

Clueless in Academe: An Interview with Gerald Graff

by John Warner

Professors complain that each year's batch of students are more clueless than the last, but could they be the ones in the dark? Our writer interviews author and academic Gerald Graff on who's to blame for the failures in our classrooms.

A common scene: In class, I ask for a student to summarize the argument of a newspaper editorial, and in return, I get only slack-jawed stares, or worse yet, the summary is simply wrong. *What is wrong with them?* I wonder. *Why can't they do something that seems so simple?* I ask. *They must be lazy,* I surmise. Whatever is going wrong, I'm certain it isn't my fault.

Maybe not, according to Gerald Graff. After teaching college for more than 40 years, and gazing from his current position as professor of English and education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Graff is well-acquainted with the phenomenon of 'cluelessness.' But rather than only blaming an unmotivated or ill-prepared student population, he sees a gulf between student and professor that is partially, if not *entirely* caused by the academy's failure to make itself accessible to students. In his new book, *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*, Graff examines this phenomenon and offers solutions to begin bridging the gap between teacher and student.

He spoke with me about *Clueless in Academe* recently via email.

* * *

Warner: First, how clueless are the clueless? That is, how big is the gap between academia and student culture?

Graff: Big enough to be a major scandal, I think. It's hard to measure the gap or even to know what criteria to use, but it's hardly news to anybody that the vast majority of American college students don't think of themselves as insiders to the academic intellectual world. Nor do educators even expect that they will become insiders. Yet, if students don't in some sense become insiders to part of the academic intellectual world—if they don't talk our talk or have a sense of what our issues are—then in what sense are they being educated?

Some of course would say that 'our issues' are so narrow, specialized, and arid, not to mention vacuous to boot, and that 'our talk' is so turgid and jargon-ridden, that it's all the better that students *not* understand them! After all, the point is not to produce clones of dry-as-dust academics but broadly educated citizens. And it's true, as I acknowledge in the book, that it makes a big difference how we define 'our issues' and 'our talk,' and I spend many pages trying to distinguish the better forms of talk—the ones that would provide good models for students—from the worst ones. In any case, the objection misses the point, that whatever students study is routed through some set of academics and their language. The disciplines themselves are mediated by the talk of scholars. And students don't simply study Shakespeare, they speak and write *about* Shakespeare, and will do so badly unless they master the proper forms of talk for the subject, in this case literary criticism. Finally, insofar as scholarly discourse about a subject overlaps with the popular journalistic discourse about it, to expect students to become 'insiders' is simply to expect them to take part in the literate discourse of their culture about important issues. I don't think many will disagree that even the vast majority of college students are very far from meeting that standard.

Warner: What are the most immediate consequences of the gap that you see in

your day-to-day work with students? How is the gap manifesting itself?

Graff: As I've just said, only the minority of high-achieving students can enter into a conversation about intellectual issues or write a competent paper about those issues. To me this means that the idea of democratic education is something of a joke.

I'm a believer in the pedagogical and civic value of bad argument. I think a culture of crude and crudely polarized debate is an advance over the Eisenhower era I grew up in, where conflicts were mushed over in a haze of evasive rhetoric.

Warner: What do you see as the long term consequences of remaining 'clueless?' How big a threat is this problem really? Is this something only college professors are wringing their hands over, or should other groups be concerned as well.

Graff: I think cluelessness in academe is a major threat to democracy, especially at a moment when talk-back radio, Cable TV talk shows, the Internet, and the reliance of politicians on opinion-polling have made a certain kind of public debate—even if it's debate within narrowly constrained parameters—more immediately important in American and global politics. In these conditions, one needs not only an 'informed' citizenry, but a citizenry that's sophisticated enough in weighing arguments to spot logical contradictions and non-sequiturs, not to mention outright lies.

The developments leading up to the war in Iraq are a case in point. A citizenry trained by schooling to scrutinize claims more critically might have prevented the Bush administration from getting away with its claims that Saddam Hussein was a real threat to U.S. security, that he had WMDs, that he was in cahoots with Osama bin Laden, etc. A citizenry trained to think more critically would also be harder to bamboozle with claims that tax cuts will help average workers as opposed to the wealthy.

