

Political Suspects

By Linda Brodkey & Shelli Fowler

In the spring of 1990, a new syllabus was developed for English 306, the writing requirement for entering students at the University of Texas at Austin. But the course, "Writing About Difference," never made it to the classroom, becoming a casualty of a disinformation campaign in which it was labeled by one professor as "the most massive attempt at thought-control ever attempted on the campus."

About 60 per cent of first-year students at Austin take English 306, an expository writing class. As at most universities, the class is taught almost exclusively by Ph.D. candidates in literary studies. Over the last

several years the course has received less than favorable student evaluations. The graduate-student instructors say studying literature doesn't prepare them to design and teach composition. They're right. (Their evaluations are dramatically better when they teach literature.) In their case, poor teaching is a matter of poor teacher preparation.

In the fall of 1989, the policy committee that oversees first- and second-year English classes, made up of seven faculty and two graduate students (including ourselves), set out to improve English 306. By spring the committee determined the course, to be

called "Writing About Difference," would teach argumentation as critical inquiry, focusing on federal court opinions dealing with discrimination in education and employment. Graduate students would teach from a common syllabus in the 1990-91 academic year and, thereafter, experienced instructors would be free to continue using the syllabus or to develop one of their own. Even though regular faculty rarely teach English-306 and all were exempted from using the common syllabus, 10 per cent were excited enough by our plans that they volunteered to teach the syllabus.

In the late spring, an ad hoc committee was formed to develop the syllabus for Writing About Difference. Following guidelines set by the policy committee, we defined argumentation as critical inquiry. Federal court opinions we selected had at least three arguments (the plaintiff's, the defendant's, and the court's) and the goal was to teach students that an argument is not merely a debate between two sides, but that one might take any number of positions. Assignments for the course were designed to teach students critical inquiry as part of laying out a case for whatever position each has.

While we were planning Writing About Difference, opposition to the course was gathering on campus. We had completed a working draft of the syllabus by July 23, the day the dean of liberal arts announced his decision to postpone the class for a year, in order to address what he called "misunderstandings about the course expressed within the university community."

The "misunderstandings" did not have to do with the syllabus. Neither the dean nor those in "the university community" whose publicized opposition influenced his decision saw the syllabus until weeks after the course was postponed. That leaves us to conclude that opponents were concerned not about how we planned to teach writing and but about the topic—difference. They projected their fears onto graduate-student teachers, who they claimed would force students to write what the media later came to call "p.c." essays. Two members of the committee resigned. And on February 4, after six months of fending off criticism and trying to have the course field-tested in several sections, the policy committee resigned en bloc.

Not so long ago, colleagues who shared progressive beliefs occasionally described some of their actions as being "politically correct." The use of the term was invariably ironic. The right's current appropriation, however, "p.c.," is devoid both of the collegial tone and of the irony. On college campuses today, "p.c." is a shibboleth for flushing out advocates of multicultural education. This is exactly what opponents of the course at Austin attempted to do, and, with a little help from the media, they were successful. "Good Riddance," a recent editorial in the *Houston Chronicle* crowing over the resignation of the committee, claims we were part of "a new McCarthyism" and "a new fascism of the left," and so gave just cause for routing the epigones of "latter-day versions of the Hitler Youth or Mao Tse-Tung's Red Guards." A course like Writing About Difference, the *Chronicle* assures readers, "is elitist cant masquerading as tolerance; it is, in short, an idea inimical to the concept of a university." No one could fault the *Houston Chronicle* for not defining what it means by "p.c." Though a good many at the University of Texas could take this and other publications to task for not knowing the difference between a course and a spin on a course.

Not one of the many journalists who have trotted out Writing About Difference as an example of the dangers of political correctness interviewed anyone who actually worked on the syllabus. Freedom from information (beyond the spin put on the course by its opponents) may explain why syndicated columnist George Will felt free to tack "Race and Gender" onto the course title; why Richard Bernstein reported in *The New York Times* that "literary classics" had to be dropped to make room for the "p.c." materials; why *Newsweek* did not

know in December that the "leftist" Rothenberg reader had been dropped in June; why Fred Siegel, writing for *The New Republic*, mistakenly claims that English 306 is a "remedial writing course" whose theme is "white male racism."

If they had spoken to us, we could have told Mr. Will that difference is an open category, which allowed us to select court cases dealing with disability, ethnicity, bilingualism, and sexual orientation, as well as race and gender; Bernstein would have learned that the cases didn't displace any literary classics (our liberal arts catalogue requires that English 306 use expository writing); *Newsweek* might have been surprised to hear that we dropped the Rothenberg book when we realized we weren't going to use enough of it to justify asking students to buy it. No one in the field of composition would mistake English 306 for a remedial writing course, and it's patently absurd to claim that federal laws and court opinions spell "white male racism."

Judging by the sheer number of times Writing About Difference appears in articles on "p.c.," the spin undoubtedly makes good copy. But we find it alarming that opponents of the course were able to convince the press that students being required to analyze court opinions should be ridiculed as "p.c." thinking. If learning to think and write critically about the arguments made and the issues raised in discrimination suits is labeled as "indoctrination" or "thought control" then we have to ask ourselves if opponents of this course are against critical thinking itself. At a time when students are complaining that teachers aren't interested in teaching, we must ask how courses such as Writing About Difference can even attempt to improve the quality of teaching if the press is also going to take the position that our motives are suspect.

Some of the most outspoken critics of Writing About Difference have been members of the National Association of Scholars. The NAS advocates courses it believes "transcend cultural differences," based on the assumption that "the truths of mathematics, the sciences, history, and so on, are not different for people of different races, sexes, or cultures." A good many people might say the NAS agenda is "p.c." But to do so misses the point. Its claim that truth transcends culture is arguable, as is ours that argument is contingent on critical inquiry. But serious intellectual differences about higher education cannot be resolved by accusing colleagues of being politically suspect. Opponents of our course and others like it may well believe we represent "a new McCarthyism of the left," but surely the tactics they use to publicize their opposition (letters to local papers and to university donors) are those of the old McCarthyism.

When the *Austin-American Statesman* ran a letter last June from an English professor calling the course "the most massive attempt at thought-control ever attempted on the campus," the president of the University of Texas said nothing. When the dean of liberal arts postponed the revised course, the president still said nothing. But when the policy committee asked his permission to field-test the materials for the proposed course in selected sections, the president said no. Saying nothing is saying that the university believes Writing About Difference may be the "p.c." course opponents claim it to be. But saying no to the duly appointed committee is saying no to academic freedom, which is why the *Houston Chronicle* should be worried rather than relieved by our resignation. ■

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