conflict. hooks suggests that love and learning are intrinsically bound. Teachers who love their students have a better understanding of their students' abilities and are committed to their emotional well-being. Students are more receptive to educators who value their emotional intelligence. Educators may be fearful of teaching with love because they have not seen examples at home of how love and conflict can work in tandem: "The loving classroom in which students are taught [...] that critical exchange can take place without diminishing anyone's spirit" (162). Bringing love to the classroom empowers both teachers and students to experience a partnership in learning.

### Teaching 28 Summary: "Feminist Change"

When people think about love, their minds often turn immediately toward romantic relationships. hooks criticizes the feminist movement for emphasizing power over love. She asserts that this focus on power disenfranchised many women from the movement who still wanted loving and meaningful relationships. Female teachers have a responsibility to show

female students that women can choose an intellectual life and still be emotionally healthy. They can do this by focusing on self-love first. hooks argues that women are obsessed with outward love because of the immense difficulty they have turning their love inward. Patriarchal culture has taught them that the self has little worthy of love. She provides her readers with a call to action: "Think of love as the most heroic and divine quest life calls us to pursue. And let that journey begin with the quest to be fully self-loving" (168).

### **Teaching 29 Summary: "Moving Past Race and Gender"**

In this chapter, hooks speaks directly about the experiences of Black female academics. She sees Women's Studies as a necessary and vital part of the feminist movement and the decolonization of education. Educators must remain vigilant to include the works of Black female writers and thinkers and never forget that their influence has been and can be again easily erased. hooks suggests that the world's attitude toward Black women is a direct reflection of their own future: "We are called to see clearly that the fate of black females in the world is the mirror into which everyone can look and see all our destinies unfolding" (171). Black women are faced with oppression at every turn, continuously combating racist, classist, and sexist ideologies. They face violence and silence. hooks's students come into her classes with no knowledge of Black female writers or feminist thinkers. Many academics speak about the work of Black female writers without ever acknowledging their contributions. Teachers must work to infuse their practice with love and continue to advocate for progressive education.

### **Teaching 30 Summary: "Talking Sex"**

hooks challenges the silence that pervades discussions about sex, even within the feminist movement. hooks identifies as a "sex radical," and she admires Audre Lorde for bringing the erotic into a discussion outside of sex. Lorde viewed the erotic as a form of powerful energy that could develop relationships, politics, and society. However, much of mainstream dominator culture views sex as perverse and dirty. hooks asserts that self-actualization requires conversations about the erotic.

### **Teaching 31 Summary: "Teaching as Prophetic Vocation"**

Teaching is a vocation that requires looking to the future. hooks explains that educators teach within a framework of the type of world they hope to create: "It demands of us allegiance to integrity of vision and belief in the face of those who would either seek to

silence, censor, or discredit our words" (181). As an English teacher, she is aware that people have strong connections to their former English teachers. hooks also had an English teacher who had a profound impact on her life as an academic. While facing apartheid and the beginnings of desegregation, hooks and her classmates were relieved to have a teacher who valued their humanity and gifted them with the power of a challenging and meaningful education. This teacher taught hooks how to be a critical thinker. Like her former teacher, hooks hopes her students will learn to think for themselves and achieve self-actualization.

### Teaching 32 Summary: "Practical Wisdom"

Many teachers are not intellectuals or critical thinkers. Nevertheless, hooks argues that all people must use forms of critical thinking in their everyday lives, and the power of critical thinking can transform the classroom and students' lives. Critical thinking helps people to live better lives: Rather than passively accepting what is handed to them, critical thinkers daringly pursue something better. Educators can harness critical thinking by placing it within the context of experience. For hooks, critical thinking helped her to imagine possibility outside of her own oppression: "Seeking to know and understand fully gave me a way to create whole pictures in my mind's eye, pictures that were not formed through reaction" (186). Teachers who foster critical thinking in the classroom encourage students to be radically open; in turn, they become lovers of the truth and engage with wonder.

