

CLASS STRUGGLE

EDITORIALS

Viewpoint opinions expressed in *The Daily Texan* are those of the editor and the writer of the article. They are not necessarily those of the University administration, the Board of Regents or the Texas Student Publications Board of Operating Trustees. Opinions expressed in *Dissenting Opinions* and staff or guest columns are those of the writer.

English Department's delay does not end debate of E306

Proponents of a new curriculum for E306 may look on the English Department's delay as a defeat, but it may actually be an opportunity.

College of Liberal Arts Dean Standish Meacham and English Department Chairman Joseph Kruppa decided to wait another year to revamp freshman composition. The plan, assailed by dyspeptic traditionalists as "thought control," would unify the course around the theme "Writing about Difference." The ensuing controversy has strayed from the core questions of curriculum reform into quibbling over procedures and protocol.

In its zeal to implement the changes, the English Department did move too quickly, and it gave faculty opponents ammunition. The department's haste allowed professors to attack the process as well as the substance of the changes.

Even worse, the speed and secrecy with which the proposals were approved made the decision seem haphazard and radical, diverting attention from the value of providing a coherent, diverse curriculum to freshman composition.

With an additional year of deliberation, the reforms in E306 can be considered on their merits. The discussion need not veer into side issues about who resigned from what committee and who was or was not consulted about the change.

These columns — written before the department's postponement — represent an attempt to begin that dialogue and bring out the fundamental issues at stake.

We believe the changes deserve attention and commentary from the entire UT community, not just a handful of administrators.

An additional year of scrutiny will bring amendments and complaints from those who oppose multiculturalism, but it will also draw a wider range of reaction from friendly voices. The University makes its worst mistakes when it acts too quickly and with too little notice to students and faculty, and multiculturalism is too important to get bogged down in ad-

Kevin McHargue
EDITOR

"With an additional year of deliberation, the reforms in E306 can be considered on their merits."

ministrative squabbling.

In fact, the department should take advantage of the postponement and broaden the process itself. In 1985, Liberal Arts Dean Robert King jettisoned the graduate students on the Freshman English Policy Committee, declaring that students had no role in deciding curriculum.

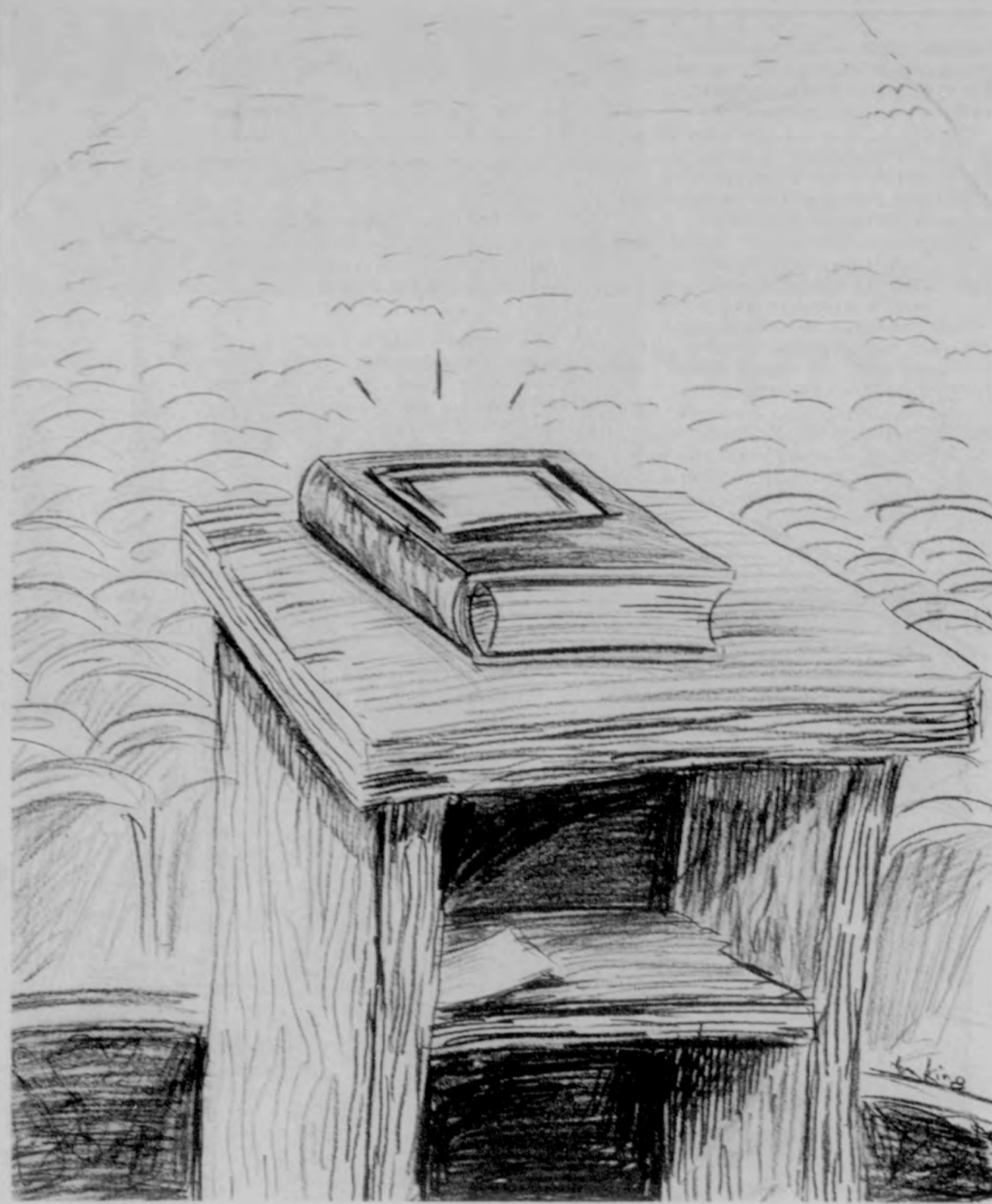
Meacham should put graduate students back on the committee and provide some means for involvement by undergraduates as well. Questions of curriculum affect graduate students and undergraduates, and they have a right to be heard.

