Conflicts Over the Curriculum Are Here to Stay; They Should Be Made Educationally Productive

Gerald Graff

Over and over, we hear complaints that the humanities curriculum has lost its purpose, is drifting without coherent direction, and has abandoned its traditional emphasis on content. We also hear a great deal about the need to recover what Education Secretary William J. Bennett calls "a clear vision of what is worth knowing and what is important in our heritage that all educated persons should know." But whose "clear vision," and whose heritage? That has proved to be something of a problem.

The current attempt to unify the humanities curriculum around some vision of educational fundamentals is only the latest in a long series of such efforts, which have inevitably ended in futility. The problem encountered by this educational fundamentalism is that any proposed unifying principle always ends up being defined either too narrowly to secure agreement or too broadly to be meaningful. If the unifying principle is specific enough to carry bite, faculty members and students rebel against it—as they did in the 1930's against the Great Books program at the University of Chicago. If it is diluted to gain faculty and student support, the content becomes so bland that it is trivial—the fate of the famous 1945 Harvard Redbook and of most subsequent general-education programs.

Fundamentalist unification projects don't simply fail, however. They eventually provoke a reaction that ushers in an even more extreme state of fragmentation than the one they set out to cure. Furthermore, the broken continuity resulting from alternating rebellion and backlash erases the memory of previous failures—which helps explain why the educators who defend the values of the past never seem to learn anything from the past.

The fundamentalists are right in identifying the curricular problem as incoherence. Their mistake is to think that the only way to counteract incoherence is to legislate a common content. Educational fundamentalism, in other words, needlessly confuses content with agreement about content, coherence with consensus. Since no such consensus is available (probably not even among fundamentalists), the fundamentalists' ideal curriculum could be institutionalized only by forcing it down everybody's throat.

It should be possible to imagine models of coherence that would not require some agreed-upon "clear vision" of what the humanities are or what it is "in our heritage that all educated persons should know." There is no practical alternative, for the academic humanities contain so many different, often hostile agendas that no consensus is imaginable. That "humanist" is now a derogatory term in the eyes of both the literary critical left and the religious right suggests how deep the divisions run.

Against the assumption that literature should be taught for the sake of its presumably universal truths, current literary theorists conceive literature as a set of discourses governed by ideological conflicts of class, nationality, race, and sex. They therefore question the administrative separation of literature from other departments and contexts, the aim being not to do away with all boundaries, but to make the ideological choices implied by them a central part of what is addressed by education. The theorists' point is that the way an institution marks off its territories commits it to philosophical and political choices, whether recognized as such or not.

These ideas draw cries of rage from traditionalist educators, who evidently hope that the new theories will disappear if abusive words such as "relativism," "irrationalism," "jargon," and "politicalization" are applied to them often enough. Since that does not seem likely to happen, however, the practical question of curriculum reform is likely to remain deadlocked as long as it is allowed to depend on securing agreement on first principles.

In such a situation, a realistic and democratic strategy would be to recognize that ideological conflicts are probably here to stay and begin asking how such conflicts might be made educationally productive. That is, instead of continuing to seek an unattainable consensus on content, why not look for ways to make the conflicts of the humanities themselves a part of that content and a new basis for a more coherent study of culture? Where consensus is not possible, why not start thinking of ideological and methodological conflict as an opportunity to be exploited rather than as a paralytic condition to be cured?

One objection to my proposal will be that while such esoteric controversies may be suitable subjects for specialized graduate seminars, the main concern of undergraduate education should be to teach the great books themselves. Given enough time, the argument goes, teachers might want to delve into matters of theory, but when the crunch comes,
their main responsibility is to teach, say, "Paradise Lost."

That objection misses the point, which is that the question of what it means to read or teach the great books (as well as of what it means to call a book "great") is precisely what the current conflict in the humanities is all about. It also evades the question of whether students can be expected to understand the classics when they are given no larger context in which to read them. Here, the educational fundamentalists contradict themselves: On one hand they complain that the great books are not being taught, while on the other they say that students have trouble understanding those books when they are taught.

