

# Teaching to Transgress, Learning to Transform: Toward a Franciscan Pedagogy

## I. Introduction

Let me begin with a confession. The subtitle of this article is doing a lot of “heavy lifting” in articulating the nascence of my thinking on this subject. Like so many other Franciscan educators, I have long reflected on how best to identify, articulate, and implement the spirit of the Franciscan tradition into the classroom. As I will outline shortly, the Franciscan relationship to education—particularly in the early years of the Franciscan movement and especially during Francis of Assisi’s lifetime—has been tense at best, and even fraught at times. Paradoxically, a religious movement born from the personal conversion of an otherwise unremarkable medieval man from the Umbrian region of what is today Italy, which was at times expressly hostile to higher learning, quickly became an influential force in the formation of the great European Universities—Paris, Oxford, Bologna, Salamanca, and so on. One of Francis’s most famous writings is a short note drafted around the year 1223 for a young theologian named Anthony of Padua in which the *poverello* offered his tentative *imprimatur* to the educator, granting him permission to teach the friars theology with the now-famous qualification that such educational endeavors “do not extinguish the Spirit of prayer and devotion during study of this kind,” an allusion to the *Regula bullata* that governed the life of the community.<sup>1</sup>

Eight centuries later, we find ourselves in the position as educators, staff members, and administrators at institutions of higher learning that fondly and proudly identify with the

---

<sup>1</sup> Francis of Assisi, “A Letter to Brother Anthony of Padua,” no. 2, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, eds. Regis J. Armstrong, J. Wayne Hellmann, and William F. Short, 3 vols. (New York: New City Press, 1999-2001), 1:107. Hereafter cited as “*FAED*” followed by volume and page numbers.

Franciscan tradition. Our schools were founded by women and men of the Franciscan family, our institutional mission and values statements refer to this foundational tradition, and in our modern context we position ourselves as distinctive among our peer institutions precisely because of our Franciscan identity. But what does this mean for the classroom? How do we translate the distinctive and inspirational Franciscan charism into pedagogical resources? What might it mean to offer a “Franciscan education” in practice?

These are the kinds of questions that I have been pondering in recent years. And it is my intention in this article to offer something of a constructive starting point, but it is only a beginning. I hope that some of my remarks might be generative for you in your own thinking about these questions and provide some helpful resources in furthering your own development of what I’m calling a “Franciscan pedagogy.”

I have organized this article into three parts: First, I provide a short overview of the complicated history of education in the Franciscan tradition; Second, I present a threefold proposal for a possible framework for a Franciscan vision of “educating the whole person;” and third, I draw from some of the insightful and challenging work of educational theorist and activist bell hooks, which I believe offers us in the world of Franciscan education stimulating resources and productive trajectories worthy of greater reflection.

## **II. The Complicated History of Franciscan Education**

To suggest that the history of the early Franciscan movement reflects a contested and, at times, unclear picture of the Franciscan approach to learning is an understatement. The complications surrounding the history of Franciscan education, particularly from the period of Francis’s lifetime through at least Bonaventure’s generalate and the promulgation of the famous

Constitutions of Narbonne in 1260,<sup>2</sup> are compounded by the genre and limitations of the available primary sources. Attempts to disentangle historical fact from hagiographical embellishment, the so-called “Historical Francis” from the inspirational “Figure of Francis,” have unfolded over the last century under the rubric of “the Franciscan question.” This scholarly enterprise originated with the nineteenth century work of Paul Sabatier, but continues up through the modern moment, exemplified best today by the meticulous historical scholarship of Jacques Dalarun and his impressive study of the “Franciscan Question” titled *The Misadventure of Francis of Assisi*.<sup>3</sup>

The precise relationship between Francis of Assisi’s own views on the role of education and the flourishing of the Franciscan educational enterprise, dating back to at least the last years of his life with the establishment of numerous regional *studia* and friar communities situated near global centers of learning, is hard to identify independent of the polemical commentaries that surface in the decades immediately following Francis’s death in 1226. In these early sources, compilations of recollections narrated by older friars in the 1240s through 1260s about the origins and early years of the Franciscan movement, we see depictions of St. Francis as one staunchly opposed to higher learning for the friars and those brothers who entered the Order with previous advanced education are presented in a harshly negative light.<sup>4</sup> The resistance to education and the critical view of Friar professors is best captured in the poetic cynicism of Friar

---

<sup>2</sup> See Bonaventure, “The Constitutions of Narbonne (1260),” in *Writings Concerning the Franciscan Order*, trans. Dominic V. Monti, Bonaventure Texts in Translation Series, vol. 5 (St. Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1994), 71-144.

<sup>3</sup> See Paul Sabatier, *Vie de s. François: Edition Définitive* (Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, 1894); and Jacques Dalarun, *The Misadventure of Francis of Assisi*, trans. Edward Hagman (St. Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> See Bert Roest, “Francis and the Pursuit of Learning,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Francis of Assisi*, ed. Michael J. P. Robson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 161-164.

