Book review: *How to talk about hot topics on campus: from polarization to moral conversation*

(Nash, R.J., Bradley, D.L. & Chickering, A.W.; 2008; Jossey-Bass)

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Today, the modern university finds itself influenced by competing interests that challenge the very role of the university in a modern society. While there is an increasing trend to see the modern university more as a vocational training school, graduating students that are job ready, there are still those who consider the true role of the university to be to develop a well rounded individual who can both think and do. To this end, many academics still see the role of the the university to be to foster an environment where it is not only possible, but encouraged, to have conversations about difficult, even controversial issues at all levels of the university from the classroom to the student commons.

The university has never before been so rigidly accountable for its role in educating students, whether through a curriculum married to KPI's, outcomes or the need to rigidly adhere to assessments paired to detailed rubrics. At the same time, the university is, more than ever, being pushed towards siloed education, in an attempt to prepare the student for very particular careers that demand very particular skill sets and lead to a particular (often one-dimensional) approach to exploring issues. In an attempt to be everything for everyone, today's university finds itself in the precarious situation of not actually graduating students that can think and converse about diverse topics but more often than not merely react and debate them.

In their book *How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus*, Robert Nash, Demethra Bradley and Arthur Chickering hope to do something that has been spoken about for many years on a national level in the United States of America, but never achieved at any scale: to draw out a clear, concise and actionable plan to facilitate the creation of an environment where the university can be a home not only for educated debate but more importantly for educated pluralistic conversation. *How to Talk About Hot Topics*, while motivated and written to address the challenge of initiating conversation on controversial topics at universities across the United States, is also very applicable to most universities regardless of their geographic location.

It is important to understand, from the outset, that 'debate' and 'conversation' are often confused with each other. *Debate* is very much a confrontational approach to exploring ideas, where there is a winner and loser as both sides attempt to advance their particular point of view. *Conversation*, on the other hand, is flexible, evolving and inclusive, allowing for ideas to be shared between parties and for opinions to change and develop on both sides. Generally speaking, debate does not facilitate the acceptance of other points of view, whereas conversation can.

What do Nash, Bradley and Chickering want to achieve through this book? Very simply, the authors want to justify the creation of a campus wide process for facilitating moral conversations about controversial types of otherness. Unfortunately, the university today, whether it is in Los Angeles, Perth or Dubai, is no longer guaranteed to be a haven for contemplative thought where competing ideas can be engaged through educated conversation. More than ever before, professors and students around

the world are far more guarded about what they speak about, default to debate or simply ignore big issues that are happening in front of them.

A case in point is the cancellation of the speaking engagement of the Breitbart News editor Milo Yiannopoulos, who had been due to speak at the University of California, Berkeley in an attempt to defy what many saw as the rising tide, maybe even epidemic, of 'political correctness' on university campuses. Because the 32-year-old Yiannopoulos is a self-proclaimed internet troll who has been accused of being racist, anti-Muslim and misogynistic, his presentation was protested by students and cancelled because it was deemed to be too controversial.[1] In the UAE, we find ourselves in a situation where the political framework facilitating objective expression of ideas exists but where those who might engage in this expression tend to exercise self-censorship, largely because they have not been educated/trained on how to facilitate pluralistic conversations about controversial topics.

How to Talk About Hot Topics is clearly a response to a national call in the United States for campus leaders to actively support a sustainable environment for informed political and civil discourse. On an even more general level, the book was conceived as a response to threats to academic freedom that are all too common today. It is about opening the door to creating a scholarly environment that encourages thinking about cultural difference, religious pluralism and the support of academic freedom.

How to Talk About Hot Topics serves as a timely bridge between the many texts on public speaking and debate that offer a means, albeit flawed, to facilitating difficult dialogues, and on the other hand the self-help and business management texts that instruct us on how to facilitate an effective communication environment in organizations. Nash, Bradley and Chickering were inspired by William Isaacs who, as they point out, talked about how the art of conversation has been lost today. What this book is advocating is the rediscovery of the art of conversation and with it a new campus culture: one that will ignite fires of conversation that might ultimately transform the lives of students.

How to Talk About Hot Topics is organized into three parts. The first part lays out the theoretical justification for moral conversations and through two chapters develops the argument for why implementing a framework for moral conversation is so important today. Part 2, which is comprised of three chapters, goes into detail about how faculty, student administration and finally senior administration can work together to facilitate and promote a healthy environment to foster moral conversation across the campus. Part 3, through a single chapter, addresses the challenges that need to be overcome to implement a framework for moral conversation. But it is Appendix A that may be the most important part of the text. In 13 pages, this appendix distills down the entire book to its fundamental core and gives the reader a step-by-step guide on how to implement a framework for moral conversation across a university campus.

