

Spring 2018

## Teaching Controversial Issues: The Case for Critical Thinking and Moral Commitment in the Classroom

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### Recommended Citation

Birdsall, Mary. "Teaching Controversial Issues: The Case for Critical Thinking and Moral Commitment in the Classroom." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2018, pp.89-93. doi:10.25148/fclj.12.2.009111.

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## Teaching Controversial Issues: The Case for Critical Thinking and Moral Commitment in the Classroom

***Nel Noddings and Laurie Brooks***

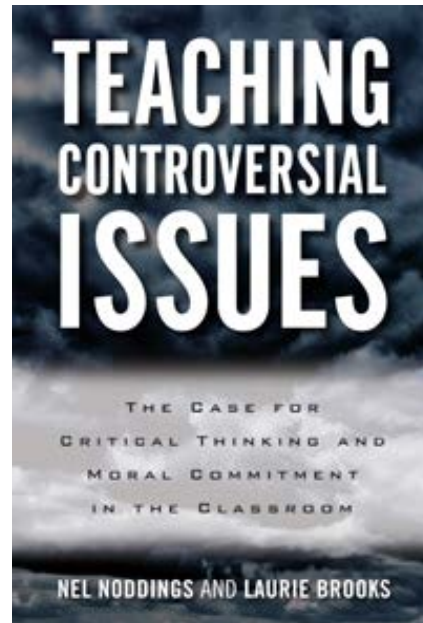
Teachers College Press, 2017. 159 pp.

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When community literacy partners work together with academic organizers, both groups recognize the uncertainties of risk, the importance of trust, and the necessity of clear communication in accomplishing their goals. Likewise, professors who use service learning must help their students negotiate experiences that are often unpredictable or uncomfortable. In both scenarios, conversations that spark reflection, untangle problems, and guide action are vital. These objectives, and their reliance on open, guided conversation, are central to a new offering by mother-daughter team Nel Noddings and Laurie Brooks: *Teaching Controversial Issues: The Case for Critical Thinking and Moral Commitment in the Classroom*. In this book, Noddings, an emerita Professor of Education at Stanford and prominent contributor to feminist care theory, and Brooks, a member of the board of Provident Financial Services and advisory boards for North Carolina State and Rutgers universities, point out that teachers today must help students cultivate critical awareness while navigating a minefield of highly controversial issues such as authority and obedience, religion, race, gender, and socioeconomic class. While Noddings and Brooks intend to target K-12 teachers, administrators, and parents, many community literacy scholars and practitioners will appreciate the ideas the authors suggest that enable their readers to more thoughtfully create room for co-inquiry, conversation, and examining resources across different disciplines and perspectives.

Noddings and Brooks' core purpose with this text lies in their dedication to helping students "prepare for active life in a participatory democracy" (2). To achieve this, they insist that adults not shy away from joining forces with students to examine complex and challenging questions. The authors advocate for critical thinking bolstered and emboldened by moral commitment, which, in their words, is "to bring people together—to help them understand each other in the fullness of their humanity" (159). Noddings and Brooks approach this task from an interdisciplinary lens, one that enables them to reach across and through traditional divisions among disciplines, genres, and media. This text provides specific suggestions for educators



to implement in their classrooms that help students practice “find[ing] a nucleus of agreement that will provide a starting point from which [they] can work together” to promote open communication and critical awareness (1).

In the first three chapters, the authors examine the philosophical basis for morals, the role of authority, and the importance of critical thinking. As they weave together a discussion of morals in the education system, government, and child development, they reiterate repeatedly the idea that “[critical] thinking . . . is not in itself a moral good” but that it “should be guided by moral motives” (32). They caution that teachers should “use pedagogical neutrality; that is, they should not tell students what is right or wrong but encourage them to think on each issue critically and to listen carefully to opposing views” (33). To illustrate the points they make, Noddings and Brooks direct teachers to examine key historical moments, figures, and documents, such as the U.S. Constitution, the Holocaust, and the more recent Black Lives Matter movement. In doing so, they encourage teachers and students to not ignore events from the past that have influenced current environments, values, and worldviews.

