

FORUM

OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT AND STANDARDIZATION: A QUEER CRITIQUE

Does it go without saying that queer is not standard? In Gerald Graff's *Profession 2007* essay on what Graff calls "our undemocratic curriculum," it does. Unfortunately, his failure to consider queer (and other) perspectives seriously impairs his argument, as when he mistakes merely "standard" experiences for universal truths. In short, he blames the "extraordinary diversity of texts, ideas, subjects, intellectual perspectives and approaches" now available on college campuses for the achievement gap between "the few who come to college with some already acquired academic socialization" and the "clueless" majority. He argues that this "mixed-message curriculum" functions "to conceal the secrets to academic success," when our mission should be "to make those secrets explicit" (129). In the interest of democratizing higher education, he thus champions transparency, standardization, and, as his Spring 2008 MLA President's Column elaborates, a program of outcomes-assessment measures ("Assessment").

There is much to admire in Graff's commitment to making higher education more democratic. Graff is right to remind us that physical access does not guarantee functional access and to insist that faculty members help all students, especially those most mystified by academic expectations, succeed. He is mistaken, however, in assuming that access to a culture of argumentation constitutes a singularly critical measure of democracy (and in overestimating the extent to which rhetorical proficiency—as opposed to, say, money and power—wins access to the forums in which influential arguments take place). Moreover, if democracy is the goal, he is dangerously misguided in advocating a program of prescribed objectives,

quantified outcomes, standardization, transparency, and what passes for public accountability.

When Graff suggests that standardization “might not mean a bad curriculum but a transparent one” (134), he takes the value of transparency to be self-evident, uniform, and universal—that is, transparent. For teachers of queer studies, however, it is not clear that greater transparency about what transpires in the classroom would always “work in our favor.” Graff’s admonition that transparency must work for us, “if we have nothing to hide,” is insulting (“Assessment” 3). As Michael Warner points out, clear expression of an idea, even a good one, does not mean that everyone will like it, as people who have ever been queer-bashed, or careful, or simply strategic in choosing their battles are aware. Graff claims that “outcomes assessment deprivatizes teaching” (3). But teaching is not private in the first place. Classroom speech does not directly address the general public, nor should it, but it is nonetheless a public activity performed by people inhabiting public roles—as any administrator will be quick to remind an instructor who forgets. Graff, however, advances his argument on the basis of the misleading simplification that outside private there is only one public and that this public is the mainstream one of “democratic citizenship” typified by “parents and legislators” (3–4). He reduces a variety of rhetorical contexts to the single distinction of public/private and all possible publics to a generic general public. By this reductive logic, speech that intentionally limits the scope of its address, speech that is subcultural, specialized, or in any way specific in its orientation, can only be seen as secret, elitist, or ashamed.

My students are not the general public; they are people who have signed up to take a queer theory class. I’m sure I’ve said things in the classroom that might sound odd out of context, but the point is that I didn’t say them out of context—I said them *there*, where my rhetorical choices made sense to a group engaged in a common endeavor undertaken in relation to an extensive archive of conversations, texts, and experiences we already shared. By the time we discuss pederasty, fisting, or anal penetration, we have built a context in which these topics are proper to our intellectual project. Graff, however, concurs with David Bartholomae’s claim that because faculty members “articulate . . . what it is we value in intellectual work . . . routinely for our students,” it “should not be difficult to find the language we need to speak to parents and legislators” (“Assessment” 4). I disagree. What we say to the general public cannot draw on the shared points of reference built up over the course of a semester or more; thus it will be less well suited to convey the complex, challenging, or unfamiliar concepts that are the substance of academic courses. The effort will require not less nuance but

more—not because we have something to hide but because we are doing the work for which universities are intended. Advanced education is supposed to advance knowledge, not mirror its current limitations.

That Graff's advocacy of transparency and standardization is bound up with a commitment to outcomes assessment is not surprising: the principle of standardization, however broadly or narrowly applied, is not incidental but integral to the logic of outcomes assessment, as is the related promise of predictability. The transparency associated with predetermined outcomes is presumed to benefit students by providing a set of known quantities from which they can choose. Therefore the products must be standardized: each class in Victorian literature should be the same as every other, no matter who's teaching it or what semester someone takes it in—just as a quarter-pounder is the same in SoHo as in Seattle and a can of Pepsi or a box of Tide is the same in whatever supermarket you patronize. There's a problem with this paradigm: knowledge is not soda pop. The logic of outcomes assessment requires that objectives be standardized and results predictable. But standardization and predictability are not a great foundation for the project of creating new knowledge, nor are they culturally queer values. And for the same reason: they are values that propagate more of the same; they support and sustain the status quo.

