

part of a larger effort to rethink humanities curricula and pedagogy.” In a sense, teaching the conflicts is itself a technology of the classroom and of the curriculum, and all my colleagues here in this symposium variously express the concern that this technology’s pace of success can, like so many others, outstrip our abilities to test, refine and rethink it. As Valenza observes, making our discipline’s defining controversies visible and relevant to the public, starting with our students, requires compromise, which risks “Disneyfying” the very conflicts that we would teach. Fredric Jameson (1981: 102), for instance, famously defines history as “what hurts . . . what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis.” Technologizing our conflicts means exposing them to such public history, and if, in doing so, we transform an idea like Jameson’s history into the Magic Kingdom’s hydraulic Hall of Presidents, we will be poor builders indeed to blame our tools.

Conflict Clarifies: A Response

Gerald Graff

Jeffrey Wallen articulates the reservation that I suspect keeps many readers of my work unpersuaded that it is a good idea to bring our academic debates to our students: Jeffrey argues that “before we bring our academic conflicts into the classroom, we need to make them much worthier of pedagogical scrutiny.” In other words, as he sees it, *academic debate is often bad debate*.

Jeffrey rightly identifies some of the reasons that our debates are bad: we are so nervous about confrontation that we pull our punches, dance around our disagreements, and replace real engagement with academic pseudopoliteness. Like many of our students, we feel safer with the pluralistic, peaceful coexistence that Jeffrey sums up in the maxim “OK, you have your ideas . . . and I have my own.” Jane Tompkins adds a further reason: we are often so angry, defensive about our egos, or eager to win debates that we talk past each other instead of listening. Others complain that too much public debate outside as well as inside academe is transacted through reductive caricatures of opposing views, if not through outright name-calling, and fails to do justice to the complexity of the subject at hand.

I agree that the quality of academic debate leaves a lot to be desired.

But I do not agree with Jeffrey that we first have “to transform our professorial discussions and debates *before* carrying out any plans to put them at the center of the graduate, undergraduate, and high school curriculum” (my emphasis). The problem is, if we cannot open our faculty debates to our students until those debates become “*worthier* of pedagogical scrutiny” (my emphasis), as Jeffrey puts it, then that moment of exposure is likely to be indefinitely postponed. After all, at what point will we know that our debates have reached the point of worthiness, and who will get to decide? Do faculties figure to be any more likely to agree on when they have reached that point than on any of the other questions they so notoriously disagree about? I don’t think so.

For such practical reasons, then, I have always been a believer in the pedagogical value of bad debate. As teachers, we have no choice but to start from where we are, with a flawed culture of debate that will always leave a lot of room for improvement. But starting out with a crude debate, even with polarized binary oppositions, does not mean that we have to end up where we begin. As Steve Benton argued at our Modern Language Association (MLA) session, structuring a course syllabus around debates that are initially far from what we want them to become is itself a way to improve the quality of our classroom debates, maybe the only way. As Steve put it in his informal response to the roundtable discussion: “I agree with Jeffrey that we need to make our disagreements worthy of scrutiny. But I don’t think we can wait to get our house in order before trying to teach our students how to disagree with each other in healthier ways. ‘Teaching the conflicts,’ bringing colleagues who disagree with you into your classroom or your reading list, seems an excellent way to move toward that goal” (29 December 2001). In other words, we are likely to get better at airing and engaging our differences by just doing it, learning from our mistakes, and trying again.

One of the worst aspects of how academic culture is organized at most schools is the lack of opportunity for *sustained* negotiation of differences. Debates flare up suddenly at faculty meetings or demonstrations, burst into shouting matches, and then break off as abruptly as they began, without the chance for follow-up engagements that would let us come back with cooler heads, learn from our mistakes, and hear each other out more patiently than we could do in the heat of battle. (Administration tends to respond by trying to put out fires rather than nourishing what might be productive in them.) Since important debates get one shot, at best, it is no wonder that many of us end up feeling, “Well, we tried hearing each other out, and it just didn’t work—too bad.”

