



Hidden Intellectualism

Gerald Graff

In an arresting memoir “of a Pentecostal boyhood” that appeared in 1993 in the *Voice Literary Supplement*, Michael Warner describes his improbable journey from an upbringing in a Christian Pentecostal family and graduation from Oral Roberts University to his current identity as a “queer atheist intellectual.” It is hard to imagine a more complete break between a past and present life than the one Warner recounts. “From the religious vantage of my childhood and adolescence,” Warner (1993: 13) writes, “I am one of Satan’s agents. From my current vantage, that former self was exotically superstitious.” How, he wonders, could he have “got here from there”?

Yet ultimately Warner finds a “buried continuity” in his journey from Pat Robertson to Michel Foucault. “Curiously enough,” he writes, though “fundamentalism is almost universally regarded as the stronghold and dungeon-keep of American anti-intellectualism, religious culture gave me a passionate intellectual life of which universities are only a pale ivory shadow.” For the Pentecostal faithful, Warner says, “the subdenomination you belong to is bound for heaven; the one down the road is bound for hell. You need arguments to show why” (13–14).

Furthermore, “your arguments have to be *readings*, ways of showing how the church down the road misreads a key text.” Throughout his childhood and adolescence, Warner writes, “I remember being surrounded by textual arguments in which the stakes were not just life and death but eternal life and death.” He recalls an especially brilliant Bible study leader who questioned the doctrine of God’s omniscience by demonstrating that the Old Testament “clearly showed God acting in stories that . . . made no sense unless

God doesn't know the future." Recalling the intense family debates about this man's biblical interpretations that took place afterward in the car ride home and at the dinner table, Warner concludes: "Being a literary critic is nice, I have to say, but for lip-whitening, vein-popping thrills it doesn't compete. Not even in the headier regions of Theory can we approximate that saturation of life by argument" (13–14).

Warner doesn't say whether his theological preoccupations competed with his schoolwork or made him better at it. Yet his account has intriguing implications for education, illustrating how the "saturation of life by argument" can occur in practices often dismissed as nonintellectual or anti-intellectual. His essay invites us to think about students' intellectual abilities that go overlooked by schools because they come in unlikely packages. There must be many buried or hidden forms of intellectualism that do not get channeled into academic work but might if schools were more alert about tapping into them.

Street Smarts and Public Argument

It's not a new idea, of course, that students harbor intellectual resources—"street smarts"—that go untapped by formal schooling. What is not so widely noticed, however, is that these intellectual resources go unnoticed because they are tied to ostensibly anti-intellectual interests. We tend to assume that intellectual distinction can be manifested only with bookish subject matter—that is, that it's possible to wax intellectual about Plato, Shakespeare, the French Revolution, and nuclear fission, but not about cars, clothing fashions, dating, sports, TV, or Bible Belt religion—and we thereby overlook the intellectualism latent in supposedly philistine pursuits.

In a recent book titled *Street Smarts and Critical Theory: Listening to the Vernacular*, Thomas McLaughlin (1996) argues persuasively that "critical theory," contrary to both its adherents and opponents, is not confined to the lucubrations of academic intellectuals but pervades the thinking of nonacademics. McLaughlin finds versions of "vernacular theory" in such unlikely places as Elvis fan clubs, sitcom viewers, advertising copywriters, and Southern Christian antipornography activists. McLaughlin's argument suggests that we are so used to opposing street smarts and book smarts—vernacular and intellectual discourse—that we overlook moments when the one is a vehicle for the other.

Taking a page from Warner and McLaughlin, then, I want to suggest that educators need to pay more attention to the extent to which adolescent lives are already often "steeped in argument" and "critical theory." My own

working premise as a teacher is that inside every street-smart student (which is to say, every student) there is a latent intellectual trying to break out, an identity that it is my job somehow to tease out and help to articulate itself. Not that this “hidden” student intellectual is a preexisting essential self that is there waiting to be discovered. To emerge as critical theory, street smarts have to undergo transformation. Students who become intellectuals are inventing a new identity as much as unearthing one that was already there.

