

April 15, 1990

To: LDEPC

From: Linda Brodkey

The objections John Ruszkiewicz raised in his memo and his presentation to the LDEPC to the proposed E 306 are several, but I wish to respond to three.

1. That the course does not satisfy the catalog description for E306. I see nothing in the catalog description that would prevent this committee from standardizing the E 306 curriculum along the lines I suggested. In fact, we are more likely to achieve the regularity among sections suggested by the catalog with the proposed curriculum and texts, since all AIs teaching the course would attend the orientation and each would then write a syllabus meant to enact stated curricular goals.

The catalog describes E 306 as a "course that provides basic instruction in the writing and analysis of expository prose" and includes "an introduction to the logic and the principles of rhetoric." In the meeting on April 3, I gave two important educational reasons for making "difference" the topic and Racism and Sexism the text: devoting the entire semester to examining differences between opinion and argument and integrating multicultural education into the undergraduate curriculum. In the proposed E 306 course, logic and rhetoric would ground the writing and analysis of expository prose more thoroughly than ever, since teachers would perforce ask all students "what do you have to go on?" Examining common knowledge or received wisdom is basic to a liberal arts education, and I can think of no better place to begin the examination of opinion than in a first year writing course. That The University owes students many such "conversations" as the one we plan to initiate with this course is underscored by recent events on campus, though I would hope that we do not require overt acts of racism to justify a course in which students would think, read, and write about civil rights, civil rights law, and civil rights cases. They are bound by laws about which they know very little, and many labor under the illusion that such laws have effectively mooted even the possibility of discrimination. They need to find out for themselves that the cases that come before the court are exceedingly complex and that the opinions of the court reflect not the simplicity but the complexity of the human problems raised by charges of discrimination. Neither they nor their teachers need to be lawyers to read and comprehend legal opinions (many newspapers and magazines report the more consequential ones in whole or in part).

2. That the course should be run as a pilot in a section of 398T. This plan seems to assume that the pre-conditions for pilot-testing would be met by

isolating some E 306 sections as experimental courses and using other E 306 courses as control groups against which to measure the performance of students and teachers in the proposed course. Classrooms can be thought of as complex social scenes, but not as human laboratories. Simply put, the curriculum is not experimental in the sense that courses need to be tested against some norm. In the first place, there is no local norm against which to measure the writing performance of students, and in the second there is no national norm against which I wish to measure their performance (unless we plan to advocate a bell curve as appropriate for assessing writing and the teaching of writing). Moreover, pilot-testing assumes a comparison on some measure appropriate to both groups. I simply cannot think of an instrument that would be a fair measure of students in courses using the proposed curriculum and in all the other courses. It would be like comparing apples and refrigerators. That normative evaluation is totally inappropriate does not mean, however, that we should not evaluate the performance of students in the proposed E 306 courses. We could probably establish some form of criterion referenced evaluation. Perhaps, we could design writing assignments, analyze the task or tasks required, and use those analyses to set the criteria for writing performance. Or, alternatively, we could design assignments, ask a group of students to write on them, rank their essays, and elicit the criteria from the successful ones. I'm open to any number of suggestions on formative evaluations of student writing, but receptive to none concerning either overt or covert normative evaluations comparing their writing performance with that of students in other courses.

3. That an anthology selected to raise the issue of "difference" should itself demonstrate an awareness of "difference." The textbook that I recommended is not an anthology. It is a sociology textbook, which also includes some of the genres that we customarily use in E 306 classes: occasional essays, personal narratives, and poems. This book introduces students to some of the ways social science research defines and analyzes racism and sexism. I am not compelled by the argument that there are opinions and arguments that would provide a balance to the author's or that other books would provide "a wider and more challenging range of opinions." That's true but moot. I didn't suggest this text as an example of all the possible positions one might take (which is impossible), but as a way to focus students and teachers on work that has been done on "difference," and to give them some time to think about how those who work on and/or live with inequity define, describe, and analyze the problems they see. The definitions, descriptions, and analyses are arguable, which is, to my mind, the point of the course: that the complex human problems which fall under the broad category of discrimination do not readily lend themselves to forensic resolutions but nonetheless require us to consider and reconsider possible remedies.