

4.0326 More on UTexas Writing Course: Part II (1/207)

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Date: Friday, 27 July 1990 6:17am CST
From: John Slatin <EIEB360@UTXVM.BITNET>
Subject: What's Going On At Texas

Short answer: God only knows. Long answer follows.

A number of people have asked for clarification of the circumstances attending my recent posting, "Bad News about the Texas Writing Curriculum" (or whatever I called it). What follows is hastily composed, on-line, and therefore longer-winded and messier than it probably ought to be; it is also biased. I am an interested party: a member of the Lower Division English Policy Committee which voted to authorize development of the new syllabus back in April (that is, we voted back in April to authorize...), and a member of the ad hoc group of faculty and graduate students who've spent much of the summer developing the syllabus. I am therefore annoyed at having my work suddenly run into a wall. But I will do my best to describe things as clearly as I know how.

The first thing I need to make clear, I think, is that we teach approximately 100-120 sections of the first-semester writing course a year, with each section enrolling roughly 25 students (that's the maximum allowed). Since 1985, when the 66 Lecturers were fired in a single coup by then-chairman W.O.S. Sutherland (who approached the Executive Committee the following day and asked for ratification of his act; and got it; I am ashamed to say I was on the EC at that time and voted with him despite my reservations)-- since what's come to be known as the Texas Massacre, virtually all sections of our required first-semester writing course have been taught by graduate students with the title of Assistant Instructor (i.e., they've completed their MAs and are working toward Ph.D.). That's still the case. Until recently, the "syllabus" they followed, more or less, was more or less a syllabus written by myself and a colleague and the then-Freshman English Policy Committee (the Lower Division Program is a conflation of two formerly separate ones, Freshman English [Writing] and Sophomore Literature Policy Committee [guess what]; said conflation having been intended to subordinate Freshman Writing to Sophomore Literature and thus restore

the Natural Order of Things, i.e., the demise of writing instruction as a significant aspect of Life In the English Department). The point of all that is that we had, in effect, no mechanisms for supervision and evaluation of writing instruction, no real way of maintaining consistency at any level: material, nature and quality of writing assignments, grading criteria, grading systems-- nothing. I'm entitled to say this because I am in part responsible for having created the situation, or having allowed it to go on, or something. When Brodkey joined the faculty and assumed the Directorship of the Lower Division program, she was quite properly horrified at the state of things (she came to us, as some of you will no doubt know, from the Grad School of Education at Penn; she has a deep and abiding commitment to professionalism in instruction and, unlike me, she actually knows something about what that might mean). What distressed her most was that we had no common syllabus, and therefore nothing to be consistent about (she might of course describe this differently).

During the Spring semester (of this past year), the Lower Division Policy Committee voted to approve the addition of the new DC Heath Anthology of American Literature to the list of texts available for use by Assistant Instructors teaching E 316K, the sophomore introduction to literature course (of which there are 3 flavors right now: Masterworks of British Lit, Masterworks of American Lit, and Masterworks of World Lit-- "world" meaning European, in most cases, and "British" and "American" meaning canonical texts as enshrined in the Norton Anthologies of etc.) While many of us expressed reservations about the Heath anthology (particularly concerning the adequacy of the critical apparatus), the committee voted to approve its adoption as an acceptable alternative to the Norton, which, along with the almost identical (to the Norton) Macmillan anthology, would continue to be available to any AI who preferred it. For those who haven't seen it, the Heath anthology, edited by Paul Lauter, makes a deliberate effort both to expand the corpus of American literature by including the work of Native Americans, Hispanics, African-Americans, and other groups not generally well represented in conventional literature courses (or in the Norton); the Heath anthology is designed to emphasize difference and cultural diversity, while the Norton is designed rather to suggest a common cultural heritage and thus to de-emphasize the marks of difference. One member of the committee expressed disappointment with the Heath anthology on the grounds that in the name of diversity it enshrined a political agenda and disenfranchised European ethnic groups; as a consequence, he voted against the adoption.

Several weeks later, Linda Brodkey called a meeting of the Lower Division English Policy Committee (sorry, I don't have the minutes in front of me so don't have the exact dates; I'll get them if anyone cares). At that meeting, she proposed a new syllabus for the existing first-semester writing course; that syllabus, she said, would center on the theme of difference. Readings would be drawn from civil rights cases pertaining to Titles VII and IX, with supplementary material in Paula S. Rosenberg's collection Sexism and Racism (St. Martin's), a text designed for sociology courses. There would also be a handbook, Hairston and Ruszkiewicz's Scott, Foresman Handbook, and a packet of photocopied material that would include material on exploratory discourse

by James Kinneavy as well as material on argumentation adapted from Stephen Toulmin's work on claims, grounds, and warranting.

Although there had been at least a week's notice about the meeting and its purpose, one member-- the same one who had voted against the D.C. Heath adoption-- missed the meeting, later saying that he had thought it was scheduled for the following day. He sent a memorandum outlining 8 objections to the proposal; the memorandum was circulated to the committee and, though we had already taken a preliminary vote to approve development of the proposed new syllabus, Brodkey re-convened the committee in order to give this member an opportunity to defend his objections in open forum. He did so, and was joined by a second member. Another vote was taken, and this time the result was 4-2 in favor of the proposed new syllabus. I should mention, by the way-- not at all by the way, really-- that Brodkey had already informed both department chair Joseph Kruppa and Dean Standish Meacham of her desire to implement this program, and had received indication of support from them provided that she had the approval of the Lower Division English Policy Committee.

