



University of Pittsburgh
School of Education
Department of Educational Foundations, Organization, and Policy, Spring 2025

EDUC 3087: the educational philosophy of bell hooks

A Freedom Seminar

3 Semester Hours

Zoom: <https://pitt.zoom.us/my/tedancy2>

Mondays, 4:30 pm - 7:05pm

A Living Course Syllabus¹

CO-INSTRUCTORS:

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Course Description

In this seminar, we examine some of the most radical works in the scholarly repertoire of Black feminist emancipator, cultural worker, and public intellectual, bell hooks. Her interests and methods were wide-ranging, beginning in poetry and fiction writing and eventually developing into critical analysis. She started writing at an early age, as her church teachers impressed on hooks the power of language, which eventually led to her discovery of the "sacredness of words".

As we learn from hooks' engagement with historical and contemporary feminism, as well as her cultural criticism across genres, we imagine education, knowledge, and schooling (all broadly conceived) as a practice of freedom and liberation. Across her body of work, we study how relationships are imagined and their meanings produced and reproduced in the broader public sphere. What questions, possibilities, and urgencies emerge? More specifically, we ask: If power systems are, in hooks' words, "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal", what kinds of insurgent and counterinsurgent praxes are concerned? What kind of politics might be cultivated

¹ This syllabus' "living" model is indebted to the imagination and work of Sabina Vaught and the Pitt SOE's Commons for Critical Pedagogy and Leadership. A living syllabus advances principles of collective teaching and learning through a dynamic, dialogic, and shared praxis of co-construction.

from keeping interlocking oppression systems in the foreground; How does hooks deploy a feminist lens here? What are the politics of identity and how do these imply and map systems of power? What are the dangers of “representation?” How do hooks’ personal relationships contribute to her politics of resistance, and how might reading her work help us reflect on our own relationships and politics? How is a liberatory worldview cultivated from the margins? How might rage and loving (as an education praxis, for instance) be revolutionary, and what are the stakes of revolutionary love and rage?

This course aims to critically engage bell hooks’ discourse on race, education, feminism, and freedom, as popular-cultural ideas, as areas of intellectual thought and scholarly study. Our course readings will include critical social and cultural theory drawing from such areas as feminisms, cultural education studies, critical education studies, film studies, and philosophy across books, essays, documentary, panel discussions, and memoir. Poetry, music, film and other art forms will also serve as texts to help us in our attempt to more clearly articulate bell hooks’ contribution to the study of education philosophy.

Artwork: Artist Unknown

About the Freedom Seminar

This course is offered as one of the University of Pittsburgh School of Education’s Advanced Freedom Seminars. Freedom Seminars support students in understanding and engaging education within global social, cultural, and political frameworks of freedom. The Freedom Seminars attend to a range of global freedom projects, theories, pedagogies, and praxes. Each course is a focused engagement with a specific set of questions, ideas, and topics relevant for understanding education within social, cultural, and political movements, systems, and structures. Students study both the *what* and *how* of freedom through global, insurgent knowledge traditions.

For more information, see: [Freedom Seminars - University of Pittsburgh School of Education](#)

Assumptions about the Field and Study of Education:

In this course, we deliberately move across theoretical texts in critical studies, many outside of the field of education, but that are about various sites and formations of education (e.g., cultural education) and offer education analyses nonetheless. Paying attention to course aims as well as the mix of people attracted to this class requires engagement of scholarship on pedagogy across the range of educational contexts bell hooks explores. We begin in our work together with the following knowledge – education is a decidedly applied field. That is, we are inherently invested in practice, not simply as an idea, but as implementable operations, either by us directly, or through our students and other partners in the communities within which we work. The theoretical work we will engage in is deeply committed to the idea of freedom with some taking up the challenge of imagining what practices might move us toward realization of these imaginations of freedom. Here, we believe, is an opportunity to explore the tensions between theory and praxis, and between theory and the applied – the impulse in education toward what are called “Monday morning solutions.” Theory should facilitate deeper consciousness and understanding (of the precise nature) of suffering, death, deception, control. It may also help us envision what refusal, resistance, life, and freedom looks like (and requires). Education as an applied field offers the possibility of praxis. However, it is also a field replete with violence and threat of violence against those who might wish to engage in liberatory practice, either as students, educators, or as cousins and aunties. In this tension, we decide what knowledge informs both thought and action, in and outside of schools (and

colleges).

