Education Theory: Education as Liberation

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My story has been a journey of the juxtaposition of struggle, overcoming and continuing transformation through the liberation that I deeply believe comes through education. My lived experience forms the essence of who I am and shapes my supervisory theory and practice in the area of education. As a child suffering through poverty, alcoholism, physical abuse, and family dysfunction, education was my ticket out. I read everything I could get my hands on and imagined new worlds, new possibilities, and liberation beyond the pages of books, longing for a new way of living not characterized by so much pain. When I received a full four-year academic scholarship to The Ohio State University, even as a teenage mother, I tasted the freedom that came from scholarship and the acquisition of knowledge, and my life has never been the same. That very same belief in education as liberation is what moves me today with a deep conviction and sense of call to educate students with an emphasis on liberation.

As an educator I am strongly connected to my roots as an African American woman. As such, I see many aspects of the world through the lens of liberation and freedom. The significant value that I place upon education and the acquisition of knowledge as a means to liberate and promote

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freedom originates from my own story, which reaches back to my ancestral heritage. My enslaved ancestors were prohibited from gaining knowledge through learning to read and write. This lack of access to knowledge was a form of bondage within a larger system of bondage. While learning to read was extremely risky and had severe consequences during slavery, the freedom associated with gaining such knowledge was well worth the risk for many, who often secretly learned to read and write. New possibilities for understanding why they were bound and how they could become unbound by challenging existing power structures through acts of passive and active resistance were made possible through the knowledge slaves acquired and their response to what they learned despite the risks.

There is a parallel here with clinical pastoral education (CPE), which is in many ways a risky business as head and heart are challenged to expand and grow in knowledge and awareness beyond previously imposed boundaries and limits of society, belief system, family of origin, and self that so often initiate and perpetuate inner and external bondage and disconnection. In my CPE pedagogical practice, I use liberative learning theory and draw upon the contemporary feminist and educational theorist bell hooks. She too connects with the liberation of slaves through education and defines liberative education as a pedagogical practice of seeking freedom for self and society in the educational space.[1] Tapping into her voice has been liberating to me as an African American Certified Educator Candidate who has had limited interaction with the voices and perspectives of people who look like me throughout my CPE process. The type of liberative learning that hooks espouses is engaged pedagogy, which occurs through critical self-reflection. Drawing upon the model of praxis, action, and reflection, which mirrors the action, reflection, decision, action model of CPE, students learn by doing. The clinical method of learning can be challenging for adult learners, who may want to be provided with the "right" way to provide care, deem themselves incompetent when they don't "get it right," or struggle with the perceptions and growing edges that emerge during the CPE process. In the engaged way in which I work with students as I journey with them through the delights and challenges of knowing themselves more fully, I experience their increased self-awareness as a pathway toward liberation. Educating in this way provides space and opportunity for learners, in community, to experience what hooks hopes will occur—freeing themselves from the bondage of their own woundedness, insecurities, fears, guilt, and shame.

I seek to create stimulating and insightful experiences in the learning environment through engaged pedagogy with the goal of both educator and student reflecting as they learn new ideas about themselves and their world. At the outset of a CPE unit, I engage hooks's educational model by teaching students about praxis, action, and reflection. I encourage students to lean into the freedom and liberation of not "getting it right" and to actively and critically reflect on what they do and why they do what they do. Praxis, action, and reflection occur through assigned reading, written presentations, reading seminars, interpersonal group work, and individual supervision. For hooks, the learning process impacts both student and educator, and in my experience in CPE teaching and supervision this is certainly the case. Teaching and learning in this way raises the consciousness of the learner and has the potential to free students and instructor alike from the bondage of past woundedness, shame, and guilt. This liberation moves beyond the classroom in that it has the potential to simultaneously free society from oppressive forces, powers, and structures. One of the central premises in family systems theory is that when one person changes in the system, the whole system changes. For hooks, when the student is liberated, so too is the society in which the student lives.