The question is how teachers can tease out the critical theory latent in student street smarts. Some, of course, will question whether any such transformation should be attempted. If street smarts are already a kind of critical theory, what transformation do they require? Then, too, why try to turn students into clones of academics and intellectuals? My own answer, with which not everyone will agree, is that until street smarts can articulate themselves as intellectual argumentation, they will have limited influence on the public sphere, and the gulf between the worlds of students and teachers will continue to yawn. Bridging this gulf is not a matter of turning “them” into miniversions of “us,” or of asking students to give up their language in favor of our academic discourse. It is a matter of finding points of convergence and translation, moments when student discourse can be translated into academic discourse and vice versa, producing a kind of “bilingualism” on both sides of the student-teacher divide.

I put special emphasis on argumentation as the form in which intellectualism needs to learn to express itself to become effective in the public sphere. Since argumentativeness is often viewed by schools as a form of troublemaking or “acting out” rather than as apprentice intellectualism, students themselves may not recognize the academic potential of their argumentative talents. Then, too, the extent to which the lives of children are “saturated by argument” varies widely for individuals and is influenced by differences of region, ethnicity, gender, and class. Furthermore, if young lives today are “saturated” by anything, it would seem to be consumption rather than argument. Yet consumption itself generates much youthful arguing, and if some groups are culturally more prone to argumentation than others, everyone has a stake in learning to use argument to express and defend his or her interests.

Growing Up Anti-Intellectual

I will come back to these issues later on, but first I want to talk about my personal experience of discovering my own intellectualism in unlikely places. Warner’s account of the buried continuity between his Pentecostal past and his academic intellectual present made me rethink the way I tend to character-

ize my own adolescence, which I have elsewhere described in print as thoroughly anti-intellectual. In a chapter of my last book, *Beyond the Culture Wars* (1992), titled "Disliking Books at an Early Age," I wrote of my youthful inability to read with pleasure or comprehension and my alienation from the intellectual ways of talking that school and college rewarded.

Presenting myself as a typical child of the anti-intellectual fifties, I contrasted my utter lack of interest in literature and history with my passionate absorption in sports. Warner's essay makes me see, however, that the story—both mine and that of the fifties—is more complicated and contradictory than I had indicated, as I would like to suggest in a brief retelling of it here. I see now that sports provided me with something comparable to the saturation of life by argument that Pentecostal religion gave Warner, that my preference for sports over schoolwork was not anti-intellectualism so much as intellectualism by other means.

Not that I was completely wrong, I think, in presenting myself as a typical teenage anti-intellectual of the 1950s. It was an era, as Richard Hofstadter (1963) would document in his *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, when intellect was notoriously undervalued and scorned. The decade had begun with the symbolic humiliation of the Egghead by the Man of Action in the landslide victory of General Eisenhower over Adlai Stevenson in the presidential election of 1952. It would end with the emergence into stardom of the quintessential anti-Egghead, Elvis Presley. My teachers, the closest thing to intellectuals in sight, seemed clearly inferior in worldly prowess and physical attractiveness to sports stars, film heroes, and pop singers. With their obscurely high-minded concerns, teachers were such unreal figures that you did a double take when you ran into one in the grocery store or the laundromat—amazed to realize that they had a life outside their classrooms. I was startled when I discovered that my seventh-grade English teacher not only played softball at the local park but threw like a Regular Guy.

The noun *intellectual* was not in my vocabulary or that of my friends. There were what would later be called nerds, who excelled at schoolwork, but these without exception were science or mathematics whizzes, technical geniuses rather than masters of argument or cultural analysis. In the adult world there were the "cultured," whom I associated with the feminized "socialites" at the cotillions and balls that were regularly pictured in sepia photographs in the Sunday papers. For girls, being articulate and brainy about schoolwork was a sign of being conceited or "stuck-up," whereas for boys it marked one as a sissy.

