

Democracy & Education

Contention and Conversation in the K–12 Classroom.

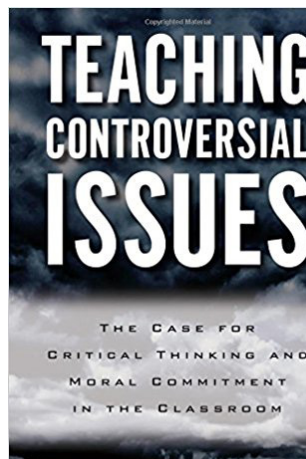
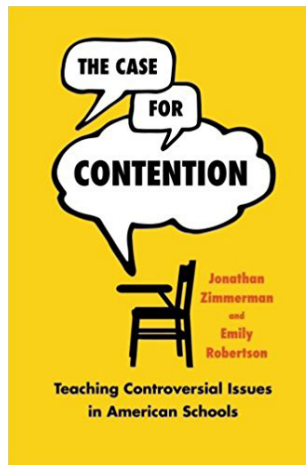
A Review Essay of *Teaching Controversial Issues* and *The Case for Contention*

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HISTORIANS ASSURE US that American political discourse has rarely been a model of deliberative virtue. But if survey analyses—and perhaps our own media-saturated impressions—are to be trusted, today’s public square seems especially lacking in models of respectful engagement with moral and political disagreement (Pew Research Center, 2014). Amid this backdrop, two recent books join a long line of scholarly arguments for a greater K–12 role in helping students learn to think critically about matters of public controversy.

Teaching Controversial Issues: The Case for Critical Thinking and Moral Commitment in the Classroom, by Nel Noddings and Laurie Brooks (2017), encourages teachers to promote critical thinking in students not only as a means to explore and evaluate arguments but also to better understand themselves, their fellow citizens, and the world we share. In this sense, the exercise of critical thinking reaps both interpersonal and intrapersonal benefits. The search for meaning is a foundational educational commitment here: critical thinking helps students to engage thoughtfully with the world’s moral diversity and to consider what they themselves believe.

Teaching Controversial Issues is organized into chapters surveying a range of topics, including religion, race, gender, media, economics, class, equality, and patriotism. “If we believe that the primary aim of education is to produce better people,” the authors assert, “then we must open young minds to the exciting ideas that have been developed in every significant facet of life” (Noddings & Brooks, 2017, p. 154). The texts and sources they summarize are a bit eclectic (perhaps inevitable when covering so



much topical ground in 160 pages) but can certainly serve as useful starting points for teachers as they consider how to weave these subjects into their curricula.

Noddings and Brooks (2017) are at their most helpful when identifying genuinely open-ended moral questions underlying these various topics, such as when and how to criticize authority—certainly a relevant theme for childhood as well as citizenship. “Is there a way to introduce students to the sort of thinking that will enable them, at the proper time, to criticize authority and not simply obey it? And what is that time? When and how should such criticism be encouraged?” (p. 10). These are rich and complex questions, ones that all teachers need to consider as they practice their craft.

Teaching Controversial Issues observes that cultivating mutual understanding among conflicting viewpoints can create important civic opportunities: “When we understand another’s position and the arguments that support it, we may find a way to compromise” (Noddings & Brooks, 2017, p. 32). This orientation of epistemological generosity doesn’t always emerge in their commentary on particular topics, however, where there is less emphasis on facilitating readers’ appreciation for the multifaceted complexity of many of these topics. For example, while religion has contributed powerfully to both

social justice and oppression, its role in the latter receives the

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preponderance of attention, perhaps with the assumption that students currently hold too uncritical a view of religion's role in society.

Noddings and Brooks (2017) describe their curricular approach as an "open system" (p. 1) that eschews preordained rules and definitions in order to provide room for students' questions and interests to shape classroom exploration. This open system approach also likely reflects their trust in teachers to take from the text what is useful rather than prescribe a rigid curricular framework. While I found the authors' resulting survey of topics and assemblage of sources to be frequently scattershot, other readers may view this approach as providing a rich palette of possibilities, both textual and conceptual. Certainly, the book's frequent attention to the ways that greater voice can be given to underrepresented groups and viewpoints is a strength worth noting and one that teachers can draw from as they prepare to engage students in these vital topics. In all this work, the authors contend, the goal should be helping students learn how to navigate disagreement and controversy rather than simply win arguments.

