

4Cs Boston file

Proposal for 1991 CCCC Program

Proposer: Maxine C. Hairston, University of Texas at Austin

Format: Round Table or Think Tank

Time period: 1 hour and 15 minutes

Title: Freshman English and Social Issues: The Experiment at the University of Texas

Participants: Maxine Hairston-- University of Texas at Austin
James Kinneavy-- University of Texas at Austin
John Ruszkiewicz-- University of Texas at Austin
John Slatin-- University of Texas at Austin

Chair: Lynn Bloom-- University of Connecticut

Description: Late in the spring semester of 1990, the lower-division course committee at the University of Texas at Austin voted to change the content of English 306, the University's only required composition class, from that of a standard expository writing class on varied topics to a course in which students would study and write on the issues of racism and sexism in American society. The main text adopted was a sociology text on racism and sexism, to be supplemented by a packet of readings on civil rights decisions and a standard handbook.

This decision came about for a number of reasons but at least partly to promote more cultural diversity in the university curriculum. Although the decision was supported by the departmental chair and the college dean, it has caused sharp divisions within the department and within the university community as a whole. The change has now drawn state and national attention, occasioning news articles in *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, among others.

I think the issues and questions raised by this significant change at the University of Texas are of great interest to all members of CCCC, especially in light of several recent articles in our composition journals that call for bringing political issues into the writing classroom. The panelists I propose include two former directors of freshman English at Texas, Hairston and Kinneavy, one of whom supports the course and one who opposes it, and two members of the curriculum committee, one for the change and one against it. I propose that each panelist make a five minute position statement on the issues to be followed by a general round table discussion. The chair will time the discussion to allow for 20 minutes of questions and comment from the audience.

"Reason is but Choosing": Ideology in Freshman English
John Ruszkiewicz
4Cs Paper: Boston, 1991

This paper challenges the assumption that writing courses informed by the tenets of "critical literacy" make students more aware of the role ideology plays in their culture. It argues that instructors in such classes rarely acknowledge or critique their own under ideological constraints, believing perhaps that their non-foundational epistemologies protect them from authoritarian postures in the classroom. Yet such principles only cause them to assume that their understanding of social realities is more sophisticated and honorable than either that of their students or of their colleagues who question the primacy of political agendas in writing classes. Ironically, critical literacy provides the framework for a new ontological rhetoric operating within the realm of social reality; for advocates of social rhetorics, political action is typically authorized by a foundational commitment to utopian schemes--what Patricia Bizzell describes as the "attempt to create and share utopian rhetoric." In practical terms, advocates of critical literacy are apt to design curricula in which most or all of the syllabus readings, assignments, and discussions represent or endorse a single set of values and explore only subject matters (e.g. race, sex, ethnicity, difference) that conform to the political agenda of the instructor, program, or course administrators. Quite often the architects of such programs are themselves unable to articulate or understand the positions of the opposition except in terms which reduce them to crude stereotypes. So denying choice to themselves and their students, advocates of critical literacy create new silences in the classroom and in the canon. Their vaunted post-structural rhetoric proves upon examination to be less subtle at instructing students in logic than the most elementary forms of traditional dialectic and less adept at teaching writing than even current-traditional pedagogies.