To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher Study Guide

To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher by Bill Ayers

Contents

Plot Summary

Many know William Ayers from the 2008 United States Presidential Election as the infamous Chicago political leader, leader of the radical anti-war 60s-era organization, the Weathermen, who was responsible for the beginning of President Barack Obama's political career.

During Ayers's tenure with the Weathermen, he and his wife, Bernadine Dohrn, along with others, were responsible for setting off a small bombs between 1970 and 1972 at the New York City Police Headquarters, the United States Capitol building and the Pentagon. The charges against Ayers and Dohrn were dropped only because the FBI was found to have used illegal methods of attaining information.

Ayers's once more became a controversial figure when his lack of repentance for his radical past led the American right to negatively associated him with Barack Obama, wrongly or rightly. As such, many will come to Ayers's book, To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher, with preconceptions about who Ayers is and what his views are.

It is best to set these views aside. Ayers's book is a popular work on education reform. In the book, Ayers makes no claims about terrorism of any kind, and he only mentions the Vietnam War once and in passing. His political ideology continues to be deeply affiliated with the New Left, but he emphasizes educational themes from the New Left with which many readers will be unfamiliar.

For instance, he argues that the public school system is too rigid, bureaucratic and hostile to creativity, that educational systems often structure learning in ways that preclude opportunities for personal expression, development and "surprise." His primary ideological influence in To Teach is to promote respect for the individuality and growth of each student, of refusing to treat students according to classifications and standardized tests, but as human beings.

The book is fairly short, with eight short chapters, and is very accessible. Ayers writes from personal experience and then draws his educational philosophy from these experiences. Each chapter encapsulates a single teaching idea and in the end Ayers ties them all together. Chapter 1, "Beginning: The Challenge of Teaching" discusses how teaching must involve the whole person of the teacher and not be seen as a mechanistic task. Chapter 2, "Seeing the Student," argues that teaching is an interactive practice that requires seeing the student as a whole and unique person.

In Chapter 3, "Creating an Environment for Learning," Ayers argues that a major part of teaching is the task of constructing a "laboratory" for learning that can accommodate the uniqueness of students. Chapter 4, "Building Bridges," argues that teachers must work hard to build bridges with students to educate them, that they must find ways of communicating to students according to students' interests. In Chapter 5, "Liberating the Curriculum," Ayers argues that curriculum is not a passive set of ideas to be taught, but an interactive set of social choices that a classroom must settle on together.

Chapter 6, "Keeping Track," criticizes standardized testing and recommends more individualized forms of keeping track of student progress. In Chapter 7, "The Mystery of Teaching," Ayers defends the view that teaching requires a complex mixture of skills that makes the whole practice of teaching a mysterious achievement. The last chapter, Chapter 8, "Beginning Again: The Current Challenge to Teach," Ayers encourages teachers to set aside their preconceptions and begin to build their own unique teaching philosophy.

Preface

Preface Summary and Analysis

William Ayers believes that a country's love of its children can sometimes become too narrow and narcissistic, sometimes producing indifference. To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher was written to reflect on the true meaning of loving one's children and that the idea of love of children can be the organizing center of efforts to improve teaching. The preface has been added to the second edition. Since the writing of the book, Ayers sees people continually losing hope about the education of American children; he wants to encourage hope. Teachers need an ethical and intellectual vision to sustain this hope and love.

Ayers next laments the enormous number of Americans that are imprisoned, two million at his present count. This symbolizes a retreat from a society that believes in learning, instead locking people away. Literacy and dropping out of school are linked, as are dropping out of school and crime. This means that education and democracy are linked. Strong democracies required educated citizens.

Too many American children lose hope too early. Childhood is not always happy, with 22% of American children living in poverty. Childhood should be full of invention, discovery and surprise. One problem with American education is the ideology of those who would turn education over to the profit-driven market, but this ignores the fact that children are multidimensional human beings. Further, public schools are characterized too often by a culture of complaint and authoritarianism. Schools are too large and managerial, turning children into factory workers and soldiers.

Those who drop out say they did so because no one cared if they stayed. The structure of educational institutions makes it hard to care. Small schools are an important strategy for rectifying this problem. But we must have the larger goal of creating decent, adequate education for all children. If that is our goal, our current system is a failure. Producing school change is producing social change.

Chapter 1, Beginning, The Challenge of Teaching

Chapter 1, Beginning, The Challenge of Teaching Summary and Analysis

The life of a teacher is a compilation of many difference experiences and is full of invention and imposition. Teaching is always the teacher's own. Ayers sees the fragments of his own teaching everywhere. He then recounts the story of playing "I Spy" with a child who, when he spied something brown, proudly pointed out herself. She had been educated to admire her distinctiveness, rather than be ashamed of it.

