

CCC Special Symposium

Exploring the Continuum ... between High School and College Writing

The following essays derive from presentations on a panel at the CCCC annual convention in 2007.

An Immodest Proposal for Connecting High School and College

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We would like to start by spotlighting what we take to be an important challenge suggested in the conference session out of which this essay grew: how to bridge the gap between high school and college. It seems fair to say that American high schools and colleges have long been and still are what Christine Farris, in her essay in this symposium section, calls "different cultures," and that the disconnections between these cultures undermines the ability of many students not just to go on to college, but to succeed once they get there. The problem, then, is before us: how do we get these two cultures to become one connected culture? And how do we do so without ignoring the necessary differences between high school and college education?

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In this essay we want to suggest that answering these questions and improving the state of American education requires educators to identify a set of basic literacy practices that these two domains have in common, and then highlight those practices as central in both the high school and college curricula. In other words, to heal the divide between high school and college, and ease the often confusing transitions that students experience between the academic world's disconnected domains, educators need to identify some one set of skills or practices that students can hold on to as they move from one domain to another, that is framed broadly enough to win the assent of educators from a wide range of subjects, disciplines, grade levels, and types of educational institutions. To put it bluntly, we believe that healing the divide between high school and college requires that educators be able to fill in the blank in the following sentence: "The name of the game in academia is _____," and then make good on this bold claim in curricular and pedagogical practice.

Our own candidate to fill in this blank is *argument*, which has the virtue of being both deeply comprehensive on the one hand—(*Everything*, after all, as the title of a popular writing textbook puts it, *Is an Argument*)—and yet simple and accessible on the other.¹ On the one hand, argument—which in our view can be reduced to the art of entering a conversation, of summarizing the views of others in order to set up one's own views—is inclusive or comprehensive in that it is central to every academic department and discipline, from history to microbiology, where practitioners are required to state their views not in isolation, but as a response to what others in the field are saying. Argument is also inclusive in that it involves a broad range of other academic skills such as statistical reasoning, factual knowledge, interpretative and narrative abilities, and the ethical sensitivity to fairly represent the views of others, especially those with whom we disagree. And finally, argumentation, as we define it, is inclusive in that it taps into the discourses of the workplace and public citizenship, and into non-academic skills that students learn as members of families and communities at a very young age. On the other hand, at the same time that argumentation has these deeply inclusive qualities, it is also elegantly simple, giving students a dependable anchor to hold onto as they move through the academic world, transitioning not just from high school to college, but from one discipline to another and from one instructor within each discipline to another.

You, of course, may have a better candidate than argumentation for the name of the game in academia, in which case we look forward to hearing what it is. Or, more likely, you may reject the very notion of "the name of the academic game" to begin with, feeling that what teachers want students to learn

is so diverse and multiple that it cannot be reduced to any one skill or skill set. In our view, however, as long as academia's basic nature remains a mysterious blank—or is presented as a multiplicity of practices with no apparent common ground—schooling will remain nebulous, overwhelming, and mysterious to most students. Unless we can formulate a unitary, overarching meta-vision of what unites us across the academic world, we will continue to make the experience of schooling a hodge-podge experience of rupture and disjunction for most students, and continue undermining their ability to see schooling as a developmental, teleological process in which what is learned in any one course is reinforced and built upon in the next course rather than contradicted or undermined. Ultimately, without such an overarching vision of academic culture, we will abandon the majority of students to an uncoordinated institution in which the left hand has little sense of what the right hand is doing, and no one is apparently responsible for the experience of schooling as a totality.

Although she does not present it as such, Christine Farris's essay in this symposium seems to us a telling commentary on the problems that arise when high school and college fail to articulate any common ground, particularly when it comes to the ever-important domain of academic discourse or literacy. Because there has been little communication between colleges and high schools, Farris explains, many high school teachers have no clear sense of the college-level literacy for which they are preparing their students. Thus, Farris notes that while college instructors tend to assume (although usually without saying so explicitly, or with any consistency) that students will master various disciplinary conventions and enter into scholarly conversations, high school writing instructors (although again without complete consistency) tend to encourage students to read literature for enjoyment, to write personal essays, and to use correct grammar and punctuation. Indeed, Farris explains, many high school English teachers, holding expressivist views, actually encourage students to shun the "obfuscated and alienating scholarly discourse" that the colleges valorize, and to take their personal experiences—rather than academic subjects and texts—as their central mode of reference. In the end, we agree with Farris on the need to build "a strong bridge between high school and college writing," and we applaud school/college collaboration projects of the kind in which she is involved at Indiana University.²

