Presidential Address 2008: Courseocentrism

GERALD GRAFF

WHEN WORD WENT OUT THAT THE THEME FOR THIS YEAR'S PRESidential Forum would be "the way we teach now," I was warmly congratulated for making an enlightened statement on behalf of teaching. Some correspondents praised me particularly for challenging a system that notoriously rewards research and publication over excellence in the classroom. As one e-mailer put it, "You've struck a blow for teaching against our overwhelming emphasis on research."

Beyond Teaching versus Research

Now, I'm always grateful for any praise that comes my way, but in this case it rests on a premise I don't accept. It's just no longer true, I think, that we give teaching no respect. On the contrary, it seems to me that the current academic generation, especially in the humanities, is significantly more dedicated to teaching than most academics were when I started out in this profession in the early 1960s.

Of course, there is one obvious way in which teaching today is literally devalued: the increasing replacement of the permanent faculty with poorly paid and overworked adjuncts. It's hardly an exaggeration to say that with the so-called adjunctification of academic labor, "the way we teach now" is for many with an eight-course load at three campuses for about sixty-five cents an hour. The problem is not that adjuncts aren't excellent teachers—many are—but that teaching is being reconceived as an easily replaceable commodity. Clearly, we need to fight this trend in every way we can, but I'd argue that fighting it effectively requires correcting the public perception that teaching still ranks low on our priorities list.

GERALD GRAFF is professor of English and education at the University of Illinois, Chicago, and the author of *Clueless in Academe* (Yale UP, 2003) and, with Cathy Birkenstein, *"They Say / I Say": The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* (Norton, 2006).

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.3.727 Published online by Cambridge University Press

It's true that the academic reward system still heavily favors research over teaching. But research and teaching are ceasing to be a zero-sum game, in which we must neglect one to pursue the other. What the complaints about the research-teaching conflict overlook is how much research now contributes to teaching and teaching to research. In the more than forty sessions linked to the theme "the way we teach now" at this year's convention, for example, the stellar quality of the papers and their presenters is striking evidence that teaching has become an object of serious intellectual inquiry in its own right, not a chore we put up with till we can get to "our own work." And if teaching has become an object of our research, we increasingly teach our research. With the emergence of undergraduate research as a national trend, undergraduates are being introduced to the more advanced conversations of the disciplines and becoming partners in faculty projects, a development that blows away the notion that research and liberal education don't mix.

I see other signs as well of a pedagogical renaissance, in which language and literature faculties play a leading role. These include the establishment at most campuses of centers for teaching and learning, the increase of courses on teaching in graduate programs, and the growing involvement of arts-and-sciences faculties in teacher education as well as in partnerships with high schools that aim to overcome the crippling discontinuity between school and college. Finally, there is outcomes assessment, a development that dismays and angers some of us, but one that in my view reflects an admirable determination on our part to be clearer about what we want our students to learn and more accountable in making sure they learn it.

The Limits of "the Classroom"

In short, then, the argument I want to make here tonight is not the familiar one that teaching is devalued, though it is as a form of labor in ways that urgently need to be addressed. The argument I want to make is that the way we *think about* teaching needs to change. At a time when amazing new forms of connectivity have been made possible by digital technologies and when much of the best work in the humanities has made us more aware of the social nature of intellectual work, we still think of teaching in ways that are narrowly private and individualistic, as something we do in isolated classrooms while knowing little about what our colleagues are doing in the next classroom or the next building. Indeed, we betray our assumption that teaching is by nature a solo act in our unreflecting use of "the classroom" as a synecdoche or shorthand for all teaching and learning, as if the way we teach now were reducible to the way *I* teach now.

Even though we are significantly more committed to teaching than we used to be, then, as long as we go on thinking of "the classroom" as an isolated space, the way we teach now will be largely the way we have always taught, at least since the rise of the modern bureaucratized university in the late nineteenth century. Though the content of our teaching has changed dramatically since then, the shape of the curriculum as a set of noncommunicating courses has remained unchanged, and there is reason to think that the quality of education students receive is determined as much by the curriculum's shape as by its content. That's not to say that good individual teaching doesn't matter, but we tend to be better individual teachers the more we take one another's courses as reference points in our own.

It's not as if there aren't proven models of curricular integration out there. The learning-community approach, in which faculty members teach together in smaller or larger groups, is the most familiar and well-developed model, but the increasingly popular practice of pairing courses—especially

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first-year composition and general-education courses—may have the advantage of being bureaucratically simpler and less expensive.[1] This tactic needs to be extended through pairings of courses in the sciences and the humanities and of those in ancient and modern periods. As long as such pairings aren't made, students in those courses will lose sight of the contrasts and continuities that define the sciences and humanities and that differentiate the ancient world from the modern. Every time a large period course isn't cotaught, we also miss an opportunity to bring together different disciplines and faculty perspectives.

Few institutions in our culture would survive long if their workers knew as little about one another's activities as we academics know about our colleagues' classrooms. I recently toured my neighborhood fire station with my five-year-old son's kindergarten class, and I was struck when the guide explained that each firefighter in the station has to understand not only his or her own role but also those of the other three dozen employees there. What a contrast, I thought, with our blissful obliviousness of our colleagues in other courses. And how ironic that we see our privatized classrooms as the appropriate setting for the lofty intellectual work we perform, when in fact our working conditions resemble those of assembly-line proletarians like the Charlie Chaplin hero in *Modern Times*, who know only their own small task and have no idea of the larger process to which it contributes.[2]

Getting on the Same Page

The isolated, privatized classroom that we take for granted was a product of the generous economic support American universities enjoyed during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century. In that heady economic climate, a university could evolve by expanding its playing field, proliferating new courses, fields, subfields, and scholarly methods while giving each enough separate space to ward off supposedly unproductive turf wars. To make a long story short, we became terrific at *adding* exciting new theories, fields, texts, cultures, and courses to the existing mix, but we've been challenged, to say the least, when it comes to connecting what we've added to what was already there and to itself. Interdisciplinary programs have helped make important connections, but ultimately they have reproduced fragmentation rather than overcome it, since interdisciplinary programs tend to be disconnected from one another as well as from the disciplines. And now that we no longer have the financial luxury to keep adding on, we need to get a lot better at putting the pieces into dialogue, which means getting on the same page in our teaching in ways we lack practice at and often find uncomfortable.

