The Academic Community

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chapter two

Empowering Student Intellectuals

Whether we in the academy self-define most emphatically as researchers, undergraduate teachers, program administrators, or through some combination of these and other roles, our primary professional responsibility is always education. This may sound like a truism to some of my readers, but I’m not sure that all of our colleagues would agree. Former Cornell University president Frank H. T. Rhodes notes with regret that “a generation or two ago, a professor at a major university would have described himself as a professor or an educator; today, such an individual is likely to describe herself as an engineer, an architect, or a musicologist, and, if pressed, to say that she teaches at such-and-such university” (Creation of the Future, 61). While, unlike Rhodes, I have little nostalgia for yesterday’s ways of professing, I agree with him that it is crucial for us to remember that even if we sequester ourselves in an office or a laboratory and spend our days and nights working to generate new knowledge about plant biology or artificial intelligence, we do so finally only as a precursor to transmitting that new knowledge to others: through publication, through conversation or oral presentation, and through teaching in the classroom. Indeed, as administrators managing the budget of a college or department chairs overseeing hiring and tenuring processes for large groups of faculty, if we do not define our roles as ones of educating and mentoring others—students, other faculty, and the public at large—then
we will likely be ineffective and irresponsible in those roles.

Later chapters of this book will examine a wide variety of venues in which we act as educators and mentors, but I want to begin here with the one that is the most common across the landscape of our profession though it often receives little attention in books devoted specifically to academic professional studies: the undergraduate classroom. Every person reading this book who holds an academic position has been an undergraduate and most will teach undergraduates regularly. The community of undergraduates with whom we interact is usually larger than any other community with whom we have regular contact, except the public at large. As we become agents of change in all of our academic communities, our actions and interactions as teachers of undergraduates is a logical place to begin.

Yet certainly at PhD-granting institutions, undergraduate education is seen often as an unpleasant necessity rather than a core mission and field of intense intellectual engagement. For many professors, graduate courses are regarded as the “prize” assignments, and undergraduate courses a punishment of sorts. No wonder students at many of our largest and most prestigious universities complain that they never get to work with or even meet the best-known faculty on their campuses. This is a state of neglect that may have dire consequences. We are doing our undergraduates and our own profession a disservice if we fail to engage in the work of undergraduate teaching with energy and enthusiasm. That enormous population will be the voting public (and pool of potential donors) whose financial support is crucial to the survival of our public institutions. But even more important, their thoughtful and knowledgeable contribution to their own professions and, especially, to the public sphere could determine our collective survival. Every ethically and critically engaged undergraduate whom we help train is potentially one more individual who can work to find creative solutions to seemingly intractable international conflicts and looming environmental crises. This is a cause for which all members of our profession should feel both intellectual passion and a sense of social and intellectual urgency.

I am not at all hesitant to call myself an enthusiastic teacher of undergraduates, and for those of us who do engage with passion in undergraduate education, “What do I want my undergraduate students to learn?” is a question with which we often grapple. While the precise answer depends
upon the specific content of a given course, I want to take a more “macro” approach here. In fact, I believe it is crucial first to ask, “What are we already doing well, and what successes can we build upon?”

I have had several extended stays teaching at universities abroad: I was a visiting professor at the National University of Rwanda for two years in the mid-1980s (working with the Peace Corps) and then held a Fulbright Chair in Cultural Studies at Karl Franzens University in Graz, Austria, for half a year in 2005. I have lectured and taught classes at the University of Helsinki, the University of Zurich, and other places. One of the reasons I have sought out, and strongly advocate, such international experiences is because they allow a hermeneutic perspective, of the sort that I discussed earlier. By putting the U.S. system of higher education into conversation with the highly diverse international system of higher education, we can develop a multilayered perspective on what we are doing well in the United States and also what needs improvement.

I believe several commendations are warranted. Generally, our students already write more often, more voluminously, and more skillfully than students in many other educational systems across the globe. In Graz, many of my graduate students in the American Studies program struggled to write the first twenty-page paper they had ever been assigned. In their fifth and sixth years at the university, many had the composition abilities (even discounting language skill problems, of course) of American freshmen. No one had ever taught them the basics of organizing and supporting an extended piece of critical analysis. Even more tellingly, they were wholly untrained in challenging the authority of the writers whom they read and the theorists whom we were referencing. We in U.S. higher education already teach our students to think and write with considerable independence of thought, and that is a strength that we can build upon.

Similarly, and perhaps not surprisingly, both my graduate students and many undergraduates in Rwanda and in Graz also struggled to find a voice in my classes, since most had encountered only traditional lectures in the past. I succeeded in getting them to express opinions contrary to the textbooks or ones even simply questioning my own assertions only by breaking them into small groups and assigning them a sort of “devil’s advocacy” role that they found unusual and at first very uncomfortable (though one they soon approached with enthusiasm). Upon returning to the States, I noted again how our students are far more active participants in the classroom.
and are far less reticent at challenging the perspectives of their teachers and peers. While our students’ knowledge base vis-à-vis world events may be thin in comparison to their European and African counterparts, their ability to engage critically with each other, with popular culture, and with the latest trends in technology and identity-political issues is much sharper. Indeed, to any pundits or politicians who would bemoan multiculturalism and the exploration of diverse historical perspectives that students are exposed to in secondary schools, I would respond that many of these students emerge with a useful and, I will argue below, highly practical skepticism regarding the truth of received or “common” knowledge. When they arrive at universities, they often already possess nascent critical thinking skills that, when honed, will help them succeed personally and vocationally.

