



THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
AUSTIN, TEXAS 78712

Office of the Chairman
Department of English
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May 1, 1990

To: Members of the English Department

From: Joseph E. Kruppa *JK*

At the department meeting on May 8, noon to 2 PM, in Calhoun 100, I want to discuss the following:

1. The attached memo from Linda Brodkey, Director of Lower-Division English, about the textbook change in E. 306;
2. The attached petition, signed by fifty members of the department, about adding another variant of E. 316K, changing the status of E. 314L, and addressing issues of multicultural education;
3. The committee I have appointed to study the English major and to suggest possible changes in the major and in our upper-division offerings. The committee will consist of Rita Copeland, Jim Garrison, Sue Heinzelman, Eric Mallin, and Ramon Saldivar, with Joe Kruppa, Wayne Lesser, and Maurine McElroy serving ex-officio.



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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May 1, 1990

FROM: Linda Brodkey, Director
Lower Division English

SUBJECT: English 306: Rhetoric and Composition

Beginning in the Fall of 1990, students in English 306 classes (with the exception of those taught by faculty) will read and write about "difference." In the first year, students will learn about some kinds of "difference" from a textbook on social issues, Paula Rothenberg's Racism and Sexism, and learn about some others from Civil Rights cases and affirmative action policy statements. The students in this course will continue to read and write about many of the same topics found in composition "readers" (which are typically collections of occasional essays and personal narratives, in some instances augmented by short stories and poems), and they will also continue to use an English handbook. However, the social issues text, court cases, and policies offer two pedagogical advantages that composition "readers" do not:

- 1) that of focusing students on how some of those who work as well as live with problems linked to "difference" define, describe, and analyze racism and sexism, and
- 2) that of providing students with an opportunity to examine some of the primary documents on civil rights law and civil rights cases.

In terms of writing pedagogy, the most important difference between the course we are designing and the ones now being taught from "readers" is the semester-long emphasis on academic argumentation. Because most composition "readers" concentrate on point of view, they often leave students with the impression that taking a position is considerably more important than the argument in support of it. Most academics know better, know that assertions are only as good as the cases that can be made on their behalf. I hope that many would also agree that academic argumentation--an informed, critical examination of received wisdom--is the sine qua non of a liberal arts education. Yet most students enter college believing argumentation to be either a prelude to violence (as in this town isn't big enough for both of us) or an invitation to debate the issues (as in all the people on the right side of room take the pro position and all of you on the left take the con). It is our responsibility to teach students that neither is the case: that we are committed to the paramount importance and value of rational thought and hence to the proposition that all assertions are arguable.

Students entering The University need to learn how to think, read, and write critically about civic issues. Our approach to writing and writing pedagogy in Lower Division English is designed to launch students on such an inquiry. We teach writing as a process. This means, among other things, teaching students how to plan essays, how to read and critique published prose as well as prose written by themselves and their peers, and to use the advice of their teachers and peers when they revise their work. In other words, the primary intellectual activity in all rhetoric and composition classes is writing. I mention this because it is sometimes difficult to imagine what we do, if only because discussions in well-taught writing classes focus on the essays students write, and only secondarily on the ones in their textbooks. It is our process approach to writing--as in other research-based writing programs across the country--that makes E 306 a course in which

intellectually responsible inquiries into the complexities of problems associated with "difference" can be carried out.

Students in our writing classes have learned to expect a fair hearing from their teachers and their peers. And college teachers who teach writing as process know that it takes students time and a good deal of information to build a case that scholars would accept as a reasonable argument. It's important to remember that only a handful of students enter this or any American university already knowing how to write the kinds of arguments that their teachers wish they could. So, if undergraduates are to learn to write academic arguments (and I can see no reason why we would not want them to), we shall have to begin teaching them how it's done, for we cannot reasonably require them to know what they have never been taught.

The revised E 306 curriculum makes it possible to generate the kinds of discussions, research, and critical activities that support young writers who are learning how to construct academically responsible arguments on controversial topics that profoundly affect us all. My own experience with undergraduates here and elsewhere, as well as with the graduate students who teach E 306, has convinced me that:

- 1) many students introduce issues associated with "difference" into their discussions and essays even though it has not been the official topic, and
- 2) many instructors would like the topic institutionalized, thereby authorizing the discussion of the topic and specifying the rights and responsibilities of students and teachers.

The rights and responsibilities of teachers and students are serious matters in all classrooms. These and other related issues concerning pedagogy will be addressed in our summer-long deliberations and work on the syllabus for E 306, and they will play a large part in the summer orientation for the AIs who will be teaching E 306 in Fall 1990.

We are anticipating difficulties, but because we see them in the light of writing curriculum and pedagogy, our concerns are not whether to teach the topic of difference, but how best to teach a college-level writing course. In the years that I have been teaching and studying writing, I have run across very few students who resisted a serious intellectual challenge of the sort we envision, but I have met many who have strenuously objected to repeating a high school course in college: a course demanding that they produce yet one more round of five paragraph essays--describing something, recalling someone or some event, or analyzing some process--and culminating in one last library paper arguing for or against some formal proposition. That's a typical tradebook publisher's version of college composition. Scholars and researchers in rhetoric and writing, however, do not rely on trade presses for their understanding of either writing or writing pedagogy, any more than faculty in the other fields and disciplines in the College of Liberal Arts depend on textbooks for understandings of their fields.

As I have described it, E306 will teach the principles of the liberal arts tradition. It would be an appalling disservice to students and faculty at The University were the pedagogical issues attending the implementation of a writing curriculum confounded with the reservations of a few who worry whether teachers and students will be able to conduct civil classroom discussions on such sensitive topics. The recent survey by the American Council on Education which reported that 86% of college and university presidents "favored devising new statements stressing civility and respect for others" (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2 May, 1990 A 32) is a measure of the need for courses such as the one we have designed. If students don't begin exploring racism and sexism in college classrooms, then I can't imagine where else in this country anyone is likely to learn how to broach these complex and critical issues--to say nothing of learning how to read, think, and write critically about them.

CALL FOR A DEPARTMENT MEETING

In view of recent events and their attendant debates campus-wide, we request that a department meeting be called to discuss undergraduate curriculum changes in English.

In the interest of multicultural education on the University of Texas campus, and in response to expressed student and faculty recommendations, we as faculty members of the Department of English request that the Department consider 1) introducing an additional section of E316K: Ethnic and Third World Literatures, and 2) changing the status of E314L to that of one of the options available to students selecting a section of E316K--to satisfy university, college, and departmental requirements. In addition, we support strengthening the ethnic representation in the upper-division curriculum of the English Department.

We further support the renewed and intensified effort to recruit minority students, both graduate and undergraduate, and minority faculty members.

We request that this meeting be held at the earliest possible convenience, preferably before the summer recess.