

## **Improving Learning Environments**

**Professor William Ayers**  
**Phone: 312-996-9689 – w**  
**E-Mail: [bayers@uic.edu](mailto:bayers@uic.edu)**

One noteworthy aspect of these little injunctions is their form: the operative word here is “*don’t*”. Whether you agree with the content or not—and I reject most of it—these bits of advice fail the test of positive, actionable propositions for beginning teachers: they enclose, discipline, and enforce, but there’s no space in them for forward motion, imagination, creativity, initiative, courage, discovery, or surprise. There’s no acknowledgement of the values, ethical dispositions, wild heart and curious mind necessary to become a great teacher, nor is there any practical advice whatsoever about getting started, nothing about creating a rich and inviting learning environment, not a word about working through the inevitable obstacles. Instead there’s a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants resignation, as well as concrete reinforcement of the worst aspects of the experience in all-too-many schools, things like contempt for parents, fear of students, lowering expectations, an unhealthy obsession with control, a culture of conformity and complaint. It’s an anticipatory set for mediocrity and failure.

Nor are teacher education programs exempt—the reign of a dull and unhelpful half-language of slogans is not a K-8 phenomenon, but a preschool through graduate school affair, indeed it infects the wider culture and is easily observable, for example, in popular films about teaching. This points to a real problem for teacher educators: if we want our students to break beyond this kind of cramped thinking, how far away from it are we in our own practice? How, for example, are we organizing our teaching in order for our students to experience something different? Do we (or do the structures of our programs) convey, for example, tacitly or not, a lack of trust? Do we or our programs encourage initiative, criticism, or different thinking? If our students have never experienced the transformative power of a trusting relationship in their own learning, how can we expect them to call up or invent such a disposition when they themselves are the teachers?

In any case these ubiquitous maxims are acceded to willingly at times, and grudgingly at other times—occasionally someone openly resists one or another, but it’s not easy. Each carries, after all, the odor of common sense, and there’s nothing more dogmatic nor insistent, more policing and self-promoting, than that.

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I want beginning teachers to resist, to rebel against all of it, to reject these clichés, to stand on their own feet, and to make their way toward the moral heart of teaching at its best. I want them to do what needs to be done—again and again—in order to achieve teaching as an enterprise whose largest purpose is to help every human being reach the full measure of his or her humanity. Teaching as humanization, teaching as a project whose irreducible goal is both further enlightenment for each and greater freedom for all—this is the priceless ideal I want beginning teachers to focus on. To adequately consider that ideal requires moving beyond the fog of the merely given, clearing a free space for challenging the dogma and the orthodoxy that attaches itself to teaching like barnacles, sharp and ugly.

To begin we have to refocus on teaching as intellectual and ethical work, something beyond the instrumental and the linear. We need to understand that teaching requires thoughtful, caring people to carry it forward successfully, and we need, then, to commit to becoming more caring and more thoughtful as we grow into our work. This refocusing requires a leaning outward, a willingness to look at the world of children—the sufferings, the accomplishments, the perspectives and the concerns—and an awareness,

sometimes joyous, but just as often painful, of all that we find. And it requires, as well, a leaning inward—in-breathing, in-dwelling—traveling toward self-knowledge, a sense of being alive and conscious in a going world. In each direction, each gesture, we acknowledge that every person is entangled and propelled and sometimes made mute by a social surround, and that each has, as well, a wild and vast inner life—a spirit, a soul, a mind. Going inward without consciously connecting to a larger world leads to self-referencing and worse, narcissism as truth; traveling outward without noting your own embodied heart and mind can easily lead to ethical astigmatism, moral blindness—to seeing children as a collection of objects for use.

I urge teachers to start with a faith that every child comes to you as a whole and multidimensional being, much like yourself. Every human being, no matter who, is a gooey biological wonder, pulsing with the breath and beat of life itself, eating, sleeping, pissing and shitting, prodded by sexual urges, evolved and evolving, shaped by genetics, twisted and gnarled by the unique experiences of living—just like you. Every human being has as well a complex set of circumstances that makes his or her life understandable and sensible, bearable or unbearable; each is unique, each walks a singular path across the earth, each has a mother and a father, each with a distinct mark to be made, each is somehow sacred. This recognition asks us to reject any action that treats anyone as an object, any gesture that *thingifies* other human beings. It demands that we embrace the humanity of every student—that we take their side. Easy enough to say, excruciatingly difficult to enact in the daily lives of schools.

