

Transforming to Teach: Teaching Religion to Today's Black College Student

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Abstract. *Emerging from the particular experiences of the marginalized, postmodern pedagogies (bell hooks, Paolo Freire, feminist pedagogies) argue that education is more than conveying information from teacher to student. Rather education should encompass the transformative process of shaping character, values, and politics through the dynamic interaction among the teacher, the students' experiences, and the content of the instructional material. These perspectives argue that educators should reject "the banking model" of education, and teach to transform.*

However, religious studies with today's black college student tests the mettle of these approaches. On the one hand, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have long practiced transformative education through a commitment to shaping both the minds and characters of their students. On the other hand, many of today's black college students are less receptive to transformation, particularly in the academic study of religion. This resistance to transformation is a reflection of (1) the socio-economic reality of the current student, and (2) a new black religiosity that portrays the world in binary terms. These economic and religious realities present a teaching context for which few religious scholars are prepared.

This essay discusses the particularities of teaching religion to today's black college student by sharing the challenges, failures, successes, and joys of teaching religion at a small church-related, historically black women's college in the south. I will discuss the techniques that fail, and the way in which this unique context causes me to transform the way I teach religion. In the midst of a commitment to postmodern pedagogies, I feel a need to return to the banking model's establishment of authority and emphasis on content. As I negotiate with this method, I find ways to stealthily infuse transformative pedagogical techniques. I also

discuss the way such a dramatic shift in pedagogy has transformed me, the teacher.

I want to begin with a bit of autobiography. I love being a teacher. It almost seemed my destiny to be a teacher. My mother was a teacher and her mother was a teacher. That is, my grandmother was the one of nine sharecropping children who was chosen among the siblings to finish high school and then go to college. She attended Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina, a historically black college. The most educated of her generation, my grandmother went on to earn a master's degree and teach public school in Washington, D.C. Widowed at a young age, my grandmother raised her twin daughters with the expectation of attending college. My mother and aunt attended Goucher College, a small women's liberal arts college outside of Baltimore, Maryland. My mother then went on to earn her Ph.D. when I was in elementary school and made a career out of public school teaching and administration. I grew up watching my mother teach what was then called "remedial reading" to junior high school students that other teachers had been unable or unwilling to bring to grade level proficiency. I saw her being strict, diligent, loving, hated, and ultimately (usually ten years after she had taught a student) thanked. So it seems more than serendipitous that I, too, would have a love of teaching and that I would, at some point, end up teaching at the crossroads of my foremothers' education: a historically black women's college. I share my story because it is part of what draws me to the classroom, and it shapes much of what I bring to the classroom – my own ideals about education and transformation. And my students, like me, bring their ideas about the purpose of education to this same room.

I also have to confess that I was drawn to a historically black institution because of my belief that educa-

tion should be transformative. I'm greatly influenced by what I'm calling postmodern pedagogies. Pedagogical approaches that emerge from the particular experiences of the marginalized have asserted that education should help to raise consciousness, liberate minds, directly connect with political action, or, to use bell hooks's term, serve as a practice of freedom (hooks 1994). Brazilian activist Paulo Freire offers one of the first written and succinct versions of postmodern pedagogies in his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Here he states that education among the marginalized or the oppressed should be revolutionary. In revolutionary education, the teaching-learning process is "co-intentional." By this, Freire means:

Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators. In this way, the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation will be what it should be: not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement. (Freire 1993, 51)

This co-intentional learning process that Freire calls conscientization is the result of a problem-posing methodology where "the teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own" (Freire 1993, 62). Problem-posing is characterized by constant demythologizing, dialogue, critical thinking, and inquiry.

