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Teaching Literature and Writing:  
An Interview with Professor Gerald Graff  
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Professor Gerald Graff has published several landmark books on the study of literature, composition, and teaching. A couple of those highlights are the well-received *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (1979), and his *Poetic Statement and Critical Dogma* (1980). Professor Graff, however, became best known for his book a decade later, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (1989), cited over the years as the best recent book detailing how the study of literature in the university evolved from its origins in rhetoric to become a discipline all its own. As the culture wars heated up, Dr. Graff argued insistently — in his *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (1992) — that rather than our recruiting students to become unwitting partisans in literary academe’s often arcane battles, we should teach all sides of the issues and so invite both undergraduates and graduate students to join in the conversations that we have all conducted so passionately. He then joined up with the narratologist, James Phelan, in developing two casebooks — on Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (1995) and on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (2000) — that attempted to do just that: using the casebook approach to help close the gap between literary critical discourse and student discourse. It appeared to be only a modest leap from casebooks to a detailed discussion on teaching literature and writing generally in his *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (2003). And that study was followed by a jointly authored book (with Cathy Birkenstein) titled *They Say / I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* (2005). This latest book advocates teaching beginning writers to make an interesting return to the formalist templates that many associate with the classic rhetoricians. Professors Graff and Birkenstein have in a sense completed the circle and have helped students who are learning to read literature and learning to write once again embrace both together as they so often did during classes at the origins of literary study in the 19th century.

*Editor’s Note: Some editorial work has been done to smooth out the hesitancies and repetitions of informal speech.*
In October, 2007, just prior to his assuming the presidency of MLA in January, 2008 — I sat down with Professor Graff in his office at the University of Illinois-Chicago. As the recently appointed editor of Style, I mentioned my interest in broadening the appeal of the journal in several directions, not the least of which included adding conversations and debates on the pedagogy of literature and language teaching. Few are better able than Gerald Graff to open this new window into what I hope will display some stimulating discussions intersecting literature, criticism, writing, and education.

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JVK: I’m going to start with the more recent They Say / I Say.¹ I sent it to my daughter who teaches at a couple of community colleges in the Chicago area. She loved the book and incorporated it into her own teaching. What she has found is that many of her students have trouble in playing the “believing game” that you and your wife, Cathy Birkenstein, discuss in your book. She also finds it difficult to teach students who don’t read widely to avoid the list summaries or the closest cliché syndrome. Is there anything about these issues that you want to add that is not in your book? Any thoughts you’ve had since publication of They Say / I Say?

GG: I think most of us, not only students, have trouble playing what Peter Elbow has called the “believing game,” which is to try to imagine what it would feel like to entertain beliefs that threaten our own, instead of instinctively dismissing them.² Few of us are generous enough to put ourselves in the shoes of those whose beliefs we don’t agree with, and the farther their beliefs are from ours, the harder it is for us to do so. It seems counterintuitive to think against our own pet beliefs, but such counterintuitive behavior, according to our textbook, is what persuasive and creative writers do; they imagine the position of those who think their beliefs are false or even absurd. Such an approach challenges the kind of writing that most American students are taught to do in schools, where they are asked either to summarize the assigned reading and efface themselves (the misplaced proscription against using “T” is symptomatic here) or, at the other extreme, to expound and support their own argument or thesis, but in a vacuum rather than with or against someone else (the five paragraph theme).

Our book, by contrast, asks student writers to bring the summary and the response moments of writing together, first by summarizing a view different from their own, then using that summary to motivate their own response. Though this approach goes against the grain of what students are often taught, it is actually far closer, we think, to what students in their non-academic lives actually do, not to
mention what actual writers do. We think this approach, which demands that writers take seriously beliefs that go against their own, challenges the familiar relativism that American students like to fall back on—"I've got my views; you've got yours, and we all have a right to our opinions," and so forth—a view that essentially renders all issues inarguable.

Cathy and I have co-taught first-year composition for several years at University of Illinois-Chicago, which has really helped us develop this book, as we'd try out different versions of it and then go back and rewrite. The hardest sell in getting students to take seriously beliefs they're inclined to dismiss was to convince them that if they do that their writing would get better, would be more interesting and more persuasive because they were generous enough to step outside their own view. Once we get that point across we have some success, but the point is counterintuitive and risky; the whole culture has a hard time doing it. Consider our presidential debates and the risk a candidate would run to take seriously the view of the other person.