A related challenge is to look deeply into the contexts within which teaching occurs—social surround, historical flow, cultural web. While the unexamined teaching life is hardly worth living, the examined life is full of pain and difficulty—after all, the contexts of our lives include unearned privileges and undeserved suffering, murderous drugs and crushing work, a howling sense of hopelessness for some and the palpable threat of annihilation for others. To be aware of the social and moral universe we inhabit and share, aware, too, of what has yet to be achieved in terms of human possibility, is to be a teacher capable of hope and struggle, outrage and action, a teacher teaching for social justice and liberation.

The fundamental message of the teacher, after all, is this: You can change your life. Whoever you are, wherever you've been, whatever you've done, the teacher invites you to a second chance, another round, perhaps a different conclusion. The teacher posits possibility, openness, and alternative; the teacher points to what could be, but is not yet. The teacher beckons you to change your path, and so she has but one basic rule: to reach.

But of course the teacher can only create a context, set a stage, open a curtain. The teacher's task is excruciatingly complex precisely because it is idiosyncratic and improvisational—as inexact as a person's mind or a human heart, as unique and inventive as a friendship or a love affair. The teacher's work embraces background, environment, setting, surround, position, situation, connection. And relationship. As Martin Heidegger said, teaching is tougher than learning in this essential respect: teaching requires the teacher to *let learn*. Learning requires action, choice, and assent from the student. Teaching, then, is undertaken with hope, but without guarantees. Teaching is an act of faith.

Another basic challenge for teachers is to create an environment that will challenge and nurture the wide range of students who will actually enter your classrooms, not the stereotypes you've been told to expect. There must be multiple entry points toward learning and a range of routes to success. The teacher builds the context, and that's what we will try to do here together. The teacher's ideas, preferences, values, instincts, and experiences are worked up in the learning environment. It is essential to reflect about what you value, your expectations and your standards—try to remember that the dimensions you work with are not just feet and inches, but also hopes and dreams. Think about what one senses walking through the door—What is the atmosphere? What quality of experience is anticipated? What technique is dominant? What voice will be apparent?

When I was first teaching I took my five-year-olds to the Detroit Metropolitan Airport to watch the planes take off and land. As you know, the concourse in any airport has a powerful message for all of us: move this way, keep moving, move rapidly.

To a five-year-old the concourse simply says, "Run!" It took me three trips to realize that my instruction—stick together, hold hands, don't run—was over-ruled by the dominant voice of the environment: RUN!

What does *your* environment say? How could it be improved?

Education, of course, lives an excruciating paradox precisely because of its association with and location in schools. Education is about opening doors, opening minds, opening possibilities; school, by contrast, is about sorting and punishing, grading and ranking and certifying. Education is unconditional—it asks nothing in return. School demands obedience and conformity as a precondition to attendance. Education is surprising and unruly and disorderly, while the first and fundamental law of school is to follow orders. An educator unleashes the unpredictable, while a schoolteacher too often starts with an unhealthy obsession with classroom management.

I'm not always sure what institutions like schools can do to improve the world, but I do know what people can do when they come together freely to choose something better. And I know what teachers can do as long as we continue to face one another authentically, as long as we talk together as free people, as long as we struggle to speak what we know and at the same time to listen, to hear, and to understand. Perhaps we need to imagine becoming part of a movement toward a revolution in teaching.

This class will be conducted as a seminar. This is because thinking is a social activity, impossible to achieve without the stimulation of other minds; we need each other, we need one another's feelings and curiosities and engagements. In a democracy there must be discussion, deliberation, judgment, dialogue. In every dialogue there will necessarily be mistakes, misperceptions, growth, struggle, and emotion. That's OK. We must each speak here with the possibility of being heard, of touching hearts or changing minds. And we must listen with the possibility of altering our own angle of regard.

We are most human after all when we are in dialogue—dialogue stimulates the mind and the imagination. It creates community even if the community it creates is sometimes contentious; dialogue is the harbinger of disequilibrium because it is an inquiry into something complex; dialogue requires self-awareness, empathy, thought, and a willingness to commit to using language well. Michael Oakeshott calls dialogue an "unrehearsed intellectual adventure"—something moving toward greater understanding, toward discovery.

We must begin with the serious intention of engaging others, but since dialogue is reciprocal and flexible, even playful, that engagement may change us. We approach dialogue, then, with conviction tempered by agnosticism, skepticism, doubt, a sense of the contingent. Our commitment must be to question, explore, look deeper, pay attention, engage. Hans-Georg Gadamer says, “To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were.”

And Freire: “Through dialogue the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student and students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.” Dialogue is based on a faith in capacity of all people, as well as the recognition that I don’t already know everything.

I accept the fallibility of all inquiry, the contingency of all knowledge, a multiplicity of perspectives, interpretations, lack of certainty. I might even find that exciting rather than a cause for despair. But, first, I must be *responsive* to claims of others. I must listen, and I must speak.

