Book Notes

TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES: THE CASE FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND MORAL COMMITMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

by Nel Noddings and Laurie Brooks

New York: Teachers College Press, 2017. 192 pp. $34.95 (paper).

As a scholar and an American citizen, I have been troubled by the recent US sociopolitical climate. On social media platforms, in the news, in the research I follow, in the workings of our government, I see tensions rising and stark ideological differences that threaten to fracture our public discourse and widen existing divides based on race, class, political affiliation, and other facets of identity. Not only does it seem to me some days that we, as a public, disagree more and more about what our problems are and how to solve them, but, even more upsetting, we are often unable to even grasp the basic perspectives of the people with whom we disagree. I am not exempt from this behavior. Even though, as a researcher, I've received formal training in how to interpret claims and evaluate evidence, I still struggle to gauge whether my disagreements could be driven by bias rather than by legitimate critique. I am easily provoked when discussing America's legacy and ongoing perpetrations of racial violence and oppression, the continued relevance of intersectional feminism, and civil rights, to name a few topics. Sometimes I slip into petty bickering even when it's clear neither I nor the other party plans to change perspectives. Thoughtful, productive conversation remains an ongoing challenge, perhaps even a moving target. In this immensely divisive moment, it is a skill that we all need to work to continually improve.

I don't mean to suggest that discussion must always be calm. The notion that people should be required to "remain calm" in order to be heard is a tactic often used to subdue the justified negative feelings of those who have suffered harm. Some issues, like human rights violations, merit a strong and emotional response to call attention to grievous wrongs being done. I find occasional catharsis in venting without scrutinizing my language among like-minded friends. However, when speaking to those who don't share my beliefs, I find it stressful when my anger outpaces my drive to listen and learn. It's tempting in such moments to write off other people as our ideological enemies and/or disengage from painful subject matter. Unfortunately, topics that spark such powerful disagreement—for example, the proper responsibilities of government, the role of religion in public affairs, or the ideal pathways toward social equality—are often key to maintaining a functional civil society. The only available option, then, is to attempt to face the difficulties and foster the kind of dialogue that can move us in the direction of change.

Teaching Controversial Issues: The Case for Critical Thinking and Moral Commitment in the Classroom, the new publication by education philosopher Nel Noddings and her daughter Laurie Brooks, helps us do just that. The book offers a way to begin thinking about how teachers can shift America's conversation culture toward critical thinking, which they define as "a dedicated search for meaning and understanding" (p. 1). It envisions K–12 classrooms as places for preparing a future American polity ready to rationally engage with divisive issues, understand opposing viewpoints, and pursue consensus.

Teaching Controversial Issues presents a view of critical thinking in which logic and reason are explicitly paired with emotion, and both are important components of responsible decision making, and in this way challenges the belief that our emotions break down our capacity to engage in calm and productive conversation. Although the book by no means encourages hostility or rudeness, the emotions that drive our negative reactions are, seen through the authors' lens, in fact essential to our development as moral critical thinkers and democratic citizens. Noddings and Brooks write, "*Feeling* motivates us by providing the 'I must' that pushes us to act; reason then takes over to direct, to optimize, our action" (p. 159). That is, if humans did not have strong feelings about issues of right and wrong, we would be less likely to act in accordance with the principles of morality—even if we could rationally understand what they were. If emotions motivate our actions, it makes sense that we might struggle to think critically and hold collaborative, solution-oriented conversations on issues we feel so passionate about. At the same time, it also makes sense that the authors stress the inclusion of emotion alongside critical thinking in educational settings.

Critical thinking, the authors argue, is a morally neutral skill that can be used as easily for bad as for good. While all students must learn to think critically, logic is insufficient if it's not guided by moral commitment. If students never consider the moral implications of their analyses, they could use sound logic to justify undesirable results. Noddings and Brooks draw on historical examples, such as the rise of Nazism in one of the world's most educated societies, to demonstrate that humans are quite capable of rationalizing atrocities. Therefore, they assert, we must not only teach students to sort, interpret, analyze, and evaluate information to make decisions—to think critically—but also help them cultivate the empathy, collaborative spirit, goodwill, respect, and passion for equality that will steer them toward morally defensible ends.