Exhorting you to "get on the same page" may sound strange coming from me, since, if you know nothing else about me, you probably know that I've been arguing for years that we should "teach the conflicts," putting our controversies at the center of our courses and programs instead of hiding our disagreements from students or revealing them only in fleeting glimpses. But I want to argue tonight that, though we certainly do conceal our disagreements from our students, we also conceal our *agreements* from them as well as from ourselves. And, as I'll be suggesting in a moment, teaching in noncommunicating black boxes helps prevent us from discovering that in important ways we already are on the same page.

In short, I believe that our experience of teaching in noncommunicating classrooms has made us, to coin a word, "courseocentric." Courseocentrism—like its ethno-, ego-, and Euro- counterparts—is a kind of tunnel vision in which our own little corner of the world becomes the whole. We get so used to the restricted confines of our own courses that we become oblivious to the fact that students are enrolled in other courses, whose teachers at any moment may be undercutting our most

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cherished beliefs. As my retired colleague Larry Poston has observed, there is something remarkable about the "almost entire lack of interest we manifest as a profession in what is going on in our colleagues' classes."

I was first led to think along these lines by an incident in an undergraduate literature course I was teaching in the early years of my career. I had assigned an essay that asked my students to discuss the meanings of a certain novel. A young man came up after class and reported that the professor in one of his other courses had said it was a serious error to attribute *meanings* to a literary work, a practice that confused literature with moral messages and propaganda. His professor had invoked the New Critical mantra that "A poem should not mean / But be" as well as its pop culture equivalent, the movie mogul Sam Goldwyn's statement "If it's a message you want, call Western Union." I conceded that there were problems with the message-hunting approach to literature, as the New Critics called it, but I argued that there was a difference between looking in a work for "meanings," which might be complex and subtle, and "a message," which implied something simplistic, didactic, or doctrinaire. I also suggested that the New Critics themselves not only frequently attributed meanings to literary works but virtually invented the classroom application of the practice. My student seemed satisfied by my response and went on his way, but the incident got me wondering how students negotiate elusive matters like the status of literary communication when they receive conflicting views on them from teachers. Everyone who has taught literature knows the problems students often have with our glib formulations of the "themes" of complex literary works, problems reflected in the C minus we give essays that fail to go beyond a mere plot summary of a work. I imagined that it couldn't have been a confidence builder for students who were already unsure how to locate meanings in a work to realize that whether they would be praised or scolded for the way they did so might depend only on which teacher they drew.

But the main thing the incident brought home to me was how little I knew about how or why my colleagues taught literature. My department had the usual staff meetings for commonly taught courses, but these generally addressed only a limited set of questions about the explication of individual works. Our syllabi were available for examination, but I could tell only so much about a course from a syllabus. There was a regular Friday afternoon colloquium in which we sometimes engaged one another on important issues, but for me these events weren't frequent or sustained enough to provide much illumination. Aside from department-party book chat and the occasional war stories exchanged in the faculty lounge, most of what I knew about my colleagues' teaching came from glimpses like the one I'd got from the student in my story, and how reliable such reports were was hard to say.[3] Furthermore, most of the time students didn't tell us about the conflicts between our teachings, probably because they didn't want to risk looking confused in our eyes, but also because they didn't want to embarrass us with the evidence that we weren't on the same page.

I reflected that learning enough about others' teaching to get on the same page would take a lot of time and would probably lead to embarrassing disagreements. If we knew little about one another's courses, it was mainly because we didn't want to know. It was not surprising, then, that instead of asking the faculty to get on the same page with respect to how we taught our subjects, the university assumed that we would all figure such things out on our own.

In this respect, my department and university were no different from most others, and though the disconnect between teachers may have been less severe in small colleges than at large research universities, my

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subsequent travels have led me to believe that most colleges have a version of it. Later I would read Laurence R. Veysey's landmark book *The Emergence of the American University*, in which Veysey argues that when the modern university emerged in the late nineteenth century, mutual ignorance was seen as a necessary means of keeping rival factions and interests from colliding. As Veysey dryly observes, the emergent modern university "throve, as it were, on ignorance." For, as Veysey explains, it was felt that clashing academic factions could coexist only if "the various participants were sufficiently unaware of the logic of the total situation in which they found themselves." Largely for this reason, what Veysey calls "patterned isolation" became the organizing principle of the modern university (337–38).[4] To Veysey's account I would only add that "the classroom," conceived as an autonomous space, has been an expression of this patterned isolation and a key means of maintaining it.