Inside every student—from kindergarten through graduate school—lurks an implicit question, often unformed and unconscious, rarely spoken. It’s a simple question on its surface, but a question that bubbles with hidden and surprising meanings, always yeasty, unpredictable, potentially volcanic. Who in the world am I? The student looks inward at the self, and simultaneously faces outward, toward the expanding circles of context. Who *am* I, in the world?

Think of the college freshman, the first year medical student, the thesis writer, the child anxiously looking at her mother on the first morning at day care. Who am I? What place is this? What will become of me here? What larger universe awaits me? What can I make of what I’ve been made?

The aware teacher knows that the question exists, that it perseveres. The wide-awake teacher looks for opportunities to prod the question, to awaken or agitate it, to pursue it across a range of boundaries, known as well as unknown. The challenge to the teacher—massive and dynamic—is to extend a sense in each student of both alternative and opportunity, to answer in an expansive, generous way a corollary question: What in the world are my choices and my chances?

Each of us is better equipped to engage these questions if we work hard to understand the commitments we bring to the project of teaching. Some of these commitments may apply to all teachers and all teaching—a commitment to enlightenment, perhaps, a commitment to empowerment, although even this may be arguable—while others may be specific to this particular person at this unique time in this distinct place.

*In this seminar we will wonder together about the commitments each of us brings to the project of teaching.* We will search for shared edges, but we will also explore and try to honor different priorities, values, and distinct emphases.

A final note: Your presence is required. You will not receive credit if you are not here. If you are sick, I’ll arrange for you to sleep in my office or at an infirmary nearby.

If you want to bring a child because your childcare failed, fine. Is this clear? Is there any room for misinterpretation or ambiguity? Show up or be doomed.

4. Michie, *See You When We Get There*\*
5. Heller, *Until We Are Strong Together*\*
6. Oyler, *Making Room for Students*\*
7. Carger, *Of Borders and Dreams*\*
8. Perry, *Walking the Color Line*\*
9. Blake, *She Say, He Say*\*
10. Lewis, *Race in the Schoolyard*\*
11. Flores-Gonzalez, *School Kids/Street Kids*\*
12. Hagedorn, *People and Folks*\*
13. Richie, *Compelled to Crime*\*
14. Cintron, *Angel's Town*\*
15. Schaffner, *Teenage Runaways*\*

FILM:

(Choose One)

"Not One Less"	- China
"Kids"	- US
"Mi Vida Loca"	- US
"Do The Right Thing"	- US
"Menace II Society"	- US
"Rabbit Proof Fence"	- Australia
"The Magdalene Sisters"	- Ireland
"To Have and To Be"	- France
"Elephant"	- US

### ASSIGNMENT ONE:

We will be reading the Freedom School Curriculum and at least three books in common, and none is a particularly easy read. The first is Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a complicated and layered book that will likely take you some time and sustained commitment. If you've read Freire, please review it, and then read Dewey. I'd like you to begin this by next week, paying attention to questions like these:

- What's his big idea?
- What are three or four arguments he develops?
- What is the evidence?
- What are three or four things you find entirely confusing or at least problematic?
- Is there a story or an argument or a quote that is simply dazzling? What page?
- Is there something that is simply idiotic? What page?
- Can you discuss an aspect of your own teaching in light of Freire's argument?

Also next week please bring to class a physical rendering (diagram, map, photo-collage, model, diorama, architectural scheme, or whatever) of a learning environment. I would prefer this to be of the classroom or school or lab or gym you teach in now, but for those of you not teaching, this representation can be of any environment where some intentional teaching and learning is represented, any place that you've known at any time. Make this representation as clear and as durable as possible—other people will want to “read” it, to understand it—and you will want to use it, refer to it, more than once.

### FINAL ASSIGNMENT:

1. Write a “Freedom School Curriculum” for a class of contemporary students—any age, any venue, any focus... The important thing is to be true to and to adequately represent your sense of the deep underlying goals and purposes of a Freedom School.
2. Beginning with the learning environment that you have somehow mapped or sketched or in another way depicted, represent an improved learning environment along several dimensions suggested by the readings, the classroom discussions, and your own developing awarenesses. This representation can capture something moving through time or focused on a specific moment, something that embodies a whole or focuses on a particular corner that somehow illuminates the whole. Your representation should draw on a wide range of media and can be expressed in a variety of forms—film, photography, painting, dramatic arts, drawing, dance, pantomime, poetry, music, sculpture, weaving, for example—and you should strive for originality and intellectual depth in its execution.