

# E306 reforms would protect students from indoctrination

Editor's note: This is the second of two columns on the proposed changes in E306 by two of the changes' primary advocates.

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We hope Tuesday's column ("New E306 keeps commitment to writing.") will alleviate the concern of those who had feared either that we were simply turning students loose to write about explosive matters or that we were requiring them or their instructors to take a particular position with respect to the matter at hand.

Some readers may still be concerned, however, about the propriety of introducing complex legal matters into a classroom full of 18-year-olds led by people whose background is in literature or composition rather than in law. We ask you to bear in mind that court opinions on matters of public moment routinely appear in *The New York Times* and other national newspapers, on the grounds that such things are naturally and properly the concern of an informed citizenry.

We have taken care to choose cases in which the outcome was not determined by narrow legal "technicalities" that only a lawyer could understand. We have been at great pains to make clear to all

who would have been teaching this course that instructors should actively encourage *all* students — not just those with whom they happen to agree personally — to make the best possible arguments for the positions they hold.

We are now in a better position to explain the controversy surrounding the proposed changes in E306. First, we want to make it clear that the controversy is not — or at least hasn't been until now — about the syllabus at all. It's about the assumptions presumed to be underlying it, or, to be more precise, about the assumptions underlying different conceptions of writing instruction. As in other disciplines, there are competing ideas about how best to teach writing; in part at least, the controversy over E306 is about those competing ideas.

One school of thought is represented by professors James Duban and John Ruskiewicz. They have argued that it doesn't matter what students write about; the important thing, they say, is for students to *write*, and to have complete

freedom to choose those topics in which they are most interested and from which they derive greatest inspiration. According to Professor Duban, "The topics that motivate students to write should receive only passing attention from the instructor ..." (*The Daily Texan*, Aug. 9).

Instead, says Duban, writing instructors should concentrate upon "the primary task" of providing "intensive feedback about grammar, style, tone, form, cogency, organization and audience" (*The Daily Texan*, Aug. 9). As evidence of the success of his approach, Duban offers the example of a young woman who produced a compelling essay analyzing a painting. We don't doubt that the essay was a good one, but the example is beside the point. As Duban himself says, the author of that essay was not a student in E306.

While Duban touts the handy "checklist of 56 editorial categories that [he] regularly emphasize[s] when teaching freshmen," Professor Ruskiewicz takes a less reductive view of writing instruction, and an apparently more generous view of students. According to Ruskiewicz, "first-year students develop most effectively as writers when they are

introduced to *processes* of composing that make them competent to handle the rhetoric of various academic assignments — from analyses of causality to evaluative pieces to research papers and exploratory essays" (*The Daily Texan*, July 24).

Professor Ruskiewicz seems to acknowledge that a concern for "the correctness and power of language" should be subordinate to "the logic and validity of arguments." However, he still holds that the actual *content* of the arguments whose logic and validity he proposes to examine is irrelevant.

At first glance, there is something attractive about attending to form and leaving substance to take care of itself. It seems to give students the freedom to think and speak as *they* see fit, and not according to the dictates of some authoritarian teacher. But it's only the illusion of freedom; it is in fact a kind of terrible *indifference*. This approach to writing instruction, embodied in the familiar five-paragraph essay, tells students that what they say doesn't matter, that their ideas aren't worth taking seriously, that they themselves aren't worth taking seriously.

The new syllabus for E306 embodies a different approach to

writing instruction, an approach which has gained widespread acceptance in recent years. There is now growing recognition that an emphasis on content is not inconsistent with the previous emphasis on writing processes. The new syllabus incorporates the very kinds of writing assignments Ruskiewicz has called for. The syllabus strengthens the commitment to teaching the writing process by linking those processes more closely to content.

The point we are making is that, contrary to what professors Ruskiewicz, Duban and Alan Gribben have claimed, there is nothing ideologically or politically neutral about their belief that writing instruction should be concerned only with form and process, and not with what students are actually writing about or the positions they take. In practice, this approach to writing leads to a curious and stultifying paradox. We encounter many students who come to the University believing simultaneously (1) that the purpose of writing is to express personal opinions, which cannot be criticized because everyone is entitled to an opinion; and (2) that it is never appropriate to speak in the first person. As Thoreau says, "[They] commonly do not re-

member that it is always ... the first person that is speaking." And if they do not remember that, students will be frighteningly unable to distinguish their own beliefs from the beliefs of others.

People who cannot tell the difference between what they believe and what someone else believes are indeed ripe for indoctrination. It is our job as teachers to help students develop the means to *resist* indoctrination. We do this by guiding students to discover that *every* position is subject to critique no matter how comprehensive or impartial it appears to be.

The philosopher-scientist Gregory Bateson has said that "All receipt of information is necessarily receipt of news of *difference*." We take this to mean that difference is the basis of all perception.

The crucial question, then, is about how we respond to differences. Racist incidents of the kind that took place at Round-Up during the weekend of April 6 are one way. Ironically, the Lower Division English Policy Committee had met just three days earlier to begin discussing the proposal for "Writing About Difference."

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