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Teaching with Conscience in an Imperfect World: An Invitation

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Teaching with Conscience in an Imperfect World: An Invitation

William Ayers

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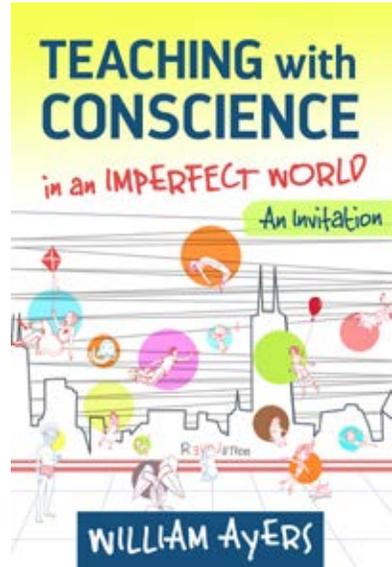
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The editors of *The Teaching for Social Justice* series William Ayers and Therese Quinn declare their purpose to promote education that, in their own words, is likely to support a “more muscular democratic society” (xi). The editors’ foreword endorses egalitarian thinkers from the history of education, starting with Jean Jacques Rousseau and continuing with several named and unnamed 20th and 21st-century radicals whose thinking about education has been inseparable from thinking about a more just society and about the elimination of “unjustified suffering, unnatural loss and unnecessary pain” (xii).

William Ayers is not only one of the editors of the series, but also the author of *Teaching with Conscience in an Imperfect World*. The review would not be complete without a brief digression to look into the author’s life history. Bill Ayers’s name may not be familiar unless one remembers Ayers’s support for Barack Obama during which he infamously earned the epithet of “unrepentant domestic terrorist” from Sarah Palin (Stripling). Indeed, Ayers, before he became professor of education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, was associated with radical anti-Vietnam War groups and with founding the Weather Underground movement.

Familiarity with the author’s past might be a limiting factor in garnering a wide audience for Ayers’s most recent book, even though he has published sixteen books and spent forty successful years in post-secondary education since his involvement in social action that might be deemed too radical for some readers’ taste. Those who supported Ayers’s causes or his radical methods might be curious to find out how Ayers responds to our contemporary social challenges, especially in the setting of education. For those who are unaware of Ayers’s background, or who have enough open-minded curiosity to temporarily bracket it, the title is definitely attractive and timely. As a matter of fact, a couple of my colleagues in a two-year, geographically isolated and politically rather indifferent tribal college eagerly reached for the copy of *Teaching with Conscience in an Imperfect World*, and after turning a few pages, they returned thin book and remarked “This looks interesting!”



Ayers's book is for those who still believe in the need for asking some fundamental questions in education about goals, values, and meaning. As a matter of fact, Ayers frames his chapters in simple, but fundamental questions: "Where do we come from?" "What are we?" "Where are we going?" In addition, Ayers briefly addresses the challenge of genuine progressive idealism in what in his title he termed "an imperfect world."

Chapter one extends an invitation to the reader to imagine a better future, or a future that is the continuation of the dreary present. Imagination without which there is no "invention, aspiration, self-consciousness, projection, desire, ingenuity, moral reflection and ethical action, courage and compassion and commitment" is a pivotal concept in Ayers's approach to education, and so is the critical rejection of the *status quo* (1–2). As he says, "The taken for granted should not be a choice," and the assumption that "the way things are is simply '*the way it's sposed to be*'" [sic] is unacceptable (2–3). Consequently, Ayers shows unveiled impatience with those whose dream of a better educational future is exhausted by improving cafeteria food or getting rid of a bad teacher. For him, this kind of thinking is "puny," "bloodless," and "fatally stuck in the mud," typical of what he calls a "rearranging-the chairs-on-the-deck-of-the-Titanic" type of thinking, which is just not good enough (4). Narrow thinking of education may not share or recognize Ayers's perception of the current reality as fraught with impending disaster, as suggested by his Titanic metaphor. Ayers's critical views reach across partisan lines, and he points out that the lack of futuristic imagination is not limited to recalcitrant conservatism; the seemingly progressive catchwords of education, like "universal design," "sustainable standards," "student-centered education," "engagement of the whole person" or even "critical thinking" lack genuine depth and substance and have become part of a meaningless technocratic routine. Instead, Ayers's invitation evoked in the book's title is "a provocation to stretch and reach . . . hold hands, close your eyes, go wild, and get utopian," a discourse reminiscent of the idealism of the 60s generation (7).

Chapter two launches with a question Ayers believes should guide educators: Where do we come from? This question, in Ayers's somewhat Thoreau-esque style, urges us to seek out the "Point Last Seen" (9). This point of departure, Ayers claims, goes back to the 19th century ideal of facts-obsessed education critically epitomized in Charles Dickens's classic novel *Hard Times*. But why is this positivist model still so popular? If, as Ayers believes, education reflects social order and values, should not the United States build an educational system that values dissent, diversity, open discussion, and the search for truth? Ayers quotes several examples from recent educational policies, including state and federal Common Cores, that appear to reinforce the Dickensian system more than anything else and demonstrate "a giddy, lemming-like rush toward a curriculum of facts: 'incontrovertible 'Truths,' uncontested and measurable, inarguable and beyond dialogue or debate" (13). This trend explains why some arcane and questionable concepts like "manifest destiny," "American exceptionalism" or "Columbus's discovery" are so hard to evaluate critically in curricula in the United States.