Conscientization stands in stark contrast to the dominant, or oppressive, pedagogical approach that Freire calls "the banking method." In the banking method, teachers lead students to memorize lectured content. In this method, students become "containers" or "receptacles" that are "filled" by the teacher: "Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat" (Freire 1993, 52–53). Freire details ten principles that uphold the banking method:

1. The teacher teaches and the students are taught;
2. The teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
3. The teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
4. The teacher talks and the students listen – meekly;
5. The teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
6. The teacher chooses and enforces her choice, and the students comply;

7. The teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher;
8. The teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it;
9. The teacher confuses the authority of knowledge and her own professional authority, which she sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;
10. The teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects. (54)

Freire's pedagogy is supported by a black feminist epistemology to which I became committed while still in college. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins (1991) describes a learning process that counters the "Eurocentric, masculinist knowledge validation process." Like the banking method, the Eurocentric, masculinist knowledge validation process derives knowledge from a "community of experts." All persons working within this process have to convince a scholarly community of white men that any given claim is valid, and any community that challenges the "community of experts" is deemed less credible. Like other feminist pedagogies, Collins's Afrocentric feminist epistemology starts with black women's lived experiences as a valid source of knowledge. Together with dialogue, an ethic of caring and accountability, Collins imagines spaces where black women find "emotion, ethics, and reason are used as interconnected, essential components in assessing knowledge claims" (Collins 1991, 219). Like Freire, Collins concludes this work by asserting that this black feminist approach should serve to empower learners – in her case black women – to political action.

These principles are echoed by other educators and theorists with varying emphases. I'm particularly drawn to the words of Parker Palmer (1998) and bell hooks as they have incorporated and expanded upon these two influential thinkers to discuss the role of vocation and pleasure, respectively, in the learning process. And so, yes, I aimed to be like them. Although I am one of those people who happen to work well with traditional, linear, competitive, banking methods, it is the teachers who did *not* use this method that made me want to be a teacher. The teachers who valued my perspectives, pushed me further than I thought I could go, and shared their experiences with me – including their experiences of how my contributions affected them – that made me leave my underpaid rewarding jobs as full-time minister, full-time community organizer, and adjunct professor to pursue the doctorate that would allow me to be a full-time writer, researcher, and teacher.

I have found, however, that religious studies with today's black college student tests the mettle of these postmodern pedagogical approaches. I encountered this with quite a bit of surprise. On the one hand, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have institutionalized transformative education. They have a long

history of commitment to shaping both the minds and characters of their students. This comes in part from their histories in church basements, Reconstruction, and their radical embrace of the concept of educating ex-slaves. HBCUs variously trained their students for social and political uplift through vocational and/or intellectual acumen (e.g., Ashley and Williams 2004, 51–100).

This takes its own form in historically black women's colleges, such as the institution where I previously worked. Alicia Collins notes in "Black Women in the Academy – An Historical Overview," that "the early education of black women focused on their social and cultural refinement, [and thus] some of the institutions established for young black women were referred to as grooming schools" (Alicia Collins 2001, 32). While there are still traditions that reveal these origins, historically black women's colleges have transformed into institutions that overtly aim to offer their students leadership skills, self-esteem, and character development. Alicia Collins continues, "Research has shown that the environment in women's colleges offers personal support, a critical mass of women, role models, a supportive peer culture, inclusion in the curriculum, and a strong institutions mission of excellence" (Alicia Collins 2001, 39). As faculty members, we are expected to, and quite delight in, teaching with social uplift and character education and service learning (before it was called "service learning"). It's not just postmodern pedagogy; it's part of the history of the school.

Nevertheless, all my wonderful postmodern pedagogical techniques failed terribly when I began teaching religion to students at a historically black college for women. I asked students what they thought about the readings, and they stared at me blankly. Then, refusing to write lectures, I began class with a series of questions that met with the same empty response. The students were able to share their own experiences, but unable to connect those to the readings. Even at the end of the semester, I had to point out the connections for them.

I refer to my students with titles and last names. When they asked me why, I replied, "Well you call me 'Dr. Coleman.'" They were shocked that I would engage them, even in name and greeting, on the same level that they engaged me. I had never had authority issues in the classroom before (although I was closer to my students' age in previous classroom settings), but my midterm evaluations revealed that students thought I was "ill-prepared for class" and that I "didn't seem to know much about the topic." I could only conclude that they wanted or needed me to assert myself as a greater authority figure than an open, dialogical pedagogy allowed. Ultimately, one class even asked me to lecture. They were convinced, they told me, that I knew stuff and wasn't sharing it with them. The banking method reigned supreme.

