

Dr. John Ruszkiewicz

To: Freshman English Policy Committee

From: Tom Cameron, Director, English 306 Individualized
Instruction Lab Course

Date: February 8, 1979

Subject: The present status of English 306 Individualized
Instruction

INTRODUCTION

As you may have expected, the English 306 Individualized Instruction course was conducted last semester essentially as it had been designed by Dr. Susan Wittig, the author of the course. It was our purpose that semester to test the course against other Freshman composition courses in an overall evaluation of the Freshman English Program. At that time, I was appointed director of the course, and I spent considerable time in preparing materials in the sequence in which they were needed, following the course outline used in past semesters. However, I also worked on parts of the course I felt needed attention: especially did I revise the Writer's Notebook assignments which all students on an A contract had to complete.

I have assumed that this semester will be, however, my final term as lab director-- in that the appointment was made for only one year, and in that the FEPC will need to make some kind of decision regarding the lab's disposition and the future of the course taught there. In the light of that knowledge, and in the light of the changes that I thought were needed in order for the course to run effectively and efficiently under the present set of circumstances, I have made some rather major changes in methodology, though not in content, of the course. In the following report I shall point up first those features of the course that remain constant and second those features that have been altered so that the body of the report will constitute a description of the course as taught this semester.

CONSTANT FEATURES

The course remains essentially self-instructional, sequenced so that students move through less-to-more complex assignments. The student sees that the course progresses not so much by what the teacher says as by what the student does. The major text in the course is Susan Wittig's STEPS TO STRUCTURE, supplemented by Blumenthal's ENGLISH 3200, revised. Work in the course is divided into three parts: Part One emphasizes sentences; Part Two emphasizes paragraphs; and Part Three emphasizes essays--thus following the organization and development of STEPS. As before, the main thrust of the course is the student's work in STEPS; for each unit in the first part (except the sixth, which is omitted), after the student finishes an assignment in the text, he/she takes a unit test to assess learning. For other units in the text, the student submits work for evaluation and commentary. Each part of the course is concluded with a mastery test, thus requiring the student to review the previous work and to be able to converse about the content of the course. An integral part of the course, originally, was the use of student (undergraduate) proctors. Their use was eliminated in Spring, 1978, when TA's were appointed to the lab as assistants. The TA's remain, but their presence has required changes which will be explained later.

ALTERED FEATURES

Course pace and attendance

Early semesters of the course allowed students to set their own pace in doing the work required, in that an important feature of the course was its PSI (personalized system of instruction) base--deriving its design from the research and work of Fred Keller and his associates. As such, the course encouraged students to master the course materials at a chosen level of achievement, not merely to do the best they could on an assignment and be "graded" on their work. Given enough time, therefore, in theory anyone could attain the level of mastery he/she chose to attain. However, at the University of Texas this freedom always existed within the framework of a somewhat loosely-administered semester-by-semester grading system, and though Dr. Wittig lobbied for a "Continuing" grade for students who had not reached their desired performance level, the administration never approved such a grade. Rather, recent proclamations by the Dean of the newly-created School of Liberal Arts set a policy which is more stringent than that of past semesters; we are now

instructed to give incompletes only in extremely unusual circumstances. Therefore, the idea that one can take longer than a semester to complete work in a class is no longer acceptable to the administration, and a change in course policy seems to be called for.

In the past few years, the course has become less and less self-paced, anyway, so this semester assignments are given weekly instead of by course part, and the administration's new policy on incomplete grades will be followed. Additionally, following the attendance policy used last semester by other tutorial courses in the Program Evaluation, each of the two sections taught this semester meets formally as a class every Monday, for the purpose of lecture and discussion. These meetings are held in the lab room rather than in some distant classroom, as has been the practice in previous semesters. (The current plan is possible because of changes I have made in the physical arrangement of the lab room, which now accomodates a class as well as students who have come by for individual instruction or to take tests.) Students are required to attend class these days without exception.

They are further required to attend the lab at least three hours per week in addition to attending at class time--a feature of the course in previous semesters. A point system has been formalized so that students' adherence to these requirements affects their final grades.

An additional benefit to the course, provided by the standardization of course pace, may be the control of the lab course's attrition rate. While this dropout factor is considered a benefit of the course by proponents of non-pejorative grading systems, it has been a cause of some concern among those who think that students should receive a grade on the work they do, even (or especially) if they fail. One reason students dropped out of the lab course in the past was not that they were doing poorly, though, but that they were so far behind they could not in reason complete the course. Tightening the pace of the course should prevent attrition resulting from the student's getting behind. It may have the concurrent effect of encouraging students to persevere until it is too late to drop the course without penalty. I do not intend this policy, however, to be a means of stopping grade inflation artificially, and I should hope that teachers will continue to encourage students to drop the course when it is apparent that they are likely to fail.

Curriculum design

While STEPS and ENGLISH 3200 are still the two major texts in the course, they are no longer assigned independently of each other. Previously, some students tested out of the 3200 materials in a diagnostic pretest; others were assigned specific units to work through. This semester, we have assigned 3200 lessons in an order that prepares students for the work to be done in STEPS. Students may take a 3200 pretest for each section in Part One of the course and place out with a grade of 85%, or they may do the required work and then take the test. Regardless, 3200 now is integrated into the course, and the main thrust of the first part of the course is now obviously STEPS TO STRUCTURE. Additional assignments may still be made for students with special problems.

