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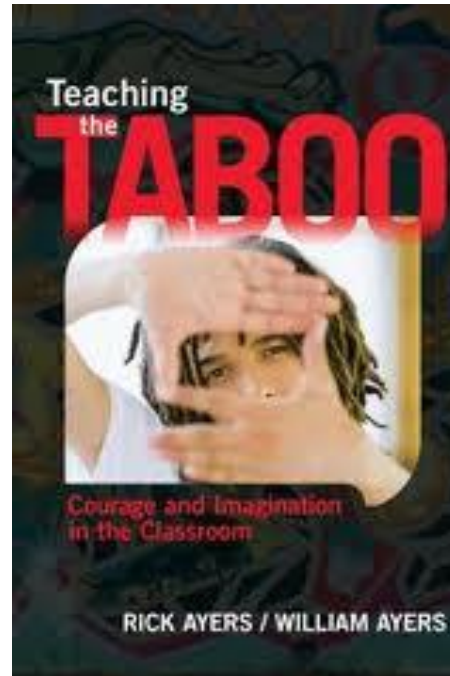


Ayers, Rick & Ayers, William (2011). *Teaching the Taboo: Courage and Imagination in the Classroom*. NY: Teachers College Press.

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Reviewed by Kenneth J. Bernstein

Taboos lurk in every area of life, and schools are no exception: Lift the cover in any classroom, in any educational venue, and there they are, waiting. But precisely because taboos are so profoundly human, we each maintain the power of reinvention: We can question, re-inscribe, and repurpose many of the taboos we've inherited. Let in a single, dazzling beam of light, a bracing breath of fresh air, and see what happens—you may find yourself advancing from the margins, sailing against the tide, speaking for the opposition. You may be—without even realizing it at first—teaching the taboo. (p. xii)



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Those are the final words of the two-page Prelude, after the Foreword (by Haki R. Madhubuti) and before the Introduction that begins this new book by the brothers Ayers, both distinguished as classroom teachers and activists for an approach to schools and their reform very different that what is now unfortunately the conventional wisdom offered by major figures from both political parties.

For those frustrated by the thrust of educational “reform” over the almost three decades since issuance of “A Nation at Risk” in 1983, this book provides what can be described as both a challenge and a set of alternatives. It is a challenge because it looks at education, teaching and schools in a way quite different from that which dominates our public discourse about these subjects. The authors are not particularly concerned with test scores, obsession with which has been driving our education policy. They are, to put it bluntly, dismissive of such an approach.

This still holds: The best predictor of how a student will do on any high school standardized tests is how she did on her first test in 3rd grade. And the best predictor of how she will do on that first test is her parents’ income. A lot of time, effort, money and nonsense could be avoided if we simply lined kids up by class background and sorted them out. It would have the added benefit of being honest. (p. 9)

But don’t misread those words. It is not that either author believes that background defines the destiny of a child. Rather they are criticizing an educational approach in which we fail to address the differences in background and in fact exacerbate those differences in how we approach our public schools. They remind us that schools in



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William Ayers is a Distinguished Professor of Education, and a Senior University Scholar at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His research focuses on the importance of creating progressive educational opportunities in urban public schools. One of his books, *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher* (Teachers College Press, 1993), was named Book of the Year in 1993 by Kappa Delta Pi and won the Witten Award for Distinguished Work in Biography and Autobiography in 1995. He is a graduate of the Bank Street College of Education and Teachers College, Columbia University.

wealthier communities spend far more per student and offer a much wider variety of courses that can invoke

the interests of the students they have, while as has been well documented especially since the advent of No Child Left Behind is that the education for those from less well off communities has been ever more narrowed to preparation for the tests required under that legislation as well as other high stakes tests to which we subject our students.

Among other things, the authors are strong advocates of the progressive approaches of the likes of Paolo Freire and John Dewey. They believe in active learning by the students, where even at an early age they begin to take responsibility for what they are going to learn and how they are going to learn it. Essential to such an approach is addressing key questions, which one finds summarized at the end of the book, after all the issues such questions touch have been amply illustrated in bulk of the book. Underlying all of this is an attitude that will be unsettling to those who think schools should be places of predefined order, that children should be socialized into predominant mores and ways of thinking. “To teach the taboo is to invent a pedagogy of insurgency—filled with hopes and dreams, it is sometimes defiant and rude, sometimes subversive, always revolutionary.” (p. 125)

Next, we encounter the questions and some key assertions for their approach, that of teaching the taboo.

