

Roundtable

Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind.

By Gerald Graff. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003.

Persuasion and Argument: Coterminous?

Patricia Bizzell

In 1977, heading toward her early death from cancer, Mina Shaughnessy published a legacy for her fellow scholars in rhetoric and composition studies, “Some Needed Research on Writing.” Here she urges an agenda exploring what she calls “the rituals and ways of winning arguments in academia” (1977b: 319). She points out that beginning college writers do not know these ways of winning arguments, and she implies that we academics ourselves, having internalized them as graduate students perhaps, seem unaware of them and unable to demystify them for students. Among the topics she suggests for further study are how academic writers manipulate “audience expectations and biases,” how they assess “what constitutes ‘adequate proof’ or enough examples in specific situations,” and how they assume “the stances of fairness, objectivity, and formal courtesy that smooth the surface of academic disputation” (319). She suggests that we do not know enough about “the common stock of words teachers assume students know—proper names, words that have transcended their disciplines, words that initiate academic activities (*document, define, etc.*), words that articulate logical relationships, etc.” (320). Shaughnessy had indeed begun the research she calls for here in

her seminal book *Errors and Expectations* (1977a), but knowing she could not complete it, she left a legacy for an entire generation of scholars in rhetoric and composition studies.

In the almost thirty years since her career ended, these scholars' work has explored the questions she posed and taken them in ever more searching directions. What are the characteristics of academic discourse? How can students be helped to write it better? How should teachers and students deal with conflicts between academic discourse and students' home community discourses? What are the relationships between discourse and worldview, and how do these impact the learning of academic discourse? And more recently—what are the varieties of academic discourse, and what are they for? How has academic writing been changed by the increased presence in the academy, as students and as professors, of men and women of color and white women? How has the advent of electronic media affected academic communication?

Occasionally, these same questions have been addressed by scholars in literary studies, but they typically ignore the enormous and long-standing body of work in this area by scholars in rhetoric and composition. Or perhaps, the literary scholar will get ahold of some research by one or two compositionists—who may or may not be considered important scholars within the field—and brandish these impoverished references as credentials for having taken account of an entire field. Impatience with such patronizing (and unscholarly!) treatment may help explain, for example, the slightly jaundiced tone that creeps into John Rouse's (2004: 455) review of Gerald Graff's book *Clueless in Academe*: "Graff is a recovering literary scholar who after publishing a number of notable books on literature has now given us one on the pedagogy of composition."

Where Graff is concerned, however, the implied criticism is unfair. *Clueless in Academe* is by no means the first of Graff's work to acknowledge scholarship in the field of rhetoric and composition studies, but it is to date his most thorough treatment of this scholarship as it bears on the specific set of issues he addresses in this book concerning academic writing. In addition to being extremely well researched, the book is also written with Graff's customary clarity and wit. He takes his own advice about how to make academic argument accessible. Scholars in rhetoric and composition studies will not find much here to surprise them, unless it is the seriousness with which Graff takes their work. Literary scholars will find a guide to important scholarship that may be unfamiliar to them but that can greatly improve their own teaching and curriculum design. Indeed, an important part of Graff's argument

here is that the dichotomy I have just set up, between scholars in composition-rhetoric and in literature, is unnecessary, obsolete, and crumbling. That is a prophecy that his book may help to fulfill if it finds a wide audience in English studies—as it should.

The analysis is divided into four main parts. In part 1, Graff summarizes the argument of the entire book. He notes the centrality of persuasive argument not only to academic discourse but also increasingly to popular discourse on issues of public importance. He contends that similar fundamental principles underlie academic argument, journalistic popular argument, and everyday-life argument (as when young people lobby parents for purchases). Students are rendered “clueless in academe,” however, because they do not perceive the similarities. They do not because they tend to see academic argument as merely negative or unpleasantly aggressive, as necessitating the tedious elaboration of supporting reasons, and as distant from any conflicts that could really matter in their lives. This is, I think, a good characterization of some of the resistant attitudes students develop about academic writing. (It does not, however, deal with forms of resistance that are culturally motivated, a weakness about which I will have more to say below.)

There is also justice in Graff’s analysis of how academics do little to disabuse students of these notions, both in the way academic writing is taught, without enough attention to its fundamental qualities as argument, and in the way the college curriculum is organized in most schools, so incoherently that students are pushed into taking a random collection of courses. Liberal education at its best allows students to perceive and think critically about contradictions between courses in different disciplines, or even within a discipline, but curricula are now so incoherent, presenting such a confused mass of contradictions to students, that they learn simply to filter them out and treat each intellectual encounter as *sui generis*. Thus they rarely venture into the exciting realm of academic argument where ideas are explored, challenged, and rigorously tested—the realm where, for Graff, one primarily lives the life of the mind.

