

# **Teaching Facts or Teaching Thinking? The Potential of hooks’ ‘Engaged Pedagogy’ for Teaching Politics in a ‘Post-Truth’ Moment**

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# **Teaching Facts or Teaching Thinking? The Potential of hooks’ ‘Engaged Pedagogy’ for Teaching Politics in a ‘Post-Truth’ Moment**

The rise of populism has sparked a debate about the role of facts in public discourse. How should higher education teachers respond? This article reviews the literature on approaches to teaching and identifies and problematises a tension between emphases on facts and thinking. It then outlines the current ‘post-truth’ challenge, which suggests reasserting the importance of facts. The institutional, disciplinary and personal context of the article are considered before it proposes hooks’ (1994) ‘engaged pedagogy’ as a prescient response to the current post-truth moment. That approach provides an anti-authoritarianism that has the potential to break down barriers between teachers (experts) and students (trainee experts), accommodate different ways of knowing, and promote collective science. This is illustrated with an example of teaching practice from a first-year undergraduate seminar on politics in ethnically divided societies, which highlights how, despite its limitations, engaged pedagogy can facilitate incorporation of facts *within* thinking.

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## Introduction

The dramatic increase in public support for populist parties on both left and right in the last twenty years (Henley 2018) has caused consternation amongst politicians and scholars. There has long been debate over what constitutes populism (Berlin et al. 1968; Rooduijn 2014; Vergara 2020), but a widely used definition formulates it as a thin-centred ‘*ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people*’ (Mudde 2004, 543). In that light, numerous recent movements have been labelled as populist, including in Bolivia, Brazil, Venezuela, the United States, France, Greece, Germany, Hungary, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Israel. This latest rise in populism has coincided with the emergence of a similarly concerning ‘post-truth’ moment, with the homophily of online environments often cited as a reinforcing factor (Farrell 2012). This context has implications for universities, which are emphasised in a special edition of *Teaching in Higher Education* focusing on ‘experts, knowledge and criticality in the age of “alternative facts”.’ The introduction to that edition calls for ‘a transformational vision of higher education that disrupts traditional elites and the counterproductive commodification of expertise and experts – producing instead knowledge that is genuinely accessible, meaningful and useful’ (Harrison and Lockett 2019, 269).

This article addresses that call by proposing bell hooks’ ‘engaged pedagogy’ as an appropriate response to the current post-truth moment. Despite having implications beyond a single discipline, the focus of the article on political science is reflected in the third section, on context, and the example of teaching practice outlined in the fifth

section. Preceding them, the first section reviews the literature on approaches to teaching and learning and identifies and problematises an opposition between emphases on facts and thinking. Deconstructing this opposition allows for facts and their bases to be the subject of thinking, and to be incorporated into it. The second section presents the post-truth challenge and the resulting urge to reassert the opposition between facts and thinking, in which the former act as a bulwark against ‘naïve skepticism’ (Wright 2019, 361). In the third section, the article considers the institutional, disciplinary, and personal contexts that shape the author’s expectations and, perhaps, limit the applicability of subsequent arguments. The fourth section proposes a response to the post-truth challenge in the form of hooks’ (1994) ‘engaged pedagogy,’ and argues that it has the potential to incorporate facts within thinking. It also recognises the limits of engaged pedagogy in terms of its restriction to the classroom context and the potential for teachers and students to reassert rather than challenge hierarchies. Finally, the fifth section provides an example of teaching practice from a first-year undergraduate seminar on politics in ethnically divided societies, which illustrates a practical constraint on engaged pedagogy but also its potential to reconcile facts and thinking.

### **Approaches to teaching and learning**

Much of the literature on pedagogy engages in categorisation of approaches to teaching and learning, and often orders or hierarchises those approaches. Common to many categorisations is a dichotomisation of teaching that emphasises facts *or* thinking. However, it is not necessary for the two to be in opposition, and teaching can productively reconcile them. A critical and thoughtful approach to facts can fit with democratic and accountable education that offers transformative possibilities by challenging ingrained power and hierarchies manifested in racism, sexism, and classism

(hooks 2003; Sharma 2020). However, Biesta (2015) argues that those possibilities are undermined by the shift towards institutionalised performance measures and educational design centred on ‘what works,’ which removes professional judgement (see also McLean, Abbas and Ashwin 2013). This argument fits within a threefold conception of the telos of education, towards which teaching is directed: qualifying students and facilitating subsequent endeavours; socialising students to adhere to relevant norms; and subjectifying students to instil initiative and responsibility (Biesta 2015).

