

## Why Assessment?

Gerald Graff

I recently went on a tour of my neighborhood fire station with my six-year-old son's kindergarten class. Our guide got my attention when he remarked that, in order to ensure effective teamwork, every firefighter in the station must understand not only his or her particular role but also those of the station's three dozen other employees. What a contrast, I thought, with the working conditions of college teachers, who are generally oblivious to the teaching of their colleagues. How long would most institutions survive if their workers knew as little about one another's tasks as we academics know about our colleagues' teaching? And how ironic that we view our privatized classrooms as the suitable venue for our lofty intellectual work when they actually resemble those of proletarian assembly line functionaries like the Charlie Chaplin hero of the film *Modern Times*, who knows only his own limited task and has no idea of the larger process of which it is part. Experiences like the one in the fire station — reinforced over my career as a classroom teacher — have shaped my thinking about education and made me believe in the transformative potential of outcomes assessment for higher education.

Early in my teaching career I assigned an essay in which I asked my class to discuss the meanings of a certain assigned novel — pretty routine stuff, I thought. But a student came up after class and reported that his instructor in another course had said it was a serious mistake to attribute *meanings* to a work of art, a practice that confused art with moral messages and propaganda. The instructor quoted the mantra prominent in critical circles in those days, Archibald MacLeish's statement that "a poem should not mean / But be"; he

also invoked its pop culture equivalent, from movie mogul Sam Goldwyn: "If it's a message you want, call Western Union." I conceded that the message-hunting approach to literature had problems, but I argued that there was a big difference between looking for "meanings" in a work, which could be complex and subtle, and looking for a crude "message," which implied something simplistic, didactic, or doctrinaire.

My student seemed satisfied by my response and went on his way, but the incident stuck with me, starting me to wonder how college students negotiate elusive matters like the nature of literary meaning when they get dramatically conflicting views on such matters from their teachers. I speculated that, if you were one of those students who was already puzzled by the mysterious "themes," "symbols," and "hidden meanings" that teachers like me seemed to pull out of our hats like rabbits — students who consequently resorted to plagiarism or *Cliffs Notes* — it could not be a confidence builder to feel that whether you were praised or scolded for your handling of those tasks depended on which teacher you happened to draw.

The main lesson of the incident for me, however, was how little I knew about how my colleagues taught literature or any other subject in the university. Aside from department party bookchat and war stories exchanged in the faculty lounge, most of what I knew about my colleagues' teaching came from secondhand glimpses like the one I had gotten from the student in my story, and who knew how much of those accounts to believe. Then, too, I surmised that if students did not ask us more often about the contradictions between our teachings, this was not just because they did not want to risk looking dumb, but also because they did not want to embarrass us with the evidence that we are not on the same page.

I reflected that getting on the same page would not only take a lot of time but might also lead to embarrassing disagreements. I realized that my colleagues and I knew little about one another's teaching because we preferred not to know more. As long as we were ignorant of each other, collegial life was easier and simpler all around. I certainly appreciated my own classroom freedom and was not about to ask for more faculty meetings or demand that I be made to submit a lesson plan to a supervisor, as high school teachers are routinely required to do. And though it has been a long time since I was untenured, I can still appreciate how for junior faculty members the classroom can feel like a safe zone that would be threatened if their senior colleagues knew too much about their teaching. Even today on my bad days as a teacher I am relieved that the train wreck is witnessed only by my student victims and not my colleagues or deans.

So it is no surprise that colleges and universities, instead of asking faculty members to correlate what we teach and how we teach it, assume instead that each of us will figure such things out on our own. And this assumption is understandable, since many of us became academics because we liked figuring things out on our own and were good at it. No wonder the tacit rule of college teaching was "I agree not to mess with your course if you agree not to mess with mine."