My parents were literate people who provided a model of reflective-

ness in household talk. This was the era, however, as sociologists would point out in books like David Reisman's *Lonely Crowd* (1953), in which influence over adolescents was passing from parents, grandparents, and school authorities to the "peer group," which meant the exploding postwar youth culture being created by television, the automobile, advertising, and consumerism. When in college I read *The Lonely Crowd*, with its account of the "other-directed" character type that aspires not to be a heroic individual but to fit in and be like everybody else, my immediate thought was, "That's me!"

These attitudes were shaped by the class tensions of a rapidly changing postwar society. The Uptown neighborhood on Chicago's North Side where we lived till we joined the suburban exodus in 1955 (my eighteenth year) had become a melting pot after the war. Our block was solidly middle-class, but just one block away—doubtless concentrated there by the real estate companies—were African Americans, Native Americans, and "hillbilly" whites who had recently fled from postwar joblessness in the South and Appalachia. Whereas the middle-class boys generally conformed to a "clean-cut" ideal ("preppy," we would now say), the working-class boys dressed and acted like what adult authorities called "juvenile delinquents" and what my friends and I, with a romanticizing inflection, called "hoods."

Negotiating this class boundary was a tricky proposition. On the one hand, it was crucial to maintain a distinction between clean-cut boys like me and working-class hoods, which meant that it was good for me to be openly smart in a bookish sort of way. Being Jewish already carried a presumption of being smart that I did not completely disavow. On the other hand, I had to establish my credentials with the hoods, whom I encountered daily on the playing field and in the neighborhood, which meant it was not good to be *too* smart. The hoods might turn on you at any moment if they sensed you were putting on highbrow airs over them: "Who you lookin' at, smart-ass?" So I grew up torn between the need to prove my intelligence and the fear of a beating if I proved it too well.

This conflict, as I lived it, expressed itself in an opposition between being tough and being verbal. For boys, only being physically tough earned one complete legitimacy in my neighborhood and my elementary school. I still recall endless, complicated debates in this period with my closest pal, Teddy Gertz, over who was "the toughest guy in the school." Being poor as a fighter, I settled for the next best thing, which was to be inarticulate, carefully hiding telltale marks of intellectualism such as correct grammar and precise pronunciation. My model was Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* ("Ah don' make no deals with no cowps") and *On the Waterfront* (the now-canonical

“You don’ unnastan’, Cholly, I coulda been a contenduh”), and for a stretch of several weeks I went about imitating Brando’s slurred speech. I spent the entire evening of my first high school date talking like Brando’s Terry Mulloy in *Waterfront*, giving up the act only when it became obvious that my date was not impressed.

My Hidden Intellectualism

In one sense, then, it would be hard to imagine a childhood more thoroughly anti-intellectual than mine. Yet in retrospect I see that I and the 1950s themselves were not simply hostile toward intellectualism, but divided and ambivalent. Hofstadter (1963) observed that the very hostility toward intellectuals in the fifties had been a backhanded acknowledgment of their “increasing importance.” Intellectuals in this period were despised, Hofstadter wrote, “because of an improvement, not a decline, in [their] fortunes” (34). When Marilyn Monroe, who in 1954 had divorced the retired baseball hero Joe DiMaggio, married the playwright Arthur Miller in 1956, the symbolic triumph of Mind over Jock suggested the way the wind was blowing. Even Elvis, according to his biographer, Peter Guralnick (1994: 327), turns out to have supported Adlai over Ike in the presidential election of 1956. “I don’t dig the intellectual bit,” he told reporters. “But I’m telling you, man, he knows the most.”

Though I, too, thought I did not “dig the intellectual bit,” I was unwittingly in training for it. The germs of intellectualism had already been sown in the seemingly philistine debates about which boys were the toughest. I must have dimly sensed at the time that in the interminable talk *about* toughness that my friend Ted and I engaged in — the kind of talk the real toughs themselves would never have bothered with — I was already betraying an allegiance to the egghead world. I was practicing being an intellectual before I knew that was what I would be or wanted to be.