Jeffrey could rightly reply that there is no guarantee that more persistence and continuity in our debates would force us to engage each other's ideas more seriously than we now do. I very much like his positive suggestions for retraining academics to take their colleagues' ideas seriously instead of one-upping or avoiding them. It is intriguing indeed to wonder what would happen "if you were held responsible for someone else's work—if you had to defend its ideas, arguments, and implications, rather than merely approve it as professionally competent." But I still say that we cannot wait to engage our students in our debates until Jeffrey's criteria are met.

There is another reason that we need to be willing to start at an "unworthy" level of debate to move to something better: reductive conflict can clarify what otherwise figures to be incomprehensible. I suspect that Jeffrey will agree that inexperienced students especially need to start with simplistic binary oppositions before they can progress to more sophisticated, nuanced understandings of academic material. If we always have to do justice to the complexity of our debates to make them worthy, we will lose the majority of our students at the start. Doing justice to complexity is a hollow victory if only the high achievers in the front row understand what you are talking about.

Robin Valenza gives a striking illustration of such misplaced fastidiousness in her remarks about the critics who accused a museum of "Disneyfying" scholarly inquiry because its exhibits were (how revolting!) comprehensible to children. What does it say about our noble pretensions to democratic education when we assume that intellectual work is compromised if it has been made intelligible to children and other laypeople? Reaching all students, not just the elite few, means being willing to start with reductive dualisms—classicism versus Romanticism, patriarchy versus feminism, objectivism versus relativism, paleontologists' clashing theories about dinosaurs—before students can problematize and complicate them, as we hope they eventually will. Too many undergraduates leave classes puzzled, bored, or frustrated because their instructors, perhaps feeling more pressure to impress their colleagues than to open intellectual doors to their students, refuse to be reductive in presenting their material.

Furthermore, this refusal may actually retard rather than advance these instructors' writing and research. Even the most sophisticated scholarly discussion has its reductive, binary moments, even its sound bites (Graff 2000a). Finally, there is something false about the opposition between honoring complexity and making the intellectual world accessible, between being sophisticated and dumbing down. For the point of reductive simplifications

is not to replace more complicated understanding but to prepare the way for it in due course, when students and professional audiences have been made ready for it.

Tompkins's generous remarks reflect her heroic efforts to transform academic culture by modeling how to cut through the impersonal conventions of academic discourse and talk to each other as if we were people. Jane is the only academic I know who can combine a hard-edged intellectual critique with a warmly personal gesture of friendship, as she does here. She has been on my case for years to get me to pay greater attention to the emotional and interpersonal dynamics that underlie academic communication and that often have more influence than the content of our ideas on whether academic debate is productive or falls flat.

Jane suggests that teaching the conflicts can work for teachers who have hearts as big as mine—thank you, Jane!—but that most academics do not. They tend to be less Billy Budds than Claggarts, motivated by “pale ire, envy, and despair . . . [by] mean, grasping, ego-driven behavior.” For this reason, Jane suggests, the conflicts that should bring out the best in us tend to be “injurious because people’s egos get battered and this either shuts them up or makes them even more aggressive and defensive than they already are.” At the end of her response, though, Jane reverses field and concedes that, given the inevitable rough and tumble of real intellectual discussion, academics need to “get used to it” rather than wait for a change in our natures before we air our disagreements with our students. We need to avoid not only being offensive to each other but taking offense too quickly when it may only be that we are disagreed with.

Nevertheless, Jane is right that I have not paid enough attention to the emotional and personal dimensions of academic conflict. Even if we academics were to “get used” to being disagreed with and become more patient, our students would often still feel silenced or intimidated when disagreement broke out or when we criticized their work. In the spring of 2002 Jane and I team-taught a freshman composition course, and I think I speak for both of us in saying that we were struck by the way our already shy students became terminally silent the harder Jane and I tried to draw them into our academic conversation.

I also felt, though, that the shyness and passivity of our students reflected not only an interpersonal and emotional problem but a cognitive one, and that these problems were interrelated. That is (and Jane may agree), what shut these students up was not only their fear of the academic culture of debate that Jane and I represented but also their difficulty in fathoming what

Jane and I were talking about and why it should matter to them. My sense was that what most prevented us from drawing our students into our intellectual discussions was not that they were frightened by strong disagreement (if anything, some working-class students may have been more comfortable with it than Jane and I were). It was, rather, that too often we were unable to make the issues clear and compelling enough for those students to understand what the issues were and why they should give a damn about them.

