

George F. Will

Radical English

At the University of Texas in Austin, as on campuses across the country, freshmen are hooking up their stereos and buckling down to the business of learning what they should have learned in high school—particularly English composition. Thousands of young Texans will take English 306, the only required course on composition. The simmering controversy about that course illustrates the political tensions that complicate, dilute and sometimes defeat higher education today.

Last summer an attempt was made to give a uniform political topic and text to all sections of E306. It was decided that all sections would read "Racism and Sexism," an anthology of writings with a pronounced left-wing slant.

The text explains that a nonwhite "may discriminate against white people or even hate them," but cannot be called "racist." The book's editor, a New Jersey sociologist, sends her students to make "class analysis of shopping malls." "They go to a boutique mall and a mall for the masses. I have them count how many public toilets are in each, and bring back samples of the toilet paper. It makes class distinctions visible."

After some faculty members protested the subordination of instruction to political indoctrination, that text was dropped and the decision about recasting E306 was postponed until next year. But the pressure is on for political content, thinly disguised under some antiseptic course title such as "Writing About Difference—Race and Gender."

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Such skirmishes in the curriculum wars occur because campuses have become refuges for radicals who want universities to be as thoroughly politicized as they are. Like broken records stashed in the nation's attic in 1968, these politicized professors say:

America is oppressive, imposing subservience on various victim groups. The culture is permeated with racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism (oppression of the working class), so the first task of universities is "consciousness-raising." This is done with "diversity education," which often is an attempt to produce intellectual uniformity by promulgating political orthodoxy.

Such "value clarification" aims at the moral reformation of young people who are presumed to be burdened with "false consciousness" as a result of being raised within the "hegemony" of America's "self-perpetuating power structure."

The universities' imprimatur is implicitly bestowed on a particular view of American history, a political agenda and specific groups deemed authoritative regarding race, sex, class, etc.

This orthodoxy is reinforced—and enforced—by codes of conduct called "anti-harassment" codes, under which designated groups of victims are protected from whatever they decide offends them. To cure the offensiveness of others, therapists and thought police are proliferating on campuses, conducting "racial awareness seminars" and other "sensitivity training."

These moral tutors have a professional interest in the exacerbation of group tensions, to which university administrations contribute by allowing, even encouraging, the Balkanization of campus life. This is done by encouraging group identities—black dorms, women's centers, gay studies, etc.

The status of victim is coveted as a source of moral dignity and political power, so nerves are rubbed raw by the competitive cultivation of grievances. The more brittle campus relations become, the more aggressive moral therapy becomes, making matters worse.

The attempt to pump E306 full of politics is a manifestation of a notion common on campuses: every academic activity must have an ameliorative dimension, reforming society and assuaging this or that group's grievance. From that idea, it is but a short step down the slippery slope to this idea: all education, all culture, is political, so it should be explicitly so.

And any academic purpose is secondary to political consciousness-raising. The classroom is an "arena of struggle," and teaching should be

grounded in the understanding that even teaching English composition is a political activity.

Recently at the University of Michigan, a teacher's description of a freshman composition course said that writing skills should be learned "in connection to social and political contexts" so "all of the readings I have selected focus on Latin America, with the emphasis on the U.S. government's usually detrimental role in Latin American politics . . . damning commentary on the real meaning of U.S. ideology . . . responsibility for 'our' government's often brutal treatment of . . ." And so on.

This, remember, for a course on composition. But, then, the teacher is candid about sacrificing writing skills to indoctrination: "Lots of reading . . . Consequently, I will assign considerable [sic] less writing than one would normally expect. . ."

On other campuses, writing requirements are reduced to the mere writing of a journal, a virtually standardless exercise in "self-expression" that "empowers" students. This is regarded as political liberation because rules of grammar and elements of style are "political" stratagems reinforcing the class structure to the disadvantage of the underclass, which has its own rich and authentic modes of expression from the streets.

So it goes on many campuses. The troubles at Texas are, as yet, mild. But the trajectory is visible: down. So is the destination: political indoctrination supplanting education.