Let us check-in frequently—as a class and in one-on-one meetings (as needed)—about how you are experiencing the course, and how you are progressing with the readings and assignments. We should all agree to make adjustments to the syllabus as needed. We invite all of you to review what is proposed here, and we can make initial revisions based on our collective interests, and our sense of what we need to do together. **We, the course instructors, also invite you to interact with this syllabus, posing questions and sharing resources.** Also, if at any time, it seems that the reading is excessive, we can talk about learning/engagement approaches (which are various); if there are additional readings we believe necessary to add, let us, as a community, find a way to familiarize ourselves, drawing upon the capacities of a living syllabus.

Course Objectives:

1. *Think* critically about systems of power in education and society (broadly and complexly conceived), as ideas, as areas of study, and as essential for informing praxis
2. *Examine* how bell hooks' scholarship makes meaning of education, schooling, knowledge/knowing, and learning and how this evolves over time
3. *Explore* (and, as necessary, trouble) the desires and yearnings of social actors within formal and informal educational spaces
4. *Interrogate* "imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy" as an ideological and material force in education and society
5. *Examine* the possibilities of transgressive and liberatory praxis in education
6. *Develop* deep(er) knowledge of the cultural politics of education, of education as a site of contestation over being
7. *Expand* our collective understanding of scholarship across various methodologies, formations, and genres using bell hooks' corpus as model

Course Methods/Professor Relationality²:

1. The rigorous praxis of a collective learning community will:
 - aspire to close readings of the assigned texts, and discussion of the primary arguments advanced in the texts, and how they relate to arguments in other texts (both from our reading and your own reading outside of this class).
 - support individual students in: developing emerging lines of inquiry into the principles, storytelling, and themes of a small set of knowledge traditions.
 - nurture the intellectual practices to generalize these to specific educational and/or schooling settings (spatial) and across time periods (temporal).
 - enhance collaborative and independent critical-analytical writing skills
 - build collaborative, advanced writing skills, in the traditions of insurgent knowledge exchange

² Thanks to Dr. Sabina Vaught for collaborative thinking.

- deepen familiarity with the complex relationship between ideologies and practices within and outside schools (and colleges)
2. We will provide advisement and engagement that intend to support our thinking and your academic projects. We encourage students to openly communicate with us and provide thoughts about their experience in the course. You may find us most easily reached by e-mail. However, we are available if appointment is needed. If, for any reason, you feel you are unable to meet responsibilities (see below), please communicate with the course instructors in advance so we might discuss supportive ways we might move forward in the interest of your learning.

Responsibilities/Principles³

1. It is your responsibility to co-create a rigorous and generative learning environment in which you challenge one another's ideas in a scholarly manner, but never insult or disparage one another.
2. It is your responsibility to engage the ideas, discussions, and materials provided in this class in ways that *enhance and strengthen your own interests*.
3. It is your responsibility to submit only your own original work and abide by the University of Pittsburgh academic integrity guidelines. Please visit: https://www.provost.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/academic_integrity_guidelines.pdf and familiarize yourself with codes of academic integrity. Here are helpful videos provided on academic integrity:
 - Academic integrity: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDFHd_31e_o
 - Plagiarism: <http://en.writecheck.com/blog/2013/10/16/3-ways-to-avoid-plagiarism-summary-paraphrase-and-quote-video>
4. It is our responsibility to engage with difficult readings and ideas as we undertake the study of repressive systems and oppressive institutions. Not all members of the class will respond to the readings in the same manner, and some readings will upset some students more than others. In light of this, there is no clear way to warn students in advance. Moreover, we as a community do not want to unintentionally engage in censorship (<http://signsjournal.org/currents-trigger-warnings/halberstam/> https://www.salon.com/2014/05/20/no_trigger_warnings_in_my_class_why_you_won%E2%80%99t_find_them_on_my_syllabi/).

What we can do as a community is:

- Recognize and affirm that affective responses to readings and discussions are part of a ***just intellectual project***
- Check in with one another in ways that honor our differences but affirm our membership in a community of conscience
- Excuse ourselves when needed and without explanation in order to take necessary space
- Listen carefully and attentively to one another's experiences and ideas, recognizing those as gifts to the community
- Make culturally specific requests as soon as you realize you need to

³ Thanks to Dr. Sabina Vaught and Chris Wright for collaborative thinking.