Finally, our universities’ commitment to serving students’ needs (with support services, advising centers, and student affairs offices) is well in advance of most other national systems. Graz, though a prestigious university with an ancestry dating back many centuries, had no central registration system, no central grade collection system, and no student services center. Furthermore, though many U.S. faculty complain about the time-consuming nature of outcomes assessment in our programs, we in American higher education clearly care enough about the skills and knowledge with which our students are exiting our colleges and universities to devote considerable time and energy to assessment processes. We attempt, sometimes successfully and sometimes not, to link the curriculum that we offer and that vision that we have of what a university education should do for students. Both curriculum and vision can be chaotic in many parts of the world. Our devotion to meeting our students’ many needs is truly commendable, and we have an emerging but still globally unique base in outcomes assessment upon which to build.

Yet those successes and laudable qualities are only beginnings and should spur us to engage with our undergraduates even more productively and with our own roles and expectations as teachers even more critically. What we already do well is to begin to nurture in our students an independence of thought and an ability to engage in critical dialogue with others. Our challenges at present and for the future can be largely addressed by building forthrightly on those strengths. But we have to prioritize that work and assume responsibility for it. If we are unimpressed
by our students’ knowledge of world events and ability to react critically to international issues and America’s role in the world, then who has more of an obligation than we do in higher education for remedying that situation? If we find that our students too often resort to clichés and hackneyed phrases when asked to reflect critically on social issues or their own lives, then who has more responsibility than we do in the academy for addressing that hastiness? If we as professionals are aware of our own lives as comprised of narratives adopted critically and judged forthrightly against broader vocational and personal ideals, then who better than we to inculcate the same critical faculties in our students? To complain vaguely about the failures of primary and secondary education systems, as is too often the case now, about the supposedly deadening influence of popular or visual culture, or about the general disrespect for intellectuals in the United States, gets us nowhere. We have a venue for social transformation—the classroom—and possess the skills necessary to help effect transformation.

But the question remains, what precise sort of transformation do we wish to prioritize? I suggest here that we build on the bases mentioned above, and work always and explicitly toward empowering our students with the critical and intellectual skills that will allow them to respond analytically to the many texts surrounding them—in print, in life, and in the media. Indeed, they should be encouraged to textualize their own life plans and to use those plans as a basis for conversation with other students, contemporary writers and thinkers, and cultural expressions from the past. Linking all of the work that teachers of undergraduates do in their classes—from the natural sciences to the humanities to the social sciences, mathematics, and engineering—is a common goal: inculcating in students the ability to respond knowledgeably and critically to the texts comprising their field of study and nurturing in them the passion needed to contribute to those fields skillfully and inventively. To put it another way: we must ask our students first to demonstrate a solid base of knowledge in a given subject or field, and then, to add responsibly and creatively to the ongoing conversation comprising that subject or field.

There is no “major” course of study or vocational track to which this broadly defined project does not pertain: as future accountants, educators, advertising executives, small business owners, teachers, engineers, financial planners, and research scientists, our students’ success in life and
in their careers will always depend upon their ability to understand, and choose wisely among, voices of authority and traditional ways of “doing,” and then to innovate knowledgeably in negotiation with those authorities and traditions. In his essay “The Tasks of the Political Educator,” Paul Ricoeur reminds us that “all the values of the past cannot survive; only those can which are susceptible to . . . reinterpretation” (292). Indeed, that is how Ricoeur defines a “political educator,” one who facilitates that reinterpretation, which is not only fundamental to personal empowerment and economic prosperity, but also to social justice and global political stability.

And what is true for “values” is also true for knowledge bases generally. A static relationship with any field of knowledge and especially that comprising one’s profession or vocation is deadly. One’s ability to respond with intellectual courage and nuance has implications for career training and advancement, and far beyond. These are life skills and are the impulse behind the concept of “lifelong learning” as it has emerged to address the predicament of midcareer individuals who are unable to react flexibly to changing circumstances and whose careers have languished or ended because of that calcification. In empowering our students with those career skills, we empower them also in their personal, social, and political lives. In reframing our national conversation about the desired outcomes of higher education to focus specifically on “knowledge,” “responsibility,” and “innovation,” we also train a citizenry that is more knowledgeable, responsible, and creative in its thinking about our nation and its place in a global conversation.