Jacopone da Todi, writing a generation or two after Francis's death. In *Laud XXXI*, he conveys the following:

That's the way it is—not a shred left of the spirit of the Rule!  
In sorrow and grief I see Parish demolish Assisi, stone by stone.  
With all their theology they've led the Order down a crooked path

Our honored professors get special treatment  
In the wing of the monastery reserved for the guests,  
While the others eat herbs and oil in the refectory.

Should the master of theology pick at his food,  
They stand on their heads to try and please him;  
Let the cook fall sick and who will pay him a visit?

In chapter meetings they keep passing new rules  
And the first to introduce one  
Is always the first to break it.

See how these theologians love one another!  
One, like a young mule, watches and waits  
For the right moment to kick the other in the chest.

Dare disagree with one and he will crucify you,  
Laying snares until he succeeds  
In sending you far, far away.

All day long he gossips and jokes with women;  
A friar who just glances their way  
Is apt to end up behind bars.

No matter if his father was a shoemaker  
Or a butcher, to judge from his bearing  
You'd think he was of royal blood!<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, the sentiment conveyed here is critical and dismissive of the enterprise of higher education, including animus specifically aimed at friar scholars and educators. If we are to take the anecdotes contained in *The Assisi Compilation*, the *Legend of the Three Companions*,

---

<sup>5</sup> Jacopone da Todi, "Laud XXXI," in *The Lauds*, trans. Serge and Elizabeth Hughes (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 123-124.

Jacopone da Todi's polemics, the *Mirror of Perfection*, or other comparable reactionary perspectives on higher learning in the Franciscan tradition as uncritically true, then we have a serious problem staking any legitimate claim about being in the college and university business.

However, several influential scholars have offered a more complex view of Francis's perspective on education by deploying a more nuanced hermeneutic, which considers the biased and nostalgic historiography of the middle thirteenth century of which Jacopone da Todi's *Lauds* are creatively illustrative. A Franciscan *ressourcement* that prioritizes the authentic writings of Francis—especially the *Regulae*, the *Admonitions*, and the Letter to Anthony of Padua—suggests, as Bert Roest notes, “that Francis was not opposed to theological learning as long as it did not threaten the Franciscan way of life.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, scholars have shown that the hagiographical depictions and even Francis's own self-deprecatory efforts to convey his own intellectual simplicity (*idiota*, as he would say) are undoubtedly exaggerated.<sup>7</sup> Given his distinctive social location, Francis was someone who benefited from an impressive amount of educational opportunity for a layperson of his time. He would have appreciated the importance of at least a basic literary and theological education in order to better fulfill the *vita evangelica* outlined in the Rules, particularly as it concerns knowledge and affirmation of the Catholic tradition.

I agree with Bert Roest, who reframes the agenda before us. He writes: “the question should not be whether Francis was totally opposed to the influx of learning in the order but rather how he felt that he could square the need for studies with his desire for evangelical poverty and humility.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, despite the misplaced stereotypes of Francis's rejection of the

---

<sup>6</sup> Roest, “Francis and the Pursuit of Learning,” 165.

<sup>7</sup> See the works of Oktavian Schmucki, among others.

<sup>8</sup> Roest, “Francis and the Pursuit of Learning,” 169.

possibility and purpose of education, it is not a matter of *if* Franciscans should be involved in education—as both teachers and learners—but a matter of *how* Franciscans should be involved in education. The practical realities of what it meant to be a friar in active ministry and missionary expeditions required study beyond what disparate schooling and trade preparation that the friars might have come with into the Order. Nowhere in his writings does Francis actually *condemn* academic studies. He expresses his well-founded reservations about *how* studies should factor into the life of the Franciscan community, arguing for the prioritization of fraternity and prayer over studies and work. It should be stated plainly that Francis does not offer us a pedagogical framework in the strict sense. However, his basic guidance that Franciscan education should not supersede one’s “spirit of prayer and devotion” does provide us with a spiritual foundation. I want to propose now that this attentiveness to a holistic understanding of the human person—mind and heart, body and soul, word and deed—presents us with a starting point for developing a contemporary Franciscan pedagogy.

### **III. Educating the Whole Person**

The phrase “educating the whole person” is not the exclusive domain of any particular religious or educational tradition. The Jesuits have adopted this as a key concept in their mission integration across their American colleges and universities, as have the Ursuline Sisters in their secondary schools and colleges. It’s a useful phrase insofar as it serves as a placeholder or reference point for a larger concept and educational principle; namely, that we in higher education are not interested in merely depositing propositional claims or facts to be memorized in a unilateral, didactic, and intellectual manner alone. Instead, to say that we at Franciscan institutions strive to “educate the whole person” is to say that what we study, teach, and learn is

not isolated from the rest of human existence. We are not only interested in the mind, but we are also interested in the development of the spiritual, ethical, and relational aspects of a well-rounded, person of character. While the Jesuits and Ursuline Sisters have their own approaches for fleshing out the meaning of this concept, I want to propose three foundational principles for thinking about “educating the whole person” from a distinctly Franciscan perspective. These are what I will call: (a) incarnational education; (b) the primacy of relationship; and (c) knowledge as the path to wisdom. While not exhaustive, I believe these can help ground us in moving toward a robust Franciscan pedagogy.