Teaching Controversial Issues focuses on the classroom as a space where students develop twin capacities for moral feeling and critical thinking by examining controversial issues with the goal of bringing people together and contributing to a healthy participatory democracy. The first three chapters make

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the case for building critical thinking, moral commitment, and the capacity to thoughtfully question authority as good democratic citizens. The topics presented in the remaining eight chapters—including religion; race; gender; sports, media, and entertainment; economic ideologies; class and poverty; equality, justice, and freedom; and patriotism—offer rich opportunities to develop these skills. Within each topic, the authors identify points of potential controversy and open questions they believe will spark productive conversation. Each chapter summarizes the salient points that teachers should cover. For example, "Capitalism and Socialism" briefly outlines the prominence of each economic approach in the United States from the Industrial Revolution through the Cold War, mentions major thinkers who have advocated for and/or criticized capitalism, compares the ideologies' core values, and then outlines the arguments that teachers can expect to encounter and recommends resources for lesson planning and further investigation. Although the chapters are divided by topic, many touch on common themes, such as the marginalization of minorities, social stratification, how certain ideas or paradigms have taken precedence over others throughout history, and the questioning of our national identity, legacy, and priorities.

Specifically, the chapter on race includes three subtopics: racial issues in American history, racial issues today, and race and education. Though "racial issues throughout history" could be addressed in innumerable ways, Noddings and Brooks focus on slavery and further narrow the coverage of slavery to specific historical events, figures, and themes they consider most salient. When discussing abolitionists, for example, they write, "Students should hear about the American Anti-Slavery Society, the Manumission Society, the Quakers, and the New York Vigilance Committee" but do not provide much context for why they selected these four groups (p. 47). They direct teachers to three specific novels about slavery and mention opportunities they see for addressing the most salient points across disciplines: how the public should interpret the significance of imperfect historical figures (such as slaveholding presidents) in history courses, the economics of slavery for economics courses, or the production of molasses from sugarcane as part of a biology course. The other chapters in the book are similarly characterized by this mélange of detailed examples and resources, apparently curated from topics of particular interest to the authors. Together, they offer a sort of condensed curriculum/resource list, seemingly intended as a point of inspiration and as a signpost for teachers eager to begin integrating controversial topics into their courses.

The authors also raise the concept of *educated despair*, or the cynicism and sense of futility that can occur when someone learns about grave, complex, entrenched issues that might seem irresolvable. They caution teachers that students may develop educated despair when they learn about the central role of discrimination in American history, the situational and generational poverty that compromise our meritocratic ideals, or the ways in which organized religion and/or military power have been implicated in harm as well as in good. Their main recommendation is for teachers to pause discussion when they observe signs of educated despair and return to the topic later. Although Noddings and Brooks do not offer much advice for helping students overcome educated despair, hopefully their work will encourage other scholars to design and examine ways we might do so.

It seems likely that some readers will disagree with Noddings and Brooks about some of the topics they raise or about some of the conclusions they intend for students to draw. Although the authors generally adhere to the principle that these lessons should be exploratory, ungraded, and not intended to meet specific content objectives, they nevertheless include some definitive statements. For example, in the chapter dealing with religion, they write that students should learn "that both well-educated believers and unbelievers share a belief in evolution and other fundamental scientific truths" and "that religion, usually thought of as a force for good in the world, has sometimes promoted evil" (p. 46). I agree with these objectives, but I can see how they (or others presented in the book) might be objectionable to some. Diana Hess's 2009 book *Controversy in the Classroom* offers a useful perspective on this dilemma.[1]

> I do not suggest that it is a problem that teachers' views influence these decisions [to distinguish legitimate controversies from settled questions]. Instead, I try to help them understand that people have widely disparate ideas about what constitutes a matter of legitimate controversy as well as what criteria should be used to make that determination . . . [and] how significant it is for teachers to make their decisions transparent and to engage in discussions about them with their colleagues. (p. 127)

Noddings and Brooks, then, have done as Hess suggests—offer us their assessment of the most important open questions and controversies facing our country and support their interpretations with multiple sources of evidence.

One issue the book might have spent some more time on is the context surrounding the classroom. First, questions remain about how educators may be better prepared to teach controversial issues or to teach from a moral perspective. Teachers may not have received any training or practice at facilitating discussions of controversial topics. Like any person, a teacher will necessarily be limited by their own worldview. How should teachers cultivate deeper and more nuanced perspectives on controversial issues themselves? What sources can teachers rely on to challenge and refine their own perspectives? After all, it is not only students who may be overwhelmed by educated despair. The authors provide numerous recommendations for further reading that could add depth to teachers' understanding, but I would be interested to hear more of the authors' thoughts about how teachers can shift to what may represent an entirely transformed pedagogical stance.