The Case for Contention: Teaching Controversial Issues in American Schools, by Jonathan Zimmerman and Emily Robertson (2017), provides a more systematic approach to this educational challenge. The first half of *The Case for Contention* describes the legal and social complexities of the K–12 teacher's role. Obstacles abound, much as they have in the past. Teachers were—and are—overworked, underprepared, and understandably reluctant to engage with controversial issues as part of their class curricula. Teachers have long felt they lack the community and administrative support necessary to wade into such topics, fearing as well that those murky waters will rise unbidden: "My pupils insist on raising questions," one teacher lamented. "The things they say continually keep me on pins and needles" (p. 19).

The second half of *The Case for Contention* shifts from historical survey to philosophical analysis and policy recommendations. It begins by providing a conceptual framework to help identify different kinds of controversial issues; the most educationally beneficial are "maximally controversial" (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017, p. 54) and entail widespread reasonable disagreement among well-informed citizens. Other social controversies, however, involve a disconnect between significant portions of the public and generally acknowledged experts on the topic. With this in mind, Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) explore the tensions that arise when the value of expertise held by a few people runs up against the democratic value of decision-making by all citizens, whether well-informed or not; such a dynamic, the authors assert, requires a more directive approach with students.

Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) consider three possible pedagogical stances toward controversial issues in the K–12 classroom—avoidance, directive teaching, and pedagogical neutrality—and assert that each has its place depending on context, an issue I explore later in this essay. The authors also evaluate a range of typical concerns voiced against the teaching of controversial issues in schools, including: teachers can get in trouble, students can be indoctrinated, families can choose to exit the system, and schools can lose community support.

Finally, *The Case for Contention* advocates that school districts develop explicit policies to support teachers in this kind of work. Such policies should emerge from ongoing collaboration among teachers, administrators, school board members, and students but cannot be decided by simple majority rule, if the rights of minority groups are to be protected. The authors also acknowledge the complicated tensions that arise when considering the relative educational interests of children, parents, and the state, particularly as they relate to parental desires to transmit personal beliefs to their children over and against the values advocated by their local school.

The Case for Contention offers careful and nuanced arguments for the importance of engaging with controversial issues in the K–12 classroom. It seeks to navigate a path between the very potent demands of local context and the value of deep engagement with the breadth of controversy inherent in our pluralistic society. Developing district policy on the teaching of controversial issues is itself a controversial endeavor marked by reasonable disagreement, but the need for ongoing conversation and collaboration within school communities is clear.

Despite their differences in structure, these two texts share some common points of emphasis in teaching controversial issues in the K–12 classroom. While both books acknowledge the civic imperative to prepare students to engage thoughtfully with moral and political disagreement, they also affirm and celebrate the intellectual value of exploring disputed matters—and the ways that analytical skills develop as a result. Throughout her career of scholarship, Noddings has asserted that critical thinking is developed by thinking about matters that are critical to students and society. And as Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) observe, controversy is embedded in many important academic topics—a "just the facts" approach to U.S. history or environmental science would be intellectually incoherent because "the facts" themselves always require vetting and interpretation. Critical thinking, interpretive complexity, and intellectual growth are inseparable features of a good education.

In what follows, I identify four important considerations in the teaching of controversial issues in the K–12 classroom, supplementing my own analysis by drawing from the perspectives offered by these two books. The first consideration involves the goals and structures—to what extent should the classroom replicate the public square and how should curricula be organized to best explore controversial issues? The next section analyzes a conceptual framework for deciding what issues our K–12 schools should label and explore as controversial. The third consideration involves the work teachers need to do in preparation for such pedagogy, especially at it relates to communication with administration and parents, as well as collaboration with colleagues. Finally, I explore the challenge of helping students navigate a fragmented moral landscape with its multiplicity of beliefs, allegiances, and sources of information.

