

## Symposium

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### Standardization, Democratization, and Writing Programs

Edited by  
*Chris W. Gallagher*  
Northeastern University

This symposium enacts a debate over a high-stakes question for writing studies: How does standardization within and across writing programs enable or constrain our democratic aspirations? In particular, we think through a set of provocative arguments advanced by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein over the past ten years, approximately since Graff's tenure as president of the Modern Language Association (2008). In brief, these arguments—which build on Graff's earlier work in *Professing Literature* and *Clueless in Academe* and culminate in Graff and Birkenstein's essay, "A Progressive Case for Educational Standardization"—might be summarized as follows:

Higher education as it is currently constituted—that is, as a series of disconnected courses, each with its own expectations that often conflict—is profoundly undemocratic, ill serving many students but especially those not already familiar with the rules of the academic game. If we want to democratize higher education, we must identify what we want students to learn, make it

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transparent to them, and hold ourselves responsible for making sure they learn it. This will require us to overcome our classroom isolationism and our allergies to standardization and outcomes assessment. Instead of defensively dismissing all forms of standardization, though some do indeed undermine learning, we must embrace legitimate standardization. Specifically, since persuasive argument and critical thinking are the *sine qua non* of academic literacy, the key moves associated with these concepts should be standardized: identified, publicized, taught, and assessed in, at the very least, a critical mass of courses. Only this kind of transparency and consistency will provide all students the kind of academic socialization that our most privileged students take for granted. (See Graff, "Assessment," "Undemocratic"; Graff and Birkenstein, "Progressive").

Mounting such a defense of standardization, particularly in the field of writing studies, is no easy task. Many in the field associate standardization with the high-stakes standardized testing and packaged curricula favored by No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, which have left behind precisely those students they were intended to help. All too often, under these programs, disadvantaged students have seen their schools transformed into glorified (or not so glorified) test-prep factories that actually subvert democratic education, while their more privileged counterparts enjoy all manner of enrichment programs, assured of high standardized test scores almost irrespective of what they do in school. Opponents of standardization also contend that postsecondary institutions are too diverse to measure with a single yardstick. Further, for some compositionists, the idea of a generic "academic discourse" that students could learn in first-year composition and then apply in all their courses across the disciplines is a fiction in the first place. From this perspective, writing, like teaching, is an irreducibly complex, situated activity to which standardization is anathema.

On the other hand, many in the field see the value of identifying and articulating the skills, capacities, and dispositions that cut across various writing contexts and hope for a broader consensus about what we want our students to learn. Recent efforts such as the "WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Writing," the CWPA/NCTE/NWP "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing," the Visibility Project (which has secured "emerging field" status for rhetoric and composition/writing studies and instructional programs codes from the National Research Council; see Phelps and Ackerman), and "threshold concepts" (see Adler-Kassner and Wardle) all attempt to stabilize and publicize the field's theory and practice. These efforts are in

part a response to external forces that include stubborn, regressive public conceptions of what writing is and how it should be taught and a failure to acknowledge writing studies as a legitimate scholarly field. These projects all aim to frame, or reframe, public discussions of writing and its teaching while asserting the field's disciplinary claim. At the same time, they are welcomed by many equity-minded writing program directors as an opportunity to provide high-quality experiences for all students. These administrators are eager to align their programs with the field's "best practices" because they believe that standardization within and across writing programs will ensure that their students are not shortchanged by dint of the section or program in which they happen to enroll. This kind of "quality control" seems especially critical in writing programs where institutional support is scant, resources for professional development are limited, labor conditions are (to put it charitably) suboptimal, teaching staffs are diverse and itinerant, and student demographics are ever-shifting . . . which is to say, in almost all writing programs. To this way of thinking, standardization becomes a democratizing force, a way of leveling the playing field.

So: does standardization undermine democratic education by imposing a one-size-fits-all model that robs students and teachers of the opportunity to build meaningful learning experiences suited to their unique goals and needs—or does it promote democratic education by providing all students and teachers access to high-quality educational experiences? The purpose of this symposium is to lay out lines of argument that we hope readers will find useful as they think through these questions and clarify their own thinking on the relationship between standardization and democratization in writing programs, whether they are writing teachers working out how to take up (or push back against) disciplinary and programmatic expectations in their courses, WPAs struggling to ensure balance between program coherence and instructor autonomy, or disciplinary leaders interested in advancing—or critiquing—broad-scale curriculum and assessment efforts.

While this debate is in some sense timeless, we believe this is a particularly fortuitous time for the profession to take it up. The democratization project of higher education seems to have stalled, and college instead both reflects and produces ever-greater social stratification. Accountability pressures are increasing as the value of higher education comes under increased public scrutiny and alternative models of higher education—including

competency-based education, “boot camps,” and adaptive learning platforms—proliferate. Under these conditions, it is imperative that we ask hard questions about whether our educational pursuits alleviate or exacerbate inequity—and that we clarify the value of those pursuits in the first place. The stakes could not be higher for our students, for our profession . . . and indeed for our democratic society.

We begin this symposium with an essay by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, followed by essays by Bruce Herzberg and Chris W. Gallagher. These essays are revised and extended versions of papers presented at the 2016 CCCC in Houston. Following these contributions are short responses to the collected essays by the symposium contributors. We hope this dialogic format invites readers into this important conversation and inspires them to continue it in their own programs and across the profession.

## **Everything-but-the-Kitchen-Sink Assessment**

*Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein*

University of Illinois–Chicago

After a rocky start, higher education has come to embrace outcomes assessment. In 2008 when Jerry was president of MLA, he caught a lot of flak for a pro-assessment column in the *MLA Newsletter* entitled “Assessment Changes Everything.” And in the same year the two of us entered a polemical minefield by defending outcomes assessment in our co-written article “A Progressive Case for Educational Standardization.” Now, eight years later, the outrage has largely dissipated. As our co-contributor, Chris Gallagher, writes in a 2012 *College English* article, “‘outcomes assessment’ now seems like educational common sense. Define goals for student learning, evaluate how well students are achieving those goals, and use the results to improve the academic experience. Who could argue with that?” (“Trouble” 42). As it happens, Gallagher *does* go on to argue with aspects of outcomes assessment that he sees as dangerous. But like most academics now, Gallagher accepts the need for outcomes assessment—at least in principle.

