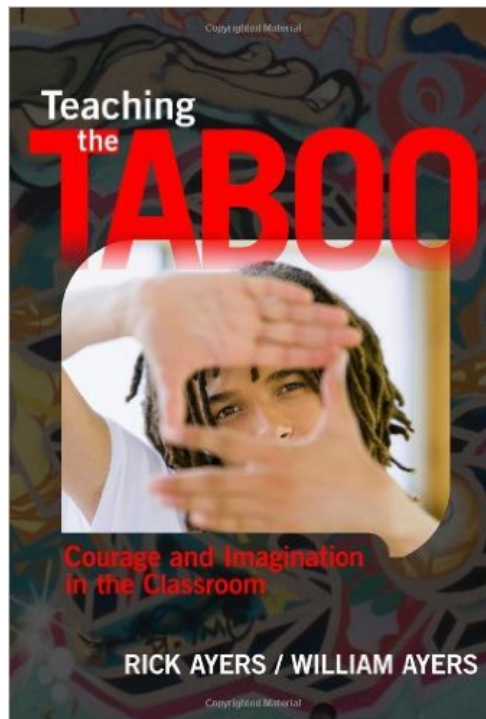


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***Review of Teaching the Taboo: Courage and Imagination in
the Classroom***

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This project began its evolution in first author Victor Rick and William Ayers' book discusses how to teach what they call 'taboo,' in the classroom. As educators themselves, they have dedicated their careers to focusing on how to teach social justice in schools, especially with minority students in poverty. The authors wrote the book as a call to action, as they feel teachers are capable of reframing and reinventing what the authors consider 'taboo' in education and if they are courageous enough to take a risk and stand up to these faulty assumptions, actually make changes in our education system. Throughout the book, the authors provide a myriad of examples to support both sides - what is going on and the ways that we can change the system.

The authors do not provide a specific definition for taboo, but they do distinguish that teaching that goes against the top-down, one-dimensional, teacher-centered practices of the current educational system, is teaching the taboo. They discuss the need to step away from myths commonly touted in education (i.e., that poor families do not care about their children's success in school or the idea that teachers should only use lecture to teach) and to instead allow a student-centered approach that encourages a "life of questioning, to imagine classrooms where every established and received bit of wisdom, common sense, orthodoxy, and dogma is open for examination, interrogation, and rethinking" (Ayers & Ayers, 2012, p. 2). They stress the need for educators to pursue the type of instruction that they think is best for their own students and to look deeper at the purpose of what and how they are teaching through the use of a pedagogy of "equity and engagement" (p. 9).

Current Education in the United States

The authors demonstrate how our current educational system in the United States functions as a commodity for middle class White students,

instead of a right accessible to all students. They identify the system as a Social Darwinist model designed to encourage competition, sorting, and tracking of students and teachers, so that it is clear to see who are the winners and losers. There is a hidden curriculum in our schools, according to the authors, that forces the students to know their place in the system through the teaching of conformity and passivity. Being inquisitive is frowned upon and often punished. The teacher's authority is the only one that counts in a classroom, and administration is the only authority that matters for the teacher's world. Little is allowed to be said by the teacher or the student. School is simply accepted as being boring, and both teachers and students learn that they must play the game by the rules or become losers.

In addition, the authors address how teachers and students are forced to learn certain standards and curriculum, even though the general public is not privy to the research behind these decisions. In reality, if one looks into the curriculum or purpose behind past educational policies, the drive seems to be for power and profit, the power to be dominant over other countries and reactive when others are doing better. The authors rightfully state that as a country, we would rather blame the teachers and teacher unions, instead of figuring out what works best for the students in this country. The current policies want to mold students into being like them: simply college educated, even though not all students want to go to college. Instead of encouraging the arts, creative writing, and other ways students use to express themselves, teachers are forced to use drill and kill worksheets, textbooks that are too difficult for many students, and standardized assessments, so that only one narrative is heard, theirs - those politicians that have never even taught inside a classroom.

Schools are compared to prisons and factories, due to the rules that are in place, the isolation (for students and teachers), lack of control, and pre-

determined labels placed on students. Additionally, the amount of surveillance used on campuses, the rules to be followed or punishments given, strict bell schedules, compulsory attendance regardless of if students are actually learning, and the idea that the students will only learn from lectures are further evidence. All of these aspects are, according to the government, in the name of safety, standards, or because of the War on Terror. However, the authors made sure to include specific ways that teachers can make changes to this system, which will allow the teachers to take back control of their classroom, and enable students of all races, ethnicities, socio-economic statuses, and genders, to be successful.