Within its overarching purpose, Carlile and Jordan (2005) outline different approaches to teaching, beginning with Behaviourism’s focus on repetition and learnt responses and Cognitivism’s emphasis on internal mental processes and critical thinking. Both approaches maintain teacher control of the aims and process of learning. By contrast, Constructivism focuses on individual meaning and diversity of understanding whilst Social Constructivism emphasises thought development through communication between students. In these approaches the teacher ‘accepts the autonomy of the student’ (Carlile and Jordan 2005, 19) and becomes a ‘gatekeeper of knowledge, enforcer of values and monitor of community participation and practice’ (Carlile and Jordan 2005, 23).

Poststructuralism extends constructivist and social constructivist ideas in a more radical direction. It challenges the power relations involved in the construction of knowledge and foregrounds the ‘social discipline exercised by agencies such as education’ (Bowen 1989, 17; see also Sharma 2020). Poststructuralism problematises ‘truth’ and binary oppositions between groups and ideas, as well as rejecting essentialism in relation to identities, which are in constant flux (Pierce 2010; Tisdell 1998). It recognises the varied and changing perspectives on knowledge that diverse groups hold and prioritises the exercise of marginalised voices in spaces without

traditional authority structures (Pierce 2010). Poststructural pedagogies express a concern for difference and emphasise the importance of positionality, which is the interaction of changing and multifaceted student and teacher identities in knowledge construction (Pierce 2010; Sharma 2020).

Empirical evidence suggests that poststructuralist feminist pedagogy can improve the performance and satisfaction of students (Wang et al. 2011). This may indicate that it helps them pass through Perry's (1970) somewhat hierarchically organised stages of intellectual development: '*dualism*,' '*multiplicity*,' '*relativism*,' and '*commitment*' (Wright 2019, 363). These stages encompass movement from a basic understanding of right and wrong through recognition of knowledge as opinion to the view that it is context specific, and finally to an awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of ideas.

The prioritisation of commitment reflects the move from 'teacher-centred learning' to 'student-centred learning' (O'Neill and McMahon 2005, 32-33). This encompasses a power shift from teachers to students, greater module choice, more student exercises, and assessment methods emphasising self-reflection, collaboration, and peer assessment (Gibbs 1995, Bates and Rowland 1988). Relatedly, in 'active learning' students are 'called upon to do [anything] other than simply watching, listening and taking notes' (Felder and Brent 2009, 1). The move towards these approaches has a long history (Somit et al. 1958) and is characterised by O'Leary (1997) as the death of 'The Great Man Theory of Teaching'. It also reflects what Biggs (1996, 437-438) calls a shift from the '*objectivist* approach' which assumes 'a dualism between the knower and known' to '*constructivist*... approaches that treat the learner as central in the creation of meaning.'

For Baxter Magolda (1999), there is a progression from ‘absolute knowing’ through ‘transitional’ and ‘independent’ knowing to ‘contextual knowing.’ This reflects Kolb’s (1984) ‘Experiential Learning Cycle’, in which learners gain concrete experience, reflect on it, and develop abstract conceptualisations, before experimenting with and evaluating them in order to apply generalisations (Fox and Ronkowski 1997). Different learning styles prompt varied engagement with each stage, and it is necessary to engage diverse styles in order to create ‘graduates who are effective thinkers and problem solvers’ (Brock and Cameron 1999, 254).

Common to the literature is an underlying spectrum running from shallow and uncritical learning of facts to critical, complex, and social thinking, and a widespread shift towards emphasising the latter. This is part of a broader tendency to name different approaches to teaching and ways of learning, and thus to construct categories. The hierarchisation of these categories creates oppositions between them and designates some as better than others. This can be problematic if facts are brought into opposition with thinking, as with the spectral terminology of this section. What is needed is not the separation and delineation of facts from thinking, but the reconciliation of the two. Facts and their bases can be thought about critically, and thinking can incorporate facts to complement and sustain understanding. However, this reconciliation can be difficult when confronted with debates about the bases of facts in the context of political discourses that utilise ‘alternative facts.’

### **The ‘post-truth’ challenge**

The uncertainty involved in complex thinking may have a negative counterpart in a world ‘where nothing can be taken granted, where no frame of understanding or of action can be entertained with any security’ (Barnett 2000, 257). Such a context is not

merely complex but ‘supercomplex,’ such that ‘the very frameworks by which we orient ourselves to the world are themselves contested’ (Barnett 2000, 257). Bhatt and MacKenzie (2019) argue that in an environment of competing information sources educators should emphasise digital literacy (see also Hordern 2019). This is additionally important because digital information providers are not neutral (Bhatt and MacKenzie 2019), sometimes seek to target (mis)information at users (Cooper 2019) and can sustain narrow networks of likeminded people (Farrow and Moe 2019). Cooper (2019) advocates the need to challenge ‘alternative facts’ in academia by actively tackling insufficient information retrieval, limited critical information strategies, uncritical trust in personal experience, and resistance to materials challenging existing beliefs.

