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Working with the Schools: Project Tempest

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ONE OF THE MOST STRIKING RECENT TRENDS IN AMERICAN education is the increasing collaboration between universities and high schools. Spurred by deepening national concern over the schools, universities are making a far greater commitment than ever before to the preparation of secondary teachers (Amer. Council on Educ.; Franklin, Laurence, and Welles; Franklin). This long-overdue development marks a dramatic change in outlook since the days when I began university teaching in 1963.

In that era, most college professors outside education schools would sooner have done hard labor in prison than worked with high school teachers, much less high school students. Teacher education was seen as a retrograde career move for the few selfless professors who took it on. Many academics still think this way about it, but attitudes are changing, as my career may illustrate.

I certainly would never have guessed back in 1963 that a generation later I would find myself working extensively with high schools. Nor would I have guessed that I would end up where I am now, a university associate dean with major responsibilities in secondary-teacher preparation. And far from retarding my career, my work in the schools has become part of my research and writing as well as my university teaching.¹

The turning point that led all these things to come to pass was a project I helped develop in the spring of 1997 and describe in this essay. The project linked several English courses in Chicago-area public high schools with my undergraduate college course *Literature and Society in the Culture Wars*, at the University of Chicago. A goal of the project was to see if linking college and high school courses around a set of controversial issues helped students at different educational levels to enter the academic

intellectual conversation. The idea was to see if such a collaboration could provide a way into academic discussions, especially for students for whom *academic* meant boring and irrelevant.

The project's guiding ideas came in part from my book *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*, in which I argued that since academic subjects best clarify themselves for students at moments of controversy, educators should "teach the conflicts" between (and about) books and ideas rather than keep those conflicts hidden from students. The guiding ideas also came from another of the project's organizers, Thomas McCann, a high school teacher whose education PhD dissertation explored ways of improving high school students' argumentative skills.

Here is how Project Tempest, as it came to be called, worked. Several high school teachers and I agreed that during the same period in our semesters we would all assign William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. We also agreed to assign a selection of critical pieces that we would choose or devise ourselves to represent the disputes over the aims of literary study that had been provoked by multiculturalist and feminist reinterpretations of Western culture. My college class enrolled twelve students, five of whom volunteered to take part in the project; on the high school side, two schools, five teachers, and over four hundred students from the ninth to the twelfth grade were involved. Delegations of five to ten high school and college students made visits to each other's classes and reported back to their classmates on the discussions that occurred. Relying heavily on e-mail (which was also crucial in the instructors' day-to-day planning of the project), students exchanged papers and responses with one another and with their teachers, creating a common conversation across the different institutions and grade levels. The unit culminated in a student symposium on *The Tempest* hosted by the university and attended by approximately 120 students and instructors. (An abbreviated program of this symposium appears at the end of this essay.)

Why *The Tempest*? Traditionally, Shakespeare's play has been read and performed as a magnificent expression of universal human experience, exemplified in Duke Prospero, whose magical powers are thought to symbolize the transcendent power of art. Some recent revisionist readings, however, depict Prospero as an oppressive colonialist and see his bestial slave Caliban, previously dismissed as a comic villain, as a heroic voice of protest on behalf of the wretched of the earth.

The debates sparked by these clashing ways of reading and staging the play raise central educational questions that we sought to address in our unit: Is it legitimate to read a work in the light of concerns that may not have been central to its intention? Can we determine what a text's intention is, especially when its author is long dead? Do our racial, gender, or ethnic backgrounds matter in how we read—for example, do men and women, or blacks and whites, read differently, or should readers try to rise above such differences? What do we do when our interpretations and evaluations of texts conflict? Why are some works judged better than others? Can judgments of works be defended rationally, or are they purely subjective or ethnocentric? Why read books anyway, and why analyze them for their "hidden meanings" instead of simply reading for the fun of it?

Such literary disputes opened out into questions about cultural difference and diversity that have entered high school and college curricula. We hoped to get students to see that though such questions may not have a single correct answer, some arguments are better grounded than others. At the same time, we were less concerned with the answers students might arrive at than with the extent to which they were able to enter oral and written discussions about them in a disciplined way.

We recognized that the level at which our questions could be posed would vary widely from course to course and grade to grade. It was understood, however, that each instructor would tailor the unit to the needs of his or her students (and each instructor was still responsible for his

or her class), so the project allowed wide variations in the way the material was handled while still sustaining a common discussion with shared reference points.

In one of the highlights of the culminating symposium (which we recorded on videotape), students on the opening panel debated whether *The Tempest* was about universal themes, political power struggles, or somehow both. Paul, a college sophomore, argued for a political interpretation, leading to the following exchange:

SUSAN [a high school senior]. According to a book called *The Celestine Prophecy* [. . .] to transcend [the] struggle for power between human relationships is to go for a greater good. And I believe this is what Prospero is doing toward the end of the play when [he forgives Caliban for plotting his overthrow]. Prospero is no longer engaging in this struggle, this power struggle.

