



Rob Lewis/Courtesy of Polix

Prof. Robert Solomon: "Multiculturalism is much more complex than people are making it sound."

### By Scott Stanford

**T**hrough the past four or five months, the issue of multiculturalism and curriculum diversity at the University has become so clouded and so distorted that the original intent of the diversity movement is now barely recognizable amid the muck.

The fault lies on both sides of the issue. The conservative, oftentimes reactionary, element which is opposed to the changes at the University has been given to egregious exaggeration and has frequently relied more on fallacy than fact

in making its argument. Case in point: During the ongoing debate on changing the English 306 syllabus to include Paula Rothenberg's book on racism and sexism (which was later modified to a reading packet including readings from the mildly infamous text), the opposition have based much of their argument on misrepresentation. In this way, they have taken the valid points of their argument, such as the correctness of the English department as a starting place for reform, and combined them with something totally specious and suspicious.

Opponents of the E306 proposal have been using incorrect terminology in vocalizing their stance. They are against changes in the "curriculum" of E306, they say. The curriculum, however, is not the issue. E306 would remain as a writing class with a new syllabus only.

The overall structure of the course has been altered in no way.

"It is a course without specific content," says Robert Solomon, a Ph.D. in the UT philosophy department. Solomon therefore views the proposed changes as "perfectly sensible," provided that the readings in the class are balanced.

It has been further maintained by those opposed to the changes that including readings on racism and sexism is "politicizing" a course which is a technical writing course. The fault in this is the assumption that an English class is not already political. Worse still, there is an attitude which has surfaced among elitist academicians that there is some sort of objective knowledge to be found in an English course, that some things (the traditional English canon, I presume) are empirically worthful,

# Loaded Canon

while those things which differ from them are worthless both aesthetically and academically.

The canon, however, is already quite political. It just happens to be that the politics of the canon are the politics of the status quo. If the scholars who are recklessly and erroneously throwing around charges of politicization would consider the ideas put forth by such notables as Ernest Hemingway, for example, or F. Scott Fitzgerald, they would realize this. But it remains that the politics of the canon are the politics of the status quo, and are therefore the politics of those people who perpetuate the attitudes against which the entire diversity movement is directed.

The paranoia generated by challenging the status quo has reached such proportions that those against the proposed changes have attempted to label them as an attempted "indoctrination," a charge which Solomon considers to be unfounded. "My experience at the University," he says, "has been that it's hard enough to get students to take you seriously." Indeed, it is not giving students the credit that they are due to assume that a person admitted to the University is not capable of formulating her or his own opinion and is therefore a perfect candidate for indoctrination. Contrary to this belief, college freshmen are often very opinionated, and the proposed changes in the E306 syllabus are not designed to elicit any particular response, only to provide an impetus for critical thought on issues which many have never considered at any significant length.

The anti-diversity crusaders are the guilty party in this instance. They are unable to understand this, though, because again they believe that the system of the status quo is inherently good and that it must be maintained no matter what the cost. For those whose interests are not served by the status quo, on the other hand, repeated exposure to those ideologies is the true indoctrination.

This was illustrated in a recent *New York Times* article, in which a professor opposed to the E306 changes said, "that universities, by definition, are multicultural institutions. Any time a student takes a foreign language course or studies Renaissance Spain or learns about ancient Greece, he or she is having a multicultural experience."

It is true that a university is a multicultural entity. At great universities such as the University of Texas, the student population comprises several different and disparate cultures. The problem is

## Second Thoughts

that what is taught at the University is usually anything but universal, or multicultural, as it were.

A foreign language class certainly does not lead to very much understanding of other cultures. Even if it did, however, what sort of languages does the University offer? The Department of Oriental and African languages doesn't offer any African languages, so what if you are of African descent? The answer is that *your* culture is not important, beautiful or necessary. This attitude is further demonstrated by the statement that a class on "Renaissance Spain or ... ancient Greece" or perhaps some other Eurocentric study is multicultural. This comment completely ignores the entire emphasis of the diversity push: that Europe and its history are not suitable to be the complete focus of education, and that the indoctrination of Eurocentric overkill in the curriculum is not acceptable.

Herein lies the fault of those who are in favor of diversifying the curriculum and seeking a "multicultural" university. The focus of the entire surge has been lost already during the brief course of its existence, and its advocates have once again, despite rhetoric to the contrary, relegated themselves to a policy of reaction as opposed to that of action. If the challenge of diversity is their agenda, then they are defeated in letting their opponents dictate that agenda.

Of the problems facing this movement, as with any movement involving such a broad-based coalition, the one which may ultimately doom it is that oftentimes one limb of the machine will move without the others. This has been the case with the E306 proposal. In acting out of concert, many in the diversity movement have been called into a position of commenting on something about which they know very little, or with

continued on 19

which they may not agree. The Catch-22 inherent in this situation is that while it is imprudent to defend something simply because it has been initiated by some part of the "same side," it is suicide to perpetuate public dissent within one's own ranks.