Political discourses in which arguments are simply dismissed as false rather than engaged with indicate the broader ‘post-truth’ context in which ‘the status of all knowledge claims has come to be viewed with equal scepticism’ (Harrison and Luckett 2019, 262). Farrow and Moe (2019) argue that the origin of this scepticism is constructivist accounts of knowledge as stemming from human activity and cognition, and thus shaped by power and perspective. Indeed, Latour (2004, 227) laments how, counter to its aims, the constructivist project can result in ‘an excessive distrust of good matters of fact’. The result for Wright (2019, 361) is ‘*naïve skepticism*’: ‘Faced with this swirling Charybdis, introductory students often reflexively declare that, at bottom, universal truth does not exist.’

Those who adhere to naïve scepticism struggle to articulate an argument for their position, relying on phrases such as ‘it’s just my opinion’. Frankfurt (2005, 34) argues that ‘[i]t is just this lack of connection to a concern with the truth – this indifference to how things really are – that I regard as the essence of bullshit.’ This is distinct from lying, which requires an awareness of the truth that is being obscured and

an intent to mislead. Frankfurt's work links to the wider post-truth context: 'The realms of advertising and of public relations, and the nowadays closely related realm of politics, are replete with instances of bullshit so unmitigated that they can serve among the most indisputable and classic paradigms of the concept' (2005, 23-24).

Thus, the implications of post-truth extend far beyond academia, with relevant examples including the anti-vaccination movement, denial of climate change science, the famed £350 million for the NHS claim made during the Brexit referendum campaign, and the refusal of some of President Trump's supporters to accept his electoral defeat. The post-truth phenomenon, then, has stark implications for the health of populations and the planet, the policies that are implemented, and who gains or retains government power. This affects the provision of public goods, the redistribution of wealth, and the measures taken to sustain or challenge social inequalities.

There is also a long history of governments deploying propaganda to sustain themselves, discredit their enemies, construct scapegoats, or rewrite history. Examples range from Nazi Germany's antisemitic caricatures of Jewish people (Holocaust Encyclopedia) to the Soviet Union's portrayal of idealised rural life (Bendavid-Val 1999), or the Khmer Rouge's significant rewriting of history (Frings 1997). Such practices are not restricted to totalitarian regimes, with examples also including the discriminatory portrayal of Asian-American citizens in the United States (Strochlic 2020) and British anti-Mau Mau propaganda during the latter group's rebellion in Kenya (Osborne 2015).

The current post-truth moment is associated with a populist opposition between the people and the elite (Mudde 2004) including experts who, as Michael Gove famously asserted, the public has 'had enough of' (Mance 2016). The distinction between the elite ('them') and the people ('us') allows dismissal of views emanating

from either side as well as the application of the label ‘elite’ or ‘populist’ to views that one disagrees with (Hordern 2019). This oppositional context moves teachers away from kindness (Clegg and Rowland 2010) and towards providing facts for an uncritical audience. This may all prompt an urge to reassert facts in the face of ‘alternative facts’ but there are many ways to respond, and our choice of response is shaped by our own contexts.

### **Institutional, Disciplinary and Personal Context**

The current post-truth and populist moment has particular implications for the institutional and disciplinary context in which I work, and for me personally. In line with the poststructuralist emphasis on positionality, it is important to consider how these contexts relate to the arguments that I make subsequently. Institutionally, I moved from primary and secondary state schools in a wealthy university town to undergraduate studies at a Russell Group university, postgraduate studies in a research-intensive department at a plate glass university, and a teaching fellowship at another Russell Group institution. My whole experience of teaching and learning has been of well-resourced institutions with small classes or seminars, and a relatively non-hierarchical relationship between teachers and students. The support and resources available at these institutions shape my expectation that higher education teachers have the capacity to develop pedagogies for time- and energy-intensive seminars.

I only have experience of educational institutions in the United Kingdom, and this informs my expectation that students are prepared for teaching through seminars and, therefore, to participate in non-hierarchical discussion. Further, the research intensity, wealth, and high entry requirements of the institutions I have experienced means that their students are often already inducted into relevant institutional

expectations. That is to say, students often have resources and knowledge that support their studies, and they expect to be challenged intellectually and in terms of workload.

The trends in my academic discipline are also important: political science has produced a great deal of literature attempting to explain the latest rise of populism (e.g., Colantone and Stanig 2018; Gidron and Hall 2017; Inglehart and Norris 2017) and the associated post-truth moment, including work on misperceptions and conspiracy theories (e.g., Duffy 2018; Nyhan and Reifler 2018; Oliver and Wood 2014). This is partly because populism and ‘alternative facts’ are political phenomena of concern to students, politicians, and the wider population. It is also because the post-truth phenomenon represents a challenge to the prevailing positivist epistemology in political science, whilst the right-wing authoritarian politicians who often deploy post-truth rhetoric constitute an affront to the broadly liberal values that are shared by many academics in the discipline.

