

Did Bill Ayers Get His Teaching Job “the Chicago Way?”

By Mary Grabar

be constant change, that the only possibilities are victory or death.

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Executive Summary

Bill Ayers' rehabilitation from fugitive terrorist to "Distinguished Professor" of Education earning a \$126,000 salary at a public Chicago university remains something of a mystery.

A review of Ayers' curriculum vitae shows a rapid path through the educational system after he came out of hiding in 1979 for his involvement in bombings of U.S. government buildings with the domestic terrorist group Weatherman. Charges were dropped after the Carter Justice Department charged the two FBI agents with illegal surveillance. Enrolling at the nation's premier training academy for progressive teachers, Columbia University's Teachers College, Ayers soon earned both an M.Ed. and Ed.D. in Curriculum and Teaching (1987).

A Freedom of Information request for his tenure review process produced only blank forms with a cover letter stating that such information cannot be released "unless the disclosure is consented to in writing by the individual." But were the standards for hiring and promotion relaxed a bit for the son of a prominent Chicago businessman who headed Commonwealth Edison and sat on the board of the Tribune Company, publisher of the Chicago Tribune? Tenure requires proof of scholarship and publication in one's field, and the only book that Ayers had to show was a loosely constructed story of six anonymous preschool teachers, with none of the rigorous evaluation and data normally required in the field.

But an examination of his writings and syllabi reveal that Ayers continued in this vein, using his platform as a professor to promote the idea of education as the "motor force of revolution" and himself as the hero at the forefront. They reveal an educational philosophy that contradicts the Illinois Professional Teaching Standards posted on the university's website. The question remains: how many others could have made such a seamless rise from fugitive to distinguished professor while flaunting all standards? Was Ayers' appointment part of the "Chicago Way"?

By Mary Grabar

How Bill Ayers catapulted from fugitive terrorist to “Distinguished Professor” of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, earning a \$126,000 annual salary, remains a mystery.

A Freedom of Information request for his tenure review produced only blank forms with a cover letter explaining that personal privacy would be violated “unless the disclosure is consented to in writing by the individual subjects of the information.” UIC News Bureau Director Bill Burton would not discuss whether such a consent was requested of Ayers. Other answers, like Ayers’ experience in teaching in inner-city public schools, for which UIC specializes in preparing future teachers, were also refused.

A review of Ayers’ curriculum vitae, however, shows a rapid glide through the educational process after his days as a fugitive from the FBI for his role in bombings with the terrorist group the Weather Underground. Ayers came out of hiding in 1979 after the Carter justice department instead pursued the two FBI agents with claims that they had used illegal observation methods. Charges were dropped against Ayers, and he earned his Master’s degree in Early Childhood Education from Teachers College at Columbia University, historically the leader in progressive educational theories, and the center of communist recruiting among teachers. At the same college he earned both an M.Ed. *and* an Ed.D. in Curriculum and Teaching in 1987.

Ayers submitted “Fugitive Days: a Memoir” in June 2002 for his M.F.A. degree from Bennington College. His dissertation, “The Discerning ‘I’: Accounts of Teacher Self-construction Through the Use of Co-biography, Metaphor, and Image,” presaged the subjective focus on the teacher that he would emphasize in subsequent writing. By the time Ayers was promoted to associate professor in 1992, he apparently had published one book, *The Good Preschool Teacher*, whose main purpose as he says at the beginning of the first chapter is “to hear the voices of six teachers and to render their stories.” Ayers does not provide any studies or surveys to his portraits of teachers. His subsequent books follow the same free-flowing format.

Ayers’ six syllabi¹ obtained through the Freedom of Information Act also reveal a radical departure from the customary statement of objectives, list of assignments, breakdown of grade distribution, day-by-day schedule, and explanation of classroom policies expected by students on the first day of class. Ayers’ students, instead, are offered rambling personal statements of up to ten pages, sometimes sprinkled with profanity. The only criteria they are given is that they should participate in engaged classroom discussion.

¹ Copies of these six syllabi, as well as two others, can be found on the America’s Survival, Inc. website, www.usasurvival.org.