Such learning can be difficult and painful as students are challenged to give up old ways of being and thinking as they learn new approaches that can empower them to risk shifting long-held paradigms.[2] On a personal level, hooks's emphasis on "interrogating habits of being as well as ideas"[3] resonates powerfully within me because of my own engagement with it. I can recall throughout my formative years being bound by the negative effects of racism, poverty, family dysfunction, alcoholism, and physical abuse. Sharing feelings, risking vulnerability, and trusting others did not characterize my lived experience or family system. The chains of fear, shame, distrust, and palpable pain kept me hidden from others and from myself. Embarking on a journey of self-discovery through CPE presented me with opportunities to confront my bondage and woundedness head on. I experienced painful but radical liberation as I engaged in self-examination through critical reflection. I reflected deeply on how I understood the world and the people in it, as well as how I related to self, others, and the world around me. My habits of mind were challenged, and I began to examine my ways of being and the assumptions I had believed throughout my entire life about the irrelevance of vulnerability, the danger of trusting others, and the fear of

exposure of my true self, in all of its beautiful light and complex darkness. Given my own experience and the ways in which it connects to liberative learning, I exhibit a sincere curiosity with students, taking on a researcher stance as I interrogate, to use hooks's terminology, their habits of being that trip them up, cause disorientation and inner conflict, or don't seem to be serving them well within the context of their current realities.

Given the nature of issues discussed and explored in the CPE environment, and the vulnerability that is often risked and shared, the establishment of trust is paramount as it is necessary for growth and liberation. As I establish and build trust, I exercise my own trustworthiness by developing an organized curriculum, orientation, and class schedule with a clear communication of timelines, expectations, and boundaries. My trustworthiness as an educator extends to my method of curriculum design based on CPE Level I and II Objectives and Outcomes, with attention given to the complex nature of our Level I trauma academic medical center as well as my own theoretical framework for adult education.

Educating and engaging with students in the way of liberative learning is very different from traditional models of education. This pedagogical approach resonates with who I am, my learning style, and my connection to hooks's work. Influenced by the work of Paulo Freire,[4] hooks resists the "banking" system of education, which is the notion that students are passive consumers of information to be memorized and regurgitated to demonstrate their knowledge.[5] Instead hooks describes her teaching methodology as an engaged pedagogy wherein participants, both learner and teacher, are not passive participants but rather are fully invested and engaged in the process, passionately bringing their whole selves to the educational environment.[6] I encourage students to use the "authority of experience"[7] as a way of asserting their voices and standing in their truth because I value, as a womanist, the power of lived experience. As I educate students, this rich learning occurs through verbatim seminars, interpersonal group sessions, presentations, and individual supervision. Lifting up both content and process, I invite students to demonstrate their engagement through sharing what they learn and how they experience what they learn. I want to know what is most alive in students in the here and now and how their experiences impact them and their peers. The banking system does not allow for this level of engagement. Engaged pedagogy through liberative learning af-

firms my investment in how students experience and understand the learning process.

hooks notes that making the classroom a democratic one in which everyone takes ownership of their learning and is responsible to contribute is key to liberative learning.[8] This is especially important for individuals for whom the silencing of their voices has characterized their experiences in the educational environment due to racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. For hooks, everyone has a voice and is expected to share their voices and make contributions in the classroom. For individuals from majority communities for whom oppression may not be operative, there are other forms of oppression and disempowerment that have worked to silence their voices in the context of family of origin, social norms and expectations, and personal challenges. I encourage them to use their voices as well.

I create a democratic learning environment and advocate for Freire's notion of *conscientization*, also espoused by hooks. This is a form of consciousness-raising whereby students, through the process of reflection, become aware of their own inner thoughts, processes, and current realities.[9] Once aware, students have the ability to take ownership and agency in the context of their learning, which then becomes the catalyst for transformation. As Freire notes, "Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men upon the world in order to transform it."[10] This type of liberative learning is at the heart of CPE, with its emphasis on self-directed learning, and is guided by the learning needs of each individual student. This aspect of the theory informs my assigning students to develop a learning contract at the beginning of a CPE unit. Through this assignment, I empower students to name their growing edges, determine their individual learning needs, and be personally accountable for working on and meeting their goals in consultation with me and their peers. The student's consciousness is raised, and they then become a change agent in their own process of liberation. In so doing, the student creates avenues for change in the lives of others in the group.

Recognizing the areas of bondage in students in an engaged manner enables me to connect with students who find themselves facing dilemmas and even resistance in the learning environment. MW, an African American female student in her late thirties, presented a verbatim to the peer group in which she became very defensive when receiving feedback. I named her defensiveness in the group and invited her to share her experience of receiv-