I engage in empirical research based on a qualified positivist position, and subscribe to some liberal values, which inform my interest in the topic of this article. Those views also shape my use of evidence in the classroom and, whilst I view knowledge as evolving and partial, I am committed to the idea of falsification. At the same time as welcoming and valuing different perspectives in the classroom, I advocate that we can, slowly, socially, and tentatively identify some facts as less well-supported than others. This matches the approach of many political science students, who are often technically minded, orientated towards seeking facts, and interested in empirical work.

On a personal level, as a white, cis male, heterosexual, able bodied person who was born and brought up in a wealthy ex-imperial country, I occupy a highly privileged position. Additionally, my family discussed current affairs when I was growing up and taught me to formulate and express positions in conversation. As such, I can engage in

discussion without worrying that my views will not be taken seriously or that my status and right to speak will be challenged or undermined. This makes it easy for me to advocate in favour of teaching in non-hierarchical discussion-based spaces, which I enter from a privileged position.

It is possible that readers in institutions with more lecture-orientated teaching, fewer resources, or students with different prior experiences of teaching and learning, whether in the UK or other countries, may find the subsequent arguments inapplicable. Readers in disciplines with a less positivist bent, such as sociology, may find the proposals passé, whilst those in disciplines in which positivism is less questioned, such as economics, may find them implausible. Finally, readers with different backgrounds to my own may find that the proposals do not fit with their experiences or how they feel comfortable teaching. Thus, the following is not an attempt to advocate a single pedagogy for all circumstances. Rather it is an attempt to show the potential of hooks' engaged pedagogy for teaching political science, and perhaps other social science disciplines, in the current post-truth moment.

### **Teaching to transgress**

bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) and *Teaching Community* (2003) propose 'engaged pedagogy' as a radical and transformative approach to teaching. Building on Paulo Freire's work, hooks' pedagogy centres on open, non-hierarchical and critical discussion that reflects the first premise of Christie's (2005) 'ethics of engagement.' By accommodating different ways of knowing and students' lived experiences in the social construction of knowledge, hooks' approach allows for the continuous 'deconstruction and reconstruction of discourses of power and positionality' (Christie 2005, 248). At the same time, like the Ako Conceptual Framework (Pale

2019), engaged pedagogy places an emphasis on authentic relationships in the classroom, and the responsibility of teachers and students to nurture and maintain them. Such relationships, like responsive pedagogy (Smith et al. 2016), facilitate recursive dialogue between teachers and students in a way that supports students' belief in their competence and abilities.

Far from standing alone, hooks' approach aligns with other transformative conceptual frameworks that challenge ingrained power and hierarchies that may take the form of racism, sexism, or classism. Indeed, hooks' work sits within a wider poststructuralist feminist pedagogy that has four main themes (Pierce 2010). First, it emphasises the mastery of students, women, and other marginalised groups in interpreting knowledge from their perspectives. Second, it emphasises the voice that those groups have in representing their interests and themselves. Third, it recognises the importance of authority in classroom power dynamics and advocates the responsibility of both students and staff for learning. Finally, it stresses the positionality of students and teachers when they engage in knowledge construction. These themes underpin the three reasons for the relevance of hooks' engaged pedagogy in the current post-truth moment: it provides an anti-authoritarianism that breaks down barriers between teachers (experts) and students (trainee experts); it accommodates different ways of knowing; and it promotes collective science.

hooks' wrote at times when authoritarian movements were in the ascendancy (hooks 1994, 28; 2003, 11) and this informs the first reason for the current relevance of her work: it's anti-authoritarianism. She advocates that teachers and students should create spaces in which 'there is a sense of mutual responsibility for learning,' meaning that the teacher becomes 'not the captain... [but] after all just another crew member—and not a reliable one at that' (hooks 1994, 144). However, teachers should not ignore

the structural power stemming from their institutional positions, and it is clear that they enter the classroom from a very different place than students. Teachers are paid for their time and are imbued with authority by their qualifications and their place within the institution. Further, even if teaching non-hierarchically, teachers and students may reflect and reinscribe disciplinary and institutional hierarchies in the ways that they talk. This might be through emphasis on the strengths of a prevailing epistemological position or mention of the excellence of research-led teaching. This has implications for wider social inequalities because subjects and institutions are not equally open to those with different backgrounds and levels of privilege.