Teachers Making Changes by Teaching the ‘Taboo’

The authors adeptly provide ways that teachers can fight back against the “taboos” in this country. The first step is to question everything. To ask the following questions: Why? Who does this help? Who benefits? What is the purpose? Teachers need to not make excuses about the best time to make changes, as there never is a perfect time. But, if teachers take some risks and have the courage to pursue what is best for students, then changes are inevitable outcomes. The authors state that “school is the rites of passage, which can be either cruel and stultifying or creative and expansive, depending on the kind of work we do” (p. 13).

The authors discuss how the best teaching is student-centered that allows them to develop the capacity to create their own world around them. To allow students to understand the purpose of the curriculum and what they are doing, making it relevant to their lives. Teachers need to allow them to “think critically about disciplinary power, about how they are being watched, by whom, and for what purpose. They can question, and they can act. By questioning and acting ourselves, we can show them how it’s done” (p. 38). Students need to be able to create their own narratives, versus only

following that of the middle class White narrative, or the victim narrative (i.e., when a disability, race, or ethnicity different from the norm needs saving by the norm) we often read about in texts. We can establish this by co-creating the curriculum together, to permit students to learn from the world instead of about the world.

The classroom needs to be one of a community, where students feel safe to collaborate, question, and investigate together. Everyone needs to collaborate, which means teachers working with other teachers, students with teachers, and students with students. Teachers can teach about various critical literacies, use complementary texts to analyze through multiple lenses, and study theorists and theories. Students need to be allowed to express varying perspectives through debate and inquiry, seeking the truth through evidence, justification and dialogue.

Moreover, the authors provide ample evidence of ways that educators have challenged the normative ways of current classrooms through the use of short vignettes. In addition to describing how well-known theorists (i.e., Dewey, Foucault, Freire, and others) have changed perspectives on instruction in education, the authors provide real-life examples of teachers breaking the norm in their own classrooms.

Teachers Breaking the Norm

The authors establish their main thoughts regarding what “taboo” is in every chapter. However, there are specific vignettes provided throughout the text to show how teachers are challenging the current norms of education. These vignettes usually include background information on the teacher, the project, the novels and texts used, as well as establishing how the teacher is breaking the norm.

For instance, the reader learns about Bob Moses and the Algebra Project he started, as well as Jonathon Kozol’s study on two high schools and the

reported disparaging differences on how funding is spent for students in a wealthy school versus an impoverished institution. Another chapter focuses on the author Harold Rugg and how the book he wrote, entitled *Man and His Changing Society*, was used to allow students to explore, contradict, and view history through multiple lenses and perspectives, which actually caused the general public to criticize and shun him.

In Chapter Two, the authors discuss a unit on African literature and how certain novels and texts can be used to analyze varying perspectives on a theme, open up discussions in class, and create opportunities for asking questions. Examples provided included the *Heart of Darkness*, by Conrad, which challenges the discourse used by the dominant class and *Huckleberry Finn*, by Twain, which offers students a birds-eye view of White civilization in the 19th century. In addition, students read Achebe's critique of *Heart of Darkness*, as well as other texts from African authors, historical studies, and travel memoirs.

Chapter Three provides a short vignette that focuses on Avi, a teacher that allowed his students to choose what to read and write in his elective class. Students with varied personal histories, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds were encouraged to work together and discuss texts. Every day, his students took center stage to read or speak a story they produced or was meaningful to them. Avi goes against the "taboo" as any topic is open for discussion, which included "race, gender, love, death, sexuality, drugs, pleasure, pain, (and) disease" (p. 55). There was no set curriculum or course material, only what the students wanted to discuss and research. Instruction and course content was meant to be personal, which is against the norm of schooling.

The reader learns about a school where students from all levels were enrolled into an Advanced Biology class, regardless of their actual abilities, in

Chapter Four. A few teachers at this school saw how many students were struggling in this class and created a time after school for students to voluntarily come to help each other be successful. The after-school tutoring encouraged risk-taking and experimentation to support growth. They looked at this time as a time for students to make mistakes and learn from them, instead of making mistakes and failing the class.