In focusing on such well-informed, responsible, and innovative reinterpretation of knowledge bases, I am unabashedly suggesting that we make the explicit aim of undergraduate education the creation of a new generation of intellectuals. I realize well that this term has a long and complicated history in the United States. In his still all-too-relevant book from 1962, Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, Richard Hofstadter writes, “Our anti-intellectualism is, in fact, older than our national identity. . . . The common strain that binds together the attitudes which I call anti-intellectual is a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life” (6–7). By necessity, then, given student demands for vocational training and the American suspicion of “thought
for thought's sake," this must be a practical, real-life intellectualism, rather than an abstract or solely theoretical one.

That distinction is one that we can assert clearly in relating knowledge, responsibility, and innovation to the career interests of students and to practical social issues facing American society today. We must assert forcefully and unequivocally the value of thinking creatively and conversing with others before acting rashly. We must reclaim the value of knowledge, responsibility, and creativity in a political and social climate that too often values bombast and unsupported assertion, and suffers deadly consequences for such rashness. Activists working toward sexual justice and freedom successfully reclaimed the word "queer" in the early 1990s; I worked in the service of that campaign and have appreciated its limited but still significant successes. But queer theory and queer self-identity are only subsets of much more far-reaching critical intellectual work. Queer activism invited into its campaign all who oppose traditional templates of heterosexual privilege. A form of practical, real-life intellectualism as an ongoing life process and project (and not a set of prescribed beliefs or predetermined outcomes) has even broader possibilities for coalition-building and social transformation.

Indeed, this is one of the pedagogical imperatives that I glean from the work of Michel Foucault, who is still largely un referenced in academic professional studies: to train a new generation of (in his terminology) "specific intellectuals," who find possibilities for critical engagement and innovative thinking in her or his sphere of "life and work, linked to his [or her] condition of employment" ("Truth and Power," 131–32). In Foucault's words, such intellectualism "does not consist in saying that things aren't good the way they are. It consists in seeing on what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based. . . . [It] is to make harder those acts which are now too easy" ("So Is It Important to Think?" 456). Yet in saying that, Foucault never implies that it is sufficient simply to create a generation of contrarians or impractical iconoclasts. His is a call for skepticism in the service of innovation, and for intellectual productivity to replace mindless repetition and social stagnation. In short, it is to nurture and acquire the critical skills necessary for individual, institutional, vocational, and broad social change. Foucauldian specific intellectualism is a practical, real-world intellectualism.
In asking our students to find a vocational passion, a projected life plan, and a venue where they can commit themselves to do that specific and practical intellectual work, we are training a generation of students who understand their field(s) of study as ongoing conversations, and then add knowledgeably, responsibly, and creatively to those conversations. Indeed, my own thoughts on this topic have been formulated in conversation with other recent voices in the field of progressive pedagogy. In the remainder of this chapter, I want to focus on one that addresses undergraduate education in ways that I find laudable and that extols conversation even as it also warrants its own rejoinders.

Near the beginning of Clueless in Academe, Gerald Graff remarks, “Professors have been trained to think of [their students’] cluelessness as an uninteresting negative condition, a lack or a blank space to be filled in by superior knowledge” (5). His implication here and throughout the book is that arrogant and consistently disengaged academics are, in fact, the truly clueless individuals in academe. Graff addresses all of us teaching in the academy (even if the examples used to substantiate his diagnoses and flesh out his remedies are drawn from composition classrooms primarily), and, indeed, here as elsewhere, I read Graff’s narrative for its truth value vis-à-vis my own commitments and pedagogy, as well as the work of others similarly invested in a version of Ricoeur’s and Foucault’s critical-thinking-based pedagogy. Frankly, I am a little skeptical about the bleakness and ubiquity of the problem he diagnoses, though at the same time I think he offers many suggestions that will help us build upon the strengths that I mentioned earlier.

To be sure, not all of our pedagogies are consistently student-centered and dynamic; however, I do think it is fair to say that most of us in higher education today would not find our students’ “cluelessness” (if we adopt Graff’s term) an uninteresting condition; it is, rather, what often piqued our initial interest in the teaching profession and is actually something with which we engage quite passionately within the microcosm of the classroom. In fact, that shift in underlying premise, in which we assume a passionate interest instead of lack thereof as our starting point, allows us then to appreciate many of Graff’s suggestions while also refining them for our own use.

Even so, “cluelessness” is a term with which I want to engage critically for a moment. Graff defines it initially as “the bafflement, usually
accompanied by shame and resentment, felt by students, the general public, and even many academics in the face of the impenetrability of the academic world” (1). Yet I am not sure that this is as profound a problem as Graff implies. The vast system of higher education in the United States, which includes community colleges and teaching-intensive universities (where I have spent most of my career to date), does not always, or even usually, baffle its students or the public. When colleges and universities add clear value to their students’ lives and can explain to the public how its programs help students realize their own life plans and vocational goals, no one (or almost no one) is baffled. As head of advising for an English department at a teaching-intensive university in California for seven years and then chair of that department for two more years, no one expressed bafflement to me (other than occasionally over the confusing general education requirements that the university had in place at the time). Graff serves as a reminder, of course, that in those venues where students and the public are baffled, we have a crisis that needs addressing immediately. Serving the public more enthusiastically will be the topic of a later chapter, but using Graff as a stepping-stone, I suggest here that we reframe our pedagogical work to make sure that we do add clear and clearly explainable value to all of our undergraduates’ lives.