Next Ayers recounts a young thirteen-year-old Hispanic boy who hated school and felt embarrassed there, leading him to act out. When Ayers saw Jose leading a group of skateboarders outside of class, Ayers had the idea of asking him to teach a mini-course to students about skateboarding and he agreed. Jose did not immediately turned around, but for a moment, there was hope.

Ayers had an experience teaching a college seminar where he argued that learning is a process of active discovery, but he wanted his students to experience this, rather than trying to apply the idea by themselves. Ayers was able to encourage these students to find questions that motivated them for their whole lives.

Teaching is about more than instruction; Ayers learned this only through chaos and pain. Teaching must be more than preplanned curriculum, and students already see teachers along many dimensions. The teacher must realize and accept this.

Teachers are often asked why they chose to teach. It is an important question. Teachers are paid to little, discouraging many from bothering. Low-status for teachers is also the legacy of sexism, and teachers are often faced with impossible conditions. Teaching is very complex, and all the reasons not to teach add up to make a compelling case against it. Ayers then illustrates the point by recounting his experience teaching in an alternative school in 1965, when he was twenty years old.

People are called to teach when they love children and youth, being with them, watching them open up, growing and becoming more powerful in the world. But only a few teachers can realize this in practice. Life has too many other distractions and contains many pressures not to teach. Often administrators manipulate teachers with promises that the administrators can never deliver on, which crushes youthful idealism. Finally, teaching is often thought to be essentially technical, which distracts from its beauty.

Ayers knows that his concept of teaching is rare and hard to achieve, but it doesn't have to be. We can see our ways to this form of life by dispatching various important myths

about teaching. The first myth is that being a good teacher is first and foremost being a good classroom manager. It is true that discipline must be maintained, but the idea of discipline is too linear and insular. Separating discipline from teaching is a mistake. And teachers must figure out how to combine these two ideas in practice.

The next myth is that teachers learn to teach in education colleges. Teachers rarely believe this myth once they have taught in the real world. Teacher education programs often structure separating theory and practice, which is a mistake. The third myth is that good teachers are always fun, but fun can often be a distracted. Being a good teacher means making the material delightful and joyful, but not necessarily fun.

The fourth myth is that good teachers always know the materials. Teachers, of course, should know a lot. But knowledge is always expanding. Teachers have to stay a step ahead of their students, but by showing that there are things they don't know, they identify with students. The fifth myth is that good teachings start with curriculum they are given and find ways to improve upon it. Many think that teachers can start experimenting at the beginning, but this is not true.

Teachers are not always good performers, charismatic exhibitionists. Much good work is quiet and unobtrusive. Nor do good teachers treat all students the same. Teachers should be fair and thoughtful, but students have different needs, fears and ways of communicating. Students are not so different as they were before; it is destructive to look back to a golden age of children that were better than the current students. Good teaching can also not be measured by how high students' test scores are. Many problems are represented in standardized testing and learning is not linear.

Good teachers need not always know what is going on in the classroom. There are many true stories and forms of interpretation at work in the minds of students, but this is not a bad thing. Further, all children are not above average. There is no ideal student by which all can be measured, and kids today are not worse than ever before.

Teaching is a human activity as variable as any other. Many students accomplish great things in many ways—Ayers illustrates this with several examples of different learning styles. Ayers has taught at every level of education, from preschool to graduate school, for over three decades. In that time, he has seen incredible differences in the academic world and among students. We must learn to love this difference and see goodness in everyone.

Ayers's teacher, Maxine Greene, believed that the teacher who wishes to be more than a functionary must make difficult moral choices. We cannot become depersonalized by the demands of our students. Teachers should not merely implement the initiatives of others; resisting this view of teaching is what is involved in moral choice. Hannah Arendt taught Maxine Green, and Hannah said that "education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it ..."

And so to be a good teacher is to take responsibility for what one teaches. Ayers then illustrates with examples. Americans are no exception to this rule. Teachers must learn

to develop their own philosophy of teaching and realize that no philosophy has all the answers. But one must still adopt an attitude of caring and engagement. Teaching involves the whole person. Becoming an active teacher requires the choice to grow. Society is often indifferent to us; we must fight our own indifference. Teaching is an act of hope.

Chapter 2, Seeing the Student

Chapter 2, Seeing the Student Summary and Analysis

Ayers opens Chapter 2 with a story of his youngest child, Chesa, who was adopted at fourteen months and was an easy child in his youth. He had a dogged determination, but his parents were worried his stubbornness could be a problem. However, Ayers and his wife were lucky. He then relates a story of working with ten-year-old boys in an inner city public school, asking them to give descriptions of themselves to reveal their characters to their class and the teacher.