Shaping Classrooms for Conversation

As *The Case for Contention's* historical and legal summary illustrates in sobering terms, the freedoms extended to all U.S. citizens

are not permitted full exercise in the classroom, either by students or their teachers. While many districts have policies intended to promote the teaching of controversial issues, contemporary case law views K–12 public school teachers as government employees whose classroom speech is “hired” by the school system. Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) concede that the academic freedom of K–12 teachers is appropriately more circumscribed than that of college professors, but they—along with Noddings and Brooks (2017)—insist that both teachers and students must have the freedom to explore issues of public controversy as part of the educational process.

While the authors lament what they view as frequently unreasonable restriction of teacher speech, neither text advocates that classrooms fully mimic the American public square: Teachers should “model, rather than directly engage in, the conversation appropriate among citizens in a democratic society” (Zimmerman & Robertson, p. 88). Likewise, Noddings and Brooks (2017) advocate for classrooms as training grounds for public speech; teachers should foster “family-like conversations that emphasize shared activity and shared responsibility” (p. 21) rather than procedures such as school elections and adversarial debates. Engagement with formal civic life, they recognize, can be a valuable complement to the public conversation, but it is not their focus. Cultivating mutual understanding across moral and political difference is a necessary precursor to respectful deliberation. Both books seek not to replicate the public square as much as prepare students for it.

But does a focus on the deliberative arts adequately prepare students for a civic realm marked by strident disagreement, strategic bargaining, and adversarial tactics? The short answer, I would contend, is no—even if we assert that there is no place in schools for learning Machiavellian tactics, active democratic citizenship involves more than deliberation. Citizens strategize, they march, they protest, they occupy, they resist. There is more to citizenship than talk. But talking is almost always an indispensable element. As Stout (2004) observes,

It is in democratic discourse that the claims and reasons of marching protestors get expressed. Protestors rarely just march. They also carry signs that say something. They chant slogans that mean something. They sing songs that convey a message. And they march to or from a place where speeches are given. (p. 6)

Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) concur: These kinds of speeches, even when wrapped in rhetorical exhortation and adversarial maneuvering, employ the deliberative art of reasoning. “Solving public problems cannot be wholly a matter of exercising political power. Being effective in solving problems requires figuring things out based on the available evidence in a process of reasoning with others” (p. 64).

So while the curricular visions sketched by these two books do not encompass the full range of important civic development—and neither text claims such—the narrower focus is hardly a flaw. The critical thinking involved in knowing how to make, interpret, and respond to arguments forms an indispensable foundation of democratic citizenship. Such interpretive and

communicative skills prevent more adversarial forms of engagement from becoming purely manipulative.

Shaping classrooms for conversation also requires recognition that traditional disciplinary boundaries sometimes hinder thoughtful inquiry. Just as critical thinking in general crosses all academic subjects, *Teaching Controversial Issues* echoes an assertion found in Noddings’s previous scholarship that social and political disagreements deserve interdisciplinary exploration (e.g., Noddings, 2006). Not only does such an approach enable teachers to assemble a richer array of questions and lines of inquiry but it provides a more authentic experience for students of how public problems are addressed in society.

This all makes good sense, especially as a broader approach to school curricula. But it may be that for some public controversies, disciplinary boundaries help clarify rather than conceal. Consider evolution, which Noddings and Brooks (2017) use as their prime example of a topic that should be addressed through an interdisciplinary format:

It has been suggested, for example, that matters of religion be sharply confined to classes on religion and that discussion of evolution be conducted only in science class. Where, then, will the exciting differences that arise between the two views be discussed? How will students work their way to a reasonable understanding when they are told x in one class and not-x in another with no discussion of the controversy? (pp. 1–2)

This stark binary, I would suggest, is not the only alternative to interdisciplinary exploration. Sometimes disciplinary boundaries can be useful in clarifying what questions are being asked and what methodologies are being used. Exploring our social and cultural disagreements over the age and origins of the universe might be a fascinating topic in a humanities or current events course, but doing so as part of a scientific exploration of evolution risks confusion about the process and scope of scientific methods.

In fact, it seems Noddings and Brooks (2017) answer their own questions about where interdisciplinary connections might be made most effectively when they advocate a four-year cycle of high school seminars focused on social and moral issues. Here is where the topic of evolution—not as scientific dispute but as ongoing public controversy—deserves attention: Why do fellow citizens believe what they do, why does it matter so much to them, and ultimately, how can we live together respectfully despite such disagreements? Such a seminar would often need to include consideration of religious perspectives, which suggests that these seminar instructors would benefit from specialized training (Rosenblith & Bailey, 2008).