In part 2, Graff attempts to deal with two types of objection to his advocacy of academic persuasive argument. He gives very short shrift to those who regard it as masculinist, unpleasantly agonistic, and so on, by pointing out that these opponents—for example, Deborah Tannen—are themselves making agonistic arguments against his position. (I think this quietus doesn’t quite work, though, and I’ll say more about it later.) Here, too, he attempts to deal with those who object to analysis, the principal intellectual operation enacted in academic argument. Those who criticize analysis as cold-blooded,

he says, aren't really objecting to it as such but rather to immoral uses of it (for example, to support technological "advances" that destroy human rights). Those who criticize analysis as empty, he says, may have a good point to the extent that they complain about the pompous generalizations so popular now in both academic and journalistic analysis—but not all analysis is fraught with such generalizations, and they are not necessary to it. Those who criticize analysis as "secondary," that is to say, *about* experience rather than *being* experience, are to a large extent making a false dichotomy. For the most part, then, Graff defends analysis by arguing that those who object to it are really objecting to only certain kinds of analysis or certain misuses of analysis. The activity itself retains intellectual legitimacy. I see the justice of his argument here, too, although I think he does not enough acknowledge how widespread and powerful bad kinds of analysis are.

Part 3 comprises a rich and wide-ranging discussion of the current state of academic discourse. Academic writing itself is no longer monolithically obfuscatory—tellingly, Graff's first example to support this assertion comes from the work of an academic of color, Henry Louis Gates Jr. Graff (2003: 116) notes with approval that "a new vernacular voice . . . has been creeping into academic prose." Graff describes in detail how he learned to abandon the bad old academic writing of his early career and arrive at a more flexible and intelligible style. While I agree that academic writing is changing for the better, I do fault him here because he does not, as he usually does, pay enough attention to recent work in composition studies on varieties of academic discourse—oddly, his main source on this topic is an essay that appeared in the literary journal *Style*. Nor does he specifically acknowledge the influence of academics of color and white women academics as principal agents of the changes he notes. Furthermore, I fault him for what sounds like special pleading: he is at pains to argue that the bad old obscure academic discourse is on the way out, but at the same time he (brilliantly!) analyzes the tropes that still make much academic discourse obscure: a trendy fondness for flashy overgeneralizations or paradigm-smashing claims; a foolish reluctance to present one's key arguments, when it would be helpful to do so, reductively or even in "sound bite" form (he gives a list of highly influential sound bites, 140–41); a dull-witted reluctance to position summaries at the most helpful moments as one's argument unfolds.

Graff ends this section of the book with excellent advice on what students need to do to make better academic arguments: most important, "planting a naysayer in your text" (158), that is, including a position against which you can argue in developing your own position. From several sources

he collects helpful “argument templates” (169–72) that can be used to teach students how academic arguments work and that might even be used by them as models for their own essays. Not surprisingly, Graff here makes a strong case for assigning literary criticism in courses that study literature, because the critics will give students views against which to argue. Finally, he includes a fascinating chapter on what he and his colleague Andrew Hoberek learned from reading students’ applications for graduate study in English: the naive “I love literature” approach fails, while the more successful approach evinces some awareness of contemporary critical conversations. I plan to photocopy this chapter for all my students who aspire to graduate work in English.

Graff begins part 4 with examples, including some from his own youth, of kinds of “intellectualism” or “street smarts” that students bring to school. He wishes to insist that students do possess these sophisticated forms of thought but at the same time to advocate that teachers not simply romantically indulge them but train and develop them with the aid of the rigorous practices of academic argument. Graff deplores the customary controversy between so-called student-centered or progressive educational approaches and the supposedly more traditional approaches that give primacy to conveying curricular content. The best pedagogies, he contends, blend and serve both of these values and thus best combat student cluelessness. He also deplores the debate in composition studies between those who advocated the development of, supposedly, students’ own voices, sometimes called the expressivist position, and those who advocated teaching students the conventional practices of academic discourse. The best writing pedagogies, from his point of view—and he gives several specific examples here—find ways to combine these two approaches, in part by teaching students about the debate itself, a new iteration of Graff’s familiar advice to “teach the conflicts.” Educator Deborah Meier provides Graff’s most detailed example of the kind of pedagogy he approves (see, for example, her list of “intellectual habits” to be inculcated in students [268]). In an epilogue (275–77), Graff lists his own nine tips for students who wish to write persuasive academic arguments, good advice that also summarizes major points of the whole book’s agenda. I agree with most of what he has to say in this section, though I think the pedagogical goals he seeks are not quite so self-evident as he presents them here.

What is my problem, overall, with this book that I admire very much? Perhaps I can say it best by noting that Graff seems to assume that argument and persuasion are coterminous. That is, for him, logical argument seems to be the only way or at least the most important way that people get persuaded—by grasping universal standards of logic that any normally rational

person can understand. Graff does not pay much attention to other factors in persuasion, such as those indicated by Shaughnessy (1977b: 319) when she calls attention to such aspects as “the deft manipulation of audience expectations and biases,” which reflect cultural contexts (and cultural clashes), or the assumption of “stances of fairness” and “objectivity” (319, emphasis added), which she appears to view as rhetorical strategies rather than verifiable obedience to universal rules. In short—and very oddly, because I am sure Graff is aware of this work—the extensive body of contemporary work in composition studies on the social construction of knowledge is neglected here.