Many teachers see some students as culturally deprived, but labeling them only deprives them more. Engaging in human-centered teaching means going beyond labels. It is hard to even know what we ourselves are deprived of, so constructing a set curriculum for deficiencies of students one does not know is impossible. Further, the whole idea of starting education with the idea of correcting deficiencies is a mistake. The lesson plan embodies these errors.

Teachers who want to understand their students must be detectives while looking at many of a child's dimensions. Studying child development can help, as can observation. Ayers then relates some of his own observation notes. Writing observation notes, he argues, can help the teacher develop an understanding of the child. Understanding is the goal, not imagined objectivity. One must avoid, however, the perspective of a disciplinarian.

Parents can also be utilized to learn about students. One can invite letters from parents as one way to learn about a student, but the student herself is the best source of knowledge. Inviting students to do autobiographical sketches is another way to proceed. Ayers then gives examples of how he does this. Then he discusses a useful approach to child observation developed at Prospect School in North Bennington, Vermont. In this approach, teachers encourage each other to make student observations, and they discuss their observations with each other, taking seriously their observations of each other's students. But the teachers leave out student identities, letting each person remain a mystery.

We must remember to see the student; however, we must also recognize how much we don't know.

Chapter 3, Creating an Environment for Learning

Chapter 3, Creating an Environment for Learning Summary and Analysis

Ayers opens the chapter describing how individuals fill their homes with reflections of their values. He believes all human environments reflect implicit or explicit values, one way or another. Environments also exert force on individuals, often telling them what to do, in part by embodying certain values.

Kids often perceive their schools as embodiments of values that demean them, including a lack of privacy and individuality, and that what is good for the group is good for you, that the schedule is in charge. Learning is linked to age more than anything else. Thus, teachers must be prepared to question their environments. Ayers then illustrates the point by describing how differently he organizes his classrooms depending on who he is teaching. He notes that small environmental choices can express important value differences.

Any genuine learning requires activity. Learning is not merely a matter of a teacher who knows and a student who does not. Ayers's classrooms, therefore, are not mini-lecture halls. He builds spaces for discovery and surprise. Ayers next discusses the work of Eleanor Duckworth who finds that cognitive development is driven by "the having of wonderful ideas." This can occur at all ages. Classrooms must be learning laboratories and must serve multiple purposes and expand multiple intelligences. Ayers describes his classrooms in more detail.

Ayers argues that people create and construct knowledge, that their development is complex and interactive, that people learn best when they are nurtured, that learning is powerful when information is integrated into experience, that culture is the frame through which individuals make sense of the world, and that all children can learn. Schools should open doors and worlds; life in school must be continuous with life itself, and teachers must create opportunities for learning to become more skilled.

There is no one way to map these ideas and values onto a specified classroom practice. Organizing goals in schools must be creating communities of care and compassion in order to implement an environment for learning.

Chapter 4, Building Bridges

Chapter 4, Building Bridges Summary and Analysis

An important skill for any teacher to learn is how to build bridges with students and how to connect with them. To learn about children adn to understand their capacity for growth, requires getting to know students, which in turn requires building bridges. He illustrates this point through the example of the development of a connection between Zayd and Ayers's wife Bernardine.

Several months before their connection began to develop, Zayd had made three commitments to create something characteristic of his Native American tribe. The commitments led to intense journeys. During the building of his native crafts, he made new discoveries about himself and decided that instead of having a birthday party, he would go on a spiritual quest. This deeply moved Ayers. He and his wife had helped Zayd to have a positive view of becoming a teenager.

Common sense holds that teenagers are trouble at best and probably dangerous. But this isn't true; common sense is often wrong and ideological. Zayd's story shows that our teenage years do not have to be this way. He learned to engage in abstract reasoning and developed a strong personal idealism. He had been drawn to develop by something he cared about. And his environment supported his efforts. In this story, the values in a hopeful approach to teaching are embodied - the importance of love, commitment and ethical action, and so on.

Good teaching is built on knowledge about children. Zayd's project was built on a "ME" curriculum that can be applied to others. Zayd's case does not have to be an exception. Ayers suggests ways of spreading the method without routinizing it. The program also varies according to age.

To build bridges, teachers must lay the first plank, but schools often require matters to work the other way around. Teachers must change this culture and the culture must be a constant practice, not something that only happens on holidays. Ayers then argues that culture goes deep and must be understood in order to connect with others. Teachers will be taught in this experience as well. Ayers then discusses how one can interface with various cultures, such as learning black English. Understanding stereotypes is also important and understanding the context of stereotypes can open new avenues for learning.

Bridge-building is promoted when the teacher structures a time where students can pursue projects in which they are interested. Projects can come from anywhere. He notes that the traditional distinction between "skill" and "process" approaches to learning is facile and false because it separates two forms of education that must be combined. Children must be encouraged not only to develop skills but to participate in

their learning and the regulations by which they are governed. Each person is an expert on his or her own life, and building bridges requires recognizing this.