Warner: My sense is that the students don't miss something they were never aware existed, particularly if they are directed towards college as the pathway toward wealth and career, as many of them are these days. They equate getting a degree with being educated. By and large, I think parents have bought into this mindset as well. So I want to ask, do you see a lot of concern over this 'scandal,' outside of the academe, or are we letting it pass us by?

Graff: You're right that many students don't miss an initiation into the intellectual world of whose very existence they never even learn. No, I don't see as much concern within academia over this problem as I think there should be. I think we've gotten accustomed to a system in which the very few excel in school (and reap the rewards in the vocational world beyond) and the many stumble along and more or less get by, or get through, or fail. In some ways such a system suits us academics—it's not our fault if the majority stumble or fail, we can easily say, that's just the way it is; only an elite in any society is going to 'get' the intellectual club, etc. Insofar as this is a common academic attitude, I blame academics more than parents, whom it's also our job to educate, after all.

Warner: What brought you to write about this issue? Is it just the logical extension from your previous work (*Beyond the Culture Wars*), or something even beyond that?

Graff: It started with the feeling I've had since I started teaching (around 1962 as a graduate student) that at best I was reaching 15-20 percent of the students in an average undergraduate class and that the remaining 80-85 percent were in some other country or time-zone. Comparing notes with colleagues over the years led me to conclude that most felt the same way. Some unashamedly said they teach to that

top 15-20 percent and figure there's no point worrying about the others. Of course, some colleagues claim that *they* reach a much higher percentage, but I suspect they are kidding themselves.

As for *Beyond the Culture Wars*, *Clueless* is both a continuation and a departure. Part of the point of the earlier book was that controversy clarifies, that intellectual issues become intelligible to us at points of controversy, when we become able to see who's where on the issues, what the relationships between positions are, and what's at stake—so what and who cares. Unfortunately, because of the culture war situation, that book got so caught up with conflict that few readers noticed that the end for which I was promoting controversy was intelligibility. In fact, I noticed that when I'd give a talk on the problem of academic unintelligibility that audiences would often act as if I'd spoken on teaching the conflicts. I realized I had to write another book if I was going to get my point fully across.

In *Clueless*, I still argue (even more explicitly actually) that controversy clarifies, but I try to separate the problem of conflict from that of intelligibility—more specifically, the unintelligibility of academe—and to focus on the latter problem more directly.

Warner: It seems that this would illustrate the point that you make in the book about those of us in the academe being as clueless as the students. Do you find resistance to the sorts of changes you propose? What is the blowback like from within the academe?

Graff: It's fair to say that my arguments are controversial. I have my critics and my supporters as well. (The current [Spring 2003] issue of the journal *Pedagogy* has a symposium on my work, 'Teaching the Conflicts at Twenty Years,' if anyone's interested. There's also a book, *Teaching the Conflicts: Gerald Graff, Curricular Reform, and the Culture Wars*, William E. Cain, ed. [New York: Garland, 1994].)

I like to think I had some success making my proposals work in the Master of Arts Program in the Humanities I helped develop and direct at the University of Chicago in the late '90s (see the discussion of this 'MAPH' program

in *Clueless*) and in my more recent work as associate dean at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where I helped institute a program of course-clustering for freshmen. I probably need to become a dean, if not a provost or president, to get to the next level. If anyone knows of a cheap university that I could get, please let me know!

Like many educators, I don't trust quantitative measurements of student prowess and can't wait till the current standardized testing craze collapses from its own silliness.

Warner: Do you have any thoughts on the commercial success of books like (on the right) Ann Coulter's *Slander* or Michael Savage's *A Savage Nation*, or (on the left) Michael Moore's *Stupid White Men*, books with 'argument' at their center that rely on extremely dubious strategies of argument?