If persuasion is merely a matter of communicating universally intelligible logical arguments clearly, then it is not surprising that Graff seems to regard the emergent diversification of academic writing as largely a matter of style in the most superficial sense, as permitting the use of “colloquialisms,” for example (116). He also speaks of what ought to be more substantive changes, such as increased reliance on “personal narrative” (117), but again, this innovation seems to be seen in the most reductive stylistic terms. Graff seems to see the changes he notes in academic writing merely as ways to make clearer what the writer has already decided to say, in what would be universally accessible logical language if only the obfuscatory discursive noise were removed. The substance of the analysis does not appear to be changed by the stylistic changes; indeed, it’s almost as if Graff wishes to reassure his academic readers that the substance will not be changed, as a way of getting them to accept the stylistic variations. On the contrary, as I have argued elsewhere (Bizzell 2002), the diversification of academic discourses enables not just new styles but new ways of thinking, new modes of analysis, and these new discourses are emerging not simply because academics want to make their analyses clearer to broader audiences but because the new discourses enable new kinds of analysis that are needed now to cope with new exigencies confronting our society.

Certainly the goal of making the academic life of the mind accessible to more students is laudable. I share it. But Graff seems to see the problem of access as one-way. Most of what he has to say about students’ nonacademic intellectualism seems designed to reassure academic readers that students are indeed capable of being initiated. There is a kind of “let’s welcome them” stance here that I don’t like. To be sure, I share Graff’s caution against romanticizing the knowledge students bring to school; I daresay they still have something to learn from us. But I don’t think Graff sufficiently acknowledges how much we have to learn from them—indeed, how much we have already learned from them, to the extent that *we* is defined as the largely

white male academic establishment of Graff's youth, the perpetrators of bad old academic discourse, and *them* is seen, especially, as the students who had not had much access to the academy previously—men of color, women of all races—who are becoming academics themselves in increasing numbers and energizing the changes in academic discourse. I don't mean to suggest anything as essentialist, for example, as that the personal narrative has become a more acceptable academic strategy because more women, who are socialized to express the personal as part of the normative feminine identity, have come into the academy. I think we are beyond that, into a period of discursive change in the academy in which traditional academic argument has to share the intellectual labor with new modes of thought, and many students and professors have multiple discursive resources not tied to their sexual, racial, or other self-identifications. If it is understood, however, that *Clueless in Academe* focuses sharply on one sort of academic persuasion, the more traditional sort of argumentative analysis, then there is no question that Graff's account is enormously helpful, entertaining—and persuasive.

Getting a Clue: Gerald Graff and the Life of the Mind

Ann Jurecic

Gerald Graff believes that his students, yours, and mine are clueless about the life of the mind and higher education. Graff defines *cluelessness*, the central topic of *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (2003), as “the bafflement, usually accompanied by shame and resentment, felt by students, the general public, and even many academics in the face of the impenetrability of the academic world” (1). He has therefore written a book that examines “some overlooked ways in which schools and colleges themselves reinforce cluelessness and . . . perpetuate the misconception that the life of the mind is a secret society for which only an elite few qualify” (1). Graff is slightly less precise in his definition of his title's other key term, the life of the mind. Ultimately, the closest he comes is in his discussion of Michael Warner's “Tongues Untied,” where he quotes Warner's phrase, the “saturation of life by argument” (Graff 2003: 212). This, it appears, is how Graff would define his own life of the mind, and this is the life of the mind

into which he would like to welcome more students. Although Graff acknowledges, very briefly, that there are “qualities that can’t be reduced to pure rationality” (3), he maintains that what students most need to know about the life of the mind is that “summarizing and making arguments is the name of the game in academia” (3). With these concepts in place, Graff then sketches a pedagogical response to what he sees as the problem of cluelessness in the state of education.

The power of Graff’s argument depends entirely on the reader’s willingness to accept the premise of cluelessness and, following that, to accept Graff’s view of the life of the mind. I have some difficulty with both of these requirements. In my career, I have taught English on the tenure track at Raritan Valley Community College, I have worked as an administrator in the Writing Program at Rutgers, a large state university, and now I am the associate director of the Princeton Writing Program. I have seen a cross-section of college students in the Middle Atlantic, and, despite having taught this wide range of students, I cannot accept the label “clueless” to describe my students, past or present. It may be true that a good number of them were unaware of and uninterested in academic culture. To some, the expectations of college were mysterious. To others, the expectations were merely rules to be complied with on the way to the degree. Very few found in academia a club they would like to join. It is fair to say that many of these students were not inclined, for a variety of reasons, to embrace the academy’s version of the life of the mind. But it is not fair to conclude, therefore, that they were clueless.

