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Organizing the Conflicts in the Curriculum

Gerald Graff

In one sense, the war over the literary canon is over. It is becoming increasingly clear that the usual alternatives in which the debate is posed—should we teach the traditional canon of Western culture, or a multicultural canon reflective of the increasing diversity of our society—are misleading. The next generation is going to be exposed *both* to the traditional canon and a new and more multicultural canon. Debates will continue to go on about how much of this should replace how much of that, and certain schools, departments, and colleges will resist change longer than others. But the cultural diversification of the curriculum is powered both by the demographic realities of the larger culture and by the most important new trends in the disciplines. For these reasons, I do not think it is likely to be reversed.

On the other hand, debates over the merits and implications of diversifying the curriculum are not likely to go away. In this sense, the curriculum debate is not over at all, but is likely to be with us for a long time. I have been arguing recently, and I will restate some of the argument here, that we are missing a major opportunity if we do not turn our energies to making positive educational *use* of this debate by incorporating it into our object of study. If we do not begin viewing the debate as an opportunity instead of a disaster, it will not only continue to generate ill antagonism and rage, but will make education more confusing to students.

For even though the cultural diversification of the curriculum has enormously enriched the content of education, there is no evidence that this diversification in and of itself has done anything to alleviate the fundamental learning problems of students. On the contrary, there is reason to think that whenever we have increased the cultural and intellectual diversity of education, we have only posed new problems for the many students who have trouble making sense of the clashes of viewpoints and values to which they are exposed. Including new texts and approaches in our classes is a necessary and salutary thing, but it is not the only thing, and in some ways it is no more than a starting point. For those students who have had problems reading the texts of the traditional canon are likely to have just as many problems reading those of the newly opened and revised canon.

There is a danger of losing sight of this fact amid the sound and fury of the culture war. It is easy to get so caught up in the fight for one list of books against another list of books that we forget that for many of our students the problem is *books period*, regardless which side gets to draw up the syllabus. It is easy to get so caught up in the conflict between traditional and revisionist canons that we forget that for these students the very words "traditional," "revisionist," and "canon" are mysterious and intimidating.

What is true for literature courses holds for composition courses as well. However the controversies over freshman composition may be resolved at places where they have erupted like the University of Texas, the fact remains that the freshmen who find it a struggle to write compositions about traditional topics will find it no less of a struggle to write compositions about issues of racism and sexism. This is not an argument for giving up the battle to bring those political issues into the composition course. It is, however, an argument for recognizing that to many students a theme assignment on racism or sexism will look pretty similar to a theme assignment on God or patriotic duty: to those students, a theme is a theme is a theme, just as an English course is an English course, regardless of whether the topic is provoked by the work of an Allan Bloom or a Catharine MacKinnon. At least this is the case for those students for whom the distance between any two intellectuals like Bloom and MacKinnon seems far less great than the distance between those intellectuals and nonintellectuals like themselves. For these students, the generic terrors of the English essay, which force you to try to sound like the intellectual you know you are not and perhaps do not want to be, are a far more fundamental problem than whether to take either Bloom or MacKinnon as a model.

The rule that applies here I call Graff's Law of the Low Visibility of Intellectual Differences: it holds that to non-eggheads, any two eggheads, however far apart ideologically, will look more similar to one another than to people like themselves. What is easily lost sight of, in other words, is that it is academic intellectual culture *as such* that intimidates or alienates many students today, as it intimidated and alienated earlier generations of students long before any canon-revisionists or anti-revisionists came on the scene. It is not books *per se* that have always given students problems, but the special ways in which books are analyzed and discussed in the intellectual vocabularies of the academy. When students have trouble with these vocabularies, that trouble is likely to have very little to do with the particular texts or other materials being taught, and attempts to solve the problem simply by changing the texts and materials have always ended up being superficial.

