

Why Assessment?

Gerald Graff

Everyone knows the rap against assessment: it's part of a hostile takeover of education by outsiders, particularly cost-cutting politicians; it's driven by the social scientific delusion that learning can be quantified. I won't have anything to say in this talk about these objections, partly because I sometimes agree with them, but also because I think they target bad versions of assessment rather than assessment at its best. I have seen or read of many campuses where assessment has made converts out of initially skeptical faculties, who have been persuaded that assessment answers a genuine educational need and where properly qualitative measures are used to assess learning.

What I want to argue here today, though, is that in addition to the good reasons some of us in higher education have for resisting assessment, there is a less good reason that hasn't been as widely discussed. In my view a major reason why much of higher education opposes assessment is that it threatens the *laissez-faire* individualism that we're used to taking for granted. What really sticks in the craw of colleges and departments, I think, is that assessment asks us to agree on what *we collectively* want students to be able to do, as opposed to thinking as usual only about what you or I as individual teachers want. Assessment asks us to think of teaching as an organized team effort rather than a set of virtuoso performances in the classroom by isolated soloists. Indeed, assessment threatens the very idea of "the classroom" conceived as a sanctified private space that even our colleagues, much less outsiders, have no right to intrude on. It asks that we think beyond the walls of our own classroom and get on the same

page with our colleagues as regards the “learning outcomes” we can agree we collectively want for our students.

Before I start waxing self-righteous about this point, though, I should confess that I too can be as resistant as anybody to having my classroom autonomy interfered with. The last thing I need is more faculty meetings on assessment. Throughout my long career I’ve scrupulously adhered to the unwritten pledge we make when we become college teachers: I won’t mess with your courses if you don’t mess with mine. I’ve taken full advantage of a system that allows me to know little about what my colleagues do in their courses and them to know little about mine, and where we don’t *want* to know, really, since the less we know about each other’s teaching the less likely we are to have uncomfortable disagreements. But though in the short run this freedom makes my teaching easier, in the long run it makes everything harder since it takes away any chance of referring to other colleagues’ courses and thus forces me constantly to reinvent the same wheel in every course. We misrecognize our own self-interest, finally, when we equate isolation with less work and less burnout—and this should be especially true if we take proper advantage of our new technologies, which make it possible for courses to communicate without our having physically to be in the same space. [NEEDS MORE ELABORATION, OKAY]

Ultimately I have to realize that the freedom I’ve been given to ignore what my fellow teachers do is more suitable to the heroes of Western cowboy films than to members of a so-called academic community. Indeed, as someone who is sympathetic to the recent social turn of the humanities, I notice that even as we ruthlessly attack the American ideology of rugged individualism in our publications, we happily accept arrangements that allow us to be sovereign kings and queens of our classrooms, embracing Greta Garbo’s line, “I vunt to be alone,” as our pedagogical motto. It would be interesting some other time to explore the curious fact that we who are such staunch collectivists when we think about literature and culture suddenly become libertarian Republicans when we think about teaching. The point in any case is that, as much as I may not want my classroom freedom abridged, I do have to grant that there’s

something irresponsible about a freedom that lets me ignore whether my courses fit or not into the larger *program* that they presumably are part of.

Ah yes, the program. Assessment is threatening, I would argue, because it demands that we live up to our glib use of the P-word—as in “literature program,” “composition program,” “creative writing program,” and so forth—when all we’re usually talking about (let’s face it) is a bunch of courses taught by instructors who have no idea whether they are on the same page or not and whose institutions, until assessment came along, never even suggested that getting on the same page might be something to consider. Of course we are aware of our colleagues’ identities as period and genre specialists and as creative writers, compositionists, ESL experts, and so forth, but this division of labor is too loose to tell us anything about our colleagues’ courses that we could play off of in ours—information for example about whether your assumptions about literature, culture, or writing agree or disagree with mine or are in the same conceptual ballpark.

Assessment in short represents a paradigm shift in education because it shifts the focus from the *teacher* to the *program*, or to the curriculum understood not as the random result of courses that don’t speak to one another, but as a collective product that needs to be orchestrated or even scripted like a theatrical performance. Imagine if a college were to think about an academic semester as something it put on rather the way an acting troupe performs a play or an orchestra performs a symphony. That sounds weird only because, again, our thinking about teaching is shaped by the individualist premise that *institutions* are the enemy of the free individual. In challenging this ideology, assessment challenges our culture’s romanticized picture of teaching—the Dead Poets Society cliché—in which the great teacher is always a heroic isolato who fights against an uncomprehending bureaucracy personified by soulless and cowardly administrators. We should not prop up this shabby cliché by casting the assessment officer as the latest of the institutional villains.

But still, I’m sure some of you are wondering, what is so wrong with going our separate ways as teachers even to the point of leaving each other alone? Aren’t we all splendidly different and aren’t our intellectual differences among the great strengths of

the contemporary university, part of its impressive cultural diversity. And why on earth should we want to “get on the same page”? Do you want us to return to the university of the Middle Ages?

No I don't, but I'm glad you asked. The intellectual and cultural diversity of today's university is indeed an unqualified strength and a big reason why today's college curriculum is a huge improvement over the comparatively restricted and tame curriculum I had as a college undergraduate in the 1950s. The problem with today's university is not that its curriculum is too diverse, but that it fails to give students enough help in sorting out and making sense of that diversity, and in learning the advanced skills of reading, writing, and argument that the increased diversity requires college students to have. And here is where the faculty's' getting on the same page becomes crucial, for it is hard for students to master those advanced reading, writing, and argument skills, or even to see that they exist, when the diverse courses they take are so disconnected that they don't reinforce one other's lessons.