We should recognize that this proposal to require a separate class entails both benefits and risks. Certainly, amid the crush of competing demands for curricular time, we could applaud the reservation of structured space for engaging with important social and moral issues. But this might also result in other teachers feeling justified in sidestepping controversial topics in their own classrooms, even when such topics arise organically and would add to student engagement and learning. One way to avoid this dynamic would be if teams of teachers worked together—planning

coordinated curricula and debriefing afterward so that interdisciplinary threads connect conversations across classes, with their fullest and most complex analysis likely occurring in the specialized seminar.

Employing a Framework for Approaching Controversy

What qualifies as a controversial issue is often a matter of interpretation and varies over time and place. Both *Teaching Controversial Issues* and *The Case for Contention* acknowledge these complexities, and the latter text offers a framework for classifying different kinds of controversial issues in K–12 public curricula:

- maximally controversial issues (public disagreements among reasonable citizens—e.g., health care policy);
- expert-public disagreements (disputes between experts and significant portions of the public—e.g., vaccine safety);
- disagreements among experts (issues not of major public interest—e.g., literary interpretations). (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017, pp. 49–50)

While this final category may seem less relevant or important for curricula aimed at controversial issues, both books identify these disagreements as rich ground for academic engagement and intellectual growth (as noted earlier). Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) point out that exploring disagreements among experts—concerning Prince Hamlet’s state of mind, for example—can help students gain valuable practice in the skills and habits of inquiry without the risk of community backlash that can arise when exploring issues of intense public dispute. Furthermore, they contend, “Understanding that even well-informed individuals may disagree is important for the development of tolerance of other points of view, a key democratic virtue” (p. 51).

The first category, however, is where the skills of public deliberation have the potential for greatest development in students. Maximally controversial issues can be “ripped from the headlines” and of obvious relevance to contemporary society, but even more crucially, they demand that citizens consider a range of competing perspectives. As Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) explain, the central criterion for determining if an issue is maximally controversial “is whether there can be reasonable disagreement among fairly knowledgeable people” (p. 74). Respectful navigation of moral pluralism lies at the heart of liberal-democratic civic virtue, and helping students recognize reasonable disagreement is a key step toward mutual understanding and productive deliberation.

Drawing on knowledge of their students and communities, teachers can identify which maximally controversial issues would be most fruitful to explore. Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) observe that some topics will be more volatile options in certain regional contexts—for example, disputes over fracking in rural Pennsylvania. If there is “emotional investment by the contending parties that generate substantial sensitivities in the local community, avoidance could be a reasonable strategy . . . There is no reason to gratuitously pick fights with the local community and place teachers or local schools in difficult situations” (pp. 67–68). Of

course, sometimes these regional conflicts are precisely what students want and need to learn how to navigate. Although neither book focuses much on pedagogical strategies, *The Case for Contention* offers here an elegant suggestion for splitting the difference in this dilemma: identifying historical parallels to the contemporary, close-to-home conflict that can be explored and analyzed with greater emotional distance and perhaps more potential to appreciate opposing viewpoints. While some research suggests that students’ open-mindedness may not always transfer across geographical or historical contexts (e.g., McCully, Pilgrim, Sutherland, & McMinn, 2002), judicious discretion in selecting controversial topics still seems a worthwhile tradeoff when the alternative might be the avoidance of controversial issues discussion altogether.

Both *Teaching Controversial Issues* and *The Case for Contention* agree that teachers should exercise what Noddings and Brooks (2017) call “pedagogical neutrality” (p. 33) when exploring maximally controversial issues with their students. This doesn’t mean teachers are disengaged bystanders, but the goal is to encourage students’ critical thinking by providing intellectual space for the formation of their own viewpoints. Pedagogical neutrality does not entail a blanket prohibition on teachers sharing their opinions either, as both texts point out. There can be great value in teachers serving as models of thoughtful conviction about an issue, particularly when they pair that conviction with a clearly communicated recognition of their dialogical opponents’ reasonableness. But I would suggest that the slope toward inappropriate influence can be slippery indeed. Is a teacher whose classroom walls display posters asserting “No War in Iraq” exercising pedagogical neutrality? Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) say yes, but this strikes me as qualitatively different—and creating a more coercive environment—than a teacher simply responding to students’ queries about her position on the war.