Figuring Things Out on Our Own

It was understandably assumed that individual faculty members would figure out how to teach their subjects on their own, seeing that people often become academics because they like figuring things out on their own and are good at it. I certainly appreciated my own classroom freedom and wasn't about to request that I be made to submit a lesson plan to a department head, curriculum committee, or district supervisor, as high school teachers were often required to do. And, being untenured, I could share the feeling of my fellow junior colleagues that the classroom was a relatively safe zone that would be threatened if our senior colleagues knew too much about our teaching. On my really bad days as a teacher, I was relieved that the train wreck had been witnessed only by my students, not the senior faculty or the deans. Still, I suspected that we exaggerated the safety our classroom privacy conferred and that greater transparency would ultimately be as safe for the most vulnerable among us as a curriculum that essentially let us hide out from one another.[5] I also wondered if the department's professionalism and prestige, which kept us from being lumped in with high school teachers, would be all that badly compromised if we did more to coordinate our teaching the way high school faculties often did.

Meanwhile, in the 1970s I began attending academic conferences, which had grown up earlier with the rise of affordable jet travel and become a kind of alternative academic culture. The professional conference scene (including the annual MLA convention, which I rarely missed) contrasted dramatically with my experience on campus at home. Conferences were far from perfect—there was much competitiveness, one-upmanship, and showing off of the supposed sophistication of one's work, which later became equated with its politically subversive quality—but even with these problems conference culture represented an exciting intellectual community of a kind I was not finding at home. Like the campus teach-ins of the late 1960s, the conference scene created a public sphere of intense collective discussion and debate, much of which addressed those questions of teaching and learning that had been relegated to the private sphere at home. It was not unusual for me to run into a colleague from my own department at a conference, someone whom I'd nodded at in the hallways for years but never had a serious conversation with, and the two of us would discover that we had strong common interests or were even practically writing the same article or book. We wondered why we had to travel hundreds of miles to have a conversation about the intellectual issues we most cared about, but the fact that we cared about these issues made them too risky to be aired at home. It was fine with me if some of my colleagues preferred their privacy to the kind of public-sphere debate I hungered for,

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but I could never understand why the whole university had to be run to suit those who wanted to be left alone.

Not everyone shared my enthusiasm for conferences—many of my colleagues found them alienating and on hearing my persistent gripes about the dearth of intellectual community must have wanted to say, "Get a life!" But the buzz in the air at conferences was a clear indication that I wasn't alone in feeling as I did. It was as if academic conference culture had come into existence to satisfy a desire for intellectual community that wasn't being met by the local campus culture. I also began to feel that I was learning more at conferences about the mysteries of how to be an academic than I had learned from my graduate school education, a realization that caused me to speculate wildly at times that our undergraduates might become more readily socialized into our intellectual practices if we got rid of courses and replaced them with a continuous megaconference with structured assignments and supervision. I would still like to see this tried as an experiment.

When I argued these points with my colleagues, they often scratched their heads and asked just what was wrong with leaving it up to individual faculty members to figure out how to teach their subjects on their own. The problem, I would reply, was that this arrangement really meant leaving it up to our *students* to figure *us* out on their own. The wishful thinking that kept the whole edifice in place was the belief that if we all taught our courses conscientiously, making sure our demands were as clear and transparent as possible, our students would make coherent sense of our diverse perspectives. The problem, however, was that, no matter how transparent each of our courses may have been in itself, as long as we knew little about one another's courses our students would still come away with mixed messages that would be hard to make sense of without more help than we were providing. For all we knew, at any moment we faculty members might be fighting one another and canceling out our teachings without realizing it. The founding theorist of learning communities, Joseph Tussman, summed the problem up most succinctly when he observed that all the courses in a program may be admirably coherent, "but a collection of coherent courses may be simply an incoherent collection" (115).

Curricular Mixed Messages

Besides the question my student had asked me after class about the validity of ascribing meanings to literary works, there were a vast number of other challenging issues about humanities study—including what we meant by "humanities"—that could only have been muddied by the clashing stories students got from the faculty. Our students had coped with these confusingly mixed messages at least since making the transition from high school to college, when what had been called "Language Arts" mysteriously evaporated and morphed into foreign languages and "English"—a term that itself was neither helpful nor self-explanatory. Now in college, those students might go from one teacher who was convinced that interpretations of literary texts could be correct or incorrect—or at least more correct or incorrect than other interpretations—to another who smiled or rolled his or her eyes at the naïveté of such a belief; or from one teacher who expected undergraduates to *analyze* literature by using a rigorous methodology and terminology to another who thought it sufficient if they learned to appreciate good books in whatever way was comfortable to them; or from one teacher who discouraged students from summarizing what they had read, telling them, "I've already read the text—I want to see what *you* think," to another who said, "I don't care what *you* think—I want to see how carefully you've read the text." No wonder when I assigned an essay students came up and asked,

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"Do you want *my* ideas in this paper or just a summary of the reading?" And I haven't even mentioned the discrepancies between the humanities and the sciences or those between both and the study of business.

Our classrooms allowed us faculty members to tune one another out, but our students didn't have that luxury. They consequently had developed their own protective forms of courseocentrism, adapting to the compartmentalization of the curriculum by mentally compartmentalizing us. I refer to the familiar student practice of psyching out successive teachers and giving each of us whatever he or she seemed to want even if it contradicted what the previous teacher wanted. Students thus learned to be relativists at ten o'clock and universalists after lunch. The faculty often complained about the cynicism of this shape-shifting act, but it was not cynicism so much as compliance with what was called for by the disconnections and mixed messages of the curriculum. Since these things prevented the faculty from constituting an intelligible collectivity for them, apparently the only way students could figure us out was one at a time.