JVK: I can just see one of the presidential candidates saying, "That's a great idea! I never thought of that before!" Let me move a little backwards from that idea. I've ordered your book for my teaching methods classes myself. Let me go back a bit prior to students coming to college. One of the more important points in your book, you said that students would never learn on their own to make the key intellectual moves the templates represent. Are you suggesting or saying that this lack of exposure to these key intellectual moves represents a major shortcoming in our public school systems? That we don't do that at the secondary level at all?

GG: Yes. We're trying pretty hard to get our book, or a version of it, into secondary schools and even elementary schools. The five paragraph theme is probably still the dominant model, even though it is politely dismissed by compositionist and rhetoricians. The one thing that everybody tends to complain about in the five paragraph theme—that it's formulaic—is what we like about it! You could say we're trying to replace the five paragraph theme with the "They Say / I Say" formula.

JVK: That leads me to the key issue. The formula, the five paragraph theme was done, by and large, as a means of boosting the quality of the students writing back in a time in the late 60s and 70s when writing was taught as largely impressionistic and needed next to no form at all. The operative phrase there was
expressiveness and so on. So if I’m being critical and say, “Well, you’ve just replaced one formalism with another. What do you see is the difference?”

GG: First, “formalism” and “formula” with us aren’t bad words. There are good formulas and bad formulas. The five paragraph formula does have some strengths; for instance it helps you to articulate an argument or a thesis, and it gives you a path to follow. If you’re not sure what you’re supposed to do — as most students aren’t — it’s very useful to have a simple blueprint for how to write a paper. The trouble is, in the five paragraph theme you’re not really arguing with anybody. You’re making a claim and then supporting it, but in a vacuum, and that’s why the five paragraph theme seems so artificial; it doesn’t resemble real social experience, where we don’t just argue, we argue with somebody and with something at stake.

There’s a cartoon image in The Say/I Say that depicts a lecturer speaking to students saying “The Characters in The Sopranos are very complex,” and drawing the puzzled response, “Yes. . .and?” A lot of academic writing, not only student writing, is like this. The proposition is clear enough, but you can’t figure out why he is saying it. Does anyone dispute it? The next picture illustrates the antidote to such pointlessness, where introducing a “they say” indicates the motivation for the claim. That’s the paradigm shift we’re trying to induce in the teaching of writing — to go from a model where students (or professors for that matter) merely summarize what somebody else says, or only give their own view, to one where what others say launches their own view. Granted, when the “they” is academics and intellectuals, responding to what “they say” can be intimidating and difficult for a lot of students to engage in, but it’s the only kind that’s useful.

That’s the big difference between our “formalism” and the five paragraph theme version. We think no one should be ashamed of being formulaic. On the contrary, we argue that if teachers don’t explicitly, even prescriptively, reveal that there are certain moves, rhetorical formulas at work in a text, students won’t recognize them in their reading or produce them in their writing. These moves are very important — like introducing a counter-argument with a phrase like “At this point you’re probably going to object” — but students don’t pick them up by osmosis as experienced readers do. Academics read in an imitative way because we grew up wanting to be George Orwell or Virginia Woolf; nobody had to teach us to say “On the one hand” or “On the other hand.” For various culturally complicated reasons, many students will never pick up or make such basic rhetorical moves unless instructors are explicit and say, “This is what we want you to do in this assignment.”
The ironic thing, though, is that students do often make these rhetorical moves when arguing with their friends or their parents. At one of our workshops a teacher said, "You know, your model reminds me of what my son did when he tried to persuade us to buy him a car. He said, 'Mom, Dad, listen. I know you’re not going to agree with what I want to say, but hear me out. I’d like you to buy me this car. Now, I know you’re going to say that I’m not old enough, that we can’t afford it, or that I’ll get in an accident...'" Students actually do know these rhetorical moves, and even some of the more sophisticated ways of introducing them, but when they get into school there’s something there that says to them, "The ways that you talk and argue with your friends and your parents aren’t going to work here. Forget those. Put those on hold."

JVK: I think you're absolutely right. The next thing I’d like to ask you is an important point you make — and I’m quoting you — "Students can best develop their arguments not just by looking inward but also looking outward, listening carefully to others’ view, and engaging in the voice of the others." Would you say the same thing is true of our literary education, especially in the secondary schools?

