

A modest proposal: Teach writing in writing courses

As one of the two faculty members who resigned from the Lower-Division English Policy Committee, I am unable to agree with the proposed changes in E306 because I deem the perfecting of basic writing skills to be the principal goal of UT's one required freshman composition class. The teaching of these skills gives students a good foundation for success in other courses and in life beyond the University. At the risk of stating the obvious, the point is this: a foundation comes first and supports that which comes later. Were I a professor of mathematics, I would similarly insist that students demonstrate mastery of basic math skills in algebra, geometry and trigonometry as a foundation for studying calculus, engineering or physics. In either case, if a student's educational foundation is weak, that student's potential for success in later college courses is, at the very least, jeopardized.

In objecting to the proposed changes in E306, I do not mean to suggest that I condone every aspect of the way E306 has been, or currently is, structured. Still, having taught a variety of freshman English classes here and elsewhere, I have come to believe that the various topics that motivate students to write should receive only passing attention from the instructor, whose primary obligation is to offer freshmen intensive feedback about grammar, style, tone, form, cogency, organization and audience. Similarly, classroom discussion about assigned readings, including those concerning social topics, should focus mainly on matters of writing,

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When my freshmen choose to write about social topics — and I provide them with the option of doing so — I still annotate their essays primarily and extensively with comments about triteness, agreement, transition, choppi-ness, conciseness, parallelism, alternate sentence structure, the construction of series, etc. Even the brightest of our incoming freshmen need basic instruction in such matters. In the limited time we have to help remedy the often numerous, serious deficiencies in the writing of our freshmen, excessive focus on expressly social, political and legal topics can interfere with the teaching of basic writing skills.

Both the newly released packet of readings and the "Tentative Syllabus" for the postponed version of E306 suggest to me that the discussion and researching of social, political and legal topics would have become the *de facto* "subject matter" of our only required freshman composition course. The size, complexity and social orientation of the reading packet also suggest to me that freshmen in that course would have been unable to focus mainly on their writing assignments. Nor am I convinced that Als could have developed a systematic method for helping students to compose and edit from the packet of pedagogical essays (i.e., outside readings for Als) recently made available to prospective teachers. And where in the syllabus is any formal attention to grammar and the mechanics of

writing? The new E306 syllabus would have required students to purchase the 822-page *Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers* (1988), written by Maxine Hairston and John Ruskiewicz. Yet, the syllabus instructs students to encounter only 81 pages of that book. Of those 81 pages, 47 deal with bibliographies and documentation. And with the exception of worthwhile instruction concerning the avoidance of sexist language (eight pages), the other 26 pages of assigned *Handbook* readings do not directly confront the complexities of editing. Students are not asked to read or learn from those remaining 741 pages of the *Handbook* that effectively cover such basic skills as revising and editing, paragraphing, fragments, transitions and punctuation. Both authors of that *Handbook*, by the way, have publicly voiced serious concerns about the possible value of this new course.

The proponents of the new E306, wishing to teach "argumentation" in complex legal writings and social commentary, fail to recognize how intensive instruction in basic editorial categories facilitates rather than impedes participation in legal forms of dialogue and discussion. Here I have in mind a checklist of 56 editorial categories that I regularly emphasize when teaching freshmen. Several of these freshmen have gone on to distinguish themselves in law school and have attributed much of their success to this foundation of editing skills. Had these students and I spent most of our time talking about difficult legal concerns, I fear that I might have restricted — rather than increased — their chances of participating so

fully in the "polis" of ideas endorsed by my opponents in this debate. Again, my 17 years as a teacher of writing lead me to conclude that the teaching of basic writing skills is the only legitimate subject matter for a freshman-level writing course.

Moreover, different students sometimes feel inspired to do their best work when writing about different topics. Thus, I see no value in politicizing freshman English by restricting the range of issues which students may be allowed to address. I'll offer an example from personal experience: one of the best essays to emerge from my recently concluded Plan II freshman writing seminar was a critical analysis of Lilianna Porter's *The Unending Story*, a painting on display at the Huntington Art Gallery. My student chose that theme because I often allowed the class to pursue topics other than those which, as a matter of convenience to students, I regularly make available. When I commended the student's work, she remarked that her best writing evolves from engagement with topics of genuine interest to her. Yet the proposed E306 — putatively about "difference" — appears to render impertinent these incontestable differences in taste, imagination and intellectual preference.

At stake is an issue of academic freedom for students and teachers alike. Als scheduled to teach the new E306 would have been offered no choice of "reader" (i.e., a textbook of readings) from which to choose prose paradigms to discuss with students. To no avail, I pleaded with the Lower-Division English Policy Committee, and then with the English department

faculty at large. I protested the potential impact of this unfortunate precedent in forbidding any privilege of textbook selection. Here, too, the purported emphasis in E306 on "difference" was compromised by an institutional failure to recognize that different teachers often teach best with different materials, just as different freshmen often write best about different topics. Faculty members should not have to petition academic freedom into existence. Here I advocate the principle of free inquiry upon which the possibility for "multicultural" education presumably rests.

I take issue, instead, with my colleagues Ramon Saldivar and Kurt Heinzelman ("Rhetoric and composition: provost meddles in E306 decision," *The Daily Texan*, July 31). Their editorial suggests that the opponents of the new E306 would proscribe as off-limits for English professors such public issues as racism and sexism. Quite to the contrary: I often discuss such concerns when the subject matter of my sophomore and upper-division courses logically invites such inquiry. Students in various classes have heard me address the sexist legacy of Puritanism, the sometimes racist tendencies of covenanted outlooks and the psychological origins of bigotry. Toomer's "Blood-Burning Moon," Lowell's *The Biglow Papers*, and Faulkner's "That Evening Sun," among many works, come immediately to mind because of the way such literature requires us to confront serious issues of race, gender and multiculturalism. It is thus not my position that the proposed E306 topics are inappropriate matters for discus-

sion by professors of English. Professors Saldivar and Heinzelman's argument to this effect is a non sequitur.

A similar non sequitur appears in the charges of racism leveled at opponents of the new E306. The allegation is absurd: I and other professors across campus see an inconsistency between imbuing students with a hope for economic and political equality of opportunities while denying these students a foundation of writing skills essential for success.

"The new E306," says Prof. Evan Carton, "would have been — and I hope will still be — a politicization of entering freshmen and their curriculum ..." (as quoted in "Protesters demand participation in decisions on diversity," *The Daily Texan*, July 30). Sorry, but I plan to remain a dispassionate teacher of basic writing skills to freshmen. Indeed, I want to give them not just a voice — but an articulate and eloquent voice so that their persuasive words will be all the more understood and heeded by future audiences. Faculty and administrators should have the willpower and decency to send a "message" of encouragement to our incoming freshmen — the "message" that these students will receive an education worthy of their time and effort and suited to their needs and goals. In expressing these concerns, I, along with the other dissenting (and now ex-) members of the Lower-Division English Policy Committee "rest our case." We look forward to the outcome of University-wide deliberations on this important matter.

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