

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH MINUTES

February 1, 1980

The departmental meeting was called to order at 3:05 p.m., Mr. Moldenhauer presiding.

The Chairman introduced Dr. Jacky Martin, Visiting Lecturer from France.

Mr. Moldenhauer identified the subject of the meeting, course content for freshman composition. This plenary session had been scheduled in response to requests from faculty to discuss "content" (course purposes, philosophy, etc.) before addressing other issues which had direct logistical consequences. Mr. Moldenhauer hoped that polarization might be avoided if initial agreement were reached on broad objectives, as sketched out in his notice of the meeting.

Mr. Friedman reported on deliberations by the University Council Committee on Educational Requirements. Although the Committee has as yet reached no agreement, tentative consensus has been reached regarding the English requirement: (1) to retain the nine-hour lower-division requirement; (2) to introduce a heavier literature component into lower-division courses; (3) to institute an upper-division writing requirement (probably two semesters) to be offered by the English Department or through equivalent courses in other colleges; and (4) a belief that writing/composition at the lower-division level should remain the responsibility of the English Department. In response to a question from the floor, Mr. Friedman expressed his opinion that any course the English Department designated as an upper-division literature course would satisfy this upper-division writing requirement; furthermore, equivalent courses offered by other colleges would be closely monitored and would concentrate on writing. Mr. Friedman announced that the Committee will meet again on Friday, February 8 at 1:30 p.m. in WCH 100, and he invited interested faculty to make recommendations directly at the meeting.

Mr. Kinneavy disagreed with Mr. Friedman's understanding of the Committee's deliberations and expressed his belief that these proposals would amount to a fifteen-hour composition requirement that would sacrifice the literature element in lower-division English and effectively do away with E 307 and E 314K.

Mr. Moldenhauer urged faculty members to offer their opinions on the English requirement to the Committee, either in writing or in person.

Mr. Wimsatt suggested that course size was essential to the discussion of course content. He identified two alternatives to the present pattern in freshman composition. First, he would either increase the teaching credits for composition courses or reduce the maximum class size from 23 to 17 students to make teaching freshman composition more attractive to faculty. In this way, he argued, the English Department could present a good rhetoric program. Secondly, if the University administration would not support this kind of program through teaching money and increased teaching credits, then the English Department must devise a plan to reduce the number of students in the course. A good way to do this would be to increase exemptions. Students not exempting through exams could be enrolled in a course long enough to reach a certain level and then be exempted; for example, some students could be exempted after six weeks, others after eight, etc.

Mr. Westbrook said he thought the purpose of freshman composition was to teach students how to think better through reading and writing and to develop the "editorial I." Mr. Lesser offered this division of the content of freshman composition: (1) reading with mature understanding; (2) persuasive writing; and (3) mechanics/grammar. His concern was in determining the emphasis of the course and facilitating the remaining two objectives. He questioned the grading base and asked whether students should write about the assigned reading or their own expression and knowledge: where do students get substance? Ms. Spivak agreed and said she found herself juggling the three categories; she also wondered where the emphasis should lie.

Mr. Kimeavy differentiated between E 306 and E 307. E 306 uses reading as a model for techniques being studied in a particular unit, as a stimulant to a topic, and as a data-body for analysis -- in other words, reading is a means to the writing. In E 307 students are not normally asked to model their themes on what they read but are asked to use reading as a stimulant to writing. In both cases, however, writing takes precedence over reading because these are both writing courses. Mr. Megaw expressed displeasure with the implied gap between persuasive writing and mechanics/grammar. He suggested that mechanics/grammar is remedial and real attention should be focused on students' problems of exposition: they can't describe; they need to learn process analysis, structure analysis, and comparison-evaluation. He believes that literary analysis, imitation and illustrative reading are valuable tools for beginners and lead to stronger persuasive writing.

Mr. Walter was displeased with the category of "persuasive writing" and would put in its stead "factual exposition." In his 35 years as a teacher and editorial consultant, Mr. Walter has found that the overwhelming majority of writing done by graduates is the communication of factual information to other people so that they can do their jobs. They do not write literary analyses. He cited a study he did with Gordon Mills on this subject; questionnaires were sent to managers asking what writing weaknesses their employees displayed: (1) 90% responded that the main problem was the inability to organize and present factual information; (2) 85% felt that the inability to adapt writing styles was the second major problem; and (3) 75% thought wordiness was a major problem. Grammar, spelling and vocabulary were at the bottom of the list. The long-range need of students, he concluded, is to write so that with a minimum of effort the reader can understand what the writer is talking about.