For the two of us, this acceptance is long overdue. Although defining “goals for student learning,” as Gallagher puts it, may seem an obvious, even

banal endeavor, something academics already do as a matter of course, it is actually a radical procedure. Since an essential feature of outcomes assessment is its focus on entire programs and curricula rather than individual faculty, it overturns higher education's deep, long-standing tradition of leaving learning goals to the whims of individual teachers. In other words, by viewing faculties collectively and thinking of teaching as a group endeavor, outcomes assessment turns on its head the "absurd" state of affairs that Edward M. White found while serving as a consultant to college and university writing programs: "Most of the time nobody really knew what was taught in the various sections of the various writing courses listed in the college catalog—that is, in any course besides the one a particular teacher was teaching, with the door to the classroom shut" (3). And consider a further absurdity: the courses that these first-year writing courses are preparing students for have their own doors shut. So besides facing students who have all been "prepared" for their courses in different ways, faculty in these other courses usually don't know much if anything about that diverse "preparation." What makes outcomes assessment potentially radical, then, is that it connects these closed classrooms, creating common ground and deprivatizing teaching. In so doing, it helps prevent the confusion that results when teachers are not on the same page and thus give students mixed messages, even in the same discipline or program, about how to do academic work.

In our view, these mixed messages undermine learning in ways that have yet to be appreciated. Many of our students' problems with writing, for example, stem not from any lack of sound advice they receive, but from the confusing overload of often disparate and even contradictory advice they receive as they move between courses, teachers, and disciplines. Though we cannot stop to develop the point here, we contend that learning a challenging and unfamiliar skill like academic writing requires a large amount of repetition and redundancy, but repetition and redundancy are precisely what our current curriculum withholds from students.

And students learn to adapt—though not necessarily in ways we want. Faced with different, often conflicting lessons, students are forced to start over again with each teacher they encounter and to give each teacher whatever he or she seems to want, even when it flatly contradicts what the last one wanted. Education as a result becomes not a coherent, cumulative process of developing skills over time, but a matter of serially pleasing

one teacher, then another, then another—in a way that makes learning the foundational literacy skills of education nearly impossible. After all, as proponents of outcomes assessment seem to recognize, it's hard to learn something when you're always having to unlearn it.

Given the foregoing critique, you might think we'd be overjoyed that academia is finally warming to outcomes assessment. But alas, we aren't. For there's a major problem with the way outcomes assessment is being envisioned, a problem that is virtually guaranteed to undermine its potential benefits. And at the heart of the problem is an issue central to this exchange: academia's fear and loathing of standardization.

On the one hand, in order to effectively address students' confusion about how to do academic work, outcomes assessment correctly recognizes the need for more regularity and consistency between courses—that is, for more standardization. On the other hand, even as this assumption is being widely embraced, standardization continues to be almost universally loathed, equated as it is with reductive thinking, educational inauthenticity, and sterile bureaucratic management that curtails faculty freedom. Certainly, as Gallagher and others point out, many forms of educational standardization are pernicious and have done considerable damage to the K–12 domain. But due to an inability to imagine productive, even necessary forms of standardization and to distinguish these from the many destructive forms, outcomes assessment gets saddled with an unresolved ambivalence that undermines its efficacy.

This unresolved ambivalence—yes, we welcome common ground and consistency, but we balk at standardization—leaves its most damaging mark on official outcomes statements, which timidly avoid calling for anywhere close to the degree of standardization that would make outcomes assessment meaningful. Consider one of the most widely used and cited outcomes statements yet to be developed: the one put out by the Council of Writing Program Administrators; we focus on the most recent, 2014 version.

On the one hand, the authors of this statement seem determined to standardize the teaching of first-year writing when, echoing a claim made in the first, 2000 version, they state that their goal is to “*regularize* writing programs' priorities for first-year composition” (emphasis added). On the other hand, the list of priorities provided by the authors is so long and diffuse that it undermines any chance of producing such regularity.

Here is how only a part of the WPA list reads:

Rhetorical Knowledge . . .

- Learn and use key rhetorical concepts through analyzing and composing a variety of texts
- Gain experience reading and composing in several genres to understand how genre conventions shape and are shaped by readers' and writers' practices and purposes
- Develop facility in responding to a variety of situations and contexts calling for purposeful shifts in voice, tone, level of formality, design, medium, and/or structure
- Understand and use a variety of technologies to address a range of audiences . . .

Critical Thinking, Reading, and Composing . . .

- Use composing and reading for inquiry, learning, critical thinking, and communicating in various rhetorical contexts
- Use strategies—such as interpretation, synthesis, response, critique, and design/redesign—to compose texts that integrate the writer's ideas with those from appropriate sources . . .

Knowledge of Conventions . . .

- Develop knowledge of linguistic structures, including grammar, punctuation, and spelling, through practice in composing and revising

The full list (again, only a small part of which we've just quoted) is typical of those we find in outcomes statements. And it's not just that the list is too long, though it certainly is, with no less than thirty-six bulleted items. Even more important, the list presents these thirty-six aspects of thinking and writing as if they were of equal weight, giving teachers and students no help in determining which might be most important. As Peter Elbow complains in a critique of the 2000 statement that is also applicable to this later version, it fails to identify, as Elbow puts it, the "one or two things" that matter most (178). Instead, the statement presents the thirty-six items it lists as if they all had the same importance, even though no instructor

could possibly cover—and no student could possibly assimilate—they all. As a result, we argue, instructors will be forced to be selective and cherry-pick those items that are a priority to them and ignore the rest, leaving us back where we started with the problem that outcomes assessment was designed to correct: a system in which what students are supposed to learn in a course depends on whoever happens to teach it.

What is needed instead, we submit, are outcomes statements that actually stay true to their implicit commitment to regularization—that is, standardization—instead of undermining such regularization by listing everything but the kitchen sink and thus obscuring rather than clarifying academic competence. Instead of merely listing competencies that some instructors may teach and others won't, such statements would take the bold step of identifying one big move—or "priority"—that subsumes all or almost all the others.<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately, there is a way to sharply focus such overwritten lists in the manner we are calling for simply by looking inside these lists. For example, buried within the overabundant CWPA list is one rubric that could constitute Elbow's "one or two things" that matter most and that, in our view, could subsume all or most of the other items. This is the stipulation that student writers should "[u]se strategies—such as interpretation, synthesis, response, critique, and design/redesign—to compose texts that integrate the writer's ideas with those from appropriate sources." As it appears in the statement, this stipulation is merely one item among so many seemingly equal ones that it is easy to overlook. But what if we revised the document so that students' need "to compose texts that integrate the writer's ideas with those from appropriate sources" were made the central, comprehensive rubric, with the others either clearly subordinated to it or eliminated altogether on the grounds that they were needlessly repetitive?<sup>2</sup>

After all, in order to effectively "integrate the writer's ideas with those from appropriate sources," students would have to perform most if not all of the other listed operations. For example, they would naturally have to be able to "learn and use key rhetorical concepts through analyzing and composing a variety of texts"; "use composing and reading for inquiry, learning, critical thinking, and communicating in various rhetorical contexts"; and "develop knowledge of . . . grammar, punctuation, and spelling." Arguably, all these skills—and others the statement lists or could have listed—are already well covered by the comprehensive rubric of integrating "the writer's



ideas with those from appropriate sources.” Listing them as if they all have the same weight only confuses students and fogs over the answer to the student questions that motivate assessment statements in the first place: “What is a good paper?” “What do my teachers—not individually but as a group—want?”

