

4.0325 More on UTexas Writing Course, Part I (2/98)

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(1) Date: Friday, 27 July 1990 8:52am CST (25 lines)
From: John Slatin <EIEB360@UTXVM.BITNET>
Subject: 4.0324 Query on Texas Writing Course

(2) Date: Friday, 27 July 1990 6:17am CST (73 lines)
From: John Slatin <EIEB360@UTXVM.BITNET>
Subject: UT's disgrace

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Subject: 4.0324 Query on Texas Writing Course

Thanks for the query, Kessler. I've posted (at some ungodly hour this morning) two long, rambling messages describing some of the ambient circumstances; buried in one of them is a brief account of the syllabus and the materials. But I'll post a more detailed account later.

Meanwhile, if it's of any interest (it certainly is to me), the National Association of Scholars has taken to telling callers that they've scored "a wonderful victory" in Texas: "We've succeeded in stopping a course there," says the phone answering person. The National Association of Scholars was described by my colleague, Prof. Alan Gribben, a member of both the NAS and the recently formed Texas Association of Scholars, as "an organization of resisting scholars": what they resist are Women's Studies programs, African-American studies programs, Mexican-American studies programs, ethnic studies programs of all sorts; they are dedicated to resisting the hiring and promotion of feminist scholars, Marxist and neo-marxist scholars. In short, they are staunch defenders of academic freedom and open debate. And Gribben has already announced his intention (and presumably his organization's intention) to fight proposed changes in both the sophomore-level literature offerings and the shape of the undergraduate English major. More later.
Slatin at Texas

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... [eds.]

The Dean's stated reason for acting had to do with what he perceived as

the need to address the "concerns" and "misunderstandings" that have been raised on campus about the course. I'll just add that some of those opposed to the course-- most notably James Duban, another Americanist and an instructor who's gotten quite a few teaching awards, some for his writing courses-- make the argument Nancy thought had been "settled" some time ago: for Duban, Gribben, and many of the psychology faculty and engineering faculty who signed the paid "Statement of Academic Concern" in the campus newspaper, a writing course should focus on writing: according to The Daily Texan (the campus paper) of Tuesday, 24 July 1990, "James Duban, the other professor who [with John Ruszkiewicz] resigned from the [Lower Division English Policy] committee, expressed pleasure with Meacham's decision [to postpone the new syllabus]...

"Students will certainly benefit from being able to enroll in freshman composition classes that continue to stress writing as the primary subject matter," Duban said in a prepared statement" (p. 2).

Ruszkiewica writes, in a longer article that appeared in The Daily Texan on the same day (Tuesday, 24 July 1990)-- this is an article by Ruszkiewicz that was written, apparently, at the invitation of the Texan's editor, Kevin McHargue, a supporter of the course; Ruszkiewicz writes:

"The catalog title of E 306-- 'Rhetoric and Composition'-- includes the term rhetoric for a good reason. It identifies the subject matter to be taught and learned-- an art of writing, research and thinking which will benefit students, in both the long and short term, far more than portentous classroom discussions of current affairs. Instruction in rhetoric focuses on the logic and validity of arguments, the development and enrichment of ideas, the appropriate arrangement of subject matter and the power and correctness of language. These are necessary and pertinent concerns of writers whatever their discipline, level of expertise, or political orientation.

"It is my conviction [Ruszkiewicz continues] that first-year students develop most effectively as writers when they are introduced to processes of composing that make them competent to handle the rhetoric of various academic assignments-- from analyses of causality and evaluative pieces to research papers and exploratory essays. Such instruction is the surest way I know of giving students the skills they need to function as responsible and articulate citizens." ("Altered E306 format compromised by ideological freight," The Daily Texan, 24 July 1990, p. 4).

Here both objections emerge: the objection to the particular content of the new syllabus, and the objection to the departure from the skills-based approach. Later in the same essay, Ruszkiewicz writes: "It is my opinion that the E306 curriculum changes were compromised by their ideological freight and by a rush to do what seemed politically correct on this campus at the moment" (4); the proposed curriculum was announced days after two ugly racial incidents occurred on campus in association with a campus-wide fraternity event called Round-Up (an annual thing which in past years has involved gay-bashing, sexual

harassment, and similar nastinesses; even the Texas Exes, an organization of alumni boosters, has withdrawn its financial and moral support for the event).

Earlier in the essay, Ruskiewicz had spoken of "a familiar manual of mechanics and usage" as the one element of the proposed syllabus that was made openly available to interested persons. He neglects, for reasons I cannot begin to imagine, to say that this "familiar manual" is The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers, and that the authorship of this handbook is attributed to Maxine Hairston and John J. Ruskiewicz. So he is quite willing, apparently, to endorse the syllabus after all.

Sorry.

John Slatin

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