

Slightly Less Clueless After Assessment

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I take my title for today's talk, of course, from Jerry Graff's 2003 book, *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*. At the heart of this book's challenge lies the author's proposal that while academic communication, and indeed, even public discourse itself, rely centrally on a culture of *argument*, we often fail to induct students into this culture, often because we either want to teach them one point of view (rather than multiple perspective in contention with each other) or because we fail to recognize the significance of argument culture or we remain skeptical of it or we outright resist it. This accounts, in his view, for much of the failure in higher education. Graff argues that we need to admit that conflict itself lies at the heart of all academic discourse, and that we do students a disservice when we withhold these strategies from them. With the founding assumptions of each discipline generally obscured, students must figure out how to think like a biologist in their biology class, but then like a philosopher one hour later. The better students can shift their thinking accordingly, but even those students do not necessarily synthesize or see those modes of thought as in conflict. The weaker students may be overwhelmed and confused. In the broader scheme of things, professors have failed to gain sufficient public support because of our refusal, according to Graff, to communicate the significance of our research in a way that those outside the immediate field can understand. In short, we mystify our discipline to both students and the general public.

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What seemed like a problem in 2003 is more likely to be described as a crisis in 2011: students aren't learning enough and aren't sufficiently engaged in their studies; the liberal arts in general and the humanities in particular are becoming increasingly marginalized; the university mission has shifted away from undergraduate education; funding has become scandalously and disturbingly scarce; tenure-track jobs are disappearing even as families see higher education as a necessity rather than a luxury.

In today's talk, I would like to suggest that assessment has a crucial role to play in colleges and universities of the future. Assessment cannot solve all of our problems; I would like to make the more modest but nevertheless controversial claim, however, that in the midst of all our well-publicized crises that assessment is ultimately more of a friend than an enemy, not only for its potential to help us improve student learning, but to help us become slightly less clueless. In what follows, I will address three areas where being clued-in to assessment work can make a difference: first, in the way we advocate for the humanities, second, in the way we understand current controversies in higher education, and third, in how we teach our students, which, I believe, is ultimately a form of advocacy as well.

Many faculty members suspect and even oppose learning outcomes assessment. But I think, actually, that they might support it more than they think. Like the undergraduate who says, "I'm not a feminist BUT," and will go on to explain that she supports equal rights and equal pay, none of which, she imagines, have anything to do with feminism, most faculty members probably support the improvement of student learning even if they're not so keen on filling out the accountability forms. This was made abundantly clear to me at this year's Modern Languages Association annual meeting when I attended a sobering panel on "The Strange Death of the Liberal University in Britain?" While the papers reported on the alarming reality of the withdrawal of public funds from English universities, Rick Rylance, the Chief Executive and Deputy Chair of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), made the point that STEM fields have been much better at advocating for themselves (with a little help from their corporate friends). He pointed out that we need to find better ways to advocate for the liberal arts in general and the humanities in particular. A lively

discussion ensued. An American in the audience made a particularly interesting point. He said something like, "What we really need to in humanities areas is to figure out how and what students are learning so we can show this to the public." He paused as everyone absorbed this novel suggestion. "But I don't know if we could do this" he resumed. "It would take a lot of research over many years, and I don't know if anyone knows how to do that kind of research or even who would undertake it. Where would you even start?"

In the context of a lively discussion about how best to advocate for the liberal arts in general and the humanities in particular, this alert and concerned attendee spontaneously reinvented learning outcomes assessment as a key component. Many in the room nodded in appreciative agreement over the need for this kind of research and were similarly vexed by the unlikelihood of such a good idea ever coming to fruition. No one seemed to recognize that, inevitably, someone in their department was involved in exactly this kind of project, and that someone in their institution was responsible for gathering and making sense of all these micro-studies. I am not trying to blame the other attendees for not knowing this, but rather to point out how much more cross-fertilization needs to take place. More to the point, it suggests that faculty might be more open to assessment than they think, and that if we are confident about the value and effectiveness of what our students are learning, and if we want to continue to improve on it, then assessment offers a strategy for advocacy as well.

Loathed as it may be, assessment is a key missing piece in advocacy. Mary Crane recently suggested in *Inside Higher Education*, we haven't been particularly good at advocacy because "a nagging sense of marginalization" has "sometimes lead liberal arts faculty to become defensive."¹ Instead, we "need to be able to explain what we do in accessible terms." **[January 17, 2011]** Yet, she goes on to suggest that we (professors) might not be the best defenders of the liberal arts because our undergraduate majors were a form of pre-professionalism. Perhaps instead, "Former

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http://www.insidehighered.com/layout/set/popup/views/2011/01/17/mary_crane_on_a_different_way_to_help_the_liberal_arts#Comments

students could attest to their experiences; managers could speak to the skills they want. It would be interesting to see if brain imaging could shed light on the effects of different kinds of higher education on the brain.” While I certainly understand the impulse to look inside the student brain and think perhaps we might even be able to learn something someday from autopsies, it strikes me that assessment might be a more convenient way to get at these questions, and would save the expense of medical equipment and personnel. Once again, it is the missing piece in an otherwise admirable argument.