#### *A. Incarnational Education*

There are two ways we can conceptualize “Incarnation”—for simplicity sake, let’s call these two approaches “Little I” incarnation and “Big I” incarnation. By “Little I” incarnation, I mean to describe the way in which we are material creatures, literally *in-caro* (enfleshed) beings that are finite, limited, interdependent, social, and interrelated. One of the persistent threats to an authentic understanding of the human person in the Christian tradition and beyond has been a perennial gnostic sensibility that rejects or subordinates the material to the spiritual. The Franciscan tradition is one that, from its medieval foundations onward, has emphasized the wholeness of our existence. We are not bifurcated creatures, as if we can separate a lesser-animal portion of a physical-material existence from a greater-spiritual portion of our identity understood as “soul” or some other category. In true catholic form, we are both/and. The emphasis on the importance of our corporeality lends itself to a great deal of reflection about education. How we learn varies according to our respective intellectual, neurological,

physiological, and social abilities and challenges. How we experience the world likewise is shaped by such circumstances of our embodiment and social contexts.

But learning is not merely reduced to the abstract, intellectual acquisition of knowledge, which might be found in the spirit of something like Thomas Aquinas's Aristotelian model of the reduction of sensory experience to the phantasm. On the contrary, from a Franciscan perspective, learning is experiential, sensory, physical, relational, and grounded in our shared reality. That shared reality is not limited to human society alone, as if the rest of creation were some kind of beautiful backdrop against or soundstage on which we perform human history independent of the rest of the universe. Instead, the truth of our incarnational existence invites us to rethink what it means to learn, to know, to grow in wisdom. It challenges a one-size-fits-all approach to higher education, invites deeper reflection on our continual reliance on others—other humans in society and nonhuman creatures in a whole host of ways. The “Little I” incarnational dimension of the Franciscan tradition provides us with opportunities to see, as Pope Francis has stated in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, how “everything is connected.”<sup>9</sup> This calls for an interdisciplinary and intercultural disposition in which no one is excluded and nothing is inherently irrelevant.

The “Big I” incarnational dimension of the Franciscan tradition is a reference to the centrality of Christ and the Incarnation of the Word. That the Word became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth is the centerpiece of Christian faith, but it is also one of the most important focal points of Franciscan spirituality.<sup>10</sup> It is a faith claim that reveals two important insights: it is a theological doctrine that says something about *who God is* and *who we are called to be*.

---

<sup>9</sup> See Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* “On Care for our Common Home” (2015). Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

<sup>10</sup> For example, see Ilia Delio, *The Humility of God: A Franciscan Perspective* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2006).



One of the distinctive elements of (though not exclusive to) the Franciscan theological tradition is an emphasis on the divine reasoning for the Incarnation of the Word. Whereas the majority tradition, exemplified by the atonement theory of Anselm of Canterbury among others, focuses on human sin as occasioning God's becoming human and entering more fully into creation, the Franciscan tradition focuses on the absolutely free, humble, and unprovoked choice of God to become incarnate out of *love*.<sup>11</sup> This says a lot about what motivates God and how God sees the world, including all of humanity. It is about a God who desires to draw near to creation, to know our experience of vulnerability and suffering, to share in our experience of joy and hope. It is a profound statement of relationship, which is what God prioritizes above all us, symbolized by the preaching, healing, and ministry of Jesus Christ.

But what that says about God also says something about who we are called to be. Relationship based on love is what governs God's actions in relationship to creation and, therefore, in relationship to us. If that is true, as Francis of Assisi and the theologians who followed him asserted, then we are called to follow that incarnational example. One reason is because that is what Christians profess to believe when they state that Jesus Christ is both *fully divine* and *fully human*—if we want to know what God is like, we look at Christ; if we want to know what full humanity is like, we also look at Christ. Christ is the point at which both identities meet. The other reason the incarnational example of God's action in Christ is important for Franciscans is because the exemplarity or model that Christ provides the world is the starting point for all forms of Franciscan life. Both Francis and Clare begin their respective *Rules* with the instruction that: “the [Franciscan] way of life is this: to live the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” or, as Francis says in the so-called *Earlier Rule*, “to follow the teaching and

---

<sup>11</sup> See Daniel P. Horan, “The Difference Love Makes: Theological Reconsiderations on the Reason for the Incarnation,” *Offerings: A Journal of Christian Spirituality and Practical Theology* 16 (2022): 3-26.

footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>12</sup> To be Franciscan is to walk in the steps of Christ, which means to embrace the fullness of our incarnational reality as creatures inherently designed for *relationship*.