### Teachings 27-32 Analysis

In this closing section, hooks brings together all three themes into a singular comprehensive idea: love. This word pervades hooks's collective body of work. She acknowledges that the concept of love within a larger discussion of academic and intellectual work feels out of place. In academia, love is often left out of the conversation. Since hooks works in college settings, she is surrounded by others who view academic work as cold and unfeeling. Her colleagues believe that there is no room for love in knowledge and truth. hooks views her work as an educator and the role love can play in the classroom differently: She sees love as the most transformative and liberating power that humans have at their disposal. She believes that love is a gateway to knowledge and truth: "Love in the classroom creates a foundation for learning that embraces and empowers everyone" (159). hooks describes an academic setting in which a teacher can exhibit love and positive regard for students, and students can love their teacher, even while critical thinking, conflict, and accountability pervade the classroom culture.

hooks rejects stringent intellectualism that insists upon an authoritarian structure, because it destroys the opportunity for students to participate in learning. Traditional models place the teacher in a position of unfettered power. They can dole out discipline and grades with impunity, and students must submit to the will of the teacher. In this model, students view knowledge as something that is gifted, and that gift can easily be taken away. hooks's engaged pedagogy presents knowledge as something that is *shared*—it is a lived experience of mutuality between students and teacher.

hooks challenges her fellow academics to incorporate love into their practice, and she criticizes the feminist movement for leaving love out of the equation. To make a place within a patriarchal system, hooks suggests that many in the movement forgot that it is the work of feminism to dismantle dominator culture entirely. **Learning as Liberation** begins with love, and hooks suggests that the first step is self-love. Women struggle to embrace self-love, and dominator culture views it as a threat to patriarchal values and stereotypes. When women love themselves, they are unwilling to be trampled upon or forced into submission. Running away from emotions to challenge a society devoid of feeling is counterintuitive.

For Black women, hooks describes self-love as a radical act. hooks asserts that educators have a responsibility to model self-love and to instill in their students a devotion to reading and learning from Black female thinkers. This connects to her belief that educators teach to the future they want to see. hooks describes teaching as a prophetic vocation. When educators utilize **Engaged Pedagogy and a Community of Learning** in their instructional practice, they teach to a future in which students embrace open-mindedness and dissent.

Chapter 23 serves as a comprehensive theory of **Critical Thinking as Radical Openness**, bringing together hooks's ideas on love and methodology. hooks shows how engaged pedagogy invites students to share in the experience of learning and to fall in love with personal intellectual development. Engaged pedagogy asks students to bring their lives to the material, making the coursework more meaningful and lasting. Students leave their classes with an understanding that what they have learned matters and has real-life connections to their personal experience. hooks reminds her readers that discussions about critical thinking are really discussions about the integrity of education. She calls for teachers to reclaim the integrity of the profession by challenging their students to do more than recite and remember. When students experience wonder through critical thinking, they are more likely to become lifelong learners and to experience healing through the development of their inner lives.

## Key Figures

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### bell hooks

bell hooks (1952-2021) was an American author, educator, and social critic. hooks grew up in Kentucky and was educated in segregated schools. She was influenced by family members and educators who encouraged her to think critically and challenge the status quo, including the patriarchal and racist values that dominated American culture.

In *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*, hooks explains that she went to schools in which the teachers valued critical thinking and higher education. They instilled in her the belief that education was the pathway to liberation and transformation. Despite their influence, hooks writes that it was the inevitable result of white supremacy and dominator culture that she learned to internalize self-hatred. In *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, hooks describes her childhood and the ways in which her parents unwittingly upheld patriarchal values. She looked forward to attending university and meeting others who valued intellectualism and critical thinking.