One of the things that I’m concerned about is I want to use this book, or something like it, to jump off into some real changes in the way we educate our literary students. I’ve shown you some stuff that I’ve written before about how I think it’s done pretty badly. I’ve been after, for example, Jim Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz, who have both sort of been playing around the edges. I want them to write a methods textbook that would take advantage of some of the ways they do things and so on. It hasn’t gotten very far yet. A book for those people training to become secondary teachers of literature, or college freshmen. And have it do something along the lines of what you’ve done here for writing, which is develop some sort of a structural model that’s different from the amalgam at this point of largely reader-response type of discussions in class, which are very productive in terms of talk. Chatter.

GG: Which I thought Rabinowitz and Smith effectively demolished in their book, Authorizing Readers.

JVK: Yes, they have. But that [success] hasn’t changed much, quite frankly, [in the practical teaching that I have observed]. Do you have, based on what you’ve done here, and on Clueless in Academe, any ideas percolating about changing literary education at all?
GG: Yes, we sure do. After our book was out, we started getting e-mails from instructors who like the book, but who are teaching introduction to literature. We got an especially interesting one from an instructor at Quinnipiac University near New Haven, CT, who asked, "Is there a way to use this book in an introduction to literature class for freshmen? What would the 'they say' be if you’re writing about Hamlet? Is it Shakespeare?" As this writer and other correspondents see, our approach calls for a critical discourse to motivate student literature essays. It doesn’t necessarily have to be published criticism, nor does it have to be academic. It could be journalistic criticism. It could even be a handout the instructor composes. You might remember a chapter in Clueless called “Outing Criticism” which makes a case for assigning criticism to introduce freshman and even high school literature classes. My premise has always been that if we expect students to produce a version of critical discourse in response to literature — and that’s what our assignments inevitably ask for — they need to see what it looks like.

JVK: When you say criticism, do you mean it would be like Rabinowitz’s institutional criticism, which would be like feminist or deconstructionist? Or do you mean some variation of a new critical textual?

GG: That’s a key question, because a lot of academic criticism is obviously not suitable for beginning college students, much less high school students, to whom academic criticism can be completely incomprehensible. What I mean by “criticism” could be as minimal as some claim that a classmate makes about literary work: ‘it’s lousy; it’s boring; I hate it; I love it; It rocks!’ But one of the hardest things to do, especially if you haven’t grown up reading literary criticism, is to respond to a single poem or short story or play or novel out of your gut with no provocation from another reader. I think we make it harder for students when we say, “Read this novel and then answer these questions about it.” Where if you say, “Some people think this is the greatest book since sliced bread, but others think its just stupid. What do you think?” you give students a shot. That’s a primitive debate, but it’s one we have all the time.

Norton may at some point ask us to do a “They Say / I Say” for literature classes, and we’re thinking about it. There’s a professor at the Community College of Philadelphia, Evan Seymour, a fan of Clueless in Academe, who has taken “They Say / I Say” and constructed a whole literature course on it based on three short stories. He has found criticism that’s pretty accessible, and his 150 page syllabus is very good and clear and may help make “They Say / I Say” possible for literary introduction.
An Interview with Professor Gerald Graff

JVK: Beautiful. I’d like to see a book like that myself for a teacher training course.

GG: Actually your interest makes me hopeful that we can do such a book. We’d have to tie it to a particular work, as Jim Phalen and I did with the Bedford *Huck Finn* and *The Tempest*. They’ve been pretty successful in their own right, but they don’t tell you how to write an essay as a “*They Say / I Say*.”

JVK: Do you see a variation of that where you’re arguing that university professors should employ students’ non-academic interests as objects of study and so on. That reminds me of classes I’ve done in the past where, in teaching of poetry I’ve said to my class, “Now bring some rock lyrics and well set them up.” What I see most of the time, is this: if I tell them what they already know, we’re doing great. Lots of conversation, fairly intelligent, about simple stuff. If I move from that to Emily Dickinson, much less Wallace Stevens, the drop is enormous. There is almost no transfer. Has that been your experience, too?

GG: By and large, yes. I don’t assign projects that ask students to write about their interests rather than mine. Hillel Crandus told his ninth and tenth grade students they could write an essay about whatever they wanted (cars or any other non-academic interest), and they liked him for that. Then he told them that they would have to write about their topic *academically*, and predictably they didn’t like that at all. It’s not whether you write about our academic interests or your own; it’s how you write about either. Again, George Orwell was very intellectual about penny postcards.