The syllabi ranged from a sophomore-level honors class called “Social Conflicts of the 1960s’s” to graduate seminars. A description follows.

“Social Conflicts of the 1960’s, Honors 201” was taught in Spring 2006. The entire syllabus consists of two pages of Ayers’ single-spaced prose attached to the cover sheet that lists the title of the course and Ayers’ contact information. The only policy provided is a note informing students that their presence is “required at each session” for “credit,” with offers to allow ill students to sleep in his office or the infirmary, and to bring children in the event of childcare failure.

The syllabus consists of a radical polemic on the Vietnam War similar to what Ayers presented in “Fugitive Days.” Students are greeted with, “In 1965, just as the American catastrophe in Viet Nam was reaching full ignition, I [Ayers] was arrested along with 38 others disrupting the normal operations of the Ann Arbor draft board, part of the bureaucratic machinery for sorting soldiers from civilians, the living from the dead, issuing we thought, warrants to kill and to die.” The rest of the narrative continues in the same dramatic style.

Ayers presents his political position as he continues by describing “US political leaders” as “blind and arrogant and cocksure as they took over the failed French colonial mission.” The U.S. enemy was “a poor peasant nation” that “refused their assigned role in Washington’s script . . . the National Liberation Front wouldn’t quit—they retreated when necessary, holed up underground as required, and reemerged suddenly to beat back the invaders.”

As regards teaching, the Professor of Education describes protestors’ efforts against the war, which consisted of drawing up “fact sheets,” holding “teach-ins,” circulating petitions, and knocking on doors to engage in “dialogue.” Ayers offers himself and his comrades as role models for education majors: “The more we tried to teach others, the more we ourselves learned. . . . We became better teachers, deeper, more thoughtful and more effective organizers. We became radicalized, and eventually we thought of ourselves as revolutionaries, committed to overturning the system.”

“Overturning the system” provides the theme for this and Ayers’ other syllabi. In this autobiographical narrative, Ayers describes joining forces with the Civil Rights Movement and then with returning, disillusioned veterans: “The movement, which had been organizing GI’s from the start, embraced the vets as a strategic priority and a practical politics. . . .” Implying a major rejection of the U.S. war aims on the part of veterans, Ayers claims that many vets found they had “more in common with young activists than with the old bastards in power.” Together they made the president “relent” --but after “2,000 innocent people were murdered by the U.S. government. . . . every day.”

Employing a literary technique of Biblical poetry and solemn speeches, Ayers repeats the opening of every sentence but the last one of the final

paragraph, with “some of us.” Among the reactions to the virtual Armageddon brought on by the U.S. government (in Ayers’ estimation), he and fellow radicals (“some of us”) successively either burned out, fled to other countries, ran for office, organized the industrial working class, or joined the Democratic Party “with the hope of building a peace wing.” Finally, he leaves students with this thought: “Some made a religion out of making love, others made a mess of making revolution. No choice was the obvious best choice, none in retrospect was up to the challenge.”

Ayers does not offer much clearer educational objectives in any of the higher level classes he teaches. His class ED 345 “Multiculturalism, Bilingualism, and Diversity in Elementary School,” which, according to the university’s description, is intended to provide “prospective teachers with information and experiences that support teaching and learning in diverse settings,” presents no specific strategies for addressing the needs of bilingual students. Ten pages of double-spaced prose begin with an extensive quotation from Vito Perrone and then questions by Ayers: “What is democracy? What does schooling in a democracy look like? How might we build democratic communities in our classrooms?” Ayers then turns to larger issues of “injustice, racism, imperial ambition.” The teacher’s “ambition might be to link democratic possibilities in education to fresh possibilities in our larger social life,” according to Ayers.

Ayers diverts attention away from evaluation and discipline. Instead, in the classroom “assessment” must be “transparent and public, collectively decided upon.” Teachers, in Ayers’ estimation, are to be models of “thoughtfulness and care, exemplars of problem-solving and decision-making, people capable of asking deep questions. . . .” and providing “opportunities for imagination, expression, and experimentation in a safe and buoyant space.” However, nothing is said about the teacher’s role in ensuring that students are overcoming cultural and language obstacles and advancing academically in this “buoyant space.”