### *B. The Primacy of Relationship*

The second way in which we think about the significance of educating the whole person according to the Franciscan tradition is through our emphasis on the primacy of relationship. Nearly all the stories about St. Francis of Assisi center on some element of relationship and the journey of healing, reconciliation, and peacemaking that is needed in the healthy existence of relationship. This is not surprising given, as we have already seen, the model for how to live in the world and to be fully human is Jesus Christ, who’s whole purpose for being-in-the-world was as a sign of God’s gratuitous love and salvation. In striving to walk in the footprints of Christ in his own time, Francis prioritized relationship, even when those with whom he engaged were considered “outsiders,” “unclean,” or even “enemies.” Francis did not hesitate, according to the early sources, to take risks in extending an invitation to relationship with those different from him.<sup>13</sup> Unlike a lot of rhetoric today among certain self-styled Christians who mistake a provisional tolerance for authentic *agapic* love by saying “hate the sin, love the sinner,” Francis of Assisi took his relational cues from Christ, who merely *loved the person* regardless of their social or religious standing.

---

<sup>12</sup> See Francis of Assisi, “The Earlier Rule,” 1.1, in *FAED* 1:63-64; and Clare of Assisi, “The Form of Life of Saint Clare,” 1.1 in *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, ed. Regis J. Armstrong (New York: New City Press, 2006), 109.

<sup>13</sup> See André Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi: The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint*, trans. Michael Cusato (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

A Franciscan approach to education is about forming our students in such a way that they feel empowered to transgress the unjust boundaries between persons and communities that societies, cultures, and churches place in our ways. In his time, Francis was forbidden by social custom, civil law, and ecclesiastical ordinance from fraternizing with lepers outside of Assisi. But looking to the incarnational model of relationship, he knew that the Gospel of Christ compelled him to recognize the fundamental human dignity and value of those excluded from the community by the unjust status quo. He not only “tolerated” the lepers, but loved them, cared for them, lived with them, and over time came to recognize his inherent kinship with them. It is a bit of a cliché today and an anachronism to ask, “and who are the lepers of *our time*?” But there is some wisdom in that inquiring instinct. There are many people that are individually and collectively disenfranchised from our communities on account of a whole host of reasons from their nation of origin to their sexual orientation to the color of their skin or their ethnic heritage, among so many other characteristics or identities. A question for us is how what we do in our classrooms and labs help our students prioritize relationship in their own lives. What can we do to better model that?

Relationship for Francis of Assisi and those who would follow him extended beyond just relationship with other human beings to include all of creation. As incarnate in the material world we, like all creatures in the universe, are part of God’s cosmic community and deeply tied at the most fundamental and macro levels to one another.<sup>14</sup> How do we prioritize relationship in our research, teaching, and mentorship? In the chemistry lab, do we help our students see that the molecular compounds that they study are the building blocks of not only other life but their own? In our biology classes, do we help our students see that we not only live in a delicate ecosystem

---

<sup>14</sup> Daniel P. Horan, *All God’s Creatures: A Theology of Creation* (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2018).

but that our very bodies are themselves a fragile biome which depends on the inherent relationships we have with other living and deceased creatures? In our history classes, do we emphasize the ways in which the events of the past not only shape the successes and failures of our present, but show us the consequences of our current choices to prioritize or not relationships grounded in the common good on future generations and eras? In our professional studies like business, education, and journalism, do we emphasize the importance of care for one another and the need we have to recognize and celebrate our intrinsic interdependence in society?

To say that Franciscan education prioritizes relationship is to say that absolutely nothing is more primary, more essential, more important. That includes other goods and goals that can be alluring, especially to young people preparing for a lifetime of civic engagement. Money, power, authority, control, influence, success, or anything else is to be subordinated to right relationships with God, one another, and all creation. If we can think of our work as educators as motivated primarily by that aim, then we are doing something in line with the Franciscan tradition that grounds our institutions.

### *C. Knowledge as the Path to Wisdom*

Despite the stereotypes about Francis's hostility to academic study and the negative depictions of Franciscan theologians in the generations after his death, the dictum the *poverello* provided to Anthony of Padua in 1223, that "it is good that he teach theology to the brothers provided such studies do not extinguish the spirit of prayer and devotion" persisted as a central principle among the leading Franciscan academics of the thirteenth century. The cynical caricatures painted by Jacopone da Todi and others bear little resemblance to the expressed

vision and aim of higher studies as articulated by these friar scholars themselves. Perhaps no greater example exists than St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (d. 1274).

In fact, near the end of his life, long after serving the order as a leading theologian at the nascent university of Paris and then as Minister General, Bonaventure returned to Paris during Easter 1273 to deliver a series of lectures known as the *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*—or the “conferences on the six days of creation.”<sup>15</sup> In an often-cited passage from lecture 19, Bonaventure critiques knowledge as an end in itself.<sup>16</sup> He argues that simply “knowing” things as an end in itself is an exercise of futility and arrogance, which restricts the knower to those things that are merely finite and passing. He argues that contrary to this kind of learner’s intention, this form of knowledge weakens an individual rather than strengthening her. The reason this is the case is because, like Francis of Assisi before him, Bonaventure recognized that the purpose of knowledge, and therefore the purpose of education, was to pursue a greater end than knowledge itself. In other words, knowledge is only worthwhile if it leads to wisdom.