Indeed, Graff’s book does have much to tell us about the work that we do—and could do better—in the undergraduate classroom; many of his basic injunctions concerning the conversational energy that makes for good teaching and its most important payoff—the honing of students’ critical thinking skills—are timely and relevant for all teachers. Graff urges us to make the classroom an exciting conversational and analytical venue. My own experience teaching gay and lesbian studies courses and content material in a variety of classes bears out the wisdom of his advice. There, even as basic premises of the class, are the rejection of formulae and a conversational engagement with static versions of truth held as core values, indeed, as microsocial and macrosocial “goods.” And if Graff is accurate in saying that “Johnny can’t argue” (155) in some of his classes, I know from experience that Johnny often has something to say when he encounters a film or literary representation of two men kissing passionately or two women living a domestic and sexual life with no need for Johnny’s presence.

This is certainly not to suggest that all teachers have to work queer-
relevant content into their classes, but it is to say that in finding mate-
rival that immediately brings to the forefront student preconceptions and
unexamined allegiances to traditional definitions, we have a singular
opportunity to ask them to do the hard work of critically engaging with
what they have been taught (or otherwise absorbed) to date, and to find
ways of either marshaling evidence to support their beliefs (evidence that
will itself stand up to critical scrutiny and communal examination) or to
modify their beliefs in the service of an expansion of knowledge and as a
creative addition to an ongoing disciplinary and social conversation. This
can occur with any material that students assume to be true: whether in
the fields of economics, psychology, management, agricultural policy, or
engineering. “What do they think they know and why do they think they
know it?” is the first question that we must ask on the first day of every
semester. While where we go from there will be heavily dependent upon
our individual disciplines, that question remains key to our own work as
knowledgeable, responsible, and creative undergraduate teachers.
In fact, it is a knowledge base that I must establish immediately in
order to know how best to meet the needs of a given class and one that
I rarely have difficulty in determining. Unlike Graff, I have found that
Johnny (or Susie, Graff’s other fictional student) enjoys speaking out, or
beginning to converse, on controversial, cherished, or vocationally rel-
levant topics—and almost always does so with little prompting—but what
does concern me is the content of what Johnny and Susie say and the
presuppositions underlying their assertions. This pedagogical shift from
simply generating conversational activity to focusing on conversational
content allows me to supplement and continue the conversation that
Graff himself has usefully initiated.
As an example: in his eighth chapter, “Why Johnny Can’t Argue,”
Graff makes a compelling case for the necessity of focusing on argumenta-
tion in teaching students how to write, think, and academically empower
themselves. He offers argument “templates” (developed by Cathy Birken-
stein) that direct students to respond to a text with their forthright asser-
tion of agreement or disagreement, and then to follow that assertion with
evidence. He concludes the chapter with the observation, “Johnny and
Susie are often forceful arguers out of school, and they can be forceful
arguers in school if the moves of the game are not kept from them” (172).
He later urges students to “[b]egin your text by directly identifying the
prior conversation or debate that you are entering” and “[m]ake a claim, the sooner the better, preferably flagged for the reader by a phrase like ‘My claim here is that . . . ’” (275). Prompting students into such a declaration certainly has a use value in getting their opinions out in the open, but in my experience, students make such declarations easily and often already, especially compared to some of the European students whom I mentioned earlier.

The real challenge I have faced over my many years in higher education is that in a heterogeneous student group, the claim or argument could very well be that “All southerners are poorly educated and racist, and here are some examples that support my views.” Or “Homosexuals are an abomination and I have passages from Leviticus to prove it.” The most important question facing the educator is, then, “Where do I go from there?” In trying to adapt Graff’s work for my own pedagogical use, I find that the problem is not that students can’t or don’t argue, it is that they argue with an often rigid basis in traditional or stereotypical notions and largely uninterrogated belief systems. They are often quite willing to add to an ongoing conversation, but without knowledge, responsibility, and innovation.

Graff asks students to consider first, “What conversation are you in?” (157), adding that “when student writing is flat and unfocused, the reason often lies in a failure to provide students with a conversation to argue in” (157). He continues, “[I]f we can let students in on the secret that intellectual writing and discussion are extensions of their normal conversation practices, much of the mystification can be dissipated and the struggling students have a shot at catching up” (158). I largely agree, but I would add that what we must do more explicitly in higher education generally, just as we do already in much of our own academic writing, is engage in a conversation about hasty judgments and problematic arguments based in prejudice and formulaic thinking. That is the conversation they are entering, not a conversation that might be reducible to: “Are homosexuals an abomination, yes or no?”