Additionally, work at the computer terminals is deferred this semester until the last half of the course and serves as remediation for students who do poorly on their work in the first part. Any student may, however, do work on the computer modules if he/she wishes.

Finally, one criticism of the course has been that students do not do enough of what the critics called "real writing"; this semester that criticism may no longer be made. Whereas in previous semesters only students who were working for a grade of A had to turn in a Writer's Notebook, this semester the Writer's Notebook has been assigned to all students. Students work through three different notebook assignments, the last due in by the mid-semester break. Thus, during the time that they are working on sentences, the students are also doing whole-essay writing. (A description of the Writer's Notebook assignment and three assignment sheets are appended; they fully explain the assignments and the purpose of the notebooks.)

Grading system

Since TA's are now a major part of the operation of the lab course, it seems wise to me to elevate the job of "proctoring" to the level which a paid staff member should be able to provide. That is, proctors were never considered to be authorities but rather peers; regardless of the level of expertise of TA's, however, freshman students do not look on TA lab assistants in the same way they regarded their junior and senior proctors of years past. The TA clearly has a different stature, and I have chosen this semester to give the TA a job that calls for the kind of commitment and

assistance for which he/she is paid. I have done this, primarily, by altering the method of grading used in the course.

Formerly, students contracted for an A, a B, or a C. Contracts required that they do different assignments and that they perform at the expected "level" of acceptability for that grade. Teachers had the ultimate say in the grade a student would get for the semester, and if a student passed all tests at "mastery" level (85%), completed all the work called for on his/her contract, and did all that work at the proper level of acceptability, then the teacher would award the student the grade contracted for. Proctors did not assign grades to papers; they rather consulted with students on their work and gave assistance on revision when called upon. They forwarded all "grading" to teachers.

This semester, I have changed the system so that TA's award grades on student work. Such is possible because of the sequential nature of the assignments: sentence tests, as in previous semesters, are graded with the use of answer keys; paragraph homework assignments are graded, but the grades are not averaged into the student's final grade, so that teaching assistants can learn grading techniques and standards at the same time that students are working on their paragraphs. By the time students turn in their first full-length papers, even the new TA's in the lab will have the expertise needed to grade properly. They will now carry the responsibility that their position allows.

There are even more compelling, reasons, however, for changing the grading system. First of all, real contract grading requires that the student be given enough time to attain the level of performance he/she desires. Such is no longer possible in this course--as has been noted above. Second, students were unhappy with the contract system; I believe a survey of last semester's student course/instructor evaluations and of the teachers of last semester's sections will bear out this claim. Previous students seemed to be happy with the contract system, but the student population has changed somewhat since the lab began. Students now are very grade-conscious; they look at the contract system as an attempt to prejudge them and force them to stay at a pre-established level. In short, though its purpose is to help them be realistic about their capabilities, it seems rather to remove the hope of achievement from some of them. I am convinced that if we had an open-ended semester we could use the contract system effectively; I am also convinced that with the system we now have, such is not possible.

Finally, the time constraints impose a further complication: the levels of contracting were quite literally separated in the past by amounts of writing. That is, students at an A level wrote more than those at the B level, who wrote more than those at C. The effect of this procedure was that students were counseled to drop from one level to another if they fell behind a suggested schedule. Dr. Wittig never condoned such, but it has been standard practice by most lab teachers. Contract switching seems to manipulate the student, but given the time constraints, there has been little else to do.

I am convinced that this revised grading system fairly assesses the work of each student without the "tracking" procedures used in the past (See page 3 of the attached course policy statement; it fully explains the percentages of the present grading system.). I do not think that this system is essentially better than a contract system--in fact, far from it; I quite prefer a non-pejorative contract system in which the student has the time he/she needs to master the required assignments. But I believe that the present system will work better in this context.

CONCLUSION

This section of the report is essentially a series of recommendations regarding the lab course. Having been director of the lab for a semester, I have ideas about further development of the lab, the implementation of which is not within my jurisdiction; properly, they require review by the Freshman English Policy Committee.

If an alternative to the standard Freshman course is to prosper in the future, it must do so under the direction and with the full support of of the Freshman English Policy Committee. The changes I have made have been, I think, good ones, but they should be reviewed this semester in the light of what the committee wants an alternative course to do. Therefore, I also offer the following recommendations: 1) the committee should decide this semester if there will be a lab course alternative to the standard 306 course in the fall; 2) the committee should decide what form that course is to take; 3) the committee should establish a director for the course for the 1979-1980 academic year; 4) the committee should decide if the lab facilities shall be used in a special program for provisional students during the summer term, 1979; (5 since there is presently no real policy for the use of TA's in the lab, but only a method of operation held over from last semester's program evaluation, the committee should establish a policy for such, taking

in substantially

into consideration the educational and scheduling needs of the TA's as well as the need for competent instructional personnel in the lab.

Some disposition of the above recommendations regarding lab course operations must be made this semester--in spite of the fact that the results of the Freshman English Program Evaluation will not be available this academic year.

As director of the lab course, I will be happy to answer any questions that the committee has regarding the current operation of the lab which I have not addressed in this report. Too, I will be happy to elaborate upon the recommendations I am making, explaining why I think they must be considered. I sincerely hope that the committee, in discussing the recommendations, will move toward making an alternative lab course an integral part of the Freshman English Program.

Enclosures:

English 306 Individualized Instruction Course Policy
Statement
Student Assignment/Record Sheets
Lab Attendance Record Sheet
Writer's Notebook Assignments

cc: Dr. Susan Wittig