Predictably, there were those who defended this disjunctive curriculum as a healthy cognitive workout regimen, an excellent antidote for dogmatic certainties, or even the perfect training for the ambiguity, instability, and unpredictable change of the twenty-first century. And the high-achieving minority of students *did* thrive on such a curriculum by making their own coherent conversations out of their courses. Their teachers' conflicting or incommensurable views on topics like how or whether poems mean were grist for the mill of these high achievers, who ably synthesized the disparate views or summarized their opposition. The high achievers saw through the curricular mixed messages to the underlying common practices of reading, analysis, and argument—what we now call "critical-thinking skills"—and thereby became insiders in the academic conversation. They cut through the clutter of jargons and methodological differences within and across the departments to detect the common argument culture to which their teachers all belonged, including even those teachers who used arguments to disparage argument itself as inherently male, white, upper-class, or Western and those who contrasted the bloodlessness of argument to the creativity of art.

These high achievers were thus able to detect the points at which their different courses and subjects converged, and they experienced the redundancy and reinforcement that all minds need, according to information scientists, to make sense of the world. For the struggling student majority, however, the discontinuities from one course to the next obscured this redundancy and reinforcement, with two disastrous consequences, I thought. First, their learning was robbed of any cumulative aspect, forcing them in effect to start over from scratch in every new course. Second, these students formed an exaggerated picture of the *differences* between faculty members and between disciplines while missing the common practices of argument and analysis that lay beneath. As taking courses for these struggling students became a process of serially giving teachers whatever they seemed to want—assuming the students could figure out what that was—jumping through hoops took the place of entering the academic conversation and being socialized into an intellectual community. In other words, the disconnect between courses ultimately reproduced itself in a disconnect between most students and academic culture itself. It also tended to widen the achievement gap between the high-achieving few and the struggling majority. As I would argue later, it was as if universities were set up for the students who were already closest to being educated rather than for the struggling majority that most needed education ("Assessement").

Courseocentrism thus went a long way toward explaining the apathy and disengagement

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.3.727 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that educational researchers would later find in reports like the National Survey of Student Engagement ("Quick Facts"). It also helped explain the finding of less well publicized studies that students who learn a subject well enough to get a good grade in a course on it often prove helpless when asked to apply what they learned to a context outside the course. In a study discussed by Howard Gardner in his book *The Unschooled Mind*, elementary and middle school students who had done well on tests that required knowing the earth is round reverted to their earlier flat-earth beliefs when tested after the course. Their learning was evidently so tied to the course in which they'd acquired it that once the course ended they quickly forgot it and regressed to their preeducated understanding (155). As my correspondent Jim Salvucci has observed, "What you learn in a course tends to stay in the course."

It wasn't that nobody was teaching the common practices of reading, analysis, and inquiry that underlay all the subjects and courses. Universities implicitly acknowledged the existence of these transdisciplinary fundamentals in requiring first-year composition. But, in another kind of radical disconnection, composition and literature since the late 1960s were becoming separate worlds with little communication between them, and this separation was deepened by the higher prestige, salary, and rank of the literature faculty (a hierarchy mirrored in foreign language departments, where literature courses were monopolized by professors and basic language courses were taught by graduate students and adjuncts). Since the hierarchical separation of language and literature instruction mirrored the split between the practical and the aesthetic uses of language, it reinforced another set of curricular mixed messages, about the goal of education itself—whether it was to get a job or to study things for the pure love of studying them.[6] As literature and composition went their separate ways and were joined by other subspecializations such as creative writing, linguistics, the teaching of English, and English as a second language, the term "English department" became a catchall for what in fact were different departments that had little to do with one another. The problem was not specialization as such, a necessary feature of any complex modern organization, but the absence of communication and coordination between specialties.

When I began studying the history of literary education in the 1980s, I realized that students must have been coping with curricular mixed messages since the emergence of the departmentalized modern university a century earlier. But up to the mid-1960s a genteel consensus had made academic culture homogeneous and predictable enough that the discrepancies students encountered as they went from course to course had been relatively mild. When I started college in 1955 and majored in English, literature professors for all practical purposes came in just two kinds—old-fashioned literary historians and New Critics. Though the two often quarreled, they shared so many assumptions about the canon and the aims of literary education that it was fairly easy for me to see what was expected of me.[7]

This consensus included the conviction that academic inquiry should be objective and disinterested and that it was unprofessional for teachers to bring their political commitments into class. As Ellen Schrecker points out in her book *No Ivory Tower*, fellow-traveling and Communist professors from the 1930s to the 1950s overwhelmingly agreed with their bourgeois colleagues and even their witch-hunting congressional persecutors that scholars' politics had no place in their teaching or research. In Schrecker's words, these academic radicals "were almost unanimous in refusing to use their classrooms for purposes of indoctrination. . . . This was as much the case in genteel Cambridge . . . as it was at the more proletarian CCNY" (42). Schrecker quotes Robert

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Gorham Davis, a fellow-traveling Harvard English professor of the 1930s and 1940s, who recalled that "we had a lurking feeling that it wasn't quite good sportsmanship to try to influence young people—at least to make use of our position in the classroom to do this." Similarly at the City College of New York "the faculty [Communist] unit actually rebuked one of its members who had boasted about how he had managed to insinuate Marxist terminology into his lectures" (43).

Nothing was more thoroughly debunked by the New Left in the 1960s than this Old Left consensus that the classroom should be a politics-free zone. Much of this rejection was reasonable, since the consensus had been based on a narrowly positivist view of inquiry that was already decades out of date. But the argument that teaching is unavoidably political raised ethical and professional questions that—as usual—were not collectively discussed but were left to individual teachers to work out on their own. The humanities split into hostile camps as bohemian academic radicals—a new social type that differed profoundly from the suit-wearing red professors of the 1940s and 1950s—formed a kind of liberated zone within the curriculum, often seeing themselves as internal émigrés, privately or not so privately in conspiracy against the faculty establishment. The disconnection between classrooms, which had not seemed a major problem as long as a tacit consensus gave academics confidence that they knew what went on behind closed doors, created new uncertainties and paranoid anxieties in a polarized climate where the political left hand didn't know what the right was doing, and vice versa.