But why should this particular rubric—“integrate the writer’s ideas with those from appropriate sources”—be the one that’s privileged? Because “integrating” our ideas with those of others is nothing short of a pithy distillation of the Burkean parlor, which is arguably the most comprehensive and widely accepted description in the field of rhetoric and composition of what effective writers do:

You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. . . . You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you. . . . The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (Burke 110–11)<sup>3</sup>

Because Burke’s formulation is so widely celebrated in the rhetoric and composition field as a representation of the essence of academic intellectual work, it seems more likely than any other to get a consensus among faculties as *the* most important feature of such work.

To be sure, we have no illusions that all faculty will embrace this Burkean model, and forcing them to do so won’t work. But if we’re right that a critical mass of faculty already *does* embrace it, this critical mass should be enough to produce the increased curricular consistency and coherence needed to significantly improve student writing. Taking a step further, what if a friendly competition were set up as an assessment tactic at the end of the semester, where a panel independently determined which pilot group produced the best writing: the academic discourse group or an alternate group or groups? At the very least, lessons would be learned that could be applied in the next round of the assessment process.

As for Chris Gallagher’s argument in his *College English* article (echoed in his remarks in this symposium) that any outcomes that are fixed in advance will inherently be too rigid and inflexible, we think it’s hard to apply this criticism to the Burkean parlor model, since students’ own ideas, the

ideas of others, and the way the two are integrated are so inherently flexible and open to improvisation that they resist the rigidity Gallagher fears.

To sum up, then, accepting outcomes assessment requires you to accept standardization. But unfortunately, the outcomes movement has run away from the standardization it implicitly accepts by producing statements that are so long, diffuse, and unfocused that they end up fueling the curricular inconsistency they were supposed to resolve. When students ask us teachers what we want, we can do much better than hand them a list.

### **Assessment, Coherence, and Standardization in the Writing Program**

*Bruce Herzberg*

Bentley University

When my institution, like so many others, went in for outcomes assessment in a big way a few years ago, it struck me as an opportunity to confront what I saw as a serious problem. As writing program administrator, I had been worrying about the fact that the syllabi for the sections looked like syllabi for completely different courses. I was also aware of complaining and disparaging chatter among the students, who naturally compared syllabi and wondered how sections could be so different in terms of content and apparent rigor. I wondered what I would say to the dean if students went to him about it and he came to me for an explanation. The differences among sections also caused problems when students moved from the first to the second course in the writing program and from there to a writing-intensive course: students too often did not seem to have had anything like the same experience regarding the types of reading and writing they were assigned, nor did they seem to share what should have been fairly standard terminology about composing. So I hoped that the assessment process would allow us to discuss the matter openly and see what might be done about it.

At Bentley, we always had a very open approach to the teaching of the two required writing courses. We do not have a graduate program: our courses are taught by the English Department faculty, both full-time and adjunct. It seemed needless, if not inappropriate, to regulate the writing courses. Thus, the only program documents were a brief general statement

of the program's goals (which were and continue to be focused on academic discourse) and paragraph-length catalog descriptions of the two required courses (the first calling for summaries of academic writing and short essays combining a few sources; the second calling for more extensive research and argument). These descriptions were tinkered up from time to time, but we never had a standard syllabus or a standard textbook—not even a standard handbook. That openness enabled colleagues to create some marvelous courses. One lecturer, who holds a law degree, concentrates on legal argumentation using materials none of the rest of us could, I daresay, possibly manage. Her course is very successful at getting students to understand research and argumentation, as well as social justice concerns. Another colleague has incorporated a service-learning project whose goal is to write grants for some local charitable organizations, grants that are backed by deep inquiry into the social issues the charities address.

On the other hand, a review of our syllabi showed that the sections seemed to be very different in terms of the amount and types of reading and writing assigned, and it was impossible to determine if all the sections met the general standards and guidelines. Indeed, it seemed that many did not meet and perhaps did not even aim to meet our goals. One section, for example, was devoted to personal essays of what seemed like a very old-fashioned belletristic kind. Another section was heavy on literary appreciation and perfunctory on argument forms. Far too many research papers, as we later discovered in our assessment, were flabby when it came to integrating and evaluating sources, another of our stated outcomes.

In our staff workshops, some colleagues expressed a desire for clearer and more specific expectations. But they also rejected the notion of a shared course syllabus and wished to continue our program's long-standing commitment to collegial trust: the freedom to choose materials, to design our own writing assignments, to set a sequence of activities that seemed appropriate to the materials, and to respond to the needs of the students as they present themselves in a given class without feeling that they are constrained to meet programmatic deadlines.

It was just about this time that Gerald Graff became MLA president and used his position to advocate for greater curricular standardization, citing assessment as a trend that pointed in the right direction. Graff argued that standardization and transparency were essential to democratization

and that enabling students to understand and use the conventions of academic disputation gave them the means to access many kinds of social power. This approach resonated with me and made sense in our writing program, with our academic- and civic-discourse orientations (our department has long been committed to service-learning). Discussing these ideas in our workshops would, I hoped, lead us to find some balance between standardization and academic freedom.

Standardization and accountability can seem threatening and off-putting. Such ideas lie behind high-stakes testing and the flattening of the curriculum, driven by the practical needs of employers (a serious concern at our school) and the pressures of public policy. From the start, then, we sought to keep in mind that our goals went beyond satisfying government or accreditation-agency requirements. If we saw rhetoric, argumentation, and critical thinking as keys to effective citizenship, the aims of accountability could, we hoped, be bent to our purposes. As my colleague Robin Reames put it, “If we’re training people to be socially engaged and critically thinking citizens, a much more ambitious project than turning them into good memo-writers or email-senders, then they will naturally be good at these other, lesser writing tasks as well.”

We began with a workshop on assessment led by Chris Gallagher, who helped us start to examine and formulate learning outcomes and explained that those outcomes needed to be assessable. The process forced us to think about our objectives and pedagogical assumptions. Optimistically, I hoped that the process would also reveal the need for greater coherence across sections and that the outcomes would be sufficient—if all instructors held to them—to create coherence *without* very much standardization (on the order of a common syllabus or textbook).

Here, briefly, is how it went for us. I offer my program’s experience as a case study, an example of the process and not a set of specific recommendations.