It was in arguing about toughness and other such concerns with my friends, I think, that I started acquiring what Warner got by arguing theology with his parents — the rudiments of how to make an argument, weigh different kinds of evidence, move between particulars and generalizations, summarize the views of others, and enter a conversation about ideas. Then, too, debating toughness took me into other areas of culture, like the meaning of masculinity and its symbols — were a “duck’s ass” haircut, pegged pants, and a leather jacket necessary accoutrements of a tough boy? Could a boy be tough and go out with “nice girls”? In arguing about such things I was learning rudimentary semiotics, perhaps even a feeling for those deeper “meanings” in

texts and events that academic intellectual culture rewards us for spotting and formulating.

Another form my unrecognized intellectualism took was my infatuation with sports and sports magazines. I had become a regular reader of *Sport* magazine in the late forties and *Sports Illustrated* when it began publishing in 1954. I was also an eager reader of the annual magazine guides to professional baseball, football, and basketball, and the autobiographies of sports stars, like Joe DiMaggio's *Lucky to Be a Yankee* and Bob Feller's *Strikeout Story*. Here was another "culture steeped in argument": was Ted Williams a better player than Joe DiMaggio or Stan Musial? Could the White Sox beat the Yankees? Could a Chicago Cubs fan also root for the White Sox? This last issue became critical in 1951, when, after suffering with the Cubs since 1946 (I have no memory of the Cubs' pennant-winning year of 1945), I shifted my allegiance to the White Sox, who won fourteen straight games in May and held first place till fading late in the season. When I declared my change of loyalty to the boys and men at the local package store where I hung out, they were contemptuous and scornful. Challenged to defend myself daily during the summer of '51, I struggled for persuasive reasons in defense of my new faith.

To be sure, sports occasionally forced one to confront real issues like racial injustice, as when Jackie Robinson broke through baseball's color line in 1947. Today one can hardly pick up the sports page or listen to sports talk radio without being plunged into conflicts over race, gender, drugs, and economics, making sports an extension of the larger social world rather than the escape from it that it once seemed. But in the sports culture of the fifties, the social stakes were relatively trivial compared to those in Warner's Pentecostal debates—not even the most obsessed baseball fan thinks "eternal life and death" hang on which team one chooses to follow.

Nevertheless, I think it was through debates over sports and through my subliterate sports reading that I first learned to form the arguments and analyses that I would later produce as a professional academic and learned to write the kind of sentences I am writing now. It was through reading and arguing about sports that I learned what it felt like to propose a generalization, restate and respond to a counterargument, and the other complex operations that constitute what we call "intellectualizing," and these skills were there to be transferred when I eventually sought an academic career. I suspect we underrate the role of sports in the elementary literacy training of future intellectuals (not necessarily only male ones either). Mark Edmundson (1999: 55), in an interesting recent memoir on a high school teacher who "changed my life" from "jock" to intellectual, writes that until encountering the man's phi-

osophy course, “I had never read all the way through a book that was written for adults that was not concerned exclusively with football.” Edmundson contrasts his young jock self with the academic he began to become when he read Nietzsche and Thoreau for his great teacher. He does not say what the football books were like, but I imagine that without them he would not have made the transition as readily.

That Edmundson doesn’t consider this possibility again shows how strong is our assumption that jock culture and academic culture are mutually exclusive. I certainly would have been incredulous if somebody had suggested that there might be a connection between the habits of mind I was forming in playground disputes about tough kids and sports and the intellectual work of school. Since school defined itself as everything that supposedly debased American popular culture was not, sports and games could only be an escape from—and an antidote to—schooling and intellect.

It certainly never dawned on me that I found the sports world more compelling than school because it was *more* intellectual than school, not less. Yet sports were full of challenging arguments, debates, problems for analysis, and meaningful statistical math in a way that school conspicuously was not. Furthermore, sports arguments, debates, and analyses made you part of a community, not just of your friends but of the national public culture. Whereas schoolwork seemingly isolated you, you could talk sports with people you had never met. Of course, schools can hardly be blamed for not making intellectual culture resemble the World Series or the Super Bowl, but schools might be learning things from the sports world about how to organize and represent intellectual culture, how to turn the intellectual game into arresting public spectacle.