Thinking through the lens of assessment can also help us intervene more productively into some of the larger debates about the future of higher education. In a recent review essay in the *New York Review of Books*, Simon Head compared the educational crisis in Britain to the one in the United States.² In Britain, he points out, the government has focused on the research function and demanded that universities defend their research in the very limited terms of usefulness, which generally means some kind of financial payoff. This, of course, leaves hardly any leverage for humanists. In the US, however, budget-slashers have turned to the educational rather than the research function for cost-saving measures, allowing a two-tier system to emerge in which tenured positions are cancelled when the professor retires and replaced by inexpensive adjunct labor. Head ascribes this to different tenure structures that would make cuts to research supports not worth the effort. I would only add here that the intense competition over prestige might have been a factor as well at US institutions, given that they compete for students in ways that differ from those in Britain.

Most scholars in “University Studies”—to borrow a phrase from a recent MLA panel-- lump outcomes assessment in with other practices contributing to the “corporate model.” My view, however, is that assessment might instead help us counter this trend. Given the situation described above, higher education is vulnerable to charges that it overlooks undergraduates, especially, and perhaps most unfortunately, at state institutions, which tend to be one of the few remaining

² <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/jan/13/grim-threat-british-universities/>

pathways for upward mobility in this country and yet have, as Christopher Newfield has demonstrated about the California system, most readily embraced the model observed by Head.³ Assessment places the educational mission of universities and colleges back on the radar screen, although without, I believe, undermining the research mission. Ideally, an assessment model defies what Steven Brint calls the “consumer model of education,” with its over-reliance on student evaluations rather than evidence of learning.⁴ Finally, and perhaps most bluntly, outcries against assessment support the worst kind of stereotypes about professorial disregard to student learning and resistance to measuring effectiveness when most other careers demand some kind of explicit or implied metric.

Finally, I feel that my own engagement with assessment has made me slightly less clueless as an instructor. Like most of my peers, I had pretty much no training; most junior faculty spend huge amounts of time conscientiously trying to figure out how to teach just at the moment when they need to get their research programs underway. They must reinvent from scratch a range of pedagogical strategies that probably could have been communicated to them fairly easily. I’ve changed my classes in many ways as a result of what I have learned from assessment data; in the limited time remaining, I want to focus on one: the central issue that I began with of making an argument in my discipline, literary studies. Graff recommends including criticism in the literature classroom because without it, “either the teacher tells student what the text means and they write it down, or the teacher shuts up and lets the students air their personal responses” (176). But in my experience, the inclusion of criticism—even of conflicting, opposed pieces of criticism—does not in itself lead to students producing arguments. Or to refine that: often students are able to make arguments, but those arguments were not necessarily recognizable as literary criticism. While I agree, then,

³ See Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁴ Steven Brint, “The Academic Devolution? Movements to Reform Teaching and Learning in US Colleges and Universities, 1985-2010.” Research and Occasional Paper Series: CSHE. 12.09 (2009): 1-29. Center for Studies in Higher Education. Web. 22 Nov. 2010. <<http://cshe.berkeley.edu/publications/docs/ROPS.Brint.Classroom.12.18.09.pdf>>.

that only limited learning takes place when the teacher dictates the meaning, I want to make the case for respecting and harnessing the personal response. Research on optimizing student learning outcomes often focuses on engagement as a necessary although not sufficient ingredient. This is entirely intuitive, but is not something, I will admit, that I much thought about before becoming an “assessment lady”—to borrow Kirsten Saxton’s resonant phrase from our collection that capture the status of assessment work in higher education—or that receives much attention in anything I have read about teaching literature. Whether or not students *like* the text in question receives attention, but they can like the novel without being engaged in the process of analyzing it. In fact, sometimes liking the novel gets in the way: the most common complaint I heard at the beginning of my “Critical Methods in Literary Study” course challenges the necessity of “picking apart” these beautiful texts. I know I am not the only faculty member who came of age thinking about teaching along the lines of feeding the cat: you agonize over which brand to buy, but then pretty much just put it out there in a bowl to be eventually consumed. Young humans, however, pose entirely different kinds of challenges.