Chapter 5, Liberating the Curriculum

Chapter 5, Liberating the Curriculum Summary and Analysis

Ayers thought a lot about curriculum in his early days as a teacher. It seemed as though everything of relevance was contained within the curriculum. He spent a lot of time looking for good texts. Ayers then began to scrutinize texts but later realized his journey was flawed. For one thing, the teacher's role in curriculum is too circumscribed. Students also have trouble finding a unique place in curriculum as well.

Curriculum is not a "thing" people need and need to know. It is something communicated to students by means of a teacher. Curriculum should be conceived of as everything that goes on a school, which gives it a more dynamic aspect. Responses to students must be flexible and tailored to their individual needs. This approach makes classrooms complicated but fascinating as well. That said, not everything is permitted. Structure is needed and some knowledge is more valuable than other knowledge.

Curriculum is a living challenge, not a package. Ayers began to design curriculum by asking whether his curriculum included opportunities for discovery and surprise, whether students are actively engaged with primary sources and hands-on materials, and whether productive work is going on. He also asked himself whether work is linked to student questions and interests, whether problems within the classroom, school and community are part of student consciousness and whether work in Ayers's classroom is pursued to its limits.

Teachers, when they take Ayers's approach, will liberate themselves. Entry points into new ideas are everywhere. Ayers illustrates his points with examples of teachers he knows, describing how they built curricula around core ideas and built upon them dynamically. Ayers and other teachers would often work off of general themes and allow for variation within them. Pursuing themes requires work, but it also produces opportunities for surprise and generates collateral benefits.

We should also understand children as untapped resources for curriculum. Their talents can be engaged within a theme and a special topic. Pursuing a theme can require all sorts of activities, such as writing, geography, history, math, science and so on. Ayers illustrates this point by giving examples of themes in the Illinois social sciences curriculum whose goals and objectives are far too narrow which stultify learning. Ayers contrasts his dynamic approach with these more rigid approaches.

Ayers notes that practically all children can learn to read and that this is a "dazzling" accomplishment. But the focus on reading problems and difficulties obscure what makes sense about reading. Age-old phonics has only compounded the problem, as has the debate about it. Math and science present a different set of problems in terms of rigidity. Math, for instance, could be taught in a more concrete way and used to gain

children's interest. Social studies is especially difficult because it has undefined content. Geography is easier to make interesting.

Much of Ayers's thinking on curriculum is rooted in his radical political work as a student. He knew Stokely Carmichael who taught classes in a "Freedom School" which SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee organized in the 1960s. These schools grew out of the struggle for civil rights as a way to educate the community. Ayers uses Carmichael's curriculum to illustrate Ayers's ideal curriculum.

Chapter 6, Keeping Track

Chapter 6, Keeping Track Summary and Analysis

Chapter six concerns how to keep track of student progress. Ayers has been a life-long critic of standardized testing because it is biased in many ways. He has had to resist letting outcomes from these tests that please him bias him in their favor.

Ayers has taken standardized tests many times himself; the last time he took one, he wondered what the relationship was between what they were testing for and what he thought teaching involved. He also became cynical, wondering if the whole point of the test was to figure out his background and exclude or include him on that basis. The tests often presuppose backgrounds that not all students have, and the test design methods used are often mysterious.

Many students react to standardized testing by identifying the test with intelligence and then ceasing to care about intelligence. But this myth must be broken, starting with destroying the idea that the tests have scientific objectivity. The tests have numerous inherent and intractable problems. Test score reporting is also a sham because it utilizes the confused idea of a test score.

Ayers thinks the main function of standardized tests is to separate students into winners and losers, but this can always be seen ahead of time. Further, standardized tests push good teachers in the wrong direction, particularly for teachers who are held responsible for students who test poorly.

Teachers, schools and school districts must have the right to refuse to buy into the testing ideology. Teachers should at least be able to tell the truth about standardized testing before administering them. Putting the tests in perspective is important.

There are alternatives to standardized tests—projects, portfolios and performance (the three p's) are several. These categories keep testing authentic and are more student-centered. It will also prove less expensive than testing. Furthermore, standardized testing is dangerous to a complex and diverse democracy because anyone who sets the standards are imposing their values on others. There is not set of values corresponding to "Here is what we value" as embodied by the tests.

Real assessment should start with the idea that all children want to make sense of the world and that this is common ground. Teachers should begin with informal assessment but also engage in formal tracking of each child's purposes, investments, growth, needs, etc. Organizing student activities around the three p's is a good starting point; however, no system will prove right for everyone. Teachers might vary between assessing student work, using checklists, tape records and taking anecdotal records.

Teachers might also use time samples, journals, child observation, partners and mentors and support groups. There are many ways to keep track; the best are those that allow multiple routes to a goal and a diversity of powerful voices and choices.