The manifesto against testing and standards is continued with Ayers’ claims that a “ghetto school” was crippled by testing. Ayers disputes the validity of what most would agree are standard principles of education: that teachers teach, and are in charge and responsible; that some students perform better than others; and that basic skills are necessary. He insists none of these should hold.

But guidelines posted on the University’s web page show that the eleven goals of Illinois Professional Teaching Standards differ dramatically from Professor Ayers’.

For example, under diversity, state guidelines say, “The teacher understands how students differ in their approaches to learning and creates instructional opportunities that are adapted to diverse learners.” But in Professor

Ayers' syllabus, there appears to be no plan for the teaching of such techniques; nor are textbooks offered that would spell these out for education majors. The required textbooks are authored or coauthored by Ayers.

The number one state standard, though, is "content knowledge: The teacher understands the central concepts, tools of inquiry, and structures of the disciplines and creates learning experiences that make the content meaningful to students." But this syllabus seems to repeat Ayers' adage, as quoted in our report, that the teacher's role is to "plunge into the unknown alongside their students" and to eschew tests as mythical measurements of progress—a policy that violates state standard #8: "The teacher understands and uses formal and informal assessment strategies and uses them to support the continuous development of all students."

Ayers' senior-level class, "Improving Learning Environments" ED 431/ "Dynamics of Learning Environments" CIE 412, appears to have been co-taught with Adrian Capehart in the spring of 2008. To learn how to improve learning environments, students were required to read among six works Ayers' *Teaching Toward Freedom* and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (Two more of Ayers' books turn up as optional reading.) Freire's polemic about radicalizing peasants refers to Mao Zedong, Josef Stalin, Vladimir Lenin, and Fidel Castro as authoritative sources; the work turns up in Ayers' reading lists on other syllabi and in books. This required reading of an unapologetic communist adds to the other evidence of Ayers' political aims, such as his statement before Hugo Chavez that education is "the motor-force of revolution."

CIE 576 "Conceptions of Teaching and Schooling" is one of the two graduate syllabi sent by the university. A description of this course does not show up in the graduate handbook as an elective or required course, so it seems to have been tailor-made for Ayers. Burton refused to answer questions about this course.

Indeed, Ayers begins the 19-page opening essay of the syllabus with an allusion to the Weather Underground's 1974 "political statement," "Prairie Fire: The Politics of Revolutionary Anti-Imperialism," by stating, "A single spark can start a prairie fire—an ancient saying." The original "Prairie Fire," which was signed by Ayers, asserts, "We are a guerilla organization. We are communist women and men, underground in the United States for more than four years. We are deeply affected by the historic events of our time in the struggle against US imperialism."

It continues:

"Our intention is to disrupt the empire . . . to incapacitate it, to put pressure on the cracks, to make it hard to carry out its bloody functioning against

the people of the world, to join the world struggle, *to attack from the inside*" (emphases added).

It is clear that Ayers intends teachers to be those "sparks," for in the syllabus he writes, "Teachers might not change the world in dramatic fashion, but we certainly change the people who will change the world." Implying a generational legacy, Ayers says, "This single spark could be that long-anticipated catalyst."

Saying nothing about the knowledge or skills to be imparted to students, Ayers continues on, describing and justifying this purpose of teachers as political missionaries. Repeating his dictum that "love" is the most important qualification for teachers, Ayers goes on to specify "love as a call to action, an impulse that insists that all human beings matter, even when law or custom or social practice or restriction says otherwise." "Love" is a theme promoted by required reading author Freire, who quotes the murderous Che Guevara approvingly: "the true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love."

The remaining pages of the syllabus form a rant that presents school administrations as bureaucracies that make teachers into "cogs" in veritable prisons. Ayers charges that schools that adhere to strict schedules make students "political prisoners," and "Compelled by the state to attend, handed a schedule, a uniform, and a rule-book, sent to a specific designated space of cell blocks, monitored constantly and controlled relentlessly—Pledge of Allegiance: 9:00; No talking; Bathroom break: 10:15-10:20; No eating in the classroom; Lunch: 11:45-12:05; Boys and girls form separate line; Dismissal bell: 3:10; No running in hallways. On and on and on, the whole catalogue of coercion under forced confinement—every young body the object of domination and control."