Another vignette provided is about Malik Dohrn, a middle school math/science teacher that personalized his instruction to the needs of each of his students. Through conferencing with students and developing a personal relationship with each one, he challenged the "taboo" of a teacher-centered classroom. He provided differentiated instruction to match the needs of his students knowing exactly where each one was in learning the math concepts being taught. He taught to the individual, not to an entire class with a one-size fits all curriculum. This unique curriculum does not assign separate math courses, but infuses them all together with students based on their ability, allowing students to question and work together.

Confusion and Questions Encountered

As a past high school literacy intervention teacher that primarily worked with struggling readers (which included various races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic levels) I had many questions and concerns while I read this text. Even with the many illustrative examples provided, there were many times I wanted more information. Although the majority of these vignettes and examples provided by the authors contained certain information for the reader, they were all missing pertinent information. For instance, we rarely were provided with the demographics of the schools or students that participated in each of these stories. Often, overall information was provided, but very little regarding what the teachers actually did, exact

questions that were asked to further conversations, or actual replies quoted from the students.

With *Heart of Darkness*, the authors provided an in-depth summary of the book as well as an analysis on how the authors would critique the text. However, the reader was not provided with any evidence from use in an actual classroom, neither with description or actual dialogue used by students. We were only told that the class being described used the film version with the novel. I feel that more specifics were needed for a teacher to fully understand how to incorporate this novel in her classroom (i.e, Did they analyze the similarities and differences between the two mediums?). In addition, the reader was informed that the novels had not been used in over 25-30 years, but the notes that were left in the books were used by current students. There was a need for more elaboration so that teachers would be able to discern the changes in reader response throughout the years. Lastly, a more thorough explanation regarding how this text could be used to grapple with the norms of today is needed. Perhaps addressing these needs would allow readers to fully understand how to implement this type of unit in their own classrooms.

As much as I loved reading about Avi's classroom, the information left me wondering about more. I wanted to know more about the school this class took place in. Was it a Title I school and were the students Title I identified? Was it a wealthy school? Was this an elective course? These questions left me wondering if this could work in a regular English language arts classroom. I wanted to know why the author felt Avi had created a safe environment in his classroom, as we were told of a student that did speak up and afterwards was treated poorly enough by her peers for her to walk out of the classroom.

The after-school science tutoring program also seemed wonderful and was established to have produced great results. But, again, I wondered why

there were only 13 students participating. I wanted to know more about this school setting as well, as we were informed that parents were also involved in the educational process. Would this type of after-school tutoring work for other schools? How? More specifics on the program would allow other schools and teachers to possibly attempt this type of program.

The theme of the book, going against the norm of current educational standards, is a theme that I think needs to be more widely discussed. Therefore, as I read this book, I really wanted to be invigorated and excited about new ways of teaching. However, I often felt confused regarding the vignettes, how they related to the topic, and the fact that there were so many examples provided. In addition, I understood a lot of the information regarding various theorists and theories, but that is only because I am currently working on my doctorate in education. As a teacher, I would have been completely lost during these sections.

On the positive end, I do feel the authors were able to establish their purpose with support and justification. The chapters were primarily short and I did find that the overall vocabulary and diction used was understandable. The authors also did an excellent job using comparisons of our current educational system to other institutions and philosophies.

Conclusion

As a teacher, I don't want things spoon fed to me, but I do want a full understanding of the process, protocols, and program. Being provided a full description from teacher and student perspectives would provide me a more in-depth understanding of how other educators have gone against the norm, thereby providing me with an exemplar to use when attempting this myself. There needs to be information regarding how the programs got started, steps that were taken to change the teaching style, and discussion on how issues that

arose were dealt with. In addition, providing explicit steps of action for teachers to use would be helpful. These additions would allow me to more fully understand how to go against the system by risking teaching the taboos with specific support and guidance.

Teaching the Taboo offered ideas of how to change the current educational system from teacher-centered classrooms to more student-centered focusing on collaboration, inquiry, and active engagement. The authors expressed that this will not be an easy transformation, and it will need to be ongoing, but it is possible. One at a time, we each need to recognize what we can do right now, in the present. The one thing that can be counted on is that education, like scientific knowledge, is constantly in flux and changes daily. Instruction and curriculum needs to change with the students, what's going on in the world, new ideas, etc. We should use the past as a reference and an example, but we need to create curriculum and teach for today.

It is up to us. Should we continue what we have been doing, or should we start to become leaders of our education?