

Still Another Point of View

by Joseph Jones

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The E.346K problem/controversy is a dramatic symptom of a much larger issue still to be defined and dealt with: how to rescue language-learning, throughout the whole school system, from the disastrous cul-de-sac it has been progressively forced into. Rationally, the promotion of continuous language-learning is (not merely *should be* but *is*) the responsibility of every teacher, not of a segregated (because mistakenly assumed “specialized”) department labeled “English” and saddled with the preposterous, utterly fruitless task of certifying or denying — at an arbitrary point in time — individual expertise in language.

This curious arrangement has never worked very well, but in the present condition of American education it is teetering into bankruptcy. Why? Because by definition it is a monstrous impossibility, and all efforts to keep it going will prove no more than tinkering patchwork. Language being *the* universal in all learning, how can it make sense to declare it a specialty and deliver it up to one segment of the academic community? I'd never say that English teachers don't work hard; I've been one and I know. I also know, however, from fairly long observation, that the results of all this hard work, while maybe not altogether

misplaced and futile, are of short duration. That is because language-learning, in order to be continuous, must come from inside not outside. We've got it backwards. Language-learning proceeds, in early childhood, as highly successful and incredibly rapid *voluntary* activity until, at length, it is made compulsory. What happens then? Well, what would you expect? Language-learning is a natural and very efficient process; language-teaching, in and for and by itself, is a fallacy—psychologically wrong-headed, artificially sustained for a brief time only, hideously expensive both economically and socially.

Would I scrap English departments, then? Categorically yes: shatter them to bits and then remold them nearer, not just to the heart's desire, but to the way things are. What would I put in their place? English centers — again, throughout the whole school system — to be staffed with people not altogether unlike present English “teachers” but who would never “teach” courses for credit, give grades, or lecture in scheduled classrooms. What they *would* do is to counsel individuals in difficulty with written expression or reading comprehension in their scheduled classes; test all students periodically, reporting and discussing test-results but not recording them as “grades”; maintain and monitor writing and reading laboratories; conduct small, short-term (non-graded, non-credit)

group-seminars, at student request, on literary/linguistic topics; give occasional public lectures on literary/linguistic topics; conduct group-seminars for interested non-students as continuing education; and work in all sorts of other ways to keep continuing interest in language alive and flourishing at all levels in all age-groups. They would interact closely with both higher and lower educational levels than their own, at times exchanging places so as to gain better understanding. These people, after probationary service, would be tenured staff members without divisive rank or hierarchical distinction other than length of service, for which they would be regularly rewarded.

It has taken me a bit of time to sketch out what I envision as a better system, but I could continue for at least that long if I were to catalogue and comment on all the paperwork, busywork, and monkey-work it takes to operate a present-day English department, nearly all of which would and should give way to more constructive and long-lived pursuits.

The "Solution" Problem

A Note from the Ranks in the English Department

by Robert Twombly
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"We have solved the Lecturer Problem!"

So boast two English Professors who feel that they can claim some behind-the-scenes credit for the suspension of E.346K.*

But which Lecturer Problem has been solved? It appears that all along there have really been two problems, very differently conceived.

The one Lecturer Problem has had to do with power and control. The corps of Lecturers in the English Department seemed soon about to swell from around 65, to around 120, or even 150. As the regular faculty in the department numbers about 82, it appeared that by Fall 1985 the Lecturers would come to have the numerical ability, at least, to vote as a controlling "bloc" in certain departmental meetings, and to elect sympathetic professors to the Executive Committee.