So I began adding components to improve engagement: research projects on primary and secondary sources, wiki building, small group work in class, a class blog. These helped, but did not only their own lead to the production of the kind of criticism I was looking for. Finally, it dawned on me that my students actually did not know what literary criticism was, even if they had seen many examples of it. Peggy Maki makes a similar observation in a discussion of graduate teaching, explaining that when we say things like: ‘you should elaborate’ or ‘sharpen your point’ to graduate students, sometimes they have no idea what we are asking them to do. I believe that this is the case with undergraduates trying to write criticism.

The prospect of defining criticism is enough to send any well-trained English professor into convulsions. Many departments have a course like my Critical Methods that introduces students to the major, and one common way of teaching this, which is reinforced by the textbooks designed for such courses, is to explain multiple critical strategies: this is how a deconstructionist would read *Gulliver’s Travels*, and this is how

a New Historicist would read it, and this is how a feminist would read it. We've gotten pretty good at providing students with a series of options, but find it more difficult to tell them outright what constitutes literary criticism and how literary criticism is related to, but not the same as, their personal response. On the one hand, most of us have a sense that, like pornography, we know it when we see it; on the other hand our own distinctions can seem unconvincing to students (who thus readily contest their grades) and is often not fully defined in our own minds. This, I think, is why so many faculty dislike grading so much, and why it takes so long, and why there is so much needless agonizing over it. This is why we hate those assessment-lady rubrics until we realize that they can do so much of this work for us.

So instead of trying to define literary criticism or repeat the smorgasbord of approaches that the introduction to the major courses usually offer, I developed a worksheet for advanced classes based on empirical information about how my students over the years have generally responded to a particular text. I posit, in agreement with Graff, criticism as something that everyone already does. And yet, they do not always do it in a sophisticated way. If the informal criticism in which most people spontaneously engage were adequate, we would really have nothing to teach them. For example, to say of *The Country Wife* that "Horner", the play's infamous rake who pretends to be a eunuch in order to seduce society wives, "is a douche bag" (I get this one on the blog every year) is indeed an argument, just not very sophisticated one. Before I starting thinking like an "assessment lady," I had trouble articulating why students couldn't see this difference, but now I understand that I hadn't been teaching them to see it. I certainly could model sophisticated arguments and provide examples of sophisticated arguments and distinguish among the kinds of arguments students were making in my grading, but I'm not sure I had never actually taught them how to get here. Perhaps this is particularly ironic in my case since I teach 18th-century literature, which I believe constructed our modern notion of both literary criticism and sophistication itself. My exemplary play, after all, is about the contrast between the cosmopolitan rake Horner and the naïve country wife who, in the naïve reading, falls into his trap.

So I have boldly mapped student responses to *The Country Wife* in terms to degrees of sophistication, which I arrogantly posit without apology. The point here is that in disciplinary learning, we expect students not only be able to make arguments, but to be able to distinguish a good—or sophisticated—argument from a crude one. Tapping into their argumentative capacity ALONE does not accomplish the second goal. Nevertheless, I think drawing out the gut reaction is the best way to get to a sophisticated argument. To that end, I represent criticism as a kind of development process in order to minimize negative judgments about less reflective answers.

What I am trying to do with my ‘stages’ is generate emotional engagement by beginning with the kind of responses that the text elicits from students. Generally these ultimately intersect with a recognizable critical problem, but I find that they are much more meaningful to students if they begin with their own responses. I have codified these on a worksheet because I want them to be sophisticated critics who know how to dig deeply into their own instinctive responses and form them into coherent forms of critical practice that will also be self-correcting. That is, I want them to be able to tell when they are working at a more sophisticated level in a range of situations. I think this could be adapted for a variety of texts. At each stage, I try to lay out, non-judgmentally, the kinds of arguments I have seen students make on the class blog and in their papers. I then analyze what is at stake in each kind of argument. Many students, I find, get stuck at stage 3, but this kind of exercise can help move them forward. I make no apologies about the goal of getting students to create more *sophisticated* arguments, although I realize that this is a complicated term.

The experience of thinking momentarily like an assessment lady, then, rather than only as a specialist in 18th-century British literature and culture, has shifted my sense of what so many academic conflicts seems to be about, and how if we are to thrive in the 21st century we need to find new, invigorated ways to put undergraduate education at the center of our collective identity, navigating between the Scylla of sentimentalism and the Charybdis of contempt. My final bit of wisdom to share is that thinking like an ‘assessment lady’ has not only made me slightly less clueless as a teacher; it has actually made teaching considerably easier. Grading in particular can

become an agonizing nightmare for even the most experienced teachers. Assessment doesn't solve this problem, but it certainly makes evaluation much less difficult when you lay out the specific goals. So just as for Graff, the culture of argument is withheld from undergraduates to everyone's disadvantage, in my view the strategies of assessment are similarly withheld from graduate students and beginning instructors and even advanced instructors when they could save us a lot of anguish and make everyone slightly less clueless.