ing critical feedback from her peers in the moment. She initially resisted the feedback and became impassioned in defending her actions in the patient encounter. As an educator, I believe in the balance of challenging students while also offering support during times of difficulty. I named MW's defensiveness again, acknowledging that it seemed to be challenging for her to hear critical feedback, and invited her peers to share their experience of her in the moment. Members of the peer group expressed frustration that MW was not open to the feedback they offered her. MW was visibly upset, fighting back the tears I could see in her eyes as she resisted being vulnerable in front of me and her peers. When I met with MW the following week for individual supervision, she discussed her deep reflections on her experience of the previous week's verbatim presentation. She articulated feelings of shame about her behavior and a burgeoning acceptance of the feedback. I was actively engaged and provided a sense of empathy to MW as she risked sharing her feelings with me. Employing use of self, I shared my own struggles with defensiveness as a beginning CPE student. In building the supervisory alliance with MW in this way, I created a pathway of trust in mutual relationship. As I invited MW to share more, she disclosed her fear of being vulnerable in front of her peers. She realized that in the context of her family of origin, vulnerability was viewed as weakness and personal positions were often strongly defended, with little consideration for the perspectives of others. MW had been wounded by such patterns and no longer wanted to operate within them. Learning new information about herself and how she was experienced by others paved the way for reconnection and a form of liberation that MW had not previously experienced.

My work with MW is an example of how I seek to partner with students to illuminate habits of being and assumptions about themselves and the world that are oftentimes sources of bondage and limitation. I believe that the process of self-examination and critical reflection that I encourage students to engage in can make way for new forms of knowledge and self-awareness that maximize the potential for liberation within students as well as myself. Feedback is an integral element of the process, and I am intentional about modeling effective feedback behaviors throughout the CPE unit. As the above example outlines, my giving timely critical feedback opened the door for the students, upon invitation, to do likewise.

I recognize that there are times in which my learning theory of education as liberation does not work. Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey's work on

"immunity to change" has been helpful to me as I seek to identify behaviors that indicate that a student may be stuck in patterns and behaviors that will not elicit growth.[11] As much as I want my students to experience the power of change, liber tion, and transformation, I recognize that I do not have the power or ability to make anyone change. Nor do I want to change students; rather, I am curious about the student and journey with them toward whatever liberation they might experience. In my work with TL, an Asian American Extended Unit student in his mid-thirties, I realized that he was stuck in a pattern of theological and relational rigidity that would not promote growth. Often using "shoulds" and "oughts," TL exhibited judgmental positions toward both patients and staff members as well as members of his parish when they did not behave in ways that he deemed appropriate. I often spoke with TL about this behavior and invited his reflection and consideration of the feedback he received in CPE. I attempted to explore with TL the impact of his rigidity on those he felt called to serve. TL, seeing the world in black and white, was convinced that his position was the right one and that he was content to continue to be himself. Developing a self-transforming mind by acknowledging his immunity to change did not seem to be of interest to TL.

In addition to the individual critical reflection that is so integral to the transformative process of CPE, the learning group environment is also critical to the learning process. Learning does not occur in a vacuum but rather through a communal process of learning, sharing, and reflecting that can ultimately lead to both individual and group liberation as students learn from one another. Students are involved in a variety of learning groups: interdisciplinary medical teams; the larger chaplaincy department; the peer group, where they experience verbatim presentations, interpersonal group sessions, and didactics; and other CPE activities. The work of critical reflection through the clinical method of learning continues in the group context. My group theory is informed by the work of Jean Baker Miller, creator of relational cultural theory. As an African American womanist theologian who values the power of relationships, I am drawn to this model. Its emphasis on viewing interpersonal dynamics through a relational lens, which is the essence of group work in the context of CPE, grounds my work with students.

According to this group model, human beings yearn for connection with others but, as a result of experiences such as shame-based oppression, marginalization, power differentials, and "isms," individuals are often

pushed toward adopting strategies of disconnection. This is defined as the central relational paradox.[12] People want connection and at the very same time resist it. These strategies include withholding love and affection, withdrawal, criticizing loved ones, and hiding authentic feelings.[13] The impact that one's sociocultural context can have on strategies of disconnection and connection is paramount to the theory and is relevant in the educational space. Having the ability to fully represent oneself authentically in relationships is one of the most challenging developmental processes of the human experience. It is my role to help students become aware of their patterns of connection and disconnection and to develop strategies for reconnection. The CPE process illuminates such dynamics. This was true for JF, a White male in his late twenties who spoke of yearning for connection and expressed feeling left out when interacting with the peer group. The central relational paradox for JF was that due to experiencing extreme isolation and rejection as a child he disconnected from others quite naturally. He struggled to make friends throughout his adolescent years. He withdrew and cut himself off from being in relationship with members of the CPE peer group because he feared rejection, even as he longed for connection. In working with him during an individual supervision session, I saw my role as the educator was to create a space for him to name and explore the patterns of disconnection in his life story and consider possibilities for new connections. Though I struggled in my supervision of JF during the first half of the unit, this particular meeting marked a turning point in our relationship with one another. He opened up to me and expressed some vulnerability, which made for more meaningful connection between us.