The unraveling of the earlier belief that academic study should be disinterested and politically neutral is part of a now familiar story of how student bodies, faculties, and syllabi became more diverse, how heterodox theories and methods opened the university to perspectives that had previously been excluded or not imagined, and how a growing fascination with contemporary issues and media made universities less antiquarian than they had been and more reflective of the culture surrounding them. What has been less widely noticed is that this increased diversity and contemporaneity intensified the mixed messages to which students were exposed and thus made the post-1960s university more difficult to make sense of than its earlier counterpart. The 1960s are still often seen as having dumbed education down, but I would argue that, in the humanities at least, the post-1960s college curriculum has been far more intellectually challenging than the relatively tame and circumscribed affair I experienced as an undergraduate in the 1950s. In language and literature departments, students had to cope with a barrage of new theories, methods of reading, and isms, and though in my view these new ideas and approaches have reenergized the humanities, they have never been explained clearly enough to undergraduates, leaving many feeling confused and nostalgic for courses in which one studies only literature itself.

Again, however, I want to stress that, explosive and divisive as the substantive *content* of post-1960s academic intellectual culture has been, there remains a common ground with respect to that culture's fundamental *practices*, though the disconnection between courses hides it from students and teachers. Whether you follow Lacan or Leavis, you would not have got far in the university unless you had mastered the critical-thinking fundamentals of reading, analysis, and argument I mentioned a moment ago—the fundamentals of summarizing an argument, using it to make your own argument, and applying the many subordinate skills the high-achieving students come in with or quickly pick up. This implicit agreement on core practices—as opposed to the content of our ideas—explains why colleagues who are otherwise at odds tend to agree overwhelmingly on who the

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good students are. But, again, in the absence of collegial discussion of questions like how much or little we academics have in common, we fail to notice the existence of these common practices—until we are shocked to discover that many of our students haven't learned them. We then may blame this failure on the students or on ourselves as teachers, but we fail to recognize that our common practices have been made invisible to students by the disconnections and mixed messages of the curriculum.[8]

The tendency to overlook faculty common ground has been deepened by the culture war over canons, theories, and values since the mid-1980s. At that time, as I have argued elsewhere, we became so caught up in the conflicts over which books were worth teaching that we lost sight of the fact that for most American students—again excepting the high-achieving few—the great stumbling block has always been the culture of books and book discussion *as such*, regardless which side gets to draw up the reading list. Today we are still so locked in the battles between traditional and trendy versions of intellectual culture that we lose sight of the fact that for most of our students the great problem remains the nebulosity of intellectual culture itself. And again this is no wonder, seeing that the curriculum has chopped intellectual culture into disconnected fragments.[9]

I encountered this problem in a striking way in a course I taught in the 1980s in which I juxtaposed readings by the arch-traditionalist Allan Bloom and the radical African American feminist bell hooks. To academic insiders, Bloom and hooks are so far apart ideologically as to occupy different solar systems, but for some of my students, I realized, the two were virtually indistinguishable, both of them using obscure academic vocabularies to discuss problems that these students had a hard time seeing as problems. In a succinct summation of my point that Michael Bérubé made after hearing a talk in which I labored to articulate it, any two eggheads, no matter how far apart ideologically, are necessarily closer to each other than to noneggheads. Whether they are on the right or the left, intellectuals are defined and differentiated from others by their membership in a common culture of ideas and arguments, a common culture that our curricular mixed messages hide from students and our courseocentric enclosure in noncommunicating courses hides from us.

Teaching with the Enemy

I have tried to show how teaching in isolated classrooms leaves us knowing little about one another's courses and how this internal lack of transparency renders academic intellectual culture opaque to many students. I want in the last part of this address to suggest that these conditions are as harmful to the faculty as to students. Courseocentrism reinforces the insularity and groupthink that many of our critics charge us with, while it weakens our ability to represent ourselves to nonacademics, including legislators and budget makers. But the most damaging effect of teaching in isolation may be that it protects us from the salutary experience of dealing with those who disagree with us. As John Stuart Mill famously argued in *On Liberty*, we don't understand our own ideas until we know the full range of arguments that can be made against them.[10] By Mill's logic, teaching in isolation from our colleagues must impoverish our thinking, since it allows us to tune out those who are most qualified and empowered to criticize our ideas.

Even more pressing in an age of culture wars, the isolation of classrooms prevents us from discussing the urgent questions about the ethics of teaching that are raised by the view that teaching is inherently political and partisan. In my view, we can't and shouldn't try to return to a time when academics agreed that politics and the search for truth don't mix, and I doubt that even Stanley Fish's formida-

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ble persuasive skills in his new book, *Save the World on Your Own Time*, will bring that era back. Political advocacy has a legitimate place in teaching, for learning to form, express, and defend normative judgments in the civic sphere is a key part of education. But Fish is right that there is a problem. Unless views opposed to the teacher's are strongly represented in a course, many students are likely to feel pressured to agree with the teacher even if he or she encourages or begs them to disagree.[11] In my view, then, teaching politics as *debate*—teaching the conflicts about politics, if you will—is the surest way to protect students from being bullied by teachers.[12]

I'm not talking about assigning sexist, homophobic, or Holocaust-denying texts for the sake of balance—a caricature of teaching the conflicts that evades the problem of how we ensure ideological fairness in explicitly politicized classrooms. Nor am I suggesting that teachers must be neutral and never take a stand, though neutrality is preferable to bullying. The more we fairly represent viewpoints strongly opposed to our own, the more legitimate it becomes to advance our own views, especially if we teach with colleagues who oppose them, a tactic that allows our students a model of how we can be disagreed with. In short, to move beyond the kind of pseudo-debate in which one side wins easily or is made to look silly, we have to move beyond the one-teacher classroom, even going so far as to teach with those deemed "the enemy" (in paired courses if not in the same classrooms), seeing that few of us can represent opposing views as convincingly and fairly as can those who hold them. To sum up, then: (1) as teachers, we need to encounter strongly opposing views in order to think at our best and to prevent students from feeling pressured to agree with us; (2) we need others to represent those opposing views, since we can't do so adequately by ourselves; (3) our colleagues will normally be the others most qualified and empowered to represent those views.