Raw exposure to the classics does not suffice to show students how to read them. A curriculum in which conflicting interpretive contexts and theories were negotiated out in the open would not be a retreat from literature, but a way of helping students make sense of it. This result is already apparent in the new programs in cultural studies (such as the one at Carnegie Mellon University) that provide a framework in which literature, rhetoric, art, history, mass media, social thought, and even the sciences become contexts for one another.

Another objection to my approach is sure to be that if educators cannot agree on first principles, there is no reason to think they will be able to disagree on those principles in productive ways. I won't try to minimize the difficulties of staging conflicts coherently in an academic scene notoriously rife with non-communicating discourses. But there should be ways to achieve that end without face-to-face showdowns.

The goal of dramatizing and clarifying conflicts should not be confused with disputation, or with getting warring factions talking to one another. The important thing is not that professors talk among themselves (though it may sometimes be productive), but that students get a sense of what is at issue in the cultural controversies they have a stake in.

A university is organized on the principle of difference—in subjects, ideologies, intellectual approaches, methodologies, values, and conceptions of culture. The trouble is, difference can't be understood by students unless it is experienced as a difference. And difference can't be experienced as difference when disparate interests, approaches, and ideologies are only encountered separately—as when students are asked to "cover" a range of subjects in unconnected courses. It is difficult to make sense of any social institution if one rarely sees its components in relation to one another.

To put it another way, a tacit assumption of the curriculum is that each academic course is about other courses, as well as its own specific concerns. In fact, because courses can hardly help intersecting in coherent and edifying ways, such is often potentially the case. But teachers and students are only rarely in a position to recognize those moments of intersection, much less to engage them. University courses hypothetically form a conversation, but in practice rarely interact. No wonder academics often complain about lack of intellectual community, when they spend so much time isolated from one another in courses.

One way to increase the internal responsiveness of the curriculum would be through what could be called a "meta-course," whose aim would be not so much to expound a particular subject as to correlate issues raised in other courses. One of my current graduate students had such a course at Notre Dame, team-taught by a sociologist, a literary critic, a philosopher, and a political scientist, and open to students in all majors. As a result, he says, "I became more aware of the contexts and methods of my courses, could fit certain professors into general categories and bring alternative perspectives to my studies." He found that the course even helped him make sense of disciplines that had declined to take part in it.

A second strategy would be to exchange classes periodically, creating situations in which one instructor asked another's students to reformulate their instructor's assumptions, which he or she would then challenge, while the second instructor did the same with the students of the first.

A third approach would be to supplement the courses in a department with a multicourse conference. (Conferences have become increasingly popular among academics, because they offer a type of intellectual community that is missing from the everyday routine.) For example, a literature department might have a two-week break for a conference dealing with issues and texts common to a number of courses. Students could be assigned to plan and run the conference, present some of the papers and responses, or write about it afterward.

Such innovations would help draw students into disciplinary debates without instructors' having to agree about the issues or even to be sure at the outset what their final positions are. They would tend to open educational content to discussion without reducing knowledge into a matter of arbitrary opinion. They would also provide a more effective introduction to the "cultural literacy" called for (rightly) by E. D. Hirsch than the dispiriting list of disjointed facts at the end of
his book. For cultural literacy would be presented not as an unlearnable inventory of information, but as material open to redefinition and dispute in the process of studying it.

As 19th-century positivism has eroded, the conception of knowledge has changed. Knowledge has begun to look less like a unified structure that can be packaged in Hirsch-like lists and more like a conversation. Instead of uselessly complaining about the loss of a "clear vision" of what should be taught, we should be looking for ways to make the most of the unruly conversation that democratic education is necessarily all about.

The educational fundamentalists' demand for a unified curricular content has always failed in the past, and it will fail again today. The point is not that content is unimportant; it is that what is meant by "content" has to be rethought when we can't count on agreement about what it should be.

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