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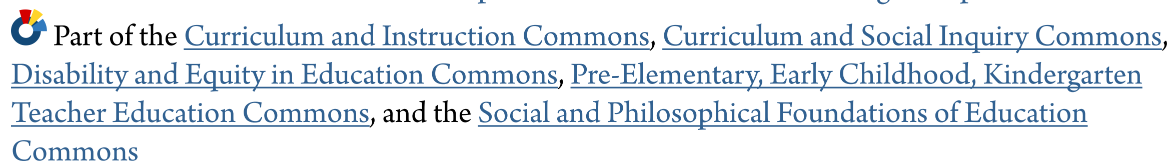
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Ayers: Spreading Out Its Roots

Spreading Out Its Roots: Bank Street Advisement and the Education of a Teacher

William Ayers

Here is some of what my advisor taught me in the year I attended weekly advisement seminars at Bank Street:

- People actively create and construct knowledge.
- Knowing is multidimensional and intersubjective.
- Learning is characterized by discovery and surprise.
- Human development is complex and interactive.
- Cognition is entwined with affect, and intellect is inseparable from spirit, culture, physical and psychological being.
- Teachers nurture and challenge people, and invite them to be more skilled, more knowing, more able, more powerful; teaching is, then, at its heart an intellectual and ethical project.
- Good teachers create opportunities for learners to have access to firsthand experiences and primary sources.

There is more. She taught that differences among learners were not *obstacles* to good teaching, but were rather *allies* of real learning. Differences—cultural, physical, racial, and intellectual—could become the soil a teacher plows in order to stimulate growth. She taught that lesson plans keep teachers busy and off the streets but have only the vaguest link to actual teaching. She taught that democracy is participatory and that education is intrinsic. She also taught me to stay awake—to think deeply about what I'm doing.

William Ayers, an assistant professor of education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, attended Bank Street College from 1981 to 1984. His advisor was Nancy Balaban. From 1989 to 1990, Dr. Ayers was the Assistant Deputy Mayor for Education in Chicago; he currently chairs the Alliance for Better Chicago Schools, a coalition of school reform activists. His book, The Good Preschool Teacher, *was published by Teachers College Press in 1989.*

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All of this—and, again, there is more—in a few hours a week for one school year. How did she do it? How did she teach all these complex and intricate things in such a brief time? What was her method, her magic?

To begin with, the answer was not in her lesson plans because she didn't have any, nor in her lectures because she never gave them. In fact, she spoke rarely in seminar, far less than we students did, and her contributions were often indirect and lateral, usually a simple question or a brief observation. Her presence was big, but she never dominated the space. No, the answer is not to be found in her schoolcraft.

The answer lies, I believe, in a particular way of thinking about teaching, and staying true to that approach whether one is teaching preschoolers to enjoy and appreciate language, or adults to become teachers themselves. The broad outline of that way of thinking about teaching is embodied in Bank Street advisement. To simplify a bit, that approach demands that teachers work to see each student in as full and dynamic a way as possible, to create environments that nurture and challenge the wide range of students in the classroom, and to construct bridges with each learner from the known to the not yet known.

Seeing the student is a complicated proposition, for there are always more ways to see, more things to know. Observation and recording, one of the first courses a Bank Street student takes, is a way to begin, for it opens a process of investigation and affirmation. But it is understood that observations are always tentative, always in the service of the next teaching challenge, and always interactive—the observed, after all, are also people with their own intentions, needs, hopes, dreams, aspirations, and agendas. The student grows, the teacher learns, the situation changes, and seeing becomes an evolving challenge. As layers of mystification and obfuscation are peeled away, as the student becomes more fully present to the teacher, experiences and intelligences that were initially obscure become the ground upon which real teaching can be constructed. This is as true in colleges of education as it is in kindergartens.

