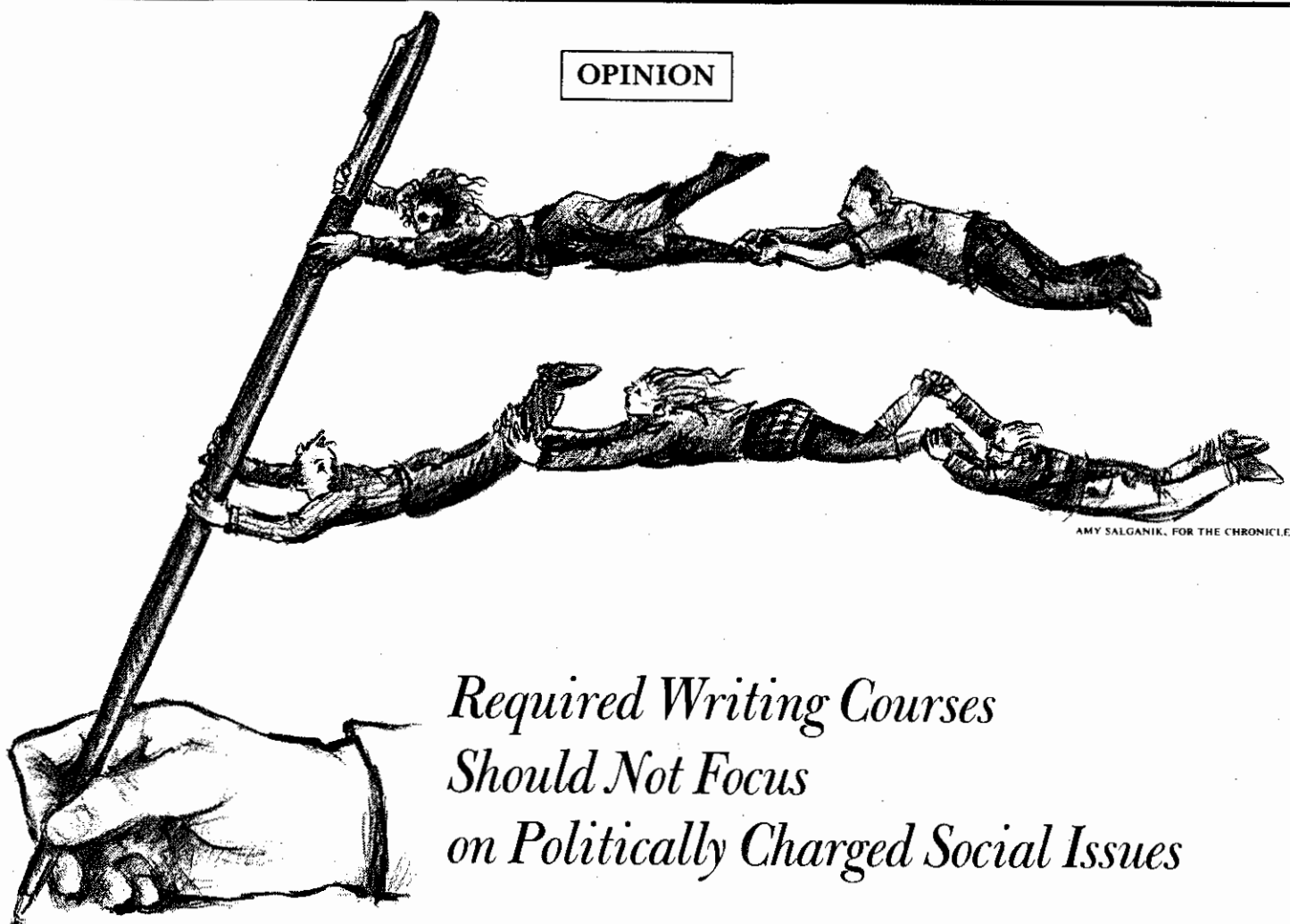


Section 2

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OPINION



AMY SALGANIK, FOR THE CHRONICLE

Required Writing Courses Should Not Focus on Politically Charged Social Issues

By Maxine C. Hairston

CONTROVERSY over a proposal at the University of Texas at Austin to make its required freshman writing class into a course on racism and sexism recently spilled over into the national news media. Although the plan was postponed for a year to allow further debate, many of its critics believe that the whole attempt to focus freshman English on discrimination is part of a larger movement by the academic far left to impose a "politically correct" orthodoxy on colleges and universities nationwide.

