

Our Undemocratic Curriculum

GERALD GRAFF

In *Clueless in Academe*, I described asking a recent college graduate who had majored in English how well her education had clarified the larger issues in literary study today. Her answer was a sobering one: “The assumption seemed to be that if I was any good I *already* knew what those issues were and why they mattered. I couldn’t ask, since I didn’t want to look dumb” (10). Despite the lip service we give to democratic education and despite the opening up of the canon, American education still sends students an undemocratic message: There are secrets of the academic world that the smart students know, and you probably aren’t one of them if you have to ask what the secrets are. I felt the force of this “Don’t ask, don’t tell” rule in college and graduate school many years ago, and I see it in my own students’ eyes now whenever I ask, “Any questions?” and get embarrassed silence.

The silence is a symptom of a serious lack of transparency in the academic intellectual world, a world in which the criteria of success seem mysterious, undefined, and perhaps unexplainable. Until this lack of transparency is addressed, our attempts to democratize American education are likely to be superficial.

Take the so-called achievement gap between rich and poor students, arguably the most serious educational problem of our day. Granted, “achievement gap” is a euphemism for economic and social inequality, a condition that can’t be overcome by changes in education alone. Granted,

The author is professor of English at the University of Illinois, Chicago. A version of this paper was presented at the 2006 MLA convention in Philadelphia.

measuring achievement by the kinds of tests that have been instituted under the No Child Left Behind Act is highly questionable. Nevertheless, I believe the achievement gap is real and that one condition for closing it is a college and high school curriculum that is far more transparent than what we have now. The curriculum is only one of many factors behind the gap, but it is an important one and one that academics are in a position to do something about.

As I argue in *Clueless in Academe*, the school and college curriculum does more to conceal the secrets of academic success than to make those secrets explicit. To quote myself again, the college curriculum obscures these secrets “by hiding [them] in plain view amidst a vast disconnected clutter of subjects, disciplines, and courses. The sheer cognitive overload” represented by the curriculum prevents most students from detecting these secrets (3). I have more to say about what I take these secrets to be, but first I want to underscore the point that “cognitive overload” is central to the educational problem.

To put the point another way, the curriculum presents students with an extraordinary diversity of texts, ideas, subjects, intellectual perspectives, and approaches, but it fails to give them adequate help in assimilating this diversity. The one subject not offered in school is the one all the others presuppose, how to do school itself; the one thing the academic curriculum fails to cover is what it means to be academic. As Deborah Meier rightly observes, “[T]oo many kids don’t see a connection between their efforts and school success, don’t know what they need to practice, can’t imagine themselves ever being ‘academic,’ and have never seen ‘academics’ played” (164). She is thinking of elementary and high school students, but her comment describes a large percentage of college undergraduates as well.

The college curriculum exposes students to a rich menu of disciplines, courses, texts, ideas, and methods and says, in effect, “Come and get it, but you’re on your own as to what to make of it; and if you can’t make much of it, it’s your fault, not ours.” This state of affairs makes a travesty of democratic education, since it favors the few who come to college with some already acquired academic socialization that enables them to detect the tacit and unformulated rules of the academic game. It leaves the rest, including most low-income students, feeling that they somehow lack the mysterious quality possessed by the high achievers.

Furthermore, the nebulosity about how “academics” is “played” trickles down from the top, leaving high schools largely in the dark about how to prepare students for college. A small but telling symptom is the way the names of things change as students make the transition from high school to college. What are called “language arts” in high school inexplicably

morph into “English,” “foreign languages,” “literature,” “composition,” or “humanities,” while “social studies” evaporate and become “social sciences.” It hardly matters, though, since students quickly see that nobody expects these terms to carry precise meaning.

We college professors often blame high schools for sending us poorly prepared students, but it is only recently that we have shown much interest in helping the schools determine what that preparation should be, and we have a long way to go. Like most undergraduate majors, students in teacher-education programs are generally not expected to be part of the research conversations of the disciplines—if they are even supposed to know that research exists. The confusion about what it means to be academics is thus passed down to the teachers we train and the schools they will teach in.

Again, this confusion gives a big edge to the high achievers, who come in already possessing some familiarity with academic assumptions and academic talk. To a large degree, American education is organized for those who are already the best educated, a fact notoriously borne out in the college admissions process, where colleges compete for the top students and are rated by the percentage of these they attract. It is almost as if the goal of college admissions were to recruit a student body that is already so good that it hardly needs a faculty to teach it.

