



recommendations for departmental hiring practices with censure or sanctions for departments that don't measure up. At the same time, a few conservative stalwarts have continued to be furious with the M.L.A. for talking about politics at all.

In place of dismay over the association's inclusion of minority literatures, feminist criticism, and gay studies in convention panels and committees (taken to be a sure sign of a political agenda), those scholars now object to our inclusion of panels on cultural studies. Boston University's Roger Shattuck responded with an indignant letter to my first presidential column on the job market in the M.L.A. *Newsletter*. He objected that I had "quoted with approval from Cary Nelson's recent book, *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical*," and must be endorsing its "strong antiliterary position." Ironically, Nelson, a professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who has just been elected to the M.L.A.'s Executive Council with the help of the Graduate Student Caucus, is the most-quoted left-wing critic of the association, its committees, and its presidents, including me.

In addition, the officers and many members of the Graduate Student Caucus, according to a recent article in *The Chronicle*, cast me as "Public Enemy No. 1" for making expansion of the non-academic job market for humanities Ph.D.'s the central issue of my columns during my one-year term. By last March, just a couple of months after I had taken office, one caucus officer was already writing in the electronic newsletter *Workplace* about "Showalter's War on Graduate Students," and concluding that, instead of urging departments to set up non-academic placement bureaus, the M.L.A. and I "should be issuing sticks to degree-holders to beat away the corporate recruiters trying to hire them away from their vocation."

When *Vogue* titled an article I wrote about my love for dark-red nail polish and shopping in malls with the alliterative but misleading title "The Professor Wore Prada," caucus members who had obviously not read it pilloried me on their electronic discussion list, "e-grad," for heartless indifference to their economic plight ("none of us can even entertain the idea of buying clothes as expensive as the Prada ones you talk about") and "cavalier ignorance about the sweatshop production of *haute couture*."

But the largest storm, so to speak, erupted over a phrase in my final column in December: "We can't afford to waste our collective energies anymore in competition for the dwindling job market, rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*, and fighting about who gets into the lifeboats first." As the context made clear, I was talking about graduate programs competing to place their own students in the best academic jobs, while ignoring the long-term issues of the structure of graduate education and the narrowness of employment opportunities. Caucus members writing on "e-grad," however, interpreted the *Titanic* metaphor as "cynical," "elitist," and even "infamous." I was "a first-class passenger who feels just terrible that there aren't enough lifeboats for all those people in steerage,"

employing an "appalling social darwinist logic."

Some of the misunderstanding and name-calling, I realized when I went on "e-grad" to talk to members, was fueled by the electronic medium itself. There were other problems, of course; some "e-grad" members mistakenly thought I belonged to "a generation of individuals who fell into positions in the academy," that I had never T.A.'d or worked part time myself, or that I was pushing post-academic jobs to the exclusion of all other reforms. But the hostility and angry tone of their remarks was exacerbated by the mechanical impersonality of e-mail. One-way electronic communication, by voice mail or e-mail, as the linguist Deborah Tannen notes in her book *The Argument Culture*, can breed misinterpretation, contempt, and aggression.

People in the business world are way ahead of academe in recognizing the problem with this kind of process. "The potential for hostility in e-mail is huge, and very disruptive for managing groups of people," Stuart Gannes of AT&T Labs told *The New York Times* last month. He noted that "people got on their high horse and became very preachy toward each other. These incredibly hostile arguments that were copied to everyone would erupt. You're challenging someone in public. These things are like little wildfires." In *Deeper: My Two-Year Odyssey in Cyberspace*, John Seabrook, a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, discusses the problem of flaming on line, where language easily becomes extreme. Seabrook, too, compares "arriving at a dead site after a flame war had broken out" to "walking through what had been a forest after a wildfire."

Face-to-face dialogues between individuals are less likely to escalate into angry confrontation than arguments on paper or on screen. Before the M.L.A. convention in San Francisco that just ended, there were hints on the Internet of disruption by graduate students, warnings of "civil disobedience," and protest. But the actual meetings were orderly and calm. A few anonymous souls distributed fliers urging people to boycott my presidential forum, "Going Public," and passed out leaflets citing Cary Nelson's latest pronouncement that "advocacy for alternative careers outside academe ... is without question the most cynical and self-interested solution anyone has offered to the job crisis." (This is a curious declaration, since in his manifesto Nelson himself recommends M.A. programs to help students pursue alternative careers.)

In the Delegate Assembly, where tempers can easily flare over the confusing details of parliamentary procedure, **civility** and decorum reigned, despite a controversial agenda of resolutions and motions. (As the classicist Mary Lefkowitz pointed out last year in *The Chronicle*, this is as it should be, for *Robert's Rules of Order* also "prescribe an etiquette of debate," a formality of address and procedure that displays respect for one's colleagues and opponents.)

