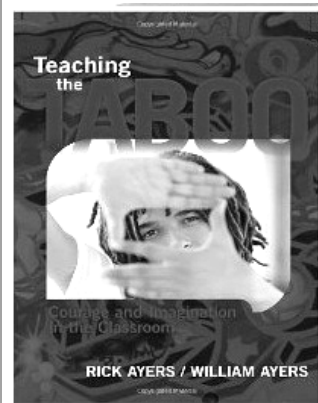


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Teaching the Taboo			
Author:	Ayers, R. & Ayers, W. (2011)		
Publisher:	Teachers College Press, New York, NY		
Pages	ISBN	Price	
144	978-0-8077-5152-7	\$21.95 USD	

Rick and William Ayers’s *Teaching the Taboo* asks educators to question common practices and to challenge the status quo. According to the authors, the educational status quo is disciplinary and adversarial in nature. For example, throughout the book, they point out that no one goes into teaching in order to “discipline little miscreants” (p. 24), yet because of the structure of the school system, educators are required at times to put away their passion and zeal for the topic and focus on getting their classes to walk in straight, quiet lines. Ayers and Ayers want teachers to be educators, passionate and zealous in education, not disciplinarians who are tools of the system.

For the Ayers brothers, the point of teaching the taboo is to move away from the focus of finding the right answers toward the goal of asking the right questions, thus the book is filled with examples of the *right questions* which focus more on: Why learn this at all? Or, Who benefits most from students believing this?, than on the traditional fact memorization who, what, where, when, why and how’s that are often the core of the curriculum, especially in social studies. Four other “taboos” make up the crux of the content of the book: public education is built on the summing up of knowledge, school is a commodity to be bought and sold (the big business of education), the present moment

as the endpoint of history (meaning that all roads led to this moment, that it was almost predetermined), and school is separate from society (as in someday students will have to enter the *real world*). The ultimate goal of the book is to ask readers to reimagine a school system in which the “hidden curriculum, mechanisms of control and school boredom” become the objects of study (p. 30). EFL Teachers are especially likely to be teaching students who are affected by the hidden curriculum, even more than mainstream students. The authors cite a proposal by Charlie Cobb, a student at Howard University, to the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from 1963, in which he describes the classrooms of Negro Mississippi as “a complete absence of academic freedom...that is geared toward squashing intellectual curiosity and different thinking” (p. 18). The Ayers note that this is the same environment still thriving today in many urban areas, especially those with the highest numbers of poor and minority student populations; be they in the United States or elsewhere. Their main point is that teachers must address this problem with their students, teach them non-conformity in the form of asking questions of the system in which they are educated, or in some cases, inculcated to norms of that society’s culture. They implore teachers to teach the “polar opposite [of obedience and conformity]: initiative and imagination” (p. 21).

Though this book was conceptualized for a U.S. audience, it does align itself with the universal TESOL goals as outlined by the TESOL organization. *Teaching the Taboo* includes information to support teachers all over the world who strive to support students’ rights, provide opportunities to access a high quality education, and promote diversity and multiculturalism. One of the most positive aspects of the book is it addresses concerns that are systemic in education, regardless of the boundaries of country. Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, A Global Education Association, lists in their mission statement that educators value “interaction of research and reflective practice for educational improvement,” the Ayers do nothing if not call for teachers to do just that: maintain a reflective practice for educational improvement.

The authors draw upon the work of many of the most renowned international educational researchers to support their theses, among them: Paulo Freire, John Dewey, Neil Postman and Ivan Illich. They encourage teachers to utilize resources such as primary sources, which can shed light upon the inconsistencies between what students are taught in school, from the textbook, and what really happened according to the people who actually lived during the specified time.

The authors address the issues in the book clearly from a social justice perspective, which urges educators to promote socioeconomic equality and unity among students of varying race, class, language, appearance, sexuality, gender and ability.

The main fault of this book is that it somewhat targets the wrong audience. For example, the author’s argue that teachers often fail to adequately convey the importance of human sexuality and of student sexual identity, stating that teachers “seldom find ways to give sex-positive messages, to declare that sex is wonderful,

delightful, multifaceted, and often precious” (p. 74). However true this statement may in fact be, the Ayers are essentially asking that teachers not only modify their own instructional behavior, but place themselves in the forefront of a reformation of the entire culture of the school system.

While reformation of the entire institution of education is certainly at the heart of the authors’ thesis, they are addressing the wrong audience to achieve those ends. As they point out, teachers do come to the profession with hopes of leaving their impact on the world in a positive way. However the limitations placed upon educators by school administrations require some level of conformity. The price for continued employment is often subordination to the curriculum guidelines and the political processes that take place at a higher level. These powerful forces are seldom within the control of the individual educator.

Though the point of the book is to question authority and societal structures, certain assertions by the authors seem to be lacking in application to reality. The Ayers suggest that teachers read over the student code of conduct with the class and engage the students in a Socratic dialogue about the utility of the code (p. 31). The only plausible results of such a dialogue would be that students reject or accept the code of conduct. Students would be inspired to acts of deliberate insubordination against those rules that the class determined to be “useless.” The end result of such an exercise would not be a paradigm shift in the educational system; it would be a series of disciplinary actions against students for code violations, followed by disciplinary actions against the teacher. Perhaps the Ayers want students to face the reality of standing up for what they believe; certainly a worthy endeavor. However, when dealing with young people teaching them which fights are worth it, is also important. It is also important to recognize the relative impotence of the teacher in challenging the system from within it, something the Ayers at some points fail to appreciate.

In U.S. and non-U.S. school systems in which administration continually describe themselves as “data driven,” the Ayers point out that much of educational data is faulty, “ridiculous or stupid” (p.70). The push for scientific research to support educational practices is incompatible with the many efforts of researchers who engage in effective qualitative research. Rather than asking how to make qualitative research acceptable to the scientific community, or the data driven administrators, the authors suggest that we should be asking: “How can we show that qualitative research is poetic? How does it contribute to insight, knowledge, understanding, joy, recognition, justice, empathy?” (p. 70). This suggestion lends itself to those in higher education rather than on classroom teachers, or school administrators, since it requires a shift by researchers to look at the artistry of the research rather than the scientific implications.

Teaching the Taboo pays scant attention to how school administrations could be an effective piece in the battle for critical education. Throughout the book, administrations are seen as the enemy. The authors have not looked at the situation through the perspective of teachers, their subordinate relationship to the administrators, and the

disparate power relationship between the two. Perhaps this has to do with the grassroots mentality of activists, where the authors owe their intellectual roots. In the case of education, without challenging the system at all levels, the teachers who do “teach the taboo” run the risk of alienating themselves from their colleagues, subjecting students to disciplinary actions, or losing their jobs. By focusing on the teacher and treating the administrator as the enemy, the authors fail to appreciate the power of the administrator to effectively bring about the sort of change they seek, or entirely prohibit it. Nevertheless, since the book itself calls for challenging “the system,” and the system is governed by the administration, it was most likely intentional.

Though the authors make many powerful arguments that are both inspiring and pertinent for educators the greatest criticism that can be made is that some of the strategies they propose are not always realistic for teachers in the current educational and political climate. However, they use compelling vignettes to illustrate how teachers who are teaching the taboo are creating classroom environments in which students thrive academically, socially and emotionally. One such teacher says he wants to teach “a really good kindergarten class with 18-year-old” (p. 51). I believe that is a goal many teachers can align themselves with—creating a classroom environment that is built around inquiry, compassion, discovery, and connectedness, a worthy goal, especially for teachers of students who are learning, not only a new Language, but possibly a new societal structure as well.

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