Graff does not mention the work of Gadamer, but there are some interesting ways that Gadamer and some of his interlocutors help us as teachers of undergraduates (and potential “specific intellectuals”) make use of Graff’s emphasis on assertion, conversation, and argumentation within the classroom. “Prejudice”—or prejudget—at the target
Empowering Student Intellectuals

of our, and our students’, skillfully conducted analysis and argumentation. Knowledge, responsibility, and innovation all derive from a critical engagement with prejudgment.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer famously recuperates the power and even mundane necessity of *Vorurteil*, which can be translated from the German as either “prejudice” or prejudgment. This recuperation has led to some misunderstandings of (what we might even call prejudicial dismissals of) Gadamer and his relevance to progressive thinking and pedagogy. In spite of these few hasty readings by critics, Gadamer never celebrates prejudice or traditional thinking in a thoughtless or reactionary way. Instead, he notes that prejudgments are the bases of daily life and for all movement toward broader understanding. In fact, and as his biographer Jean Grondin argues, “All understanding is always only a project, only provisional” (*Philosophy*, 75), and those provisional judgments metamorphose as we continue our endless quest for understanding. At the same time, we could not exist in the complexity of a single day’s requirements for decision making if we did not rest comfortably on some prejudgments that we never interrogate: if I run that red light, I will injure myself and others; if I am consistently late to work, I will be reprimanded or fired; if I fail to pay my rent, I will be evicted. As I noted in my recent book *Queer Theories*, even living “queerly” is not living in a state of chaos. We must respond formulaically in most situations, and that is equally true for the most radical or conservative among us.

However, from Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Foucault, we learn that an energetic critical engagement with some prejudgments and traditions is exactly what living as an intellectual should mean. Even if we must exist in a constant state of prejudice, our critical task is to sort out which prejudgments are necessary or relatively benign, and which are destructive, oppressive, and untenable. Gadamer observes that “there is undoubtedly no understanding that is free of all prejudices, however much the will of our knowledge must be directed toward escaping their thrall” (*Truth and Method*, 490). The importance of that quest for critical distinction and knowledge is his central concern in *Truth and Method*: “What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from the countless others which it is the undeniable task of critical reason to overcome?” (277). Gadamer’s question points us to the most important overall thrust for student analysis and argumentation as well: isolating, accounting for, and critiquing the prejudgments
and traditions that comprise the knowledge base in their academic and vocational fields, and their everyday lives. That common project of argumentation about prejudice and inevitably changing notions of what is “true” can link the projects of Graffian pedagogy, Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics, and Foucauldian specific intellectualism.

Indeed, for feminist educators working with Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics, these linkages have developed considerable appeal. They highlight the power and necessity of social conventions without assuming that they are unalterable, and focus on conversation as a key component of any process of alteration. The philosopher Lorraine Code writes, “Interpretive understanding begins when someone/something addresses us and we attempt to respond. It requires a suspension of our prejudices in the sense of putting them into question, opening up and keeping open other possibilities while taking account of its own (i.e. interpretation’s own) historicality” (Feminist Interpretations, 9). Georgia Warnke further relates this Gadamerian insight to her work as a scholar, teacher, and activist: “Gender is an interpretation, a fusion between the wants and needs of developing individuals and the history of interpretations of them, including objections to those interpretations. . . . To some extent [Gadamer’s] analysis buttresses [Judith] Butler’s. . . . [Our gender identities are] the interpreted fusions that we currently are. At the same time, we can acknowledge their interpretive character and modify them if we think we should” (“Hermeneutics and Constructed Identities,” 72). This is not instrumentality whereby we change our “selves” with mechanical ease; it is an always slippery process by which we reference an ideal of significant change but return to work on the particulars of the lived and necessarily, incrementally metamorphic.

Susan Hekman discusses Gadamer’s potential utility for feminists in ways useful for all of us working in higher education today. She contends that “Gadamer’s emphasis on tradition offers feminism an opportunity to explore its greatest contemporary challenge: how to effect change within the existing set of meanings that constitute society” (“Ontology of Change,” 184). Hekman goes on to note that Gadamer supplements Foucault in practical and important ways: “Foucault claims that there are gaps and silences between discourses; subjugated knowledges can rise to the surface, breaking the hegemony of established discourses of knowledge. But exactly how this occurs is not specified” (191). Gadamer fills in that
blank: “Every experience, he claims, is a confrontation—it sets something new against sometime old. . . . The disruption of a new experience, in particular, can reveal a previous opinion to be untenable. . . . The constant juxtaposition of tradition and new experiences, understood in the context of the historical situatedness of all understanding, provides Gadamer’s hermeneutics with its critical possibility” (193). That is not to say that a new situation or new information might not simply be recuperated within old paradigms or dismissed out of hand, but the potential in the classroom and in intellectual work generally is to bring the confrontation between old and new, tradition and revision, to a point of consciousness and overt expression.