So why didn't postmodern pedagogical techniques work with my religion students at Bennett College for Women? As an aside (and partly in my own prideful defense), these techniques worked when I taught black and gender studies at a public historically black university and when I taught religion at a small predominantly white women's college. In my experience teaching religion at this black college, my students were not very receptive to transformation. While conversations with colleagues at different kinds of institutions let me know that I am not alone in this discovery, I think there is something distinctive about the students at HBCUs.

So to invoke my pedagogy now, I'll begin with some of the students' experiences. First, the socio-economic reality of the average Bennett student affects what my students expect from the classroom experience. While Bennett was once known to educate the daughters of the black community's elite, the college is increasingly characterized by first generation college students. Bennett still has the students whose mother, aunt, godmother, or family friend attended Bennett. Nevertheless, the school has just as many, if not more, students who are the first in their families to attend college. Many of these students have not had a quality elementary and secondary education, and did not have parents who had the time (because they were working so diligently) or ability to demand a high standard for their daughter's education. Thus, many of the students are admitted for their unrealized potential to learn; that is, they have fewer learning skills than students of past generations do. In addition, these students often understand education as the basic requirement for getting a job and improving their economic situations. This teleological focus on finances often devalues both the study of humanities, in particular, and the learning process, in general. In short, many students do not value the idea of learning for the sake of learning. Education is transformative only inasmuch as it leads to a J-O-B.

On another important note, many of my students – legacies and first-generation – come from large, black mega churches with a kind of fundamentalist instruction that circumscribes righteous faith and morality into a specific sphere. In other words, they are the products of what many scholars are calling "a new black religiosity," that is part and parcel of a larger American religious fundamentalism, which portrays the world in binary terms. All of us who teach religion have to deal with the effect that American fundamentalism has on our students. But there is something particular, I argue, to students coming from what Marc Lamont Hill and Shayne Lee call "the new black church" – a mainline black Christianity, the child of the civil rights movement, that is known by its increased materialism, prosperity theology, lackluster politics, the erasure of denominational boundaries, and a resurgence of neo-

Pentecostalism (Hill 2005; see also Lee 2005 and Harrison 2005). In an online article entitled, "I Bling Because I'm Happy," Hill correlates the materialist drive of hip-hop culture with the capitalist embrace of the new black church. He writes that the pastors of the new black church "no longer preach the virtues of struggle, sacrifice, or redemptive suffering, instead exhorting the poor to 'get right' with God by accumulating capital for themselves" (Hill 2005). Jonathan L. Walton critiques this nomenclature of "new black church." He writes: "Mega churches date back in mass to the first quarter of the 20th century with the Great Migration. Iconoclastic preaching is found with each emerging generation. The theme of personal empowerment antedates Booker T. Washington. The music of the black church has always been ahead of the cultural curve in America. There has never been a time where black preachers have not been regarded as celebrities in the black community" (Walton 2005). While prosperity doctrine is not new to African American religion, it is a departure from the civil-rights-supporting, historically black denominations that scholars call "the black church," and it is a departure in unforeseen numbers. Hill and others assert that the new black church betrays the historic black church's commitment to social change and political involvement. Hill gives the examples of one black mega church whose affirmative action advocate pastor refused to publicly challenge Bush because it was "inappropriate to take a political stance against the President's policy from the pulpit" and another church whose pastor encouraged members to forgive, forbear, and forget racism because "we're already in the promised land." Hill concludes that, "By eliminating political protest from the church's agenda, these leaders effectively strip the church of its transformative potential while enhancing their own earning capacity" (Hill 2005).

All this is to say that my classroom is filled with students who are deeply faithful, but unaccustomed to questioning much – including religion. They are often ignorant of and uninterested in the history and diversity of religious practices – even and especially within Christianity. They can better tell me what their pastors said, than what they believe. They can better tell me the words of the latest gospel song than the words of the Bible. Although all my students are black women, they do not consider themselves members of oppressed groups. The only transformation on their minds is the kind that comes from financial success. Although I speak with some generalizations, and some of these things may be just as true of non-black first-generation students in rural or even urban contexts, I found that this was the experience of nine out of every ten students I taught. This resistance to transformation, to critical thinking and religious questioning is supported by a staff and faculty who embody a similar spirituality as that of my students.