At Stanford University, hooks was struck by the contrast of her professors and the teachers of her childhood who emphasized education as a practice of freedom. Her professors dehumanized their students and upheld structures of white supremacy and patriarchy. Those few educators who used counter-hegemonic pedagogy inspired her to deconstruct and challenge patriarchal and racist biases. However, it was her professors who demeaned and dehumanized hooks and her intellectual works who inspired her to develop a pedagogy that would empower students to achieve self-actualization. hooks obtained a Bachelor of Arts in English in 1973 from Stanford University and a Master of Arts in English from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1976. Her first teaching position was as a senior lecturer in ethnic studies at the University of Southern California. After completing a doctorate in English from the University of California in 1983, she continued her award-winning teaching and writing career.

hooks received the American Book Award in 1991 for *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. In 2020, hooks was named one of *Time* magazine's 100 Women of the Year. hooks changed her name from Gloria Jean Watkins to pay homage to her maternal great-grandmother. The intentional lower casing of her name was intended to symbolize the

importance of her work rather than her celebrity. After teaching at Yale, City College of New York, San Francisco State University, the University of California, and other esteemed institutions, hooks returned to Kentucky to take a position at Berea College where the bell hooks Institute was later founded.

At first, hooks became a teacher to support her work as a writer, but she quickly fell in love with the profession and described it as one of her most rewarding endeavors. hooks was a prolific writer, publishing more than forty works in a variety of genres, including essays and poetry. One of her major influences was Sojourner Truth, whose speech “Ain’t I a Woman” served as the title for hooks’s first major text, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Her works explore the intersectionality of race, sex, class, and culture. She published several works on teaching and education, including two works that precede *Teaching Critical Thinking* – *Teaching to Transgress* and *Teaching Community*. hooks believed that education was the key to transforming a culture and the front line for enacting social justice.

## Themes

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### Learning as Liberation

bell hooks's collective body of work focuses on the intersectionality of race, class, gender, sexuality, and culture. In *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* she shows how this intersectionality impacts the classroom. hooks argues that dominator culture—which she perceives to be an extension of white supremacy and patriarchal ideologies—has shaped traditional educational models. In a classroom defined by dominator culture, the teacher is an authoritarian and disciplinarian who presents material in lecture-style presentation. Students are submissive and passive receivers of information. They have no personal connection to the material, and they are taught only about white, and primarily male, writers and thinkers. hooks argues that this model leaves students out of the learning process entirely. They have no personal connection to the material, and they are forced into a system of colonization of mind.

For Black students and other students from marginalized groups, dominator culture classrooms are especially challenging: “Imagine what it is like to be taught by teachers who do believe that they are racially superior” (2). hooks describes her own experiences in these types of classrooms. As a child, she had teachers who believed in her ability and intelligence, but when she first arrived at college, her professors repeatedly reinforced the idea that she was not on the same academic and intellectual level as her white male peers. Some even questioned that she was the author of her writing, insisting that female writers could never reach the same level as their male counterparts. However, hooks did have a few progressive professors who saw education as liberation and transformation, and they provided her with a model for the power of true learning. When she became an educator, she quickly learned that she wanted to be like those educators who made her feel like she had worth and purpose.

hooks advocates for a pedagogical approach that enables students to think critically and to dismantle bias and dominator culture. Collaboration through discussion and the sharing of personal stories enable students to see the perspectives of their diverse peers. This serves as a catalyst for students to decolonize their minds, and it provides a roadmap for teachers to decolonize their teaching practices. Dominator culture instills in students a sense of self-hatred and destroys their self-esteem through shame and guilt; learning through community and love liberates. hooks describes learning as a form of spirituality in which the inner life is



fostered. She describes many ways to cultivate the inner life, such as through reading, touch, and humor. As students develop their intellectual selves, they gain self-esteem. When students cultivate their inner lives and learn to think critically, they are liberated from the internalized self-hatred of dominator culture.