Not all matters of public disagreement qualify as maximally controversial, however, and the distinction carries important pedagogical implications. Both books contend that pedagogical neutrality is not always the appropriate stance: When an issue is “closed” (Zimmerman and Robertson borrow this terminology from Hess, 2009), a more directive stance—although not necessarily a more directive teaching style—toward the subject matter is warranted. Topics can be closed either because they involve a question that society overwhelmingly views as settled (e.g., “Is racism wrong?”) or because they qualify as expert/public disagreements as described in the framework before.

Identifying a topic as closed does not exempt it from ongoing critical analysis, as *The Case for Contention* acknowledges; much depends on what questions are being explored, and what learning goals are involved. Some citizens might argue that racism itself has tipped back toward an open topic, but the controversies are still more about what qualifies as racism than whether racism itself is acceptable. For example, Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) present the concept of White privilege as one that might arise as part of a broader discussion of racism, and they illustrate the range of arguments involved in its articulation and application to addressing problems of racial injustice. Many facets of these

arguments traverse contested terrain, and helping students learn to navigate and interpret this landscape is educationally vital. Where exactly teachers should shift from a directive stance to a more neutral one is itself disputed ground, open to interpretation (and, as I argue later, a decision best not made in isolation).

A similar interpretive dynamic is involved in the identification and treatment of expert/public disagreements, where a significant portion of the public disagrees with a clear consensus of experts on the matter. How do we help students strike the appropriate balance between acknowledging the value and necessity of expertise while not abdicating their own responsibility to investigate claims and evaluate evidence? Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) urge “a cautious respect for expert authority” (p. 3) and argue that “schools should dispel the derisive rejection of expertise that infects so much of our contemporary political discourse, on the Left as well as the Right” (p. 98). While their point is well taken, it would also certainly help if scientists—and especially journalists who cover science—resisted the urge to oversimplify or claim more than the evidence warrants and readily acknowledged the limits of their understanding. “Half of what we are going to teach you is wrong,” former Harvard Medical School Dean Charles Sidney Burwell is reputed to have told incoming students. “Our problem is that we don’t know which half is which.” While perhaps apocryphal, the story does underscore the provisional nature of much expert knowledge; yet today, the industry of scientific research production sometimes damages its own cause (Ioannidis, 2016). Zimmerman and Robertson acknowledge as much, even while expressing dismay over the blithe disregard many citizens have for professional expertise: “All the more reasons that our schools need to teach the difference between issues that are really controversial—because people of knowledge disagree about them—and those that are not” (p. 98).

Some public questions are simply not best answered democratically. As *The Case for Contention* points out, school leaders’ concerns about local community sentiment can exert undue pressure to offer a neutral treatment of issues that do not actually merit a balanced presentation:

The tendency to use local community sensitivities to define controversy tends to obscure the difference between maximally controversial issues and disagreements between some members of the public and an expert consensus . . . Instead, districts assume that all controversial issues require a presentation of all sides of the issue without any pressure on students to choose a particular point of view.
(Zimmerman and Robertson, 2017, pp. 81–82)

Falling back on the surface-level democratic sentiment to “teach all sides” and “let students decide” can be a tempting choice, but it paradoxically threatens to limit students’ analytical development by implying that all sources of information and analysis deserve equal standing.

That being said, I contend that an important pedagogical distinction exists between teachers identifying a topic as an expert/public disagreement and preemptively advertising it as such for their students. Teachers should be cautious about framing any expert/public disagreement as simply and conclusively closed,

absent a process of exploration and evaluation. Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) concur, endorsing Warnick and Smith’s (2014) “soft-directive teaching” approach, but nonetheless assert that some subjects require insight and analysis beyond the capacity of students and even their teachers. Even then, there is analysis to be done about the qualifications of experts and the social context that has spawned this category of disagreement.

Laying the Groundwork for Exploration

The “wild triangle of relations” (McDonald, 1992) among teacher, students, and subject matter is obviously the prime focus when considering how to navigate the challenge of teaching controversial issues in the classroom. But as both *Teaching Controversial Issues* and *The Case for Contention* recognize, pedagogical success often relies heavily on the work done outside of class.