Altogether, in this context, teaching had to include rudimentary study skills, the basic value of education, openness to difference, and the most basic content of the religious studies class. These economic and religious realities present a teaching context for which few religious scholars, myself in particular, are prepared. In short, by the end of my first semester, my students and I were so miserable and frustrated with each other that I don't think either one of us wanted to be in the classroom.

The summer gave me time to recover, regroup, research, and reinvent myself as a teacher in this context. Although each new semester brings different students, one thing became clear, something had to change, and I had the most control over changing myself. I was going to have to go back to the banking method. The next semester, I did just that:

- I taught a quarter of the material I had taught to undergraduate students in other settings because (1) I wanted them to actually read it, and (2) I wanted to go over it very slowly (academically, I call this "a close reading") because I knew the information would be so new to them.
- I gave mini-lectures on historical context with allusions to contemporary parallels.
- I gave a quiz at the end of each section.
- I assigned reports that allowed for little critical thought or reflection.

And yes, my students loved the class. They reported learning more than they ever had before. Attendance was steady. They told me that they told their friends and family members about what they were learning about religion. They thought I was "extremely knowledgeable" and "impressive." That's what the course evaluations said. More than half the students signed up for my class the following semester – just because I was teaching it.

I considered myself as reverting to the banking method because I realized my students didn't have enough basic information or skills, "religious literacy," if you will, to engage material that was so new to them – despite their deeply religious background. When I portrayed myself as the purveyor of knowledge, the respect levels increased and we began to develop a friendly rapport. As bell hooks (1994, 11) had warned, I learned that teaching was indeed performative, and I did all types of things to keep my students entertained:

- The most effective technique involved inventing game shows with tangible prizes to prepare for section quizzes. My students needed a system of reward and punishment (as exhibited in the game shows and constant display of grades on the quizzes) to be adequately motivated to learn.

- I was able to find practitioners of some of the minority religions that I taught – in this case, traditional Yoruba religion and Rastafari.

Then the lessons seemed to take hold.

The banking method worked, in part, because my students generally don't have sufficient religious funds upon which to draw for classroom dialogue and inquiry, but also because these students were accustomed to, and thus expected and craved an authoritative deposit of information that they would draw upon when needed. They are already products of Bush's "No Child Left Behind" policy with its institutionalized system of reward and punishment based on standardized test scores. My students are also participants in an educational system that emphasizes hierarchy of role, rank, and responsibility (hooks 1994; 8, 203). I find HBCUs at a formal extreme of this hierarchy where faculty have explicit or unwritten dress codes, and even refer to each other by title – Dr., Mr. or Ms. – revealing one's educational attainment upon each encounter. Students, of course, represent the lowest strata. As participants in the new black church, my students are not accustomed to a system of inward (or outward) religious reflection. While judgment reigns supreme in the new black church (only as regards policies about the rights of homosexuals and abortion though), it offers no models for questioning themselves, their leaders, their faith, let alone the practices of dominant society. This is why John W. Fountain, a third-generation black minister, decried in his well-circulated Washington Post article, "I still love God, but I've lost faith in the black church" (Fountain 2005). With little reference to any other black church, my students embrace the uncritical, and often capitalist, black Christianity they see. They are the products of both a wider society and a black faith that discourages questioning, "deposits" information, and preaches and rewards efforts that will result in students going to the bank. To communicate with these students, I was going to have to speak their language. I, too, was going to have to "go to the bank."

When I taught my course on "African American Religious History," I sneaked in a postmodern pedagogy when my students weren't looking:

- I asked students to write down one question from the reading when they first arrived in class. I read the questions anonymously and gave feedback or initiated a discussion based on the question. (As it turns out, this was their least favorite activity – course evaluations.)
- I gave an in-class essay on questions that emerged from classroom discussion. They had identified some major themes of the philosophy of religion from their study of African American religious history –

although I didn't use that language until after the essays were turned in.