Although I want to develop that position, for the moment, let’s move forward with Graff’s argument, to see what kind of academic world he wants to build for students. His goal is to help students find a place for themselves in academic culture. His reason for fighting cluelessness is to make sense of academia for those who pay the tuition and taxes that support the club but are not full members themselves. The way to bring outsiders in, according to Graff, is to bridge the academic and the vernacular, and this can be best accomplished, he thinks, by two activities central to academic culture: good teaching and good writing—both of which clearly communicate academic ideas to a general audience. Graff’s text also articulates a number of compelling claims that make his vision attractive: college students should learn to read and write argument because these skills are fundamental to academic literacy and portable in meaningful ways beyond the academy; as a consequence, greater value ought to be placed in first-year composition as well as in writing-across-the-curriculum and writing-in-the-disciplines courses throughout students’ undergraduate educations; teaching at colleges and

universities is too often mediocre, or worse, but professors and administrators can be inspired to value effective teaching; and finally, professors should require clear and accessible arguments not only from their students, but from themselves and their colleagues. Graff makes each of these points in support of his main thesis that “academia reinforces cluelessness by making its ideas, problems, and ways of thinking *look* more opaque, narrowly specialized, and beyond normal learning capacities than they are or need to be” (1). In addressing this proposition, Graff is utterly confident about how much teaching, writing, and the teaching of writing matter, and he is willing to build his vision of a reformed academy on how very much they matter.

Although this argument is nearly irresistible to a compositionist and writing program administrator, the profound differences in our premises and pedagogies became fundamentally clear to me when Graff quotes a high school student’s response to one of his earlier books. The student—not one of Graff’s own—demonstrates that he has learned the lessons of argument well. He positions himself aggressively against Graff:

Does critical analysis really stir up interest in literature? Perhaps it did for Graff, but will it do so for others who are more truly alienated? . . . 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. (259)

Graff is utterly taken with the quality of the student’s argument where it meshes with his own understanding—yes, he *was* a closet nerd and, yes, every kid with a critique *can* be an English major—but he cannot hear the student’s deepest criticism where it questions the core of his pedagogy, the idea that students must be “exposed to critical analysis of literature.” Graff is committed to having students write about the debates in the secondary literature, not only because such texts supply students with a window into the intellectual world, but also because they offer models of the kinds of texts the students are being asked to produce, essays of argument in which writers engage with ideas and with one another.

I, however, take something quite different away from the student’s comments. Rather than seeing the student’s analysis as confirming the value of teaching argument through secondary criticism, I recognize that the answer to the rhetorical question “Does critical analysis really stir up interest in literature?” is a firm “No!” The student’s response requires me to con-

sider, once again, more varied ways to teach writing, as well as writing about literature. I hear in the student's rejection of Graff's pedagogy a discomfort with the narrow mode of inquiry that studying literature primarily through secondary criticism offers. Of course, students often rail against convention and constraint, but in this case, I hear a student who, far from being clueless, is asking for a broader definition of the life of the mind. That is a complaint worth listening to.

As this example suggests, Graff and I may always interpret students differently. After all, when Graff defines the academic problem that he is setting out to solve as cluelessness, he uses language that places upon the students a good part of the responsibility for the troubles of the academy, although he also admits that the academy perpetuates that cluelessness. Since the way one formulates a learning problem defines the pedagogy one develops to solve that problem, when Graff begins with a premise of cluelessness, it is not particularly surprising that he defines a pedagogy that promotes formulaic ways for students to practice academic argument. Two elements of Graff's pedagogy are most important to address. He maintains that students best gain admission to academic culture by learning about the critical debates that are stirring, or perhaps raging, in the secondary literature, and then writing in a way that engages that debate. He also insists that they can best learn to write argument by using templates, many of which help the students to push against the views of critics or other writers with whom they disagree, whom Graff names "naysayers."

Initially, perhaps, these both seem like good strategies. I fully agree with Graff that students need to learn to write essays of argument—essays that define genuinely interesting problems and that engage with challenging readings. I also agree with Graff that "unless we produce some problem, trouble, or instability, we have no excuse for writing at all" (161). If a writer has a truly compelling puzzle to write about, then she or he is prepared to answer two questions that Graff thinks readers deserve answers to up front: "So what?" and "Who cares?" One of the simplest ways for students in the humanities to answer these questions and to define motivating problems for their essays is to enter a conversation that is already happening about their topic—that is, to use Graff's first strategy and to write about some of the scholarly literature.

