



Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind

Gerald Graff, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2003

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I was first introduced to this book in 2010. The title sums up for me how I feel about working in Higher Education, it was how I often felt as an undergraduate, and I'm pretty sure that my students feel like that as they tackle coursework and exams. And so, I read it, and it helped to change the way I looked at students and the work that they produce.

What is so special about this book? Well, as a biology teacher at a research intensive university for almost twenty years, I have read countless essays and lab reports, and I don't need to tell you that the quality varies from the sublime to the ridiculous. Why? These students have to have the best grades to get into my institution, so how can students with a bundle of A grades be incapable of writing a coherent essay, or differentiate between the sections of a lab report? Gerald Graff, with over forty years' experience in academia has made some bold observations, which, for the most part, remain the "Elephant in the Room". He describes how articulate young people become tied up in knots when it comes to academic writing, producing stilted, strangled prose, devoid of coherent argument. And he reasons that it is academia that is to blame, because we insist on making academic language impenetrable, and we demand that students communicate in what is essentially a foreign language, before they have come to grips with both the subject and its conventions. Graff suggests that we allow students the freedom to explore our disciplines in their own language, building their knowledge of concepts in ways that they can relate to, before they tackle language and conventions. Further to this, Graff critiques the

(American) college system, pointing out ways that academics seek to maintain their intellectual superiority, and he questions the anti-intellectualism that permeates the media and popular culture. Graff offers examples of possible solutions, critiquing the marketization of education, and instead suggesting that education is a social enterprise in which we are all involved. He suggests that curricula are content-heavy, and offers examples of alternative strategies to help students.

I am keen on Graff's philosophy because I put it to the test. My final year biology students produce an online reflective diary which they keep as part of their coursework for a business course I run. They are introduced to the diaries on the first day of the course, and our agreement is that they write about their experiences every day. I agree to comment on their diaries and also write my own daily reflection. Every year I marvel at the insight that is produced as the students negotiate their way through the course. The students are encouraged to share their thoughts with one another, and I also contribute a shared diary of my experience of the course. I am always surprised when students ask me about something that I've written, but they show the same interest in my diary that I show in theirs. The diaries, then, become another form of communication between us during the course. But it's not just the students who benefit from the approach. I'm currently researching for a doctorate in education and I'm constantly reminded that I have to explore ideas in my own words for them to make sense.