

New Course Syllabus Ends Univ. of Texas Conflict

"Difference" Is No Longer Sole Writing Option

Months of conflict over a controversial syllabus for the required freshman writing course at the University of Texas at Austin appeared to have ended in May, when the English faculty voted to approve an alternate plan for the course.

Department Chair James Kruppa told NCTE May 9 that the dean of the College of Liberal Arts was "enthusiastic" about the replacement syllabus, and that liaison people in other colleges whose students must take the freshman course "seemed pleased." He added, "I consider the conflict resolved."

University administrators had overruled the English Department's earlier syllabus, "Writing about Difference," built around arguments in court cases involving charges of discrimination. The dispute, aired in the education press and general news media, featured charges that students could be pressured to assume "politically correct" attitudes in order to pass the key course and countercharges of infringement of academic freedom.

Profile of the New Course

Emeritus Professor James Kinneavy, an NCTE member, headed the committee which undertook the crash project of developing another syllabus. Sketching the re-

sults, he said the new course plan retains certain elements of the earlier syllabus, developed under the direction of faculty member and chair Linda Brodkey (also active in NCTE).

"The course will be based on argumentation and research," Kinneavy said. It will use Stephen Toulmin's approach, from *The Uses of Argument*, will center on "writing about social and political topics," and will feature "small writing exercises such as summaries of arguments," plus major papers.

"We backed away from the heavy set of readings in legal documents [specified in the earlier syllabus]," Kinneavy explained. "Also, multicultural concerns have become an option for teachers and individual students" when choosing readings and topics for research papers. Instructors (chiefly teaching assistants) will choose from two recommended texts on argument, two readers (presenting arguments on different sides of various social issues), and two handbooks. Experienced instructors can apply for permission to use other books.

"Up-to-date inductive and deductive reasoning" and "issues from classical rhetoric—claims of fact, of definition, of value, and of policy" are featured in the syllabus, Kinneavy added.

A New Consensus Emerges

His committee shared its draft syllabus with liaisons from other university units

without encountering objections. When the English Department met May 3, "no one voted against the syllabus or abstained," Kinneavy said. "We pitched a no-hitter. We don't foresee objections from the top administration."

"I voted for the syllabus, along with other faculty," said Brodkey, declining further comment.

Faculty member and former CCCC chair Maxine Hairston had questioned whether the earlier syllabus, with its focus on highly charged sociopolitical issues and on legal documents, would provide freshman writers and novice instructors with the sense of security they need in order to take risks and learn.

"The committee made a great effort to come up with a syllabus that gives people a lot of choice and still encourages the students to write on topics that are substantive and solid," she said. Hairston praised the committee's "special effort to include good principles of writing instruction and of rhetoric," saying, "The priority was to come up with a course that meets students' needs and gives an introduction to college thinking and writing that they need."

Technically, decisions about courses reside with university departments. But Hairston added, "Freshman English is such a key course that it's not a concern simply of the [English] department; it's the concern of other disciplines, students, and parents."

—D.A.

Diane Allen

Univ. of Texas Controversy

Academic Concerns vs. Media Perceptions

by Alex Huppé

Huppé, who has taught English at West Piedmont Community College, Morganton, North Carolina, is director of the News Service at Dartmouth College. His report of debates about the University of Texas rhetoric syllabus conflict at the March CCCC Convention in Boston follows.

BOSTON—There is one topic on which all sides of the powerfully political "English 306" controversy at the University of Texas at Austin agree: they lost control of their issue to the media. At the CCCC Convention, each side got its turn to criticize, and each side, in turn, criticized reporters first.

Speaking at a session titled "Cultural Studies and Composition," Lester Faigley of U.T.A. complained that what he sees as the "open, complex" study of culture is seen differently by the popular press. But only Faigley seemed to see the irony in the essentially political position taken by cultural studies advocates. According to Faigley, the "New Right" has responded in the media with "We'll show you politics if you want to talk about politics."

"The joke's on us," he admitted.

Introducing the same session, Richard Ohmann of Wesleyan University described cultural studies as "an aftermath of the sixties, . . . leftist, feminist" and essentially "oppositional." He claimed that the assault from the right in the Texas dispute grew out of the success of cultural studies.

What's the Best Response to Attack?

During a question period, Linda Brodkey of U.T.A. and Faigley both said they felt the media had misrepresented the Texas case. Both suggested that the wiser response to being "under attack" is to reach out to a broader audience and to create a network between the academy and the media. Brodkey advised listeners to learn how to give interviews to reporters.

In another session, "Freshman English and Social Issues: The Debate at the University of Texas," John Ruskiewicz of U.T.A. cited the extraordinary and unwanted media attention given the "E-306" controversy. He quoted Charles Sykes, a critic of the U.S. professoriat, as claiming that the question of social issues in English is "the single most important debate in the USA today." Listing various articles that had appeared in the press, Ruskiewicz said that, whatever the coverage came to mean, it was clear that "freshman English means a lot to a lot of people."

He blamed the 1990 syllabus-writing committee for sending out news releases to the media. Brodkey, in an interview, denied the charge, claiming that the university itself sent out a release as a "sop" to counteract adverse racial publicity.

Understandable Public Concerns

James Kinneavy, another member of the beleaguered University of Texas English



Kinneavy

Brodkey

Photo: W. Blaine Pennington

Department, argued that the people of Austin and the country are rightly concerned about racism in the culture, and that freshman English is a reasonable setting for such discussion. He warned, however, that the classroom should be neutral, exploratory, and not doctrinaire. The media, Kinneavy said, acted properly in decrying dangers to the First Amendment, but journalists had failed to provide a solution.

John Slatin of U.T.A. complained bitterly about letters written by his colleagues to local newspapers, challenging critics of the syllabus to do more than "use" the media.

A major issue to emerge from the CCCC debate was whether the syllabus should have been field-tested before implementation.