This rule suits the teachers, but how well does it serve students? My student's question (How kosher is it to ascribe meanings to works of art?) is just one of a vast number of confusing and contested issues in humanities study (including the meaning of the word *humanities*) that are made even more confusing by the clashing stories students encounter as they go from course to course. Students begin coping with these mixed messages at least as early as the transition from high school to college, when the very names of things suddenly change without notice. What had been called "language arts" in high school, for example, mysteriously evaporates and becomes foreign languages and English (the latter term itself nebulous and unhelpful), and "social studies" morphs into sociology, anthropology, and political science. In college the contradictory messages intensify with a vengeance, as students go from one teacher who insists that good reading means inferring the author's intention to another who dismisses authorial intentions as unknowable and irrelevant; or from one teacher who believes that textual interpretations can be objectively correct or incorrect to another who smiles or rolls his or her eyes at the naïveté of such objectivism; or from one teacher who expects undergraduates to employ a rigorous analytical methodology and terminology more or less like the teacher's own to another who thinks it sufficient if students learn to appreciate a good read in whatever relaxed way is comfortable to them.

Furthermore, the frequency and intensity of these mixed messages has significantly increased with the explosive ideological divisions of our recent culture wars. A student today can go from one course in which it is taken for granted — and therefore possibly not spelled out — that the traditional canon constitutes an unproblematic heritage transcending politics and ideology to another course in which it is equally taken for granted and therefore unsaid that the traditional canon is deeply compromised by politics and ideology. Given the very different vocabularies likely to be employed in such cases, a student who takes both courses may not even recognize that the teachers are talking about the same thing. And this is not even to mention the dramatically mixed messages students encounter when they go from the humanities to the sciences, from the hard to the soft sciences, or from the liberal arts to business.

The confusion comes to a head whenever we give a writing assignment. You might think college faculties would meet to discuss a key question like whether writing in the humanities is fundamentally different from science or business writing, or whether significant areas of overlap exist. Yet in more than forty years of teaching, I have never heard of such a meeting taking place, at least not until outcomes assessment came along, since again the default assumption has been that each of us will figure such things out in our own. First-year composition and writing across the curriculum programs have tried to address such problems, but composition itself is rarely connected closely enough to the other disciplines — or respected enough in them — to give students the help they need in negotiating conflicting writing advice. Consequently students can go from one instructor who discourages them from summarizing what they have read, telling them, "I've already read the text — I want to know what *you* think," to another who tells them, "I don't care what *you* think, I want to see how carefully you've read the text." No wonder when I assign an essay students come up and ask, "Do you want *my* ideas in this paper or just a summary of the reading?"

When such conflicts are noticed at all, instead of seeing them as a problem we tend to celebrate them as evidence of the wonderful diversity of our academic intellectual culture. And that diversity *does* represent a vast improvement over the relatively limited curriculum I was exposed to as a college student in the 1950s. The problem is not the increased intellectual and cultural diversity of today's curriculum but rather our failure to give students enough help in making coherent sense of it. Though we are used to complaints about curricular incoherence and cafeteria-counter curricula, I do not think we appreciate the cognitive damage that results when the assumptions of one course undermine those of the next or have no discernible relation to them at all.

Indeed, the lack of connection between courses may negate much of the benefit of our increased curricular diversity by effacing the contrasts students need in order to experience diversity *as* diversity or difference *as* difference. In our general education requirements, for example, we ask students to take courses that cover the sciences and humanities, but since those courses do not converge students lose sight of the contrasts that define the sciences and humanities. Similarly, we often ask students to cover a range of historical periods from ancient to modern, but the disconnect between the courses causes students to come away with no clear sense of what it means to be "ancient" or "modern." True, interdisciplinary programs have helped connect some of the dots, but ultimately these programs have reproduced fragmentation rather than

counteracted it, since interdisciplinary programs tend to be disconnected from each other as well as from the disciplines themselves.