Ayers then takes a direct stab at the "Uniform Discipline Code" of the Chicago Public Schools. Indeed, he incites student hostility to the code's requirements for teachers' and students' "cleanliness, modesty, and good grooming," as well as to student responsibilities to "be honest and courteous" and "improve your performance upon notice of unsatisfactory progress." Further school injunctions to parents to present cases in a "calm, reasoned manner," and to principals to "notify the Chicago Police Department as necessary," provide sad evidence of the condition of the city school system—something that Ayers apparently has not experienced firsthand.

Quoting, sometimes at length such radical philosophers as Ivan Illich (who advocated the abolition of formal education), John Gatto (who advocated the end of compulsory schooling), and Michel Foucault (the radical theorist), Ayers reaches a crescendo by applying "the architectural model of [Jeremy Bentham's] Panopticon [a prison]" to the schools, with students monitored by "the unobstructed gaze of state power."

Ayers concludes this narrative with a reference to Paulo Freire, whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, along with bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* and Ayers' own *Teaching Toward Freedom*, forms the required reading list. Ayers quotes Freire's statement that, characteristically, says nothing about the real quantitative goals of education: "Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world"—and in a circular fashion, "it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people."

While this course appears to have been designed by Ayers as a loose introduction to his philosophical views of education reform, the last syllabus obtained, for "Curriculum Instruction & Evaluation 578: Qualitative Research in Education," flaunts common standards. For example, at the University of New Mexico, Professor Jan Armstrong tells her graduate students on her 2003 syllabus that among course objectives they will "learn how to engage in qualitative fieldwork and other data collection activities in an ethical and technically defensible manner," "practice interviewing and field observation techniques," and "develop skills in the application of advanced information technologies for information gathering and analysis." Syllabi from other professors confirm the emphasis on methodology, data collection techniques, and analysis, often through the use of computer programs.

Ayers, however, begins his syllabus² with "The transcendent (sic) literary critic Edward Said—author of the essential text, *Orientalism*—explores the contested space of teaching and learning and research in much of his work, but perhaps most pointedly in *Representations of the Intellectual* in which he offers in effect a brief for the ethical and lively conduct of intellectual life. The book is crisp, concise, small in size—the perfect companion to cram into your backpack between your toothbrush and your bottle of water, and as necessary to daily survival as either of those."

The author of a book that Ayers deems as having the value normally assigned a religious text is the highly controversial late Columbia professor and member of the PLO's Palestinian National Council—until he resigned in protest of Yasser Arafat's too moderate stance toward Israel. Furthermore, Said's scholarship on Palestinian affairs has nothing to do with education.

Nonetheless, Ayers cites Said to expostulate on "the requirement to search out and fight for relative independence from all manner of social and institutional pressures, to authentically choose oneself against a hard wall of facts." More bewildering, nonsensical statements follow, like one on intellectuals, who "represent something to their audiences, and in so doing represent themselves to themselves."

² This syllabus was for the Spring 2008 class. A slightly different version for Spring 2006 was also received.

Ayers' own thoughts then follow in these twelve pages to explicate Said: for example, "Each of us is out there on our own, with our own minds and our own hearts, our ability to empathize, to touch and to feel, to recognize humanity in its many unexpected postures, to construct our own standards of truth about human suffering that must be upheld despite everything."

Such rambling nonsense perhaps is intended to justify the fact that Ayers will offer no tools for students in this area. But first he must question the validity of the endeavor: "Within our disputed spaces objectivity is not a self-evident good." In fact, according to Ayers, "In education a sentence that begins, 'The research say. . . ' is too often meant to silence debate. It evokes Science, which is assumed to be larger than life; the expected response is awe and genuflection." Rather than qualifying the research, as most researchers do, Ayers dispenses with it altogether and brings in a personal example: "a principal in Chicago, resisting the idea of bringing in a literature unit based on rap poetry, told me that there is no research that links studying rap with improved test scores." Ayers takes the principal to task for calling Ayers' rejoinder that *Romeo and Juliet* had not been proven to increase test scores either as "ridiculous."

