

The Reasons Why Not

by Maxine Hairston



The hot controversy that developed last year when the UT Lower Division English Policy Committee voted to punch up freshman English 306 by focusing on issues of race and gender should soon be resolved.

An ad hoc committee appointed by English department chairman Dr. Joe Kruppa in early March is in the process of deciding what direction English 306 will take next year. Headed by Dr. Jim Kinneavy, the committee includes four other faculty members — Dr. Linda Ferreira-Buckley, Dr. Betty Sue Flowers, Dr. Sheila Kearns, and Dr. Bill Worthen — and two graduate students, Louis Mendoza and Alison Regan. A report will be made to Kruppa in May; it will then be sent to Dr. Standish Meacham, dean of the College of

Liberal Arts, and UT President William Cunningham.

Dr. Maxine Hairston, a professor of English at The University of Texas and author of several textbooks on writing who has published extensively on writing theory and on the teaching of writing, reviews the controversy here and takes a stand against introducing political issues into the course. In 1985, she chaired the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the national organization of college writing teachers.

The "other side," which favored the proposed changes, chose not to present its arguments after the new ad hoc committee was charged with making a decision on the course content. Alcalde thanks Hairston for a calm, studied appraisal which illuminates both points of view.

In the spring of 1990, the English department in The University of Texas was split by a proposal to make English 306, the freshman writing course required of all students, a course on Writing About Difference. The reading text chosen for the course was a social studies text titled *Racism and Sexism*: students would read and write about essays from that book, and all sections of the course that were taught by graduate students — more than 90 percent of the total — would follow a single syllabus. Those advocating the course argued that teaching evaluations had sagged in freshman English courses and that evaluations would improve if the course were focused on substantial issues in our society. They thought every freshman would benefit by reading and writing about the problems of racism and sexism in our society. Readings in the course have always been models of good writing on various subjects.

Two of the six Undergraduate Course Committee members strongly opposed the course on the grounds that the text-

book did not give a balanced presentation of the issues and that neither students nor teachers were offered any choices other than the prescribed text and syllabus. Nevertheless, the proposal passed by a vote of four to two.

That action triggered a debate that quickly moved beyond the English department into the larger university community. In July, 56 faculty from a cross-section of University departments published an open letter in *The Daily Texan* asking the English department to reconsider its action. In a few weeks, the dean of the College of Liberal Arts announced that the course had been postponed for a year to allow further debate. Nevertheless, in September a strong majority of the English department again approved the proposed course, now with somewhat expanded readings, asserting that the department alone has the sole right to determine the curriculum of any English course, even if it is required by every college within the University.

Not everyone agrees with that position. A few faculty within English and

several faculty from other departments took the position that what goes on in a course that is required of every freshman at the University is the legitimate concern of all departments. At least one dean said that if the proposed course were put in place, he would consider having his college institute its own freshman writing course. And as controversy about the course spilled over into the state and national press, observers outside the University began to voice objections to what they saw as the highly political content of the course, suggesting that the attempts to implement it at Texas were part of the political left's much publicized attempts to impose a "politically correct" orthodoxy at colleges all over the country.

Such allegations may well be valid, but I prefer not to get into that debate here. Although it's an important debate, one that I think warrants the attention of everyone concerned about the direction of higher education, the issues are too complicated to deal with fairly in this article. What I want to do here is voice

two objections to the proposed course on other grounds. My first objection is instructional; the second is ethical.

First, as a professor who has spent more than 20 years teaching writing, and as a specialist in writing theory, I think the proposed course is unsound from an instructional point of view. I say this because I believe the primary purpose of a required college writing course is to teach students to write. In order to do that it should:

1. Show students how to use writing to explore ideas. Through writing they can find out what they think and put their ideas into a form that allows those ideas to be tested and examined.

2. Show students how to develop and refine their ideas through writing a series of drafts and revisions.

3. Help students to become confident writers who know how to express their ideas logically and clearly in a way that commands attention and respect.

Well taught, a freshman writing course becomes an introduction into the essence of a university education: learning how to think critically and articulate ideas clearly and logically.

For several reasons, I do not believe a freshman writing course that requires students to write about controversial social issues will achieve these goals.

