

E346: The debate continues

English course fails to be discipline-specific

Editor's note: This column was co-signed by 13 professors in the Department of English.

By Wayne A. Rebhorn

In the last few days there has been a vigorous debate over the recent decision of the University administration to postpone the implementation of E 346K, the upper-division composition course, for current students and for students who will enroll next year at the University. We members of the English department faculty support this decision. We also urge that the discussions which will surely occur during the period of postponement seriously consider the many, often intractable problems associated with the course. For although E 346K is well-intentioned, it is, in our estimate, based on an educational premise which it fails to implement, and it is — and will continue to be — a staffing and logistical nightmare. This letter should not be construed as an attack on the value and validity of teaching composition, whether at the lower- or upper-division level, nor should it be seen as an indication of our inability or unwillingness to continue to teach students how to improve their writing, something we have all been doing for many years. But it does express our reluctance to endorse a course which is too narrowly conceived and technocratic and which should not properly be considered the exclusive responsibility of the English department.

Theoretically, E 346K is a discipline-specific writing course which upper-division students, having settled on a major, would find valuable because of its direct relationship to their field of study, and which they would consequently be

highly motivated to take. However, as presently taught, the course is offered in three general variants — humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. None is truly discipline-specific. Nor could they be, since a course aimed at students in chemistry, physics, biology and so on, for instance, could not possibly allow the students in one of those disciplines to write in its specific language. Instead, such a course, lacking in real content, could at best offer students training in general, belle-lettristic writing *about* (not *in*) science, a laudable goal perhaps, but certainly not what the course was intended to be. Moreover, to students it must doubtless appear a repetition, at a somewhat higher level perhaps, of the training they received in E306, the freshman composition course.

If one responds to the preceding argument by suggesting that E346K be made truly discipline-specific, that variants in chemistry and zoology, sociology and geography, English and art history be offered, one runs into a different, equally intractable problem, based this time not on an incorrect pedagogical assumption, but one of incorrect staffing. The English department simply does not have personnel qualified to teach writing courses in all the different disciplines studied here at the University, and it is highly unlikely that it could ever assemble such a staff.

Finally, if E 346K by its nature presents us with an insoluble staffing problem, it is also a logistical nightmare. Students sign up for sections of the course to suit their schedules rather than their fields of study, so that a humanities variant of the course, for example, may well be filled with majors in business, the natural scienc-

es and the social sciences.

Although we are critical of E 346K, we would like to end this letter with a positive statement, for even though the course has been temporarily suspended, the education of students will not necessarily suffer. Recognizing the general responsibility of the *entire* University community to provide instruction in writing, the University recently began requiring all students to take six hours of courses with a substantial writing component, three of which must be at the upper-division level. Students thus have available to them — or should have to them — courses concerned with writing in each and every discipline at the University, courses which, in a sense, render E 346K redundant. Since these courses are actually *in* students' major fields, there can be no complaint that they are a mere repetition of lower-division work. Moreover, since they are taught by professors trained in those disciplines, rather than by well intentioned non-specialists from the English department, there can be no criticism of

the qualifications of the staff to teach those courses. Finally, since they are courses within the students' majors and often required by those majors for graduation, the logistical problem associated with E 346K will be minimized or will simply vanish. Thus, to postpone the implementation of E 346K could actually work to the students' benefit. It could allow the University as a whole to do what it is already on record as having committed itself to do — provide all students with a professional training in writing that is truly discipline-specific.

Rebhorn is a professor of English.

Literature, composition can be taught in same class

By Larry Carver

James Kinneavy's arguments against postponing the implementation of the E 346K requirement (*Texan*, Feb. 20) surprised me. In a Department of English Executive Committee meeting Feb. 12 when responding to the announcement that Chairman William Sutherland had asked the administration to postpone the requirement for the course, Kinneavy said: "Bill, I understand. Although I oppose it, if I were in your position, I would do the same thing."

Equally surprising was Kinneavy's censure of "E 303." There is, of course, no "E 303." Kinneavy means HMN 303/E 306, a variant of E 306 cross-listed with the Humanities Program and a course set up under Kinneavy's directorship of the freshman English program. Although Kinneavy makes many other and more important errors in his column, I want to address specifically what he says about HMN 303/E 306 because I direct the Humanities Program under whose auspices it is taught; I believe this course to be a most valuable educational experience for

students and faculty alike, one that should become a model for freshman English.

