

E 306 changes bring UT something new — critical thought

Surprise! The University is turning over a new leaf — teaching freshmen to think. In addition to the usual gauntlet chock full of weed-out courses, immense lecture halls and droning professors, this fall's freshmen will face an intellectually stimulating challenge for a change — in the freshmen composition course of all things.

The English Department is re-vamping English 306. Instead of reading and writing essays about writing and whatever random topics happen to be in the textbooks, students will be reading landmark court decisions on civil rights and some essays, poems and narratives on "difference." Out with the usual hodgepodge anthology of traditional essays, deadened discussions from bored

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students and vague notions about writing; in with a unifying theme, classroom debates and a clear path to constructing an essay.

Students will be able to draw (and, more important, critique) from their own experiences, then discuss topics that have direct and deep effects on their lives. And when someone actually has opinions on a topic, writing about that topic comes that much easier.

Teaching students to think is the best way to teach writing. Anyone can blurt out sentences all day long, but to write something worth reading, that the reader will actually remember afterward, requires thinking through and con-

structing an interesting and convincing argument. The most popular and rigorous upper-division writing courses, like John Trimble's E 325M, are structured around this premise.

Not surprisingly, the new, improved E 306 resembles Southwestern University's freshman symposium. Consistently cited by *U.S. News and World Report* as the best liberal arts college in the West, Southwestern requires all incoming students to take the symposium course. Students listen to lectures on, discuss, then write about a given topic. The freshman class as a whole is given an entire semester to learn, debate, then synthesize a position on one topic.

No doubt, with the changes in E 306, some will complain that the

canon has been watered down (quick, alert Allan Bloom). While those dissenters are scrambling around trying to define the "canon" for freshmen composition courses, please note that the point is to teach the students to develop arguments, convey ideas and write them down so others can understand — not to worship writers long since gone.

The English Department will probably face accusations of "politicizing" the curriculum. Even if you assume that the curriculum isn't already politicized, it's ridiculous to claim that this is part of some grand plot to liberalize incoming students. As Linda Brodkey, director of Lower Division English, said, "The question that will be addressed in this class is not 'What is your position on rac-

ism or sexism?' but 'What do you have to support your argument?' " God forbid students are thinking and developing sound arguments for their opinions in the classroom.

"This approach takes the students seriously, and it takes their civic responsibilities seriously," said Brodkey. It's about time. Pating the students on the head and telling them to be good little Americans does not a democracy make. In real democracies people can think about, understand and develop sound opinions on the issues of the day — including racism.

Faculty members are taking the changes seriously, too. So seriously, some of them are actually going to teach the dreaded E 306. So instead of overworked and un-

derpaid grad students, freshmen will face real, live, tenured faculty, instead of just passing them in the hall occasionally.

The English Department is also considering changes in the curriculum of E 316K. Too many of the "world" literature sections are in truth only the literature of continental Europe.

Considering the rapidly changing demographics in Texas and the United States, it's about time universities start teaching students to deal with these realities. Of course, reality is something the University too often ignores. Congratulations to the English Department for bringing the ivory tower back to the streets where it belongs.

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