Most obviously, teachers need to have the support of their administration—ideally, prior to classroom activities and with an opportunity for dialogue and clarification, if necessary, about plans and goals. Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) take it a step further, arguing that school districts, through deliberation among school board members, administrators, teachers, and students, should develop clear policies that both affirm the value of an education that explores public controversies and distinguish between maximally controversial issues and expert-public disagreements. The goal here is not to provide an airtight formula—there should be latitude for teachers to address issues that arise organically during daily conversation. But there can be significant value in building trust with school leadership, resulting in greater freedom for teachers to experiment with curricula and explore riskier subjects with students.

The benefits of advance communication and building trust certainly extend to a teacher’s relationship with parents as well. Here the relational dynamics become more complex; parents obviously have a legitimate moral interest in the ideas and values that their children encounter, but young people deserve the opportunity to consider and explore ways of life beyond those of their parents. With these considerations in mind, for example, do parents “have a right to object to the development of critical thinking and autonomy-facilitating skills and attitudes that might lead their children to become skeptical of their parents’ religious beliefs?” (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017, p. 63). *The Case for Contention* offers an even-handed summary of the tensions that exist when considering the relative educational interests of children, parents, and the state, and urges districts to establish policies that strike an appropriate balance. Here the distinction between maximally controversial issues and expert/public disagreements is pivotal; parents should have their views represented in the former, but when expert consensus exists on a topic, “teacher judgment and student rights prevail over parental interests in transmitting their own point of view to their children” (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017, p. 90). At the same time, Zimmerman and Robertson acknowledge the need to keep an eye on practical implications: Sometimes it makes sense to allow parents to opt their children out of particular lessons, if the alternative is either parents pulling their children out of school entirely or the

community becoming so embroiled in conflict that the school feels compelled to censor the curriculum for everyone.

One understudied aspect of teaching controversial issues in public school classrooms is the role of community goodwill—the cultural capital teachers can build among parents and other local stakeholders that gives them greater curricular leeway and, if controversy erupts, an opportunity to make their case before condemnation takes hold. Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) observe that Depression-era teachers in cities had more leeway for discussion of controversial issues than their rural counterparts, suggesting that urban teachers' relative anonymity allowed them to avoid scrutiny. In smaller locales, communities kept a closer eye on their schools, and teachers "faced ostracism and demotion, if not dismissal" (p. 17) if they broached controversial issues in their classrooms. But I suggest that we not overlook the value of familiarity and goodwill that veteran teachers can accrue in such settings, where they are known throughout the community and across multiple siblings, if not generations, of families. *The Case for Contention* itself recounts the 1963 story of Virginia Franklin, a veteran teacher from a small town in the Sierra Nevada foothills who was charged by the American Legion and other right-wing groups with encouraging communism and pacifism; her colleagues, parents, and community members rallied around her and ultimately dealt her critics a decisive defeat.

One aspect deserving greater attention in both texts involves the value of collegial collaboration. Zimmerman and Robertson conclude their book by asserting that we need to have more faith in our teachers, but this is too simple. Find the best teachers in a school and ask them if they trust all their colleagues to handle controversial issues effectively; not only will they answer in the negative, but they will likely acknowledge their own blind spots or ignorance about certain topics. Here we can draw on the work of Katherine Simon (one of Noddings's former students), whose book *Moral Questions in the Classroom* (2001) develops a rich and compelling vision of collaboration—one that honors the wisdom of practice that teachers bring to their craft but also recognizes that the pedagogical complexity of exploring controversial issues almost always benefits from multiple perspectives in planning and evaluation, if not in the teaching itself. Simon observes, "Isolating teachers in their classrooms—without structured opportunities to talk about the moral implications of their work—almost ensures teaching that is inadequate to the needs of a pluralistic society" (p. 219). Simon echoes Noddings and Brooks's (2017) advocacy of interdisciplinary exploration as a more organic, compelling, and enlightening approach to engaging with controversial issues. This is perhaps most effective when teachers co-instruct, providing students with multiple voices and varied expertise. But even if the instruction is not collaborative, diverse colleagues working together to plan, conduct reciprocal observations, debrief classes, and evaluate student work can help ensure that teachers are providing a learning experience more capacious and less subject to blind spots that we all inevitably have as teachers and citizens.