Intellectuals are going to write about anything in an intellectual way, whereas those who are not won’t, even if they write about *Hamlet*. The degree of intellectual challenge in your writing isn’t determined by the subject. The challenge is to move students into our ways of thinking and speaking, regardless of the texts or subjects. One of the primary goals of “*They Say / I Say*” is to deepen a student’s ability to that. Summarizing an argument and getting close to another writer changes the way you think. “They say” is a launching pad, a motivation; it triggers your own views. There’s a process of intellectual growth that comes through reading and engaging with otherness. That’s our premise.

JVK: My next question — the growing divide between those of us who came of age in the 50s and 60s and the 22-year olds.

GG: I came of age in the 1940s!
JVK: What do you do to just stay with touch with the sort of things that interest the younger students? Do you have to remain in some sort of touch with each culture in order to teach effectively? And I gather what you’re saying is “No.” Perhaps, you do need to have them understand the forms of argument, if I’m reading it correctly.

GG: I’ve never gone out of my way to understand youth culture. I spend some time on the internet, watching television and reading the newspaper. I know something about American Idol from a few very casual glimpses. It’s convenient for our purposes to see youth culture and academic culture as in competition. If we’re to win that competition we have to represent academic culture as a real counterculture. Of course, one good way to do that is to invite students to write in an academic way about youth culture.

JVK: Madison, Wisconsin has one of the first of Robert Redford’s Sundance movie theaters, and they show most indie films and European films and that sort of thing. There’s a big huge poster for Beowulf which is coming apparently in November [2007]. I’m thinking to myself: “Boy, I’ve tried to teach that a couple of times and that’s tough, tough going.”

GG: It might be easier now.

JVK: Let me flip to Clueless in Academe for a minute. One of things that I remember and wanted to argue about when I first read the book a few years ago after it first came out. You claim that small group work, while admittedly increasing student engagement, (and I’m quoting now) “does little to raise the quality of discussion, at worst results in the blind leading the blind.” Do you still believe that?

GG: Yes. Ken Bruffee and I carried on a long argument about it through correspondence. He’s one of the gurus of collaborative learning, and I’ve always liked his work. His book, Collaborative Learning, is a sharp defense of group work. People I’ve co-taught with, like my wife and Jane Tompkins — [JVK: I read that exchange in Pedagogy.6] GC: — they think I should be more generous to the potential of group work, that perhaps I just don’t do it well. My education students have also criticized me for dismissing group work because they find that it can be successful when done well. I agree that breaking up a silent, sullen class into groups will get them talking and break that deadly silence, but I would like to be convinced that group work does more than that. It gets the students to talk, yes, but not very well. Bruffee once told me that a well-structured task will elevate the instructional
value of group discussion. He tries to explain this approach in Collaborative Learning, but I remain skeptical. I think we ought to operate in larger groups, but at the same time I'm aware that large groups can further alienate already-disengaged students.

JVK: When you say big groups what are we talking about? Ten people?

GG: Ten thousand? Ten million? I don’t know. I’m intrigued by the excitement that rock concerts, the Super Bowl, and American Idol have on American culture. Education should learn something from the popularity of such mega-spectacles and use it for our own purposes. That’s where I argued with Deborah Meier. Also, it’s not always necessary to choose between big and small. You can do small groups on Tuesday, and big groups on Thursday. There is a rhetorician/communications scholar at Temple University, Herbert Simons, who developed the Temple Issues Forum, somewhat influenced by my ideas of teaching the conflicts. It sponsored large student debates about public issues, but was also tied to smaller courses. It generated a lot of interest among the students.

I’m a teacher who hates small classes. I’ve had classes of five students, and it’s easier with only five papers to grade, but I hated it. I felt that I was being wasted. If I’ve got something worthwhile to teach, why can’t I say it once to thousands of people rather than five thousand times to ten people? There’s something dysfunctional about the numbers game in academia that always valorizes small classes. We pay a high price for small-class intimacy; the more you chop the curriculum into small units and the more privatized it becomes, the more you get a mixed-message curriculum where one class contradicts another.

JVK: There really is a “mixed message curriculum,” especially in our field, I suppose in chemistry there are prerequisite courses where everybody has to learn certain basic stuff. Whatever one’s opinion is, those classes tend to be more or less the same. But in our discipline it really is every person for himself.

GG: It’s very confusing. Students are forced to study their professor rather than the subject.

JVK: Would you like to talk about the MLA for a little bit? Or would you prefer to wait on that until we were actually there?