For another thing that never dawned on me was that the real intellectual world, the one that existed in the big world beyond school, was organized very much like the competitive world of sports, with rival texts, rival interpretations and evaluations of them, rival theories of why they should be read and taught, and team competitions in which partisans or “fans” of one writer, intellectual system, methodology, or ism contended with those of others. My schools missed the opportunity to capitalize on the gamelike element of drama and conflict that the intellectual world shares with the world of sports.

To be sure, school culture was filled with competition that became more intense and invidious as you moved up the ladder. In this competition, points were scored not by making arguments in intellectual debate, of which there was little or none, but by a show of knowledge or ostensibly vast reading or by the academic one-upmanship of putdowns and cleverness. School

culture has tended to reproduce these less attractive features of sports competition without the aspects that create close bonds and community.

Schooling certainly did little to encourage or channel my intellectualism. History, for example, was represented to me not as a set of debates between interpretations of the past, but as a series of contextless facts that one crammed the night before the test and then forgot as quickly as possible afterward. Literature was a mass of set passages to be memorized, like the prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* and Mark Antony's funeral oration in *Julius Caesar*. Such memory work might have been valuable had there been some larger context of issues or problems to give it point and meaning, but there rarely was.

In retrospect, I see now that my elementary schooling reflected an uneasy postwar compromise between traditional and progressive theories, theories that might have been explained to us but were not. On the one hand, it reflected what was left of the fading nineteenth-century theory of "mental discipline," which held that making school as dull and hard as possible was good for the development of the child's character. To paraphrase Terry Eagleton (1983: 29) in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, making a given subject "unpleasant enough to qualify as a proper academic pursuit is one of the few problems" educational institutions have ever effectively solved. On the other hand, after the war this archaic belief in the virtue of making school hard and dreary was being challenged by progressive theories of "life adjustment" as well as a resurgence of vocational education. The result was an odd curricular mixture that combined courses in which I memorized historical facts and literary quotations with courses in home economics, typing, and driver education. But though the old and new theories behind the mixture were opposed, they came together in discouraging genuine intellectual engagement.

School officially stood for intellect, however, so intellect was compromised and sports became the saving alternative. I failed for a long time to see the underlying parallels between the sports and academic worlds, parallels that might have enabled me to cross more readily from one argument culture to the other. And insofar as academic intellectual culture is still defined by its supposed contrast with popular culture, schools are still passing up the chance to bridge the gap between the argument culture of adult intellectuals and the ones students join when they grow up arguing about sports, parental authority, dress fashions, soap operas, teen entertainment idols, weight, personal appearance, dates, and the myriad other things adolescents talk about.

Intellectualism and Conflict

To put it another way, what looks like anti-intellectualism in student culture is often an alternative kind of intellectualism, which grows up alongside schooling and is usually seen as irrelevant to it. In speaking of “alternative intellectualism,” I don’t mean to suggest, as some current educational theorists do, that the student argument culture I’ve described should be seen as a repressed rebellion against intellectual culture. On the contrary, in arguing about toughness and sports as an adolescent, I was not rebelling against traditional academic practices (though I may have thought I was) but was unwittingly learning them. If my schooling repressed anything in me, it was not rebellion against the adult world but adulthood itself.

Deborah Meier (1995: 3) writes of how “schools, in small and unconscious ways, silence . . . playground intellectuals.” If I was one of Meier’s playground intellectuals, I can’t say schooling silenced me—it wasn’t powerful or well organized enough to do that. What schooling did was prevent me from recognizing my own intellectualism. In my case, no permanent harm may have been done, but the failure to channel the argumentative energies that students invest in conventionally nonacademic concerns can carry high social costs. The stakes are certainly raised when these “nonacademic concerns” come to include drug trafficking, gang-banging, and other criminal behavior. While it would be facile to suggest that schoolyard violence can be easily sublimated into intellectual debate, we have no way of knowing how much aggressive behavior might be redirected if schools were to provide curricular occasions for debate and argument rather than try to avoid them. As Meier observes, “fighting with ideas” would be a welcome substitute for fighting “with fists or guns or nasty sound bites” (11).

