

Guest Opinion

Dr. Alan Gribben

E 306: Oppressing English Composition

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Guest Contributor

On September 14th, the U.T. English Department faculty met in public session to discuss, and finally vote on, the new curriculum for English 306 that has convulsed the campus and gained increasing attention in the state and national press since it was announced last May.

The furor over this reconstitution of the required freshman English composition course had heated up an already-sweltering Austin summer and eventually led to the department chairman's cancelling (on June 25th) a bookstore order for the adopted textbook, Paula Rothenberg's *Racism and Sexism: An Integrated Study*. Critics had lambasted that social sciences reader as woefully inadequate for an English course and unfairly distorted in its portrayal of race/class/gender themes in American culture. Even Chairman Joseph Kruppa acknowledged, in an interview with the *Houston Chronicle*, that Rothenberg's textbook could be characterized as "radical," but he told *The Daily Texan* that the department would still proceed to standardize the course under the title "Writing About Difference." "We're going to do the same thing with the class, but we'll be working with a packet," he said.

As the time for fall classes drew nearer, however, the contents of what came to be dubbed "The Mystery Packet" remained unknown except to a few committee members. A signal of deepening faculty disenchantment with this hastily designed course appeared on July 18th in the form of "A Statement of Academic Concern"—a large advertisement in *The Daily Texan* signed by fifty-six professors from more than a dozen departments. The list included two former directors of the U.T. freshman English composition program and the former dean of the College of Liberal Arts. Five days later Dean Standish Meacham issued a memorandum postponing the new course for one year while expressing continued support for the "imaginative and exciting" concept of a required writing course about "diversity and difference".

Professor Kruppa told the *Houston Chronicle* that he was "sickened" by the decision, which he claimed was the "result of misrepresentation and misinformation on the part of a few people of bad intentions." He vowed to work to "overcome a campaign mounted by a few zealots." To a columnist for the *Houston Post* he noted that "opposition to the course was a campaign of misinformation spearheaded by two right-wing faculty members," and said that some opponents of the new course "are ultra right-wingers who are members of the National Association of Scholars." Rothenberg's *Racism and Sexism*, he explained, was merely "a possible textbook we were considering at one stage." Dean Meacham informed the same columnist that English 306 previously "didn't have a direction beyond the fact that something was to be written.... Individual instructors have been allowed more or less a kind of freedom to introduce whatever material they think is appropriate."

If At First You Don't Succeed...

Although the dean's memorandum of July 23rd had called for a year-long period of "planning and consultation," Professor Kruppa waited only two weeks into the fall term, and scheduled no preliminary discussions, before calling for a departmental vote on the proposal. Inasmuch as the Chairman's summons to the meeting did not mention a mail-ballot, or even a secret ballot, it was not surprising that only sixty members of the ninety-plus-member English faculty assembled on September 14th to vote on a subject of such acrimonious dispute. Since the Chairman had recently appointed two of the staunchest proponents of the revised E306 as members of the Executive Committee that determines faculty salaries and promotions (and which was already internally divided over the issue), only the promise of secrecy could have obtained the largest possible turnout. Even during the meeting the Chairman resisted entreaties for a mail-ballot, which would have recorded the opinions of all instructors. At least the members present narrowly ap-

proved (30-27) a secret paper ballot for those in attendance.

The "debate" at the meeting became almost a charade, so predetermined seemed the outcome. John Ruskiewicz pleaded for pilot sections to test the validity of the course, but received the reply that there was inadequate time remaining before January (despite the fact that the department *had* been prepared, paradoxically, to implement this same course for thousands of freshman students when fall classes started last August 29th).

James Duban eloquently reviewed the deficiencies of the proposed course, to little avail. One professor opined that grammar and style—the formal instruction of which virtually disappears in the new E306—are rarely learned in classrooms; instead, students are ideally motivated by such topics as racism and sexism and then discover techniques of mechanics and diction, on their own, to improve their forms of expression.

I pointed out the imbalance of the reading materials (not a single success story about minorities or women), the guilt-inducing intention of such essays as Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege and Male Privilege," and the unsatisfactory function of legal briefs of courtroom decisions as the basis for an English course. I called for the adoption of exemplary prose models rather than such selectively chosen political messages. But one faculty

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member joked about whether opponents of the course would prefer a course based on "Sameness" rather than "Difference," and another ridiculed the notion that a basic English course like E306 is analogous to an introductory Chemistry course, carrying with it a similar responsibility to prepare students for advanced courses requiring requiring fundamental skills.

Members of the press were present, and so an elaborate pretense of (strained) civility was mustered for the sake of appearances. The Chairman ultimately gained the mandate he had sought so arduously, a sad tribute to the radicalization of a once-diversified department: 46 English faculty members endorsed the idea of what some people are already calling "Oppression English," 11 dissidents voted against it, and 3 individuals abstained from voting. Applause broke out at this victory over those who had the temerity to ask for freedom of choice, and who sought something resembling a traditional composition course as an option for students and faculty. In the name of so-called "diversity," all alternatives to a rigidly standardized topic ("difference") and method ("argumentation") were eliminated by a department that once prided itself on its individualistic character and its contributions in preparing students for courses of study in other departments and colleges.

Several weeks later, a *Daily Texan* editorial by Philosophy Professor Douglas Kellner offered a hyper-

bolic reading of the E306 controversy. According to this view, the new course was not postponed because people recognized its intrinsic potential for racial and sexual politics, or because it neglected traditional instruction in style and mechanics, but as the result of a "well-orchestrated right-wing offensive" against an innocuous course, "part of a nationwide rightist attack on educational changes."

That NASTy Distortion

Professor Kellner's description of the recently founded National Association of Scholars is ludicrously distorted. In reality, the group endeavors to become, in President Stephen H. Balch's words in 1988, "a movement to redeem higher education from intellectual and moral servitude to forces having little to do with life of the mind or the transmission of knowledge." This morale-building organization of professors, graduate students, and college administrators has undertaken important goals: defending "rational discourse as the foundation of academic life in a free society" and encouraging "a renewed assertiveness among academics who value reason, democracy, and an open intellectual life."

Most members of the local chapter of the National Association of Scholars presumably oppose the revamped curriculum for E306 because of its abolition of choices for instructors and students, its slanted and restricted range of readings, its abandonment of key elements of traditional freshman writing courses, and its immense potential for indoctrination in a required course. But the NAS bugbear conjured up recently by campus leftists was hardly what "defeated" the initial attempt to install this course; the actual cause was a developing awareness among faculty, students, administrators, alumni, and taxpayers that the new E306 was a bad idea whose time (fortunately) has not come. Yet rather than reexamine the doctrinaire tenets of a course already unpopular before it was offered, its proponents prefer to rail about the purported menace of a national conspiracy.

Two enormous questions now confront the U.T. campus. Can its English Department, adroitly in step with radicalized academic departments across the country but crucially *out* of step with the needs and wishes of many faculty members and students at U.T. as well as most citizens in the state who support public higher education, succeed in this presumptuous move to "reeducate" freshman students and cheat them out of a true course in composition? And can this happen in 1990, a year when Massachusetts Democrats have just selected as their gubernatorial candidate a former U.T. dean and present NAS member, John Silber, famous for an uncompromising integrity regarding academic standards?

We shall find out.

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