

21 February 1980

PROPOSAL FOR A FRESHMAN ENGLISH CURRICULUM

Premises:

1. A Plan I Freshman English program without specific training in composition methods is a gross abnegation of our service responsibilities to the University.
2. A Plan I Freshman English program without specific literary content and without specific training in reading skills as such is an equally gross abnegation of our service responsibilities to our own department of English.
3. No "literature-based composition course," at least at the Freshman level at a public university like ours, can effectively mediate between what Prof. Walter calls "functional competence" and what Prof. Farrell calls "humanities"--i.e., the study of literature as an epistemologically-specific inquiry. Indeed, the tendency to conclude that points one and two above ~~can be combined~~ ^{simply or loosely} is as nefarious as the tendency to conclude that they are irreconcilable.

Plan:

All freshmen whose test scores do not exceed a certain minimum level will be required to take a year-long course (E. 306A & B) in compositional methods, mechanics (including grammar), and such verbal skills as modes of discourse, logic, analysis, persuasion, and research. At the end of the year, it would be expected that a student could use the library, write and organize meaningful sentences, recognize logical fallacies and forms of verbal persuasion, and effectively employ multiple discursive techniques in his own writing. That we would exempt, say, one-third of all entering freshmen from this course (using the present exemption rate as a guideline) indicates that 306A & B, if not remedial in the strict sense of the word, at least demands skills which can be learned at a pre-university level. Thus, at the end of the year, 306 students would earn only 3 university credits for this course. It is a year-long course

because we recognize that the longer a student has intensive training and practice in composition, especially at this relatively late date in his general education, the more productive will be the long-term results.

As a class, 306 students would meet once a week. Each week they would write a two-page paper or its equivalent (i.e., a 10-page research paper would equal a 5-week assignment). The course could be taught in many ways: as a large weekly lecture class (say, 250+) using graders for the papers, as a conference-type course (i.e., a 20-person maximum), or anything in between. The pedagogical mechanics would be determined by the collective wisdom of the department. Whatever final disposition is taken, however, all instructors/graders of this course would receive the full 3 TLC for each semester.

Concurrently with 306A & B all Plan I freshmen at the University of Texas (i.e., no test exemptions) would take a year-long course (E. 307A & B) in what might be called the humanities or the "great books"--a course modeled on the highly successful Plan II curriculum. The individual instructor would have a good deal of latitude in structuring this course, within the limits of a general statement of intent, such as "A course in the literary/intellectual history of Western Civilization from the ancient to the modern world." Surely every member of our department would feel at home in this course and, just as surely, every instructor would approach it differently. (I enclose a rather idiosyncratic curriculum which Prof. Kinneavy and I drew up to present as an alternative for the present 306/307 sequence, in order to show one kind of latitude that could be accommodated in the new 307A & B. But a more inventive and a more conservative curriculum are both easy to imagine, as a quick look at Plan II 603A & B curricula will make plain.)

So, a student would receive six credits for 307A & B to go with his three credits for 306A & B.

Results:

At the end of his freshman year, a student would have completed his full nine hours of university study in English, during which he received both extensive and intensive training and practice in both writing skills and literary skills. Both facets of an education in English have

been presented as a sequence. This program asserts the integral connection between writing and reading skills--that is why the study of them is made concurrent--and thus affirms that an English Department is concerned, unlike many other departments, with the whole life of the literate mind. But in making sense out of Freshman English we have also been sensible of a crucial distinction: that reading skills are not always teachable in the same ways that writing skills are teachable. I personally believe that reading well precedes writing well--when "well" is the *operative* word. But to teach reading skills under the same aegis as writing skills may create, at least at such a basic Freshman level, a dangerous self-fulfilling prophesy: that students can neither read nor write at all.

We recognize, of course, that all English courses are immediately pertinent to society's demand for literate citizens and that no English Department can overemphasize the importance of studying literature to the general health of the commonwealth. But this plan humbly acknowledges that reading and writing skills, especially if acquired as late as the freshman year of university education, both are and are not teachable; that acquiring these skills requires, in turn, specific, concentrated, and extensive work, just like any other skills; and that this awareness of discipline(s) is what makes the study of English a "discipline" in the first place.

Freshman English is traditionally regarded, and with some justice, as a general introduction to college life. So, we are often tempted to believe that a university English Department should be all things to all people. And others are tempted to believe that we should lay out the basal trivium while the other liberal arts and professional schools add the real substance to the curriculum. Both positions are erroneous. Under this plan, the English Department might be able to go on to affirm more securely its own identity as a department. For instance, at the sophomore level we might expand the already very successful E. 310 course for students who want further training in writing. We might continue to offer 314L-type courses in popular forms of literature, such as detective stories, science fiction, Tolkien, and so on. And we might vigorously promote a 312L/M and a 337/338 sequence of survey courses in English and American literature for prospective majors and for students who want to know something about the body of their inherited

literature. Technical writing, E. 317, would continue to provide significant service to the university and depth to the department.

I suspect that our sophomore courses would blossom under the new plan, especially the survey courses. Students who have taken 307A & B (and that would mean everyone) might be more curious about what we do because they have seen, in their Freshman English curriculum, a meaningful connection between reading, writing, and thinking that is not now apparent, even to many of us, in our present 306/307/314K sequence. More importantly, we will have our long overdue chance to make students familiar with humanistic inquiry as a purposeful and congruent discipline.

Admittedly, we will need to continue to work hard if we are to convince students that upper-division English courses are valuable. The plan for Freshman English, outlined above, will, I believe, give us our best chance of being convincing, because it affirms our departmental strength as our departmental multivalence and our multivalence as the essence of a humanist competence.

--Kurt Heinzelman