### Engaged Pedagogy and a Community of Learning

In response to the traditional educational methods outlined by dominator culture, hooks presents engaged pedagogy as an alternative for progressive teachers. Engaged pedagogy rejects the gatekeeping mentality of knowledge and views the classroom as a space of *shared* learning. hooks explains that engaged pedagogy moves students to think critically and to work toward self-actualization. The text outlines practices that contribute to the comprehensive methodology. hooks emphasizes that teachers must begin with themselves before using the practices of engaged pedagogy in the classroom. Educators should develop their inner lives through reading, writing, and thinking, and they should model self-love and collaboration for their students.

hooks advocates for a pedagogy that she believes will restore integrity to the profession by bringing students' whole selves to the learning. She suggests that dominator culture has stripped education of its integrity by promoting lofty ideals like freedom while denying access to learning to many. Engaged pedagogy encourages the teacher and students to participate in a shared learning relationship that embraces the diversity of learners. hooks explains that traditional classrooms have a disparity of power: Teachers act with authority and impunity, and students are forced into submission. In many instances, teachers' biases influence the instruction they provide to students. In contrast, engaged pedagogy gives both teachers and students the responsibility of learning. Both parties bring mutual respect and an open mind to the classroom.

Engaged pedagogy also embraces students' and teachers' stories. It acknowledges the diversity of the people in the classroom and encourages them to understand the material through various lenses. hooks uses practices like having students write paragraphs and then sharing them to create safe spaces for students to bring their personal experiences to the content. While students are expected to participate and engage in active listening, engaged pedagogy does not mean that the learning experience is devoid of conflict. Instead, tension and conflict are understood to be an important part of dismantling bias and belief, and the community can still hold respect while disagreeing. Engaged pedagogy also acknowledges the emotions that arise during this difficult process.

Acknowledging students' whole selves is a practice of love, and hooks views love as the core of engaged pedagogy. Dominator culture in academia argues that love has no place in the classroom. An emphasis upon reason and knowledge, independent of personal experience and community, leaves love out of teaching practices. Engaged pedagogy models self-love and encourages students to see themselves as active participants in a community of learning. Love leads students to a liberation and decolonization of the mind.

### Critical Thinking as Radical Openness

Children are born with a sense of wonder. Every idea is new, and fresh thoughts and beliefs quickly replace old ones. However, this sense of wonder and critical thinking is soon abandoned: "Most children are taught early on that thinking is dangerous" (8). They learn that critical and independent thinking sets them apart from their peers, and conformity dictates that they submit to the status quo. hooks argues that educators have a responsibility to help students recapture the complex thinking processes of youth. Students come into class with established sets of beliefs. They are naturally uncomfortable when the material presented challenges those beliefs or asks them to consider their ideals from new perspectives. hooks shares stories of students who felt they were being targeted by her instruction simply because the content did not align with their preconceived ideas. In short, their minds were closed.

hooks describes critical thinking as an action that takes intent and practice. Students learn to think critically when they begin to see that others have different experiences from their own. hooks's work differs from other writing on critical thinking. Instead of focusing on neuroscience or developing rigorous questions, hooks presents a simple pedagogy for promoting critical thinking. Students are asked to learn from one another through discussion and the sharing of stories: "Learning and talking together, we break with the notion that our experience of gaining knowledge is private, individualistic, and competitive" (43). hooks argues that when classrooms make space for students to learn from one another through dialogue, students are more receptive to new ideas.

Critical thinking as radical openness is important because it emphasizes self-critique and self-actualization. hooks models this through her relationship with her colleague Ron. These two educators frequently discuss their work on social justice and hold each other accountable for

aligning their actions with their words. hooks learned through her conversations with Ron to dismantle her own personal prejudices, revealing how collaboration contributes to openness and critical thinking.

When students learn to open their minds and think critically, they discover wholeness. Their thoughts and actions are in unity, and they understand how to continue the process of self-examination long after they walk out of the classroom. Self-actualization, often interpreted as self-fulfillment, is the point at which people feel that their life has meaning and purpose. hooks argues that critical thinking is the pathway toward self-actualization, and that students who are open to new thoughts and ideas help society at large move closer to its own version of self-fulfillment.