Our writing program adopted the academic-discourse approach some time ago. In the first of the two required courses, we focus on reading and summarizing academic writing, after which students write essays that synthesize a variety of views on the same issue. This approach is quite consonant with Graff’s ideas about teaching the conflicts—the idea of a synthesis being to enter the conversation about an issue that is defined

or shaped by previous authoritative speakers. It is also compatible with Graff and Birkenstein's work in *They Say/I Say*, which is widely used in our program. And so, our initial key terms were *summary*, *synthesis*, *analysis*, *research*, and *rhetorical effectiveness*—a reasonable place to start, if not terribly specific.

We then studied the learning outcomes devised by the Council of Writing Program Administrators. The WPA outcomes are divided into four categories: Rhetorical Knowledge (seven items, such as responding to audience needs and understanding different genres); Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing (five items, including “use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating”); Processes (seven items such as drafting, collaboration, and the use of technology); Knowledge of Conventions (four items on formats, documentation, surface features and the like); and Composing in Electronic Environments (several items on drafting, sharing, and research, with this concluding goal: “Understand and exploit the differences in the rhetorical strategies and in the affordances available for both print and electronic composing processes and texts”).

How wonderful if we could adopt and hope to achieve these outcomes! Mainly, though, they reminded us of how extensive the aims of the writing course can and perhaps should be. Picking through them and thinking about our own circumstances, we settled (after three semesters of meetings) on these outcomes:

### **Expository Writing I**

1. Students will be able to write summaries in which they
  - Accurately identify thesis, evidence, and arguments
  - Express the source's ideas in their own language
2. Students will be able to write synthesis essays in which they
  - Analyze and evaluate arguments in the context of the synthesis
  - Integrate sources into their own writing
  - Relate sources to each other meaningfully
  - Bring independent thinking to the conversation

3. In all of their writing, students will be able to
  - Engage in substantive revision through multiple drafts
4. With respect to research and the use of library resources, students will
  - Demonstrate an understanding of concepts relating to research and information resources
  - Demonstrate the ability to conduct research effectively
  - Demonstrate the ability to use information ethically

### **Expository Writing II**

5. In addition to the foregoing, students will be able to engage in substantial writing projects in which they
  - Develop potential research questions and refine them to discover a thesis
  - Engage in productive research
  - Formulate a coherent writing plan
  - Produce rhetorically effective writing

I still like these outcomes: they focus on particular forms of academic discourse—summary, synthesis, and engagement with sources—that form the basis of so much academic research and writing. We understood that there was also a good deal of underlying knowledge that would need to be mastered in our courses, but here, we thought, were the main elements and reasonably specific outcomes that we could assess. The English Department formally adopted the outcomes along with some explanatory comments; the resulting document was distributed with a note urging the writing program faculty to include the outcomes on syllabi and course websites.

My committee then turned to the task of assessment proper—and that required a rubric. Designing a rubric called on us to ask how we would *know* if students had achieved the goals we had set—not, as it turned out, an easy task at all. Here is what we came up with:

	<b>Fails to Meet Expectations</b>	<b>Meets Expectations</b>
<b>Summary</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Confuses or misrepresents original sources, ideas, or arguments.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Substitutes quotations for true paraphrase.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sources are too few or too shallow to demonstrate ability to summarize.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Clearly represents or explains original sources, ideas, and arguments.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Clearly distinguishes author's language from his/her own.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sufficient number and complexity of sources.</li> </ul>
<b>Synthesis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Insufficient analysis or evaluation, or inappropriate criteria for evaluation.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Does not show relationships among ideas or is reductive in doing so.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Does not assimilate ideas or bring own perspective to bear.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sources are too few or too shallow to allow demonstration of this ability.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Analyzes or uses appropriate evaluation criteria for most sources.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Shows relationships among ideas and addresses complexities in the texts.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Brings in own perspective.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sufficient number and complexity of sources to demonstrate synthesis ability.</li> </ul>
<b>Research &amp; research question</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Does not generate a robust research question.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Research does not address the question.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sources are too few or too shallow.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Development of ideas is confusing, difficult to follow, or superficial.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Research question is substantive, even if not original.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Research addresses several ideas and issues within the topic.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sufficient number and complexity of sources.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ideas are appropriately developed given the scope of the research.</li> </ul>
<b>Rhetorical effectiveness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Does not show concern for (or ability to address) audience or genre.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Arguments are weak.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Fails to use any rhetorical strategies or devices.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Surface errors are highly distracting.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Addresses appropriate audience, and chooses appropriate tone and genre.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Arguments are persuasive or at least plausible.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Successfully uses some rhetorical devices.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Reasonably mechanically correct.</li> </ul>

The rubric reveals the complexity behind what we thought were pretty well-focused learning outcomes. Indeed, the rubric turned out to be difficult to use, and we changed it later. For the moment, though, we went ahead, collected a large sample of student writing—and got some distressing results.

A substantial majority of the papers we read failed to meet our expectations for sufficient analysis of sources, for showing relationships among

sources, and for finding a sufficient number of relevant sources. In addition, a fresh review of section syllabi suggested that very few of our colleagues had changed anything in response to the revised program goals. We could not detect much if any movement toward greater coherence.

At a long workshop where the committee reported on and discussed the assessment results, we again raised the question of standardization and wondered whether the outcomes we had generated were sufficient to achieve either the learning or the programmatic coherence we hoped for. Pressing ahead, we formulated additional guidelines for such things as the number of pages students should read, for the characteristics of the assigned reading and writing, and for the number of revised and “finished” pages students should write. We held to the principle that instructors could choose the course theme and readings, the sequence of assignments, and so on. I tried and failed to get the group to adopt *They Say/I Say* as a common text.

Even as we seemed to be agreeing to these additional standards, some colleagues conveyed the impression that they were exempt and would continue to follow their own stars. Our guidelines say that the sections “must” reflect the objectives and “should” be similar in many ways—but it is not clear, in a program so committed to collaboration and instructor autonomy (not to mention many sections and many instructors), how such requirements would be enforced. Though the committee diligently investigated several systems used by other schools to improve adherence to standards (periodic reviews and group mentoring, for example), they proved to be cumbersome to implement, at least in a program like ours that does not rely on TAs.

While assessment proved to be a valuable opportunity to examine our program’s assumptions and aims, we were still struggling, both conceptually and pragmatically, to determine what “coherence” meant and how to achieve it. As for the two approaches advocated in this symposium, we gave Chris’s method a good long run, with our meeting- and workshop-filled years of development, assessment, and reconsideration. We carefully considered what needed to be standardized and what, perhaps, should not. We relied on the assumption that open discussion and a good deal of flexibility within the guidelines would be regarded as consensus, and that the process itself would promote a collegial willingness to enact the standards. At the same time, we went a long way in the direction of the kind of standardization for which Jerry and Cathy argue, and we definitely agreed with them on



the main objective of teaching the fundamentals of academic discourse. But the standards mean nothing if the instructors ignore them. Cheerful agreement—Chris’s goal—would undoubtedly be best. But what if agreement does not come? Even Jerry and Cathy say that they hardly expect all faculty members to embrace their model and that trying to force them to do so would not work. What then becomes of the whole enterprise of standardization? Why go to all the trouble if instructors can opt out?