Engaged pedagogy does not, in and of itself, end disciplinary, institutional and social hierarchies. However, it aims to create a situation in which everyone in the classroom is equal in their responsibility for, and commitment to, a constructive learning environment. Students and teachers alike should challenge and be challenged, be ready to say and hear uncomfortable things, engage in lively and impassioned debate, and learn the difference between ‘critical interrogation’ and ‘dismissal’ of views (hooks 1994, 49, 2003, 133-136). Difficulty is productive and learning can be painful, though it should be coupled with kindness in a fashion akin to critical friendship (Clegg and Rowland 2010). In this context, the ‘bottom-line assumption has to be that everyone in the classroom is able to act responsibly’ (hooks 1994, 152). This creates space to foreground the perspectives of groups that are subjected to the authority of the state and social structures more widely, such as women, black people, and working class people. It also allows for disciplinary and institutional hierarchies, and their relationships with wider social inequalities, to be the subject of consideration and critique. There are no guarantees here, and the institutional position of the teacher vis-à-vis the students remains a powerful thing. Critiquing established hierarchies can be hard work that

requires commitment by students and teachers, but the creation of a critical environment in which differing perspectives are valued is an important step.

Such an environment can also promote the kind of critical, complex and social thinking that supports students taking positions whilst knowing their strengths and weaknesses. If they may be challenged by the teacher and each other, students must be ready to explain why they believe something and revise their views if challenges are legitimate and well-developed. This sets a high bar for justification of views and mitigates against recourse to phrases such as 'it's just a fact' or 'I have my view, you have yours.' It encourages recognition of uncertainty and 'the times of not knowing' whilst prompting inquiry (hooks 2003, 47-48). Engaged pedagogy's creation of a space in which teachers and students co-create knowledge also challenges the distinction between the qualified few and the unqualified many. The teacher, or expert, is humanised and students engage in discussion that reveals the roots of expertise and facts, which may still be challenged but for good reason rather than bad.

Deconstruction of the barrier between teachers and students underpins the second reason for the relevance of hooks' approach: the accommodation of knowledge based on personal experience (see also Biggs 1996). Diverse voices, with different perspectives stemming from their experiences, are accommodated and there is no insistence on detachment (see also Bourdieu 1984). This challenges the idea of a split between mind and body, and the focus on the former without the latter, in which:

We are invited to teach information as though it does not emerge from bodies.

Significantly, those of us who are trying to critique biases in the classroom have been compelled to return to the body to speak about ourselves as subjects in history. We are all subjects in history. (hooks 1994, 139)

Students are taught that their experiences are one perspective and way of knowing, and that other perspectives and ways of knowing contribute to a ‘richer’ picture (hooks 1994, 89). This links to the need for knowledge to be informed by disciplinary, personal, and shared contexts (Rowland 1999), and to Hauke’s (2019) definition of knowledge as ‘a personal relationship between ideas, sources of evidence (and resulting ‘truths’) and the individual.’

Combining ways of knowing enables students to move from a position in which research is ‘perceived to be a mediated experience that was done by others’ (Clark and Hordosy 2019, 418) to one in which it becomes ‘something that they do themselves for their own academic and everyday purposes’ (Clark and Hordosy 2019, 421). This can be facilitated with the use of data that they create (Loepp 2018), with a ‘throughline’ of integrated research activities, and with ‘ipsative assessment’ in which students’ development is considered by comparing current with past work (Hughes 2019). Becoming researchers who appraise sources is aided by group discussion, examination of a range of beliefs and understandings, dialogue, and myth-busting (Cooper 2019). This can enable students to engage with the bases of facts and incorporate them into thinking whilst keeping them open to revision.

The capacity to incorporate research activities underpins the third reason for the relevance of hooks’ approach: its accommodation of science as a collective endeavour. Interaction and discussion promote students’ roles in constructing scientific knowledge:

The heroic saga of the isolated individual genius is purely a myth. Real scientists work in hierarchical communities, subject to a discipline which reinforces the paradigm... Thus the knowledge industry is enmeshed in a wider social and political system, which helps further to explain why a particular paradigm persists and how it regulates the practice of science. (Hollis 2003, 86)

hooks' pedagogy is less hierarchical than this characterisation of science, but it can situate students within a community of sceptical scientists who share a responsibility to think critically about ideas. This fits within Thomas Kuhn's conception of science as the interaction of rising and falling paradigms (Hollis 2003), which requires communities of scientists with differing theories to interact and coexist until the resilience of a new paradigm is established. Karl Popper's establishment of falsification as the core element of good science (Hollis 2003) also requires a community of sceptical scholars who engage with each other's work, for instance through peer review (see also Farrow and Moe 2019; and Hauke 2019).