The confusion that results from these curricular discontinuities and mixed messages helps explain why few undergraduates really enter the intellectual conversation of the university, which they do not experience as a connected conversation at all, and why the intellectual culture of college remains largely impenetrable to the high schools, which — in a process I call "trickle-down obfuscation" — have trouble figuring out how to prepare their students for college. Unfortunately, we have become so used to this state of affairs, in which only an elite minority of students become insiders to the academic intellectual club and the majority remain outside, that it seems normal, inevitable, and even democratic: the majority of students, we can rationalize, just are not cut out to be eggheads like us. They do not want to be eggheads, and if we seriously asked them to be, they would probably only be miserable and rebel. Outcomes assessment is revolutionary because it challenges this fatalistic and ultimately deeply undemocratic way of thinking.

In short, then, we do not appreciate the educational damage that results from teaching in self-isolated classrooms, and perhaps the function of such classroom isolation is to protect us from having to be aware of this damage. Our ignorance of what goes on outside our own classroom induces a condition I call "coursecentrism," a state of mind that insulates us as teachers from the consequences of the curricular system in which we work. Coursecentrism — like its ethno-, ego-, and Euro- counterparts — is a kind of tunnel vision in which we become so used to the confines of our own course that we are oblivious to the fact that our students are taking other courses whose instructors at any moment may be undercutting our most cherished beliefs. To be sure, we know those other courses are out there, but since we have no contact with them and feel we could not do much about them if we wanted to, their existence becomes an abstraction pushed to the back of our minds.

My complaint, then, is not the familiar one that teaching gets no respect but rather that the way we think about teaching needs to change. At a time when our online technologies make amazing new forms of connectivity possible, and when much of our cutting-edge academic research insists on the inherently social and collaborative nature of intellectual work, we still think of teaching in ways that are narrowly private and individualistic, as a practice naturally enacted behind classroom walls that allow us to tune out the classroom next door or in the next building. In fact, we betray our assumption that teaching is by nature a solo act in our unreflective use of "the classroom" as a shorthand for all teaching and learning. I say this not to disparage good

individual teaching but to point out that we become better individual teachers the more we can get help from our colleagues and learn enough about one another's courses to be able to take them as reference points in our own.

I have complained that the university leaves it up to us as individuals to figure out how to teach our courses on our own, but, you may still ask, what is the problem with that? The problem is that such an arrangement really means leaving it up to our students to figure *us* out on their own. With coursecentric logic, we assume that if we all teach our courses conscientiously, each making sure that his or her demands are spelled out as clearly and transparently as possible, then our students will make coherent sense of our diverse perspectives. They will put it all together for themselves even if we do not or cannot. The problem is that, no matter how transparent each course is, the aggregate effect will be opaque if courses are fighting each other and canceling each other out without their teachers' realizing it. The point was made tellingly years ago by Joseph Tussman (1969: 115), a founding theorist of the learning-community model of curricular integration, who observed that though all the courses in a program may be admirably coherent, "a collection of coherent courses may be simply an incoherent collection."

To put it another way, our closed classrooms enable us as teachers to tune each other out, but our students do not have the same luxury. They consequently develop their own reactive form of coursecentrism, adapting to the compartmentalizations of the curriculum by mentally compartmentalizing us. I am thinking of the familiar student practice of "psyching out" successive teachers and giving each whatever he or she seems to want even if it flatly contradicts what the previous teacher wanted. Students thus learn to be relativists at ten o'clock and universalists after lunch. A University of Chicago student summed it up succinctly, if crudely, when asked how he coped with the challenges of the humanities and sciences: "In humanities I B.S. In science I regurgitate." Professors often complain about the cynicism of this student shape shifting, but such cynicism is an understandable reaction to our curricular mixed messages. Since the faculty fails to represent itself as an intelligible collectivity, the only way most students can figure us out is one at a time. This is yet another way of saying they do not become socialized into our intellectual community.