To be sure, the recent emergence of first-year experience programs that reach out to the academically inexperienced is a step in the right direction. But such programs are generally not in a position to address the problem of intellectual socialization. First-year composition programs, whose mission is to provide students with the academic metadiscourse needed to negotiate the discourses of the different disciplines, are generally too marginal, low in prestige, and lacking in intellectual focus and coherence to carry out this mission. I’ve found that students in my composition courses see them not as a guide to their other courses but as one more hurdle among others to get over.

What are the rules of the academic game, and do these rules differ fundamentally from the humanities to the sciences or is there an important area of overlap? It is symptomatic that we on college faculties virtually never discuss such questions among ourselves. The pretense is that we all agree on them, or perhaps that we so disagree that there would be no point in discussing them. Or do we assume that the disciplines are indeed so different that the very notion of a unitary academic game is absurdly reductive?

Whatever the case, the disdain for anything that seems reductive serves as an easy excuse for not discussing and explaining what we do. The truth is that any effective communication must be reductive sometimes to make

an impact and circulate. Even the most complex thought has its reductive moments, a fact illustrated by celebrated intellectual sound bites like, “I think, therefore I am,” “All history is the history of class struggle,” and “There is nothing outside the text.” Indeed, reduction and complication are not opposites, as they are usually understood to be, but different moments in the process of communication. And the more complex and diverse our public culture becomes, the more desperate becomes the need for viable reductions and simplifications.¹

If I am right that curricular cognitive overload is a central cause of student cluelessness, then improving education—and closing the achievement gap—will not be possible until academic institutions get as good at pedagogical simplification as we are at proliferating multiplicity and complication. We cannot make the curriculum more transparent—that is, more democratic—until we are willing to be reductive about how academics is played, and this means getting over our protective queasiness about totalizing self-characterizations.

My own candidate for the most pedagogically useful simplification comes from the title of a popular recent composition text by Andrea A. Lunsford and John J. Ruszkiewicz, *Everything's an Argument*. If we must find a single overarching concept to characterize the academic game—and unless we do, we can forget about making academic intellectual practices accessible on a democratic scale—then persuasive argument seems to me the clearest and most comprehensive available term.

At its core, persuasive argument means listening closely to the arguments of others, summarizing them in a recognizable way, and making your own argument in response. It is not just a technical skill but an ethical imperative in a world where our survival may depend on our ability to get into the heads of those who think very differently from us. It is a game of “They say, I say,” as my wife, Cathy Birkenstein, and I call it in the title of our recent textbook. Though each discipline has its own particular conventions for making the “They say, I say” move, there is no discipline whose members do not use a version of the following formula: “Most people in the field believe _____. My own view is _____.”

The point should be obvious, but since it is not conveyed to students—or is buried in the welter of other information—I have found that it comes as a revelation and a shock. As students go from one disconnected course to the next, they tend to form a highly exaggerated idea of the differences between teachers and subjects. For this reason they often have to ask us teachers what we want—a question that implies that what you learn in one course provides no clue to the next, that academia is essentially unreadable as a collective culture, that teachers can be decoded only one at

a time. As teachers we are largely oblivious to the problem, isolated as we are from one another by our classroom walls. No wonder taking courses becomes for most students a business of psyching out their successive teachers and giving each of us whatever we seem to want even when it is contradictory. Students thus become positivists in the morning and social constructionists after lunch, and giving teachers what they want—assuming students can guess—replaces deep cumulative socialization into the intellectual community, into how academics is played.

Academia needs to get the word out, then, that everything's an argument, that it's the argument game that connects the different disciplines and enables one course and subject to help you with the next. We also need to get the word out that the argument game is what connects academic communication with communication in the workplace and in public sphere citizenship—that real-world relevance that students often find sorely missing from their education. Finally, we need to get the word out that the argument game also connects academic practices with those that students have engaged in long before starting school.

For the most disabling secret the curriculum hides from students is that academic competence is grounded not in arcane mysteries fathomed only by nerds, highbrows, and geniuses but in rhetorical skills students have been practicing since infancy. It is axiomatic that to teach any subject one must tap into something the learner already knows. Arguing—in the sense both of making and defending claims and engaging in disputes—is a practice everyone at some level knows. Obviously, I could not make this claim if I agreed with the view that arguing is a male thing, a Western thing, an upper-class thing, a white thing—a view that confuses argument with aggression and domination. To be sure, different cultures evolve different conventions for negotiating disagreements, and some cultures discourage children from any argument and disagreement. Nevertheless, children of all cultures learn to argue in the very process of learning language.