In Popper's vision, 'science is always open-ended, offering no certainties and no rest for the enquiring mind. The process of testing does not tend to eliminate all hypotheses other than the true one' (Hollis 2003, 75). Like the thinking that engaged pedagogy promotes, science is revised and updated through interaction between differing perspectives. Scholars rely on the 'intellectual and practical tools available... in a particular historic context' and, as social beings, must accept that 'interests... inevitably enter into our science' (Chalmers 1990, 14, 112-113). The core element of hooks' pedagogic practice, open and challenging discussion, prompts identification the types of evidence that have been cited in sources, and appraisal of their strengths and weaknesses (Blings and Maxey 2017). Students can develop an understanding that 'knowledge itself may be rather ephemeral, transient and contradictory – and therefore it might be both true and untrue at the same time' (Hauke 2019, 390). In this view, knowledge and expertise are not distant and authority-based but are engaged with and critiqued. This aligns with treating truth as a 'threshold concept' (Hughes 2019, 396), such that a developing understanding of truth is linked to 'new ways of understanding the world' (Wright 2019, 361).

Despite its potential, it is important not to see hooks' approach as a panacea for the problems faced by teachers and students in the current post-truth moment. Whilst engaged pedagogy helps to address Harrison and Lockett's (2019, 269) call for knowledge that is 'accessible, meaningful and useful,' questions remain about for whom that is the case. By bringing diverse experiences and perspectives into classroom discussions, and promoting challenging interactions, hooks' approach has the scope to accommodate discussion of who is included or excluded from knowledge, and what functions it does or does not fulfil. So, a student might move from knowing that they grew up in a town to knowing that they grew up in a privileged position in that town, based on hearing the experiences of others and learning about indicators of inequality in the area. However, a student might also use the same forum to develop, strengthen, and assert an existing viewpoint that sustains their beliefs and excludes others. hooks' approach can provide the forum in which these outcomes occur but cannot ultimately resolve questions of who knowledge is for, which remains a point for students and teachers to consider and work on together.

Similarly, the anti-authoritarian and non-hierarchical nature of engaged pedagogy has limitations. It can facilitate critical consideration of disciplinary, institutional and social inequalities but does not guarantee that progressive positions will be agreed or that action to challenge hierarchies will be taken. Such outcomes require the commitment of teachers and students and, even then, may remain an aspiration stemming from illuminating and challenging classroom discussion. Thus, the anti-authoritarianism of hooks' approach may be constrained to the classroom and have few implications for hierarchies more generally. Marginalisation, harassment, abuse, mistreatment, and insecurity, be they based on gender, ethnicity, employment status and

role, or anything else, may continue on campus even if an ideal form of engaged pedagogy is adopted on a unit or course, or in a department.

Even within the classroom, opening the space to different perspectives and prompting reflexive considerations can recreate and reinforce existing hierarchies. Engaged pedagogy can foreground and value behaviours that have traditionally been seen as feminine (Bondi 2009), fitting with the emphasis on such behaviours when students are seeking work in existing economic hierarchies (Adkins 2003). It can also empower middle class students to utilise their existing resources and dispositions to talk about themselves, the course materials, and the relationship between the two (Skeggs et al. 2008). Approaches that can be used to challenge prevailing hierarchies and inequalities can also be co-opted by, or contribute to, the systems that sustain those them (Davies et al. 2005). Practicing diversity by valuing different voices in the classroom may contribute to the neutralisation and quantification of the term such that it loses its progressive impetus (Taylor 2013). As such, teachers and students must work to ensure that diversity is reassociated with terms such as equality and justice rather than merely deployed by universities to emphasise their excellence on another metric (Ahmed 2007). Engaged pedagogy can create a context in which authoritarianism and hierarchies are challenged but this requires commitment and effort on the part of students and teachers and may have limited implications outside the classroom. Nevertheless, hooks' approach has important potential, especially in relation to the reconciliation of facts and thinking.

### **An example of teaching practice**

Engaged pedagogy can be practiced through small group teaching 'characterised by high levels of interaction among the students and between students and the tutor'

(Bogaard et al. 2005, 117). I attempt to adopt such an approach, for instance in the seminars that I teach on an undergraduate first-year introduction to political science. The unit is core for many courses on politics at the institution so most of the 250 or more students who take it each year are based in the Department of Government. The large student numbers mean that fellows teach the seminars that complement the 20 weekly lectures. The 50-minute lectures are given by the unit leader, who is a senior professor, and are grouped into sections covering political behaviour, institutions, and policy outcomes. The topics of the lectures and associated seminars include policy preferences and ideologies, electoral systems, and economic growth. The structure and topics of the unit are well established, but the unit leader consults the fellows on assessment methods, sources, and examples. The fellows are also given a great deal of freedom to design and run the weekly seminars, though they must cover the topics, core readings, and key concepts.