We expect students not simply to *read* texts in the academic setting, but to find things to *say* about texts, to engage in book-talk or intellectual-talk,

to contribute to an intellectual discussion, to join an intellectual community and produce its special kinds of discourse. Some, of course, say there's our problem right there—our teaching is overly intellectualized, overly fixated on getting students to sound like us, to replicate the forms of academic discourse. But this anti-academic line of argument seems to me self-defeating and a betrayal of students' interests. Students need to master academic discourse not only in order to make their way through the university, and not only in order to get ahead in an information-oriented culture which increasingly rewards those who can use analytic and argumentative forms of speaking; they also need to master academic discourse to become more critical as thinkers and more reflective as citizens. The problem as I see it anyway is not that we are trying to turn students into intellectuals but that we are not succeeding very well. It is not that we are perversely trying to recruit students into our academic intellectual community, but that we are not doing it as effectively as possible.

I believe a large part of this failure stems from our own ambivalence about our academic intellectual community, our uncertainty about whether we really want students to become intellectuals like us or not. Being ambivalent about our own discourse, we partly withhold that discourse from students—and then we punish them for failing to possess what we have withheld from them.

To take an example of what I am talking about from the study of literature, we generally do not expect undergraduates in literature classes to read literary criticism, even though, when you think of it, literary criticism is precisely what we expect them to produce. Some teachers actually discourage undergraduates from reading criticism and they certainly discourage them from reading literary theory, on the ground that criticism and theory can only distract students from literature itself. This is disastrous reasoning, since it is students' lack of a critical and theoretical vocabulary for dealing with literature itself that makes literature so frightening to many of them, keeping them tongue-tied in the face of it and sending them to *Cliffs Notes* to get the critical discourse that is not taught to them in class. By a bizarre paradox, the defenders of literature itself turn out to be keeping *Cliffs Notes* in business. But what we are withholding from students in these cases is not only criticism and theory, but the discourses of the intellectual community, those discourses that, as I say, we then punish students for not being able to speak.

I trace the problem, however, not to any deficiency on the part of individual teachers, but to our collective failure to construct for students the intellectual community that we expect them to join. Here is why concentration on the individual components of the curriculum—texts, authors, traditions, theories, and so forth—is counter-productive unless attention is also paid to how the components fit together, whether they form an

intelligible community in the minds of the students who experience them. Students do not just study texts, ideas, and other materials in a vacuum; they study these things as part of a socialization into a set of community practices, practices which, to those not already familiar with them, often seem as mysterious and arbitrary as an initiation into a secret club. The club-analogy is not a bad one, despite its overtones of snobbery; for entering the intellectual world is as much an initiation-rite as joining a social club.

If the mysteries of the intellectual club remain out of reach for many students, I believe a good deal of the blame falls on educational institutions for representing the club very poorly. And here is the essence of my complaint about the established curriculum, both the old curriculum before the flood and the new improved curriculum being reshaped by multiculturalism. If this new curriculum does not do more than incorporate new texts and subjects, if it does not put the old and the new texts and subjects into a new and more coherent shape, then like the old curriculum it will end up doing more to obscure than to clarify the nature of the intellectual club for students.

For the curriculum still represents itself to students not as a collective or club-like social practice at all, but as a series of courses. Even when these courses are excellent and culturally diverse, and even when they achieve a club- or community-like atmosphere within themselves through a "collaborative learning" format – they remain structurally isolated from other courses and from the rest of the academic intellectual community. Thus the sum total of students' exposure to a series of good courses rarely adds up to a helpful sense of what the community of a given discipline is all about, much less the community of the intellectual life as a whole.

I have elsewhere told some exemplary stories that illustrate this point. There is the student who took an art history course whose instructor observed one day, "As we now know, the idea that truth can be objective is a myth that has been exploded by postmodern thought." It so happened this student was also enrolled in a political science course in which the instructor spoke confidently about the objectivity of his discipline, as if the news that objectivity had been exploded had not reached him. "What did you do," the student was asked? "What else could I do?" he replied. "I trashed objectivity in the one course and presupposed it in the other."