How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus is written by seasoned academics and university administrators who are very aware that what they are suggesting in this text can be and is met with resistance even on their own campuses. To mitigate resistance to their thinking each chapter begins with a clear rationale. Chapter 1 is an introduction to the idea of moral conversation and the basic premises, strengths and weaknesses of moral conversation are laid out. Chapter 1 sets the tone of the book, outlining the broad topics that the authors feel need to be spoken about on campus. The chapter also outlines the theory and practice of moral conversation by clearly outlining the author's philosophical assumptions about the theory and practice of moral conversation. It is the belief of the authors that the world's most dangerous ideas need to be spoken about openly, honestly, robustly and respectfully because a liberal education is based on the idea of the critical investigation of contrasting ideas.

It is important to note that while *How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus* is a blueprint of sorts for facilitating conversation on controversial topics on a university campus, this will only become possible, by the authors own admission, if there is a change in organizational cultural.

As Nash, Bradley and Chickering point out, there is great resistance to moral conversations in the United States, leading us to ask several questions. How do the ideas of this book resonate and fit in universities in more guarded academic and cultural environments as in some parts of the Middle East? How do the ideas in this book translate into measurable outcomes? And there is the larger question of whether university administrations are willing to stand behind the faculty, staff and students who will undertake these conversations. Our fear is that for all the good intentions of the authors, the reality of what they are suggesting is more difficult than ever to achieve today.

Even with challenges obstructing the implementation of a model of moral conversation in universities around the world, the text does still allow the reader to step into the world of the authors and see how they have addressed opposition to the idea of moral conversations in their own institutions. What can 'kill' moral conversation from the start is to approach a conversation issue with an 'either-or' or 'all-or-nothing' attitude. What the authors are advocating is the acceptance of a point of view which accepts that no matter how 'outrageous' a point of view might at first appear, it must always be granted the right to be heard. The goal of moral conversation should not be to prove that a way of thinking is right or wrong but to ask open-ended, clarifying questions with the aim of understand the thought process of others. As the authors point out, the golden rule of moral conversation is to embrace a willingness to find truth in what we oppose and the error in what we espouse.

An obvious question is: what is holding back the adoption of moral conversation as a way to explore issues in academia? As Nash, Bradley and Chickering point out, the idea of moral conversation is premised on a very particular set of philosophical/political assumptions that at their core celebrate pluralism in postmodern liberal terms, which can be a barrier to the adoption of moral conversation. The second challenge is the underpinning belief of any moral conversation: that an indeterminate number of narratives, languages, perspectives and points of view can be treated equally. For many, this ardent adherence to pluralism and the moral equivalency of ideas is simply unacceptable on any level.

Through Parts 2 and 3, the text tries to create and exemplify a mechanism for the reader to make moral conversations possible on their campus. For moral conversations to be successful, no participant can have a position that one truth must be adopted by all. Truth for one group will not be truth for another, and moral conversation is all about conversations, not debate. Moral conversation is all about a process, which allows various interests to emerge that will generate more questions through the inevitable conflict of ideas. Moral conversations only work if all campus constituencies work together and cooperate to bring pluralism into practice. Inevitably, as Nash, Bradley and Chickering point out, success is contingent on new configurations of teaching and learning being adopted that will facilitate the desire to engage in conversation not only in the classroom but throughout the university in meaningful well thought out contexts.

As the reader finishes the last sentence of chapter 6, they are sure to be more enlightened about the process of initiating a program of moral conversation at their institution not only in the classroom but also at the larger institutional level. What the reader will be looking for is an easy, quick reference that distills the 204 pages of the text into a manageable do-it-yourself moral conversation guide; and this is exactly what Robert Nash and Alissa Strong have done in Appendix A. This Appendix summarises the core instruction of the book into 13 pages: it is Appendix A that truly adds value to the text and makes it work. Our advice would be to read Appendix A first and then read chapters 1 and 2, then 3 and 6, and finally chapters 4 and 5.

What we learn from Appendix A is *when* it is a good time to introduce the ideas of moral conversation to your institution. For moral conversation to work, it is important that a space is designated for the conversation to happen. Moral conversations work best when they are not spontaneous but planned with agreed-upon goals. Moral conversations need to be actively managed from start to finish and there needs to be particular attention paid to sustaining the conversation. For moral conversations to flourish, traditional power dynamics that exist in all university settings need to be broken down. At intervals it is important to take stock of where the conversation has gone, allowing issues to be dealt with as they arise. Finally, the existence of other ideas and beliefs need to be affirmed in the conversation and there needs to be a clear conclusion.

This is an important book that offers guidance on a particular way to support talking about (rather than 'debating') issues on a university campus; but there are great challenges. The suggestions in this book will only work if there is a change in organizational culture at a university looking to embrace moral conversations; otherwise, sadly, as is the case on most campuses the best we can hope for is the status quo.

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[1]   http://www.independent.ie/world-news/north-america/protesters-force-us-university-to-cancel-talk-with-controversial-uk-journalist-35417395.html