When Jerry read an earlier version of this paper, he seized on my comment about a possible challenge from the dean regarding section coherence. The problem, he said, was that the dean was extremely unlikely to raise such an issue. He appears to have been right. The administration simply requires evidence that we are using the assessment process to think about how we define our learning goals and seek to achieve them. That we unquestionably did—and that, consequently, remains the status quo. If we care about program coherence, the issue lies with us. Just how to achieve that coherence remains an open question. My best hope for this symposium is that it can inform and facilitate this process for programs like ours.

## **Articulation, Not Standardization**

*Chris W. Gallagher*

Northeastern University

I enter this conversation as a researcher of K–12 and higher education “reform” and as a longtime writing program administrator (WPA). My research on K–12 educational assessment has led me to call for (in the words of the subtitle of my book *Reclaiming Assessment*) “a better alternative to the accountability agenda.” Standardized testing and curriculum are at the heart of the accountability agenda, and so my work can perhaps best be described as one long argument against educational standardization and in favor of teacher- and student-driven, relationship-focused, locally meaningful teaching and learning. At the postsecondary level, I am on record as opposing what passes as “outcomes assessment” (“Trouble”), and I have sounded the alarm on competency-based education, which flies under the banner of “personalization” but risks becoming a form of mass customiza-

tion—which is to say, standardization lite—masquerading as individualism. (“Disrupting,” “Our Trojan.”) I have proposed instead models of local writing assessment validation (“Assess”) and a social process—articulation—that stands as an alternative to standardization (“Trouble”).

This attention to alternatives is important because I agree with Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein that knee-jerk dismissals of standardization will not do. What we most need in this era of undemocratic accountability models, I believe, are not snuffy dismissals of standardization but rather thoughtful critiques *and* workable alternatives rooted in democratic models of engagement (for a full treatment of accountability and engagement models, see my book *Reclaiming Assessment*).

First, the critique.

As someone who has spent a lot of time with educational policymakers, and as a former WPA myself, the allure of standardization is not lost on me. *All* students, K–college, deserve meaningful, effective educational experiences, and merely hoping that will happen, in complex systems in which resources and talent are unevenly distributed, is a form of willful ignorance. If a writing program puts the curriculum entirely in the hands of a large, poorly compensated, and unevenly trained staff, for instance, it is not reasonable to expect that all students will have a similarly high-quality experience. Some form of consistency, at least across sections of the same course, is necessary. More broadly, it is clear that we risk leaving students behind if we do not ensure consistency across institutions, whether K–12 or postsecondary.

So let’s be clear: some things need to be standardized. The key questions, to my mind, are *what* is being standardized, for whom, for what purpose, and with what effects? I am all for government mandating standards to cap harmful emissions from factories to protect public and environmental health. (An aside: I would love to see more regulation of the harmful emissions of the educational testing industry as well.) In education, certain kinds of broad behaviors and practices must be proscribed (physical punishment, say) and prescribed (fair grading, say) to protect civil rights and ensure professional standards. It’s perfectly appropriate and even necessary, in the name of fairness, to ensure that certain groups of students are not given short shrift when it comes to effective teachers, robust educational programs, assessment, proper facilities, appropriate class sizes, and so on.

The trouble comes when we attempt to standardize teaching and learning themselves. At the core of teaching and learning are human relationships, and at the core of human relationships are messy, unpredictable interactions. If teachers and students are not actively engaged in shaping the terms of those relationships, including especially the aims and practices of their shared educational experiences, then they are not engaged in education at all, but rather in training. Teachers and students who are merely doing the bidding of remote experts or policymakers are not practicing or preparing for democratic engagement. Democracy needs critical and creative thinkers, not drones who can take instruction from those in power.

In my book *Reclaiming Assessment*, I tell the story of students on a Native American reservation who struggled mightily on a standardized writing exam because the prompt asked them to write about the advisability of after-school jobs. After-school jobs were literally unthinkable on this economically depressed reservation—students were at a loss. While Graff and Birkenstein insist that we must not equate standardization with what they call “invidious, NCLB-style testing,” the experience of these kids demonstrates that when we attempt to standardize educational experiences, we serve marginalized students *less* well. Studies of K–12 education consistently show that the students who most need rigorous, high-quality curriculum and pedagogy are least likely to experience them and are more likely to receive instead unrelenting, mindless, and joyless marches through curricular material—and, of course, test prep (Darling-Hammond; Gallagher, *Reclaiming*; McNeil). Standardizing curriculum and pedagogy provide only the veneer of equity and actually exacerbate educational and social inequalities and undermine our hopes for democratic education.

There is a difference, as Linda Darling-Hammond, Deborah Meier, and others point out, between having standards and enforcing standardization. Unfortunately, in education, standards typically lead to standardization: the act or process of making things *the same*. I’ve seen this again and again in my K–12 research: the standards *become* the curriculum across highly diverse schools, taking the place of unique, context-sensitive curriculum and pedagogy. This happened under No Child Left Behind, and it is happening under the Common Core State Standards and the PARCC and Smarter Balanced consortium tests. I’ve also seen this process play out at the postsecondary level in outcomes assessment regimes. Often despite the best intentions of those involved in their formulation, outcomes—when we think about them

as *outcomes*—tend to become ossified, atomized, overspecified, fetishized, and imposed on teachers and students (Gallagher, “Trouble”).

Graff and Birkenstein claim that standardization need not impinge on instructor diversity and creativity, but of course it does—that’s the whole point. And unfortunately, as Linda McNeil’s research has demonstrated, controlled teachers tend to become controlling teachers. Teachers who are made to operate in compliance mode, who cannot bring their own unique identities and strengths to their engagements with students, whose professional judgment is displaced or ignored—these teachers cannot develop rich, dynamic teaching and learning relationships with their students. As Meier has long argued, if we want to prepare active, thoughtful democratic citizens, we need to put active, thoughtful democratic citizens in front of them—lead learners, not compliant functionaries.

None of this suggests that we do not want to engage in consensus building on broadly defined learning goals, whether expressed as learning goals, habits of mind, or threshold concepts. This work can help shape powerful learning experiences for faculty and students alike. But then we must ask: what is the status of those learning goals and what should we do with them? The fact is, standardization is not the only thing we can do with learning goals. There is an alternative. I call it *articulation*.