PAUL. [. . .] But if you look at who has the power in this situation, Prospero or Caliban, it is very easy for Prospero to say, "Oh, I can transcend politics," because he's already got the power. Caliban has no chance to forgive because he has no power, and he can't forget the politics because he's at the bottom.

JACK [a high school junior, from the audience]. Right. That's not transcending politics. That's just another continuation of it.

SUSAN. It comes down to what you believe, and I happen to believe that human beings are inherently good, not power-hungry [. . .].

Such articulate give-and-take created tremendous excitement in both the students and the teachers, giving us a sense of the educational potential of projects like this one. Our project challenged high school and college students to perform such fundamental tasks as reading with close attention, listening to and summarizing arguments opposed to theirs, and formulating their own arguments and giving reasons and evidence for them. Students also

got an opportunity to see that arguing over ideas can advance everyone's understanding even when a consensus is not reached. Yet though we had made a promising start, the instructors came away feeling that much work remained to be done to bring a wider range of students into the kind of discussion we had created.

But we also came away feeling that bringing schools and colleges together in projects like ours could do more than either institution alone to heighten student interest in intellectual work. The high school students benefited from the models of engagement offered by their older peers, while getting an inspiring view of college intellectual life. The college students, on their side, benefited from the rhetorical challenge of communicating their ideas to audiences outside the course. As for me, I was surprised to realize that having to explain myself to high school students, far from making me dumb down my ideas (as I might have expected), forced me to be clearer and more in control of them.

In still another unanticipated result, the experience left me feeling that such collaborative projects can play a role in teacher education. Planning and executing a unit together, my fellow teachers and I learned much from one another about our subject matter and how to teach it to different kinds and levels of students. Instead of a top-down process in which professors bestowed their expert secrets on high school trainees, professors and teachers learned while doing in the course of working through their unit together. "Staff development" became part of the daily business of planning and teaching the course.² At the same time, the curricula and the intellectual climates at our different institutions were enriched. In my new position as associate dean of curriculum and instruction at the University of Illinois at Chicago, I hope to encourage such projects and introduce them into teacher education.

NOTES

¹I draw extensively on my work with high school teachers and students in a book in progress entitled *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Academic Conversation*. My work in Project Tempest here described has resulted in a textbook on Shakespeare's play and on the critical debates about it (Graff and Phelan).

²Deborah Meier notes that in her successful Central Park East schools, "there is no sharp dividing line between 'staff development' activities and student educational activities" (58).

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- Presenters: Paul C., Univ. of Chicago, 2nd year
Abel M., Univ. of Chicago, 1st year
- Respondents: Susan K., Community High School, West Chicago
Karen D., Downers Grove South High School
Professor Janice Knight, department of English, Univ. of Chicago

2:20–2:40 p.m.: Break, Informal Discussion

2:40–4:00 p.m.: Concurrent Small Group Discussions

A. Can We Know What Shakespeare Intended?

Can twentieth-century readers make legitimate claims about Shakespeare's intentions in *The Tempest* or about the culture supposedly reflected in the play? Or are our responses to literary works primarily a personal or subjective matter?

Leaders: Tad Howard, Univ. of Chicago MA Program in the Humanities

Hillel Crandus, Univ. of Chicago MA Program in the Humanities; department of English, Downers Grove South High School

B. Must We Always Look for "Hidden Meanings" in Literature?

Do literary works really contain all the "symbolism" that teachers love to attribute to them? How can one tell? Why not read literature just for the fun of it? Do real-world events and actions have "hidden meanings" too? (Discussion in part will focus on Gonzalo's speech on the innocence of nature in act 2, scene 1, lines 152–274, *The Tempest*.)

Leaders: Erika S., Univ. of Chicago, 4th year

Melissa M., Univ. of Chicago, 4th year

Danielle Crawford, department of English, Community High School, West Chicago

Respondent: Professor Richard Strier, department of English, Univ. of Chicago

C. Why Should Students Care about the Controversies over Literature?

As our unit on *The Tempest* has illustrated, literary and humanistic studies have become a scene of intense conflict—over what texts should be taught, over rival interpretations, over clashing cultural traditions and perspectives. What stake, if any, do students have in these controversies? Do they help or hinder academic literary study?

Leaders: Tom McCann, department of English, Community High School, West Chicago

Joe Flanagan, department of English, Community High School, West Chicago

Carol Pennel, department of English, Community High School, West Chicago

Respondent: Clarence P., Univ. of Chicago, 2nd year

4:00 p.m.: Refreshments

APPENDIX

High School–College Student Conference on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

Saturday, 8 March 1997, 1–4 p.m.
University of Chicago

1:00 p.m.: Welcome and Opening Remarks: Gerald Graff, departments of English and Education, Univ. of Chicago

1:15–2:20 p.m.: Plenary Debate and Panel: *The Tempest*—Is It Really about Colonial Oppression and Other Political Issues?