Another story concerns a student in a history course where the teacher insisted on the superiority of Western culture in developing the ideas of freedom, democracy, and free market capitalism that the rest of the world was now clamoring to imitate; she was also taking a course with a literature teacher who described Western culture as a hegemonic system that had unjustly arrogated to itself the right to police the world. When asked which course she preferred, her response was, "Well, I'm getting an A in both."

For some today, the moral of these stories would be that students have become cynical relativists who care more about grades than about learning to form convictions. In fact, if anything is surprising it is that more students don't behave in this cynical fashion, for cynicism is precisely what the curriculum asks for. A student today can go from a course in which the universality of Western culture is taken for granted to a course in which it is taken for granted that such universalism is fallacious and deceptive. Such discrepancies can be exciting for students who come to the university already skilled at synthesizing ideas on their own; others, however, become confused and, like the two students I just described, try to protect themselves by giving each teacher whatever he or she seems to want, even if it contradicts what the last teacher wanted.

Nor is it even easy to infer what the teacher wants, for this can be hard to guess in an environment in which there is increasingly less unspoken common ground. Since students do not want to be exposed as naive, they will often hesitate to ask questions about assumptions that are taken for granted in a course, finding it less trouble to conform.

Take something seemingly as trivial as the convention of using the present tense to describe literary and philosophical ideas while using the past tense for historical events. For a historian, Plato *said* things, for a philosopher or literary critic he *says* them. Practiced writers become so accustomed to these tense shifts that they seem innocent, but they may well reflect potentially controversial assumptions about the disciplines. Presumably Plato speaks in the present in philosophy and literary criticism because in these fields ideas are considered timeless; only when we move over to history does it matter that Plato is dead. English teachers write "tense shift" in the margin when student writers betray uncertainty on this matter, but how do we expect them to "get" it when they pass through very different time-zones of history and philosophy/literature without seeing any engagement of the issue. But the issue could only be engaged if the teaching of history were somehow connected with that of philosophy and English.

One of the oddest things about the university is that it calls itself a "community of scholars," yet it organizes itself in a way that conceals the intellectual links of the community from those who do not already know what they are. The courses being given at any moment at a school or campus represent any number of rich potential conversations across courses and disciplines. But since students experience these conversations as a series of monologues, these conversations are only rarely actualized, and when they are it is only for the minority of students able to make the connections on their own.

Then too, when students are exposed to disparate assumptions that never engage one another, they may not even recognize that these

assumptions are in conflict. If a student does not know that "positivism" has in some circles become a hostile buzz word for "objectivism," he or she may not become aware that the art history and political science teachers in my above example are in disagreement. If a student goes from one teacher who speaks of "traditional moral themes" to another who speaks of "hegemonic discursive practices," it may not occur to that student that the two teachers are actually referring to the same thing. These students are being exposed to some of the most important cultural debates of their time, but the conditions of exposure are such that it may be impossible to recognize them as debates, much less to enter them. It is as if you were to try to make sense of a telephone call by overhearing one side of the conversation.

No conscientious educator would think of deliberately creating a system designed to keep students dependent on their teachers. Yet this is precisely the effect of a disconnected series of courses, which systematically deprives students of a clear view of the community comprised by those courses and thus throws them into dependency on the individual teacher and what he or she "wants." We talk a lot nowadays about "empowering" students, but I would argue that the very structure of a disconnected set of courses disempowers students and makes them dependent on teachers, even when individual courses have empowering effects.

This last point should indicate the bearing of my argument on the question of "oppositional discourse." Though current theorists of oppositional pedagogy invoke the ideal of democratic education, too often they conceive their project as a direct *transmission* of "transgressive" ideas and practices. The followers of Paulo Freire's "pedagogy of the oppressed," for example, assume an audience that is already converted to an oppositional social program—instructors who desire to become "transformative intellectuals" and presumably lack only the lesson plan to find out how it is done, and students who are interested in (or at least not resistant to) becoming radicalized. Presupposing an already converted clientele of teachers and students, this model only provokes resentments among ideologically mixed faculties and student bodies like the ones most of us know. The goals of oppositional pedagogy seem to me to have more chance of being realized by the strategy of making political debate more central in the curriculum rather than trying to turn courses or curricula into extensions of radical thought. Such a strategy makes for a more coherent curriculum as well as more democratic culture.