Navigating a Fragmented Moral Landscape

Liberalism is "a fighting creed," Taylor asserts (1994, p. 62), entailing a certain set of commitments to democratic processes and individual rights. The terms of those commitments, and the relationships among them, are of course vigorously contested. The diversity of moral sources and languages used to express and justify them—and arguments about how best to live together amidst that diversity—have only intensified in our increasingly multicultural and globally interconnected society.

The tensions presented by such diversity, and the risk of moral fragmentation it poses, are a worthy subject for consideration in any liberal democracy and its schools. The ways technology adds to the multiplicity of voices, and the opportunities for messaging and manipulation, deserve interrogation as well. These concerns appear to underlie *Teaching Controversial Issues*' critique of entertainment, sports, and media. In a chapter offering an especially eclectic collection of assertions and personal anecdotes, Noddings and Brooks (2017) rue "the increasing commercialization of all aspects of entertainment and the decreasing opportunities for face-to-face social interaction as the result of the digital revolution" (p. 80).

Teaching Controversial Issues expresses dismay over audience fragmentation in media sources—citizens hear wildly different narratives from a countless array of sources, and many of these sources are infiltrated by marketers seeking to influence every corner of daily life. Certainly, our students need greater media literacy. In fact, Noddings and Brooks (2017) likely underestimate the challenge in this regard. Brooks shares an anecdote about visiting a sixth-grade classroom to engage them in analysis of the environmental messaging in two different videos; she left feeling very encouraged about students' capacity to detect and evaluate propaganda. Broader empirical investigation paints a more sobering picture, however; Wineburg, McGrew, Breakston, & Ortega (2016) assessed more than 7,000 students' ability to judge online information and concluded that "they are easily duped" (p. 4).

Regardless, the concerns raised by Noddings and Brooks (2017) appear to run deeper than the bewildering array of media outlets of dubious quality and intent. Noddings and Brooks quote 1970s futurist Alvin Toffler (1970) and perceive his troubling vision as being fulfilled today: "The Super-industrial Revolution will consign to the archives of ignorance most of what we now believe about democracy and the future of human choice" (Noddings & Brooks, 2017, p. 95). Too many consumer options threaten to overwhelm us, and incessant, omnipresent marketing manipulates our perspectives on social and political movements. The center, it appears, cannot hold; we don't watch, listen to, or read the same sources of information and analysis. "How are we to engage in the business of democracy, to dialogue, to listen, to care about the common good and other principles of social justice," Noddings and Brooks ask, "if we have no common point of reference?" (p. 94).

As a reader, it is hard to know what to make of this question. If it signals the continued need for a fighting creed of liberal principles, this seems warranted as a counterbalance to the moral

pluralism of modernity. But if the concern is with the multiplicity of moral sources themselves, and the need to speak a moral language of the lowest common denominator, appealing only to reasons we can all share, the circle of civic virtue is being drawn too tightly. Instead, we need to learn how to communicate our values with one another without preordained restrictions on the languages we use and the reasons we give (Stout, 2004). The complications of moral diversity run even deeper than interpersonal, however; not only must we navigate diverse and competing commitments among fellow citizens in the public square but we must do so within ourselves as well. We are typically taught from birth what loyalty we owe to family, tribe, or faith. Learning to honor those commitments while also assuming the role and responsibilities of democratic citizen, cultivating bonds across those earlier loyalties, is an educational achievement indeed.

Noddings and Brooks's (2017) exploration of patriotism suggests a way forward. They seek to complicate students' understanding of patriotism's value and its dangers, urging an attitude that balances an appreciation for what is best in our national tradition with a sober acknowledgement of its historical shortcomings. But patriotism, they suggest, need not—should not—end at national borders. Noddings and Brooks offer the term “ecological patriotism” (p. 149) as a recognition that our well-being is not only intertwined with fellow Americans but with all who share the planet's resources.