Articulation, as I have defined it (see “Trouble”), is a pragmatic method through which administrators, teachers, and students both *express* their learning goals and *place them in relation* to other such expressions: these are the two common meanings of the term *articulate*. Under articulation, learning goals are treated, not as standards to be imposed upon teachers and students, but rather as starting and check-in points for shared work. Articulation can and should be conducted at both the program or department level, vis-à-vis learning goals formulated by outside organizations (the government, professional bodies), *and* at the classroom level, vis-à-vis learning goals formulated by programs and other institutional entities. At both levels, the participants reflect on and express their own learning goals; put those goals in conversation with the goals expressed elsewhere, rearticulating their goals; revisit and (perhaps) revise their goals in an iterative process; and track consequences *beyond* their expressed goals.

What might this look like? A college writing program uses a program-wide meeting to involve as many of its faculty as possible in expressing their shared learning goals. This activity might start with some individual writ-

ing, then move to table-level conversation, then a whole-group consensus-building process. At a subsequent meeting, the faculty goes through this same process, but this time they work from their draft set of goals and also consider the “WPA Outcomes Statement and the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing.” They determine, again through a consensus-building process, what kinds of changes, if any, they want to make to their set of goals, and they agree to a schedule for revisiting their goals periodically (perhaps annually at program meetings). Importantly, they also develop a mechanism for capturing what is happening in the program that does *not* fall under the expressed goals. This could involve something as simple as carving out small periods of time during meetings to discuss and reflect collectively on examples of productive learning moments that faculty observe but cannot categorize under the existing learning goals.

A similar process might play out in classrooms: during the first session of the semester, teachers and students articulate a small set of individual and shared learning goals. (Again, this could include a mix of individual writing, paired or small-group discussion, and whole-class brainstorming and consensus building.) During the second session, they put their draft goals in conversation with program or department learning goals and perhaps those of relevant professional bodies or accrediting agencies as well. Throughout the semester, they regularly return to their individual and collective goals in light of their unfolding experience and, when appropriate, revise the goals. At the same time, they develop a mechanism for sharing learning experiences that are not anticipated by the articulated learning goals. As with the writing program meeting, this could be as simple as carving out class time, or issuing a standing invitation, to share with each other important learning moments that seem to fall outside the learning goals that have been expressed so far. More than the readings, the writing assignments, or the course theme, this work with learning goals becomes the shared through-line of the course.

The key to articulation is to start with the goals of the assembled teachers and students, not externally formulated goals. The latter can be helpful, to be sure, in shaping and reshaping the former, but—unlike in standardization models—they are secondary. Also note that in these scenarios, the initial articulation of learning goals is just that: initial. It is expected that the goals will change over time—and differently for different learners (teachers and students). When articulation is taken seriously,

the most likely result is a move *away* from standardization, not toward it. Each learner would be able to articulate their goals in relation to each other's and to externally formulated goals, but ideally they would be more uniquely *their own* as the learning experience unfolds. Finally, articulation, unlike standardization, is always open to—indeed invites—*excess*; because it understands learning as a dynamic and often unpredictable process, it is alert to consequences beyond expressed goals.

Standardization and articulation both hold open the possibility of alignment within and across sites, but while the former looks to enforce alignment through compliance, the latter invites it through engagement. Under articulation, the ultimate goal is not, in fact, alignment to outcomes but rather meaningful learning experiences for all vis-à-vis collective engagement with internal and external goals. Teachers and students are responsible to engage external goals, but they are not required to adopt them. In this way, articulation helps courses and programs achieve coherence and consistency without demanding slavish adherence.

Of course, none of this is easy or simple, especially at the program level, where we see constant turnover of staff and challenging (to say the least) working conditions. But this *is* the work of educational programs, and it never ends—nor should it. As WPAs, we must try to engage as many instructors as possible in as many forums as we can. Whenever possible, we should use assessment to make instructor working conditions, along with student learning conditions, visible and to agitate for improving those conditions. And we should do all this in ways that involve but do not unduly tax instructors. In programs I have run and taught in, beyond program-wide meetings, we have used interviews during faculty office hours, surveys, concept maps, online discussion boards and chats, and more.

I have found that for the vast majority of instructors, including those who are part-time and teaching at multiple institutions, the invitation to shape the initial learning goals of the program and then to engage them in their classrooms with their students has been warmly received. Articulation treats them like the professionals they are, not like the functionaries they become under standardization.

In the end, we cannot standardize our way to meaningful educational experiences for students or faculty. Standardization demands compliance, which leads to resignation at best and subterfuge at worst. On the other hand, articulation invites commitment, which is more likely to lead to

enthusiasm and engaging teaching and learning experiences. If we want democratic education—that is, education for all in which the purpose is to practice democracy as a way of life (Dewey)—far better to start with articulation.

### **Graff and Birkenstein Response**

At least one thing seems to be agreed on in this forum: that to enhance student learning there needs to be far more consistency and coherence among courses. In our original statement and elsewhere, the two of us have expressed our concern with what Jerry has called our nation's "Mixed Message Curriculum," which undermines learning by providing students with what look like different, often competing visions of how to do academic work as they go from course to course. Along similar lines, Bruce reports his own concern as a writing program administrator that "the syllabi for the sections" of his program "looked like syllabi for completely different courses," and he imagines deans and students wondering how sections of supposedly the same course "could be so different in terms of content and apparent rigor." And Chris states that "some form of consistency, at least across sections of the same course, is necessary. More broadly, it is clear that we risk leaving students behind if we do not ensure consistency across institutions, whether K-12 or postsecondary." It's not surprising, then, that all of us see assessment as a promising way of drawing faculty out of their habitual silos to create this type of consistency.

Beyond this point, however, differences in our positions emerge, particularly between our own position and Chris's. While we endorse a type of standardization based on dialogical argument, Chris opposes "the attempt to standardize teaching and learning," and Bruce, while endorsing standardization, appears to see no workable, democratic way of achieving it.

Chris's position puzzles us. Though he calls for greater coherence and consistency, Chris so vilifies predefined outcomes—which he sees as "ossified, atomized, overspecified, fetishized," and "imposed on teachers and students"—that he undermines any chance of such coherence and consistency. In this way, Chris perfectly illustrates the contradiction at the heart of current assessment efforts that we pointed out in our original statement.

He wants consistency but opposes standardization, even though the terms mean basically the same thing.

Chris does advocate an alternative to standardization that he calls “articulation,” which uses the assessment process to develop learning goals that, instead of being defined in advance, are constantly being developed and revised in ongoing discussions by teachers and students. Learning goals under Chris’s articulation process are “context-sensitive” and specific to the “unique identities” of particular teachers and students; they are always local and transitory—or only “aims-for-now,” as Chris himself put it in 2012 (54). Or, as he puts it in this forum, with articulation “it is expected that the goals will change over time—and differently for different learners (teachers and students).” But no curricular agenda that is this particularist, diversitarian, relativist, antinomian, and nominalist (take your pick of terms) could provide the consistency Chris says he wants. No such agenda could ever provide students with the overarching guidance—the type that transcends individual teachers and courses—to which assessment aspires. Indeed, instead of resolving the curriculum’s mixed messages, as we believe the assessment process should, Chris’s articulation would result in mixed messages on steroids!