Having acknowledged the pedagogical potential of assignments based in reading secondary literature, however, I now must say that my experience in the classroom, as well as my work training composition instructors and helping to develop courses, makes me question the value Graff places in secondary readings, especially for first-year composition and high school stu-

dents. These students can have a particularly difficult time defining their own arguments when faced with the authoritative voices of critics. When a debate has already played itself out extensively in the pages of academic journals, it can be even more difficult for a less-experienced writing student to take the risk of defining her own intellectual territory. Let me be clear: I am not endorsing a return to New Criticism and assignments based solely in primary sources. Instead, many of my colleagues and I assign other kinds of sources that provide a variety of interdisciplinary contexts for the primary sources we use: theoretical, historical, anthropological, philosophical, and so on. Thus, when I work with faculty to design first-year writing seminars, I encourage those who are teaching literature-based courses to look for readings not in the literary criticism, but rather in the bibliographies of those sources. There are many other options for assignment design, but such assignments are appealing because an instructor can use the key theoretical or perhaps historical texts that the critics draw upon to stage a writing experience in which the student wrestles with the intellectual problems that challenged those critics at the same time that she develops her own argument.

Looking at our different stances on secondary criticism and assignments, I sense that Graff and I diverge, in part, because my pedagogy does not respond to a belief that newly entering college students suffer from cluelessness. Like many of my colleagues, I have always seen my job as giving students practice with college-level writing skills—skills that we do not expect them to have as incoming first-year students—and this approach has served me equally well in classrooms composed of community college students and classrooms composed of first-year students in the Ivy League. While the language abilities of students in these courses generally differed, as did their orientation toward academic success, neither group of students arrived prepared to produce the kind of writing I value most highly—writing that not only underwrites academic success, but that also provides access to a more fully defined version of the life of the mind. In the program where I work, we strive to provide students access to that fuller definition through a pedagogy that attends to inquiry and process as well as argument. In our writing seminars, students practice developing the compelling questions that define the intellectual contexts for arguments, while they also attend to drafting, feedback, and extensive revision. In addition, students become adept at using sources in a variety of ways—not simply to provide evidence or to confirm their own ideas, but also to situate their arguments, to extend or develop ideas, and to build a complex conversation in which they are contributors.¹

Since my pedagogical goals are not only to give students practice

with academic writing, but also access to a version of the life of the mind that is broader than the “saturation of life by argument,” I am predictably resistant to Graff’s second strategy—that we should use templates to teach students how to construct arguments. He observes, quite correctly, that such frameworks will help many students “to produce the conventional formulations that characterize written argument” (168). And he astutely anticipates the counterargument that using templates can be intellectually limiting to students. In fact, Graff plays rhetorical hardball to convince me that I am wrong to question his strategy of using templates, stooping on occasion to insults to make me join his team: “It is simply condescending for educators to withhold tricks that they themselves have mastered” (169). He maintains, again accurately, that those of us who became scholars and writers probably intuited the classic moves of argument through our practice as readers and writers. Thus, we may never have needed anyone to offer us an argument template such as, “Whereas X argues ____, I claim ____” (6). Our students, who are less experienced readers and writers, and who are also usually less driven to make careers composing argumentative articles, may not be as lucky, according to Graff: “For such students, not to provide explicit help in using Arguespeak amounts to concealing secrets from them and then punishing them with low grades when they fail. In other words, withholding crucial formulas from students is at least as disabling as teaching such formulas too mechanically” (169).

Despite Graff’s assertion, it is still worth exploring the argument that templates can be mechanical and constraining. Templates are a teaching tool, but they leave much of the hard work of teaching writing undone and, in fact, accomplish far less than Graff promises in helping students to develop as independent thinkers and writers. Although a template can clarify “what the teacher wants,” they are only truly beneficial if the students receive multiple templates, judiciously contextualized. A single template, or a limited repertoire of templates, too easily becomes a fixed formula for “what writing is.” Every year, for instance, my first-year students enter my class knowing that successful school writing is defined by the five-paragraph essay—with a three-pronged descriptive thesis; body paragraphs, each of which addresses one of the three parts of the thesis (and which can often be shuffled like cards because there is no real development of ideas in the essay); and a conclusion that reviews the argument, such as it is. This structure has served the students well, many of them since elementary school, and certainly through the endless standardized tests of middle school and high school. Because good writing has been defined through this formula, many students have enormous

difficulty letting go and reaching beyond its predictable structure to allow their ideas to develop with greater complexity. What I find most disturbing about the formulas students bring with them into my classroom is that they have reduced writing for many of them to an empty exercise. The first great breakthrough of the semester occurs when I can convince them to put away the strategies they used on their SAT and AP exams and begin to use writing as a tool, albeit an imperfect one, for figuring out what they think and for communicating those thoughts.

I hesitate, therefore, when Graff's discussion of argument templates offers mostly variations on the theme of "stake out a position of opposition" (91). (There are a few versions, but only a few, that invite agreement or identification of similarity [170–71].) Even though many academic articles—including this review—begin by reading against another writer's argument, the persistence with which Graff promotes the naysayer template suggests that it may become the college English department's version of the five-paragraph essay. While such a formula may be an easy way to arrive at a motivating problem for an essay, it is certainly not the only possibility, and our students should know that there are alternatives that will provide them with more flexible ways of thinking and arguing across discursive contexts. After all, the naysayer template is not particularly useful to science students because the competition that drives most science is generally not about proving the other person wrong; it is more often about getting experimental results that support a hypothesis and getting those results published first. My colleagues and I therefore offer alternative versions of argument that students can use across many disciplines. Academic writers can pique a reader's interest by showing that an issue is more complex or mysterious than previously comprehended; they can reveal that a case can be better understood by looking at it in relation to another case from a different context; or they can show that a certain theory or text can illuminate another particular text, idea, or phenomenon.² As this list suggests, I am not above argument templates. I do talk with my students about multiple, simplified ways of thinking about arguments, but I accomplish this within the context of an assignment, within the context of a class, and within the context of the students' own ideas, all of which, I hope, put these templates in perspective.

