

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

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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?"