This is not to say that none of Chris’s concerns are legitimate. We agree with his claim, for instance, that students are often asked to write in multiple disciplines, genres, media, and technologies and for different audiences, and that transferring their writing skills between them all can be challenging. We further agree that the Burkean conversational move of summarizing and responding to arguments can take a different form in “literary critical papers” than it does “in scientific writing.” Nevertheless, we would reply that the disciplines are not as incommensurable as Chris implies; if they were, scientists, say, would be incomprehensible to humanists, as they clearly are not. This presumably is why first-year composition programs have traditionally focused on forms of argument that transcend the disciplines: because students who master these generic skills are better able than those who don’t to transfer these skills from one domain to another.

We also agree with Chris’s frequent claims that outcomes should not be “imposed on teachers” and that they need to remain open to revision by teachers and students. Indeed, we agree with this view so thoroughly that in our original statement we explicitly stated that “forcing [faculty]” to adopt



any learning goals or outcomes “won’t work,” and we’re dismayed at Chris’s implication that we actually endorse standards being imposed on faculty.

Finally, then, Chris answers the question with which he opened this forum—whether standardization is compatible with democracy—in the negative. Chris, as we read him, cannot imagine standardization without authoritarian, top-down coercion. But we can. Indeed, it was precisely our belief in consensus building and persuasion as alternatives to coercion that led us to write as persuasively as we could about assessment and standardization in the first place. It was also our belief in consensus that led us to refer to the Burkean parlor in our original statement. Our hope was that by invoking the widespread popularity among compositionists of Burke’s conversational view of writing, we would highlight the existence of an already developed consensus on writing that programs could build on to develop more standardized curricula. (Unfortunately, because instructors tend to be isolated from one another in their closed classrooms, the existence of this latent consensus goes unnoticed and needs to be made obvious—that is, standardized—in order to become useful to students.)

While far friendlier to standardization, Bruce is also concerned about the issue of faculty autonomy versus top-down coercion. After struggling to achieve consensus in the writing program at his university, he asks: What if such programmatic consensus “does not come?” “What then becomes of the whole enterprise of standardization?” This is a challenging question for us, not just because we advocate consensus, but because it was our specific candidate of the Burkean, conversational model of academic writing about which Bruce and his colleagues could not reach consensus.

The two of us have certainly been around academia long enough to know that Bruce’s story about the difficulty of achieving consensus is all too common. Still, as we suggested earlier, we wonder if the point at which Bruce leaves off in his quest for consensus must be the end of the story. “Consensus” need not mean 100 percent agreement. As we noted previously, in cases where a program or campus can’t get “all faculty” to embrace one model, “a critical mass” might suffice. Such a critical mass may exist in Bruce’s case, where many if not most of his colleagues already seem committed to what his program’s mission statement calls “the academic discourse approach to writing,” which foregrounds summarizing and making arguments and sounds a lot like the Burkean conversation model we described. As we asked earlier, what if the courses taught by these like-minded teachers

were grouped together as a pilot cluster while their colleagues remained free to go about their miscellaneous practices? The mere existence of this academic discourse cluster, in our view, would constitute a major step forward in clarifying, at least for the students enrolled in it, the skills that they are expected to learn. And if an independent panel assesses which pilot group has produced the best writing, the academic discourse cluster or the alternate one, lessons would be learned that could inform the next round of the assessment process.

In sum, then, a key premise underlying our argument here is that for students to effectively master the fundamentals of writing, they need consistency—that is, standardization. And what we have proposed here, we hope, is one way of achieving such standardization without the undemocratic coercion that is too often seen as inseparable from it.

### **Herzberg Response**

Chris makes a compelling case for *articulation*, which would honor the independence of faculty members while (one hopes) forging a consensus on outcomes. He asks “what might this look like?” The answer is an ongoing series of meetings that continually generate and review the outcomes, along with a “mechanism for capturing what is happening in the program that does not fall under the expressed goals.” The meetings should “involve as many . . . faculty as possible.”

This is wonderful idea, one that we tried to enact, guided by Chris, as I describe in my statement. But there are problems. First, even though we were able to get a substantial proportion of the writing faculty members into the big annual workshops, we did not get everyone. In relatively short order, too, there were changes in staffing, with new colleagues coming on board to fill new sections or replace faculty who left (inevitable in a program with many adjuncts). A number of those who were present demurred from the “consensus,” though rarely in open discussion. Grumbling at lunch—and later, review of syllabi—showed that some were on their own paths, regardless of what we seemed to agree about, and despite official departmental endorsement of the “consensus” aims.

Our assessment of student papers and a review of syllabi and course materials after a year and a half of meetings to reach the outcomes and another year of implementation showed, as I note in my statement, weak student performance in critical areas and little progress on apparent section-to-section coherence.

To address this problem, the writing committee proposed a system of teams (based on the Rutgers writing program model) to allow small faculty groups to interact around our stated aims and strategies and to compare the results from their classrooms. This approach, we hoped, would both engage colleagues and provide a degree of oversight and persuasion by the leader of each team. We were unable to get university support for this program in the form of time or compensation for the team leaders, and the effort to make it work without support proved excessive.

And so I raise again the issue of enforcement. Is there an acceptable amount of noncompliance? Is noncompliance grounds for nonrenewal of adjuncts or TAs? Do tenured faculty members get to do whatever they like? Who gets to decide?

Cathy and Jerry imply that adopting “integration of sources” as the overarching goal will address the problem of “fear of standardization.” But how will it do that? Presumably, a program administrator will declare that “integration” is the program standard. Will that sweep away the fear of standardization or exacerbate it? How will this step address the issue of compliance?

Cathy and Jerry say “we have no illusions that all faculty will embrace this Burkean model, and forcing them to do so won’t work. But if we’re right that a critical mass of faculty already *does* embrace it, this critical mass should be enough to produce the increased curricular consistency and coherence needed to significantly improve student writing.” Wait a minute. If there is *already* a “critical mass” of faculty who embrace this model, then there should be no problem, right?

For writing programs with real university support and strong leadership, Chris’s approach to articulation is certainly the way to go. In such programs, the central focus of integration offered by Jerry and Cathy makes excellent sense to me. The conclusion we seem to be reaching is that we should keep the ideal of program coherence before us and do the best we can. But I don’t want to forget the powerful argument that Jerry makes in his earliest writing on this subject: that we disserve our students by the

incoherence of our programs. I wish we could do better than just doing the best we can.