Bonaventure believed that academic pursuits are always a means to a more transformational end. He calls this goal “wisdom,” but it is not used as a synonym for knowledge as such. As is reflected in the University Values statement at St. Bonaventure University, one of the AFCU member institutions, wisdom is about transformation “of the whole person, concerned not only with the intellect, but also with the will, the heart, and the body.”<sup>17</sup> The second descriptive sentence of the values statement reflects this Bonaventurian insight about Franciscan education: “Education must be eminently practical, not just about learning concepts and skills, but discerning how to truly live humanly, deeply, and well in the world.” Wisdom, in other

---

<sup>15</sup> See Bonaventure, *Collations on the Hexaëmeron*, trans. Jay M. Hammond, Bonaventure Texts in Translation Series, vol. XVIII (St. Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Bonaventure, *Hexaëmeron*, XIX:3 (Hammond 328-329).

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.sbu.edu/about/values-mission>

words, means to grow into a person capable of integrity and compassion (the other two “university values” identified at St. Bonaventure University). While not explicitly outlined in this values statement, St. Bonaventure—being the Franciscan theologian that he is—goes on to describe this path of knowledge toward the goal of wisdom as also a journey of holiness, or greater participation in the life of the divine. Learning, provided it is understood and pursued as a path toward wisdom, can also be a means toward transcendence.

Bonaventure is a great example of a Franciscan educator. While this articulation of knowledge as the path toward wisdom and holiness is expressed most famously in one of his last lectures, we can look at one of his first works—his *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, what amounts to a medieval dissertation—as instructive about the nature of academic study.<sup>18</sup> He engaged a question about theology, his particular discipline, and whether or not it constituted a legitimate science according to Aristotle’s categorization. Bonaventure believed that it did, and therefore he had to then identify what *kind of science* was the practice of learning theology. His answer, departing from his contemporary Thomas Aquinas, was that theology was a *practical* science. I believe that this insight about the nature of the discipline of university learning as inherently practical, even for fields like theology and philosophy that strike so many as abstract or irrelevant, lays the foundation for what a Franciscan educational experience is all about.

To put it in contemporary assessment terms, “the learning goals” of an academic course are not simply about acquiring more information regarding this or that thing or subject matter. The learning goal of all higher education is to lead to *transformation*—transformation into a

---

<sup>18</sup> See Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Sentences: The Philosophy of God*, trans. R. E. Houser and Timothy B. Noone, Bonaventure Texts in Translation Series, vol. XVI (St. Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2013).

person of wisdom, a person of compassion, a person of integrity. Taken seriously, this pursuit, Bonaventure argued, also leads students toward greater holiness and bolsters one's relationship with God. But one does not have to be a religious person or even care about the category of holiness to appreciate the importance and holistic aim of wisdom as the outcome of higher learning. We all know people who are quite knowledgeable or skilled in certain areas but are not at all wise people. This is the sort of outcome that Francis of Assisi was fearful of promoting and what Bonaventure wished to avoid. The question for us, in our own time, is to consider how we might facilitate an experience of Franciscan education that is incarnational, prioritizes relationship, and seeks wisdom. In this spirit, I want to explore some insights from the educational theorists and social activist bell hooks in the last section of this article.

#### **IV. Teaching to Transgress, Learning to Transform**

There's a memorable scene in an early Franciscan text called *The Sacred Exchange Between Saint Francis and Lady Poverty* in which Francis is asked by the virtue of evangelical poverty personified as a noble woman to be shown the early Franciscan religious enclosure, in other words, their monastery. The text says: "Taking her to a certain hill, they showed her all the world they could see and said: 'This, Lady, is our enclosure.'"<sup>19</sup> I have always loved this image of the whole world being the "enclosure" or "cloister" of the Franciscan tradition. Franciscans are not meant to be isolated and hidden away from the "joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties" of the people of our time,<sup>20</sup> but are meant to be situated in the midst of reality, living out our

---

<sup>19</sup> *The Sacred Exchange Between Saint Francis and Lady Poverty*, no. 63, in *FAED* 1:552.

<sup>20</sup> See Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), no. 1. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)

incarnational spirituality, prioritizing relationship, and seeking the holistic wisdom that aims to make the world a better place for all God's creatures.