Graff: I'm ambivalent about this trend. On the one hand, as you say, these kinds of books tend to rely on pseudo-argument. On the other hand, to modify something I say in *Clueless*, I'm a believer in the pedagogical and civic value of bad argument. I think a culture of crude and crudely polarized debate is an advance over the Eisenhower era I grew up in, where conflicts were mushed over in a haze of evasive rhetoric. I can imagine a good course in which students would read Coulter and Moore for starters and then move on to more nuanced and complicated texts on the same set of issues.

Warner: I worry that this polarized debate is creating too much noise for nascent critical thinkers to work though towards the goal of more nuanced thinking that would allow them to judge the actions of their elected leaders more thoroughly. We may have them in class three hours a week for a semester, but Rush Limbaugh

is on for 15 hours a week, 52 weeks a year, sports talk (and its requisite bellowing) is available 24 hours a day. With these models, particularly models that are built to ‘entertain,’ how can we compete? Doesn’t it have to extend beyond the academe?

Graff: Hey, leave my sports talk shows alone—they get me to work every day and back! Though it’s true that at their worst they’re rampantly sexist and homophobic as well as just plain stupid, I wish the quality of political debate in this country was anywhere near as good as the debates on sports talk radio about whether the Cubs should trade or hang on to Sammy Sosa (clearly they should hang on—and I wrote that, mind you, before he hit a ton of homeruns in July and August!). As for noise, that’s simply what critical thinkers learn how to penetrate, make sense of, and deflect for their own purposes, it seems to me. It’s true that we educators have far less time with students than do the Rush Limbaughs, but that only means we should be making far better use of the time we do have. I argue in *Clueless* that schools and colleges have a lot more potential power to become a significant counterculture to the worst of the media and of youth culture (see my final chapter on Deborah Meier’s work in Harlem and Boston schools) than we recognize or come close to realizing. As I point out, the media didn’t gain its enormous power without thinking carefully about how to *organize* its representations for a mass audience, whereas for us academics (despite our impressive theorizations of the nature of representation) we think it’s sufficient to organize education by saying ‘You teach your thing at 10AM and I’ll teach mine at 11’ and leave it at that! I say this much better in the book, of course.

Warner: Lastly, how will we know when we’re winning (or perhaps losing) the battle against cluelessness? What are the signs we should be looking for that will signal either a shift toward greater engagement between academic and student culture, or, on the other hand, the formation of a permanent and uncrossable breach between the two?

Graff: A great and tough question. Like many educators, I don’t trust quantitative measurements of student prowess and can’t wait till the current standardized testing craze collapses from its own silliness. On the other hand, I’ve heard the claim made by high school administrators that curricula that make challenging intellectual issues accessible and interesting to students significantly raise

standardized test scores as a byproduct. One colleague claimed, for example, that such a curriculum led to higher reading scores in his school because it motivated more students to learn to read. I'd like to think this is true, that programs that make the intellectual world intelligible to students will produce measurable success, even by criteria that are too crude to measure genuine intellectual performance.

Beyond this, I think the evidence will have to be of the 'we'll know it when we see it' kind. I find there's a fairly strong consensus among the teachers I encounter that the majority of high school and college students is, if not completely clueless in academe, more or less confused about the intellectual game academics play and in some cases turned off by it. The statements by 11th graders that I quote in Chapter 2 of the book back up this claim, I think. Courses and programs that make the game more accessible and user-friendly should produce fairly clear observable results that could be gauged for example in exit interviews with students.

Here's what I'd like to do some day and may get a chance to do soon: Take five sections of freshman composition at a university and teach them using the 'argument templates' discussed extensively in *Clueless* and other methods for demystifying academic culture. Closely monitor the writing done by the students over the course of the semester or year, and compare their work with that produced by a randomly-chosen control group of a different five sections of the same course. I like to think the results would dramatically bear out my claims. If they didn't it would be back to the drawing-board for me. But it's symptomatic of the incuriosity of higher education about what students actually get out of college that one never hears about such experiments even being tried.