First, all my experience as a writing teacher convinces me that students develop best as writers when they can write about something they care about and want to know more about. Only then, I believe, will they be motivated to invest real effort in their work. Few students will do their best when they are compelled to write on a topic that they feel is politically charged and about which they feel uninformed, no matter how thought-provoking the instructor presumes that topic to be.

Intellectual growth and diversity in a writing course comes from each student's investigating and writing about a topic that is congenial to him or her, sharing that writing with others, and being exposed to other people's ideas in the process. Over the years my students have written about growing up in a family of migrant workers, sexism in advertising, coming to terms with homosexuality, corruption on the tennis circuit, the experience of being a Vietnamese refugee, child abuse, Navajo culture, children's television, yoga, the economics of college football — the list of their interests is long and varied. As they write about them, they develop their individual knowledge and expertise, but they also learn about each other.

I also know that young people de-

velop best as writers when teachers are able to create a low-risk environment that encourages students to take chances. We know from research that novice writers can virtually freeze in the writing classroom when they see it as an extremely high-risk situation. Apprehensive about their grades in this new college situation, they nervously test their teachers to see what they are supposed to say and will venture opinions only timidly. They will be particularly reluctant to express their opinions in a political environment, especially if they think they are picking up signals that their instructors might not agree with their views. Under these circumstances, the creative impulses will fade, and students will not think critically or write honestly.

The content of English 306 is seen as a fundamental issue which raises again the question of academic freedom and responsibility.

Finally, I think few writing instructors, especially graduate students, have the sociological or psychological training to qualify as experts who understand and can talk knowledgeably about the complex and difficult issues of racism and sexism in our society. Since one criterion for a first-class university is that its courses are taught by qualified scholars in a field, a university can offer legitimate courses on these problems only if they are taught responsibly and effectively by faculty members trained in sociology, psychology, history, women's studies, or cultural anthropology. That criterion would certainly not be met in the more than 100 sections of the proposed freshman writing course that would be taught principally by graduate students in English.

My second objection to turning a required freshman writing course into one of racism and sexism, or any other complex and controversial social issue, is an ethical one.

For one thing, I believe that to do so seriously encroaches on the academic freedom of those who must take the course and those who must teach it. Mandating political content for a course that students must pass in order to graduate severely limits their freedom of expression, and to say that the proposed content is not political would be naïve — I think even the proponents of the course would grant that. The teachers are equally restricted, especially if they're graduate students. If they feel unqualified to teach

the material, or believe — as many trained and experienced graduate students do at Texas — that the prescribed curriculum will work against their students' learning to write, they must still conform to the syllabus even if it goes against their professional judgment and their personal feelings.

Second, I believe the proposed course will work to subvert students' integrity at the very beginning of their college careers. When they are forced to write on controversial topics in a high-risk situation, rather than explore and test out their own ideas, they will opt for survival over honesty. They will give the instructor back what they think he or she wants to hear, and if they are rewarded for doing so, they will learn a chilling lesson in the first semester of college. Hypocrisy pays. Don't try to think for yourself.

Granted, it's difficult for any instructor, faculty, or graduate student to keep his or her politics out of the classroom. We're only human. But just as we would not allow professors to use their classrooms to proselytize for their religious opinions, so we should not allow anyone to use university courses to promote a political agenda. Students arrive at a university not as empty vessels to be filled with the faculty's opinions, but as intelligent and inquiring people who bring their own knowledge and opinions and who want to expand, question, and test what they know in a rich and challenging intellectual environment. It is our commitment as faculty to create such an environment. In order to do that, we must respect our students' minds and give them the tools of inquiry, including writing, that will allow them to educate themselves in the free market of ideas and theories that is the university. We continually need to remind ourselves that we teach not to give students our truths, but to make it possible for them to discover their own.

Political activity and controversial opinions swirl around all new students as soon as they set foot on campus at any major university, and they have every chance to become active in any causes they choose. They're hardly deprived of stimulus or a chance to express themselves. They can also choose from a broad range of courses on all cultures and philosophies once they get beyond required courses. But when we use required freshman courses to force students to engage with complex social issues on which they are uninformed and with which they may not be mature enough to cope honestly, we stifle rather than foster the very critical abilities that we profess to value. A