The book also only gestures at the possible barriers to raising certain controversial issues in the classroom. The authors urge teachers to "be aware of the opposition they may incur" (p. 140). Any number of obstacles might prevent teachers from pursuing controversial topics in the classroom, such as a strict standardized curriculum, administrator opposition to the topics, or family and community concerns. Though it is beyond the scope of this book to make recommendations about how teachers can resist external pressures when they wish to teach controversial materials, there is high potential for these constraints to prevent teachers from engaging with some of these topics.

On the subject of the broader context surrounding the classroom, I had questions about Noddings and Brooks's call to facilitate communication across oft-segregated groups, particularly between students with different family income levels. I don't dispute the importance of dialogue that reaches across groups. However, the authors' main suggestion for achieving this is a four-year ungraded, but mandatory, high school seminar on social, moral, and civic education, mixing students from different schools. The authors do not discuss many of the potential challenges of such an initiative. Adding a new structure, particularly one that involves all students systemically, is a massive logistical challenge. In the current climate of accountability, there is not much incentive to build in an ungraded course of this type. And although there may be segregation within schools and districts, there are also many homogeneous districts in this country where intradistrict segregation is far starker than interdistrict segregation. In these areas, an interdistrict seminar might not foster the diversity the authors seek. Of course, the authors do not claim that this seminar would be a panacea for socioeconomic segregation across schools, even if it could be implemented as they envision. Much room remains for others to devise innovative strategies for cross-class communication.

Noddings and Brooks are writing primarily for teachers and others who have influence over young people's intellectual and moral development. However, the volume is thought-provoking and relevant to people of any discipline and of any age. I suspect the authors would agree that as democratic citizens, we are responsible for continuously refining our own critical thinking skills, checking our assumptions, bridging divides to build productive dialogue with those whose perspectives and experiences differ from our own, and aligning our actions to "morally justified ends" (p. 158). The book reinvigorated my own commitment to habits of mind that promote increased understanding and collaboration and pointed me toward many topics and sources that I should study in more depth. I suspect it will do so for others, teachers and otherwise.

Teaching Controversial Issues is an intriguing and generative volume. It is not a comprehensive curricular resource, but it does summarize many fruitful topics of discussion and provide starting points and resources on which teachers can build. Each question the authors pose is thought provoking for adult readers as well as for students, and the vision they offer of morally guided critical thinking leaves the reader's mind buzzing with possibility and hope for the potential of educational reform. It is neither template nor how-to, but a spark—or perhaps a beacon guiding us to better public conversations.

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Note

1. I thank Eileen McGowan for directing me to Hess's work.

Reference

Hess, D. E. (2009). *Controversy in the classroom: The democratic power of discussion.* New York: Routledge.

LEARNING AS DEVELOPMENT: RETHINKING INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION IN A CHANGING WORLD

by Daniel A. Wagner

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Today, nearly one in five children, adolescents, and youth are without educational opportunities, with 263 million young people worldwide out of school (Global Partnership for Education, 2018). The most vulnerable children, particularly those living in fragile and conflict-affected countries, remain the most likely to experience interrupted education (Bird, 2009). And even for children who do access schooling, learning remains a major challenge. In this global context, initiatives like the Global Partnership for Education and Millions Learning seek to address gaps in education access and quality, often with success, even as international resources for education development work comprise just 2 percent of global humanitarian aid (Robinson, Winthrop, & McGivney, 2016; Tapp, 2016).

With the challenges and opportunities of education development work as its background, Daniel A. Wagner's new book *Learning as Development: Rethinking International Education in a Changing World* offers a comprehensive review of major issues related to education in developing countries, with a particular focus on lifelong learning among the most marginalized people. Wagner draws on his deep experience in international education research, policy, and practice, proposing a new approach to international development work that centers not on economic growth but on human development, measured through learning. Wagner is the UNESCO Chair in Learning and Literacy, the director of the International Education Development program, and professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania, and he brings to the book insights from his work in these various roles. The book is written in clear and accessible prose and will be especially valuable for students and research-