GG: I’ve been trying to decide how to bring my agenda to the MLA. One benefit of the MLA’s structure is that once elected president you begin as second vice-president, then first vice-president, and become the president in the third year.
So I’ve had two years on the executive council interacting with the MLA staff to figure out what I might be able to do.

I’d like to bridge the gap between writing and literature. I argue this somewhat in *Clueless in Academe*. The hierarchy that privileges literature faculty over composition teachers is distressing. Quite often composition instructors are stuck in the basement of the college building, or are only part-time lecturers, while the tenure-track faculty are off teaching literature. I think this split is very destructive. In fact, it goes against the interest of literature. It’s a stark contradiction that literature professors complain that their students can’t write — as they frequently do — but don’t provide any example of how to write. So I’m hoping to exert some influence on that.

Also, I helped to institute the Links Program at UIC which links a composition course to a general education course, and a lot of universities are starting to do something similar. It’s very promising. I taught a freshman composition course coupled with an introductory German course taught by a colleague. It was a great experience for me; for once I felt on the student’s side, coaching them to write papers for their Introduction to German course. I was still grading them, but they saw me as an ally rather than as an adversary. It won’t work, however, if there is a lot of unevenness; every student has to take both classes. In a big university like UIC it’s quite a challenge to bring that about because of all the registration complications — re-coding the computers, it turned out, is almost impossible. Once we worked it out, it was very successful. Such innovation has great potential to de-marginalize writing. It gets the faculty working together and out of our foxholes. It brings graduate students into relationship, with faculty. It also solves the problem that bedevils writing courses: you’ve got to write about something and so often the subject tends to take over, or vice versa. The Links Program strikes a much better balance, and it’s an approach I hope to promote.

Another is undergraduate research. As associate dean I oversaw the undergraduate research symposium at UIC. I was impressed at how it fired students up. It is mostly a science-based, honors program, but I envision a future where every student is involved, especially at research universities. What’s the point of going to a research university if you don’t know what research is? I certainly didn’t. I had no idea what research is all about. Of course there are bad ways to do it. You don’t want research professors making students do their research for them, but with some quality control and good management it can be great. So there are two initiatives I would like to take up during my time with the MLA.
JVK: I did an experiment 10-12 years ago at Northern. I was teaching a course called The Teaching of Writing for teacher certification people. The colleague right across the hall from me was teaching — we were trying it for the first time — a mass lecture of 120 students in a room. As always we had no money to fund it with several TAs, so basically he [taught] the course by himself, and he had one TA. So there were two of them for 120 students. We were talking one day and I said, "Well, how about I bring my Teaching of Writing Class," I think I had 16 in the room, "and bring them over? And you tell me what you’re going to do at a given day.” It was a night class. "I’ll have my students read the same short story." It was a D.H. Lawrence story. "And then we’ll take each of my students and group them with, lets say, four or five of your class, and they can act as writing tutors.” Those kids in that mass-section class were hungry for advice. They couldn’t get enough. My own students came back and said, “My God, we’re overwhelmed! I had all this to do and they kept wanting to do it, and they were calling me and all sorts of things.” So that kind of synergistic relationship between the two disciples of literature and writing. We stopped that mass-section thing because it didn’t work; the writing, except in that one section, was not good at all.

Let me shift if I could back to where I started. This last month’s American Education Research Journal has an article called “The Changing Roles of Teachers in the Era of High-Stakes Accountability.” They talk about the pervasiveness of the No Child Left Behind to the public schools. Do you anticipate that, at least with the state universities, it won’t be too much longer before the government starts getting its mitts into our business, under control by money, either money or withholding money or that sort of thing? I keep seeing signs by legislators of one sort or another that they really want to start doing some of the same thing with No Child Left Behind at the universities that they’ve been doing in the public schools. Do you see any of that?

GG: The Spellings Report is perhaps the most conspicuous expression of what you’re identifying. The MLA executive council issued a statement in response to it, and I took the lead in shaping it. At the meeting of the MLA Delegate Assembly last year, the Spellings Report polarized the delegates of the discussion I chaired. There was a very vocal minority — the radical populace of the MLA — who argued for a “Just Say No” approach, claiming that the Spellings Report is a government takeover that will turn us into tools of the administrative state, of patriarchal capitalism, and so forth; however, the majority of people took a more moderate position. People pointed out that current outcomes assessments at universities are
not imposed from outside. Some were involved in it at their institutions and thought it was quite progressive because faculty members were finally accountable to work for a common outcome. There’s an interesting debate building on all this.