I recognize that my critique of curricular fragmentation rehearses some old and familiar complaints. In some ways, I have only been echoing today's educational conservatives, who lament the atomization of the curriculum into a cafeteria counter of disparate items. And up to a point, the conservatives are correct. They have exposed the consequences of a century of liberal pluralism in educational thinking, which has operated on a

principle of live and let live. Liberal pluralism says, in effect, I won't try to stop you from teaching and studying what you want if you don't try to stop me from teaching and studying what I want. Conservatives are correct to point out the bad educational consequences of this live-and-let-live philosophy, which has resulted in a curriculum that offers a great diversity of subjects but virtually abdicates the responsibility to help students make sense of it. The trouble is that, having identified a real problem, the conservatives would cure it by superimposing a higher order on the curriculum, an order that they like to call "the tradition" or "the common culture," but that is essentially *their* idea of order and common culture, which is only one contender among many.

Modern educational history has been one of alternating pendulum-swings between the liberal pluralist solution, everyone do their own thing, and the conservative solution, everyone do the conservatives' thing. We would seem to be in a conservative phase of the pendulum-swing at the moment, with cultural literacy programs in the schools and core curricula in the colleges. But I believe it would be closer to the truth to say that both the liberal pluralist and the conservative solutions have run out of gas. Everyone doing their own thing has made a mess of the curriculum, but cleaning up the mess by returning to a traditional curriculum would make a far worse mess, if only because it would have to be imposed by force.

The liberal pluralist and the conservative visions are actually only two sides of the same coin, for neither vision is able to imagine any positive role for *conflict* within the curriculum itself. Conflict for the conservatives is a symptom of nihilism, decline, the disintegration of the common culture. But liberals are almost equally ill at ease in the face of conflict. Liberals like to glorify "diversity," but when diversity leads to conflict they too are at a loss. And today the conflict has become so deep, antagonistic, and overtly political that the old conflict-avoidance strategies no longer work as well as they used to—that is, parceling out the curricular spoils to the conflicting factions and then keeping them in separate departments, courses, and offices so that no unseemly disagreement can break out. The dirty linen is showing anyway despite the silent agreement not to wash it in public.

That is why it seems to me that the best way to deal with the present educational conflicts is to start turning them to our advantage, not simply by teaching the conflicts in isolated courses, however, but by using these conflicts as a new kind of organizing principle to give the curriculum the clarity, focus, and common ground that almost all sides agree it lacks and to engage our students in our most fundamental disputes. Conflict as a form of common ground? It sounds at first like a strange and threatening idea—we think of conflict as something that divides us when what we want is to

come together; it smacks of traditional agonistic male competition. We need to distinguish, however, between unproductive conflict, which fails to rise above the level of antagonism and put-downs and the kind that can bind people in a new kind of community. In this latter sense, the term "conflict" is not opposed to "community" but presupposes it. I believe the conflicts that are now compounding the confusions of students have the potential to help those students make better sense of their education and their world.

Trying to practice what I preach, I have lately begun reorganizing some of my literature courses around the current culture war. As you know, the last year saw a sudden increase in the number of articles, editorials, and angry polemics attacking the ideology of "political correctness" that has been alleged to be running roughshod over dissent in the academic humanities. Every time a new attack or counterattack appeared during the quarter, I would add it to my Xerox packet and assign it. (One advantage of teaching this way is you never have to worry about running out of material.)

It so happened that the first week of our quarter coincided with the reprinting of an essay of mine in *Harper's* in which I described a debate in the faculty lounge between a traditionalist and a feminist professor over Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach."¹ In the piece I suggested that the students whose lack of interest in "Dover Beach" the traditionalist professor complains about might have found the poem more interesting and accessible had they been able to witness his debate with his feminist colleague, who questioned the gender assumptions about the poem. After all, "Dover Beach" hadn't been doing all that well with students even before feminists or deconstructionists arrived on the scene.