The eminent educator, theorist, and activist bell hooks shares a similar sense of the role of education with Francis's sense of the world as a cloister.<sup>21</sup> The opening essay in her 2003 book, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, is titled "The Will to Learn: The World as Classroom."<sup>22</sup> She opens that chapter with a statement about the intersection of justice and teaching, noting that educators have, over the decades, challenged the ways in which the classroom—at all levels of study—has been used to reinforce "systems of domination" in categories like "race, sex, and nationalist imperialism" and in the process launched a "pedagogical revolution" in college classrooms.<sup>23</sup> She has always been committed to pedagogies of empowerment and freedom, which are oriented toward enabling our students to be agents of positive transformation in the world through transgressive pedagogy. This style of teaching is "transgressive" insofar as it encourages students to "question"—to raise questions about the status quo, to raise questions about assumed norms, to raise questions about whose subjectivity and personhood is recognized as fully or less-than-fully human, and so on. In this sense, the learning does not stop at the boundaries of our classrooms or within the confines of a semester timeframe. Indeed, the world is the classroom and the classroom must take seriously the challenges and realities of the world in which we live and move and have our being.

The vision hooks presents for an effective and transformative classroom is one that is well aligned with what I have already sketched out in terms of the Franciscan tradition. Reflecting on her own commitments as a teacher, hooks writes of advice she has given numerous

---

<sup>21</sup> Note: bell hooks intentionally published her name with non-capital letters.

<sup>22</sup> bell hooks, "The Will to Learn: The World as Classroom," in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (London: Routledge, 2003), 1-12.

<sup>23</sup> hooks, "The Will to Learn: The World as Classroom," 1.



times to colleagues: “The union of theory and praxis was a dynamic example for teachers seeking practical wisdom.”<sup>24</sup> As it was for Bonaventure, “practical wisdom” is the aim of higher education. In an essay titled, “Practical Wisdom,” hooks describes how she understands this concept:

When we make a commitment to become critical thinkers, we are already making a choice that places us in opposition to any system of education or culture that would have us be passive recipients of ways of knowing. As critical thinkers we are to think for ourselves and be able to take action on behalf of ourselves. This insistence on self-responsibility is vital practical wisdom.<sup>25</sup>

In a spirit again like Bonaventure, hooks explains that the means to reaching the goal of practical wisdom is not merely a matter of book learning or rote acquisition of propositional facts and figures, but an openness to transformation of self through knowledge.

She challenges educators to remember that, according to this commitment, “Our thoughts then are not abstract meaningless currency, of use solely to those who seek to live their thinking lives in an academic environment removed from the ways and workings of everyday life.”<sup>26</sup> If that is what we see as our purpose or place in higher education, then there are plenty of other academic institutions where we might find a comfortable home. But a Franciscan university is oriented toward a different aim; one that aligns well with the challenging vision hooks offers us. Pointing again to the importance of practical wisdom as our pedagogical goal, she writes: “Inviting us to critically examine our world, our lives, practical wisdom shows us that all genuine learning requires of us a constant open approach, a willingness to engage invention and reinvention, so that we might discover those places of radical transparency where knowledge can

---

<sup>24</sup> hooks, “Preface,” in *Teaching Community*, x.

<sup>25</sup> bell hooks, “Practical Wisdom,” in *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (London: Routledge, 2010), 185.

<sup>26</sup> hooks, “Practical Wisdom,” 186.

empower.”<sup>27</sup> That open approach, that willingness to engage invention and reinvention ought to be at the heart of the experience of Franciscan education. No topic or issue should be off limits, because everything that affects the lives and experiences of our students and the broader community is of importance to Franciscan education because our spiritual home is not limited to the walls of a monastery and the boundaries of our classrooms extend to the whole world.

The title of this article comes from the first of hooks’s pedagogical trilogy, a 1994 collection of essays titled *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*.<sup>28</sup> For all the rich educational and critical theory hooks engages, she is not afraid to invoke spirituality as an essential element of the practice of education, which should further endear her to Franciscan educators. In an essay on “Engaged Pedagogy,” hooks suggests that education as “the practice of freedom” is a learning process that “comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students.”<sup>29</sup>

So, what does all of this look like in practice? What principles or guidance might we glean from the wisdom of hooks’s impressive reflections on the art and skill of teaching in higher education? I want to suggest five focal points that might aid us in our efforts toward developing and deploying a “Franciscan pedagogy.” These are hardly exhaustive, but they are drawn from the wisdom of bell hooks, especially from her trilogy on pedagogy. I cannot recommend highly enough that educators, administrators, and staff at Franciscan colleges and universities avail themselves of these rich texts, perhaps in the form of reading and discussion groups on campus

---

<sup>27</sup> hooks, “Practical Wisdom,” 187.

<sup>28</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>29</sup> hooks, “Engaged Pedagogy,” in *Teaching to Transgress*, 13.

or remotely across the AFCU member institutions.