I begin each seminar by offering a brief summary of the core readings and linking them to a real-world example, in part to prompt any clarifying questions that students have. The bulk of each seminar is set aside for small group discussion, in which each group chooses one or two pre-circulated questions to discuss. Most of the small group discussion is unsupervised but I circulate between the groups to answer any clarifying questions, offer my opinions and suggestions, and pose further questions. Each group is asked to keep brief notes of their discussions on Padlet, and I save these on the related Moodle page for future reference. Finally, the groups reconvene to engage in a whole-group discussion of the topic. It is often difficult to fit this all into the 50-minute seminars but time for the unsupervised small group discussion is prioritised.

Although the seminars are quite structured, I attempt to create a less hierarchical environment by organising desks into clusters for the small-group work and prioritising

unsupervised discussion. I also speak openly about my own experiences, the gaps in my knowledge, and when I do not know the answers to questions, which often provides an opportunity for learning by myself and students. This is the context for trying a new approach to teaching for the final topic of the unit: politics in ethnically divided societies. The starting point for the seminar is two essential readings, which both deploy quantitative techniques to investigate factors that shape the salience of ethnicity in politics. The first article uses the colonial-era drawing of the border between Malawi and Zambia to investigate the role of group size in the differing political salience of Chewa and Tumbuka ethnicity in each country (Posner 2004). The second article analyses survey data from 43 countries to counter to a widespread assumption that proportional electoral laws are associated with higher levels of ethnicization in voting behaviour (Huber 2012). Both are excellent articles that deploy robust empirical analyses to make interesting and important contributions. However, in line with hooks' engaged pedagogy, I seek to do three things:

- Explicitly challenge the notion that 'ethnically divided societies' exist 'over there' in non-Western contexts.<sup>1</sup>
- Introduce the voices of an ethnic group that is, and has been, marginalised in its country, recognise racism as a key reason for that marginalisation, and recognise emotional responses to that racism.
- Introduce the idea that the expression of experiences through cultural output such as music is a valid source of knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This was more important in the preceding year, when the second essential reading had focused on the factors that facilitate cooperation within and across ethnic groups, using experiments that took place in Kampala, Uganda (Habyarimana et al. 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Reflecting the poststructuralist challenge to the delineation of the canon within a discipline from other sources (Alan 2018).

I suggest that students read an article that focuses on tensions between minority ethnic communities as a key driver of the 1992 LA riots (Bergeson and Herman 1998). The article opens by describing the events that followed the acquittal of four white Los Angeles police officers charged with the beating of the African American motorist Rodney King. Whilst the article notes the context of the court case and refers to historic relations between white and black people in the United States (and argues that focusing on relations between only those two groups is insufficient), it does not mention the word racism. As a counterpoint, I provide links to a video of coverage of the beating of Rodney King (ABC News 1991), and an article on the death toll from the riots (New York Times 1992). I also circulate links to materials that students bring to my attention such as the National Geographic documentary, *LA 92*. Finally, I ask students to listen to and read the lyrics of nine jazz, soul, and hip-hop tracks by black artists, which express experiences of racism in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

The inclusion of the above sources for consideration by students presents them with a range of materials that attempt to strike ‘the delicate balance between facilitative structures and an uninhibiting openness’ (Komers and Kester 2018, 20). This approach provides an illustration of the three reasons for the potential of hooks’ approach in the current post-truth moment. First, highlighting the racism experienced by black people in the United States, and their resistance to it, introduces a substantively anti-authoritarian and egalitarian note into the non-hierarchical discussion that is practiced in the seminars. Second, presenting diverse sources in the form of academic articles, news reports, documentary, and music, highlights the different bases for knowledge and

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Strange Fruit’ by Billie Holiday, ‘A Change Is Gonna Come’ by Sam Cooke, ‘The Backlash Blues’ by Nina Simone, ‘Mississippi Goddam’ by Nina Simone, ‘Why (The King of Love Is Dead)’ by Nina Simone, ‘Is it Because I’m Black’ by Syl Johnson, ‘Across 110th Street’ by Bobby Womack, ‘Can’t Truss It’ by Public Enemy, and ‘Conspiracy’ by Gang Starr.

challenges the divide between experts and non-experts. Third and finally, juxtaposing accounts of ethnicity and politics that emphasise group size, electoral systems, tensions between ethnic minorities, and racism, allows students to engage in collective scientific endeavour. That is to say, it facilitates the drawing together of different reference points, some of which are in tension, to create fuller understanding of a subject. In this sense, hooks' engaged pedagogy can incorporate the teaching of facts *within* the teaching of thinking.