These issues have taken on special urgency because critics of higher education, many though not all on the political right, have loudly denounced academic humanists today as politically correct thought police (or as their enablers), and these insulting characterizations have gained traction in the popular media. Many of us have reacted to these denunciations as an outrageous interference with our academic freedom, one that at worst is aimed at cutting off our public support. I would argue, however, that to respond effectively to these charges we need to become less dismissive and defensive and more willing to ask whether some of them may be true.

Unfortunately, in responding to the conservative charges, we too often deny or minimize the possibility that abuse of classroom authority is a genuine problem, evading the issue by accusing the accusers of being the ones who are motivated only by ideology. Thus, a mission statement by the organization Free Exchange on Campus dismisses David Horowitz's Academic Bill of Rights as "a solution in search of a problem." The statement goes on to suggest that the alleged problem is a fabrication of right-wing ideologues who are bent on imposing a conservative "ideological agenda on hiring, curriculum, and teaching through government or other outside intervention." In a similar vein, a pamphlet published by the American Federation of Teachers, *Academic Freedom in the Twenty-First-Century College and University*, asserts that "academia has come to the attention of powerful conservative interests because it has been perceived as a bastion of independent and liberal thought that retains influence over public discourse" (15).

Echoing this ad hominem line of argument in an essay in *Profession*, Doug Steward attacks conservative critics for caricaturing liberal-left arguments while he himself represents the critics only at their worst: "In their worst forms," Steward writes,

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.3.727 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> such anti-intellectual movements seek not merely to exercise the right to critique how universities run their affairs but to put the stopper on controversial scholarship and teaching, to defund the institutions sheltering controversial professors, and to institute a kind of academic unfreedom closely monitored by trustees, governors, alumni, legislators, parents, and affluent think-tanks with well-defined agendas. (148)

Even if Steward and the American Federation of Teachers are right about the motivations of those backing the Academic Bill of Rights (and of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, another conservative pressure group), it doesn't follow that the concerns of these groups aren't justified. By characterizing our critics as "anti-intellectual" advocates of "academic unfreedom" who would impose an "ideological agenda" by force, we conveniently avoid asking whether some of their concerns are legitimate. I agree with Mark Bauerlein, in short, who points out that this response to Horowitz and other critics denies them "any decent or honest motive," as if they did not sincerely "care about young minds and the curriculum" (qtd. in McMillen).

My own view is that though the conservative critics present a highly skewed picture of the problem of classroom indoctrination, they have not made it up. And I believe we don't serve our moral or material interests by being in denial.[13] To be sure, the shrillness and inaccuracy of many of the conservative charges of classroom indoctrination have made them easy to dismiss as an academic equivalent of the Swift Boating of liberal election candidates. For one thing, "indoctrination" seems a misleading characterization of teachers who don't engage in the soapbox preaching the word implies but who more seductively speak in class as if it goes without saying among the hip and the sophisticated that Republicans and corporate capitalism are vile.[14] For another thing, conservative critics jump too quickly to conclusions—and sometimes demands for punitive measures by state governments and funding agencies—from the circumstantial evidence of course descriptions and syllabi or of complaints from students who may be politically biased or academically clueless. Furthermore, some of the most widely credited conservative charges are canards, like the one that "dead white males" have been virtually expelled from required-reading lists[15] or that a repressive, monolithic political orthodoxy dominates humanities faculties. It's true that it is as hard to find a Republican on a major humanities faculty as it is to find a follower of Hélène Cixous on a professional golf tour, but it's not hard to find prominent humanists who defend the primacy of aesthetic over political values in the arts, and in literary studies a backlash against the privileging of power and ideology—or simply against deadeningly predictable political readings of texts—has been under way for at least a decade.

All this might be the end of the story if it were not that since the 1960s "transforming" the political consciousness of students has been widely defended in print as a legitimate goal of teaching, as is seen in such self-described trends as "the pedagogy of the oppressed," "critical pedagogy," "teaching for social justice," "radical pedagogy," and "anti-oppressive education." Having complained earlier in this address that we know shockingly little about what our colleagues do in their classrooms, I won't now claim to know that unethical classroom behavior is taking place on a significant scale. I do know, however, that what the advocates of these pedagogies say in print is often disturbing.