My interest in this problem of the sheer incomprehensibility of intellectual culture has begun to shift the emphasis of my work from conflict to comprehension. Academe's opaqueness was already a subtheme of my *Professing Literature* (Graff 1987) and of my last book, *Beyond the Culture Wars* (Graff 1992). The fourth and fifth chapters of the later book, "Hidden Meaning, or Disliking Books at an Early Age" and "Life of the Mind Stuff," are only secondarily about conflict or teaching the conflicts. Their main subject is the cluelessness of most students—indeed, most people—in the face of the blank impenetrability of academic intellectual culture. Though I still propose teaching the conflicts as a solution to this problem, I think that this problem is separable from the problem of conflict. Eventually, I decided to write another book, *Clueless in Academe* (forthcoming), to free the subargument that had haunted *Beyond the Culture Wars* (and, earlier, *Professing Literature*) but was obscured by my emphasis on conflict.

I am therefore especially pleased that several commentators here have spotted the subargument about cluelessness that has underlain my work on teaching the conflicts—and that sets me apart from many Freirean educational radicals. David R. Shumway is right on target when he points out that whereas Henry A. Giroux "wants to bring about radical social transformation[,] Graff wants to make undergraduate students more interested in intellectual issues." As David also puts it, my aim is not to push a perspective on students so much as "to make the significance of having a perspective clear" to them, since students "frequently do not understand the arguments" that Giroux's liberatory program "takes for granted." David is also right in suggesting that my goal—turning students into intellectuals—"might be a necessary step" before students can become Freirean transformative intellectuals. Precisely.

Jeffrey Wallen also recognizes my concern with the problem of intellectual socialization when he comments on the "anti-institutional" self-hatred of those American academics who, unlike their French counterparts, act as if they would never ask students to join a club that would have those academics as members. In a similar vein, I like Robin Valenza's important point that

American undergraduates “are taught in a manner and a vocabulary wholly unlike the practice of the profession itself; in which students are either shown something entirely different from what their professors do, or are handed a set of end results instead of a process . . . instead of [being] given a window onto a brighter, livelier outside world of deliberation and debate.” Illustrating Robin’s point, I note that English majors are generally asked to read and comment on literary works but are rarely expected to enter the conversation of critics, even journalistic ones. These expectations infantilize undergraduates, who are supposed to *produce* criticism without reading it.

The point is that for me the primary goal of teaching the conflicts has always been a pedagogical and cognitive one: to clarify an otherwise opaque academic intellectual culture rather than to resolve a nasty impasse between teachers with clashing reading lists and ideologies. As I propose in *Clueless in Academe* and hope to explore further in future work, the best justification for making controversy a central principle of the organization of courses and curricula is the deep cognitive connection between controversy and intelligibility. John Stuart Mill (1972: 93–94) touched on the connection when he observed that we do not understand our own ideas until we know what can be said against them. In Mill’s words, those who “have never thrown themselves into the mental position of those who think differently from them . . . do not, in any proper sense of the word, know the doctrine which they themselves profess.” In other words, our very ability to think depends on contrast—on asking, “Who would say otherwise?” or “As opposed to what?”

This dialogical or contrastive character of human cognition has long been a given of modern pragmatic thought, from Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism to Kenneth Burke’s “perspective by incongruity” to Richard Rorty’s conversationalism to Jacques Derrida’s *différance*, but the academic curriculum, with its self-isolated courses, has yet to reflect it. This is not the place to try to work out how understanding a proposition, say, can depend on grasping “what can be said against it” or as-opposed-to-whatness, but consider one example: when ancient and modern texts or cultures are studied in separate courses, the points of comparison and contrast that enable us to see ancient and modern qualities *as such* are erased. The same holds for Western and non-Western texts and cultures.