### *1. We Must Build Communities, Not Merely “Safe Spaces”*

There has been a lot of criticism over the last decade of what is perceived to be the “coddling” of college students in the classroom. Oftentimes, this takes the form of conservative-media critiques of otherwise responsible inclusivity and healthy concern that sensitive subject matters might “trigger” undisclosed trauma for students. Despite ignorant dismissals of these kinds of best practices, such exercises are important and necessary. What I am talking about is not the rejection of a context of respect, but that the presumption of “safety” as an overarching value in the classroom is misguided. Instead, we would do well not only to embrace what educational scholar Robert Boostrom famously described as a “brave space,” but focus more on the Franciscan value of community. In an often-cited 1998 article, Boostrom critiqued the conceptualization of the classroom as a “safe space,” noting that we cannot merely establish contexts in which “conflict is ruled out” but must facilitate the need to be brave (or, in Christian virtue parlance, *courageous*).<sup>30</sup> He explained that in dealing with the most important subject matters we teach, especially at the intersection of topics related to injustice, “We have to be brave because along the way we are going to be ‘vulnerable and exposed’; we are going to encounter images that are ‘alienating and shocking.’ We are going to be very unsafe.”<sup>31</sup>

But hooks argues that classrooms that encourage bravery and courage are only possible within the context of what she and Parker Palmer have both described as a genuine community

---

<sup>30</sup> Robert Boostrom, “‘Safe Spaces’: Reflections on an Educational Metaphor,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 30 (1998): 397-408.

<sup>31</sup> Boostrom, “‘Safe Spaces’: Reflections on an Educational Metaphor,” 407.

of truth and learning.<sup>32</sup> She explains: “I enter the classroom with the assumption that we must build a ‘community’ in order to create a climate of openness and intellectual rigor. Rather than focusing on issues of safety, I think that a feeling of community creates a sense that there is shared commitment and a common good that binds us.”<sup>33</sup> Given the primacy of relationship in the Franciscan tradition, this perspective aligns perfectly. She adds, “What we all ideally share is the desire to learn—to receive actively knowledge that enhances our intellectual development and our capacity to live more fully in the world.”<sup>34</sup> One of the ways we build such communities in our classrooms is by recognizing the “value of each individual voice,” which leads me to the second focal point.

## 2. *Valuing Experience, But Resisting Doxography*

One of the things that a true community requires is the honoring of each member of that community. In the Franciscan tradition we have a number of resources at our disposal to theologize and articulate that value from St. Francis’s *Admonition XIX* in which he exhorts his hearers to recall that who they *truly* are is who they are in God’s eyes, to the beautiful if complex principle of individuation of John Duns Scotus popularly known by its Latin reference *haecceitas*. One of the things that hooks emphasizes throughout her writings on education is the importance of transformation of the learning experience that breaks through the unilateral, “banking model” of learning in which students are passive recipients instead of active agents in their own education. This is challenging, for instructors and students alike, for hooks notes that, “the work of transforming the academy so that it will be a place where cultural diversity informs

---

<sup>32</sup> See Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> hooks, “Embracing Change,” in *Teaching To Transgress*, 40.

<sup>34</sup> hooks, “Embracing Change,” in *Teaching To Transgress*, 40.

every aspect of our leaning, we must embrace struggle and sacrifice. We cannot be easily discouraged.” Furthermore, she adds: “We cannot despair when there is conflict. Our solidarity must be affirmed by shared belief in a spirit of intellectual openness that celebrates diversity, welcomes dissent, and rejoices in collective dedication to truth.”<sup>35</sup>

This requires of educators an openness to difference and the humility to accept that we are not the absolute arbiters of truth. In short, we must value the diversity of the experiences of those in our classroom, allowing for exchange of perspective and even dissent. However, this does not mean that opinion triumphs over fact or that preference supersedes reason. This is an especially challenging line to walk in the age of widespread doxography, which means that all information is reduced to opinion and therefore all prospective views are weighted the same. Instead, we ought to reflect on what is or is not permitted in our labs and classrooms. Whose voices are represented? Whose experiences counts? An awareness of the absence of diversity of experiences on our syllabi, reflected in our lectures, or allowed in our class discussions may move us to see that the system we are a part of and perpetuate is deeply flawed and in need of reform, which invites us to consider what topics have also been excluded from our curricula and classrooms.

### *3. Confronting the Tough Topics*

There is nothing that exists in the world outside our classrooms or beyond the boundaries of our schools that does not also affect what happens within our magisterial domains. Today there is, thankfully, a growing and renewed awareness among the dominant groups of our society and institutions of the persistence of systemic racism. On the subject of racism, hooks notes that,

---

<sup>35</sup> hooks, “A Revolution of Values,” in *Teaching to Transgress*, 33.

“Teachers are often among that group most reluctant to acknowledge the extent to which white-supremacist thinking informs every aspect of our culture including the way we learn, the content of what we learn, and the manner in which we are taught.”<sup>36</sup> There is a lot of work to be done by white professors and professors of color regarding the ways in which we unwittingly perpetuate ways of thinking, speaking, and viewing the world that reinforce unjust racial structures and attitudes. But it does not stop with racism. Other topics and themes related to issues of justice tend to be minimized or sometimes avoided altogether given their sensitive nature and the fear educators may have about how to handle such issues. Alongside racism, we might add sexism, institutional violence, income inequality, environmental justice, homophobia, transphobia, and LGBTQ rights, among so many others.