Something I read recently that put the point well, asking how can we reconcile the assessment the state wants with our own? I think that these things are ultimately compatible, and I would like to make this part of the stand I will take as MLA president. If higher education doesn’t take the lead in determining assessment, it will be externally imposed. We have to fight inappropriate tests that are anti-intellectual or counter to liberal education. We can’t claim that the status quo is fine, that we’re great and should be left alone. That’s not going to work. Higher education is so expensive that I think citizens have every right to hold public education accountable. I’m hopeful that colleges and universities can take more of the initiative and accept the outcomes assessments as legitimate, but do it internally. I’m sure we can do it better than anybody else.¹³

JVK: I agree. However, the result anyway may be that the government will have its way simply by holding the purse strings, and then the private universities will be fine, where a number of people who are making the loudest claim saying “let’s ignore it?” will be perfectly all right. But state universities like UIC and NIU and so on, were going to be in big trouble. [GG: We’re already hurting.] JVK: I think Northern has been hurting since I’ve been there some 30 odd years ago.

Getting back to some other things in MLA, a long time ago I sent you an essay where I reviewed the MLA book *Preparing A Nation’s Teachers*, and I argued that we ought to think of the high school English teachers as a sort of university farm team as it were.¹⁴ They are the people who are by extension training the students that we get ultimately — freshmen and sophomores and so on — before we get a chance to do anything with them. And since so many enrollees in public universities come from the faculties of the public schools, can the MLA do anything to enhance further the literary and rhetorical education of these teachers? That is, I get the sense that for the most part the MLA has had a policy of what Sen. Moynahan would call benign neglect. They had a big book that came out, *Preparing A Nation’s Teachers*, and then there was another newsletter a few months later and then I haven’t heard a thing from the MLA about training teachers any more. And as you know I had some reservations about things in that book.

GG: I should go back and read that essay because I didn’t read it from the position of MLA president. I do remember you were pretty caustic about the MLA’s bad performance, or non-performance, in this whole area.
JVK: The bottom line was for the MLA, there’s a code that’s used by elite places like Virginia and so on. The code goes, “This is beyond the competence of the English department.” Which, if you think about it, is utter nonsense, because we are theoretically trained scholars and at some degree or another, trained teachers. My own feeling is that there is a real class condescension. So many of the people who go into public school teaching are roughly middle class type folks. That’s where I came from myself. The people who attended the more elevated schools, the privates and some publics, at least in the MLA, very often are people who once they have gotten into elite universities just really don’t have interest or concern at all for what’s going on in the public schools. So one of the big issues, for example, that I’d like to see raised is the issue of textbooks in the schools. Public school textbooks are destroying Shakespeare. Have you ever seen those dual language editions where they have “colorful English” on one side and Shakespeare on the other? They are often tearing apart good novels and dumbing them down. If MLA is largely concerned with, let’s say, texts and textual issues, that’s a whole area that’s not paid any attention to whatsoever.

GG: Well, I could probably use your advice and suggestions on this issue. I have made the relationship between high school and college part of my concern. I organized a panel at MLA last year called “The University and the High School.” Deborah Meier was on it, as was David Steiner, Dean of the College of Education at Hunter College in New York. It was widely attended by many high school teachers and stirred up some interest, but that was a one-shot thing. The Spellings Report, among other criticisms of higher education, claims that higher education has done very little to build bridges with high schools so that high schools are unsure how to prepare students for college, and that minority students often suffer the most. The report is right about that. There is still derision or scorn or condescension at the mention of high school education in the university. In some ways, it is the faculty who are scornful or just above it all, but the issue has gotten the attention of college administrators who see the need to make more productive connections with high schools. Here at UIC we have a good English education program, a flourishing program that places a lot of teachers. Also, UIC is founding a math and science high school.

JVK: Is David Schaafsma on this?

GG: David Schaafsma and Todd Destigter are the two principal faculty members in the English Education program. I teach some of the courses there too and work with a lot of the students, but that program is somewhat marginal or
isolated. They have their own separate program and I don’t see as much connection with the mainstream English department as there should be.

JVK: At UIC, do the supervisors, student teachers and teachers of methods classes, are they all separate from the English department?
GG: It’s split between the English department and the college of education, and there’s some tensions between the two.