## Index of Terms

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### Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy describes a methodology of teaching that focuses on exposing and dismantling biases. bell hooks uses the term to refer to practices that actively seek to decolonize the mind and educational institutions. Critical pedagogy asks students to examine how dominator culture contributes to ways of thinking and societal systems. Asking students to discuss diet culture and its origins is one critical pedagogy. hooks suggests that dominator culture is threatened by critical pedagogy and that there will always be groups who actively seek to destroy critical awareness in the classroom.

### Critical Thinking

In Teaching 1, hooks outlines a definition for critical thinking as a form of radical openness. She suggests that critical thinking is an action during which students engage with wonder and challenge their own beliefs and ideas. hooks suggests that all children innately participate in critical thinking, but dominator culture quickly teaches them to submit and conform. Within hooks's definition, critical thinking helps students to see the world from the perspectives of others and enables them to live a life of learning and self-reflection. Critical thinking leads students toward self-actualization.

### Engaged Pedagogy

Engaged pedagogy is central to the theme of **Engaged Pedagogy and a Community of Learning**. hooks defines engaged pedagogy as a teaching practice that invites students to participate in a learning community with the teacher. Engaged pedagogy moves beyond rote memorization and regurgitation of material by requiring students to think critically and collaboratively about the material. Engaged pedagogy invites students to bring their personal experiences and stories to the classroom and encourages teachers to view learning as a shared experience with students. In the engaged classroom, both teachers and students learn from one another and build community on a foundation of love. hooks views engaged pedagogy as a challenge to traditional pedagogies built by dominator culture.

## Hegemony

Hegemony is defined as dominance. hooks uses the term to unpack white hegemony and patriarchal hegemony within society. Often referring to dominator culture, hooks explores how white patriarchal society shapes and informs education. Teachers are often unaware of how their practices support white supremacy and patriarchal ideologies. For example, the authoritarian style of teaching is representative of a system of oppression that places people into hierarchical categories.

## Integrity

hooks defines integrity as the point at which one's actions and one's beliefs are in alignment. She suggests that the term "wholeness" is synonymous with integrity. Her work expands on the idea that education is in a crisis of integrity. She argues that dominator culture emphasizes freedom while dehumanizing and oppressing marginalized groups. Attacks on Women's Studies and critical pedagogy continue to threaten the integrity of education. hooks explains that teachers can fight back against this threat by utilizing engaged and critical pedagogy in the classroom.

## Pedagogy

Pedagogy is defined as the methodology and practice of teaching. It encompasses the science of learning and teaching. Pedagogy considers the psychology and sciences of how students learn and engage with material. For example, a teacher who believes in monitoring students' understanding of the material throughout the lesson is modeling a pedagogical principle. There are many pedagogical philosophies, including bell hooks's methodology of engaged pedagogy presented in this work. hooks presents engaged pedagogy as a counter approach to traditional methods of teaching.

## Self-Actualization

Considered by many to be the goal of education, self-actualization describes the point at which a student achieves full potential. Others define self-actualization as a feeling of self-worth and self-fulfillment. hooks contributes to the understanding of self-actualization by viewing it as a point of radical openness. She believes educators have a role in guiding students toward self-actualization, and that when enough students are radically open and utilizing critical thinking, then society at large can begin to move toward self-actualization.

## Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning describes a process of learning in which the student takes charge of the direction and accountability of learning. hooks uses the term to describe the types of learners she hopes to cultivate through her use of engaged pedagogy. When students engage in critical thinking as radical openness and learning as a collaborative effort, they carry effective learning practices into their personal life. This means that they will continue to dismantle their own biases and think critically about their beliefs and ideas on their own, independent of a teacher's instruction.

## Important Quotes

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1. "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."

([Teaching 1](#), Page 7)

*In Teaching 1, bell hooks defines **Critical Thinking as Radical Openness**. She suggests that critical thinking is an action, meaning that it takes intention and practice. In her work, she shows how educators can use this idea to lead their students toward critical thinking. Instead of looking at critical thinking as something that students should be able to do innately, her pedagogical theory emphasizes that students must relearn critical thinking through continued effort.*

2. "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."