In the end, when I consider Graff's recommendations to use templates and secondary criticism to teach argument, I must ask to what extent these strategies teach students about the life of the mind that Graff names in his title and to what extent they obscure it further. The life of the mind, as Graff defines it, is a securely fenced-in playing field for a particular style of

argument. He promotes this mode of argument because he believes it is most likely to lead his students to academic success, and he wants his students to be winners in the academic game and the argument game. If that is one version of the life of the mind, surely it must be acknowledged that there are others. The mind, over the course of its life, certainly produces arguments, but it also generates ideas that are better termed creative, analytic, scientific, even essayistic. As I mention the possibility of an essayistic way of thinking, it strikes me that in all of Graff's discussion of teaching writing, I do not recall him remarking at any length on revision, the messy process of turning ideas over again in the mind, developing new thoughts, and returning to the writing to reshape it and make it new. This omission seems related to a vision of the life of the mind in which there may be no significant place for reflection. All of this leads me to ask finally, who is clueless in academe? If the life of the mind has become for many of us, "Whereas X argues ____, I claim ____, " then perhaps our own schooling has succeeded in obscuring the possibilities for what the life of the mind could be.

Notes

1. In part, I think our pedagogy succeeds because we have the luxury of being able to offer students small, topic-based seminars. In 2003–4, for instance, our alphabetical course offerings began with *Alienation and Modern Identity* and ended with *Weapons of Mass Destruction in World Politics*. In between were the courses *Impressionism and the Making of Modern Art*, *The Race Debate in the Modern United States*, and *Rethinking Global Warming*. Students are able to select topics they are interested in, then build expertise in that topic throughout the semester, and this helps them to develop arguments. Now, topic-based courses are not a solution for every institution because they can be expensive. At other colleges and universities, however, instructors creatively use multidisciplinary readers to compose similarly challenging, sequenced assignments.
2. My thinking about teaching writing with sources has been strongly influenced by the directors of the writing programs in which I have worked: Kerry Walk, director of the Princeton Writing Program, and Kurt Spellmeyer, director of the Rutgers Writing Program. The pedagogy of the Princeton Writing Program has also been influenced by Harvard's Expository Writing Program and, in particular, by Gordon Harvey's work on writing with sources, including his 2000 Conference on College Composition and Communication talk, "'Sources' of What?"

Getting Real about Failure in the Classroom

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Teaching, like any other form of communication, is necessarily partial, incomplete. It tempts its practitioners into dreams of perfect success but always contains within it the possibility of failure. In *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (2003), Gerald Graff, who is professor of English and education at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the author of, among other works, the American Book Award–winning *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (1993), takes a stab at analyzing the “cluelessness” he sees as the open secret of the contemporary educational system: “the bafflement, usually accompanied by shame and resentment,” felt not only by students but also by many teachers “in the face of the impenetrability of the academic world” (1). Cluelessness is indeed an often-disavowed but permanent element of the pedagogical scene. Any honest teacher will admit to knowing the feeling of despair when nothing works in the classroom. Even your most reliable techniques and gimmicks—small-group work! Turn to your neighbor! Brainstorming! Freewriting! Peer editing!—fall flat and you feel in your heart: we are speaking different languages. Ernest Renan wrote that nationalism requires the forgetting or repression of ancient tragedies—massacres and wars that would prevent group identification if kept in mind.¹ Something similar might be said about teaching, which also seems to require the repression or forgetting of these terrible moments of noncommunication, blank stares, and freefall panic at the lectern—moments that can momentarily convince you that teachers and students are members of warring tribes, hearing one another’s speech as noise or babble. Graff’s aim is to bring these shame-streaked memories of failure and miscommunication in the classroom into the light of analysis in order to demonstrate how we might banish them for good. His book is well worth (even necessary) reading for any teacher open to new ideas about the ways classrooms function and malfunction—even if his attempt to diagnose the problems lurking in the heart of educational practice sometimes falls into a reformist or self-help optimism that is not completely satisfying.