And this is the potential, at least, for the argumentative process that Graff highlights as necessary to student skill-building and empowerment. In fact, I see it as key to our mission as educators to “raise consciousness” in our classrooms, however old-fashioned that phrase might seem. In some fields, that consciousness-raising may mean approaching textbook material and current disciplinary “truths” as ones that will inevitably be revised and sparking student interest in contributing to that metamorphosis. In my cultural studies classes, and as an educator trained in Paolo Freire and Foucault and feminist theorists from the past half century, my specific intellectual work is to help students better critique their own cultural positions. Again, Graff provides some very useful starting points. His epilogue reminds students to “Enter a conversation just as you do in real life,” “Make a claim,” and “Remind readers of your claim” (275). Yet if Graff’s injunctions are going to have continuing relevance to the work we do beyond composition classes populated by particularly inert students, they have to be bracketed with an insistence on some critical attachment to the presuppositions or traditions behind the conversation that they are entering. “Real life” and its argumentative frames of reference are the problem from a Gadamerian and Foucauldian intellectual perspective. As intellectuals in training, students should learn not to enter disciplinary and consequential social conversations as they might argue over a bar tab or poker hand; they should attempt first to understand the terms of the conversation and the norms encoded therein. Then they should enter the conversation and advance a thesis. That constitutes an intellectualism based in knowledge, responsibility, and innovation. If those emphases mean that students learn to hesitate before advancing an argument, that
is for the good. Rushing into assertions often means a stunning lack of reflection on the impact or consequences of a proposed agenda. Action without sufficient thought is already too common in the current American social and political scene.

Graff writes, “I would make the case for the pedagogical value even of ‘crude’ debate, if only as a precondition of advancing subsequently to more nuanced, less reductively polarized conversations” (Clueless in Academe, 94). I have a different perspective. I do not believe that we should ever start from crude debate, even if we value an energetic exchange of opinions and analysis. For two people to start by shouting crudely “You’re an abomination” and “You’re a breeder” (or “You’re a liberal” and “You’re a fundie”) is not a healthy precondition to anything. In my own pedagogical and life experiences, I have never found that crude attacks on beliefs or identity positions, which Graff would seem to countenance in the quotation above, lead regularly to nuanced conversations. Even in eliciting from students their base of knowledge or opinion, as I do in every class, I urge them always to keep statements in the first person. Conversation and nuanced interaction grow from emerging and deepening reflections upon those “I” statements.

Gadamer again helps us refine some of Graff’s concepts: “To be in a conversation . . . means to be beyond oneself, to think with the other, and to come back to oneself as if to another” (“Destrucktion and Deconstruction,” 110). That cannot happen without a metareflective move and some critical awareness of the presuppositions behind our own and others’ cherished beliefs. Crudeness does not allow that, or, in fact, it is not crudeness. Gadamer admits that “one can never by means of reflection place oneself in an externalized relation to one’s situation” (Gadamer in Conversation, 46), but such externalization can be achieved, even if always imperfectly, through conversation itself. What matters then, for my pedagogical purposes, are the conditions under which productive conversation can occur with the goal of such enlarged and transformed perspectives. At the very least, this potentially radical conversational engagement demands a willingness to put one’s own opinions at risk, and that decision must precede the decision to assert. That is a key aspect of “responsibility” as it links knowledge (or what we think we know) and innovation (or what we would like to see in the future).

Given the growing popularity of freshman seminars, and other
university or college life introductory forums, we are already developing venues where the necessity to risk and reevaluate, as part of an intellectually responsible life, can first be articulated as central to an undergraduate education. In fact, the extent to which students have risked and reevaluated their beliefs over the course of their education is something that we must find ways of measuring in exit assessments. This does not involve a process of ideological indoctrination, and it does not revolve around a set of positions that students are expected to parrot back to us. It is, instead, a set of necessary life skills that have clear and explainable vocational, as well as communal, value. These are the skills of innovative thinking, lifelong learning, and continuing critical investigation. They help undercut doctrinal thinking on both the left end and the right end of the political spectrum, in inculcating the core principles of openness to others and to the inevitability and desirability of change.

Yet most of the readers of this book may have little immediate ability to influence the goals of freshman seminars or the broad definitions of a university’s mission. When we do have leverage, however, it is important to make our perspectives on intellectualism and the desired outcomes of a university education known. Of course, we must continue to seek out new opportunities to exercise such influence. Indeed, those who complain most bitterly about the “state of the institution” where they are employed are often the ones least likely to involve themselves in the service opportunities that would contribute to their institution’s improvement—faculty governance bodies, planning committees, core (or general education) curriculum committees, and assessment bodies. Here as elsewhere, if we don’t like aspects of our institution, it is our responsibility to address them as opportunities present themselves. That is our specific intellectual work.

