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What Should Colleges Teach?

By **Stanley Fish** August 24, 2009 9:30 pm

A few years ago, when I was grading papers for a graduate literature course, I became alarmed at the inability of my students to write a clean English sentence. They could manage for about six words and then, almost invariably, the syntax (and everything else) fell apart. I became even more alarmed when I remembered that these same students were instructors in the college's composition program. What, I wondered, could possibly be going on in their courses?

I decided to find out, and asked to see the lesson plans of the 104 sections. I read them and found that only four emphasized training in the craft of writing. Although the other 100 sections fulfilled the composition requirement, instruction in composition was not their focus. Instead, the students spent much of their time discussing novels, movies, TV shows and essays on a variety of hot-button issues — racism, sexism, immigration, globalization. These artifacts and topics are surely worthy of serious study, but they should have received it in courses that bore their name, if only as a matter of truth-in-advertising.

As I learned more about the world of composition studies, I came to the conclusion that unless writing courses focus exclusively on writing they are a sham, and I advised administrators to insist that all courses listed as courses in composition teach grammar and rhetoric and nothing else. This advice was

contemptuously dismissed by the composition establishment, and I was accused of being a reactionary who knew nothing about current trends in research. Now I have received (indirect) support from a source that makes me slightly uncomfortable, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, which last week issued its latest white paper, “What Will They Learn? A Report on General Education Requirements at 100 of the Nation’s Leading Colleges and Universities.”

Click on the square at top right to read the paper.

Founded by Lynne Cheney and Jerry Martin in 1995, ACTA (I quote from its website) is “an independent, non-profit organization committed to academic freedom, excellence and accountability at America’s colleges.” Sounds good, but that “commitment” takes the form of mobilizing trustees and alumni in an effort to pressure colleges and universities to make changes in their curricula and

requirements. Academic institutions, the ACTA website declares, “need checks and balances” because “internal constituencies” — which means professors — cannot be trusted to be responsive to public concerns about the state of higher education.

The battle between those who actually work in the academy and those who would monitor academic work from the outside has been going on for well over 100 years and I am on record (in “Save The World On Your Own Time” and elsewhere) as being against external regulation of classroom practices if only because the impulse animating the effort to regulate is always political rather than intellectual.

It is of course true that political motives can also inform the decisions made by academic insiders; the professorial guild is far from pure. But the cure for the politicization of the classroom by some professors is not the counter-politicization urged by ACTA when it crusades for “accountability,” a code word for reconfiguring the academy according to conservative ideas and agendas.

Nevertheless, I found myself often nodding in agreement when I was reading ACTA’s new report. In it, the 100 colleges and universities are ranked on a scale from A to F based on whether students are required to take courses in seven key areas — composition, literature, foreign language, U.S. government or history, economics, mathematics and natural or physical science.

It’s hard to quarrel with this list; the quarrel and the criticism have been provoked by the criteria that accompany it. These criteria are stringent and narrow and have been criticized as parochial and motivated by nostalgia and politics; but in at least four of the seven areas they make perfect sense. Credit for requiring instruction in mathematics will not be given for linguistic courses or computer literacy courses because their “math content is usually minimal.” Credit for requiring instruction in the natural or physical sciences will not be given for courses with “weak scientific content” or courses “taught by faculty outside of the science departments” (i.e., the philosophy or history of science). Credit for requiring instruction in a foreign language will not be given for fewer than three semesters of study because it takes that long to acquire “competency at the

intermediate level.” And credit for requiring composition will not be given for courses that are “writing intensive” (there is a significant amount of writing required but the focus is on some substantive topic), or for courses in disciplines other than English and composition (often termed “writing in the discipline” courses), or for courses in public speaking, or for remedial courses. In order to qualify, a course must be devoted to “grammar, style, clarity, and argument.”

