

Book Review

Teaching in Mind: How Teacher Thinking Shapes Information

by Judith Lloyd Yero

Reviewed by Laura Szmuch

There are many excellent books about teaching available. However, seldom have I read a book that reflected the state of the present educational situation in the United States so clearly. In *Teaching in Mind: How Teacher Thinking Shapes Education*, Judith Lloyd Yero analyzes the present state of affairs in a very honest and straightforward way, discussing common myths and beliefs about educational issues such as teaching, learning, curricula, and standards. She shifts the emphasis from things to people—from the excessive attention to “the curriculum, the schedule, the arrangement of desks in the classroom, teaching methodologies, motivating students, assessing knowledge, to a real **empowering** of the teachers. Yero moves up the ladder of the Neurological Levels pyramid, and claims that in order to create meaningful change in the system, educators must move beyond the environment, behaviour or capabilities and reflect on the beliefs and values that motivate certain behaviours or decisions.

Einstein said we can't solve a problem on the same level where it originated. In this enlightening book, the author encourages teachers to shift their focus inward—to appreciate

how influential they are in shaping the lives of their students and take time to reflect on their purpose as teachers. Without that reflection, educational reform is condemned to maintaining a status quo—focusing changes solely on **what** people should learn (new curricula) and **how** they should learn it (new teaching methodologies) rather than on the human factors. In other words, they will continue to create small and superficial changes so that nothing of importance really changes. Teachers are often ignored in these decisions, and “the experts” (educational theorists and reformers) propose changes that in many cases are not viable in the working classroom. They “rush teachers to implement new programs without considering the belief/value system upon which they rest.” However, the real experts, according to Yero, are the teachers themselves. The teachers who are in contact with the students and the teaching material day after day, quite illogically, have to constantly wait for external validation of what they do. They are expected to conform to rules that are often not congruent with their own beliefs and values. This occurs because the system deals with standards and educational

“packages,” rather than the real people who take part in the process. A real and lasting improvement of the educational system must start at a higher level, and consequently, that change will affect the levels of environment, behaviour, and capabilities in a more mindful way.

One of the most important presuppositions in Judith's work is that **there is only one thing that people have the power to directly change—their own behaviour**. She insists that a change in behaviour can be facilitated by an examination of the underlying beliefs that motivate us. And for teachers, looking inwards and examining their beliefs and values and the metaphors they attach to education is of utmost importance. It is essential for them to understand how they may unconsciously undermine externally imposed theories and practices that are not consistent with their hearts and minds.

In *Teaching In Mind*, Yero very skillfully argues the need for introspection, and suggests a close examination of the readers' beliefs and values and the metaphors that we use that give origin to our beliefs. She only suggests awareness, never judgement.

She considers that knowing exactly where we are is the first step in deciding mindfully what changes are possible to get to our ideal teaching situation.

From the focus on awareness at the beginning of the book, she moves the reader to “doing” something. There is an explicit request from the author for the reader to commit to doing the included processes while reading the book. There are some really interesting reflection activities in the Self-Inventory section at the end of the book, so that rather than “nibbling round the edges,” we can really “digest” the material.

The chapters where Yero analyzes metaphors—metaphors about teaching, institutional metaphors, and

a teacher’s personal metaphors—are superbly woven. She lists the typical metaphors used in connection with education and cleverly explains how the same metaphor can have different meanings and entailments depending on the world view of the person who uses them. She goes beyond that to suggest ways to acquire new metaphors that may expand perception. She discusses, for example, how a teacher’s performance may change when instead of seeing herself as a *transmitter* of content she becomes an *organizer* of content so students can learn it on their own and in their personal learning style.

What do individual teachers believe about the learning process itself? Teachers will behave in completely

different ways if they perceive, for example, the mind as a *container*, the mind as a *container plus processor*, or the mind as a *modifiable information processor*. What does the word “understand” mean to the teacher? How do teachers expect students to show they have understood a new topic? What is “knowledge”? Is it something to be *given* to students by the teacher? Is it subjective experience? Is there objective truth out there? What about the cognitive processes that create knowledge?

Another important presupposition in the book is that **every teacher makes a difference**. Consequently, what teachers believe about themselves, their students, their subject, the educational system, and the purpose of education affect

and effect what they actually do in class *with* or *to* their students.

And what does the teacher understand by *education*? Is *education* what a teacher does or what a student learns? Can teachers cover all the topics in the curriculum and still teach in depth? Does preparing students to pass tests insure that they are really learning?