The systematic structures that might bring such comparisons, contrasts, and other kinds of relationality to light are the focus of Craig Stroupe’s provocative argument about the Internet. I like Craig’s suggestion that new “information technologies provide the infrastructural means, the operational metaphors, and the new institutional practices that enable college campuses

to become more authentic sites of intellectual foment and debate.” I also like his suggestion that the motto “Teach the conflicts” contains “a microcosm of [a] whole philosophy” that has been trying to break out (and with his help here begins to do so). I have long considered myself a kind of homegrown information theorist as well as a poor man’s cognitive scientist.

I am intrigued by Craig’s account of his experience at San José State University, where a faculty intellectual community resulted from the “institutional and economic need to work more cooperatively to use [electronic] technology in the competitive higher-education marketplace.” I wonder, however, why the same competitive pressures seem to have operated at other campuses without leading to the collectivizing that Craig describes at San José State. As he himself suggests, electronic technology at most schools and colleges tends to supplement rather than transform the standard patterned isolation of disconnected courses, disciplines, and faculty members. Even in the Internet age, many academics and administrators see teaching as an inherently solo activity. Craig is right that electronic technology makes collective teaching feasible on a systematic scale, but we still seem a long way from recognizing that a more collective model of teaching is necessary for the clarification of academic intellectual culture. I share Craig’s hopefulness about the promise of electronic technologies, though, and am even learning to make more use of them in my own teaching.

Finally, I want to thank David Shumway for answering two frequent charges made against me. The first is that teaching the conflicts assumes the “fiction of liberal neutrality.” Not so, as David points out. The extent to which neutrality or objectivity is possible is itself one of the central controversies that we need to let our students in on. Furthermore, if you think that liberal neutrality is bunk, you are more likely to reach those who need to hear you by entering into public debate with defenders of neutrality than by preaching to already converted or captive audiences in the privacy of your course.

The second charge David defends me against is that teaching the conflicts is about professors arguing with each other while their students sit around admiringly and watch. This charge has most recently been made by Stephen M. North in *Refiguring the Ph.D. in English Studies*. North agrees with me that English doctoral education needs to be reconceived in ways that acknowledge the contested nature of the field, but he thinks that for me the role of students should be “to watch and analyze the conflicts” of their professors, “not participate in them.” I want to keep students in this subordinate position, according to North (2000: 72–73), so that “graduate professors [can] maintain something akin to Magisterial power in the doctoral classroom.”

It is true that I see no problem with professors' holding the stage for a while to establish the contours of a debate. We are *too prone* these days to assume that if professors talk a lot, students cannot be active learners. Here the objection to teaching the conflicts really becomes an objection to *teaching*. But for me, as David points out, teaching the conflicts is a travesty if it fails to involve students as active participants, or even fails to invite them to question and redefine the agenda of the debates.

David ends, though, by echoing another criticism that has been made by many others, that I fail to address the question of *which* conflicts we should teach: "Determining which conflicts to teach is a political issue that Graff does not address." It is true that I generally leave this question open, but I have reasons for doing so. I assume that the particular conflicts that become central in a curriculum have to grow out of the interests and preoccupations of the faculty and the student body. Since these conflicts shift and change as the academic and public conversation changes, which conflicts are best to teach is a local and contingent matter that should not be dictated a priori. The controversies I organized my courses around at Northwestern University and the University of Chicago do not necessarily speak to the students I teach at the University of Illinois at Chicago—and if they do in 2003, they may not in 2005.

So when critics ask, "But *which* conflicts should we teach?" I usually try to turn the question back to them by offering general criteria rather than specifics: Which conflicts seem most pressing to you and your colleagues? Are these conflicts important enough and sufficiently representative of the culture around you to be worth highlighting for your students? Above all, do these conflicts figure to interest your students? If not, can you show your students why they *should* be interested in them?

In closing, I want to say what a pleasure it has been to be honored by these six colleagues at MLA 2001 and now in this symposium. I want to give special thanks to Andrew Hoberek for organizing the MLA session, to Steve Benton for taking the lead in seeing it into print, and to *Pedagogy* for publishing it. I want to thank the contributors for their thoughtful, friendly, and challenging remarks. I hope I've given them all a run for their money here.