For service learning, literacy, and composition scholars, Noddings and Brooks’ attention to “conversation gaps” will be of particular interest. For participants in an active democracy, communication breakdowns, and the “conversation gaps” created, constitute a significant obstacle, and the authors note that conversation in democratic society is crucial but challenging to maintain. They acknowledge that “[language] is probably the most important influence on our judgment about social class” and even though it is somewhat shameful to admit “we know that we do draw . . . conclusions” about a person’s class by the way they speak (131). For composition professionals, this statement will bring to mind the persistent efforts made over 50 years—ratified by the NCTE 1974 statement *Students’ Right to Their Own Language*—that take on just such conclusions, challenge them, and work for greater linguistic diversity and validation. Noddings and Brooks here identify the continued need for such work when they admit that these links between language and stereotypes still linger. To them, encouraging understanding continues to be a challenging task. Not only do prejudices limit “free conversation” (156) with their cross-class assumptions, but even well-intentioned efforts to reach across class divides can be fraught with misunderstandings and misguided effort: “Many well-placed people who want to help in the larger society make things worse by taking charge and failing to invite the active participation of those they are ‘helping’” (56). To offset the damage that can occur due to these “gaps,” Noddings and Brooks call “for students to apply critical thinking and moral commitment to these issues and to be able to discuss these issues across class boundaries to help identify a wide range of solutions that will carry us forward to a brighter future for all” (123). This clarion call echoes that of Linda Flower, who similarly invoked the need for “attempts to confront the divisive and unjust effects of social disparity. The premise of community literacy is that such a rhetoric calls us to speak out *about* and *for* silenced voices. But, in addition, we are called to communicate *with* ‘others’ across gulfs we may not always know how to cross” (Flower 9–10).

Noddings and Brooks respond to “[deep concern] about the increasing gap in communication across social classes” (2) by offering suggestions for one way to reach

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across this divide: a potential four-year social studies course that would bring together students from all programs and school tracks, thus providing a consistent opportunity for students to communicate with members of other groups. Just as the group is dynamic and diverse, so too should be the materials: the course must be taught from an interdisciplinary perspective, the authors aver, proposing a range of topics, questions, and texts. Additionally, they point out that these suggestions can be utilized not only in their hypothetical four-year seminar but in firmly established courses as varied as math, science, humanities, economics, social studies, history, and vocational courses. For example, the authors advise,

Given our experience in math education, we . . . would be delighted to add Abbott's *Flatland*, Martin Gardner's *Annotated Alice*, a brief history of the Pythagoreans, or any of a number of books suggested by Douglas Hofstadter to our math curriculum. Similarly, science, history, art, music, and foreign language teachers could make suggestions that would enrich the whole curriculum. (2)

A biology text, therefore, could effectively be used in a music course, just as a musical text or piece could illustrate a concept in a science class. Throughout the text, Noddings and Brooks repeatedly revisit possibilities such as these. The authors' work in imagining the potential of interdisciplinary and multi-genre possibilities is perhaps one iteration of the suggestions often found in literacy studies. For example, writing and literacy practitioners have long been familiar with Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines approaches emphasized in collegiate composition and rhetoric programs. In this regard, the authors' insistence that such cross-disciplinary work is valuable harmonizes well with WAC and WID theory and practice, further extending their application to the elementary, middle school, and high school levels.