I suggested that the traditionalist's feminist colleague was doing both him and "Dover Beach" a favor by attacking the poem in a way that made both the poem itself and his traditional way of teaching it more meaningful than they were before. Traditionalists should be grateful to theorists for giving their position more legibility than it had before. I have discovered to my surprise that it is much easier to explain the *universality* claimed by traditional canonical authors like Matthew Arnold once you introduce the feminist challenge to this idea, since students now have something to compare it with. By the same principle of contrast, I have found that reading non-Western novelists like the Nigerian Chinua Achebe makes it easier for my students to understand the "Western" qualities of a writer like Joseph Conrad. Whereas previously the concept of "Western" seemed puzzling – Western as opposed to what? – they now have a point of comparison.

I concluded in my *Harper's* essay that the best way to rescue poems like "Dover Beach" was not to try to protect them from the critical controver-

sies about their value, but to use those controversies to give them new life. I also concluded that, far from diverting students' attention from reading literary works in themselves, such controversies were a perfect way to give students entry into those works by raising the question of what it means to read a literary work "in itself" and how one goes about it. The debate over "Dover Beach" that I had described in my article could be used to introduce the traditional skills of close reading while at the same time inviting the questions about those skills that the new theorists raise—to what extent does the close reading of any text inevitably involve the reader's culturally induced assumptions about where the power of representation lies.

I was struck by the eagerness with which my students entered into the debate over "Dover Beach," some taking the feminist's side, some the traditionalist's, some arguing that neither position was adequate or that the issues themselves needed to be reframed. In one class, the most severe criticism of the feminist's interpretation came from a student who was taking a feminist theory course and who found her interpretation of "Dover Beach" simplistic and reductive. As in any good discussion, the original polarization of left vs. right was displaced as third, fourth, and fifth positions emerged and as those who began on one side ended up on the opposing one or somewhere else entirely. One student acknowledged that though he was not convinced by the feminist's critique of "Dover Beach," struggling in his paper to refute her interpretation made the poem seem more interesting to him than when he had read it in high school, where it had been presented simply as an example of poetic greatness.

It was clear that my class's interest in the debate over "Dover Beach" came partly from the public prominence of such controversies, which have made the issues of the humanities suddenly seem more *real* to students than they have seemed in the past. But I believe their interest also came from the fact that they had been exposed to these clashing theories and interpretations in a fragmentary way throughout their college careers and were finally getting a chance to see what was at the bottom of them. And contrary to widespread fears, the revelation that their teachers are at odds did not seem to destroy the students' respect for them. It was as if the sight of their teachers becoming passionate and angry made us seem a bit more human, less the image of remote imperturbability that so often makes teachers seem strange and forbidding to students.

So much for how in my own teaching I have been feeling my way into organizing literature courses around the culture war. But for reasons I suggested earlier, I think we need to move beyond the confines of the individual course and begin using such debates as a means of overcoming the isolation of courses, departments, and university divisions and opening up a dialogue between them.

In a way, I was already moving beyond the confines of my course in so far as I identified the different positions in the debate over "Dover Beach" as ones my students could recognize in their other teachers. Your colleagues do not have to be physically present in your classroom in order for you to teach their debates with one another or yourself. But if I am right in arguing that students need to experience an intellectual community in order to be able to join one, then there are limits to how much you can accomplish through even the best solo performance.

How, then, can we begin to link our courses, assuming this has to be done with a minimum of cumbersome administrative red tape and without limiting the freedom of choice of teachers and students? I believe the model we need is at hand in our professional *conferences* and *symposia*, which have a great deal of untapped educational potential. Conferences make creative drama out of intellectual activity in a way that the more restricted setting of the course makes it hard to do. One senses in the heightened atmosphere of these conferences that the eagerness with which they are attended stems from their ability to provide the kind of intellectual community that is so sadly missing from the home campus and the everyday routine of teaching. The conference format, however, can be used to inject some of that community into that everyday routine.