Chapter 7, The Mystery of Teaching

Chapter 7, The Mystery of Teaching Summary and Analysis

The work of a teacher is intellectual and ethical. It is the vocation of vocations and requires knowledge of many other callings. It is both practical and transcendent and both matter-of-fact and creative. Teaching in many ways is a mystery. One must have an intimate encounter with teaching.

Teaching isn't merely something a teacher learns to do once and for all. It is a lifelong learning project. Teaching in many ways requires constantly starting over. Teaching is not merely external or final. To be a great teacher, one must struggle with one's autobiography and always pursue the next performance or encounter. Individual teachers should engage in creative insubordination, self-criticism, finding allies, learning from their own experience, linking their consciousness to their conduct, finding authentic friends, and learning both balance and clarity.

Good schools are places where many good teachers are placed together and allowed to teach. These schools are always unique but share many features. First, they have high expectations of all learners. Second, they are geared towards continuous improvement. Ayers then illustrates his argument with several examples of good schools and discusses the Imani School, which he is in the process of building. He also encourages a democratic approach to teaching and to teacher relationships - working together as equals for the common good.

Good schools teach students to look for opportunities when they see deficiency; they encourage students to form core values and believe that experience is important. Students should share an attitude of mutual respect.

Ayers claims that education is also liberating, claiming that "education will unfit anyone to be a slave." Education is often nothing more than training but can be so much more. Schools today strip students of their individuality. Teachers must see that they are partners with their students in their live's journeys. This makes teaching hard, but that is what it takes to teach well.

Chapter 8, Beginning Again, The Current Challenge to Teach

Chapter 8, Beginning Again, The Current Challenge to Teach Summary and Analysis

Teaching well requires many character traits. A teacher needs to be intelligent, ethical, reflective, and caring. She must have a heart and a brain. Teaching requires faith and hope. Teachers must be willing to work against the grain.

Teaching requires an individual to be alert and wide-awake. They must try to see children as wholes and organize the classroom around those wholes. Good teachers "kidwatch" and pay attention to who their students are.

To teach is to choose a difficult and challenging life. Teaching requires faith in yourself and other children. It will not have a steady flow. It requires change and development, along with the skills to grapple with and contribute to an evolving environment.

The intellectual work of teachers is not merely about subject matter but about how to combine subject matters and communicate them to students in a compelling fashion. Teaching requires ethics because they must have a deep regard for their students' lives. The life of a teacher is a quest, and so teachers must always understand themselves as in transition.

Democratic life requires discussion, deliberation and dialogue. It requires uncovering mistakes and responding to them. Teachers must be open to criticism and self-criticism if they are to develop. They must always choose, actively, what aspects of the world to accept or reject.

Teachers must believe in their students and have faith in students' capacities and dreams. Education is where teachers determine whether they love the world enough to take responsibility for how it develops. It is deeply political as schools are always an unfinished conversation. Ayers then implores teachers to always be honest with themselves and with others.

Learning to teach is hard. It takes hard work, lots of energy, and stretches of time. Learning to teach well is even harder. And being a great teacher is a lifelong struggle. But anything worth doing is this way. Teaching is also ethical in that it teaches toward what should be. The teacher's message is that individuals must change their lives and that they can change the world.

Characters

William Ayers

William "Bill" Ayers was born on December 26th, 1944. Today, he is an American professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Ayers specialized in elementary education theory. He is widely known as a one-time leader of the American anti-war movement opposed to the War in Vietnam. His 1960s activism was quite radical and continues to inform his views on educational reform, curriculum, and teaching in general.

Ayers understands himself as in an ideological tradition that grows not only out of the anti-war left in the 1960s but of the "small-c" communist tradition. He argues that modern social institutions like government bureaucracy and capitalism produce rigid conformity and destroy individuality by stunting individual growth.

Ayers ardently rejects the classification of persons according to types, holding that generally speaking the ways that humans classify one another, say by race, class, IQ, etc., are mostly tools of separating "those who matter" from "those who don't."

Ayers's educational strategy reflects this attitude. He argues that the public school system effectively excludes large classes of people from active participation in their institutions, from intellectual life and from personal development.

Instead, many aspects of the school system, by failing to take account individual differences, consign marginal members of society to dark fates, to crime, poverty and discrimination. A human-centered school system would function very differently, with many more schools, at a more local level, diversified according to individual character and interest.

The Teacher

There are few consistent characters in the book, but Ayers often speaks of archetypal characters, such as "the student" and "the teacher." In Ayers's view, the teacher is currently trapped and oppressed by the restraints of the public school system. She is encouraged to passively teach a predetermined curriculum built around a system of standardized testing that inevitably divides the haves from the have-nots. Teachers are undervalued by society; they are paid them too little. Ayers sees this as the legacy of sexism, as most teachers historically have been women.