We would add, however, that building such a bridge requires finding some singular game or practice upon which it can be built. We would also add (and hope that Farris would agree) that many more bridges are needed—that the

confusing disjunction that Farris describes between high school and college is but one of the many disjunctions with which students must contend as they move not only from high school to college but from discipline to discipline in college, and often even from instructor to instructor in the same discipline. In *Clueless in Academe*, one of us, Gerald, has coined the term “the mixed message curriculum” to highlight these disconnections, showing that because college courses are generally isolated from each other and instructors rarely meet to compare notes, those instructors are usually unaware of what their own colleagues are doing down the hall or across the quad. Consequently our lessons not only fail to reinforce each other but often conflict, and we are so isolated in our privatized classrooms that we’re oblivious to these disparities and contradictions when they occur.

Gregory Jay has called this syndrome the “Volleyball effect,” in which college students are batted from one course and set of expectations to another as the rules mysteriously change without notice. Thus one instructor wants students to develop arguments and interpretations of their own, while another discourages it, wanting only evidence that the students grasp a body of information; one instructor, who remains faithful to the expressivist outlook common in high school, welcomes personal narrative and the use of “I,” while another prohibits them. One teacher encourages explicit road-mapping in student writing (e.g., “In this paper, I will show, first, that . . . , and, second, that . . .”), while others express irritation at it, invoking a supposed golden rule of writing that demands doing, not telling. Making matters even more confusing, instructors are often not explicit about these expectations and prohibitions, leaving students to guess them, if they can, on their own. No wonder students often approach us with questions like “Do you want *my* ideas in this paper or just a summary of the reading?”³

A minority of high achievers manage to see through these curricular mixed messages to detect the fundamental critical thinking skills that underlie effective writing in any course or discipline. The majority of students, however, must resort to the familiar tactic of giving each instructor whatever he or she seems to want in a given assignment and then doing that again with the next teacher and assignment and again with the next. For these students, giving instructors what they want—assuming they can figure out what that is in the first place—replaces real socialization into academic ways of thinking and writing. Given the lack of correlation between courses and disciplines, students come away with the disabling impression that they must start all over again and reinvent the rhetorical wheel each time they enter a new grade level or discipline or encounter a new instructor.

Making matters worse, some academics speak as if curricular disconnection were actually a good thing. According to this logic, "If the perspectives and styles of academic work students are exposed to as they move through college are multiple and diverse, so be it. Exposure to such multiplicity will only help students realize sooner rather than later that all experience is contingent, that, as the saying goes, no 'one-size-fits-all' model of literacy can be adduced to fit all situations and purposes." We would reply that exposing students to multiple perspectives is obviously a good thing, but this multiplicity only tends to overwhelm students if they are not equipped with the fundamental rhetorical skills needed to negotiate it.

Taken together, we believe, the mixed-message curriculum and the uncritical valorization of curricular multiplicity give students an exaggerated view of the differences between the academic disciplines, and thereby make academic literacy look much harder than it actually is. Ultimately, the mixed-message curriculum and the valorization of rhetorical contingency prevent students from seeing the common rhetorical fundamentals needed to negotiate the different domains not just of high school and college but of the workplace and public citizenship.

What, then, are these common rhetorical fundamentals that cut across all the disciplines and grade levels, and that in our view need to be put at the center of high school and college curricula? What common rhetorical practices and principles can be used to bridge academia's many disconnected domains? As we have already suggested, they can be reduced to one very comprehensive skill of making arguments, which for us entails not necessarily attacking others but entering a conversation or debate. To enter a conversation you have to be able to listen carefully to what others around you are saying, be able to summarize it in a recognizable way, and then use that summary as the motivation or launching pad for your own response—for putting in your own oar, as Kenneth Burke says in his famous passage likening intellectual exchange to a never-ending conversation in a parlor. To put it another way, the one move that can give greater coherence to schooling and connect its dissociated parts is implicit in the widely touted ideal of critical thinking, which again is for us reducible to the ability to read and summarize a text (whether of high school or college-level difficulty) and to offer a relevant and cogent response.