Framework for shared inquiry:⁴

- ***Stretch*** enables a question to reach further than the immediate object without bypassing its particularity—rather than merely asking a community, “Why do you want this development project?” one asks, “What is development?”
- ***Resonance*** enables a question to support and model nonhierarchical collective action by producing a hum that, by inviting strong attention, elicits responses that do not necessarily adhere to already existing architectures of sense making. Ornette Coleman’s harmolodics exemplify how such a process makes participant and audience a single, but neither static nor closed, category (Rycenga 1992).

Consider: [Beyonce - Irreplaceable - 4 Tour 2011 @ Roseland \(youtube.com\)](#)

- ***Resilience*** enables a question to be flexible rather than brittle, such that changing circumstances and surprising discoveries keep a project connected with its purpose rather than defeated by the unexpected. For example, the alleged relationship between contemporary prison expansion and slavery falls apart when the question describes slavery in terms of uncompensated labor because very few of the 2.2 million prisoners in the United States work for anybody while locked in cages. But the relationship remains provocatively stable when the question describes slavery in terms of social death and asks how and to what end a category of dehumanized humans is made from peculiar combinations of dishonor, alienation, and violent domination (Patterson 1982; Gordon 2006).

passage from: Ruth Wilson Gilmore, pp. 37-38, [“Forgotten Places and the Seeds of Grassroots Planning”](#) in Charles R. Hale, Ed., *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, University of California Press, 2008, pp. 31-61)

Resources & Accommodations⁵

COVID-19 CUE Resources: <https://www.cue.pitt.edu/resources/covid-19-resources>

COVID Testing (Same-day results): [Rapid COVID-19 Testing | The COVID-19 Testing Center of Pittsburgh, PA \(covidtestpittsburgh.com\)](#)

Kinloch Commons for Critical Pedagogy and Leadership: [Curriculum - University of Pittsburgh School of Education](#)

Pitt non-discrimination policy: <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/about/notice-non-discrimination>

Parenting and pregnant student rights:
<https://www.gradstudies.pitt.edu/student-life/resources-pregnant-and-parenting-students>

LGBTQIA rights:

⁴ The section is adapted from a syllabus authored by Sabina Vaught. It is also a guiding framework for the Practices of Freedom syllabus.

⁵ Thanks to Dr. Sabina Vaught for collaborative thinking.

<https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/resources/resources-diverse-populations/lgbtqia-resources>

Codes of conduct and violence against women:

<https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/title-ix-policies-and-procedures>

Gender transition and inclusion guidelines:

<https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/guidelines-inclusion-relating-gender-transition>

Disability accommodation. Any student who needs accommodations should inform me at the beginning of the course or as soon as one needs accommodations. To receive accommodations, you must apply for services with the Pitt Office of Disability Resources and Services, 140 William Pitt Union, 3959 Fifth Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, Phone: 412-648-7890, Monday – Friday: 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., Email: DRSRECEP@pitt.edu

NOTE: It is possible that university language around equity and inclusion follows antiquated frameworks. For instance, you may find that the parenting and pregnant students policy does not speak to various pathways of parenting and family. Should you be adopting, fostering, or otherwise significantly shifting your dependent care demands, or should you be a student whose gender is not clearly covered by the policy and is pregnant, etc., and would like accommodations, please let me know as soon as possible so we can work together to establish a fair plan. Let us also work together to establish plans anywhere and when institutional policy and guidelines do not accommodate needs.

Absences. Please notify the professor of any anticipated absences by the second week of class (if possible). This will support the organization of class.

Writing resources and support. Call upon CLOE. Seek:

- C** **Clarity** with respect to expression, grammar, meaning, sentence structure, and paragraph structure.
- L** **Logic** in the presentation of arguments, positions, treatment of issues, and conclusions
- O** **Organization** that builds a coherent structure (consider an outline)
- E** **Evidence** to support statements and opinions of the writer/speaker. Ask yourself, ‘on what basis am I making claims?’

The most recent edition of APA will articulate more specific guidelines. Please note that dissertations in the education field and publications in education journals usually require APA formatting.

Additionally, the Pitt Writing Center offers services for graduate students. You may schedule appointments at writingcenter.pitt.edu. Location: 3178 O’Hara Student Center, 4024 O’Hara Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, Phone: 412-624-6556.

Assignment due dates. All work is due on the due date. Please contact the instructor if the assignment will be late to discuss context and possibilities.