If members of the University community, and particularly the administration, consider themselves acting in good faith with those who have been behind the multicultural push for several years now, then they must not assume that they know what is best and act upon it rashly. After all, if they had been advocates of curriculum diversity as long as the Black Student Alliance or the members of the recently formed Todos Unidos, then the curriculum would, by now, probably be showing signs of change.

Despite the fact that Solomon says it is "not surprising" that the English department would attempt such a change, since English Departments are traditionally controversial, it was certainly the wrong place to start. It should have been obvious to those attempting to institute the changes that a sociology textbook dealing with racism and sexism would not be well received. Not that it was a poor idea to institute the new syllabus; certainly no one can fault the syllabus group for trying. The problem is that it appears as if the Department of English is the only department willing to lead on issues of curriculum diversity.

It would make more sense to have a sociology class deal with these issues. Psychology, anthropology and philosophy also seem like more realistic areas in which one might try to institute multicultural studies. According to English Profs. Kurt Heinzelman and Ramon Saldivar, "Fifty percent of the freshman class ... actually end up taking 306 at the University," so the changes would be only marginally effective anyway.

One would hope that the whole E306 fiasco was not brought about by an administration eager to appease angry students by instituting multicultural studies, in what can only loosely be termed a "required class," as requested by the Proposed Reforms to Institute Diversity in Education (PRIDE) document of the BSA. Knowing the players on the side of the new syllabus, there is a high probability that this is not the case. They should be aware, however, that a class that is required, but one most people do not take, will be considered by opponents of PRIDE and Todos Unidos' TU Manifesto as the mandatory class that the organizations were seeking. E306 is certainly not it.

These organizations are shooting themselves in the foot, though, by requesting a class in ethnic studies to be required of all UT students. First of all, most people don't want to take an ethnic studies class, and therefore the BSA and TU stand to suffer an insurmountable backlash from several groups at the University, including members of their own communities. Furthermore, many students do not have the time or money to be burdened with an extra requirement. In light of the very recent turmoil concerning class availability for graduating seniors, the UT community is not likely to take to a new requirement very well.

Most would agree, however, that the college level is too late to begin training people about the virtues of acceptance and appreciation of other cultures. If people are to be taught these things as a way of life, as opposed to a mere accepted standard of living, then there will have to be substantial change within the society. Much in the same way that a child more easily learns a new language than a person of some 18 or 19 years, so

too will students have to be taught tolerance. At the university level, it is likely that most people taking a required class on multicultural studies will either already be interested in the subject matter, or will be totally disinterested and may even internalize some deeper resentment for the subject matter. The goals of diversity would not be well served in this way.

If African, Native American or Latino studies, for example, are not required of white students at the University, then further European studies must not be required of us. There is the rub. If students do not want to study Ramses, Imhotep or Shaka, then they shouldn't study Africa. If students don't want to study Nietzsche, Locke or Plato (who got his knowledge from the libraries of Africa anyway) then they shouldn't be forced to study Europe any further. Granted, the United States is a country founded on European principles and one that embraces European cultures, but anyone admitted to the University has already studied enough of this country's foundation. They should not be subjected to it again if that is not their will.

But on the issue of government there will be debate. Perhaps Hobbes and Rousseau are not familiar to many, and no one will argue that it is essential to understand them if one is to understand U.S. government. Back to English, however: The requirement that all students have credit for either American, British or "world" literature (E316K) is absurd. First of all, the groupings indicate a certain marginalization of those things which are not European or some facsimile thereof (except the sporadic tokens which have appeared as of late).

Many of the books required in these classes are books that most people have already read. If they are considered classics by some, then so be it. Let those people read them. Not everyone finds value in Shakespeare or Faulkner, as these writers — especially Shakespeare — do not relate to the experience of the so-called minorities in this country. There is a class in black literature, but it fulfills only elective credit, and E316K is actually a prerequisite to it.

But this is the true fault in the university curriculum. The answer is not in creating new classes, or in forcing people to study things that they do not wish to study. The injustice is that the existing classes are permitted to teach things which are either patently false or show a rather salient bias. Even in the very simple issues — such as Columbus "discovering" a continent which was already inhabited by millions of people, or that the framers of the Constitution believed in democracy and that "all men are created equal" when they penned into the Law of the Land that a black man was only three-fifths of a white man — there is a very apparent bias in our education toward that which is white.

The status quo is not willing to accept these things. Unfortunately, the status quo is as such for a reason. Most people are quite comfortable with a biased education, and for that reason diversity in the day-to-day affairs of our society is very far away. "Multiculturalism," says Solomon, "is much more complex than people are making it sound." To attempt to introduce diversity, educate people about it and make it policy in a matter of semesters won't make for the lasting changes for which we are searching. The answers are obviously not listed in this column, but they will never be found if people on both sides do not take more time to analyze the issues. We cannot undo in a matter of months what has been created over many generations. ■