([Teaching 1](#), Page 10)

*Central to hooks's work is **Engaged Pedagogy and a Community of Learning**. hooks views teachers and students as part of a partnership based on trust and love. She argues that many teachers fall into traditional methods of teaching because they fear the outcome if they embrace engaged pedagogy. However, hooks suggests that the responsibility of learning does not fall solely on the shoulders of educators: Both students and teachers bring learning to the table.*

3. "Progressive Educators continue to honor education as the practice of freedom because we understand that democracy thrives in an environment where learning is valued, where the ability to think is the mark of responsible citizenship, where free speech and the will to dissent is accepted and encouraged."

([Teaching 2](#), Page 17)

*hooks contrasts traditional methods of teaching with progressive education and engaged pedagogy. She cites her own teachers who believed that education was a pathway to betterment and who promoted **Learning as Liberation**. This form of education emphasizes resistance and critical thinking over passive and submissive learning.*

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([Teaching 3](#), Page 21)

*hooks believes that education is lacking in integrity. Students read the works of great thinkers who promote ideas like liberty and reason while simultaneously oppressing marginalized groups. This lack of integrity reveals a conflict between thinking and action. She asserts that wholeness can be returned to education when students can think critically and challenge the status quo.*

5. "Throughout the history of education in the United States, both in the public school system and in higher education, imperialist capitalist white-supremacist patriarchal politics has shaped learning communities, affecting both the way knowledge has been presented to students and the nature of that information."

([Teaching 5](#), Page 29)

*Throughout the text, hooks carefully dismantles the different processes in education that have been influenced by dominator culture, including the role of the teacher as authoritarian disciplinarian and the student as passive receiver of information. Engaged pedagogy challenges this hierarchy while still maintaining reverence for educators. Rather than presenting material in long lectures, educators can invite students to participate in meaningful discussions about the material, ensuring that the learning lasts and is accessible to everyone.*

6. "Collaborating with diverse thinkers to work toward a greater understanding of the dynamics of race, gender, and class is essential for those of us who want to move beyond one-dimensional ways of thinking, being, and living."

([Teaching 7](#), Page 37)

*In this chapter, hooks speaks directly about educators' collaboration with colleagues. She believes that teachers can enrich their understanding of material and improve their pedagogical practices by entering meaningful collaborative relationships with other*



*educators. She describes her own relationship with a teacher named Ron Scapp, with whom she frequently discusses ideas and conflicts.*

7. “Learning and talking together, we break with the notion that our experience of gaining knowledge is private, individualistic, and competitive.”

([Teaching 8](#), Page 43)

*While hooks focused on collaborative relationships among educators in the previous chapter, in this section she examines how collaborative relationships within the classroom benefit students. **Engaged Pedagogy and a Community of Learning** allow students to learn from one another. Students are no longer expected to learn in isolation, and knowledge is not kept away from certain groups.*

8. “I had been trained to believe that anyone who relied on a personal story as evidence upholding or affirming an idea could never really be a scholar and/or an intellectual, according to dominator thinking via schools of higher learning.”

([Teaching 9](#), Page 49)

*hooks frequently describes her own experiences unpacking dominator culture and how it has impacted her teaching practice. She suggests that a focus on academia is often misdirected toward an authoritarian-style classroom. When she first began teaching, she avoided incorporating stories into her academic work—either her own or her students’. Engaged pedagogy leaves space for students’ stories and recognizes that experience enriches the meaning of the material.*

9. “The soul murder I felt as a child was no longer the mark of my being; by telling stories I had entered a redemptive space. I had entered a world of soul retrieval.”