Works Cited for Symposium

- Bialostosky, Don. 1999. "Is Gerald Graff Machiavellian?" *Style* 33: 391–405.
- Cain, William E., ed. 1994. *Teaching the Conflicts: Gerald Graff, Curricular Reform, and the Culture Wars*. New York: Garland.
- Cooper, Henry S. F. 1996. "Origins: The Backbone of Evolution." *Natural History* 105, no. 6: 30–41.
- Engelhardt, Tom. 1997. "Plugging Culture." *Nation* 265, no. 7: 27–29.
- Fish, Stanley. 1996. "Them We Burn: Violence and Conviction in the English Department." In *English As a Discipline; or, Is There a Plot in This Play?* ed. James C. Raymond, 160–73. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- Garner, James. 1995. "Devolution." *National Review* 47, no. 17: 69–70.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. 1990. "The Master's Pieces: On Canon Formation and the African-American Tradition." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 89: 89–111.
- Giroux, Henry A. 1994. "Academics As Public Intellectuals." *Minnesota Review* 41–42: 310–23.
- Graff, Gerald. 1987. *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1988a. "Conflicts over the Curriculum Are Here to Stay: They Should Be Made Educationally Productive." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 17 February, A48.
- . 1988b. "Teach the Conflicts: An Alternative to Educational Fundamentalism." In *Literature, Language, and Politics*, ed. Betty Jean Craige, 99–109. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- . 1988c. "What Should We Be Teaching—When There's No 'We'?" *Yale Journal of Criticism* 1: 189–211.
- . 1990. "Teach the Conflicts." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 89: 51–67.
- . 1992. *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*. New York: Norton.
- . 2000a. "Scholars and Sound Bites: The Myth of Academic Difficulty." *PMLA* 115: 1041–53.
- . 2000b. "Two Cheers for the Argument Culture." *Hedgehog Review* 2: 53–71.
- . 2001 [1986]. "Taking Cover in Coverage." In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al., 2056–66. New York: Norton.
- . Forthcoming. *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Graff, Gerald, and Reginald Gibbons. 1985. "The University and the Prevention of Culture." In *Criticism and the University*, ed. Gerald Graff and Reginald Gibbons, 62–82. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press.
- Graff, Gerald, and Andrew Hoberek. 1999. "Hiding It from the Kids (With Apologies to Simon and Garfunkel)." *College English* 62: 242–54.
- Graff, Gerald, and James Phelan, eds. 1995a. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Case Study in Critical Controversy*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- . 1995b. *The Tempest: A Case Study in Critical Controversy*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Graff, Gerald, and Jane Tompkins. 2001. "Can We Talk?" In *Professions: Conversations on the Future of Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Donald E. Hall, 21–36. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

- Jameson, Fredric. 1981. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative As a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Levine, George. 1989. "Graff Revisited." *Raritan* 8, no. 4: 121–33.
- Li, Luchen. 2001. "Gerald Graff." In *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Twentieth-Century American Cultural Theorists*, ed. Paul Hansom, 190–96. Detroit: Gale.
- Menand, Louis. 2001. "The Marketplace of Ideas." American Council of Learned Societies, Occasional Paper no. 49. Accessed on 1 April 2002 at www.acs.org/op49.htm.
- Mill, John Stuart. 1972. "On Liberty." *Utilitarianism, Liberty, Representative Government*. London: Dent and Sons.
- Nelson, Cary. 1997. *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical*. New York: New York University Press.
- North, Stephen M. 2000. *Refiguring the Ph.D. in English Studies: Writing, Doctoral Education, and the Fusion-Based Curriculum*. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Poster, Mark. 2001. *What's the Matter with the Internet?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Remen, Rachel Naomi. 2000. *My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging*. New York: Riverhead.
- Richter, David, ed. 2003. *Falling into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literature*. 2d ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Thomas, Brook. 1994. "Teaching the Conflicts in the Humanities Core Course at the University of California, Irvine." *College Literature* 21: 120–36.
- Wallen, Jeffrey. 1998. *Closed Encounters: Literary Politics and Public Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 2002. "Professional Discord." *College English* 64: 348–59.

Copyright © 2003 EBSCO Publishing