Take the still widely genuflected-to holy text of the movement, Paulo Freire's 1970 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, of which 750,000 copies have been sold worldwide, according to the cover of the thirtieth-anniversary edition, published in 2000. At first sight, "libertarian education," as Freire calls it, sounds admirably democratic, dialogic, and student-centered, especially since, to his credit, Freire often

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warns that libertarian education must not become merely a left-wing version of the "banking" model of teaching, in which students are treated as passive receivers of knowledge, and since Freire often urges that libertarian education "cannot present its own program but must search for this program dialogically with the people" (124). You don't have to read much farther, however, to see that Freire regards the program of "the people"—that is, the students—to be authentically theirs only if it approximates Freire's own liberal-left politics. If after being engaged in dialogue by a Freirian teacher, the people choose to become Republicans or to go to work for Halliburton, Freire can dismiss their choice as a manifestation of false consciousness in which the oppressed buy into the mentality of the oppressor. I agree with Richard E. Miller, who argues in a recent critique that "Freire presents the recipients of his pedagogy as coming to their own conclusions, as learning to think for themselves. He doesn't linger over the fact that all this self-motivated thinking leads his students to think exactly what he would like them to think" (19). Ultimately, Freire assumes that, deep down inside all of us, in our authentic being, there's a radical leftist trying to break out.[16]

To be sure, this assumption may have been defensible in Freire's work in the 1960s with Brazilian peasants, who seem to have considered themselves oppressed and sought out his teachings. But Freire's approach becomes worrisome when it is transplanted to North American classrooms, where it may provoke resentment or the acquiescent student practice I discussed earlier of giving teachers whatever they seem to want. By now, however, this approach has become an established field and thus free to disregard objections by outsiders. Versions of the pedagogy of the oppressed, going under euphemisms like "critical pedagogy" and "teaching for social justice," have become particularly influential today in teacher-education programs and organizations. Take, for example, the Center for Anti-oppressive Education, which in 2008 held its fifth annual international conference, on "teacher education and social justice." According to a conference announcement, some sessions focused on the "ways that teacher educators are preparing pre-service teachers to teach toward social justice," while others sought to "describe, analyze and model the ways that teacher educators are challenging oppressions and advancing social justice in the various courses found in teacher-preparation programs today." As these comments suggest, it is no longer controversial that a goal of teaching should be to "challeng[e] oppressions and advanc[e] social justice." The only pertinent questions are now technical ones about how to achieve this goal.

Of course, even the extreme right doesn't openly advocate teaching for social *in*justice and oppression, but there is reason for concern when nobody seems troubled by the possibility that teaching for social justice might take authoritarian forms. Whatever happened to the concern about classroom authoritarianism that marks Freire's writing? Is it that proponents of teaching for social justice can't imagine how anyone could think their pedagogy could ever be authoritarian or that they can but don't air such concerns for fear of playing into the hands of the right?

Whatever the case, without trying to turn back the clock, I believe we would benefit today from more of the spirit of fair play embraced by earlier fellow-traveling academics like the one I quoted a moment ago who worried that using one's "position in the classroom" to "influence young people" is not "good sportsmanship." Compare such scruples with the view expressed by Jackie Brady and Richard Ohmann, the editors of a "Forum on Radical Teaching Now" published in 2008 by the journal *Radical Teacher*: "What are the conditions for teaching radically in 2008? For opening students' minds to left, feminist, anti-racist, and queer ideas? For stimulating them to work for egalitarian change? . . . What

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.3.727 Published online by Cambridge University Press

pedagogies have the best chance of helping students become radicals?" Again, questions about whether the project of radicalizing students should be attempted at all have been replaced by instrumental ones about how to achieve this goal. I'm all for teachers' "opening students' minds to left, feminist, anti-racist, and queer ideas" (which are often underrepresented in the major media), but again only if students are free to disagree with those ideas and are presented with strong models of how to do so, whether through the course reading list or through dissenting colleagues invited in to debate or teaching a paired course. This condition seems unlikely to be met when the course has the expressed aims of "stimulating" students to work for egalitarian change and "helping" them become radicals, the latter euphemism suggesting that our students, if only in some inchoate and as yet inarticulate way, are *yearning* to become radicals and lack only a little "help" from a friendly radical teacher to show them the way.[17]

When I've voiced such criticisms elsewhere, radical-pedagogy advocates have indignantly retorted that they regularly assign views strongly opposed to their own and do not bully their students but invite them to make up their own minds. I don't doubt the sincerity of these disclaimers, but I can sympathize with conservative critics who aren't satisfied to simply take the radical teacher's word for it. Then, too, if it's true that radical teaching in practice consists of little more than asking students to choose from a spectrum of political positions, I have to wonder why its advocates don't call it "teaching political debate" instead of "the pedagogy of the oppressed," "teaching for social justice," "radical pedagogy," and other labels that inevitably suggest an effort to convert, if not to brainwash. If you want to issue manifestos to teachers that urge "helping students become radicals" and "stimulating them to work for egalitarian change," so be it, but then don't get angry and defensive if someone says that sounds like coercion.

At the least, there seem to be unresolved contradictions in the radical-pedagogy movement and a need for more clarity about its goals. But, again, such clarity would have a better chance of emerging if radical teachers were not quarantined in their curricular liberated zone and had to teach with colleagues whose questions could flush them out of their equivocations.

To give students a genuine chance at understanding and entering our academic conversations, then, we need a curriculum that presents itself to them as a set of conversations rather than as courses that pass one another like ships in the night. Make political advocacy and counteradvocacy a prominent part of this conversation, but let students decide for themselves where they stand.

I've often been told that I'm naive to expect that academics will ever consent to coordinate their teaching across their partisan ideological and disciplinary divisions or to hear one another out on fundamental questions like the place of politics in teaching. And I've been told that I'm even more naive and out of step to think that we will ever be willing to argue our differences publicly, especially to the point of "teaching with the enemy." Rightly or wrongly, it is said, arguing our differences in public just isn't the way the academic world works.

Yet it is striking to me that we argue our differences in public all the time when we engage one another's ideas at professional conferences as well as when we review one another's books and articles. Somehow only when it comes to "the classroom" is it assumed that these collegial arguments, which go on everywhere else, must stop. I would claim, then, that it's the privatized classroom, not the collaboration that I've urged in this address, that is out of step with the way the academic world works.