([Teaching 9](#), Page 51)

*In this section, hooks connects **Critical Thinking as Radical Openness** with engaged pedagogy. She explains how using stories to understand material and to explore the intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality, and class engages students in healing the broken parts of themselves. By healing, students understand how others’ perceptions shaped how they viewed themselves and become more open to challenging their biases.*

10. "Imagination is one of the most powerful modes of resistance that oppressed and exploited folks can and do use."

([Teaching 11](#), Page 61)

*The text outlines many ways in which educators can embrace engaged pedagogy and lead students through a process of **Learning as Liberation**. Incorporating opportunities for students to use their imagination connects them to thinking processes that many have not used since they were children.*

11. "Genuine learning, like love, is always mutual."

([Teaching 12](#), Page 64)

*hooks argues that there can and should be a place for love in the classroom. Many teachers fear loving their students because they worry it will make them too vulnerable or that they will not be able to handle the weight of their students' stories. hooks suggests that love leads to liberation and that true learning cannot take place without it.*

12. "Classes where students are learning new ways of thinking and knowing that may challenge all the belief systems they have heretofore held dear need humor as a mediating force."

([Teaching 13](#), Page 72)

*In this chapter, hooks explores another aspect of teaching that is left out by dominator culture: humor. Academia dictates that humor has no place in the classroom because it is not directly connected to knowledge or reason. However, hooks shows how humor plays a significant role in the classroom by making students feel safe and included.*

13. "Emotional awareness and the expression of emotions necessarily have a place in the classroom."

([Teaching 14](#), Page 81)

*Just as hooks explores the way humor can give students a sense of community, she asserts that academia has falsely avoided emotionality in the classroom. **Engaged Pedagogy and a Community of Learning** invites students to bring their whole selves to the classroom, including their emotions.*

14. "The pressure to maintain a non-combative atmosphere, however, one in which everyone can feel safe, can actually work to silence discussion and/or completely eradicate the possibility of dialectical exchange."

([Teaching 15](#), Page 86)

*hooks suggests that it is a mistake to structure a classroom around the avoidance of conflict. Tension is a natural part of learning, especially as students begin to dismantle biases and beliefs. Teachers can combat the negative effectives of conflict by teaching students how to manage the consequences of risk and to love, even while disagreeing.*

15. "We must teach students to first see that perspectives vary depending on the degree to which any of us have been socialized to have blind spots in our thinking based on race, gender, and class."

([Teaching 17](#), Page 100)

*In her teaching practice, hooks often confronts students who feel negatively toward her for challenging their preconceptions. In this passage, she confronts a white student who insisted that her Black housekeeper felt valued and loved in her work without ever asking the woman her own feelings. hooks suggests that teachers must take the time to prepare students to hear thoughts that may challenge what they believe or think and learn how to handle the emotions that arise as a result.*

16. "Letting students know that they were participants in creating and sustaining a constructive classroom dynamic helped to lessen my initial sense that it was solely my responsibility to make the classroom an interesting place."

([Teaching 20](#), Page 118)

***Engaged Pedagogy and a Community of Learning*** removes the pressure from the teacher alone to contribute to the learning environment. Instead, both students and the teacher participate in a mutually beneficial relationship of growth, development, and engagement. To her students who find certain classes boring, hooks suggests to bring engaging discussion and contributions to the classroom.

17. "It soon became apparent to me that if lack of self-esteem served as a barrier to students' learning, then I would have to help them work at removing that barrier so that the information and knowledge I hoped to share could be constructively grasped by them."

([Teaching 20](#), Page 125)

*Many teachers do not feel that emotional work should be a part of their pedagogy or practice. However, hooks reveals how emotional issues like a lack of self-esteem can inhibit students from learning. Teachers who use engaged pedagogy understand that developing students' emotional well-being prepares them for **Critical Thinking as Radical Openness**.*

18. "Much intellectual work embraces the art of the possible; it is like an archaeological process where one goes deep in search of truths that may constantly change as new information comes to light."