However valid that political interpretation may be—and I think the content of the debate at Texas indicates it is at least partially correct—I want to voice other objections, both pedagogical and ethical, to turning a required freshman English-composition course into a forum for debate on social issues.

As a writing specialist and teacher for 20 years and as a former president of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, I believe required college writing courses should teach students to:

- Use writing as a tool for discovering and organizing knowledge.
- Become critical thinkers by learning to articulate their ideas in writing and then refine those ideas through revision.
- Become confident writers who use logic and rhetoric to communicate their thoughts clearly.

Required writing courses should *not* be "service" or "skills" courses taught by the English department for the benefit of other departments. The outdated view that writing courses have no real content encourages attempts, such as the one at the University of Texas, to take them over for other purposes. Often in the past that purpose was to teach literature; now it's to

raise social consciousness. But writing courses taught by properly trained teachers do have important content: learning how to use language to express ideas effectively.

Many supporters of the proposal to make racism and sexism the focus of English 306 at Texas want to believe that those of us who oppose it are right-wing extremists without a social conscience. Or they see us as academic reactionaries who want to take freshman English back to a mechanistic course more concerned with semicolons and split infinitives than with teaching students to communicate effectively. We

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are neither. We are concerned professionals who do not enjoy opposing our colleagues in public, but who feel the proposed course is pedagogically unsound, a retreat from everything we've learned about teaching writing in the past 15 years.

WE DO NOT BELIEVE required writing courses built around politically charged social issues can achieve the goals I've outlined for students learning to write. One reason is that we know students develop best as writers when they are allowed to write on something they care about. Having them write about other people's ideas doesn't work well.

Another reason these courses will fail is

that most freshmen enter composition courses with great apprehension about grades. Convinced that they are in a high-risk situation, they are reluctant to take risks. They will be especially reluctant to express their opinions on controversial issues, particularly if their radars are picking up clear signals about what their instructors' views are. Under such circumstances, they will not think critically or write honestly.

BUT MY STRONGEST pedagogical objection to the proposed course is that racism and sexism are deep, complex psychological and social problems that cannot be understood or solved quickly or easily. Any teacher who hopes to speak knowledgeably about these problems in a classroom or comment productively on students' attempts to write about them needs to understand the reasons for their strength in our culture. If such courses are to be taught responsibly, they must be taught by trained faculty members from disciplines like sociology, psychology, or cultural anthropology, not by English teachers. Being passionate about the issues doesn't confer the expertise to deal with them in the classroom.

Few regular faculty members in English departments have had time to train themselves as specialists on racism and sexism. Even less prepared are the graduate students in English who teach 95 per cent of the required writing courses at Texas and most other universities. Graduate teaching assistants are the last people who can afford time to prepare themselves to teach these courses; they are the last ones who should be put into the difficult and high-risk situation such courses foster. They are the people most likely to be harmed by

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the complaints from students, parents, and alumni that such courses will certainly trigger.

My ethical objections to turning any required freshman writing course into a class on racism and sexism are equally strong.

FIRST, I believe that to do so seriously encroaches on the academic freedom of those who must take the course and those who must teach it. Mandating political content for a course that students must pass in order to graduate severely lim-

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its their freedom of expression, and to say that the proposed content is not political is simply specious. The teachers are equally restricted, especially if they’re graduate students. If they feel unqualified to teach the material or believe—as many trained and experienced graduate students at Texas do—that the prescribed curriculum will work against their students’ learning to write, they must still conform to the syllabus, even if it goes against their professional judgment and their personal feelings.

Second, I believe the proposed course will work to subvert students’ integrity at the very beginning of their college careers. When forced to write on controversial topics in a high-risk situation, they will opt for survival over honesty. Most will simply parrot their instructors’ views and, predictably, will be rewarded for doing so.

Thus, in their first semester in college they will learn a chilling lesson: Don’t try to think for yourself. Find out what the game is and play it.

Finally, I believe that faculty members are presumptuous and patronizing to assume that students are empty vessels to be filled with their opinions and brought to see the world as they do. We have no right to define students as benighted beings who live in an oppressive culture from which they must be saved.

We’re not missionaries; we’re educators. We teach not to give students our truths but to make it possible for them to discover their own.

WE SHOULD respect our students’ minds and give them the tools of inquiry, including writing, that will allow them to educate themselves in the open bazaar of ideas and theories that is the university.

When we use required freshman courses to force young students to grapple with complex and troubling issues on which they are uninformed and with which they may not be mature enough to cope honestly, we stifle rather than foster the very critical abilities that we profess to value.

Politicizing freshman English is not the solution to social ills either on campus or in society.

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