Inclement weather policy. If Pitt is closed due to inclement weather or other conditions, students are

to assume that all classes on and off campus are cancelled and all offices in all units will be closed.

Formatting. American Psychological Association. (2019). Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (7th ed.). Washington, DC.

Text to Speech Readers

- Speechify app (free and paid versions) <https://speechify.com/>
- Natural readers (free and paid versions) <https://www.naturalreaders.com/>

Resources for Life Circumstances

For any of the below, if you believe your circumstances may affect your performance in the course, please advise Professor Dancy (if comfortable):

Campus Police: [Cops Off Campus Coalition – an abolition network to get cops off campus and cops off the planet](#)

Hunger. Pitt Pantry offers the following: “All members of the Pitt community are welcome to visit the pantry. Through a self-certification form, shoppers are eligible to use the pantry if they earn less than 150% of the federal poverty line, a state regulation, which equals \$18,090 for a household of one and \$24,360 dollars for a household of two.” For questions regarding eligibility, please email pantry@pitt.edu. Additional resources are the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank (pittsburghfoodbank.org).

Safe and stable shelter. Please see resources at the following links:

Housing and housing justice: honorscollege.pitt.edu

Housing resources: pitt.libguides.com

Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh. The 24-hour hotline is 412-687-8005. The website is wcspittsburgh.org

SisTers PGH Community Center is a safe space for trans people of color. Phone: 412-259-3091, Website: www.sisterspgh.com

Racialized and gender-based discrimination. Contact the Pitt Title IX Office. Community members may visit the office during scheduled office hours without an appointment. Students, staff and faculty can also call 412-648-4034 or email to schedule an appointment. For more information, go to <https://www.titleix.pitt.edu/policies-procedures>.

Sexual violence. The Pitt Student Affairs site offers several resources and contact numbers. Visit studentaffairs.pitt.edu.

Course Readings:

A collection of readings has been selected for our consideration. All (except required books) readings will be linked in our weekly schedule.

Required Texts:

See Schedule of Readings

Texts available through Pitt's Library System or other sources: [University of Pittsburgh Library](#)

COURSE CONTRIBUTIONS

Dialogue

Much of the work in this class is shared and interdependent. Hence, our learning is contingent upon your reading and writing deeply. Preparation and participation are the highest values. Grades are reflections, as much as possible, of two things: 1) your contribution to the collective learning process and 2) your intellectual growth over the semester determined in our in-class dialogue and our engagement with your thinking/writing over time. Members of our learning community are also expected to contribute to our shared syllabus' resources and reactions as essential for active and desired course engagement.

The instructors will write to you about your engagement quarterly.

*Reflective journaling, dialogue with thought partners, and weekly class dialogue.*⁶ As you prepare for class discussion, think about the questions and ideas that emerge. Bring your thoughts on a complex idea. Feel free to share something in process and ill-informed, half-baked, or messy and complex. Engage, consider, contemplate, storytell, question, but do not hold forth. **We are not a community of "experts"**. As you read, you should keep a reflective journal with substantive entries and reflections about your learning and you should dialogue weekly or bi-weekly with your thought partner about the ideas in the course. Ask your thought partner(s) their ideas. It may be helpful to meet prior to class to dialogue about ideas. We will discuss your reflections over the time of the course in class and how dialogue contributed to your thinking. This exercise will also support the below writing contributions. Share from these activities with the class as you feel comfortable.

Enter your thought partners here so we may appreciate your dialogue outside of class (groups of 2 or 3): [bell hooks thought partners - Google Docs](#)

The Cinema of Social Life: An Analytic Essay Project

bell hooks remains one of our most powerful social critics and essayists through textual analysis. In this project, we will write an analytic essay informed by bell hooks' scholarly models. In this project, we ask that you study bell hooks' essays (here and elsewhere) as models of critical analysis and then draft your own. In preparation, you may wish to: 1) watch a film or documentary, 2) reflect on your lived experience, 3) select a case/matter in news media, or 4) other circumstances. The aim is to write a social critique based on the cinema you choose. Consider submitting for publication among a wide range of outlets. Let's discuss possibilities. You may draw from frameworks of your choosing as you write to strengthen your interests.

Parameters:

Page length: 10 - 12 pages

Format: APA

Working draft due: 2/26

Final draft due: 4/23

⁶ Thanks to Dr. Sabina Vaught for collaborative thinking.