There are those who defend this disjunctive curriculum as the perfect preparation for the ambiguity, instability, and unpredictable change that will characterize life after graduation. If students are increasingly forced to put the curricular pieces together on their own, is not that precisely in tune with what we now know about knowledge, that it is socially constructed by

the learner rather than pre-given? According to these arguments (which were recently made against me when, as president of the Modern Language Association [MLA], I wrote in praise of outcomes assessment for encouraging us to coordinate our teaching),<sup>1</sup> what I disparagingly call the mixed-message curriculum is actually a healthy cognitive workout regimen and an excellent corrective to the dogmatic certainties held by many students.

This argument strikes me as a desperate rationalization for continuing to do what we have always done, but it is true, I think, that the high-achieving minority of students often do thrive on our disconnected curriculum, sometimes perhaps by simply being better than their struggling peers at giving each different teacher whatever he or she wants, but sometimes by constructing their own coherent conversations out of their courses. For these high achievers, the clashing or incommensurable approaches of their different teachers become grist for their mill as they synthesize the disparate views or summarize their conflicts as a debate that they can then enter.

I believe that these high achievers see through the curricular mixed messages to the underlying common practices of reading, analysis, and argument — what we now call "critical-thinking skills" — and thereby become insiders to the academic conversation. They cut through the clutter of jargons and methodological differences within and across the departments to detect the common argument culture to which their teachers all belong. They detect the points at which their different courses and subjects converge and thus experience the redundancy and reinforcement that our minds need, according to information scientists, to make sense of the world.

The majority, however, fails to construct a coherent conversation out of the discontinuities and inconsistencies between courses and is thus prevented from experiencing redundancy and reinforcement. As a consequence, the learning of these students is deprived of any cumulative dimension, forcing them virtually to start from scratch every time they take a new course. To put it another way, since these students fail to detect the common practices of argument and analysis that underlie their diverse courses, they tend to form a greatly exaggerated picture of the differences among faculty members, disciplines, and course demands. As taking courses for these students becomes a process of serially giving teachers whatever they seem to want — assuming the students can figure out what it is — jumping through hoops takes the place of deep socialization into an intellectual community. In short, the disconnect between courses ultimately reproduces itself in the disconnect between college undergraduates and academic culture itself. It also widens the achievement gap between the high-achieving few and the majority.

Coursecentrism and the mixed-message curriculum thus go a long way toward explaining the widespread apathy and disengagement among U.S. undergraduates, now amply documented in research reports like the National Survey of Student Engagement. They also help explain the finding of less well-publicized studies that students who learn a subject well enough to get a high grade in a course often prove helpless when asked to apply what they have learned to something outside the course. In one study discussed by Howard Gardner in his book *The Unschooled Mind* (1991: 155), elementary and middle-school students who had scored high on tests that required them to know that the Earth is round reverted to their earlier flat-Earth beliefs when they were tested after the course. What they had learned was so tied to the course in which they had learned it that once the course was over they forgot it and regressed to their pre-educated understanding. As Jim Salvucci, professor of English at Stevenson University, has observed, "What you learn in a course tends to stay in the course."

All of which is a long-winded way of explaining why I am a believer in outcomes assessment in higher education, the only trend on the horizon that seriously challenges coursecentrism and thus the only trend with the potential to make the college intellectual world transparent and accessible to all undergraduates. Outcomes assessment sets in motion a chain reaction in which three things can happen that have never happened before in higher education and are unlikely to happen without it.

First, outcomes assessment makes us seriously ask whether our undergraduates are actually learning what we are teaching. This is shockingly revolutionary, since, if anything, our assumption has been that most students will *not* learn what we teach them, that given human nature this is to be expected, and that ultimately this is not our problem. In the many faculty meetings I have attended over the course of my career I have never heard anyone ask what our students are actually learning—until this year, when every department in my college has been asked to assess its undergraduate major. We are still in the early stages, but the process has already provoked the most searching collegial discussions I have ever experienced. I have also heard similarly positive accounts from many other campuses where assessment is under way.