If it seems a stretch to compare education to consumer products, consider Graff's claim that "it is no more possible to democratize education without standardization than it would be to democratize affordable clothing, food, transportation, health care, and entertainment without standardization and mass production" ("Our Undemocratic Curriculum" 134). With public funding on the wane, "affordable" would appear the operative word: mass production of instruction saves money. However, it has its costs: the conception of knowledge as already known, prepackaged content subject to delivery by any variety of means is both the condition and the effect of a system in which something called teaching is increasingly accomplished by a disenfranchised cohort of deskilled and deregulated workers rather than by tenured faculty members. In this model, knowledge is not created in the classroom, only at best transmitted there. Meanwhile, the student who encounters something advertised as higher education primarily in the form of taped lectures and podcasts, so-called tutoring services that teach to the test, bundled courseware, and Triple A Notes is conditioned through that experience to see knowledge as an inert commodity and to conceive of education as a process of commodity acquisition, whether it arrives in the form of information, skills, credentials, or cultural capital. Queer possibilities—the idea that the unforeseen might be valuable, for example, or that idiosyncrasy itself might be a virtue—are completely foreclosed.

My gripe with Graff is certainly not that he seeks to make academic success accessible to every student or even—entirely—that he asserts without evidence that a standardized curriculum will accomplish this end. What concerns me are his zeal for outing and then standardizing such secrets and the disregard for difference that informs his whole argument. Graff assumes that the keys to academic success will or should be the same for every discipline and every student and that the basic objectives of higher education will and should be the same in every instance—even though different people bring different needs, values, and purposes to the institution. He assumes that access to a reductive argument culture everywhere and always trumps access to any counterpublic or subculture, though these may offer life-changing and even life-saving ways of thinking and being in the world. He invokes the general public as the appropriate arbiter of academic standards, effectively chaining diverse field-specific judgments to the unitary yoke of popular opinion. He maintains that curricula must be organized to minimize “disjunction” and “contradiction” (“Assessment” 3) and calls this democratic.

Tellingly, Graff defines education as “internalizing the norms of the intellectual community” (3). He also claims that “improving education—and closing the achievement gap—will not be possible until academic institutions get as good at pedagogical simplification as we are at proliferating multiplicity and complication.” But simplification has its drawbacks, as his conclusion to this line of argument makes clear: “We cannot make the curriculum more *transparent—that is, more democratic*—until we are willing to be reductive about how academics is played, and this means getting over our protective queasiness about totalizing self-characterizations” (“Our Undemocratic Curriculum” 131; my emphasis). Only a willingness to be reductive could allow this conflation of democracy with transparency—and then subsume both within a normative logic that holds assimilation to be education’s highest purpose. It is not elitism that induces queasiness at this point but the ease with which the MLA president arrogates my position, my perspective, my purposes, and those of everyone else with a stake in higher education, to the homogenizing presumption of his self-characterization. It does make me feel queer.

The position Graff assumes at such moments seems possible only for someone who experiences no disjuncture between the public and himself, someone whose private life is fundamentally of a piece with public sentiment and popular opinion. But this is not the case for all our students. It is a position predicated on a sadly enfeebled idea of democracy, here reduced to the formal (but not actual) inclusion of recognized citizens in a closed and self-perpetuating system. A queerer, more open understanding

of the democratic project might, in contrast, encompass the extension, expansion, and continual reinvention of currently extant possibilities. It might invite and elaborate practices conducive precisely to “proliferating [the] multiplicity and complication” that Graff derides, because it would recognize what he calls “confusion” to be the condition, ends, and means of a more radically democratic commitment.

Graff is right, nonetheless, that some contexts call for reductive simplification, so I’ll give it a shot. If there is a secret to academic life, it is this queer one: intellectual inquiry leads to unexpected places. Outcomes assessment asserts the opposite. Built on prescription and predictability; quantification and comparison; standardization, transparency, and a reductive notion of democratic publics, outcomes assessment offers control and containment in place of open-ended exploration. It conditions students to accept the acquisition of discrete skills and pieces of information in place of genuine intellectual engagement. It relies on anti-queer, anti-intellectual presumptions and procedures to deny students the true key to the academic kingdom: the secret that our future is unknown, that research will reveal surprises, that difference offers a safeguard against narrow-mindedness, that incoherence is a condition of possibility, and that knowledge is neither finite nor fixed. In all these ways, and despite all Graff’s good intentions, outcomes assessment and standardization make higher education not more democratic but less.

Kim Emery
University of Florida

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Reply:

1. Contrary to Kim Emery, I don’t “blame” the educational achievement gap on “the ‘extraordinary diversity of texts, ideas, subjects, intellectual perspectives and approaches’ now available on college campuses.” In the