There were other examples of student needs as defined by faculty. Mr. Duban felt that some students have no idea of how to structure upper-division term-papers and essays, and how then to compose these with smooth and coherent prose. Imparting such skills, he suggested, ought to be the primary aim of the freshman composition program. Ms. Spivak felt that beginning composition courses should train the student to write prose that advances an argument and meets the writer's obligation to the reader. Mr. Lesser believed that composition courses should develop the individual who can recognize and appreciate organization in literature and who can then persuasively write about it. Mr. Farrell suggested that the English faculty should find a way to extend literary training beyond literary analysis to lend itself to everyday reading and writing. Mr. Rebhorn defined his problem as not knowing what to

have the students read. In his E 307 classes he had students write papers on their own research; these papers were much better than ones written on the assigned reading. He is confused about what to do: he prefers to assign papers on literature because this is what he is familiar with, but students write better about subjects of their own interest. What reading materials do teachers assign? Mr. Twombly expressed his belief that humanists are responsible for more than the promotion of technical skills and the reading of literary texts. Humanists should make their students sensitive to value questions and should ask students to make subtle value distinctions; the result would be an individual who questions always the values and judgments before him.

Mr. Kinneavy discussed the quality of the students enrolling in E 306 in terms of verbal aptitude. The average national verbal score on the SAT is 429; the average at UT is 481, at the University of Michigan it is 531, and at the University of Houston it is 450. Although the average freshman at UT ranks in the top 35% nationally, one-fourth to one-third of UT students score below the national average of 429. ECT scores seem to corroborate this trend. In a 1974 Coleman Study of national reading levels, with northeastern schools as the norm, the average high school graduate in Texas reads at the 11th grade level while Chicano and Black students read at the 8th and 7th grade levels, respectively. Only one-fourth of entering UT freshmen exempt E 306. Therefore, he concluded, the kind of student in E 306 is very ordinary and it is a mistake to label E 306 as remedial. Mr. Lesser questioned whether state universities could use harsh grading practices as feedback to high schools to "beef up" their courses. Mr. Westbrook related this to ineffectiveness in teaching and wondered whether more laboratories would increase the "reading readiness" of students. Ms. Rodi agreed that expanded labs would be helpful because teachers don't have the time to concentrate on grammatical errors.

Mr. Moldenhauer said that, very generally, purposeful writing seemed to be the primary objective of freshman composition. Mr. Westbrook surmised that the English Department as a whole would never agree to one definition of the "content" or "purpose" of freshman composition, and he moved that the Department proceed to the study of logistics. The motion was seconded and obtained general assent. Mr. Moldenhauer suggested that the teaching staff divide into groups, or teams, to study different aspects of freshman composition. Each team would work on proposals affecting logistics in the area of its concern; for example, he suggested that the team discussing instructional format would investigate lab facilities and determine ways to distinguish those students who needed labs. A task force would then be formed from the various teams to coordinate the proposals, and the department as a whole would debate and vote on the final package of proposals. He hoped that faculty members would feel free to make suggestions to any team. He asked that volunteers for teams be coordinated through the Chairman's Office. The teams he envisioned are:

1. Admissions and Registration (suggested topics include cut-off dates; limits on admits-numbers; limits on admits-quality; credit or non-credit courses)
2. Degree Requirements (suggested topics include actual number of hours to require; courses satisfying requirements)
3. Exemptions (suggested topics include cutting scores; instrument for E 307 or E 308; timing of exams)

4. Format (suggested topics include sequencing in student's career; class size and student-teacher ratio; labs; computer instruction; use of graders; workload for student; grading curves)
5. Staffing (suggested topics include size of staff; staff levels--AI, temporary, regular; departmental affiliation of staff; workload for faculty)
6. Administrative Rearrangement (suggested topics include a separate rhetoric department)

The meeting adjourned at 5:00 p.m.

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