As Meier knows, however, for many educators and parents, “fighting with ideas” seems dangerously close enough to fighting “with fists or guns” that it can be difficult to imagine how argumentation can be a substitute for violence. Our tendency to see argument as a form of violence rather than an alternative to violence helps explain why the studious avoidance of open conflict is such a prominent feature of the American high school and often the college and university. This avoidance of conflict is well described by Arthur G. Powell, Eleanor Farrar, and David K. Cohen (1985: 67) in their classic study, *The Shopping Mall High School*: “Conflict is rarely the way classroom participants come to terms with one another. Most classes are relaxed and orderly, despite the presence of so many diverse individual intentions. Agreement is far more common than antagonism. . . . Sometimes it is because, when interests sharply diverge but power is perceived to be equal, peaceful coexistence

seems preferable to outright conflict. Sometimes one or another party to an agreement has little choice in the matter: the agreement is really an imposed diktat." Like the antiseptic shopping mall, the school maintains an appearance of harmony and choice that denies the realities of conflict. Though this repression of conflict does help preserve short-term peace and quiet, it ultimately bottles up aggressions that, when they do erupt, are more likely to take antisocial and destructive forms than they might if they had an intellectual outlet.

It is understandable if school authorities fear that encouraging students to argue can escalate into violence, but repressing argument can lead to violence, too. In my own case, the fascination with being tough played itself out in amicable disputes with friends, but in different circumstances it might have taken a more aggressively defiant and machismo form. A critic of my work has suggested that it actually did. In a reading of my autobiographical account in "Disliking Books at an Early Age," Christopher Looby suggests that in moving from a male jock culture into an academic career, I and many other boys of my academic generation only transferred our macho impulse from one realm to another. In my case, Looby suggests, the pedagogy of "teaching the conflicts" and the joys of literary critical contention became a kind of street fighting by other means (Graff and Looby 1994: 440–41).

Even if this explanation is correct, however, most of us would still prefer a society in which aggression is expressed in arguments rather than bullets or bombs. Here, as elsewhere, I agree with Meier, whose book *The Power of Their Ideas* provides an account of her own work as principal of the Central Park East schools, which sought to replace fighting with fists, guns, and nasty sound bites with a more edifying clash of ideas. Meier (1995: 11) describes the success of these schools, which are organized around a culture of argument, "the clash of ideas" that, according to Meier, "will make us all more powerful." As Meier recognizes, kids are often good at fighting with ideas, and those who are not have the capacity to be taught, especially, again, if teachers can recognize and tap into the hidden intellectualism that lurks in ostensibly anti-intellectual or nonacademic interests.

Teaching the Problem: Thematizing Intellectualism

But how can they do that? Kids who argue with passion about rock bands don't necessarily see the point of arguing about a Shakespeare sonnet, a social or psychological theory, or the mind-body problem. Even more important, they don't necessarily see the point of arguing about rock bands in the intellectualized ways and vocabularies in which academics and cultural journalists

argue about popular culture or anything else. This is why educational problems are not solved by junking traditional subjects in favor of courses on sports, cars, fashions, and rap music, though it is foolish to resist introducing such subjects if they figure to hook students who otherwise will tune out academic work entirely. Bringing contemporary youth culture into the curriculum, as schools now often do, can help get students' attention, but the value of this tactic will be limited unless students develop an intellectual and public voice for talking and writing about these subjects. How can this be done?

Like many academic problems, this one seems to me best addressed by bringing the problem directly into the class itself. I have lately been making the question of intellectualism an explicit theme of many of my own courses and of units I have been developing in collaborations with high school teachers. We ask students questions like the following: Would you describe yourself as an intellectual? What would you gain or lose if you translated your street smarts into more intellectual forms of expression? Is being an intellectual a good or bad thing? What is an intellectual anyway—should the word be synonymous with *nerd* or *dweeb* or with being cool? These questions lead to others about the relation between intellectualism and street smarts: Are the two opposed, or can the one be latent in the other? What are the students' nonacademic interests and pursuits, and do these harbor hidden intellectualism?