Kinneavy claims that a "small segment of entering freshmen take E 303 instead of E 306." This semester the "small segment" is 26 percent, 12 out of 46 sections of E 306 being cross-listed with humanities. According to Kinneavy, the course "covers eight to 10 major literary or philosophical texts" and is a "literary course." In truth the readings from the course do come from literature and philosophy, but also from history, folklore, the social sciences, fine arts and the sciences. Kinneavy admits that the course "requires themes based on these readings" but writes that it is not a "course devoted primarily to composition." My students in HMN 303/E 306 would find these two statements contradictory and the last untrue. For Kinneavy, I believe, they are neither. The word "primarily" is the key to his logic and to what concerns him about this course and English courses in general.

Without E 346K there are, he contends, no other courses "devoted primarily to writing in

the Department of English." For Kinneavy, a course must focus on the mechanics of writing and the formal concerns of rhetoric to be primarily a composition course. And if the course uses one of his textbooks, so much the better. To teach writing by subordinating mechanics to content, to stress reading, is to neglect composition in favor of "literature."

I can understand Kinneavy's concerns, and no doubt some English courses do slight writing, but the overwhelming number do not. And to criticize a course such as HMN 303/E 306 for not being a composition course because it emphasizes content while teaching writing skills is to skew the truth. But rhetoricians, it seems, from the days of Socrates on down have never been much concerned with the truth. In the spring of 1981, Kinneavy, meeting with a group of us then teaching the course, told us: "I think it is a splendid idea." He was right then, just as he was right to recognize, at least before some audiences, that E 346K should be postponed.

Carver is an associate professor of English.

Technical majors need E346K skills

I am appalled at the postponement of English 346K. Every student that graduates from college is expected to be able to write precisely and fluently when he goes to work for a company. Unfortunately, graduates of the University of Texas at Austin will be unable to do so. It is a real shame that students of one of the top universities in the country will be allowed to graduate with such a deficiency.

It is bad enough that a substantial writing class is no longer required, but now it will not even be offered to those who want to learn to write well. I know that I need to learn how to write a good report, because I will be required to write reports as an electrical engineer. I took E 306 as a freshman and learned nothing, even though I tried my hardest. The emphasis in E 316K is on literature, not on writing. English 346K is a very important course that would teach writing as its main and only objective.

To those few senior professors who are advocating the elimination of E 346K: Don't you care that graduates of this university will not be able to write as they should? You are directly responsible for allowing students to graduate without writing skills and for giving this university a bad name.

I propose a petition to allow a substantial writing course specifically for technical majors, to be offered at least as an elective. If E 346K must be eliminated, at least the University can offer E 317 (technical writing) — and other courses as electives. Postponement of the course until 1986 will wreak havoc on students' course plans and it will create a bottleneck of people wishing to take the course in 1986.

John Babcock, electrical engineering

Ad hominem arguments not fair play

When the controversy about the status of E 346K began, I made a vow to myself not to enter into the fierce public debate about the problems in the Department of English. I felt that there would be enough combat and chaos without whatever contribution I might make. I am breaking that vow because I am tremendously disappointed to see that on both sides of the debate some of the main weapons being used are *ad hominem* arguments.

It does no good for anyone to attribute motive to the people on the other side, whether that attribution involves characterizing those people supposedly "against" E 346K as "overpaid, underworked literati" or those people supposedly "for" E 346K as "our rhetoric and composition faculty members hav(ing) a financial interest in 346K because their potentially lucrative textbooks might be adopted on a mass scale."

As a graduate in the department interested in *both* literature and rhetoric, I submit that neither of these characterizations is accurate *or* relevant. There are many issues involved in the problems facing the Department of English, and there is no space even to begin to summarize them here. Some of us hope, however, that the personal weapons will be put away so that the debate can be carried on with *evidence*, the proper tool of argumentation for *all* academics.

Thomas C. Reber, English

Unite to fight the menace to E 346K

Okay folks, what *is* going on? Where is the student uprising, the concern over the recent decapitation of our proud English department? Suddenly, all's quiet on the Longhorn Front. This is *our* university, *our* education and our apathy strikes in regards to this serious matter. If our first priority is our education, then let's stop quibbling over Josh; let's stop worrying about the sexuality of our blue-jean clad classmates; instead, let's come together and fight for a cause that does have an immediate impact. If the English program falls apart as it is doing now, the apathy of the students is as much to blame as the short-sightedness of William Sutherland and chums. Please, continue writing Firing Line letters of protest, express your concern to your English lecturers and professors. Let's get serious on education for a moment. We need unity and action. Now!

Cheryl M. Welch, secondary English education