JVK: That was my major complaint. Basically we outsource the most crucial part of our education of teachers to another department.
GG: I think that student teaching is supervised by Todd Destigter here. They seem to be involved and hands-on, but I don’t know how it’s correlated with the UIC college of education.

I think the type of person becoming a high school teacher is changing. The poor job market for college teaching has led some good people into high school teaching, people who have research interests, who see themselves as academics, as intellectuals, as researchers. High school teachers will often turn up at the same conferences that college faculty go to, but they’ll also have their own conferences and contribute to journals. I know in the education courses I have taught some students were shocked that I expected them to take an interest in research, much less do their own research. I think that’s changing. The type of person aspiring to be a high school teacher has a more professional, intellectual attitude. At least I’d like to think so.

JVK: I’ve not seen a whole lot of that myself. What I have seen, especially right here in the City of Chicago Public Schools, is what I would call the deskilling of the teachers. That Chicago schools have scripting, where teachers actually have a script to follow — if it’s Tuesday it must be King Lear or something. The second thing is that with the No Child Left Behind Act most of the public schools teachers now are spending close to 1/3 of the school year just preparing for the exam, and as a consequence of what they are doing is that the previous questions on the exam tend to indicate what texts will be taught, what kinds of writing — well, what George Hillocks did in that book, The Testing Trap. Roughly the same sort of thing is happening with literature as well. I just think that to the extent possible, the MLA gets involved with promoting the connection between secondary teachers and universities, that’s going to make the pressure on the states to sort of back off
a little bit when you have the professional organization weighing against some of the scripting policies.

GG: That sounds plausible. I’ve looked at the state’s standards and frankly I’m surprised that anybody could ever test for any of it. They’re so vague and confusing, as well as ridiculously voluminous and redundant.

JVK: They’re frankly silly, if I can say that. I just tell my own methods students: if it makes you feel better to put in the state standards, go ahead. Heuristically, they’re close to worthless. They’re too vague, too vague and too diffuse. I’m looking at their developing literary skills as well as writing skills to teach other people; the state standards don’t help at all. I’ve run out of questions. Do you have anything in the pipeline that you’re kind of looking at or developing or that you want to talk about?

GG: “They Say / I Say” has made me think about how I essentially do two kinds of work. I write books like Clueless in Academe where I nag everyone into doing what I think we should do or I get into big debates; and that’s the nature of our scholarly enterprise. Then we do a textbook like “They Say / I Say” or my Huck Finn textbook which is quite different. If I want to have influence on how people teach literature or writing — which is what I always want my work to do — writing a textbook is much more direct and satisfying. “They Say / I Say” has had a hugely favorable response with a tremendous amount of adoptions. People tell me that it really works. Students say they love it. Last week my wife and I were in Charlottesville, VA, at a conference on the high school and the college. There was a lot of debate around our lecture, and we got a certain amount of flak. After the session, though, people would walk up to us and say, “We’re using your textbook. It’s really good. We like it.” It makes me stand back and wonder where I should spend my energies. Also it doesn’t hurt that those textbooks make money.

Also, “They Say / I Say” was simply refreshing to write. I started doing my part of it at the end of Clueless in Academe, with a list of nine peremptory propositions: How to make an argument; Be dialogical; Summarize an argument. There’s something refreshing about the prescriptive mode, where you can say, “Just do this! Try it, you’ll like it.”

JVK: It’s a mastery system. You’re the master.

GG: You’re also the salesman. You’re saying “Try this product. If you don’t like it, okay, but try it.” I’m intrigued by that mode, and it’s easier to write in it to. It’s a little easier on the spirit to say, “We think this will work. Do this,” rather than
exhaust yourself trying to summarize all the scholarship. So I don’t know where I’ll be going. I just turned 70 and I still feel like I have a lot of energy, but I don’t know how long it’s going to last. We have a 4 year old child who’s in pre-school.

JVK: Oh, I have 5-year-old & 2-year-old granddaughters, and a 1-year-old grandson, and another about to be born within a couple of weeks.

GG: Well, that’s a whole education in cognitive development.

JVK: I thank you very much.

Notes


2 For more on Elbow’s “believing game” see Chapter Two, “Her Point Is” in “They Say / I Say.”


4 See Figures One and Two in “They Say / I Say,” 4-5.


8 See Pedagogy (Spring 2003) 3.2: 245-75.

9 See Clueless, pg 265-66.


Appendix

Figure 1. From "They Say / I Say."

Figure 2. From "They Say / I Say."