Over all, however, the decline in **civility**, community, and good humor in academic life has certainly become an issue of

the 1990s -- and it's not rooted just in electronic communication. Both the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Chicago have recently set up national commissions to study increasing incivility in America.

*The Chronicle* has reported various complaints about academic incivility, and various efforts to stem its course. On some campuses, disruptive and ill-mannered students have become what one faculty member called "classroom terrorists." In our culture generally, as Judith Rodin, the president of the University of Pennsylvania, stated in *The Chronicle* in December 1996, "incivility and extremism infect our political culture, polarize the discussion of almost every public issue, and drive successful candidates ... to appease the most extreme of their potential supporters or to retreat from political life." Now, after the Clinton-Starr debacle, the punitive and prosecutory elements in American society seem increasingly shrill, and academe is not immune.

Many academic thinkers during the decade have pondered the seeming paradox of incivility among intellectuals and tried to explain it. In *We Scholars*, David Damrosch, a professor of literature at Columbia, argues that academic life looks for -- and reinforces with rewards -- traits of isolation, competitiveness, and associability. "For the better part of a century," he writes, "we have been selecting for certain kinds of alienation and aggression on campus." Thus departments are "clubs of the unclubbable," and controversy degenerates into hostility. Damrosch asks whether this tribal culture can be changed to a communal one: "Alienation and aggression are distasteful grounds for an educational system; further, I wish to argue that they are now also historically outmoded and intellectually counterproductive," he writes.

The literary critic Jane Tompkins, in *A Life in School*, laments that "we ... do not know how to conduct ourselves when there is real conflict, inside the classroom or out. We fumble around. Sometimes we tear each other apart, or, afraid of doing that, we avoid speaking. I could use some instruction in how to disagree fruitfully. And in how to listen constructively to an opponent."

In fact, such instruction is widely available in the legal and corporate world that so many academics disdain or distrust. All academics, from graduate students and faculty members to deans and provosts, could learn a lot from the literature of negotiation that is required reading in business and politics. That literature is not just about winning, and certainly not just about power. It explains, step by step, how to separate people from problems, how to listen, how to identify shared interests, how to develop a process of principled dialogue and negotiation. In *Getting Together: Building Relationships as We Negotiate*, for example, the legal scholars Roger Fisher and Scott Brown explain that any dialogue will be more substantive when both parties acknowledge that feelings, as well as facts, can influence our behavior -- and when we learn how to control them. "The injunction to be rational," they

conclude, "is not a prescription to reject emotions, or to ignore or suppress them, but rather to think about them, exercise self-control over how we express and enlist them."

In *Beyond Machiavelli: Tools for Coping with Conflict*, Fisher and his co-authors, the law professors Elizabeth Kopelman and Andrea Kupfer Schneider, stress the positive side of difference, and the ways that "working well together can turn adversaries into partners." Dealing with conflict can bring out people's energy, motivation, and creativity as well as their incivility and wrath, they say.

American academics sneer at management seminars, although in Britain, department heads are expected to take them. Moreover, while many institutions have sessions on dealing with difference and conflict for undergraduates, they usually assume that graduate students and faculty members don't need them.

But academics, whether they stay in the university or leave, whether they remain faithful to one profession their whole lives, or, like most Americans, reinvent themselves, juggle multiple roles, and give priority to different roles at different times, need to learn more about the skills the business world calls "emotional intelligence" -- the human capacities of empathy, self-awareness, and self-regulation, and the ability to reward and motivate themselves and others. "Emotional competence," writes the psychologist Daniel Goleman in his best-selling *Working With Emotional Intelligence*, "is particularly central to leadership," and, "for star performance, in all jobs, in every field, emotional competence is twice as important as cognitive abilities." Executives and C.E.O.'s understand, moreover, that emotional intelligence is not simply intuitive, and that it can be taught and learned.

But the academy, valuing the cognitive to the exclusion of all else, pretends that anyone can run a department, an association, or even a college without learning something about administration and management, a form of labor we relegate to the amateur or volunteer level of "service." No wonder our tribal culture is so often unhappy and abrasive, when our middle managers -- our chairs -- receive no training in the complex skills of team-building and leadership that keep community alive even when strong emotions and conflicting priorities exist.

No wonder incivility is rampant, when many legitimately dissatisfied voices in the academy regard collaboration as nothing more than co-optation. The crisis in the humanities is real, and surely, as Fisher, Kopelman, and Schneider conclude, "conflict is inevitable. ... For better or for worse, we will have to cope with conflicting interests as long as we live."

But now, more than ever, we need to learn to listen rather than to boycott, to consult rather than to insult, and to search for common interests rather than to revel in divisive ideologies.

*Elaine Showalter, a professor of English at Princeton University, just finished a term as president of the Modern Language Association. Her most recent book is Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media (Columbia University Press, 1997).*

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**Mary Cassatt**  
1844 - 1926