But even more to the point, our work in this arena must start in all of the venues that we do find at hand. Even as we ensure that we understand the guidelines and goals of our college or university, so that our work reinforces that of our colleagues, we can also adapt our classroom policies and practices to emphasize the practical, real-life intellectualism that I have been discussing here. It means asking students in every one of our classes to understand the content of the conversation that comprises the field of study at hand, and then to add responsibly and thoughtfully to that conversation with their own innovative work and thoughtful opinions. It means shifting the desired outcomes of our pedagogies from “mastery” of
course material to “dialogic interaction” with that material (which always requires a depth of understanding and does not, therefore, abandon the expectation of knowledge underlying the rhetoric of “mastery”). For my part, I make intellectual risk-taking the explicitly identified mode of operation of all of my classes. Even for the most pragmatic of students, I can explain it successfully as a quality of mind that will keep them employed in a rapidly changing world and allow them to succeed in personal and professional arenas where innovation is almost always rewarded over inertia and inflexibility. To put it into the bluntest terms for them, people lose their jobs every day because they cannot innovate and acquire new perspectives on old knowledge bases. The skills that they learn at university, even in theory-based cultural studies classes, are ones that do have a practical payoff. It is always incumbent upon me as the instructor to clearly articulate that payoff to them.

To focus on specifics here, my emphasis on students learning to “shift” perspective leads to classroom exercises and projects in which I, like Graff, ask them to challenge the texts they read. Graff’s most recent work, They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing (co-written with Cathy Birkenstein), is a textbook based on Clueless in Academe that contains some excellent exercises encouraging students to structure their academic writing around moves that mirror the entering of a literal conversation (as the title suggests). These are useful in a wide variety of writing-based courses and argumentative contexts. Furthermore, out-of-class writing exercises or in-class group projects in which students summarize the argument of a writer, theorist, or other interlocutor, and then clearly articulate their response (full agreement and why, partial agreement and why, or substantial disagreement and why) allows us immediately to establish the base of opinion that will lead to productive classroom exchange. Indeed, these are “life moves” in that students will have to make similar arguments in their work lives and personal lives long after they exit the university.

However, as I have been suggesting throughout this chapter, the university experience is not only about learning to marshal evidence effectively. It is also about probing one’s own opinions, listening to counterarguments, and learning to shift perspective. My substantial gloss on Clueless in Academe and They Say/I Say is in maintaining that students need to have their entrenched opinions interrogated and unsettled in
Empowering Student Intellectuals
every class they take, and they need to be reminded that an intellectual and successful professional life means changing one's mind, not simply finding clever ways to justify one's initial assertions. Therefore, I often ask students to play a devil's advocacy role, to test the logic of their own presuppositions and to marshal evidence to support positions that they may not fully understand or even agree with. This allows them at least to begin to see the world through someone else's eyes, to discover where entrenched disagreement comes from, and to start to understand when and why it may be necessary to compromise on opinions that they may have forcefully asserted in the past.

In writing projects, in classroom discussions, and in life generally, they do enter conversations, as Graff notes, but they also must learn to probe the premises underlying individual perspectives, including their own. If they do not, as I explain carefully to them, they will always be at loggerheads with others, and this is an intransigence that will have dire vocational and social consequences. To this end, I often ask them to trace the genesis of their beliefs, to write brief essays outlining what aspects of their perspectives on a given subject are tenaciously held and what aspects are ones on which they might compromise, and to probe how their beliefs reflect a certain, always circumscribed, positioning in the world (of class, gender, geographical location). For a few, there is no possibility of compromise on a given issue; there is simply “nothing to discuss” on a subject fundamental to their belief system. Indeed, I, too, have certain opinions that I hold very tenaciously. But in discussing those beliefs as reflecting a personal history, a temporal and cultural location, and a set of foundational premises, they and I can at least come to an understanding of why others may hold very different opinions with equal tenacity. That understanding fosters dialogue, even if compromise may be elusive or impossible on some issues. Certainly I don’t convince all of my students of the worth of intellectual risk-taking as a way of life, but I do engage enough in a process of critical self-reflection to create a general environment conducive to intellectual growth and exchange.

In “The Tasks of the Political Educator,” Ricoeur writes, “I believe, in fact, that there is a historic function of utopia in the social order. Only utopia can give to economic, social, and political action a human intention and, in my sense, a double intention: on the one hand the will of humanity as a totality; on the other hand, the will of the person as a
singularity” (289). All students should be able to articulate that vision for a better future, whatever their cherished beliefs. Indeed, nothing that I say above is meant to imply that students should not hold and retain very diverse perspectives on the world and what that utopia entails. So what if, you might ask, a student’s “utopia” involves patently racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, or homophobic aspects? I have no easy answer to that question, but firmly believe that it is far better for those beliefs to be expressed and held up to conversational scrutiny than it is for them to remain unarticulated and unscrutinized. It is not my job, even as a cultural studies professor, to disallow or censor positions that I find personally troubling. It is my job, however, to get students to marshal evidence to support their opinions and to require them to critique thoroughly the basis for the views that they bring to the subjects at hand. That is the intellectualism that I am calling for here, and that is also a form of continuing self-reflection that is still sorely needed in general public discourse in this country. In fact, that hermeneutic dynamic of self-reflection in the context of energetic conversation constitutes my vision of an ideal future.