When the University of California at Berkeley considered creating new multicultural courses, its curriculum committee met with graduate instructors, faculty and student organizations, ensuring a full range of opinions on the changes. The University could profit from Berkeley's example.

The basic question is whether the University wants to make its curriculum honest and inclusive, or whether it will perpetuate its dated Anglocentrism. That question, apart from details of execution, is enough to keep us busy for quite some time.

The College of Liberal Arts has, in effect, invited a year of discussion on the fate of E306. Let us, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, reason together, toward the goal of creating a strong, diverse and meaningful curriculum.

McHargue is a Plan II senior.



New E306: more than high school English all over again

English 306 is one of those freshman rites of passage like surviving centralized adds and drops or carrying credit cards that don't have your parents' name on them. The course's goal, as explained in the Liberal Arts catalog, is to provide "basic instruction in the writing and analysis of expository prose," including "an introduction to logic and rhetoric." However, as course evaluations and student writing has shown, E306 has fallen short of effectively teaching critical thought and writing skills.

To strengthen the course, the Lower Division English Policy Committee took sound and concrete measures to revise freshman English and make it worthy of its "Rhetoric and Composition" billing. The policy committee is to be applauded for formulating a shift from the old E306, a class that Department Chairman Joseph Kruppa has characterized as a "fragmented, wandering course" that "lacks context and focus."

As debate continues into the next year now on what, if any, changes will be made to the

Adam Hersh
TEXAN COLUMNIST

POINT

course, knee-jerk criticisms of the new proposals will persist. The charges that have been thrown around have created much fanfare, but they and future arguments that will be cut from the same cloth are grounded in fundamental misconceptions of the course's direction and content.

Organized under the theme "Writing About Difference," the new E306 would expose students to issues of race, gender, disability, national origin and class through Supreme Court documents and topic-oriented essays. English professor Alan Gribben attacks the class' focus as a "politicized study" and that it "has to be the most massive effort at thought-control ever attempted on the campus." In addition to hy-

perbole, Gribben's comments reflect oversight of the course's intent: to teach college-level composition.