For teaching the taboo, the basic questions are of a category one could define as eternal, or at least of deep meaning:

- Who are we?
- How did we get here?
- Where are we going?
- Why?
- How will we get there?

The authors note that these questions “underline all learning” before offering other questions which keep the inquiry, “if not exactly on track, perhaps at least lurching forward”:

- How do we know what we know?
- What's the evidence, and where else might we look?
- What is invisible, erased, missing, or denied?
- What is the conventional interpretation? What are alternative possibilities?
- What have we experienced or observed first-hand?
- Whose voice is heard, whose perspective and viewpoint represented?
- Whose interests are served?
- Where is the unnecessary suffering, the unjust hurt?
- Why does any of it matter? (p. 125 *et passim*)

Most education policy makers and many teachers might well shy away from such questions. Those of us who regularly engage with students—in my case primarily 10th graders—can recognize in these words some of the underlying concerns of our students about who they really are, where they belong in the world, why things are the way they are, why they are studying what they are studying, and what beyond grades and scores on tests it all means? Although my experience with students younger than middle school is limited, I suspect from what experience I do have that similar questions also function as part of the tapestry of the overall learning processes even of very young children. Students of many ages attempt to create frameworks that help them make sense of the world. The brothers Ayers are advocating an educational approach that makes use of these questions, that includes the voices and perspectives of students as having value and importance, that seeks to broaden the universe of materials from which they learn, including from cultures other than the dominant ones, thus taking advantage of the richness of cultural diversity that is an ever-increasing part of the fabric of our nation and society.

They posit this in opposition to what they quote Martin Haberman describing as “a culture of poverty”:

The teaching acts that constitute this pervasive pedagogy of poverty are these: “giving information, asking questions, giving directions, making assignments, monitoring seatwork,

reviewing assignments, giving tests, reviewing tests, assigning homework, reviewing homework, settling disputes, punishing noncompliance, marking papers, and giving grades. (p. 23)

This is based very much on a teacher-centered approach in which it then becomes logical to evaluate teachers by the performance of students on some supposedly “independent” measures of learning (tests) whether or not those measures are relevant to the real learning the students have done or to the lives they actually live.

On the following page the authors offer a list from Haberman that suggests good teaching is going on not when it is teacher directed or teacher centered, rather when students are

- involved with issues they regard as vital concerns
- being helped to see major concepts, big ideas, and general principles
- planning what they will be doing
- applying ideals such as fairness, equity, or justice to their world
- actively involved
- asked to think about an idea in a way that questions common sense
- redoing, polishing, or perfecting their work
- reflecting on their own lives and how they have come to believe and feel as they do. (p. 24)

The authors weave a solid understanding of educational literature with observations from their own experience and the experience of observing other teachers. Their personal experience goes back to the Freedom Schools in Mississippi in the 1960s, where an approach that relied heavily on student experience and freedom was employed. As the authors note, Charlie Cobb, who designed the Freedom Schools, like Paolo Freire, and like some others “...approached education as a kind of community organizing, community empowerment, and not simply the transmission of static knowledge from above.” (p. 18)

They remind us of the many whose work includes these and similar liberation views, including Civil Rights veteran Robert Moses with the Algebra project, and noted educators such as A. S. Neill in England, and Americans

as far back as W. E. B. DuBois and Carter Woodson, through to the likes of Maxine Green and Herb Kohl, and to more contemporary examples like Gloria Ladson-Billings.

This is not a pedagogy operating primarily through transmission of received values and knowledge. It does not ignore them, because the students will have to live in a society in which they exist. It empowers students to challenge and rethink them, to participate in creating a set of values and knowledge that can help reshape and improve our society for the benefit of all. This touches a real issue for our purpose of schools today. They question whether our schooling will serve mainly to perpetuate an industrial order traceable to the 19th century and which in the 20th century led to American dominance, or if perhaps America might consider another alternative—if we can or will

...fashion schools that allow students to envision a new relationship with people of the world, a new purpose for social production besides the creation of more commodities? Educational visionaries do not simply slot children into narrow roles determined by those in power; they help children and society reinvent our lives, generating structures that reflect our deepest values. (p. 19)

Here I must reflect on that last sentence. Increasingly, we have seen an approach to education that attempts to impose a set of values, such as international economic competitiveness, as a primary reason for our public schools, and in the process elevates STEM—science, technology, engineering and mathematics—above other domains. The authors devote a chapter to this issue entitled “Tell No Lies: Science and Math Matters.” It is not that they are opposed to learning science or math. They do seriously question how we teach the subjects, often in a fashion leaving little room for “heart, intuition, or playfulness” (p. 63). Nor does current practice allow any approach other than the rational positivism that is so often the basis of our school approach to science. Instead they point not only to the idea of considering the wisdom of, say, indigenous cultures, but also the experience of those in the West who have explored a different approach. They cite Frank Oppenheimer and his founding of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, where no glass is placed between the exhibits and the visitors.