We have no shortage of books and essays addressing local failures of pedagogy, but *Clueless in Academe* stands out for its more searching attention to pedagogical failure as a fundamental and even perhaps structural

condition of the academy. One explanation for the general reluctance to pay more attention to failure in the classroom may be that many of those who most enjoy school and who feel most sympathy with the teacher, themselves become educators and writers. There is a mystifying circularity here. Those who teach draw on a reservoir of positive memories of the classroom, while forgetting that they were sometimes surrounded by more typical peers tuning the teacher out. It is easy to teach those who will themselves become teachers, much harder to instruct those who find the classroom a fundamentally uncongenial space. My colleague Murray Sperber, in his recent *Beer and Circus: How Big-Time College Sports Is Crippling Undergraduate Education* (2000), draws on an early 1960s study by sociologists Burton Clark and Martin Trow that characterizes U.S. college students as falling into four basic subcultures: the collegiate, the vocational, the rebel, and the academic. Almost all college professors, Sperber observes, were themselves members of the latter small subculture of students who identify with the intellectual concerns of the faculty members—which leads to the problem of academics becoming a self-perpetuating tribe, congratulating themselves on their pedagogical successes achieved with those students who were already predisposed to being taught. If many students continue to view the language, methods, and culture of the school with skepticism, miscomprehension, or distrust—well, those kids tend to disappear quickly enough after class.

Graff, who wants no part of an educational system that reaches only the more academically minded, depicts the average professor as, in effect, ethnocentric in her implicit assumption that her own academic “culture” is or should be natural or transparent to students. “Professors are trained to think of cluelessness as an uninteresting negative condition, a lack or blind space to be filled in by superior knowledge” (5), he observes. Those who teach assume, unreasonably according to Graff, that resistance to their special brand of knowledge must be obduracy or stupidity. Graff rolls up his sleeves and tries to diagnose and offer solutions. In a witty section on what he calls “six degrees of obfuscation,” he outlines some of “the specific educational practices, structures, and beliefs that prevent students and others from penetrating the secrets of academic culture” (25). One basic difficulty, in his view, is the tendency of professors to take “academic discourse,” and all its protocols and methods, for granted. The typical American college student does not necessarily share the professor’s assumption—so fundamental as to be in effect invisible to most of us—that analysis and critical questioning are good or necessary things. “Personally,” one student observes, “I don’t like analyzing everything that happens to me. To me a lot of things happen for a

very obvious reason that does not need a lot of discussion or insight” (44). Graff insists that the high valuation placed on “critical analysis” itself among academics is, quite simply, alien to the worldview of the typical American student and that this is a cultural difference that should be recognized in order to overcome it.

Taking an ethnographic approach to the cultures of professors and students, Graff offers a number of suggestions for ways to coax students into the “argument culture” their instructors take for granted. He sees this not as forcible conversion, but instead as a drawing out of qualities already in the student. One of his key ideas is that students, for all their apparent bafflement at or even disdain for their professors’ “argument culture,” in fact do possess their own version of such a culture, one in which such figures from popular culture as athletes and pop singers typically take the place of canonical literary works or academic disciplines. Graff shrewdly observes that “the very concept of what is ‘academic’ has been derived from a presumed contrast with popular culture” (136); “in a sense, the modern American university and American popular culture are estranged twins”(37). Recalling, in a chapter first published in the inaugural issue of *Pedagogy* (2001), his own Chicago childhood of street-corner debate over the relative merits of rival sports teams and movies, Graff realizes that his own progress from sports-obsessed boy to PhD-credentialed English professor was less discontinuous than he had long assumed. It was only his formal education that tricked him into believing that arguing about sports was nonintellectual; in fact, he realized much later, he was a sports fan as a boy because the culture of sports, “full of challenging arguments, debates, problems for analysis,” was “more intellectual than school, not less” (220). Graff’s solution to the failures of schooling, then, is to tap into the “hidden intellectualism” of students’ experience of popular culture. “Sports and games” in general tend to be seen as the enemy of or rival to academic thinking and success, but Graff proposes that we use them as a route into academia. He cites, for instance, a research project assigned by John Brereton of the University of Massachusetts at Boston, who in effect tricks or seduces his students into locating a topic in which they are passionately interested (motorcycles, football, greyhound racing, hairstyling, etc.) and then, step by step, pushes them toward subjecting it to an academic style of inquiry (228–31).

Forms of colloquial or vernacular speech play a role in Graff’s argument similar to that played by sports and pop culture: they are that which academia has traditionally seen as its competitor or other, but which the school—according to Graff—should instead embrace and incorporate into

its own practice. Graff recommends the use of colloquial language in academic discourse as a way to close “the gap between teacher talk and student talk” (120). He cites the use of phrases like “says who?” and “get real,” or the image of the university as a “roach motel,” in scholarly essays by the likes of Eve Sedgwick, Michael Bérubé, and James Nehring, as “a small example of how academics can touch base with the language of students and other non-academics” (130). By dropping such phrases into otherwise dense and abstract discourse, Graff suggests, we open up a space in which a student or other nonacademic can imagine herself into the conversation. Given that, as he has persuasively argued, the very concept of the academy and its mode of thinking is premised on a contrast with popular or mass culture, it makes a certain sense that learning academic discourse has traditionally required what he defines as a “repression” of “our vernacular selves” (126). In part through autobiographical reflections about his own path into academia, Graff suggests that to enter the ivory tower has too often required a symbolic disavowal and repression of the popular and the plainspoken.

