



**Teaching Controversial Issues: The Case For Critical Thinking And Moral Commitment
In The Classroom, By Nel Noddings And Laurie Brooks,**

Book Review By

Sheetal Digari

Texas A&M University, sheetaldigari@tamu.edu

Introduction

The recent book *Teaching Controversial Issues: The Case for Critical Thinking and Moral Commitment in The Classroom*, by Noddings & Brooks, a mother and daughter duo, is an excellent addition to the theme of critical issues in school. Nel Noddings is a Lee Jacks Professor of Education, Emerita, at Stanford University, and has written extensively in the area of ethics and care, educational theory, and philosophy of education. Laurie Brooks is on the board of Provident Financial Services and serves on advisory boards for programs at North Carolina and Rutgers Universities. According to the authors this book “is an invitation to teachers to think and to explore ways in which to promote critical thinking in their students” (p.4).

Purpose

The timely publication of *Teaching Controversial Issues: The Case for Critical Thinking and Moral Commitment*, brings this book as a handy tool kit on teaching controversial issue in schools. An excerpt from the book aptly summarizes its purpose: The authors state,

We must remember, however, that our purpose in shaping young minds is to produce people who can think for themselves and, eventually, reject further attempts to control their decisions or prescribe the form of their rationality and purposes. (p.8)



To achieve this purpose, the book proposes that teachers initiate conversations on controversial issues in classrooms. The authors emphasize adopting an interdisciplinary approach enriching the curriculum. With their interdisciplinary approach, the authors argue against the “educational trap”, where people believe that a set of skills and concepts are learned and taught only under a specialized course. The authors support their view with a potent argument

It would be better, in the interest of developing critical thinking, to teach about science, about religion, and about the various debates both between them and within them. Further, the material comes alive in this approach, and students can see a point of studying it. (p.33)

Additionally, the authors admonish teachers about the challenging nature of discussing controversial issues in classroom, which might build up cynicism among students (p.2). Therefore, it is recommended that teachers practice “pedagogical neutrality” while discussing controversial issues as pedagogical neutrality safeguards students from indoctrination, introducing them to different positions on the same issue.

According to Noddings & Brooks, another approach to initiate conversation on critical issues is to address the communication gap across social classes. They claim that a 4-year series of seminars on social issues/moral issues for high school students would resolve the communication gap, inviting all the students to think collectively on controversial issues.

Relevant Literature

The genesis of Noddings’s enthusiasm for fostering critical thinking in students is also found in her previous book, *Critical lessons: What our schools should teach* (2006). Noddings’s earlier book on critical lessons delves into developing critical thinking among high school students through social issues. Here, she explains critical thinking as “the diligent and skillful use of reason on matters of moral/social importance - on personal decision making, conduct and belief” (p.32). However, in “*Teaching Controversial Issues*” (2017), Noddings and Brooks have adopted a



different approach. This difference is evident in their defining of critical thinking as, “critical thinking is best thought of as a dedicated search for meaning and understanding” (p.1).

In *Teaching Controversial Issues* (2017), the duo adds a new perspective on the theme of critical thinking. The central theme of this book is constructed around the argument that “critical thinking must be guided by moral commitment” (p.4). Throughout the book the authors emphasize that critical thinking is not a moral value in itself unless critical thinking is used for a common good, “deeper search for the truth” and service to the society. Critical thinking for individual progress and endeavors is not justified as a moral virtue. As per to the authors, for a kind and healthy society, critical thinking must be guided by moral commitment.

Noddings & Brooks’ bold approach of analyzing relevant critical issues from “an open system approach” (interdisciplinary perspective) reflects their ardor and commitment towards developing responsible American citizens. The energy of the authors in building their conceptual framework will leave the readers with certain uncomfortable questions like “what should we do when the authority goes wrong?” (p. 25) this book, clarifies and answer such questions.

Outline

The content of *Teaching Controversial Issues* is divided into 12 chapters, the introduction gives us an overview of the book’s design. First three chapters of the book are 1) Sources of Morality, 2) Authority and 3) Critical Thinking, these chapters provide a philosophical foundation on morality and its different sources, the role of schools to develop a moral conscience in a democratic environment, and the use of critical thinking for a common good. Chapters 4- 11, introduces controversial issues like; 4) Religion, 5) Race, 6) Gender and Public Life, 7) Entertainment, Sports, and Media, 8) Capitalism and Socialism, 9) Money, Class, and Poverty, 10) Equality, Justice, and Freedom, 11) Patriotism. The book concludes with the chapter on 12) Moral Commitment, reinforcing the central theme that “critical thinking must be guided by moral commitments.” Interestingly, Noddings inclusion of the prevalent social issues enables the readers to connect with their social political climate and the book’s context efficiently.

Noddings & Brooks presents the book’s content logically; I recommend the readers to start the book in a sequential manner, as the chapters are built on a sequence. The authors narrative uses



an academic tone and is backed by historical and philosophical theories with excerpts from famous cases advocates for teaching controversial issues. The facts and events discussed in the book are up to date and connects to ongoing issues in the country. Each chapter starts with a critical question on a social issue and explores its way through an in-depth analysis of the particular topic. At the end of each chapter, the authors provide recommendations to the teachers.

Yet, the authors have not fully explored the issue on gender. Chapter 6, on Gender and Public Life is focused on women, little is discussed about the LGBTQIA community, a critical issue in schools. Although, the book recommends teachers to initiate conversations for critical thinking and reflection, there is hardly any mention of activity connecting the abstract idea of thinking and reflection into classroom action. There is no prescriptive methodology in the book which can be applied in teaching controversial issues. Moreover, as was in the case of Noddings' previous work there is no data to validate the conceptual framework proposed in the book on teaching controversial issues in schools.

Nevertheless, this book is a foundation for teachers to understand how controversial issues can be integrated in the classroom. This book is also helpful for teachers and parents to understand controversial issues from a historical and philosophical perspective. As most of the book's content is written around students, teachers, and schools therefore, it is suitable for pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, professors, trainers, and parents. With this book, Noddings & Brooks have made a contribution in the conversation about critical thinking and education in school.



References

John (Jack), M. (2009). Critical Lessons: What Our Schools Should Teach, Nel Noddings.

British Journal of Educational Studies, (1), 91. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8527.2009.427_2. x.

Retrieved from <http://library.tamu.edu/>

Noddings, N., & Brooks, L. (2017). *Teaching controversial issues: the case for critical thinking and moral commitment in the classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press, [2017].

Noddings, N. (2006). *Critical lessons: what our schools should teach*. Cambridge: New York
Cambridge University Press, [2006].