There will be times when national and ecological patriotism conflict, of course, just as there are ways in which loyalties to family and community sometimes stand at odds. We are each a complicated mix of sometimes conflicting values, identities, and commitments (Pew Research Center, 2017). This complexity demands of us a civic multilingualism, whereby we learn to talk across the differences we have with our fellow citizens and even within ourselves. Can we better teach young people how to navigate among their multiple identities, moral languages, and moral commitments—some of which may very well be in tension with one another—in ways that enable respectful and productive conversation across public controversy? There may be no greater educational challenge for our schools and society.

Conclusion

This essay began with the observation that our public square and its discourses appear to serve as poor models of engaging respectfully with controversial issues. But perhaps the harsh glare of national politics has fostered an exaggerated sense of social fragmentation and distracted us from ways that citizens and public officials have navigated controversy and disagreement more effectively at the local level, both historically and in recent times (Fiorina, 2014; Justice, 2005; Katz & Bradley, 2013).

Our vision and practice of civic preparation would benefit from close attention to these smaller successes—lesser in scale, and often more modest in resolution. We should certainly still teach our students the ideals of deliberation but also cultivate an appreciation for the virtue of “muddling through” (Lindblom, 1959): acknowledging the likelihood of limited information, imperfect analysis, and the necessarily provisional nature of our

decisions about the shape of our shared public life. Such an incremental approach to communicating across profound moral difference, one less focused on procedural rules and ideal speech, might also feel more familiar and authentic to students—conversation rather than conclusions, appreciation rather than resolution.

Teaching students to muddle through, seeking to better appreciate their fellow citizens, would likely resonate with the authors of *Teaching Controversial Issues* and *The Case for Contention*. The cultivation of mutual understanding “may prompt greater willingness to engage in continuing discussion and less temptation to vilify the opposition” (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017, p. 71), and “we may find a way to compromise” (Noddings & Brooks, 2017, p. 32). A willingness to compromise, and the skills necessary to achieve it, constitutes a prime civic virtue, one that our schools could hardly overemphasize.

Here I would add a companion virtue—call it *accommodation*—that focuses less on establishing common ground and more on finding ways to recognize and honor what matters to our fellow citizens with whom we disagree (Kunzman, 2011). Efforts toward accommodation seem part of what Allen (2004) describes as civic friendship:

Not an emotion, but a practice, a set of hard-won, complicated habits that are used to bridge trouble, difficulty, and differences of personality, experience, and aspiration. Friendship is not easy, nor is democracy. Friendship begins in the recognition that friends have a shared life—not a “common” or identical life. (p. xxi)

The challenge before us as citizens of a democracy, Allen explains, is to contend with inevitable loss, sacrifice, and distrust—to find ways to extend goodwill and accommodation to our dialogical opponents, even when the vote tally doesn't require it and self-interest doesn't advise it. Allen asserts:

The real project of democracy is neither to perfect agreement nor to find some proxy for it, but to maximize agreement while also attending to its dissonant remainders: disagreement, disappointment, resentment, and all the other byproducts of political loss. A full democratic politics should seek not only agreement but also the democratic treatment of continued disagreement. (p. 63)

Attending to such byproducts is clearly not only an intellectual endeavor but an interpersonal one as well. While the full exercise of civic friendship may be limited in the classroom-as-model context, certainly the value of attending to the democratic loss of our fellow citizens can be explored through historical and contemporary examples. Ultimately, our ability to enact the virtues of compromise and accommodation depends mightily on our capacity to understand our fellow citizens, attending to what matters to them and why, and recognizing the ways in which the democratic process has created disappointment and perhaps even imperiled a sense of belonging and commitment to shared public life.

Exploring controversial issues in the K–12 classroom is complex and challenging work; done well, it requires of teachers not only thoughtful preparation and moral commitment but

personal humility and sensitivity to context. As *The Case for Contention* notes, it's the kind of work that draws creative and independent people to the profession and helps schools justify their claim as vital training grounds for democratic citizenship. Granted, neither students nor their teachers enjoy full freedom of expression in the classroom, as Zimmerman and Robertson's (2017) legal survey makes clear. Nevertheless, we must find ways to cultivate schools' and teachers' commitment to preparing citizens who can engage respectfully and productively with moral and political controversies. Our schools must be places where we learn to talk, listen, and live together despite our differences.

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