

Dilemmas and Decisions: A Critical Addition to the Curriculum

Patrick F. Miller

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At its core, Miller's well-researched, reasoned, and written *Dilemmas and Decisions: A Critical Addition to the Curriculum*, explores the distinction between dilemmas and problems. At first glance one might be tempted to use the terms "dilemma" and "problem" interchangeably with little regard to their difference in meaning, but upon reading this text, the moral chasm between the two is apparent. According to Miller: "problems have solutions and disappear as soon as these are found. Dilemmas on the other hand leave you with an aftertaste and a sense of regret about the rejected alternative" (ix). Throughout the book, Miller weaves in additional context to describe this distinction, leaning on philosophy, classical literature, secondary school education, and psychology to buttress his argument that instead of a pedagogical focus on problem-based learning, a focus on dilemmas would yield more substantive results, rooted in critical thinking, for students.

Prior to an exploration of the application of dilemmas throughout secondary education, Miller delves deeply into the philosophical underpinnings that delineate the difference between problems and dilemmas. While a solved problem inherently has no leftover attributes—it's solved—a dilemma results in a moral remainder "cost" that exists as regret or guilt (35). One particularly striking realization and discussion occurs in chapter 3, where Miller explores how the late adolescent period of development is rife with turmoil that characterizes a developmental dilemma. As late adolescents develop their own identity and navigate the choices inherent in that development, moral remainders exist and schooling should leverage those experiences to expose students to more intensive learning experiences designed around dilemma.

While defining a purpose for education is a conversation for another book—or, more realistically, a series of books—Miller elevates a very important purpose: "dilemmas and differences of opinions are the lifeblood of a thinking society and some of the essential prerequisites of democracy" (65). If, even in the context of burgeoning anti-democratic trends in Western democracies, a role of education is to prompt and promote democracy, meaningfully incorporating dilemmas within secondary education is of paramount importance. We need to move beyond the simplistic notion of measuring and designing learning to focus around the idea that the most important thing is to arrive at the correct solution, and to do so in the quickest way possible (x). Explicitly incorporating dilemmas into secondary curriculums will offer students the chance to leverage their own funds of knowledge (social/cultural capital and identity based) to the topic, and will allow for exploration via a conceptualization that better reflects the democratic ideals and underlying purpose of education.