These are not just “niche issues,” as some would claim, nor are these subjects to be dismissed wantonly as problematic “identity politics.” These are pressing issues that should be on the forefront of our educational agendas at Franciscan colleges and universities because no part of our schools, not academic discipline or department, no individual remains untouched and un-implicated by these realities. If we are truly committed to building community, valuing diverse experiences, and prioritizing relationship in our collective journey from knowledge to wisdom, then we must not avoid these pressing “signs of our times.”<sup>37</sup>

#### *4. Teaching with Love*

Love plays a significant and central role in the Franciscan theological tradition. Love is the reason God created. Love is the reason why God became human. Love, St. Bonaventure says, is even a proper name for God, who is referred to as the *summum bonum* or the “highest good” in

---

<sup>36</sup> hooks, “Talking Race and Racism,” in *Teaching Community*, 25.

<sup>37</sup> Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 4 (1965).

the Seraphic Doctor's writings. Love must also be a principle that governs our teaching and, in doing so, reflects the Franciscan tradition in practice. Among the challenges to embracing a pedagogical style rooted in love—love for the subject we study and teach, and love for our students—is the prevailing myth of objectivity, which bell hooks identifies as the negation of community. She writes that the dominant culture often promotes a kind of “calculated objectivism that is dehumanizing.” But adds: “Alternatively, a mutual partnership model invites an engagement of the self that humanizes, that makes love possible.”<sup>38</sup> In a way that I believe encapsulates a lot of our Franciscan commitments, hooks defines love as “a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust.”<sup>39</sup> How does love fit into our understanding of the educational task? What might we do to love what we do more? What might we do to love our students better? And, in light of our answers to these questions, how might we and our classrooms change in the process?

### 5. *The Importance of Spirituality*

Finally, if somewhat unexpectedly, bell hooks makes a strong case for the importance of spirituality in higher education. This does not mean proselytizing or dogmatism. Instead, she says that spirituality “belongs in the classroom because it is the seemingly magical force that allows for the radical openness that is needed for genuine academic and/or intellectual growth.”<sup>40</sup> In a way, hooks is expressing the core of the Franciscan approach to education, which recognizes that knowledge is not an end in itself, but a means toward wisdom and *holiness*. Education for hooks is also a preeminently practical exercise where theory and praxis meet, which has

---

<sup>38</sup> hooks, “Heart to Heart: Teaching with Love,” in *Teaching Community*, 131.

<sup>39</sup> hooks, “Heart to Heart: Teaching with Love,” in *Teaching Community*, 131.

<sup>40</sup> hooks, “Spirituality,” in *Teaching Community*, 150.

implications for embodying the Franciscan tradition in the classroom. Describing an experience all educators can recognize, hooks explains:

To most of us, spirituality is about practice, how we live in the world and how we relate to self and others. When we bring conscious mindfulness to work in the classroom we often have an ecstatic experience. Everything flows wonderfully and learning takes place for everyone. I know this is happening when students do not want class to end, when class discussion continues out into the hallways and into the dormitory and into the streets. At times like this I feel myself to be in the presence of the sacred.<sup>41</sup>

One does not have to invoke the name of God or Christ or even Francis of Assisi to realize what hooks is inviting us to consider here. Instead, this is a challenge for us to consider ourselves and our students to be whole persons, not compartmentalized monads consisting of a mind reserved for knowing in the classroom to the exclusion of all else. Instead, remembering the importance of what I earlier called “incarnational education,” we acknowledge and celebrate the wholeness of human personhood and subjectivity, including the spiritual. As hooks also says, “To me the classroom continues to be a place where paradise can be realized, a place of passion and possibility; a place where spirit matters, where all that we learn and all that we know leads us into greater connection, into greater understanding of life lived in community.”<sup>42</sup>

## **V. Conclusion**

In closing, I believe that the Franciscan tradition offers educators a distinctive vision for what higher learning is meant to be about. Despite the persistence of centuries-old stereotypes about the antithetical nature of higher education within the Franciscan tradition, a closer look at the history and sources of the early Franciscan movement suggest a different vision. It is a vision

---

<sup>41</sup> hooks, “Spirituality,” in *Teaching Community*, 150.

<sup>42</sup> hooks, “Spirituality,” in *Teaching Community*, 151.



marked by education as a holistic enterprise, geared not simply to the acquisition of propositional knowledge, but instead a process oriented toward a greater goal—wisdom. The process begins with recognition of the incarnational nature of Franciscan education and proceeds along a course always guided by the primacy of relationship. The outcome is at once deeply intellectual and eminently practical. Charting a course toward a Franciscan pedagogy today requires our engagement with the insights and experience of expert educators such as bell hooks, whose vision of holistic education aligns well with the Franciscan tradition’s own approach. Drawing from hooks’s writings, we can better appreciate what a Franciscan pedagogy might look like in practice through the transformation of our classrooms by building community, valuing diverse experiences, confronting tough topics, teaching with love, and recognizing the importance of spirituality.