“Stages of Criticism”

Also posted at The Long Eighteenth: <http://long18th.wordpress.com/>

My goal here is to move students from various kinds of non-critical or semi-critical responses to the critical ones. We go through this worksheet on *The Country Wife* and have been working with these terms. These stages are based on the types of responses student often write in their blog posts and papers. Thus this is more my analysis of what I usually see students do rather than what I recommend that they do, and especially how I can harness #2 and #3 to get them to move to #4 and #5. The point is not that they need to through all five stages, but that they can match up their response to a stage and challenge themselves to move to a higher one. My strategy here is twofold: first, to respect and encourage their emotional reactions but to lead them to recognize that these emotional reactions do not constitute criticism. I have then (second) tried to define what my discipline generally understands as criticism. By casting them as stages rather than “right way” or “wrong way,” I feel that I allow them to develop sophisticated arguments through the process of beginning with relatively unsophisticated one.

Stages of Criticism:

Stage 1

Literal Reading: What is actually going on at the most literal level in the opening of *The Country Wife*? What problem is being set up? Your answer here can be right or wrong and depends on careful reading of the text, including parsing the sentence structure, understanding the vocabulary and certain elements of cultural context.

Wrong reading: Horner has come back from France impotent.

Correct reading: Horner is getting Quack to help spread an incorrect rumor that he has come back from France impotent.

Stage 2: Your gut reaction. There is no correct or incorrect response here.

Example 1: I can't believe that Horner is planning to trick all those people like that. What a pig.

Example 2: Horner has an awesome plan. I can't wait to see if it works.

Notice: Both of these responses essentially rely on treating Horner like a real person.

Stage 3: Ethical analysis based on your own moral world that takes other characters into consideration. This requires more reflection. There is no entirely correct or incorrect response; however, an extended reflection here depends on following the character through the entire text and correctly understanding each turn of events.

Example 1: Horner is amusing because he takes advantage of a hypocritical society in which people can't tell the truth about what they are doing. With this framework, he finds a way to sleep with lots of women without getting caught. He makes some lonely women happier than they would be otherwise.

Example 2: Horner exploits a lot of women, including Margery, who falls in love with him. She is heartbroken at the end of the play and the men play along but

are secretly humiliated. He causes a lot of damage in his drive to fulfill his selfish desires.

Fallacy at Stage 3: Making sweeping generalizations as a result of a specific situation.

Example 1: The plot of this play shows that men are really only interested in sex and will always exploit women when they can.

Example 2: This play shows that you should really just be honest with your spouse and everything will work out.

Stage 4: Analysis based on what you think the author is doing rather than how you feel about the ethical issues raised by the play.

Example 1: Wycherley sets up Horner's plot to expose the hypocrisy of his society.

Example 2: Wycherley is showing how limited women's lives could be and is creating a situation that allows them to defy their husbands and societal expectations in general.

Fallacy #1 at Stage 4: Sweeping Generalization

Example: Society is basically hypocritical, which is something that Wycherley shows.

Fallacy #2 at Stage 4: Psychologizing the author or imagining that you know what he or she thinks

Example: Wycherley was a rake and really admired men who could get around the rules of society, so from this we know that he is on Horner's side.

Fallacy #3 at Stage 4: False historicizing

Example: Back then, women had no rights at all and the plays shows how they were taken advantage of.*

*Hint: Don't ever start a sentence with "back then." Nothing good will follow. Instead try "In the late seventeenth century" and observe how that demands that you be honest and accurate about the history.

Stage 5: An argument about the representational strategies of the play and their effects that does not necessarily rely on what you think the author thinks. This argument describes what the work does, even if it does something that the author did not necessarily envision. It can take historical context into consideration.

Example 1: This play features a central character who thinks he has plumbed the depths of cynicism, but is shocked to find how many other characters have gotten there before him. (Laura Rosenthal)

Example 2: The play exposes the hypocrisy of individual characters, but in the end suggests that a certain amount of deception is necessary for society to function smoothly. (Laura Rosenthal)

Example 3: Horner is a figure just outside the most elite echelons of society, and his scheme represents an attempt to break through the final barrier by sleeping with the most elite women. The elite men, however, close ranks in the end and leave him humiliated and alone. (J. Douglas Canfield)

Example 4: The sexual dynamics of this play are fundamentally homoerotic. Horner only wishes to sleep with married women in order to cuckold their husband, which shows more desire and interest in other men than in the women themselves. (Eve Sedgwick)