

Teaching With Conscience in an Imperfect World: An Invitation

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reviewed by [Gillian Rosenberg](#) — August 22, 2016

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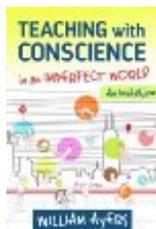
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Teaching with Conscience in an Imperfect World: An Invitation, by William Ayers, is a recent addition to the Teachers College Press *Teaching for Social Justice* series for which Ayers is an editor. The author takes readers on a philosophical, existential, and practical journey (a motif used throughout) to explore the nature of public education in the U.S. as it presently is and as he believes it ought to be in a democratic society. Although Ayers is a distinguished scholar of education, this is not a typical academic book. Arguments are not disguised in theory and references to scholars are reserved for those of significant stature such as John Dewey, Maxine Greene, and Paulo Freire. The language used within the book is informally punctuated with colloquialisms and slang such as *pinheaded*, *queeroes*, *ginormous*, and *bits and pieces*. Consequently, Ayers achieves broad appeal for those inside and outside of the academy.

Two complementary voices vie for attention

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About the Author

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GILLIAN R. ROSENBERG received a Ph.D. in Education from the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Research interests include the moral

throughout the text: the critic and the visionary. Each are presented as imperatives; the critical voice coincides with an ethic of critique and the visionary voice with an ethic of social justice and care. Although Ayers does not frame his discussion in this way, I borrow Starratt's (1994) multidimensional ethical framework as a theoretical anchor for summarizing the book's content. An ethic of critique entails dissatisfaction with the political, social, and/or cultural state of affairs and obligates one to expose systemic injustices and human indignities. Citing recent policies and legislation in Florida, Arizona, Wisconsin, Illinois, and U.S. federal programs such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, Ayers is critical of the corporate takeover of public education resulting in curriculum standardization and high stakes standardized testing. He contends that this promotes "a curriculum of facts: incontrovertible 'Truths,' uncontested and measurable, inarguable and beyond dialogue or debate" (p. 13). Further, Ayers accuses public education of systemic prejudice, oppression, exploitation, bias, deception, passivity, racism, sexism, and homophobia. These problems collectively rob students and teachers of their experiences, interpretations, intellectual curiosity, joy, and love.

An ethic of justice necessitates reforms that overcome such failings. Ayers accordingly touts values of democracy like fairness, equity, freedom, and the core belief that "every human being is of infinite and incalculable value" (pp. 57–58). He challenges educators to advance a curriculum of trust, initiative, courage, imagination, skepticism, and curiosity to open spaces for individual and collective *interrogation of the world*. Finally, an ethic of care is personally situated within relationships. Ayers advocates for teacher-student relationships and classroom cultures characterized by joy, trust, faith, compassion, and love. He asserts that "[t]he ethical core of the schools we need must always be love" (p. 71). By way of advancing a vision for public schooling that is "more joyful and more just, more hopeful and more loving" (p. 2), Ayers suggests 21 core tenets to be embraced and built upon by "students and families, teachers and educators, members of our varied and diverse communities" (p. 53).

and ethical dimensions of teaching and learning and school and classroom life, and school-based moral education. More recently, Gillian has been involved in research regarding classroom expressions of sociopolitical, cultural, and controversial values embedded in high school curriculums and pedagogical practices. She is connected, particularly on twitter and LinkedIn, with enthusiastic educators from around the world, who collaborate across physical and ideological borders to provide excellent learning experiences for their students. Her recent publications include the book *Portrait of a Moral Agent Teacher: Teaching Morally and Teaching Morality*.

The critical and visionary voices and the three ethics they embody are expressed in language

that is poetic with phrases such as “spirit spaces and emotional landscapes” (p. 1), “the prison of received wisdom” (p. 4), and “a cloud of comforting convictions” (p. 6). Several ideas are romanticized including, “[s]torm the Heavens! Change anything!” (p. 4); “[c]hallenge whatever offends your experience or your soul” (p. 76); and “[e]veryone will be teaching, side by side, and hand in hand” (p. 76). Metaphors are intense and include “a vicious swamp fight among the reptiles for the meager available resources” (p. 18); “a kaleidoscope of possible futures” (p. 43); and “one foot planted firmly in the mud and the muck of the world as it is” (p. 82). Ayers also makes connections with the literary works of Charles Dickens, George Orwell, Bertolt Brecht, Walt Whitman, Virginia Woolf, and Lewis Carroll; the radical works of Darwin, Copernicus, Galileo, Mahler, Tubman, Marx, and Einstein; and the visionary works of Thomas More, Henri de Saint-Simon, Robert Owen, and Edward Bellamy. Such a vibrant writing style, charming and engaging from start to finish, nonetheless has a potentially lulling effect. Readers are at risk of intellectual docility and passive acceptance of assertions and assumptions that are arguably raised without substantiation.

One of these assumptions involves teachers and students as educational activists, change agents, and crusaders for social justice. Ayers implies that teachers are innately predisposed to activism by the same ideals that attracted them to the profession. He also encourages students to be “catalysts, activists, and organizers for change” (p. 85) by similarly assuming all youth are inclined to engage with their sociopolitical environments. While I have met politically involved teachers and students, my personal and professional experiences do not corroborate this assumption for *all* teachers and students. Further, some scholars strongly caution against promoting an activist agenda in classrooms even among those who are so inclined. Campbell (2008, 2013) submits that such an agenda has the potential to encourage moral relativism, dogmatism, and partisanship that undermine teachers’ essential role as moral agents. This is contested ground and requires readers’ active scrutiny.

Beyond tokenism to individual educators, Ayers asserts that “[t]here are hopeful bits and pieces everywhere” (p. 79). He does not acknowledge the groundswell of reforms taking place in North

American classrooms and schools. Instead Ayers testifies that “[f]ew classrooms invite students to ask any serious questions” (p. 16). However, the plethora of constructivist, experiential, and learner- and learning-centered programs and pedagogies such as flipped classrooms, genius hour, project- and problem-based learning, STEM, and service learning are spreading virally through social media platforms such as Twitter chats, LinkedIn groups, TED talks, YouTube videos, and video blogs (vlogs) as teachers from diverse communities and educational situations share their activities, resources, and experiences both locally and globally. These teachers and the students engaging in this learning are not necessarily radical or progressive activists, but are courageously *reimagining and resisting, rethinking and rebuilding*. The revolution Ayers dreams of might already be underway but in a less overt politically critical format.

It may be evident that I am not a critical theorist or activist. I do not accept most ethical rationale for compelling teachers and students to engage with political and controversial issues in the classroom. Further, I do not believe that societal reform should be a primary objective of schooling. However, I find the author's broad convictions, critical and visionary, dystopian and utopian, to be persuasive and appealing. These perspectives are also not unfamiliar as Ayers has argued many of these issues in his other writing before. His vision for public education in the U.S. reestablishes to its core the well being of all children and the quality of their learning. In my opinion, *Teaching with Conscience in an Imperfect World's* key contribution is the following: it offers an ethically compelling vision with concrete proposals that can rally, empower, coordinate, and guide the efforts of activist educators and innovative teachers as they contribute their own brand of action to school reform.

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