The rationale behind these exclusions is compelling: mathematics, the natural sciences, foreign languages and composition are disciplines with a specific content and a repertoire of essential skills. Courses that center on another content and fail to provide concentrated training in those skills are really courses in another subject. You can tell when you are being taught a mathematical function or a scientific procedure or a foreign language or the uses of the subjunctive and when you are being taught something else.

Things are not so clear when it comes to literature and history. Why should the literature requirement be fulfilled only by “a comprehensive literary survey” and not by single-author courses (aren’t Shakespeare and Milton “comprehensive” enough), or by a course in the theater or the graphic novel or the lyrics of Bob Dylan (all rejected in the report)?

With respect to science, composition, foreign language instruction and mathematics, ACTA is simply saying, *Don’t slight the core of the discipline*. But when the report decrees that only broad surveys of literature can fulfill a literature requirement, the organization is intervening in the discipline and taking sides in its internal debates. Why should trustees and alumni have a say in determining whether the graphic novel — a multi-media art that goes back at least as far as William Blake — deserves to represent literature? (For the record, I think it does.) This part of the report is an effort to shape the discipline from the outside according to a political vision.

This holds too for the insistence that only the study of American history “in both chronological and thematic breadth” can fulfill the history requirement. Here the politics is explicit: such courses, we are told, are “indispensable for the

formation of citizens and for the preservation of our free institutions.”

Indispensable I doubt (this is academic hubris); and while the formation of citizens and the preservation of our free institutions may be admirable aims, it is not the task of courses in history to achieve them. The question of how best to introduce students to the study of history should be answered not by invoking external goals, however worthy, but by arguing the merits of academic alternatives; and I see no obvious reason why a course on the Civil War or the American revolution or the French revolution (or both of them together) would not do the job as well as a survey stretching from the landing at Plymouth Rock to the war in Iraq. (At any rate, the issue is one for academic professionals to decide.)

But if I have no problem with alternative ways of teaching literature or history, how can I maintain (with ACTA) that there is only one way to teach writing? Easy. It can't be an alternative way of teaching writing to teach something else (like multiculturalism or social justice). It can, however, be an alternative way of teaching history to forgo a broad chronological narrative and confine yourself to a single period or even to a single world-changing event. It is the difference between not doing the job and getting the job done by another route.

This difference is blurred in ACTA report because it is running (and conflating) two arguments. One argument (with which I agree) says teach the subject matter and don't adulterate it with substitutes. The other argument says teach the subject matter so that it points in a particular ideological direction, the direction of traditional values and a stable canon. The first argument is methodological and implies no particular politics; the other is political through and through, and it is the argument the authors are finally committed to because they see themselves as warriors in the culture wars. The battle they are fighting in the report is over the core curriculum, the defense of which is for them a moral as well as an educational imperative as it is for those who oppose it.

The arguments pro and con are familiar. On one side the assertion that a core curriculum provides students with the distilled wisdom of the western tradition and prepares them for life. On the other side the assertion that a core curriculum

packages and sells the prejudices and biases of the reigning elite and so congeals knowledge rather than advancing it.

Have we lost our way or finally found it? Thirty-five years ago there was no such thing as a gay and lesbian studies program; now you can build a major around it. For some this development is a sign that a brave new world has arrived; for others it marks the beginning of the end of civilization.

It probably is neither; curricular alternatives are just not that world-shaking. The philosophical baggage that burdens this debate should be jettisoned and replaced with a more prosaic question: What can a core curriculum do that the proliferation of options and choices (two words excoriated in the ACTA report) cannot? The answer to that question is given early in the report before it moves on to its more polemical pages. An “important benefit of a coherent core curriculum is its ability to foster a ‘common conversation’ among students, connecting them more closely with faculty and with each other.”

The nice thing about this benefit is that it can be had no matter what the content of the core curriculum is. It could be the classics of western literature and philosophy. It could be science fiction. It could be globalization. It could be anything so long as every student took it. But whatever it is, please let it include a writing course that teaches writing and not everything under the sun. That should be the real core of any curriculum.

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