As a case in point I adduce our four-year-old son, Aaron. When Aaron first started speaking at around age two, one of his favorite phrases was “good boy” (pronounced “gude buoy”). My wife and I soon noticed a curious thing: he said, “Good boy,” only when he had done something bad. Saying it was his way of anticipating and preemptively refuting our charge that he was being a bad boy. He was making an argument—not a very good argument, perhaps (we pointed out to him that repeating, “Good boy,” doesn't make you one), but still an argument.

At home and at play, children are steeped in argument cultures, and many become adept at persuasion, which is one of the few kinds of power children possess. Yet to say that American schools fail to tap into stu-

dents' argument skills would be a big understatement. Instead of seeing children's argument skills as a resource to be cultivated and built on, schools often discourage argumentative students, even stigmatizing them as troublemakers. Thus children who are energetic and adept at schoolyard argument get the message that school is a place where their argumentative skills will be punished or not rewarded and where intellectual tameness and dullness rule.

The failure of schools and colleges to tap into the argument skills of students has especially damaging effects on low-income students, many of whom have considerable talent for argument. In a famous study from the early 1970s, the linguist William Labov found that the black working-class subjects he interviewed actually showed more verbal facility than his white middle-class subjects. He concluded that "in many ways working-class speakers are more effective narrators, reasoners, and debaters than many middle-class speakers, who temporize, qualify, and lose their argument in a mass of irrelevant detail" (208). It is said that in hard-core poverty neighborhoods, many of the smartest kids turn to gangs and drug dealing, activities that seem the surest road to prestige and wealth. It is worth speculating about how much of the aggression that now goes into such antisocial or violent behavior might be sublimated into intellectual pursuits if the school curriculum encouraged vigorous argument.

Meier has actually suggested such sublimation as an educational objective. She observes that "fighting with ideas rather than fists or guns or nasty sound bites could be a welcome relief" (11). In *The Power of Their Ideas*, an account of her work as principal of an elementary and high school in Harlem that organized its curriculum around "the clash of ideas" and made arguments about books, culture, and politics part of the daily experience of teachers and students (11, 58, 81), she provided a model of how a rich collective argument culture can turn potentially alienated low-income and minority students into intellectuals. Her work shows how a school culture organized around intellectual argument can become a powerful counterculture, successfully competing for students' attention with the anti-intellectual youth culture, which usually wins this competition.

Foregrounding argument in the curriculum would enable schools and colleges to tap into skills already possessed not only by students but by teachers as well. Training teachers, regardless of their subject areas, to teach argument would lend substance and coherence to teacher-education programs, thereby making good programs—and good teaching itself—more replicable or scalable than they tend to be now.

Some will object that what I have been proposing is too much a one-size-fits-all prescription, echoing the fixation on standardization and

standardized testing that characterizes the age of No Child Left Behind. To this objection, I reply that to make academic intellectual culture intelligible, an educational system must work as a system, and *system* assumes common ground, standardization, even “one size fits all,” though nothing would prevent the sort of argument curriculum I urge here from being adapted to the needs and competencies of very different students at different educational levels.

We need to break our habit of treating *standardized* and *standardization* as dirty words. Historically, the politics of antistandardization has generally been reactionary, from the feudal and aristocratic reaction against modern industrialism and democracy to today’s states’-rights localism and the conservative attack on big government. It used to be the aristocracy that complained that mass-produced shirts, clocks, and books debased culture, as it was elitist mandarins who judged TV entertainment and sporting events inherently vulgar because they were standardized. Most of us today would grant some value to the standardization that makes the Super Bowl or a Rolling Stones concert available to large masses of people, but we draw the line when it comes to education. Yet it is no more possible to democratize education without standardization than it would be to democratize affordable clothing, food, transportation, health care, and entertainment without standardization and mass production.

Instead of uncritically demonizing standardization, we should start distinguishing between good and bad forms of it. Most current multiple-choice tests are examples of bad standardization, but in reacting against these tests we are in danger of forgetting kinds of standardization that make democracy and public accessibility possible. As I remarked at our session in response to Meier’s often voiced objections to educational standardization, when we devise a curricular model that works well, as Meier’s does, “we should standardize the hell out of it” (“University”).

Instead of rejecting standardization as such, progressive educators would be more persuasive with politicians and the public if they worked to create standardized tests and other assessments that make good educational sense. A standardized curriculum, then, might mean not a bad curriculum but a transparent one, in which how to be an academic would no longer be a well-kept secret.

NOTE

1. For an elaboration of this point, see my *Clueless*, ch. 7.

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