In practice, the consequences of discussing these sources remains to be properly observed. The move to online teaching during the Coronavirus pandemic, and the personal circumstances of a number of students in that context lowered attendance at seminars and changed the nature of the discussion. Reviewing the notes that discussion groups keep on Padlet reveals a strong focus on the academic sources and, to a lesser extent, the news coverage. There are also clear indications of willingness to incorporate both those kinds of evidence into a wider understanding of the factors at play in politics in ethnically divided societies. This indicates the potential for engaged pedagogy to facilitate the incorporation of competing perspectives into knowledge.

The particular focus by students on the academic sources might be expected because of the proximity of the seminar to the end of unit summative exam, for which academic sources hold more utility. This highlights a practical constraint on engaged pedagogy: its potential to promote thinking that incorporates multiple perspectives and evidential bases may be limited by the imperative that students feel to learn particular things in order to succeed in their degrees. Adopting engaged pedagogy within seminars does not change other components of the unit, including the approach to assessment, which may pull students in competing directions.

Feedback for the seminars indicates a positive experience on the part of students. Many of them find the non-hierarchical group discussions combined with question-based interventions from myself to be engaging, challenging, and enjoyable. Positive though this may be, it is not the same as students adopting a critical approach to hierarchy, inequality, and authority. This suggests the need for engaged pedagogy to be incorporated at the level of unit design, rather than only in seminars. Thus, the teaching practice adopted in the seminars generally, and the seminar on politics in ethnically divided societies in particular, does not realise engaged pedagogy's anti-authoritarian and non-hierarchical potential.

However, the teaching practice demonstrates the capacity for hooks' approach to incorporate differing perspectives and ways of knowing. Although engaged pedagogy, and poststructuralist feminist pedagogies more broadly, may seem to oppose the idea of facts, it can actually deconstruct the opposition between facts and thinking. It rejects traditional authority as the basis for facts, and their uncritical supply and consumption. Instead, it can promote consideration of perspectives and ideas that are overlooked or excluded from even the strongest empirical analysis. It asks that students think about how excluded views could contradict or amend the evidence being presented, and thus highlights that each fact is part of the wider, ongoing construction of knowledge. By creating students as critics who assemble rather than debunk (Latour 2004, 246), it can provide a response to Latour's (2004) concern that critical approaches have lost their way. This can overcome the dichotomy between facts and thinking, recognising that facts are constructed through hard social work.

## **Conclusion**

Whilst '[t]he problems associated with "post-truth" are much bigger than can be solved by rethinking academic practice,' (Farrow and Moe 2019, 282) this article provides some hope. hooks' engaged pedagogy offers the possibility of rehabilitating 'intellectuals in public space' and working towards citizens who are 'willing to engage with them and debate ideas rationally' (Farrow and Moe 2019, 282). The implied opposition between emphases on facts and thinking in the pedagogy literature may be exacerbated by the urge to reassert facts in the face of 'alternative facts.' This is particularly so because of the serious political and social implications of post-truth claims. The potentially overwhelming amount of competing information in the current, supercomplex moment may also cause us to seek the certainty of facts.

However, whilst shaped and limited by the context and position from which I write, this article argues that hooks' engaged pedagogy can be helpful in the context of political science, and perhaps other social science disciplines. This is because of its anti-authoritarian nature, which provides an explicit rejection of the populism that is associated with 'alternative facts.' It creates an egalitarian learning environment in which the distinction between experts and non-experts is deconstructed and expertise becomes experienced and humanised. hooks' approach also recognises the different bases of knowledge, including personal experiences, and accommodates them in discussions between students and teachers. This brings different perspectives into contrast and allows participants to revise, amend, and combine their views. The social enterprise of presenting and critiquing evidence replicates the social nature of scientific endeavour. The identification of facts through scientific inquiry requires a community of critical reviewers and colleagues with different knowledge, experiences, and perspectives. That community subjects facts to scrutiny, keeps them under review, and is always open to new evidence that could revise or replace them.

Engaged pedagogy is not a panacea and does not necessarily challenge hierarchies or authoritarianism outside the classroom. Further it can reinscribe hierarchies by emphasising particular behaviours, and requires active efforts by students and teachers to promote equality and justice. However, it shapes my approach to teaching generally and a seminar on politics in ethnically divided societies in particular, which incorporates a range of sources offering different perspectives on ethnic divisions, some of which foreground racism. Those sources challenge the idea that ethnic divisions are particular to non-Western contexts whilst showing that there are multiple evidential bases to draw on when constructing knowledge. The full anti-authoritarian and non-hierarchical potential of this approach is limited by changes to teaching practice during the Coronavirus pandemic and by the unit design. However, students do engage with different perspectives and evidential bases and attempt to reconcile them. As such, the adoption of hooks' engaged pedagogy allows for facts to be incorporated *within* thinking.

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