Not only would students in the new E306 have the opportunity to negotiate the issues studied, but they would be encouraged to challenge the presented methods and conclusions. In *Nelson vs. Thornberg*, a Supreme Court case that was tentatively scheduled for the course, blind social workers successfully sued the governor of Pennsylvania for the right to have readers provided by the state rather than the blind employees having to cover the cost themselves (essentially paying to stay employed). In addition, the course would have included an essay by Richard Scotch's on disabled citizens (*Journal of Social Issues*, volume 44, 1988) to help the students place the Court's verdict in its societal context.

As Linda Brodkey, director of the policy committee that proposed the changes, states: "Evaluation is based on how students lay out their arguments, not their particular position [on the issue]."

Hence "Writing About Difference" would focus on questioning the validity of "given" information, and emphasizes forming logical arguments to reach solid conclusions. Such is the stuff of quality writing courses.

The only "thought control" in the new E306 was the teaching of quality, lucid exposition. The class was designed to be a rigorous negotiating forum of critical thought, and notions of politicalization only go so far as those who fail to understand to course's focus.

Other concerns have centered on assistant instructors' abilities to use legal documents to teach college composition. One does not need to be an attorney to teach critical thinking, however. As Kruppa explains, the nature of "Writing about Difference" is such that "all intelligent citizens can read and understand it." Assistant instructors who have not taught E306 would be required to enroll in English 398T, a course that guides instructors on effective teaching techniques.

In addition, all E306 teachers

would attend a week-long orientation prior to fall semester to ensure course familiarity and intent. Discussion groups of five to seven would also be available for any instructor with continued doubts on how to teach the course. Clearly, the English department provided solid training and orientation measures to guarantee a well-prepared teaching staff.

Neither would students be expected to embrace immediately the legal perspective. The course would begin by exposing students to the judicial framework, but not in a dry or rote manner. Rather, the precedent-setting *Heman Sweatt* Supreme Court decision would be used to acquaint students with the way judicial conclusions are reached.

Portions of Richard Kluger's *Simple Justice: the history of Brown vs. Board of Education and black America's struggle for equality*, would be used to dimensionalize the civil rights issues at work in the *Sweatt* decision and to situate them into their cultural context.

Students would write critical

and persuasive essays on the issues raised in the course. In order to fully elucidate their claims, students would be encouraged to become familiar with the UT library and resource materials.

Class topics would not remain grounded in the text. Rather, E306 students engage timely and significant issues of race, gender, national origin and class. The new freshman English, as Brodkey explains, would teach comprehensive writing through "civic issues and in civil ways."

"Writing about Difference" is a rigorous expository course that ends conventional attitudes of E306 being "high-school English all over again." Students would be taken seriously, and the issues would be thoroughly analyzed within its productive environment. Freshman English teaches college composition skills, and if critics would truly examine "Writing About Difference," they would find that it soundly meets those expectations.

Hersh is an economics/RTF junior.

Altered E306 format compromised by ideological freight

It's unfortunate that skirmishes over implementing the altered freshman English (E306) curriculum are diverting attention from a vastly more important issue: doubts about the quality of the writing course first-year students will encounter in the fall.

The director of Lower Division English reported in a departmental meeting in May that student evaluations of E306 classes have been dropping precipitously for two or three years. If that is the case, then the course undoubtedly needs to be modified to restore its effectiveness. But, ironically, the E306 "Difference" curriculum pushes the class in precisely the direction that has occasioned its decline — toward displacing writing instruction with topical discussions of social issues.

The catalog title of E306 — "Rhetoric and Composition" — includes the term *rhetoric* for a good reason. It identifies the subject matter to be taught and learned — an art of writing, research and thinking which will benefit students, in both the long and short term, far more than portentous classroom discussions of current affairs. Instruction in rhetoric focuses on the logic and validity of arguments, the development and enrichment of ideas, the appropriate arrangement of subject matter and the power and correctness of language. These are necessary and pertinent concerns of writers whatever their discipline, level of expertise or political orientation.

It is my conviction that first-year students develop most effectively as writers when they are introduced to processes of composing that make them competent to handle the rhetoric of various academic assignments — from analyses of causality

John Ruskiewicz
GUEST COLUMNIST

COUNTERPOINT

and evaluative pieces to research papers and exploratory essays. Such instruction is the surest way I know of giving students the skills they need to function as responsible and articulate citizens.