In my experience, high school and college students are intrigued by these questions, and their responses divide in interesting ways. For some, the suggestion that they are or might want to become intellectuals seems patently ridiculous and bizarre, while for others it seems simply a logical outcome of their education. Similar divisions appear in response to the question of whether intellectualism is or is not already latent in their nonintellectual interests. As these questions are probed, the students' ambivalence about them tends to emerge while definitions of terms are sharpened and key distinctions surface between intellectualism and pomposity or snobbery.

Hillel Crandus, an English teacher at Downer's Grove South High School in the Chicago suburbs, and I have developed a unit for his eleventh-grade literature classes on "becoming an intellectual." The unit takes advantage of the fact that questions about hidden intellectualism are posed in many of the most frequently taught high school literature texts, such as Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. Furthermore, these texts often dramatize the issue of hidden intellectualism by focusing reflexively on language.

Crandus and I took our point of departure from the fact that these

texts are widely taught as initiation stories, narratives that address the ways adolescents become—or in Huck Finn’s and Holden Caulfield’s case, refuse to become—initiated into the adult world. We agreed there was a problem when *initiation*, the critical term that motivates the unit, remains a teacher’s word that students are not even expected to use. Unless students at some point learn the empowering terminology that governs the unit, the initiation is arrested. That is, until student readers of Twain and Salinger control intellectual terms like *initiation*, their street smarts stay at an inarticulate stage. Our premise was that students *can* use such terms if they are encouraged to do so and provided with some models, especially if the cultural power conferred by intellectual discourse is made clear. Crandus and I were aware, however, that this view of the legitimacy and power of intellectual language set us against Huck and Holden themselves (and presumably Twain and Salinger), whose distinctively vernacular language dramatizes their rejection of the hypocritical and inauthentic ways of conventional society and the rigidified forms of academic intellectualism. Indeed, in the famous “Notice” that opens Twain’s (1995: 27) novel by threatening prosecution for anyone who attempts “to find a moral” in the story, the author virtually warns us not to look for the sort of “hidden meaning” that most English instruction would come to focus on.

With Holden and Huck against us, Crandus and I decided that, though our goal was to persuade his eleventh graders that becoming an intellectual might be a good thing, the best tactic would be not to try to convert them but to spark a classroom debate on the pros and cons of intellectualism and its forms of talk, a debate that would get them to wrestle with their contradictions and ambivalences over the issue. Thus, in teaching Salinger’s (1951) novel, Crandus started by pointing his students to the contrast between Holden’s personal vernacular language and the intellectual language Holden and Salinger associate with school.

In the correspondence we maintained during the unit, Crandus wrote as follows:

I called the class’s attention to a scene near the start of the novel in which one of Holden Caulfield’s teachers reads a school history paper that Holden has written back to him: “The Egyptians were an ancient race of Caucasians residing in one of the northern sections of Africa. The latter, as we all know, is the largest continent in the Eastern Hemisphere . . .” (16). Holden is embarrassed to hear the teacher read this paper, which is written in the school language that is Holden’s idea of Intellectual-speak, the language associated with “phonies” throughout the novel.

We then spent a bit of time comparing the prose Holden uses in his history paper,

noting how the flat, padded prose indicates Holden's alienation and disengagement from academic work, with the prose Holden writes the book itself in: "Game, my ass. Some game." Or, "I was standing way the hell up on top of Thomsen Hill, right next to this crazy cannon that was in the Revolutionary War and all" (5).

Most of Crandus's students readily saw that Holden's colloquial voice is more authentic and thoughtful than the ostensibly more intellectual voice in which he writes the school paper. Through class discussion of this issue, they also began to see how differences in language — here the contrast between official school language and personal language — imply choices of the kind they may face between different identities and views of life.