Conference culture, though imperfect, is a likely place to start imagining alternatives to

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.3.727 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the privatized course. It's time we took what we have learned from a generation of experience with academic conferences and looked for ways to infuse the best of their intellectual give and take and learning by immersion into our curricula. In fact, something along these lines has been happening: attendance at professional conferences has for some time been a regular part of graduate education, and undergraduates too are starting to show up at conferences and attend their own undergraduate research symposia.

I mentioned at the start that the privacy and secrecy of the classroom are at odds with the new forms of electronic connectivity, which can be used to create conversations between classrooms when the participants aren't in the same physical space. I'll end by mentioning that privatized classrooms are also at odds with the most sophisticated and original work in the humanities over the last generation, which has taught us that what seem to be freestanding identities—whether texts or selves—are produced by collective structures of language, discourse, and representation. It seems we have deconstructed the autonomous, self-authorizing subject and the autonomous, self-authorizing literary work. It's time we got around to deconstructing the autonomous, self-authorizing course.

Notes

1. On learning communities, see Gabelnick et al.

2. As my friend Andrew Hoberek observed in response to a draft of this address, "It's ironic that many academics who criticize the Taylorization of factory labor, which robs workers of a view of the whole production process, submit to a kind of self-Taylorization by teaching in closed classrooms. The result is a process of professional reproduction whereby the best undergraduates (i.e., those most able to set aside the specific content of individual classes and see their overarching practices) get into graduate school, where as their reward they eventually get to control their own privatized classrooms, which reinstate the very alienation of labor they sought to overcome!"

3. Hazard Adams, in his recently published autobiography, *Academic Child*, observes that when he taught at the University of Washington his "only so-called knowledge" of "what went on in . . . the classrooms" came "from students and, over the years, former students who liked to entertain me with their reports, some lurid, some comical, some both" (215).

4. Veysey's concept of "patterned isolation" became central to the argument of my history of academic literary studies, *Professing Literature*, as well as to much of my subsequent thinking.

5. Arguably, adjunct faculty members today would be less easily replaceable and thus gain greater job security if teaching were more of a coordinated team effort.

6. Scholes's chapter "The English Apparatus" is the most eye-opening discussion of the literature-composition split I know (1–17).

7. As Adams recalls, contrasting this period with the more acrimonious one to come, "[T]he literary historians and the literary critics . . . held some views in common about teaching and scholarship that transcended their differences" (231).

8. For a more developed version of the argument that academics across the disciplines share critical-thinking practices, see Graff and Birkenstein.

9. For a more extended analysis of how academic common practices are obscured, see Graff, *Clueless*.

10. As Mill put it in ch. 11, "Liberty of Thought and Discussion," those who "have never thrown themselves into the mental position of those who think differently from them . . . consequently . . . do not, in any proper sense of the word, know the doctrine which they themselves profess" (105). According to Homi Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture*—where I found the Mill quotation (23)—Mill's view assumes that anticipating how others may disagree with us is an internal condition of thinking itself. The fact that I found the arch-rationalist Mill's statement in the pages of the Lacanian deconstructionist Bhabha exemplifies for me the argument, made in different ways by both, that we need the challenge of otherness to understand our own thinking. Bhabha's sympathetic quotation of Mill represents a rare deviation from the usually reified oppositions of the culture war, according to which poststructuralists and liberal rationalists must stay in their sealed compartments.

11. "But I always encourage my students to disagree with me" therefore seems to me a weak response to the argument that espousing political positions in one's teaching is unethical. Cary Nelson made such a response to David Horowitz during the 2008 MLA session "Academic Freedom?" stating that whenever he takes political stands in his courses, he urges his students to vigorously disagree with him. The problem is that the fight is rarely a fair one given the differences between teachers and students in power, experience, and control of academic discourse. I have heard it argued that courses with activist

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.3.727 Published online by Cambridge University Press

political goals are defensible as long as the students enroll voluntarily, knowing what they will get. It could be argued, however, that students who take a course to whose politics they are committed need the challenge of an opposing critique most of all.

12. For a cogent defense of "teaching the political conflicts," see Lazere.

13. Not only academics have been in denial but some journalists too. In a 1998 article in the *Nation*, Katha Pollitt writes, "If there were no political correctness, conservatives would have to invent some, and since in fact PC barely exists, invent it they do." Pollitt and I have obviously not been reading the same academic publications or attending the same conferences.

14. Bérubé describes this attitude in what is otherwise a strong defense of the academic humanities against conservative attacks: "when I hear leftist professors here and there arguing that their students watch six hours of Fox News every day and that it's therefore their job to expose them to 'the other side' for an hour, I tend to imagine that their classes sound, to some students, more like a seventh hour of Fox News than the voice of liberation. It is a skewed notion of dissent to think that one's classroom should be deployed as a counterweight to conservatism in the rest of the culture; it is a poor conception of rhetoric that leads a professor to speak as if everyone in the room agrees with him or her . . ." (12).

15. My earlier argument on this topic, the chapter "The Vanishing Classics and Other Myths," is still pertinent today, I think (*Beyond the Culture Wars* 16–36). It's true that the canonical classics are less prominent in the curriculum than they once were, but if we must blame someone for this development, paperback publishers would seem a more plausible target than politically correct academics, since for over half a century these publishers have flooded the market with affordable editions of the works of thousands of noncanonical authors.

16. My critique of radical pedagogy in this section builds on the more developed arguments I have made in several earlier essays, particularly one that appeared in *Radical Teacher* ("Teaching Politically").

17. On the pervasiveness of the euphemistic verb *help* in the work of Freire and Henry Giroux and in radical-pedagogy discourse generally, see Graff, "Teaching Politically."

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