Yet I also understand the allure of topics courses in writing and appreciate a logic to them at a level beyond freshman English. Certainly, experienced instructors with solid credentials in particular disciplines can balance instruction in writing with topical information. And students interested in learning to write about a particular subject would obviously have good reasons for selecting a course that intrigues and motivates them. An individual topics course clearly makes sense when a teacher's credentialled expertise matches a student's elected interest: such is the logic behind the E309K and E379C topics courses in writing already on the books at the University of Texas.

However, it is illogical — and simply bad pedagogy — to transform a required multi-section class like E306 into a topics course when its teachers lack expertise in the mandated subject area and when its students don't have the option of selecting another topic. Yet this would be the situation in E306 this fall for many instructors and students.

I am not suggesting that instructors in

composition courses ought to avoid discussing compelling subjects and challenging ideas; quite the contrary. Anthologies designed for writing courses routinely survey a range of formidable ideas. But I think students are less likely to write significant and challenging pieces when they find themselves constrained by a subject matter that seems to hide a political agenda — as I believe that E306 "Difference" may. Which brings me to the second aspect of my objection to the altered E306 class, one that does make the origin and implementation of the course a relevant matter.

I was, until July 11, a member of the Lower Division English Policy Committee charged with shaping and supervising course curriculum in freshman and sophomore English. I objected to the new E306 "Difference" curriculum for the reasons above, but also because members of the supervisory committee were being asked late in the academic year to approve an entirely new course affecting thousands of undergraduates without any of the materials we routinely expect from individual instructors requesting a mere course variant — a methodology, a syllabus, a roster for assignments, a list of readings.

The one concrete component of the new curriculum available to committee members (aside from a familiar manual of mechanics and usage) was Paula S. Rothenberg's sociology textbook *Racism and Sexism*. I found that book — since withdrawn — to be more politically coercive and imbalanced than any text I could ever recall being suggested for E306. Yet *Racism and Sexism*, subsequently conceded to be "radical" by one of its supporters, was mandated for all sections of E306 taught

by assistant instructors, breaking a long-term tradition of offering teachers a range of choice in readings. It was when the committee majority refused even to consider better-balanced anthologies designed specifically for writing courses (including two on precisely the same topics) that I became convinced that the focus of E306 "Difference" was ultimately not on rhetoric or composition, but on the political agenda set forth in articles in Rothenberg's book.

Yet I might have been able to tolerate even the Rothenberg collection, radical and intolerant of alternative views as it was, had I at least been able to see how it might be merged into the framework of a composition class. Certainly, an existing course like E306 being revamped to present a multicultural look ought to develop from a complete and thoughtful syllabus faithful to the basic catalog description. One would expect as much, except where the original point of the class — instruction in writing — is being subordinated to a more compelling goal, in this instance, versing students in the provisions of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Hector's words in *Troilus and Cressida* seem apropos: "Tis mad idolatry! To make the service greater than the god."

Significantly, an inflexible majority of the Lower Division Policy Committee opposed all suggestions that E306 "Difference" be offered first in pilot sections to prove its merit. And, lest anyone suspect that the new course would simply overhaul proven approaches and methodologies, the committee also rejected my motion that any new E306 course syllabus "be written so as to permit and encourage a diversity of approaches to teaching writ-

ing, including process methods that emphasize genres or modes." My concern to preserve a rhetorical approach that I and many others have, in the past, employed successfully in teaching writing was dismissed as a matter for a later committee meeting. No such meeting has been called.

It is my opinion that the E306 curriculum changes were compromised by their ideological freight and by a rush to do what seemed politically correct on this campus at the moment. The new course has not been developed fully enough to establish its credentials as an effective approach to freshman writing instruction; its subject matter crosses too many disciplinary boundaries; its instructors aren't adequately trained to deal with the themes of the course.

The fact is that instructors — especially new instructors — who have designed courses around social issues have had a difficult time of it here and at other institutions. The dismal teaching evaluations in E306 in recent years attest to a steady erosion in the course since we have moved away from writing instruction based upon, well, writing instruction.

Yet the English Department proposes to rescue this failing pedagogy by implementing it in a still-larger scale. Such an approach isn't fair to students of any race, class or gender who might be interested in getting a good education.

John Ruskiewicz, an associate professor of English and former director of freshman English, has taught E306 regularly and often for more than a decade.