Where are we now... OK, we have a 4-2 vote from the Lower Division English Policy Committee authorizing the development of the new syllabus centering on difference, with readings from the Rothenberg volume Racism and Sexism plus a packet of photocopied materials, plus the Hairston/Ruszkiewicz Handbook. Several committee members, myself included, volunteered to participate in developing the syllabus; later on, an invitation was issued to any graduate student who might be interested to join in the process. The syllabus writing group was composed of four faculty members and eight graduate students; we met at least once a week, beginning in May and continuing until this past Monday, 23 July.

I should also add that early in May, the Chair called a department meeting. At that meeting, a majority of members present expressed an interest in modifying the sophomore literature offerings to reflect the Eurocentric orientation of the current "World" literature variant, and finding a way to broaden the representative character of the courses. Then the meeting was turned over to Brodkey, who outlined the proposed new syllabus for first-year writing course (the goal here was to inform both faculty and graduate students about the planned changes in the syllabus). The associate chair, Wayne Lesser, suggested that the new syllabus would perhaps be more credible in the eyes of the University community (rumblings of protest had been heard from outside the department: the Psychology department was especially incensed that we would consider using a sociology text in an English course; so were some sociologists; so were the two members of the Lower Division Committee who had voted against the syllabus changes and, having lost, had taken their case to the campus newspaper and other campus and off-campus organizations)-- the new syllabus, Lesser suggested, might have more credibility if a number of faculty expressed an interest in teaching it. I raised my hand to volunteer, and was followed by quite a few colleagues: I believe 8 of us were scheduled to teach the new syllabus in the Fall semester, and an approximately equal number had requested to teach the course in Spring 91. It would be impossible to overemphasize the unusual character of this situation: faculty members who for years

had resisted any suggestion that faculty ought to be involved in teaching first-year writing were signing up in large numbers to teach the new syllabus. And they-- we-- were signing up *because* of the new syllabus.

Work on the new syllabus continued throughout May, June, and July. So did opposition. Publicly at least, that opposition was led by Professor Alan Gribben, an Americanist, an expert on Mark Twain, who had in the past served as chair of the Graduate Studies Program-- this was during the "Rhetoric Wars," when the Lecturers were being axed and the Literature Wing was in the ascendancy. Gribben has been writing constantly to the campus newspaper and to the Austin paper, contending that the course represents a form of "thought control" and an attempt by the radical left to politicize what ought to be a course devoted solely to "writing." He has been joined in his crusade by John Ruskiewicz (who has not, however, asked that the Handbook he co-authored with Maxine Hairston be withdrawn from the required texts for the course) and Maxine Hairston (whose public opposition has taken the form of adding her signature to a paid advertisement appearing in the campus newspaper and signed by 55 other faculty members (there are well over 2200 faculty members at UT Austin)-- 7 from the English Department, a multitude from Psychology, and many from various Engineering Departments, all of course *well* known for the abiding interest in writing instruction).

I omitted to say that in early July (I think it was early July; it may have been late June; again, I can get dates if anyone wants them), Brodkey and the syllabus writing group concluded that the Rothenberg text (Sexism and Racism) was unworkable-- not because the opponents of the course continued to demand its removal, but because it did not fit into the syllabus as it was evolving by then; in particular, the essays in Rothenberg's collection didn't provide the kind of contextual material we thought would be most useful in helping students understand the issues at stake in the court cases), and Brodkey and Kruppa acted to withdraw the textbook and rescind the order that had been placed with St. Martin's Press. Now given the vehemence of the opposition to the book (I had spent an hour one afternoon trying to calm the Chair of Psychology, who cornered me at a cocktail reception and seemed headed for a stroke), one would think the announcement that it had been dropped would have met with resounding approval from those who had demanded that it *be* dropped. But the response was instead the now-often-repeated charge that the syllabus writing group was doing its work in "secrecy," and refusing to tell anyone what we were doing.

Now it is true that we had not published either the draft syllabus or the table of contents for the packet of materials with which the Rothenberg text was to be replaced: the draft syllabus was still just that, a draft, not yet coherent in our own minds, not yet ready for publication (and there's no precedent at this University for asking people to publish their syllabi); we were still awaiting receipt of various permissions, so the contents of the readings packet were still unsettled.

On Monday of this week (that's the 23), the syllabus writing group was to meet to hammer out the final details of the syllabus and begin thinking through the orientation program that was to be offered August

20-24 to all those teaching the course. The Department Chairman came to the meeting and read us the memo from Dean Meacham announcing postponement of the syllabus.

Tonight, the local PBS affiliate will air a debate (I guess that's what it is) among Prof. Gribben, speaking for the opposition, and Profs. Elizabeth Fernea (a member of the Lower Division Policy Committee) and Ramon Saldivar, an expert on Mexican-American narrative.

This ain't over by a long shot. I apologize for the inordinate length of this message, and hope it clarifies the circumstances.

John Slatin, UT Austin

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