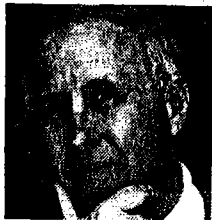


English faculty should stick to English



WILLIAM MURCHISON

Drat, darn and so on. Is it really the universities' duty to take us unwashed plebians by the ear, escorting us, with a minimum of nonsense, into the Sun-Dappled Future? Can't teachers lay off the politics, the sociology, the economics — and simply teach?

The English faculty at the University of Texas is making ready to seize by the ear the 50 percent of freshmen who sign up for English 306, a course in rhetoric, composition — and consciousness-raising.

English 306 has been sensitized. It is henceforth to be called "Writing About Difference," meaning the differences between race and race, sex and sex. I invite attention to the fact that this is an English course, not one in sociology or political science. Students will read and comment on civil rights, women's rights and affirmative action.

One un-ideologized English prof, Alan Gribben, wrote a cogent letter to the Austin newspaper and to this one, protesting that "Next September, all UT students who cannot avoid this course . . . will begin having their social attitudes as well as their essays graded by English Department instructors in what has to be the most massive effort at thought-control ever attempted on the campus."

The letter helped stir up a stink, and straightway the department withdrew the text that would have been the centerpiece of the course, the forthrightly titled *Racism and Sexism*, by Paula Rothenberg. Dr. Rothenberg, of William Paterson College in New Jersey, is so objective a pedagogue that she described to a recent "socialist scholars" conference her practice of dispatching students to shopping malls for toilet-paper analysis. "It makes class distinctions visible," she explained smoothly.

Alas, the withdrawal of the Marxist-oriented Rothenberg text (which describes racism as "the subordination of people of color by white people") doesn't make the course any less offensive or tendentious.

In bygone days, expository writing courses at UT lacked political quotient. I myself took such a course, back in the Kennedy era; we read, among other writers, Soren Kierkegaard, the existentialist, and A.J. Ayer, the logical positivist.

Maybe today's students can't spell "Kierkegaard." And maybe — much likelier — the English department establishment has finally taken the sociological bit between its teeth. Multiculturalism — which in practice means playing down "Anglo" culture and playing up Third World writers and sensibilities — is today's academic vogue. The overriding idea, it seems, is to make whites, and especially white males, feel penitent and ashamed.

Never did I get the impression, back in the Dark Ages, that my expository-writing prof was trying to convert us to logical positivism. It is clear, however, that today's English department is pushing multiculturalism. In a composition class, there is, after all, no point in examining racial and sexual "differences." There can be only a sociological point — that differences result from oppression and discrimination.

The *Austin American-Statesman* gazed with frank admiration on this whole exercise in academic propaganda. "The philosophies, contributions and values put forth in the classroom," cooed the editors, "must be as diverse as the world the students will enter upon graduation. . . . If efforts to change are made, change can take place."

Wonderful! The English classroom as social laboratory, the textbook as manual of 21st-century citizenship. Sociology first, syntax second — is that it? If UT students emerge from English 306 not knowing a strophe from a bushel of blackeyed peas, maybe they can write editorials for the *American-Statesman*.

In American academia, straightforward scholarship is a diminishing ideal. We can't teach students just to think. We must teach them to think Correct Thoughts. Respect for genuine differences — differences of viewpoint and interpretation — shrinks correspondingly.

At least, on the UT faculty, there's a rebellious cadre of old fuds. These, inspecting academic slop like "Writing About Difference," say it's spinach and to hell with it. Add my voice to the chorus.