([Teaching 23](#), Page 139)

***Critical Thinking as Radical Openness** is a process that never ends. Students who learn how to think critically in their classes become lifelong learners who never stop unpacking their biases and adding to their knowledge. In her work, hooks models this idea by sharing stories of times when she had to reevaluate her thinking.*

19. "Critical thinking in the classroom is one way to cultivate greater awareness. It enables students to better recognize the interconnected nature of life and by so doing brings them face to face with the sacred."

([Teaching 24](#), Page 149)

*In this chapter, hooks considers spirituality as an element of teaching and learning. She defines spirituality as the sacredness of knowledge and the cultivating of a rich inner life. Fostering critical thinking in the classroom enables students to practice it in their everyday lives, contributing to a better, more fulfilling internal life.*

20. "Love's place in the classroom is assured when there is any passionate pursuit of knowledge."

([Teaching 27](#), Page 160)

*In this chapter, hooks enfolds the three themes of the work into one comprehensive idea: love. She suggests that engaged pedagogy must be built upon a foundation of trust and love, and that students experience **Learning as Liberation** when love leads them toward critical thinking.*

21. "The female search for love has to begin with the work of self-love."

([Teaching 28](#), Page 167)

*While hooks argues that teachers can and should love their students, she asserts that this cannot happen until educators engage in self-love. This is particularly challenging for women in academia who have experienced education through shame and guilt.*

22. "For love as the foundation of all social movements for self-determination is the only way we create a world that domination and dominator thinking cannot destroy."

([Teaching 29](#), Page 176)

*This quotation provides hooks's central argument for why love must be a part of the classroom. She views education as a transformative experience of liberation and resistance, and her collective body of work focuses on love as a powerful weapon for good. By combining love and learning, hooks presents a pedagogy that marches toward a new future.*

23. "The erotic, particularly in the realm of the sexual, can lead to spiritual and emotional self-actualization, even if the place where it begins, where desire places us, is imperfect, unequal, and, yes, potentially dangerous."

([Teaching 30](#), Page 180)

*In this chapter, hooks explores how education has been designed to focus only on the brain and ignore the body. She suggests that teachers should recognize the wholeness of students, including their bodies, and how their bodies contribute to learning and understanding. By harnessing desire and passion for learning, teachers can embrace eros.*

24. "Shaming is one of the most common strategies used by educators in classrooms where prejudices prevail. Shaming dehumanizes."

([Teaching 31](#), Page 183)

*hooks cites shaming as a key tool of traditional pedagogy, and she explores how shame and guilt played a part in her own educational upbringing. The type of learning that takes place in this environment is quickly forgotten, while meaningful learning through engaged pedagogy is lasting and affirming.*

25. "And when the mind is fully open, fully aware, we necessarily find ourselves understanding even that which we seek. For all true intellectuals are at hearts lovers of truth."

([Teaching 32](#), Page 186)

*hooks explains that **Critical Thinking as Radical Openness** brings students to a place of self-actualization where they can seek truth on their own. When teachers instill critical thinking in their students, then those young people transcend the oppressive boundaries of dominator culture.*

## Essay Topics

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1. How is critical thinking defined in the context of bell hooks's work? How does this understanding compare to other definitions and writing about the topic?
2. How does intersectionality play a role in hooks's critical pedagogy? How does politics play a role in curriculum and instruction?
3. What decolonizing practices can teachers utilize? What impact do they have on the classroom?
4. What role does love play in the classroom? How can teachers foster love and trust with and among their students?
5. How do hooks's assessments of modern academia and the influence of the feminist movement compare to the state of academia today? Are college institutions still at the forefront of decolonization, or are they actively contributing to the colonization of the mind?
6. How do hooks's education theories compare to the "Whole Child" approach to education or other contemporary educational movements?
7. How can teachers promote mutuality and community in the classroom?
8. How can an individual foster the inner life or the personal intellectual life? What practices can one employ?
9. How does collaboration with others contribute to learning and growth? How can teachers develop collaboration in their practice?

10. Reflect on your own educational experiences within the context of hooks's work. How does her work inform your perception of these experiences?