To most, the principal's response would be the logical one, with the contrast between the gain in terms of vocabulary, history, understanding of poetic form, and complexity of ideas from reading Shakespeare, opposed to the vile doggerel heard on the ghetto street every day, as obvious. Ayers not only rejects the research that repeatedly demonstrates that teachers' knowledge of the subject and classroom discipline are keys to student success, but common standards and common sense.

Ayers betrays his agenda by revealing his view that the only legitimate role of research is "research for social justice," and the only legitimate questions to ask include, "What are the issues that marginalized or disadvantaged people speak of with excitement, anger, fear, or hope?"

Instead of methodology, Ayers offers that "Researchers peer into the unknown and cultivate habits of vigilance and awareness, a radical openness, as we continually remind ourselves that in an infinite and expanding universe our ignorance is vast, our finiteness itself all the challenge we should need to propel ourselves forward. Knowing this, we nourish an imagination that's defiant and limitless, and like the color blue or love or friendship, impossible to define without a maiming reductiveness." Ayers, through such rhetorical ploys, simply says that it is impossible to evaluate teachers or students.

Nonetheless, according to Ayers, teachers will learn to ask themselves questions about "What will invite people to become more aware, more critical, creative, active and productive, more free?" The place to begin is "by recognizing that 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 and hammered by the unique experiences of living.”

Aside from the radical agenda--the use of education students as revolutionary functionaries in the manner of Freire with his peasants—one must stop and pause at the language used by someone with the title, “Distinguished Professor.”

Do Illinois taxpayers want someone who displays contempt for his profession, who undermines the ideals of freedom and democracy, and who works to keep inner-city children in ignorance? Certainly, Ayers violates the foundational idea expressed by John Adams: “The preservation of the means of knowledge among the lowest ranks is of more importance to the public than all the property of all the rich men in the country.” Ayers, however, appears to have provided himself with a comfortable living through the exploitation of the “lowest ranks.”

From Cliff Kincaid's introduction to Mary Grabar's report, ***The Extreme Make-Over of William Ayers: How a Communist Terrorist Became a "Distinguished" Professor of Education:***

Everyone should know by now that Bill Ayers, who served on the board of an educational foundation with Barack Obama, was a communist terrorist whose organization, the Weather Underground, targeted government facilities, especially police stations, with bombs and violence. The Weather Underground was the outcome of the Weatherman and the SDS, groups which disrupted educational activities on many college campuses in the name of fighting U.S. "imperialism" and openly agitating for a communist victory in the Vietnam War.

This expert analysis by Mary Grabar, a conservative Professor of English, makes it plain that Ayers is still a communist and that his goals are the same. What has changed is his method of operation. Instead of planting bombs in government buildings, he is now planting bombs in students' minds. These bombs are designed to destroy the history of America as a nation that has not only freed its own citizens but has freed other peoples and nations from totalitarian control, slavery and death.

Grabar provides the evidence that parents and concerned citizens will need, not only to challenge the notion that Bill Ayers deserves to be in any position to "educate" students, but to challenge the growing influence he is having through various academic associations.

For the first time, in a comprehensive fashion, Grabar systematically examines the Ayers approach, based on what he has himself written and said. She goes through his books, writings and statements, concluding that he is, in effect, attempting to carry out a communist revolution through educational channels. But in order to grasp the insidious nature of this process, one must understand that the Ayers notion of education is quite different than our own. He does not intend for students to learn anything in the traditional sense, and does not believe that teachers should impart any real knowledge. In fact, he seems opposed to learning anything of real value about the American system or even the global economy that could help students get actual jobs. Instead, he wants them to undergo a transformation that will make them into revolutionary activists like he was and is.

Grabar offers the proof to student parents, as well as administrators, that Ayers is a direct threat to academic standards and discipline, not to mention the investment of huge amounts of money that have been predicated upon the notion that a college or university education will produce students with marketable skills. This may be the traditional purpose of "higher education," but it's not Ayers' purpose.