

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
AUSTIN, TEXAS 78712

April 22, 1985

Professor Waneen Spirduso
Chairman, Faculty Senate
Belmont Hall 710

Dear Professor Spirduso:

I write you as an English faculty member concerned with the debate about the future of English 346K.

Attached is a statement about E. 346K that I wrote almost two months ago. It was intended as a response to editorials by Professor James Kinneavy and lecturer James Skaggs that appeared in the Daily Texan on February 20.

When my rejoinder had not been published after some ten days, I withdrew it. I have subsequently made it available to a number of colleagues who have asked to see it.

Would you kindly pass the enclosed copies of my statement on to members of the Senate committee that is engaged with this issue of E. 346K? My statement has a polemical air* that was more appropriate two months ago, but it also articulates an ideal of composition that your committee members might welcome.

Thank you for your attention to this crucial matter.

Yours sincerely,

Charles Rossman
Associate Professor

* P.S. I have omitted the single most polemical sentence from the original, Maxine. It was the second sentence of paragraph three, and read: "Rarely has educational policy been so clearly made in the name of students for personal ends."

Misconceptions about the English "Writing Program"

One expects professor James Kinneavy to defend the so-called "writing program" that he helped to design and to implement. And one understands why lecturer James Skaggs would pull out all stops--rhetorical, intellectual, and moral--in defense of English 346K. After all, his job depends on the perpetuation of that course, no matter how ill-conceived, impractical, or ineffective the course might be.

But it is not to the credit of either of these gentlemen that they should depict themselves as enlightened teachers dedicated to the holy mission of teaching "important writing skills," while depicting their opponents in the department as a cabal of self-serving mandarins who inexplicably stand in their way.

I hope that the university community is not taken in by this Manichaeian vision, or by the ad hominem arguments and pious rhetoric that accompany it.

The truth is that English 346K suffers from grave theoretical as well as practical problems. The course was probably a mistake from the outset, and it should be abandoned for good. What is more, English 306, the required freshman course, suffers from even worse problems. Kinneavy is entirely correct that it is under attack within the department. He is wrong only in lamenting that attack, rather than applauding it.

The essential problem with both courses is that their emphasis on writing skills, rather than on a body of knowledge, is so disproportionate that the courses are gutted of any satisfying intellectual content. These courses employ a method of teaching writing that concentrates almost exclusively on the

components and processes of composition itself.

Such a course works well for a small percentage of students and for some faculty, especially those whose careers are based on theorizing about "composition." But for the vast majority of students, this approach leaves them with no real subject matter to think or write about. They experience the course as a boring and mechanical encounter with intellectual pap.

Many instructors find such a course even more deadening and frustrating. They know that they are engaged in remedial education. Worse yet, they know that they are teaching basically the same course that their students have endured every year since grammar school--the same course, incidentally, whose failure during all those years of primary and secondary schooling has contributed to the very crisis in literacy that is now offered, with audacious irony, as the rationale for the course at the university level.

English 346K makes some concessions to the need for satisfying intellectual content. It aims at least to engage students in the subject matter of their major. Even then, I had several students come to me during the add-and-drop period last month, outraged at the lack of content in English 346K and at the attitude of the instructors. These students complained that it was just another high school English course.

What is more troubling about English 346K, however, is the very nature of its response to the demand for subject-matter content. The recently approved business variant serves as a case in point.

Does a university of the first class really want to capitulate

so completely to exclusively professional training? Of course, such training is important. But shouldn't specialists like business majors confront subject matter specifically outside their disciplines? Shouldn't they think, argue, and write about some of the profound issues that have troubled thinking people throughout history? A conventional English course--in Shakespeare, say, or the modern novel--would help accomplish these ends. But not English 346K, which unfortunately isolates its students from general education and, consequently, from broader culture.

As I say, English 306 is designed to be even more mindless than English 346K. To be sure, most instructors attempt to subvert that design--by ignoring the syllabus, by supplementing the horrible "rhetoric" texts with personally selected teaching materials, and by all sorts of innovative ways to inject life into a stillborn course. Nevertheless, English 306 and its echoes across America are deservedly the most hated courses on any college campus that I have been on, hated by students and faculty alike.

After the fact, of course, many students will grant that something good came out of their experience of English 306. Suffering brings wisdom, as we know. But there is a better way.

In fact, there are numerous "better ways." Like the paths to God, there are many paths to literacy. To begin with, we could acknowledge that all intellectual disciplines on campus whose medium is largely language are equally responsible for their students' writing. That means that the professional schools, all the humanities, nearly all the social sciences, and many of the natural sciences must accept responsibility for their students'

language abilities. Every professor who reads and writes, and who expects his or her students to do the same, should be, ipso facto, a teacher of writing.

It never made sense to presume, as English 346K does, that English faculty can best drill professional students in the writing skills appropriate to all their various disciplines. Of course, English faculty can pore over the essays of engineering or psychology students, for example, and understand enough of the content to help improve the writing. Engineering and psychology faculty could do the same for English students. But it makes more sense to have experts in a given discipline also teach writing about that discipline.

One "better way" for the English Department would be to affirm that its faculty is expert in a noble and valuable subject matter, one that offers substantial intellectual content, provokes the students' deepest concerns, and offers valuable topics to write about--literature. ("Literature" must, of course, be broadly defined. The "popular culture" variant of English 306, for example, is a course in "literature," even though it deals with t.v., film, music, and advertisements.)

Both Kinneavy and Skaggs perpetuate the false dichotomy that reading and writing are separate activities. But literacy is one thing: the informed response to, and informed use of, words. We in the English department can best impart this unified skill by asking our students to read major works of literature and to respond to them in writing. Naturally, we must also give close attention to our students' language, logic, organization, and

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rhetorical strategies.

But our attention to the mechanics and processes of writing, must help our students to say something worth saying. As presently designed, English 306 and (to a lesser extent) English 346K produce glorified versions of the vacuous and infamous "English theme" of popular caricature: "What did I do on my vacation?"

There is, as I say, a better way. Plan II has been offering such a way for decades, in its superb year-long sequence, English 603. Recently, the English Department has experimented with a similar course—a humanities variant of English 306. Both courses ask students to write about literature, an activity that Kinneavy and Skaggs appear not to respect at all. Such courses should be embraced, not scorned.