## Gallagher Response

It seems to me that we all agree on the problems, so well dramatized from the writing program administrator's perspective in Bruce's piece: inconsistent educational experiences, incoherent curricula, privatized teaching. Where we differ, fairly radically, is in our proposed solutions to the problems. And it strikes me after reading the three pieces that this disagreement might run deeper than even the philosophical and methodological differences between standardization and articulation.

Those methodological differences are clear enough, I think, in our statements, and I won't spend much time on them here. I will say, however, that Bruce's program has not, as he claims, given my "method . . . a good long run." Articulation is not just hoping for "cheerful agreement"; it is a social process that, as far as I can tell, has not been undertaken by Bruce's program. True, I helped kick off their assessment process by leading them through a process of articulating initial program-level learning goals, but this is only the very beginning of any assessment process. The real test is what happens in classrooms and how classroom practice articulates with program goals. Without setting in motion *that* articulation process, in fact, instructors will reasonably assume that standardization reigns, and the kind of resistance Bruce describes, as I suggest in my statement, is altogether predictable. So I cheerfully suggest they give articulation a try.

The deeper disagreement I now see has to do with the nature of our enterprise in the first place—that is, the purpose of writing courses.

In my reading of the pieces, both Jerry and Cathy's argument and Bruce's program are predicated on teaching argument-based "academic discourse." They assume that academic discourse is a stable, or stable enough, thing that we can teach students how to produce it through skills development. Jerry and Cathy want writing courses to teach students "one big skill"—"integrating one's ideas with those of others"—through "redundancy and repetition," presumably until they master it. This way, students will not be required to move from class to class having to learn and unlearn and relearn what teachers want.

The problem here is that, as Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle have asserted, “more than twenty years of research and theory have repeatedly demonstrated that such a unified academic discourse does not exist” (553). Our students are asked to write critical essays, lab reports, technical reports, computer code, field notes, discussion board posts, feasibility reports, business plans, legal briefs, SOAP notes, literature reviews, peer reviews . . . the list goes on (and on). As they move across disciplines, and certainly as they move into other professional and public spaces, students are required to learn not only textual conventions but different ways of thinking, knowing, and representing ideas. They are encountering different purposes and audiences for their writing—and new genres and media in which to compose.

I am as drawn to the Burkean parlor as any compositionist, but from the perspective I am describing here, “integrating one’s ideas with those of others” is neither a neatly transferable skill nor a meaningfully assessable construct. Writers learn, unlearn, and relearn how to integrate their ideas with those of others as they encounter new rhetorical situations. Anyone who has taught writing in the disciplines courses will recognize this problem: sometimes the writers who most effectively integrate their ideas with those of others in literary critical papers have the hardest time doing so in scientific writing. The difficulty is not that they haven’t mastered this “one big skill”; it’s that what they do know and can do is not directly applicable in this new context—and it’s possibly even counterproductive, since scientific writing handles quotation and paraphrase very differently than does literary criticism.

So integrating one’s ideas with those of others is not a “skill” that one masters in any linear way. One can be, and most of us are, quite good and quite bad at it *at the same time*, depending on the rhetorical situation. This, by the way, is precisely why we always—always—get the long laundry lists of subskills in outcomes assessment: not because people are ambivalent, as Jerry and Cathy suggest, but because they come to understand, once they begin actually to assess, that no “one big skill,” no matter how celebrated, will get us very far in assessing writing.

But all this is only a problem if one imagines that the purpose of a writing class is to equip students with skills that they can master in their writing classes and subsequently apply to other forms of “academic discourse.” This is not an appropriate goal for a writing class because the

concept of a unified academic discourse is chimerical, because the goal is too narrowly construed (leaving out other kinds of writing that writers do in their professional and public lives), and because the goal does not reflect how writers actually learn (and unlearn and relearn) to write. When writers are effective, it is not because they already know how to integrate their ideas with those of others, but rather because they can learn how to do so for *this* audience, in *this* genre, in *this* medium, with *these* technologies. And this, in my view, is the proper purpose of writing classes: to equip students, not with isolated skills, but with a capacity to read, understand, respond effectively to, and help shape the myriad rhetorical situations they will encounter. I hope that this goal can become our common ground and that we can get on with the important, even necessary work of program-level and classroom-level articulation.

### **Graff and Birkenstein Notes**

1. Revising assessment lists in this way would accord with the popular writing principle—one needed as much by the curriculum as by outcomes statements—that readers can assimilate details in a text only if those details are clearly subsumed by an overarching claim or through line.
2. The 2014 reformulation of this rubric illustrates the overcomplicating impulse we have been criticizing. Whereas the 2000 version stated simply and clearly that by the end of first-year composition, students should be able to “integrate their own ideas with those of others,” the revised 2014 version is far wordier and more cumbersome: “By the end of first-year composition, students should [be able to] use strategies—such as interpretation, synthesis, response, critique and design/redesign—to compose texts that integrate the writer’s ideas with those from appropriate sources” (Council, “WPA Outcomes Statement,” 2014). The fact that the earlier statement was changed in this way leads us to wonder if the authors of the later revision were embarrassed by the earlier clarity. Did they feel the need to fog over the earlier, simpler formulation lest they be accused of being reductive? By listing these additional “strategies,” did the authors, as a committee, deem it more important to include the pet concerns of each committee member than to produce a coherent document that can actually help students write?
3. Though this passage seems intended as a description of how the intellectual world operates, it can be read prescriptively, as how-to advice to students who are unsure how to enter that world: “listen for a while”; catch “the tenor of the argument”; “put in your oar”; when “someone answers you, you answer him”; and so on until “you depart.” The recipe-like quality of the passage lends itself

well to the kind of standardization that, as we are arguing here, is essential to outcomes assessment and, more broadly, to mass-scale democratic education.

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## **Chris Gallagher**

Chris Gallagher is vice provost for Curriculum Advancement and professor of English at Northeastern University. His work has appeared in a wide range of writing studies and education journals, and he is author or coauthor of several books, including *College Made Whole*, forthcoming from Johns Hopkins University Press.

## **Gerald Graff**

Gerald Graff, emeritus professor of English and Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, served as the 2008 president of the Modern Language Association and is the author of such books as *Professing Literature*, *Beyond the Culture Wars*, and *Clueless in Academe*.

## **Cathy Birkenstein**

Cathy Birkenstein is an adjunct lecturer at the University of Illinois at Chicago and has had her work published in *College English*. Together, Cathy and Gerald are the authors of the writing textbook, *They Say/I Say*, and articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Academe*, and *College Composition and Communication*.

## **Bruce Herzberg**

Bruce Herzberg is professor emeritus of English and Media Studies at Bentley University, where he served for many years as writing program director and department chair. He is currently finishing the third edition of *The Rhetorical Tradition* (with Robin Reames and Patricia Bizzell).