- I had my students debate the value of "the black church" to their generation using online articles and videos published within the last year; I assigned them to the perspective that I knew was contrary to their natural disposition; I asked them to dress up for the occasion and I invited a few colleagues to serve as judges.
- I insisted that presentations on non-Christian religions include a section on "how learning this impacts my life."
- I asked students to interview someone who practiced a religion different from their own; some even talked with classmates of different faiths (in the previous class, interviews were required, but I didn't insist that they interview anyone with a different perspective than their own).

All these changes were effective. My students loved the class and enjoyed learning. They did the reading and even the student with the worst grade told me that this was her favorite class. The truth of the matter is that transforming my teaching to teach my students transformed me. I like to see my students learn. I like to see them even a percentage as excited about religion as I am. I left class invigorated and happy (compared with the despondency and frustration of the first semester), and eager to work on the next class's lesson plans.

Lesson plans?! Can I tell you that I never wrote lesson plans before in my life? I preferred a more organic, dialogical format. In many ways, I am disappointed and frustrated in myself. I hear Freire's condemnation in my head:

To substitute monologue, slogans and communiqués for dialogue is to attempt to liberate the oppressed with the instruments of domestication. Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into the populist pitfall and transform them into masses which can be manipulated. (Freire 47)

God, what kind of activist, am I? What kind of teacher have I become? Not the kind I wanted to be; the kind that had the most effect upon me. Some days, I think that I'm being pragmatic and teaching students about religion. There are other days when I hope that my surreptitious and covert use of postmodern pedagogy will take over the classroom experience. There are days when I wonder whose bright idea it was to go into a career that expects individuals to read about the current trends in one's field, come up with new ideas, write intelligently about them, support the administration of an institution, and teach often unwilling and unprepared kids. And then there are days when I'm just grateful that

I can make it through the class without my students seeing the drama and stress that the larger job and life events create in my life. Yes, my idealism and commitment to transformative education have been dashed. Perhaps conveying anything about the academic study of religion is transformation. Perhaps that's grossly insufficient. Perhaps I am adapting to my context, as, I am sure, my students have had to adapt to me.

There are thrilling change-noticing moments in all of this: the atheist who feels comfortable in my "Introduction to Theology" class; the comments my students made about gender bias in the worship language of the local church we visited; the two students who tell me that they want to minor in Religion; the fact that the small student population allows me to know a good deal and care about my students, their hopes, dreams, and struggles – Patricia Hill Collins's ethic of care that bell hooks' calls "engaged pedagogy" (hooks 1994, 13–22). I reject the banking method to greater or lesser success:

- I made the midterm a full-participation-required field trip to a church to test out theology in practice with the newly acquired skills; we met over brunch to talk about what we noticed.
- I insisted that each student bring in her favorite piece of music and tell me what it tells us about God (i.e. "theological analysis"); I heard everything from gospel music to hip-hop.
- I sat and read six different creation stories one day and asked students to choose which they liked and why.

In my moments of self-doubt, frustration and crashing ideals, the small pay-off and moments of banking-method-rebellion sustain me.

Overall, there were several things that allowed me to transform my teaching through and in the midst of the banking method. I did "go to the bank" with mini-lectures, quizzes, and assigned reports that required little reflection. I acknowledged that my students really needed some basic information on religion, and had to be instructed and evaluated accordingly. They were used to this, and I needed to make sure they knew it. I let my students know that I was an authority, but I continued to address them with a nomenclature that connoted an authority of their own. Then, I subverted that "bank" through what I repeatedly said: "This is supposed to be fun, too:"

- Allowing students to incorporate music that they like,
- Having students ask questions about the readings anonymously on note cards,
- Requiring students to debate a perspective different from their own outside the classroom setting,

- Facilitating personal contact with practitioners of different faiths and perspectives than their own, and
- Going on field trips and de-briefing from them in an informal setting.

Doing these things made teaching "more fun" for me too. I had to acknowledge the power of "the bank;" stop resisting it, and work with and through it. As much as I hated to admit it, it was what my students both wanted and needed. The "transformative" pedagogical practices that I had used in other settings would not work here. However, I remained committed to teaching in a way that affirmed my students' experiences, brought their voices in conversation with the readings and one another, and empowered them to become religious thinkers in their own right. It worked – at least in two instances – when I infused them into the "banking method."

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