

Literary specialists unable to handle technical writing

Anyone following the latest controversy from the UT Department of English may well have wondered why people immersed in literary studies feel so adamant about controlling writing courses.

We might take this even further by questioning why people devoted to literature should traditionally have dominated (often as a sideline) the teaching of practical writing skills, particularly when most writing that goes on in the world has nothing to do with literature.

Teaching for over 25 years in English and engineering departments has helped me see the shortcomings of this tradition. Coming from the UT Department of English in 1985, I was invited to set up a technical writing program for students in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering.

Immediately, I encountered an appreciation and support from engineering faculty familiar with the demands of an industrial world. Their enthusiasm for what I was to do far surpassed any I had enjoyed in my years in English departments. Moreover, I soon found I was no maverick — many engineering colleges around the country support their own writing programs.

Why should engineering departments teach their students to write in the ways they must when they graduate? In 1985, when he fired some 60 writing teachers and drastically reduced the department's writing courses, the then-chairman of our Department of English told me that technical writing had become "too technical" to continue to be offered in his department.

A rationalization, perhaps, but he was right. Few English doctorates, including those who become expediently born-again technical writing experts because of the job market, are qualified to teach the writing required in a technical field without having some extensive training or experience.

Power-conscious English faculty probably will assert that anyone in an English department can learn to teach specialized forms of writing. After all, I did. But I did it by teach-

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ing unprestigious "generic" technical writing classes for years, by attending EE classes for two years, and by working part-time at Texas Instruments. Few teachers have the encouragement or incentive to do such things while ensconced in an English department that myopically views literary criticism as the summum bonum (which it is — for the minute group of mortals who earn their living by doing it).

I'm reminded at this point of the Ph.D. student in medieval literature who four years ago landed a job in another university's English department. Besides teaching his specialty, he would be "stuck with a section of tech writing," and wondered if he might drop by my ECE office for half an hour to find out what to do. I had myself been demoted from assistant professor to lecturer by our Department of English in 1982 primarily because of teaching writing courses.

Technical fields deserve much better than this in the vital matter of specialized writing. Both academia and industry must ask whether literary folks are qualified to discuss the writing a working engineer does. For example, how competent are they to employ the metaphors an engineering student must relate to, such as accessibility, retrievability, control and noise?

What knowledge do they have of writing engineering proposals, specifications, patent applications or software documentation? How capable are they of jumping into the intricacies of technical illustration, abstracting and indexing, visual literacy, or the non-linear nature of on-line documentation?

Parallel questions might well be raised regarding the practical needs of other professions — professions that are sadly short-changed if they leave the teaching of technical communication skills to departments focused primarily on literature.

The engineering profession at least — where so much depends on competent communication — has been demanding more from us for some time, as evidenced by accreditation requirements and our own College of Engineering's now nationally-recognized technical communication program.

In industry, millions of dollars are spent each year on the written

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The administration's recent adoption of a separate Division of Rhetoric and Composition will significantly change the nature of writing instruction at the University. Given the far-reaching effects the division will have on undergraduate education and the Department of English, we present these different views on writing instruction. It was by coincidence that we received them the same day.

word and oral presentations. Many engineers will write more during their careers than most English graduates, and unclear or ineffective writing can have dire consequences. The *Challenger* disaster has been seen fundamentally as a communication problem.

Industry constantly needs winning proposals, exact reports and unambiguous procedures — that is, accurate technology transfer. The public requires from engineers readable user manuals, clear warning and product-liability statements, and comprehensible impact statements. Again, the equivalent could be said of other professions.

These real-world needs make the teaching of writing far too complex and vital a task to be pawned off to traditional English departments whose primary allegiances are to literary concerns.

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New division has nothing to offer writing education

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Two assumptions about student writing skills were evident at the Oct. 19 University Council meeting on the proposed Division of Rhetoric and Composition, and are widespread throughout the UT community.

These assumptions are: 1) that the new division, mandated by Chancellor William Cunningham in one of his last acts as UT president, is seriously intended to ensure that University graduates can write competently; and 2) that English Department faculty do not currently teach writing or take writing instruction seriously. Both assumptions are demonstrably false, and, until this community

— a change in the administrative structure that oversees writing courses.

I have many reasons for strongly believing that the separation of composition from the larger disciplinary context in which professors and advanced students of rhetorical history, theory and practice work will diminish rather than enhance the quality of English 306.

But even if we assume the new administrative structure will improve the course, it is a statistical fact that freshman English, whoever administers it, has precious little to do with the general quality of undergraduate writing. The reason is simply that 80 to 90 percent of the students who receive bachelor's degrees from this University do not take freshman English here. They place out or transfer in, while two-thirds of those who do take English 306 do not graduate from UT.

A serious campaign to improve student writing, then, would begin by turning current exemption practices inside out. No student could place out of a UT composition requirement; rather, on the basis of test scores and prior course work, every student (including transfers) would place in to one or another level of composition class.

This, of course, would entail a large institutional commitment of resources as well as cooperation, and possible sacrifice, by departments across the campus. But even such an effort would not dramatically improve undergraduate writing. To understand why not, you have to know how the second assumption that I mentioned above is mistaken.

When UT juniors and seniors write poorly, they do so for a very good reason: because they can succeed in most of their college courses and majors without having to write well. I believe my colleagues in other departments when they

tell me their students can't write, but I don't share their experience.

We have more than 1,300 English majors, most of whom — without ever having taken freshman composition — write competently and many of whom write superbly. They can write because thoughtful, lucid, substantive written expression is requisite for success in their discipline and because, in course after course with my colleagues and me, the writings of others are read and analyzed, and their own writings are produced, critiqued, graded and discussed.

Assigning, reading and critiquing student essays is intensive labor. Only when it is essential disciplinary labor for every UT department will all UT graduates write competently. Most students are busy and pragmatic people, and as long as ineffective writing does not impede them from reaching their academic goals, they know that effective writing is not seriously valued in their discipline, however much the press and their professors fulminate. So, why should they go to the considerable trouble to learn to do it and to keep doing it?

I understand that sustained written expression is more crucial to undergraduate training in some majors than it is in others, but it is — or can be made to be — part of all of them. A few faculty in most disciplines do demand and evaluate student writing, but every professor on this campus is qualified to teach and critique written expression pertaining to his subject area.

General improvement of student writing at UT depends on the sorts of commitment, by institution and department alike, that I have outlined. At this moment, I doubt that the University has the will to make such commitments.

Until it does, however, some may take comfort in the fact that the students who choose to study language and literature in the Department of English are learning to write, as they always have.

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