For Noddings and Brooks, collaborative approaches to controversial issues requires not just imagining potential, but clear-minded reflection on America's history. There is much in American history that does not live up to our supposed values of justice, equality, and freedom, most notably in regard to race and gender. For example, in their chapter on race, the authors discuss how many of the Founding Fathers either participated in or obliquely benefitted from slavery. This reflection will lead some to become discouraged or disillusioned, perhaps even causing them to question whether the contributions of those individuals should be discounted, even erased, from public memory or history. This "disremembering" or "active forgetting" (Glaude, qtd. in Noddings and Brooks 47) might, in some people's mind, function as a kind of payment for wrongs committed or unjustly tolerated. At this point, Noddings and Brooks offer a different option, encouraging readers to acknowledge the bad but remember the good:

Surely there are good, morally justified, reasons for remembering these American leaders. We should neither deny their contributions nor overlook their racism. It is dismayingly clear that people can engage in

both admirable and detestable activities. Somehow, we must recognize and remember both. (55)

Facing our history might require us to, in effect, rewrite it: to go back, look at the historical events, artifacts, and documents, and reassess how history has been written. In so doing, “topics that were ignored and suppressed in the past” can re-emerge and provide a fuller picture of those events (51).

This principle is also true for the authors’ discussion of gender and gender-based inequalities. On this controversy, both Noddings and Brooks speak from personal experience as professionals in male-dominated fields (math and engineering, respectively), and they compellingly address the situation of women in the U.S. both historically and currently. Community literacy scholars will be interested in the points the authors make about the key influence, for women interested in STEM fields, of having multiple STEM literacy sponsors in order to explore and stick with those disciplines: most women who actively pursue STEM fields have one or both parents also in those fields (70). This feature of active sponsorship is a significant part of community literacy study and projects.

Noddings and Brooks articulate intriguing ideas for interdisciplinary work, promoting active questioning, and focusing engagement on social issues; however, there is an aspect to this text that service learning, literacy, and composition professionals might find troubling: the absence of scholarly expertise when the authors discuss issues of language, race, class, and identity. Take, for example, the authors’ questions in the chapter on race:

Should well-educated Americans learn to respect Black English as we do other foreign languages, or should we insist that all students master standard English? . . . Should we commit ourselves to recognizing and respecting Black English? Can we do this and still encourage all students to learn and to use standard English where it is expected? (60)

These are questions for which there exists a robust body of thought, research, and discussion—so much so that the authors’ lack of acknowledgement of these resources might be frustrating. Critical race theory is never mentioned, nor the scholarship in the field of composition and rhetoric such seminal work as the aforementioned *Students’ Right to Their Own Language*, Mina Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations*, or more recent scholarship like Vershawn Young’s *Other People’s English*. Furthermore, the personal example subsequently included by Brooks of her personal dislike of certain Pittsburgh pronunciations (later alleviated, she assures their audience, somewhat by her reading an enlightening passage in the novel *The Twelfth Card*, by Jeffrey Deaver) leaves one with a rather uncomfortable sense of white positionality and privilege. When she notes, “I asked my son-in-law what he thinks when he hears someone say *axe* instead of *ask*, and his immediate response was, ‘They are uneducated or sloppy and too casual and probably African American,’” the authors’ follow-up to this comment leaves much to be desired: “We will talk more about cultural/linguistic issues in Chapter [sic] on Money, Class, and Poverty” (61). The later chapter, however, does not return to address the attitude brought up in this example. Such an omission

suggests that the authors may be unaware that they are entering a well-established, vigorous conversation, one that treats with great seriousness the effect stereotypes like this have in our society and on our students.

In all, community literacy scholars will be interested in what Noddings and Brooks have to offer in regard to conversational gaps and interdisciplinary curriculum development; community literacy practitioners will be able to use this text as a springboard for collaborative imaginings suggested by Paul Feigenbaum: Noddings and Brooks have “[modeled] possibilities of the future” in a way that will help “[guide] deliberations and decision making about both short- and long-term goals” (Feigenbaum 5). Even if the details are different than those suggested by Noddings and Brooks, readers are sure to come away with ideas about how to promote thoughtful, respectful conversation across divides. Too, critical examination of one’s own and others’ commitments, beliefs, and perspectives is a skill of ever-increasing value and importance. Given the diversity of our society and the centrality of open conversations to progress and peace, the effort to encourage space for such opportunities is a moral commitment we can all support.

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