The authors also describe the experience of learning in a Mastery Class where much of the instruction was done by students only two years older than the learners in the class, an experience which quickly overcame the “gap” in learning and achievement that existed at the end of more conventional instruction.

The brothers Ayers not only challenge conventional thinking about education and schools, they criticize what we have been doing as counterproductive to real learning and to the benefit of students and the society they will be helping to create. The approach is at its core one of student empowerment, albeit under adult guidance. It considers the idea of received wisdom and top-down teaching as something to be undercut, in the mode of the work of Postman and Weingarten in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. The authors do a superb job of weaving together material from education thinkers who have already explored aspects of such an approach. I would suggest that neither author would claim to be inventing something new. Instead they would argue that this approach is not being heard because of the voices excluded in the current discussion. This is probably best expressed by a young teacher whose classroom they visit, Malik Dohrn (son of Bill Ayers and his wife Bernadette Dorhn), who opined “There are two classes of folks in the current school debates: people who teach, like me, and people who talk about teaching.” (p. 92) Dorhn thinks his father and uncle now fall in the latter category, to which their response is “Ouch!”

This reviewer is in both categories. I am still a classroom teacher, with more than 180 students in my six classes on any given date. I write about teaching, including reviewing books about education, precisely because I believe it is important that the voices of those in the classroom be an essential part of how we rethink and redesign our public schools and our teaching. Like the authors, I would not argue that what we have now works for all or even for most students the way it should and could. Like them, I think the current thrust of our discussions on education policy is misguided. As they note at the end of the main text, before the CODA with its final questions,

Problem-posing and question-asking is the central strategy of the taboo. This is the stance of challenging convention, questioning common sense, unsettling orthodoxy. This is teaching the taboo. (p. 121)

Above I referenced a final set of assertions about what teaching the taboo means for the authors. Because it is how they chose to end their book, it seems appropriate similarly to end this review with the same words. Before I do, let me offer these thoughts: this is a book that requires readers to be honest with themselves, even if they think of themselves as teachers focused on empowering the students. Too often even those who like to think of themselves as creative do not realize how trapped in conventional ways of thinking and acting they are. Certainly I had to step back and rethink some of what I do as a result of reading this volume.

For those involved in policy matters, this book will, if you let it, unsettle you. Most involved in policy are addressing matters around the edges, even if they do confront matters of poverty and background. Perhaps you will find yourself disagreeing with some of what the authors present. Fair enough, but can you then as a reader and a policy maker come up with reasons for not addressing the issues with which they challenge you? Do not all of us—teachers, parents, administrators, policy makers—owe our children, our students, a willingness to think beyond our current practices so that we can do the best job possible of preparing them to take responsibility for the world which we will leave them?

And now, from p. 127, the final words, offered in response to those who might argue that they can't do everything, as to what we can do:

Turn out the lights in this room. . . . Light a candle anywhere and it will challenge the darkness everywhere. One candle. We may not be able to do everything, but we can do something, and something is where we begin.

What we can hope for:

- A sense that injustice can be opposed; that justice can be aspired to
- A sense of ongoing unease
- A spirit of connectedness, of solidarity
- A spirit of outrage tempered by a spirit of generosity
- An open-ended dialogue, the questions always open to debate
- A full and passionate embrace of the life we're given combined with an eagerness to oppose suffering and injustice is what we have to work with: trudging towards freedom; teaching the taboo.

About the Reviewer

Kenneth J. Bernstein is a National Board Certified Social Studies teacher. He holds degrees in music from Haverford, Religions from St. Charles Seminary, and teaching from Johns Hopkins University. He did extensive doctoral studies in educational administration and policy studies at The Catholic University of America, and additional studies in reading education at the University of Virginia. He has served as a peer reviewer for a number of professional publications, including *Current Issues in Education* and *Teachers College Record*. He is coauthor of Rotberg, I; Bernstein, K. J. & Ritter, S. B. (2001). *No Child Left Behind: Views About the Potential Impact of the Bush Administration's Education Proposals*. Washington, DC: Institute for Education Policy Studies. He was recently named 2010 *Washington Post* Agnes Meyer Outstanding Teacher.



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