A culture that affirmed the value of teaching would not merely pay teachers more, however. It would liberate them to be the best teachers they can be. Ayers has specific ideas of what a great teacher is.

First, for Ayers, teaching is a highly intellectual job. One must not only know the material but must struggle with how to creatively and effectively communicate it to students. One must also be highly ethical as a teacher. Teachers must actively care for students; they must strive to see their students as their equals and as worthy of respect; they must also learn to "kidwatch" and see the "whole" student. The life of a teacher is a challenge. The teacher must be the master of many crafts and must always build her teaching philosophy, approaching teaching as an unending path of learning and growth.

The Student

The teacher must see the whole student, appreciate individuality and bring it out by appealing to the student's interest and building bridges with the student.

Bernardine Dohrn

Bernardine Dohrn is the wife of William Ayers and they together have several children. She features in the book as a teacher and parent herself. Her political fame is similar to that of Ayers.

Zayd Ayers-Dohrn

The son of Dohrn and Ayers who is used as an illustration of Ayers's teaching methods in the book.

Maxine Greene

An American educational philosopher and Ayers's teacher.

Hannah Arendt

A famous political theorist and teacher of Maxine Greene, who in turn taught Bill Ayers.

Standardized Test Makers

Ayers criticizes standardized test makers for failing to test for skills that actually matter to life and that mark out student differences and uniqueness.

Textbook Writers

Textbook writers make the same errors as standardized test makers do - their work groups people according to classification systems that serve the powerful; textbooks close minds and create rigid conceptual structures.

The Good Teacher

The good teacher is one who breaks through the rigid traps that her institutions place upon her and teaches students in an ethical fashion.

Objects/Places

Chicago

The Illinois city where Ayers spent most of his professional life.

The Classroom

The classroom is not merely a room but a dynamic learning laboratory in Ayers's view.

The Public School

The public school can be a place of great learning and growth or its opposite, depending on the ideas and methods of those who teach there.

Hyde Park

To this day, Ayers and Dohrn live in Hyde Park, Chicago.

Diversity

Ayers believes very strongly that humans have natural creative propensities that express themselves differently in development.

Individuality

Ayers defends the development of the individual, arguing that current educational practice prevent individuality from surfacing.

Standardized Tests

Ayers criticizes standardized tests for failing to track real progress in learning that matters.

Projects and Portfolios

Ayers prefers the use of projects and portfolios when teaching students rather than tests.

Curriculum

Curriculum is often seen as a passive set of facts to be taught, but Ayers's conception of curriculum is more active, involving the creative application of facts by the teacher.

Education College

Ayers thinks that few people learn about education in education college. Education must be learned by doing.

Classroom Environments

Classroom environments are key for getting students interested in learning.

Lesson Plans

Lesson plans made in advance of class can often limit a teacher's creativity.

Student Interest

Teaching should be tailored to student interest so as to promote their own personal development.

Themes

Individuality vs. Collectivism in Student Treatment

As a member of the 60s left, Ayers's politics are a direct reaction to the previous generation of left-wing intellectuals. These intellectuals supported fairly orthodox Marxism or Progressivism, both of which appealed to a large, industrial state in order to bring about efficient and just social policy. New Leftists came to criticize their predecessors on the grounds that a belief in the equality of persons meant that they could not be treated as cogs in a machine but instead must be free to express their diversity, individuality and uniqueness.

When Ayers was a college student, many intellectuals on the left were becoming conscious of racial issues and later feminist issues, which tended to emphasize the ways in which social classes such as blacks and women were repressed and their opportunities for self-development squelched.

Ayers is not an individualist, exactly. While he believes that an individual knows her or his needs the best and that everyone should be left to develop themselves, he also holds that the individual good is inseparable from the common good and that communities are at their best when they promote the good and autonomy of the individual.

The reaction to bureaucratic conformity runs throughout the book, particularly when Ayers discusses curriculum and standardized testing, both of which he believes classifies individuals in a crude way and consequently crushes their individuality. However, he still shares with his leftist predecessors' hostility to commercial society and institutions rooted in the profit motive and thus still conceives of education as properly controlled by the nation-state.

Equality vs. Hierarchy in the Classroom

The key orienting value of 20th century left-wing politics and politics on the growing left in the late 19th century is that of human equality. The view that all humans have equal worth is taken to be the cornerstone of any leftist approach to political life. If it is not "egalitarian" in spirit, then it is not a form of leftism. Ayers's leftism is no exception. He is hostile to hierarchical institutions and as a deeply committed leftist, he is willing to push his commitment to equality into education in a radical form.