Creating environments for learning means essentially constructing laboratories for discovery and surprise. In an early childhood classroom, for example, this would mean having a large block area, a comfortable reading corner, and an easel with red, yellow, and blue paints available. Working at the easel, a child might encounter purple and construct knowledge about primary and secondary colors upon this dazzling discovery. Along with the color purple comes confidence, self-esteem, curiosity, and a sense that knowledge is open ended and that knowing is active. A lecture and worksheet would be a rather tame and anemic alternative, with lateral lessons about knowledge as finite and knowing as passive. The same essential features hold in a college for teachers: When students of teaching are immersed in the laboratory of the classroom, struggling with the

complexities of the real world of schools and children, and then provided adequate opportunities to reflect on it all with peers and more experienced colleagues—in these conditions, teaching is a discovery, and knowledge about teaching can be constructed by students themselves on a broad and considered experiential base.

Bridge building begins on one shore with the knowledge, experience, know-how, and interest of the student, and moves toward broader horizons, deeper ways of thinking and knowing. In this regard, it is worth transforming the old notion that you can learn something from anything into a deeper sense of relatedness and interactivity: You can learn *everything* from anything. I remember Suzanne Caruthers at Bank Street cooking eggs with kids. It was all there: math and science, language and culture, history and geography, and more. I remember Joan Cenedella and a group of youngsters pursuing a question about the Hudson River into an extended investigation of the environment, the natural world, the city, history, and on and on. It was a matter of igniting interest, engaging energy, and then following that interest and energy into deeper and further places. John Dewey argued that a big part of the art of teaching "lies in making the difficulty of new problems large enough to challenge thought, and small enough so that in addition to the confusion naturally attending the novel elements, there shall be luminous familiar spots from which helpful suggestions may spring."

I carry the Bank Street experience into my work in school improvement and teacher education. As a researcher, I resist the notion that teaching is something easily contained and counted, quantified and measured, the application of laws and methods which should at least aspire to positivistic exactness. As a teacher-educator, I reject the idea that teaching is the delivery of the curriculum, the transference of discrete bits of information, the job of a glorified clerk. And as a participant in school-change projects, I oppose the convention that the experts and professionals are the only ones with worthwhile knowledge and experience. In fact I base my efforts on the simple, elegant, and subversive thought that the people with the problems are also most likely to be the people with the solutions.

In my teaching, I work with students to construct autobiographies as vehicles for self-awareness and more intentional teaching practices. Autobiography can connect personal knowledge and the world of feelings with knowledge of the outer world. We work to be inquiring teachers, aware of the complex and kaleidoscopic contexts of our work. We work to be reflective, critical, and activist. We talk openly about the need for creative insubordination if teaching and learning are to survive the machinery of schooling—all the idiotic stuff standing in the way.

We sometimes create metaphors: A teacher is like a midwife, intuitive and improvisational, called to a life of helping others through her ever-widening knowledge of content and craft. Or a teacher is like a healer who must move beyond stereotypes and aggregates and objective data in search of an authentic meeting with a complex individual in a unique situation.

We look at Stanislavsky's instruction to actors: Reach inside yourselves, he says, draw upon your own experiences, use your lives as basic tools for the never-finished construction of your roles. We find tidbits that inspire: This is what the jazz great Dexter Gordon said about style: "You don't just go and pick a style off a tree. The tree's growing inside you—naturally." This is Rilke's advice to a young poet: "You are looking outward and that above all you should not do now. . . . There is only one single way. Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you write [or teach], find out whether it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places of your heart." Through it all, we try to build serious learning communities, collective spaces of free thought and action where people can think, question, speak and write, read critically, criticize freely, work cooperatively, consider the common good, and link consciousness to conduct. In other words, places where democracy is practiced, not ritualized.

At Bank Street I felt challenged and energized, but I often thought, "Ah hah! I knew that, but never quite said it that way." The luminous familiar spots were being stimulated. Bridges were being built. Connections were being made. Advisement was like no other experience I have ever had as a learner. The curriculum was emergent; the experiences we ourselves had were the raw material for reflection and critique. I was a student but I was also a teacher. Now that I try to teach teachers in this way, I see the other side: I am a student of my students, a learner first, and I understand the essential paradox of teaching—they want to know what I cannot teach them, and only they know what they don't know yet. This is part of the challenge of teaching. ✦