And on that point I actually find some conversational common ground with David Horowitz and the politicians who are supporting his so-called Academic Bill of Rights. Vigorous, perspective-expanding conversation demands a diversity of viewpoints, including conservative, middle-of-the-road, and leftist. The most uninteresting classes I ever took as a student and have taught as a professor are those in which everyone agrees on everything. Frankly I have never had a close colleague who thought otherwise. Thus where I clearly part ways with Horowitz is in his oft-leveled charges of rampant discrimination against conservative students; I have simply never seen that happen. Everyone’s viewpoints should be challenged and changed in the experience of higher education. Nothing makes me feel like more of a success in my role as classroom conversation facilitator than the e-mails I get from students—conservative and liberal, American and European—who say that they remember my class as a place where they were able to complicate their understanding of issues and knowledge areas that they thought they knew well, but that they are now continuing to reflect upon, sometimes years afterwards, as they work toward even greater understanding.

And, of course, the risk-taking that I discuss here must include the instructor as well. In a room full of Johnnies and Susies, many will pos-
Empowering Student Intellectuals

sess knowledge that we lack, and one thing that Graff does superbly is to remind all educators that students bring to the classroom their own expertise. We should never forget that many of our students will have experience bases that make their engagement with the subject matter at hand far different from ours, especially when we pay attention to generation, as well as gender, race, and class positioning. This provides particularly exciting base matter upon which conversation can draw. Graff takes seriously the work of Thomas McLaughlin in *Street Smarts and Critical Theory*, a book that I, too, find useful, and he reminds educators to attend to student’s nascent critical skills in responding to each other and to popular culture, out of their own identity political affiliations. I would add that because of this base of student expertise, the undergraduate educator must also be an enthusiastic learner, because she or he must always first acknowledge what students can also teach us about their backgrounds and analytical engagements. As a forty-six-year-old university professor who has spent most of his adult life in urban areas, I still have a lot to learn about the lives and perspectives of my West Virginian students, many of whom are in their twenties and have solid skills, certainly different from mine, at negotiating lives on the margins of small Appalachian towns. If I am going to “add value” to those skills, first I have to educate myself about what they already know and do well.

In ways pertinent to our discussion here, bell hooks, in *Teaching to Transgress*, speaks of the importance of personal narratives in the classroom: “Engaged pedagogy necessarily values student expression. . . . When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. . . . When professors bring narratives of their own experiences into classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators” (20–21). It is imperative that we, in the process of mentoring our students into intellectualism, also demystify our own work and intellectualism. Unless we reveal to students that an intellectual life is also a human, fragile, and imperfect life, it will always seem impossible, impractical, or simply dishonest.

How precisely we exchange those narratives will obviously depend upon the individual class and its format. But if a reflective, practical intellectualism is an ongoing goal of undergraduate education, those narratives will emerge and reemerge in numerous class settings. If students
are expected as part of their first-year experience to articulate their values and vision for their lives—their life plans—then the narrating of the “self” becomes a part of their understanding of what happens at a university. Individual classes then open without anxiety with forthright statements of how a given class will draw on students’ previous knowledge and how it dovetails (or perhaps, in their opinion, does not dovetail) with those life plans as narratives always under revision. For the educator also to bring in her or his own life plan, goals, vision, and values in a classroom is to make more transparent the role she or he will play in the dialogic process that is successful teaching. I start every course with a session in which students talk about their own previous experiences with related materials, their hopes and fears regarding the course, and how it fits into their academic course of study or life plan. Then I do the same.

The purpose of such exercises is more than simply breaking the ice or finding out what expectations students bring to a particular class (so that my expectations can be adjusted accordingly), it also furthers a process of life goal establishment and revision in a context of the pursuit of knowledge, responsibility, and innovation. The cumulative effect of numerous encounters with such exercises and in a variety of classes is, I hope, a honed ability to place one’s own life in dialogue with others, to approach “authorities” as individuals with their own lives and failings, and to textualize a set of values and commitments that can be justified in communal conversation (and with the ability also to address sensitively the values and commitments of others). Indeed, that simple but elusive outcome of learning to add to conversations knowledgeably, responsibly, and creatively is a compelling justification for a university education that we can all articulate, over and above any static knowledge base that could be acquired from CDs, DVDs, and self-study guides available from online suppliers. Supple conversational skills are life skills and vocational skills, as well as social survival skills, indeed, those needed for our world to survive. These are the core components of an intellectualism that is integrated into life.

One of Graff’s most memorable injunctions directed at academics primarily, but with use value for students, too, is “Dare to Be Reductive” (Clueless in Academe, 136); in other words, don’t be afraid to put things in their simplest or most accessible terms. I would agree generally. But as a queer individual, I have certainly been the target over my lifetime of a lot of verbal and even physical violence that derives from reductive
notions of who and what I am. Being reductive and hasty in reductive assertions is already a significant problem in American life. I at least want us to remember that an acknowledgment of the reductive as reductive is actually the beginning of a very long and exciting conversation. It is the beginning of an intellectual life and the beginning of a sense of passion toward and commitment to a vocation and set of life goals and purposes. The opportunity afforded to us in undergraduate education is to help students to acquire the knowledge and sense of responsibility necessary to innovate within the conversations that precede and include them. In doing so, they and we can transform the world in thoughtful ways.