Ayers sees traditional public schooling as hierarchical. A teacher is superior to the student and the student learns from the teacher. The teacher knows all the relevant material and simply passes it down to students effectively. Ayers sees this as nearly dictatorial. Instead, teachers should recognize that they can learn from their students and that the process of learning to be a teacher is never-ending.

The idea of ongoing individual growth seeps into his views of classroom environment, grading and curriculum formation. Instead, the teacher should proceed largely democratically with her students, attending to student interest and student preferences and allowing these factors to strongly influence how she structures class time and class assignments. Ayers's commitment to democracy is directly tied to his commitment to egalitarianism. It is because students and teachers are ultimately equal that students should have a say in their development.

Passivity vs. Activitism in Teaching Style

Much of Ayers's arguments in To Teach are that teachers cannot be mere passive communicators of information to students. Ayers has a conception of the standard, unreconstructed school teacher as a mere machine that is given a fixed, stolid curriculum geared towards getting students to jump through establishment-imposed hoops by way of getting them to pass standardized tests.

On Ayers's view, within the standard public school teaching practice, the teacher does not learn, but instead only tells students what they must know, maintaining a hierarchical relationship that stunts the growth of the individual and sucks the joy out of teaching.

Ayers recommends a radical change of perspective. First, he implores teachers to understand their goals differently. Their goal is not merely to teach students information but to help them develop and explore their values and capacities. Teaching is both ethical and intellectual, not merely a matter of facts and numbers. The teacher must adopt an active attitude, constantly learning and growing with students, learning to see students as whole individuals and engaging in a mutually beneficial back and forth between the teacher and the class.

Furthermore, the teacher's conception of curriculum must include not only facts but the methods in which the facts are presented dynamically to students. Curriculum must come to life, rather than remaining dead on the page. A passive teacher cannot be a good teacher; only an active teacher can hope to be truly great.

Style

Perspective

William Ayers came of age intellectually during the 1960s. He was then and remains today a prominent member of the political left. However, his leftism is particularly radical; further, it is of a specific type, New Leftism, or the leftism of the 1960s and 1970s developed during the civil rights, anti-war and feminist movements.

Ayers's generation of leftists developed their ideas in response to the more traditionally statist and often Marxist (even Stalinist) politics of their predecessor generation (and in many cases, their parents). The leftism of their parents' generation supported a powerful, managerial, industrial state as the solution to both economic efficiency and just social policy.

New Leftists criticized the previous generations. While sharing a common commitment to human equality, the New Left rejected many of the activities of the modern industrial nation-state, arguing that the traditional left-wing state treated people like cogs in a machine rather than respecting their diversity and individuality.

Ayers's, however, is not a libertarian individualist. He affirms the traditional classical liberal idea that the individual knows his or her own good better than others and that individuals should be allowed and encouraged to develope themselves. However, Ayers believes that the individual and community good are inseparable. Good communities promote the flourishing of the individual, but good individuals promote the good of the community.

For this reason, Ayers is particularly hostile to what he sees as bureaucratic, stultifying forms of education, believing it to crush individuality and promote the oppression of some groups by others, particularly economic classes and racial groups. He shares with his leftist predecessors a commitment to human equality and so stridently opposes social hierarchy, instead embracing a dynamic, deliberative democratic ethic.

This perspective runs throughout the book, manifesting itself in many places. Ayers rejects standardized testing on the grounds that it applies a cookie cutter picture of success to diverse individuals. He criticizes a "passive" account of curriculum, believing it to restrict the creativity and opportunities for surprise in the student. He believes that teachers also have something to learn from students and that classroom proceedings should be more democratic and egalitarian.

Tone

Ayers's To Teach is a work of philosophy, philosophy of education specifically. It has two aims, one negative and one positive. The negative: critique current approaches to teaching with respect to relationships with students, classroom environment, curriculum,

standardized testing, and so on. The positive: offer creative and inspiring alternatives to these approaches in order to breathe life back into the life of the teacher.

The two aims shape the tone by effectively creating a two-toned book. First, the negative tone is sharp, animated and full of contempt. Ayers despises current school teaching practices. He believes these practices perpetuate social stratification along the lines of economic class, race and gender. Much of what goes on in modern public schools exists simply to divide the haves from the haves-nots. Further, modern American public schools regiment curriculum and communicate it passively to students. Ayers despairs over how many students have been alienated from reading and learning generally by the ways in which they are taught.

However, Ayers also displays a positive tone of hope, excitement and creativity. Ayers enthusiastically and proudly discusses his teaching activities from pre-school all the way to college. He tells stories of his struggles with students and the many cases in which they flourished and began to love learning. He ardently encourages teachers to create "opportunities for surprise" and to learn the whole student. It is clear that the positive and negative tones are both ones of passion, but the positive tone always seems stronger. As a result, it uplifts.

