

Rhetoric and composition: provost meddles in E306 decision

The strangely intemperate letter by Prof. Budziszewski of the Department of Government ("English or indoctrination?" "Firing Line," Friday) continues the grave misrepresentations of the new E306 being made to the general community by certain of our UT colleagues. Prof. Budziszewski unblushingly calls the new E306 "indoctrination in bigotry" and assails potential 306 instructors for "serving the ends of hatred." He concludes that the course's aims and methods are as doctrinaire as the Ku Klux Klan's; he represents his own discourse as objective scholarly dissent.

We were not involved in planning the new E306, although we enthusiastically supported it and deplore Provost Fonken's intervention in the internal curricular affairs of our department. We are writing now because there is reason to believe that the provost's interference, which resulted in the course's suspension, was based upon the same misrepresentation of E306 that have bombarded readers of *The Daily Texan* during the past few weeks and that have been replicated in newspapers around the state and in letters sent to UT alumni organizations. It seems as if the belittling of E306 has evolved from local objections by a few members of the University community to a carefully planned

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"We deplore Provost Fonken's intervention in the internal affairs of our department."

and well-financed operation with a national agenda.

The result has been that we no longer recognize E306 from the caricatures of it. Nor do we recognize our colleagues who designed this course in the degrading portrayals of them as "secretive" and as "liars" who "cannot be trusted." We would be leery about having our own children take the mind-control course described by Prof. Budziszewski. When Prof. Daniel Bonevac of the Department of Philosophy referred to the new E306 on a TV talk show last week as "Marxism 306," anti-306 rhetoric reached a level of hysteria that can no longer be silently tolerated.

Much of the misinformation about the new course flows from "A Statement of Academic Concern," a petition published two weeks ago in *The Daily Texan*. It is important to understand what these petitioners disarmingly called their "academic concern,"

especially since they perpetuate the academically false notion that the new E306 is something other than a writing course. Their primary academic concern is not simply that the course may be in the vanguard of a new multicultural curriculum, but rather that faculty in the humanities may stake a claim to participating in American civic discourse when it confronts such public issues as, say, racism and sexism. In other words, these petitioners would have you believe that only a few academic disciplines are entitled to address, at what they call "the college level," "the complex legal, sociological, psychological and historical issues" at stake here. You can tell from the adjectives which disciplines these are. Those of us who study literature and writing are not, in their view, part of American social practices. Our fellow academics even doubt that English instructors can "judge the adequacy of student arguments in these matter," a statement so disparaging that it posits us as significantly less competent than general readers of *Newsweek*, *The New York Times* or even *TV Guide*. The final academic concern of these petitioners are from either the College of Engineering or the Department of Psychology, not heretofore hotbeds of writing instruction. Indeed, some of these are the same faculty members who, several

years ago, refused to teach E346 (Writing Across the Disciplines) because, as they said at the time, only Departments of English could teach writing.

The authors of this statement, a minuscule fraction of the UT faculty, want the University to believe the following narrative: 1) that there is one and only one way to teach composition, 2) that virtually everybody is more expert than the collective English department in deciding what way that is, and 3) that the new E306 violates their own self-serving definition of academic "property" and propriety. Virtually all objections to the new E306 come down to this: that it distorts "the fundamental purpose of a composition class ... by subordinating instruction in writing to the discussion of social issues."

Let us point out, just for the record, that it would be virtually impossible for our course to do this. To start with, one of the required texts for this "new" course is a handbook on logic, rhetoric and modes of argumentation written by two of the faculty members from the English department who signed the petition, the same handbook that has been used in this course for some years. The reason for this continuity is that E306 will not have a new curriculum, only an altered syllabus, one that coordinates long-used pedagogical

strategies. Virtually any research paper — and E306 has long required one — addresses social issues, and the reason for this is that writing itself is always subordinated to life in the polis, the degree of readiness or subordination being largely keyed to an author's cultural self-awareness and reading/writing skills.

The opponents of E306 want you to believe a further scenario: that the Department of English, which has about 90 faculty members (or more than many schools and colleges in the University), is of one mind politically and that the name for this unanimity is "Marxism." Moreover, they would have you believe that this all-powerful, single-minded faculty would impose its will surreptitiously upon 50 to 60 graduate students, who would then teach the course without resistance. They want you to think that the department has effected an un-American abridgement of academic freedom and the First Amendment by using standardized texts and required assignments in the first year of a new course taught almost exclusively by graduate students who have never before taught a course of their own. Finally, they want you to believe that the UT community will be indoctrinated and the entire mentalité of Texas altered because 50 percent of the freshman class —

for that is how many actually end up taking E306 — must pass a three-hour writing course.

Past students of E306 will recognize in this scenario a prima-facie case that is deeply illogical, even absurd; others may hear more chilling echoes in this rhetoric of innuendo. We believed that both the provost and UT President William Cunningham would have recognized how risible it is to suggest that a department as large and diverse as English could concoct, even if it wanted to, a "single hegemonic view" (as the petitioners call it) on any issue. But they didn't. Instead, something induced them to short-circuit not only E306 but also their normal process of scholarly inquiry and skeptical analysis of the data. We call upon the 1,944 UT faculty members who did not sign the "Statement of Academic Concern" to join us in helping to clarify this increasingly reckless controversy. Much of the confusion and a good deal of the misinformation could be allayed if Provost Fonken would simply explain clearly his reasons for interrupting normal curricular procedures and publicly affirm his faith in faculty governance and in the value of innovative, challenging courses like the new E306.

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