In shifting the focus from what *we* teach to what *students* learn, assessment inspires college faculties—for the first time in the history of higher education, I believe—to take responsibility for our students' progress instead of placing the blame for failure completely on them. Once this step is taken, we are pushed to take a second step: identifying what it is we want students to learn

and getting collegial agreement on it. In step three, we work together as a faculty to create a curriculum coordinated and connected enough to be transparent, accessible, and self-reinforcing instead of self-undermining. The operative word here is "we," signaling that what students learn is seen as a function of the entire curriculum rather than of isolated courses and departments.

Fortunately, proven models of curricular integration already exist. The learning community approach, in which faculty members collaborate by coteaching in smaller or larger groups, is one of the most familiar and well-developed models, though it is symptomatic of the neglect of the problems I have been describing that learning community colleges are one of the best-kept secrets in U.S. higher education. An alternative to learning communities, however, as a means of connecting the curriculum that may be bureaucratically simpler and less expensive is the practice of pairing courses, as for example in the increasingly popular strategy in which a cohort of students takes the same first-year composition course and the same general education course. Last but not least, we will dissipate the vast potential of our online technologies if we do not start using them to break down the barriers between courses instead of shoring them up, as Blackboard, for example, tends to do.

I hope I have said enough to suggest why it is deeply beside the point to object, as I have heard some of my MLA colleagues do, "But we're *already* doing assessment—don't we *grade* our students all the time?" This objection fails to see that it is ultimately not our students who are being assessed; it is we and how well we are instructing them. Another common objection is that colleges are intellectually and culturally so diverse—both within each college and across the range of colleges—that it is impossible to reach a consensus on meaningful assessment standards. Indeed, according to critics of assessment both inside and outside the MLA, when we seek agreement on measuring student outcomes, we end up rewarding not real learning but those superficial trappings of it that can be measured or even quantified. Here the critics inevitably cite the standardized tests that have been inflicted on the lower schools under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), arguing that these illustrate the disastrous results of trying to measure educational outcomes by common criteria.

I certainly agree that NCLB represents a very bad model of how to do outcomes assessment: if assessment in higher education resembles anything like the pattern set by NCLB, then I too am against it. But in my experience most college assessment has not followed the NCLB model, and NCLB should not be allowed to give college assessment a bad name. In fact, we who

teach in colleges have a great opportunity to show how to get assessment right and thus how it can be better done in elementary and secondary schools.

Accordingly, as Cathy Birkenstein and I have argued, it is perfectly possible to develop strong assessment standards without reducing them to a superficial least common denominator of measurable outcomes. Indeed, I would argue that it is not only possible for faculties to "get on the same page" with respect to what we want our students to learn but that in an important sense college faculties are *already* on the same page. Teaching in noncommunicating black boxes, however, helps prevent us from discovering our common ground. As my department head, Mark Canuel, recently put it at a department meeting, we as faculty members "are continually reinventing the same wheel" without our knowing it.

I have already suggested the basis of our unnoticed common ground when I observed how our high-achieving students become insiders to the academic conversation. Lest I sound as if I am renouncing my past pleas for "teaching the conflicts," I want to stress that the existence of common argumentative practices is consistent with enormous intellectual and cultural diversity in the content of our academic intellectual beliefs. That is, although there is little agreement within most college faculties in the content of our *ideas and beliefs*, there is tremendous implicit agreement in our *practices*, in how the academic intellectual game is played. Indeed, we would not even be able to disagree with one another intelligibly or communicate our disagreements if such agreement on practices were not already in place, if we did not belong to a common argument culture that presupposes shared axioms.