Structure

To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher is not a long book. Ayers clearly aims for it to be read by any teacher at all and as a result it articulates a forceful thesis and illustrates and defends the thesis in eight concise chapters. Ayers relies heavily on his own teaching experience, making his educational philosophy more concrete. The chapters all attempt to convey a core teaching concept. In the final chapter, Ayers pulls the concepts into a whole.

The first chapter, "Beginning: The Challenge of Teaching" encourages teachers to let teaching involve their whole personality, to not separate what is good and loving about themselves from their work. They must learn not to see teaching as a rote task, as a chore. Chapter 2, "Seeing the Student," encourages teachers to learn to "see" their students, to understand their whole personalities in order to appreciate them as individuals.

Chapter 3, "Creating an Environment for Learning," concerns the classroom setting. Ayers believes a teaching philosophy can be embodied in the very set-up of a classroom. Classrooms must be constructed to be laboratories for learning and should reflect the uniqueness of students. Chapter 4, "Building Bridges," contains arguements that teachers can only be effective in reaching out to students by learning their own symbolism, i.e. by building bridges of communication with them and understanding and meeting their interests.

Chapter 5, "Liberating the Curriculum," has Ayers arguing that the traditional understanding of curriculum as a passive aggregate of information to be forced into

student minds is flawed. Instead, curriculum should be understood as a dynamic flow of information and a set of active social choices a classroom must negotiate together. In Chapter 6, "Keeping Track," Ayers launches his critique of standardized testing as a tool of the establishment. As an alternative, he outlines several forms of individualized methods of recording how well students are learning.

Ayers argues in Chapter 7, "The Mystery of Teaching," that teaching requires a much broader skill set than is traditionally understand. These skills must be artfully combined and no one description of this combination will fit everyone. When they are artfully combined, these skills work together in a mysterious way. Finally, Chapter 8, "Beginning Again: The Current Challenge to Teach," discusses the whole book's lessons and encourages teachers to abandon their old concept of teaching and construct their new teaching philosophy around the ideas in Ayers's book.

Quotes

"And yet in the modern world, our love of children can become dangerously narrowed, constrained, narcissistic, and in the end turn to something other than love, something unintended, something like indifference." (Preface, xi)

"Big schools tend to be mechanistic and managerial, hierarchical and bureaucratic." (Preface, xiv)

"When I ride the train and sit next to a person of the opposite race/I feel like a crow in a robin's nest/ And I feel dirty." (Chapter 1, "Beginning: The Challenge of Teaching," 2)

"Teachers must be experts and generalists, psychologists and cops, rabbis and priests, judges and gurus. And that's not all." (Chapter 1, "Beginning: The Challenge of Teaching," 4)

"If I were to brainstorm a list of things I can't do or can't do well ... I could fill a chalkboard in just a few seconds. ... Now imagine some school administrator or teacher constructing a curriculum designed to correct these deficiencies in me." (Chapter 2, "Seeing the Student," 29)

"Staying open to mystery, to the recognition that there is always more to know and more to be, is to allow students their full humanity, and to stay alive as a teacher." (Chapter 2, "Seeing the Student," 47)

"Questioning everything in the environments, from the bottom up, is an important task for teachers." (Chapter 3, "Creating an Environment for Learning," 51)

"The only problem with this solid bit of common sense is that it is not true. Common sense, of course, can be more dogmatic and insistent than any religion or political ideology, and the popular wisdom on teenagers is a clear case." (Chapter 4, "Building Bridges," 71)

"What is basically wrong is this: The curriculum is considered to be 'things' and these things amount to the stuff that some people have and other people need." (Chapter 5, "Liberating the Curriculum," 87)

"Sorting children into winners and losers is the main business of standardized tests." (Chapter 6, "Keeping Track," 113)

"There are all kinds of ways to keep track, but the most hopeful approaches are those that encourage multiple routes to a goal, and a diversity of powerful voices and choices." (Chapter 6, "Keeping Track," 121)

"Education will unfit anyone to be a slave." (Chapter 7, "The Mystery of Teaching," 132)

"The purpose of education ... is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not." (Chapter 8, "Beginning Again," 139)

"And so the fundamental message of the teacher for ethical action is: You can change the world." (Chapter 8, "Beginning Again," 142)

Topics for Discussion

Why does Ayers think teaching is such a challenge?

What elements of New Left political philosophy do you see in Ayers educational ideology? Give two examples.

What does Ayers mean when he tells teachers to "see the student"? Give an example from the text.

Give two examples of what Ayers means when he suggests that teachers should create environments for learning.

What does it mean to "liberate" the curriculum? What is Ayers's concept of curriculum and how does he conceive of the traditional conception of curriculum?

What is Ayers's criticism of standardized testing? What are two of his preferred methods of tracking student progress?

Why does Ayers think teaching is mysterious?

In Ayers's view, what are some current challengers that teachers face?