The author points out that the way teachers perceive students requires "a foreground/background shift in thinking." When the language of education focuses on groups, how can a teacher perceive individuals? Does the teacher acknowledge the absolute uniqueness of every individual? Are students "flawed" and in need of "fixing" or should a teacher improve

what is already working well? Are schools *organizations, communities*, or something else?

According to the author, apart from becoming motivated to change what is not functional, teachers could also spend time analyzing what they do really well "to build on that excellence." The goal of the book is to awaken and encourage teachers to feel free to act on their visions in spite of the pressure the system creates.

What is needed nowadays is a shared vision about the purpose of education. When teachers start their careers they go into their classrooms "aglow with promise and idealism." However, the system and conventional wisdom wear them down. The author suggests teachers get in touch

with their original beliefs about education and move towards their vision of the ideal teaching situation. Yet, there are some factors that work against teachers doing what they believe is in the best interest of their students.

- *The more a teacher improves, the more apparent it is there is more to be improved.*
- *The more teachers are recognized for their success, the more criticism those teachers receive.*
- *The more successful a teacher becomes, the less easily others can emulate that success.*

Yero reminds teachers that one way to be brave enough to take risks, to try to do something new, to commit to improve and face obstacles is to have a sufficiently compelling vision. Although not every teacher will be ready to challenge the establishment, the actions of an individual teacher in an individual classroom can be extremely powerful.

There is an outstanding chapter where the author describes comprehensively the present criteria used to determine standards and draft curricula. She says that the Newtonian/mechanistic world view prevails in the design of explicit curricula. The purpose of many schools is still the transmission of disembodied knowledge in "small chunks." Standards are fixed in an arbitrary way, and every student is expected to reach the same standards. What a standardized curriculum doesn't take into account is that students are much more different mentally than they are physically. Children are more motivated when their

teachers have high expectations for them than when they have to memorize more and more material for a test. Students, rather than knowledge, should be the focus of attention. Authentic assessments should replace tests with “lists of factoids that can be machine-graded.”

Yero mentions a study conducted with millions of students at five grade levels in more than forty countries. The researchers found that in world-class schools, knowledge is pursued in “greater depth, so that content has a chance to be meaningful, organized, and linked to the student’s other ideas, and to produce insight and intuition rather than rote performance.” (1994-95, The Third International Mathematics and Science Study).

She also mentions the importance of the *implicit* curricula, which refers to what the school teaches because of the kind of place it is, and the *null* curriculum—what designers and teachers choose to leave out.

The Outstanding Teacher

What makes an outstanding teacher? In several studies, teachers ranked as outstanding by students are “teachers with high expectations, who listen to their ideas and their questions, treat them with respect, and demonstrate honest caring.” In Chapter 11, the author mentions some studies about

teacher effectiveness and student “success.” There are three factors that are significant in describing a teacher as outstanding: *teacher efficacy* (a belief in one’s own capabilities), *locus of control* (internal or external), and *pupil-control ideology* (outstanding teachers typically demonstrate respect, positive attitudes, flexibility, active interaction and communication).

Future generations will reap what today’s teachers sow

In the last part of the book, Yero says that the future begins now. No external authority can make the internal decisions and changes in the teachers’ minds. The teachers them-

selves must choose. "The task is possible once educators recognize and break free of the conventional mindset." She compares that mindset with a monster that "has gobbled up the enthusiasm of too many teachers and the love of learning of too many students."

It is time we adopted a different paradigm to re-humanize the educational process. We don't need to reform, but to transform. A big change in education will affect the future of our society. And this book inspires us to start right now.

About the author

After more than twenty years in teaching, Judith Lloyd Yero began pre-

senting workshops for teachers on the myriad ways in which students learn. During those workshops, she recognized teachers were eager to learn more about their own thinking processes. She combines a strong background in physical and cognitive sciences with experience in middle school, high school, and college teaching, and extensive training in psychology and NLP.

Conclusion

This book is a *MUST* for those involved in any kind of educational process. Teachers, professors, NLP, NS (Neurosemantics), and TC (Transforming Communication) trainers will find in this material a treasure to discover and enjoy. An extensively

documented book, it is richly illustrated with excellent and relevant examples of real situations which make it both pleasurable reading and deep reflection stimulation. This is definitely a book to be read more than once to muse on different layers of introspection. Although there are several NLP techniques "in disguise," all jargon has been dropped as the book is directed mainly to the teaching community.

The author says that what a teacher does influences the students in ways we would never imagine. What is left for us to see is how this great book will impact and change the life of educators of any field.

Teaching in Mind: How Teacher Thinking Shapes Information
Judith Lloyd Yero
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