But surely, I hear you say, these practices of reading, writing, and argument are precisely what our students *do* get from the best individual teachers. If we all teach conscientiously and well, the good effects on students will reinforce one another and leave no need for us to get on the same page. In other words, we are already on the same page enough with respect to the basics of reading, writing and argument. And that's true up to a point. The problem is that though many of us do indeed teach the same fundamental practices of reading, writing, and argument, when these practices are diffused over a spread of courses whose teachers are oblivious to one another's lessons, students have a hard time recognizing that the practices are in fact the same.

On the contrary, what students experience as they go from course to course and discipline to discipline, or even between courses in the same discipline, is a barrage of apparent mixed messages, including mixed messages about how academic work is done. In the face of these mixed messages, it is difficult for students to determine which faculty perspectives they encounter are compatible and which are at odds. For example, students take general education courses covering the sciences and humanities, but they are given no help determining whether the assumptions of the

sciences and humanities ultimately clash, coincide, or both. It's symptomatic, for example that we never discuss with students—at least I've never seen or heard of such a discussion taking place—whether writing is fundamentally different in the sciences and humanities or whether there are significant areas of convergence.

In the humanities, students can go from one course in which it goes without saying—and therefore is left unarticulated—that in studying works of art anything besides focusing on the text itself is suspect to another course in which it equally goes without saying that to understand works of art you need to read them in their sociopolitical contexts. And with respect to writing again, students can go from one course in which their essays are graded down merely summarizing without making a strong argument (“Hey, I’ve read the text,” says the teacher: “I want to know what *you* think.”) to another course in which they are graded down for being too argumentative (“I don’t care what *you* think,” says the teacher: “I want to see if you’ve read the text carefully.”) No wonder students are always coming up and asking us, “Do you want *my* ideas in this paper or just a summary of the reading?”

So just as teachers are expected to figure out how to teach their subjects on their own without consultation with colleagues, students are expected to figure *us* out on their own, including our contradictions and mixed messages. The surprising thing to me is how many do it quite well. For the mixed message curriculum is often enormously exciting and rewarding for the minority of high achievers, those who come to college with some previously acquired skill at synthesizing disparate teachers’ perspectives on their own and putting contradictory perspectives into dialogue and debate. The majority of students, however, can’t do that on their own. The curriculum for them lacks the *redundancy*, the repetition and reinforcement of the same messages that are able to be recognized *as* the same, that according to information scientists is necessary for deep learning.

Not experiencing enough of such reinforcement, these students can only resort to a familiar tactic: you psych out each of your successive teachers as they come and try to give them whatever they seem to want even when their lessons flatly contradict one another. So literature students learn to be New Critics in the morning and

poststructuralists after lunch, but only sort of. Since they encounter the different positions in isolation rather than in dialogue, students' grasp of the positions and what's at stake in embracing one over another doesn't sink in deeply. Education itself ends up being not a cumulative socialization into the conversation of an intellectual community, but a matter of jumping through the hoops presented by successive teachers.

I can attest that in my own teaching, I feel more palpably than I ever did in the past that my students think they have to start over again from scratch when they come into my course, since they can't depend on anything they learned in previous courses carrying over into mine. In this they are reacting understandably to the compartmentalizations of the curriculum by compartmentalizing *us* in their own minds. What they learn seems so specific to the particular contexts of the courses in which they learn it that, as recent researchers find, they are often unable when asked to apply the lessons of one course to the domain of another, much less to life after graduation. As one disillusioned high school teacher observed to me, "What you learn in a course stays in the course."

Since I'm known for having often complained that we hide our disagreements from our students, I should emphasize that what I'm arguing here is that the mixed message curriculum hides our *agreements* from students just as much. When teachers are in no position to compare and coordinate our various perspectives for students, it's easy for them to think that we are disagreeing when we are actually saying similar or compatible things in different vocabularies. In other words, the mixed message curriculum gives students—and us too—an exaggerated idea of the differences between us. Take the example I just mentioned of seemingly conflicting teachers' messages about writing where Teacher A says he wants to know what students think and Teacher B says she doesn't care about that but wants to see if they've read the text carefully. The chances are that these two teachers are merely emphasizing different aspects of writing, and that both would reward the same qualities when they saw them, both probably praising a good summary that sets up the writer's argument.

What is obscured from students' view in such cases are the common formal practices of argument and analysis that underlie faculty differences in beliefs and methods, the common formal practices that enable us to negotiate those differences. Cathy in her talk later today will be going into detail about these common practices, so I won't preempt her discussion here except to say that it's no accident that these common formal practices that we tend take for granted, practices like summarizing a critical argument or comparing several arguments and making our own claims, are precisely the practices that many of our students notoriously fail to master. But this failure to learn our common academic practices isn't surprising if you agree with me that it's just these common practices that the mixed message curriculum hides from students.

To sum up, then, the mixed message curriculum we have hides the secrets of academic success from the majority of students and thereby perpetuates the gap between the academic haves and have nots. Assessment asks us to stop hiding those secrets and make them explicit to all. It's not our enemy.