Ayers does not spend much time on analysis in chapter two; rather, he moves along history in hops, leaps and jumps, grabbing a couple of quotes on the way. From the positivism and utilitarianism of the 19th century, he swiftly proceeds to the 1960s, when education was a crucial medium of progressive social thought—that is before education morphed into a national security concern expressed in the Reagan administration’s commissioned *Nation at Risk* report in the 1980s. This report stressed that a poorly educated population is a national security liability, and U.S. students falling behind the Russians or the Chinese was the main incentive for reforms. The last stretch of Ayers’s historical journey in chapter two covers the emergence of a business model of education. As a result, school administrators began acting like CEOs, teachers became employees, and students were viewed as clients or products carefully manufactured on the educational system’s standardized conveyor belts. Ayers devotes several pages to discussing the detrimental effects of this paradigm shift that created the current view of education as a commodity, as opposed to the earlier perspectives that education is a social good or even a human right. In this new, business-inspired system, Ayers argues, genuine learning is impossible because both teachers and students focus on what is rewarded, and what is conveniently equated with measurable outcomes, standardized tests, retention rates, etc. This system contains no incentives for better teaching and more meaningful learning, just higher scores. Among the many well-documented anomalies, which the business model of education created, Ayers mentions cheating and falsification of standardized test scores, cynicism and narcissism among successful students, alienation and lack of ambition among the disadvantaged, and a general atmosphere of “anti-intellectualism, dishonesty and irrelevance” (26). In addition, the current system solidifies the “hierarchy of winners and losers” (27). Testing, Ayers asserts, is a “scientized eugenic device” in the service of labeling the “winners” and the “losers” and contributing to the growing gaps between the privileged and the underprivileged. Politicians of both parties are to be blamed for maintaining this inadequate system while sending their own children to the handful of outstanding alternative schools that still exist outside the dilapidated domain of public education. Ayers points out that the current public education of the United States could not be farther away from John Dewey’s idea that in a truly democratic society, the minimum standards of education for the whole community should be set by what the most privileged members of society find desirable. Dewey is also quoted to predict that a departure from this ideal is “narrow and unlovely; acted upon it destroys our democracy” (qtd. in Ayers 24).

Chapter three focuses on the theoretical framework that targets human learning to ask the question: “What are we?” It opens with a joyful narrative of Ayers and Bernardine welcoming their newborn child. The cornerstones of this chapter are the following ideas: no learner is a blank slate; learning is a dramatic process of “asserting identity, power, and agency” (33); letting go of what we thought we knew is part of the learning process; teaching should be rooted in a dynamic acknowledgement that human beings are both uniquely diverse, yet share some fundamental sameness. Each child is a bundle of unruly sparks of meaning-making energy, concludes Ayers, after observing how even their 5-minute-old baby brings some knowledge of his or

her own to the lesson of learning how to breastfeed. The learners' life experiences and previous knowledge should be even more dominant in the process of effective teaching as learners grow and bring more learned and lived experiences to the classroom. One of the numerous metaphors evoked in this chapter is the metaphor of education as colonization: in this framework, the educational system disregards what the students already know and basically treats learners not as partners in construction of knowledge, but as "savages to be broken and tamed, their minds conquered and colonized" (35). Another set of metaphors highlights the dramatic nature of learning new ideas while rejecting old ones in a diverse and constantly changing environment. Education is an emotion-filled process, described in terms of "fire and ice, pleasure and pain, surprise, ecstasy and agony" (36). Ayers also adds a punctuation metaphor that aligns education with question marks and exclamation points rather than "dull periods" (35). The chapter closes with a long quote from Doris Lessing's 1995 autobiography *Under my Skin*, which reinforces Ayers's main points about tamed and colonized minds and about the process of learning.

Chapter four moves on to the next stage of Ayers's inquiry. After he outlines how the current educational system evolved and delineates a framework for what learning and teaching intrinsically entail, the next question is where conscientious educators need to go and what they need to do. Thus, the chapter "Where are we Going?" starts with quoting the classic conversation between Alice and the Cheshire Cat at the crossroad from *Alice in Wonderland* to remind the readers that it is easier to find out which way to go if we know where we are going, but if it does not matter where we are going, we can be sure that no matter which path we choose, we will get somewhere. Ayers admits that it is hard to set directions for the future of our educational system that is currently stuck in the quagmire of testing and sorting, obsession with outdoing India or China, economic forecasts and job market projections. Technology and globalization are two new components that policy planners, who produce a prolific number of pamphlets and brochures about 21st century education, have to take into account. For Ayers, however, defining the precise set of skills his grandson's generation will need is not only difficult, but it is also futile. The real choice, he claims, is posed on a more general level and boils down to a choice between educating for "obedience and conformity" through teaching the basics and a bland set of skills, or targeting dispositions of the mind such as "initiative and courage, creativity and imagination, respect for oneself and the full humanity of others, inventiveness, self-confidence and compassion, curiosity and risk-taking, experimental spirit" (46).