Whether you are a deconstructionist, a string theorist, or a practitioner of econometrics or rational choice theory, you would not have gotten far in the university unless you had mastered the critical-thinking fundamentals of reading, summarizing arguments, and making your own arguments, practices whose mastery is a minimal requirement for membership in the academic club. Without underestimating the differences between disciplines, I would point out that there is no discipline whose members do not have to be able to summarize the claims of others in the field and make their own claims in response. It is this implicit agreement on such basic rhetorical practices that explains the familiar fact that colleagues who are otherwise hopelessly at odds tend to agree overwhelmingly on who the good students are. It also explains why even those who dislike argument and disparage it as a Western Eurocentric thing, an upper-class thing, a male thing, or a white thing inevitably express their critiques of the argument culture by making arguments.

The last point may seem trivial, but its pedagogical importance

becomes clear when we reflect that it is just these moves we take for granted of summarizing arguments and making one's own that our students often have not mastered. And given the dearth of collegial discussion of educational aims and objectives, it is not surprising that we fail to notice the existence of our common academic game until we are shocked to discover that many of our students have not learned to play it.

As this may suggest, for me assessment criteria are best when they are few, simple, and well focused, whereas the more we multiply and complicate these criteria and the more discipline-specific we make them, the less chance there is that faculties and students will be able to hold them in mind well enough to do assessment effectively. Unfortunately, there is an understandable temptation to try to please all constituencies by making assessment criteria so multiple, diverse, and discipline-specific that shared practices are obscured, and at this point the assessment process simply mirrors the incoherent and disconnected curriculum itself.

In contrast, a less cumbersome and more workable assessment process for majors, say, might ultimately be reducible to a single comprehensive question: are students able to summarize a central assumption or claim in their major discipline and respond to it articulately in writing? (See Graff and Birkenstein 2008.) Arguably, students who can perform such a task will have had to master many subordinate tasks, including appreciating ways of thinking very different from their own, informing themselves about essential information, managing different kinds of evidence and data, moving between abstract claims and particular examples, and correctly using written grammar and punctuation.

Finally, such a focus on arguments anticipates the frequent objection from humanities faculties that assessment cannot fairly measure the elusive imaginative experience of the arts. It can do so, however, if we accept the axiom that our students' experience of works of art and the humanities necessarily remains private until it is translated into *arguments*. Insofar as assessment encourages a focus on argument and analysis as a primary measure of student work, it may even have the unexpected benefit of dissipating some of the woolly headed anti-intellectualism that still often surrounds arts education.

I realize that bad methods of assessment exist and that it is hard for faculty members who have endured them to believe that assessment can be productive. The most convincing evidence that it can be not just productive but transformative is testimony like that of Richard, an unidentified professor who responded to my 2008 article, "Assessment Changes Everything," in *PMLA*:

A little anecdotal evidence to back up Graff's argument. In our history department at a large Western land-grant university, we were dragged kicking and screaming into doing outcomes assessment. We started as simply as possible, assessing just two learning outcomes using two essay-exam responses as our instruments. What we found surprised us. No, it didn't surprise us that our students performed rather badly at some of our outcomes. It did surprise us that the entire assessment process (especially the measuring) led us to the richest, most intellectually engaging, and most useful faculty discussions we've ever had about teaching and student learning. I actually look forward to our assessment measurement day (it takes six of us faculty about 5 hours) each semester and the talk about what we might do to improve. Each of us has changed the way she/he teaches, and we will probably change our major in response to what we've found in assessment. And overall the frequency and quality of our talk about teaching and learning is enormously enhanced: there's a buzz on about teaching and learning. We thought we were great teachers before (and we were), but assessment has helped us teach together. Three years ago I never thought I would have said this, but our "culture of teaching and assessment" is much improved. I am certain this wouldn't have happened without assessment.

Such testimony—and I could cite similar examples—is the best answer I know to the question "Why assessment?" In fact, I would say it is unanswerable.

#### Notes

Parts of this essay appeared in slightly different form in my 2008 MLA presidential address, "Coursecentrism," which was published in *PMLA*, vol. 124, no. 3 (May): 727–43. Reprinted with permission.

1. See, for example, the critical response by Laurie Fendrich (2008) to my essay "Assessment Changes Everything" (2008).

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