Our remedy, then, for the problem of the mixed-message curriculum and the disconnect between high school and college is to begin letting students in on the big secret that (1) the name of the game in academia—and in the public or working world beyond—is making arguments, and (2), that you play this

game not by thinking of something true or brilliant to say in a vacuum—by retreating, that is, to some empty, uninhabited space—but by entering into conversation with other perspectives, often by challenging and disagreeing with them. Furthermore, we believe that the only way to let students in on these academic secrets, to demystify them on a democratic scale for large masses of students, is by making them common across a broad range of academic domains: that is, by representing them with enough consistency, redundancy, and transparency across grade levels, disciplines, and courses that students can recognize them *as* fundamental practices rather than one teacher's (or set of teachers') arbitrary preferences among many.

As David Bartholomae points out in his widely read essay "Inventing the University," the best student writing

works against a conventional point of view. . . . The more successful writers set themselves . . . against what they defined as some more naïve way of talking about their subject—against "those who think that . . ."—or against earlier, more naïve versions of themselves—"once I thought that . . ." (607)

If Bartholomae is right—and we think he is—then why withhold this crucial information from students? Why not identify this fundamental move of pushing off against (which can mean agreeing with as well as disagreeing with) other ways of thinking for students as clearly and explicitly as possible?⁴

But let us be clear. In suggesting that high schools and colleges highlight the common rhetorical conventions that cut across the disciplines, we are not suggesting that students be excused from negotiating multiple contexts and contingencies, which are indeed the stuff of contemporary global culture. Nor are we suggesting that the curriculum become a homogeneous monolith that erases all difference and complexity. English *is* different from biology, and both are different from economics, just as academic writing differs from personal writing or journalism, and high school writing differs from college writing. What we are saying, rather, is that students will be able to negotiate these different educational domains only if they are first equipped with the transcendent rhetorical move of entering into dialogue with other thinkers and writers.

For those who still insist that no such transcendent rhetorical practices exist in the academic world, we would suggest that they do exist but appear not to only because they are so pervasive—because, like the air we breathe, we fail to notice them, and we take them for granted. Indeed, even to oppose the idea of transcendent academic practices itself requires the type of conversational, argumentative literacy that we have been defending, since such opposition

involves grasping the views of others (ours, in this case) in order to motivate one's own critical response. Those who are successful in the academic world and beyond (even as opponents of our views) are successful not because they learn to do something completely different each time they encounter a new subject, audience, or situation, or because they all do something different from each other, but because, often without noticing it, they have mastered this conventional summary/response pattern. It is precisely these argumentative conventions, however, that have neither been clearly articulated for students nor consistently reinforced throughout the high school and college curriculum. It is precisely these argumentative conventions that are crucial to academic success but that remain hidden for most students beneath the curriculum's disconnected messages. It's time, then, to develop high school and college programs that highlight argumentative critical literacy as the key to academic success at all levels and disciplines.

Notes

1. We are referring to Andrea A. Lunsford's and John J. Ruszkiewicz's *Everything's an Argument*.
2. The many summer Bridge Programs that have grown up at colleges and universities across the country offer yet another laudable model for connecting high school and college writing instruction. These programs are designed to help ease the transition between high school and college writing for "at-risk" students. The problem, however, with these programs is that, through no fault of their own, they, like the composition programs that sponsor them, are often sequestered from the rest of the college curriculum. Colleges and universities have not done enough to integrate these programs and their sponsoring composition programs into the larger university curriculum, or to take seriously their concern with rhetoric and academic literacy. As a result, these programs may end up *adding* to the curricular disjunctions that students are exposed to as they move through the academic system, rather than resolving these disjunctions and helping students negotiate them, as they are intended to do.
3. For more on this topic, and on Gregory Jay's comment, see Graff's "The Mixed Message Curriculum," 62-80.
4. Another compositionist with a similarly conversational view of academic discourse is Irene Clark, who advises thesis and dissertation writers, regardless of their discipline, as her book's subtitle suggests, to "enter a conversation" and present their arguments as interventions in a field. Still another is Joseph Harris, who sees academic writing as "writing that responds to and makes use of the work of others," writing in which one "situate[s] what one has to say about texts or issues

in relation to what others have had to say about them" (578). These statements by Bartholomae, Clark, and Harris seem to us evidence of an emerging consensus on the conversational nature of academic discourse.

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