According to Relational Cultural Theory, relationships in the context of groups go through relational patterns of connection, disconnection, and back into new, transformative, and enhanced connection.[14] The stages of development in groups, according to this model, are (1) supported vulnerability, (2) flexibility, (3) empowerment and conflict, and (4) relational confidence and relational resilience. During the first stage of the group process, which is supported vulnerability, it is my role as group facilitator to foster a sense of safety. Students engage the difficult process of working through disconnections by naming the ways in which they will need support and from whom. It is important at this stage that students share and discuss their relational images, which are expressions of expectations and fears of how those we are in relationship with will respond to us.[15] Students are also

prompted to name patterns of disconnection, feelings and issues that would prohibit them from seeking support in the group.

This group theory works under the assumption that students will have the ability to name the ways in which they need support. In the event that students are unable to articulate this, particularly at this early stage, my critical purchase comes from Irvin Yalom's formative stage of orientation, hesitant participation, search for meaning, and dependency as a way to help students name their fears and anxieties.[16] I name the elements of this stage in real time as I see them presenting in student behaviors. For example, BS, an African American female Summer Unit student in her late forties, was unable to name her needs at the outset of the unit. However, upon exploring the disorientation of the orientation process and her hesitant participation in group, she was able to better articulate her needs, which created individual and mutual understanding. I set the tone for the group environment, outline my expectations, and model behaviors consistent with effective interpersonal relationships. As the group develops, a deeper sense of relational trust is established. Students become more differentiated in the sense that they embody "increasing levels of complexity, choice, fluidity and articulation within the context of human relationship."[17]

In the empowerment and conflict stage, the group facilitator has the role of "holding the tension" when there is conflict in the group until the group matures in such a way in which they are empowered to hold the tension themselves. I speak with students about my philosophy of conflict, letting them know conflict is a normal and inevitable part of life and relationships with others. It is also healthy and can foster growth when engaged in healthy and productive ways. Conflict, though challenging at times, can also lead to deeper connections between those experiencing it. Within the CPE group, I expect conflict and encourage students to engage it, despite the tension it causes. I held the racial tension between MW, an African American woman, and TL, an Asian American male, as they struggled to communicate and connect with one another. Recognizing that talking about race was uncomfortable for both students, I identified the tension and invited them to explore their feelings, perceptions, and experiences of one another. A difficult conversation ensued, and I held the tension as they engaged the conflict. In so doing, both students began to relate to one another more authentically and empathically, emerging with a deeper connection and understanding of self and each another.

The final stage, relational confidence and relational resilience, posits that the more capable the group is in reworking disconnections the better they can manage disconnections. The greater the ability to recognize and manage disengagement in the group process, the greater the relational resilience of the group. Growth-fostering relationships have the potential to transform individual group members as well as the group as a whole.

Within my use of liberative education as a theory for learning, I am in a continual state of evaluating students throughout the CPE unit. I evaluate student learning, growth, and growing edges through reviewing and assessing their written work, assessing observable behaviors, determining their use of the process and their engagement in reaching their learning goals, and their interpersonal relationships with me and their peers. My evaluation of students culminates with the final evaluation, which provides a summary of the student's work and engagement with the CPE process as they work toward meeting Level I and Level II outcomes.

It is truly from the depths of my soul that liberation through CPE education springs forth. I am both educator and student as my own process of liberation continues. Often challenging, disorienting, painful, and risky, liberation through the clinical method of learning can also be transformative in life-giving and life-changing ways as students discover the essence of who they are as well as the possibilities for who they can become. As hooks puts it, "When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-discovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice."[18]

NOTES

1 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 51.

2 hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 43.

3 hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 43.

4 I reference Freire at various points in this paper, not as my primary theorist but as the individual who has most influenced my primary theorist.

5 hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 5.

6 hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 193.

7 hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 84

8 hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 39.

9 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy and Civic Courage* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 3.

10 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 66.

11 Robert Keagan and Lisa Lahey, *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2009).

12 Dana L. Comstock et al., "The Relational-Cultural Model: A Framework for Group Process," *Journal for Specialists in Group Work* 27 (3 September 2004): 259.

13 Comstock, "Relational-Cultural Model," 255.

14 Comstock, "Relational-Cultural Model," 258.

15 Comstock, "Relational-Cultural Model," 260.

16 Irvin D. Yalom, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, 4th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

17 Comstock, "Relational-Cultural Model," 262.

18 hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 61.