Accordingly, measures would have to be taken to secure departmental control in the hands of tenured (and, some allowed, tenure-track) faculty. To many tenured faculty it seemed imperative to obtain a re-interpretation (or "clarification") of the Regents' Rules that would decisively close the door against continued enfranchisement of Lecturers. The sense of urgency was reinforced by the tendency to see the Lecturers as representing (the next step was to see them as *supporting*) both a pedagogical mediocrity and (in the eyes of some) a particular educational ideology. Accordingly, one solution to this problem that was proposed early in the year involved a division of the department, — of such a kind that virtually all the Lecturers would be bureaucratically separated from the greater part of the regular faculty. This of course has not yet taken place. Rather, a bolder solution has been found (at least for the present) in the curricular adjust-

ment that, with a single stroke, eliminates the need for any English Department Lecturers. Apparently, as of June 1, they will all be gone. This problem is indeed solved.

The other Lecturer Problem has to do with principle. In the Fall of 1978 the English Department did not have "Lecturers," as we now understand the term. But the department, trying to put an end to the practice of staffing its courses with graduate students, did resort to an *ad hoc* expedient of hiring on ten new "Instructors," without the conventional nationwide canvassing and academic screening of its recruits. Though the rank of Instructor was, and is, a probationary rank, these men and women in 1978 were hired with the mental reservation that they would *not* be probationary and would not be given any sort of tenure-review. An invisible but significant threshold had been passed. The men and women in that apparently non-tenurable sub-rank began to look like a kind of coolie class, intellectually and socially as well as economically. And when in 1980 they were redesignated as "Lecturers," and their numbers abruptly increased to 66, it was clear, or should have been clear, that the department had committed itself to a reliance on a bureaucratically second-class labor force. These men and women were not subjected to the kind of scrutiny given tenure-track recruits, either at the time of their hiring or thereafter. They were not on probation, and (beyond being scored in the course-instructor survey) their skills and accomplishments were not reviewed. They were rarely placed on

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*Various reasons have been cited for the suspension of the entire E.346K offering, most prominently the observation that several sections "had problems" with apparent grade inflation, and with Engineering students enrolling in the "Humanities" variant. It is not my intention to overlook this, or in any way to question the candor of those (including the Chairman) who cite this as the sole reason for the suspension. Supporters of the suspension, however, are far from univocal in their reasons, and where the "Lecturer Problem" has been cited as one of those reasons, it seems to me that a clarification of the problem is in order.

“Solution” Problem

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committees, and they were not expected to initiate change in courses or curricula. They were to be prepared to teach low-level, standardized material at very short notice. And they were to understand that their employment (even after years of service) was never assured, never more than “temporary.” They were, in short, academically invisible line-workers.

As such, through no fault of their own, they came to stand for, to reify, both the paradoxes of an academic double-standard, and the deprofessionalization of university instruction. Unintentionally, they became a generic model, a precedent, for thinking of higher education as a sequence of standardized classroom operations. The perverse irony was that as certain highly accomplished Lecturers gradually escaped from lower-division teaching, and began to teach their own research-specialties, they *seemed* to represent the next subversive step in the deprofessionalization process: The principles of academic review could be dispensed with here, or there, or perhaps anywhere.

This Lecturer Problem has not yet been solved. In fact for the moment it has been made worse. For by making all English Department Lecturers bureaucratically redundant at once, we have expressed, through the eloquence of deed, just how dispensable the principle of academic review could become at other levels, at all levels. And I would venture to suggest that the problem belongs really not just to the English Department, but potentially to several other departments as well.

We can solve this Lecturer Problem, over time, by now fixing a policy and keeping to it: We can give ourselves the leeway to solve *bona fide* emergencies by retaining the one-year appointment. (With appointees accorded all the rights and privileges given Assistant Professors in their tenure-review year.) But we should make such appointments absolutely non-renewable, either at full-time or at part-time! We should make it clear that those who hold emergency appointments can be rehired *only* into a legitimate tenure-track position, subject to the same professional scrutiny given to all true academic colleagues.

Otherwise, bureaucratically speaking,

let's have no more of them, whatever they are, Lecturers, Adjunct Faculty, Specialists, line-workers!

No more “temporaries,” hired on without recruitment screenings and probationary appointments!