Too often, we tend to think of these conferences as preliminary to what we do in "the classroom," when the kinds of conversations we have there would often be more illuminating to our students than any strategies we take home *from* them. In fact, we teachers feel we learn a great deal from these conferences, we are increasingly making them a part of graduate education, and there is nothing about them in principle that would prevent us from adapting them to the interests and needs of undergraduates.

Here, then, are some specific conference ideas that can be used to turn courses into conversations and conflicts into communities. Imagine, say, that as few as two or three instructors or as many as a whole department or college agree that in the fifth, the eighth, and the eleventh week of a semester, they will suspend their regular class meetings and hold a series of multicourse symposia, each of which will be based on one or two common texts agreed on in advance by the instructors. All the students in the courses involved will be expected to take part.

An ambitious department or college might even declare a theme for a whole semester: a semester that was actually *about* something such as the battle over the humanities or political correctness would figure to generate tremendous excitement and community without in any way forcing anyone to conform to anyone else's beliefs, and the theme could change from one semester to the next to keep diverse interests satisfied. (Faculty should be free to decline to adapt their courses to the theme, though dropping out would now acquire meaning, for once.)

Some possible topics for these symposia:

1. Writing and Culture: this symposium would combine composition and literature courses around the issue of utilitarian vs. aesthetic concepts of writing, a conflict buried in the great division between literature and composition. A good text might be the opening chapter of Robert Scholes's book *Textual Power*, which points out that the very identities of composition and literary study are defined by the invidious hierarchy of low practical communication in composition and high aesthetic communication in literature.² If the budget allows, Scholes or some other author (whether a critic or creative writer) can be invited to speak at the symposium.

2. The Multiculturalism Debate: Pros and Cons, or, a variant: Poetry, Nationality, and Gender; the publicity flier for the new World Studies program at Queens College, New York suggests an excellent topic for this one: "Do women writing poetry in Egypt, Latin America, and the United States have more in common as women or as poets?" Poets and critics could be invited from outside.

3. Are Art and Scholarship Political? or, The Conflict over Political Correctness, in the Disciplines and in Student Life; *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe's critique of it, and his *Things Fall Apart* would be a natural for this one.

4. Academic Cultures and Student Cultures. Lots of possibilities here; the very concept of "student culture" bridges the gulf between student discourse and academic discourse, encouraging students to think like anthropologists about their own lives and to take stock of their often ambivalent relations to the academy.

5. Truth, Objectivity, and Subjectivity in the Sciences and Humanities. This one sounds dry, but a good conference would figure to make it less so.

6. High and Popular Culture. Based perhaps around a classic novel and the film treatment, or on readings of literature and readings of advertising.

Though they would take their starting-point from contemporary debates, conferences could be aimed at exploring the history of whatever debate is chosen: is the current challenge to traditional culture unprecedented? How might the 20th-century culture war compare, say, to the 17th-century battle between the ancients and moderns (as dramatized in Swift's *Battle of the Books*) or to later conflicts over the advent of romanticism or the modern avant-garde? How does the present debate over "the canon" compare to the debates which raged in periods when that term referred to religious rather than secular texts? Ideally, these issues would not draw attention away from literary and other texts but would provide points of entry into them that students now tend to lack.

It is obviously crucial that steps be taken to combat the deadly syndrome in which professors speak only with professors and students sit by passively as spectators. To prevent this from happening, students should be assigned definite roles with increasing degrees of involvement:

Conference 1: Students write papers *about* the conference;

Conference 2: Students give formal papers or critical responses *in* the conference;

Conference 3: Students organize the conference, choose the topic, plan the program, invite inside and outside speakers, and so forth. Students would figure to become less timid, more intellectually aggressive in such a communal situation, having some models to imitate of how disagreements are acted out and negotiated while a single professor is no longer the sovereign authority in the room. As one instructor put it after teaching an introductory course with several of his colleagues, "Our students were able to disagree with us because they saw us disagreeing with each other."