Crandus then posed the question of intellectualism: if Holden's personal talk is more intellectually substantial than his version of school discourse, is there any justification for school discourse at all? Crandus wrote:

Happily for my purposes, Salinger too seems to have this issue in mind. Later in the book, Holden runs into one of his old teachers, Mr. Antolini, who gives him the following advice about language:

"Educated and scholarly men, if they're brilliant and creative to begin with — which, unfortunately, is rarely the case — tend to leave infinitely more valuable records behind them than men do who are merely brilliant and creative. They tend to express themselves more clearly, and they usually have a passion for following their thoughts through to the end" (246).

Here Salinger seems to present a positive view of intellectual discourse, which is more likely than informal discourse to leave permanent "records behind." Or is this advice intended to be read as just another example of the pompous pseudodiscourse that Holden repeatedly gets from the adults in the book?

Once again, Crandus put these questions to his students, using the contrasting styles in the novel to get them to reflect on their own language. What is gained or lost by expressing oneself in Holden's personal register? In the register of the school paper? In the register of the teacher who speaks of "educated and scholarly men"? What are the gains and losses in being able to translate Holdenspeak into Intellectualspeak? Is it possible to blend both into a single discourse? That is, can students talk the talk of the intellectual world without giving up their own ways of talking and being?

Among the other texts Crandus assigns in this unit is my previously mentioned essay, "Disliking Books at an Early Age," in which I describe how my youthful alienation from books finally dissolved when I encountered critical debates about books in college. Crandus asked his students to summarize

my account and express their own feelings about reading and intellectually analyzing and debating what they read. Many of the students were candid in expressing their distaste for such analysis. As one of them put it, "The only thing that overanalyzing leads to is boredom. . . . I like to just read a book, and not so much to analyze it."

Another student, T. E., who expressed similar doubts about the value of intellectual analysis, made a particularly trenchant critique of both my story and my argument. "Does critical analysis really stir up interest in literature?" he wrote. Maybe it did for Graff, he goes on, but will such a solution work for *others, who are perhaps more truly alienated?* After all, T. E. asks, "How did Graff even get to the point of even searching for a solution? I question his sincerity in his 'admittance' of disliking books at an early age. . . . Not to insult Graff, but maybe his inspiration comes from the fact that he might actually have been a 'closet nerd.' . . . Please. If Graff's ideal solution is to be 'exposed to critical analysis of literature,' then every gum-chewing high school kid who has ever been caught criticizing something by saying 'it sucks' could be an English major." Responding to T. E., I had to admit that he had found me out: I had indeed been a closet nerd, as my retelling of my story in the present essay suggests. I went on to say, however, that, despite T. E.'s disclaimers, his *penetrating comments suggest that he, too, might be a closet nerd.* I added that it didn't seem so wildly implausible to me to imagine that many gum-chewing kids who say "it sucks" may become English majors and critics — aren't all our sophisticated theories grounded in some gut reaction of that kind? What is most great criticism, after all, but an elaborated way of saying, in effect, "It sucks" or "It's cool"?

What is most pedagogically intriguing here, however, is that in expressing his doubts about the value of analytic close reading, T. E. produced one of the most penetrating close readings of a text of mine that I have seen. T. E., it seems, is being seduced into becoming an intellectual in the very *process of expressing his resistance to such a role.* Hence the potential of thematizing the problem of intellectualism in our classes. Crandus and I have agreed that he will give a copy of the present essay to his students next year and see how they respond to my telling of their story and mine. In effect, our unit asked Crandus's students to inventory whatever "hidden intellectualism" they might find in themselves and wrestle with what they want to do with it, that is, decide what kind of voice they wish to give it. Again, however, our point was not to convert T. E. and his skeptical classmates into nerds and eggheads, at least not directly. It was rather to get them to reflect on their own contradictory feelings about becoming intellectuals and talking Intellectual-

speak. Our premise, which we continue to test, was that it is such reflection more than anything the teacher may say that will induce students to discover the hidden intellectual in themselves. "Becoming an Intellectual" is still a pedagogical work in progress.

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