Before chapter four goes into a more specific list of suggestions, Ayers cites a few futuristic projections. Orwell's *1984*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* represent the dystopias whose frightful elements are already recognizably ingrained in our current system. But then he also evokes a long line of educational utopias and experimental schools that implemented dreams closer to what Ayers considers meaningful education: Sebastian Faure's beehive school in France, Francisco Ferrer's modern schools in the first decade of the 20th century in Spain, or A.S. Neill's Summerhill school in England are mentioned, along with a list of other alternative, modern or anarchist school projects, including Socialist Sunday schools,

Steiner and Montessori's schools, as well as the Black Panther Party schools. What all these seemingly different schools share is a flexible curriculum that constantly evolves, experiments and redesigns itself "in endless pursuit of an inexhaustible question: What knowledge and experience is of most value?" (50). They also focus on learning (rather than teaching), support learning by doing, and refrain from setting learning outcomes or objectives (let alone measuring them) beyond the general goal of students growing and learning. These three fundamental principles of education are grounded in Dewey's educational philosophy, his faith in human agency, the principle of adjusting learning to the child's existing knowledge, and making learning as connected to real life experiences as possible.

In addition to endorsing these principles, Ayers adds more to create what he calls an inventory of dreams for the schools of the future, stressing that these ideas are not geared towards the privileged or "gifted" elite, but for all participants of public education in a democratic society. In this chapter, Ayers shares some ideas central to his "inventory of Dreams": perform freedom (54–57); function democratically (57–60); support children and youth in pursuing their own interests (60–62); tell the difficult and tangled truths (62–64); practice courage (65–66); search for root causes (66–68); expect young people to gain agency in their lives and the world (68–69); practice cooperation (69–70); choose love (70–71); resist orthodoxy (71–74); live in the present tense (74); unite hand and head (74–76); organize opportunities to do and to make (76); prompt fearlessness (76); resist the notion that education is a K-12 or K-16 affair (76–77); pursue the production of human beings, not things (77–78); see and do art (78–79); embrace mystery (79). At the end of chapter four, Ayers acknowledges the rudimentary character of these sections and calls them "twenty-one baby steps forward," not even a first draft, but "merely a draft of a draft of a draft" (79). This perhaps explains why some of these sections appear to overlap, or to be unevenly developed through a few quotes from Bertolt Brecht, and through a few scattered examples of successful teaching projects that involved some form of social activism: support for protesters against hospital budget cuts or a letter written to the EPA expressing concern about water quality, which students discovered while testing water for chemicals.

Chapter five is a confirmation of the radical idealism of the book. "Be realistic", Ayers recommends. However, if the reader expects some practical strategies on how to navigate our lives and our students' lives in the terrain of contemporary education shaped by learner outcomes, belligerent parents, budget-cutting politicians, and disinterested students, then they will be disappointed. Ayers's main approach to the situation is that we should "demand the impossible" (79). His powerful phrases express in no uncertain terms that working towards progress is not an option but a vocation, and that we should not "*underreach*," should not "fail to articulate a deep enough vision" or miss "to understand the root causes of problems" or settle for "anemic reforms," "trim our own sails" or "self censor" (79). To support these daring propositions, Ayers points out that no progressive change in history, science or the arts has ever been achieved without someone boldly stepping up in face of resistance. Education, Ayers claims, is an integral part of society, and it reflects and reveals society's

shortcomings, but it does not mean we have to wait until society changes to change education.

Ayers's short book is not short of encouraging vision, and his diagnosis of some of the systemic problems of education is insightful. However, the book does not provide enough researched evidence, and it does not give enough practical examples and procedures to integrate the general principles into the everyday teaching and learning. It would also be helpful and less alienating if those attempts that educators currently make to negotiate imagination alongside the pressure for accountability would not be rejected as "anemic," "bloodless," and in general, ineffective. Similarly, while the consumerist encroachment on education is a matter of serious concern for most educators, the new approach has some elements that should not be outright rejected without examining its values and possible overlap with Ayers's fundamental premises. In fact, learner-centered education, the emphasis on critical thinking, and employable skills may not be as incompatible with the dream of a more meaningful and empowering education as Ayers suggests. It is an imperfect world, and the suggestion that it is possible to implement utopias without having to deal with some of the dystopic elements is not realistic.

Ayers's book addresses teachers and educators in general and particularly those who are committed to community literacy practices. The book is relevant to its intended audience to the extent that it reveals a poignant—although not very deep—diagnosis of the current educational system. The dreams and visions it offers reflect the radical ideas of an earlier era, offering a sore reminder to educators who might be at a loss for dreams and vision. In that sense, a community literacy practitioner might find this book's documentation of utopian ideas to be relevant reminders of how we can better listen to locate sources of strength and stamina to continue teaching with conscience.

Works Cited

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