

Students, AIs deserve changes in E306

I am writing to describe my experience as an assistant instructor in English at the University of Texas. I believe my account will be of serious interest to those who are concerned about undergraduate education at this university.

I walked into a classroom to teach my first E306 class without having received any instruction at all. I had been expected to independently select all texts and to design a syllabus for the course. I selected a text from the "approved list" because it was the only one that offered suggestions for how to build a syllabus around it. I learned later that this text was known by our department's professionals in composition and rhetoric to be entirely useless, but what could I do midway through a course? I spent the whole semester apologizing for myself. The experience was demoralizing in the extreme, and it wasn't much better for the students.

To relieve the horror of the assigned text, I would bring in bits of literature that I liked. The whole thing was entirely incoherent. My main concern was making sure no one felt "threatened" by the fact that, as a thinking person, I have political views. I apologized for *that* all semester too, since every time I attempted to deviate from a "content free" approach to the teaching of writing, I had only my own favorite texts to use, and they are relentlessly "political." I hated trying to teach that to first semester undergraduates, but it's the only literature I know about and know how to teach, having taken nothing but women's and minority litera-

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GUEST COLUMNIST

ture in some time (which should be my option, since it should not be my *literature* classes upon which I base my composition/rhetoric teaching anyway).

Because I was so obviously at pains to protect their right to an opinion, the students didn't hate *me* for the political material, but I had to read some really embarrassing and uncomfortable writing in their journals, where some of them chose to vent their discomfort about homosexuality and race. Clearly they were confused and traumatized by being confronted with this material without any sort of rhetorical framework in which it could safely be explored, and then I was traumatized by having to read sudden outbursts of undifferentiated and incoherent hate.

The administration, in its wisdom, has just signed up its English AIs and its undergraduates for another year of this mess, in the apparent belief that a well-prepared, well-thought-out syllabus would be too sudden a jolt to everyone's system. I hope that those who believe that they have "kept politics out of the classroom" will see from the above story that the administration's move will do just the reverse; it will cause the individual graduate student to fall back, in desperation, upon whatever political, cultural and critical perspectives s/he knows best. S/he will have had no support

for developing an alternate model which would support a safe and fair airing of all perspectives within the classroom.

As I have suggested, my personal taste in literature runs toward the "oppositional," and this situation reminds me vividly of the closing scene of Brecht's play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, in which two women fight over the rights to a child. In a dramatic court scene, the judge reenacts Solomon's most famous ruling by suggesting that the child be placed in a circle, and that he should belong to the woman who can drag him onto her side of the line. The child's biological mother, an aristocratic matriarch, agrees to this plan, while his caretaker, a peasant woman, vehemently objects and agrees to give up the child rather than harm him. The UT administration has recently shown that it is willing to sacrifice (metaphorically, to rend) the psyches of its AIs and undergraduates rather than risk controversy, however ill-founded that controversy might be.

It is already clear that the UT administration does not care what happens in the classroom as long as no one "important" has an opinion about it. But academics who consider themselves educators would do well to speak out against a move which harms all those about whom the radical right has professed to be most concerned, and which is designed to placate a handful of people who will not have to live with its concrete effects in their classrooms.

Fitzgerald is a graduate student in English.

FIRING LINE

Keep department autonomy

As faculty members at the University of Texas at Austin, we deplore the manner in which certain opponents of the new syllabus for E306 misrepresented the substance and aims of the course.

We rigorously protest the suspension of the new syllabus and unreservedly support the right of every department to implement curricular goals. *

Susan Heinzelman

Ramon Saldivar

Professors of English

Editor's note: this letter was signed by 41 others, 26 from the Department of English

Disparities due to accessibility