Graff calls for what would be in effect a therapeutic undoing of that repression, an academic embrace of the popular, colloquial, and mass-cultural for the purposes of more effective teaching and communication. His enthusiasm for the colloquial, and for the release of the vernacular self within they would trigger, can, however, seem somewhat utopian or even deluded. Despite Graff’s caveat that “how I talk in the Laundromat or hardware store is no more or less the real me than how I talk in a seminar room” (128), he does in effect assign a transformative power to the “release” of colloquial voice hitherto trapped within the conventions and forms of academic prose. Citing the rash of memoirs and novels published by literary academics in recent years, Graff unconvincingly lauds a “new vernacularism” injecting straight-shooting vitality into stuffy academic prose. However, to the suggestion that a phrase like “get real” might assist an otherwise out-of-touch professor to communicate effectively with students, one is tempted to rejoin: get real.

Clueless in Academe, despite its gloomily Miltonic title, is in the end a practical, hands-on book, as Graff combines reflection on his own experiences in the classroom with analysis of the work of such pedagogical theorists as Deborah Tannen, James Nehring, and Deborah Meier in order to offer a way out of cluelessness. Schooling may threaten to “obscure” the “life of the mind,” but Graff is confident that this obscure gloom can be lifted. Students’ vernacular “street smarts” may manifest themselves as resistance to the culture of the school, but they can be shown to be compatible with it in the end.

What might appear as a fundamental conflict between the street and the ivory tower, between students and professors, ultimately dissolves into shared goals and compatible ways of thinking.

I admire and have learned from Graff's practical suggestions about ways in which we might better convince students to join us in academic conversations; I plan, for example, to assign to my students next semester, before the first major paper assignment, a section of his chapter "Why Johnny Can't Write." But I reserve a nagging suspicion of Graff's confidence that the seeming antagonism between students' "street smarts"—itself a questionable concept in this age of suburban subdivisions—and teachers' academic knowledge can so easily be overcome. That skeptical student's dismissal of the ultimate value of "a lot of discussion or insight" haunts me. We persuade ourselves that resistance to critical thinking and learning itself in the classroom is only a temporary hitch in the general march toward education and enlightenment—but might we not do better to admit that such resistance contains a hard core of antagonism and difference that will forge no treaty, raise no white flag?

My primary reservation about this humane and useful book is that some of its reformist prescriptions evade or turn away from the murkiest depths of the topics of "cluelessness" and the resistance to education. By arguing that even the most resistant or indifferent students possess "street smarts" and "hidden intellectualism" that need only to be drawn out and turned in the direction of academic procedures by the teacher, Graff implies that what occurs in the classroom is less a transformation than a translation: a translation of vernaculars and subjects from mass culture into the academy, leaving the subject empowered but not fundamentally changed. Yet the uneasy power of education may be that it is truly transformative, instilling new logics and ways of thinking—and just as surely destroying others. *Clueless in Academe* broaches a difficult topic, naming a syndrome central to our educational system; for this it deserves credit. Yet in the end it backs away from a confrontation with the nub of the problem. Hostility and indifference to education and learning exist; they are real, substantial, and not only a by-product of ineffective teaching. Graff is, simply put, too optimistic—after all, this is a man who somehow reads Bush's close victory over Gore in 2000 as a sign that intellectualism is in the ascent in American culture.² He insists, in effect, that the kid in the back of the room, listening to his iPod with a blank expression as you lecture, is already an intellectual who simply doesn't know it yet, as Graff was on the street corner in the 1950s arguing about the Cubs

and the White Sox. But consumption of pop culture is not always active, engaged, and questioning; anti-intellectualism is not always shallowly rooted; and educational failure is, I suspect, only rarely a by-product of the abstractness of scholarly writing.

Graff names as his topic the failure of, and in, the classroom, but ends up with a celebration of education—and we can understand why this would be so. Unreasonable optimism is almost a necessary requirement of good teaching, and this may also be true of writing about pedagogy. Perhaps it would be impossible to publish a book on education without at least a final turn toward the celebratory; perhaps one could not even publish an essay or review on the topic without it. We can hardly think about education, it would seem, without grasping for some evidence that it does not fail in the end, for some proof that those who hate, resist, or fear education can be converted into one of those who care enough about education to finish their reading. And if you are reading this sentence, you are, of course, already one of us.

Notes

1. Renan's famous discussion of nationalism and forgetting is discussed by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1991: 199–200).
2. For a similar critique of Graff's argument, see Steve Benton's "Concealed Commitment" (2001: 256): "A kind of Horatio Alger myth is hidden in Graff's stories about how young baseball fans and fundamentalist Christians learn to make arguments, realize that they are intellectuals, and eventually become captains of the industry."

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