An advantage of the conference idea is that almost any group of teachers can implement it at any time, without the need for exhausting faculty meetings, changes in requirements, and bureaucratic red tape. Instead of wrangling fruitlessly for hours trying to agree on the content of a new introductory course, a department or college might be wiser to convene a conference on "The State of the Discipline Today" and channel the wrangling into a discussion – keyed to a list of literary and critical readings – that will introduce students to the issues the department would not have been able to agree on anyway.

I want to conclude by addressing some objections that have been made to these proposals. It has been objected that teaching the conflicts in this fashion would only add yet another obligation onto the shoulders of already overworked and burned-out teachers. But teaching the conflicts is not a matter of adding a new obligation, but of doing something we are already doing now in a way that would help us as well as our students get more out of it. It is not a matter of adding another extra task, but of performing existing tasks in relation to our colleagues rather than in a vacuum. Nor is it a matter of *adding* theoretical debate to teaching literature, but of embedding the teaching of literature in our theoretical differences. It is really the existing system of disconnected courses that is the prescription for burnout, since it results in immense duplication of activity while leaving teachers with no means of helping one another.

A second objection is that teaching the conflicts involves a kind of relativism or skepticism: the university throws up its hands and says, "Ah, well, it's all relative. . . ." But this objection confuses relativism with disagreement. The real prescription for relativism is to expose students, as we do at present, to a series of disparate perspectives which never engage one another. Disagreement is the opposite of relativism: we would not engage in it unless we assumed there was some consensual truth to be gained at the end of the process. When truth is contested, it is by entering into debate that we search for it.

A third objection is that today's undergraduates do not possess the basic

cultural literacy that would be needed to understand today's major cultural debates. What good would it do to expose students to a debate over poetry in Egypt and Latin America if he or she thinks Egypt is a planet and Latin America a neighborhood in New York? It is true that we do need to know some information in order to enter into it. But the best way to learn the facts about Matthew Arnold and "Dover Beach" is not to memorize such items as dead information, but to be exposed to an interesting discussion that gives you the incentive to want to learn these things.

A fourth objection is that power differences and hierarchy would make debate impossible. Would an untenured assistant professor risk challenging the department chair? Would part-timers risk challenging senior faculty? The answer is yes, I think, at least some of the time in some departments. You can fail to get tenure by *not* challenging your superior, by not speaking up. Power differences would not be eliminated by the sort of thing I am recommending, but would become part of the agenda of discussion.

Finally, I have been told that we do not want to turn the curriculum into a shouting match and further polarize an already overly polarized discussion. But the fact is, the curriculum is *already* a shouting match, and it can only become a more antagonistic one if we do not find productive ways to engage our differences. The hostility in the atmosphere at present is all the more reason for bringing the conflicts to the level of open discussion rather than let them further deepen and fester.

I would respond similarly to those who scold me for using pugilistic or other adversarial images and tell me that conflict is inherently male. Feminists who object to adversarial discourse can only do so adversarially—I think we need to talk about this double bind. On the other hand, the question of how controversy and debate *are* gendered in our culture is serious and important. It would make an excellent question for a multicourse symposium, with suitable texts perhaps by Carol Gilligan, Deborah Tannen, and others.

The point that all these objections miss is that we are *already* "teaching the conflicts" right now. We are teaching the conflicts every time a student goes from one teacher's course to another or from one department to another. I am only suggesting that we stop teaching the conflicts randomly and haphazardly and start doing it in a controlled way that gives students a chance to join our conversations. We are already teaching the conflicts now, but to do it well we need to do it together.

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Notes

1. Gerald Graff, "Debate the Canon in Class," *Harper's* April, 1991: 31-35; this article is excerpted and adapted from a longer essay, "Other Voices, Other Rooms: Organizing and Teaching the Humanities Conflict," *New Literary History* 21.4 (1990): 817-39.
2. Robert Scholes, *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985) 1-17.