

Comments at Department Meeting

I don't wish to repeat the arguments that have been made in the last several months about E 306 Difference, but I do intend to draw your attention to the character of my original objections to this course.

Various recent articles--some of them stuffed in our mailboxes--have implied and various spokespersons from this department have gone on record as suggesting that my objection to the E 306 Difference curriculum was completely and entirely political. I have even been characterized in the press as an ultra right winger, which I guess is what a Bush Republican must seem like in an English department these days.

The record of the LDEPC last spring shows, however, that I made a motion supporting the preparation of a syllabus on the issue of difference, with the proviso that it be tested in pilot sections in the 1990-91 term with the purpose of implementing it more generally in 1991-92. This is a motion I stand by and continue to recommend. My motion to that purpose, however, was defeated.

I asked pointedly at one meeting whether the new class would be compatible with the rhetorical approach I have been using for the last fifteen years in my own first year courses. I was informed that it probably would not, so I came prepared at a subsequent meeting with a motion that any new syllabus--and remember, we did not have at this time even a sketch of what this syllabus would include--I made a motion that any new syllabus allow for a diversity of methodological approaches. My motion **in favor of diversity** was defeated, and yet I have been accused of trying to coerce this faculty into following a single approach to the teaching of composition. The record shows otherwise.

I was very uneasy with the Racism and Sexism textbook--the only concrete element of the course we had to look at. I abhorred what I regarded as its extremism and offered the LDEPC a list of alternative texts, which no one was willing even to discuss. Yet I have read recently in the Houston Post that "there was to be a choice of three different kinds of readers--a kind of hodgepodge of essays." That's precisely what I had suggested for the course, but my motion to that end was, in fact, rejected by the LDEPC. The "leaders of the committee" subsequently rescinded the Racism and Sexism text, finding it--as I did--inadequate for the purposes of the course, though assuredly for different reasons.

With the support of the Dean, the chair, and active groups of students on campus, other members of LDEPC perhaps saw a rare

opportunity last April to act with unaccustomed swiftness on this campus and with a minimum of compromise to address what they saw as a significant problem in our society, a significant problem on our campus. It was an unusual opportunity, indeed a moment demonstrating the principle of kairos. I read their reaction to that moment differently and responded to preserve the integrity of a course I had taught more frequently, written more about, observed more often than any other person on that committee--indeed perhaps as much as all the other members of that committee combined. I knew that E 306 was not the course that "everyone hates," as one of my colleagues has described it, or at least it hadn't been so in the past.

I stand by many of my pedagogical objections to the E 306 Difference curriculum; I continue to feel uneasy with its politics--as I must, given my political perspectives, my upbringing, my worldview. I admit that "**difference**;" I ask you not to reduce that difference to a stereotype.

None of us, I hope, takes pleasure in seeing this department embroiled in controversy--though we are certainly getting good at it. I, therefore, return to the suggestion I made in April, which I still believe can go a long way to resolving pedagogical doubts, eliminating political qualms, and more important restoring a spirit of cooperation to what should have been, first and foremost, an intellectual endeavor. My recommendation is simply that we test the course. Run pilot sections in the spring and sensibly evaluate them. If the new syllabus has problems, the LDEPC will be in a position then to resolve those difficulties before offering the course generally in 1991-92. But if E 306 Difference serves our students well, challenges them without coercion, teaches them to write, then I can have no reason for opposing it. That was my position in April; it is my position now.