



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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TO: W. Barnes, L. Bertelson, L. Carver, A. Gribben, R. Hinojosa-Smith, R. J. Kaufmann, W. Lesser, W. Rebhorn, W. Reed, C. Rossman, R. Saldivar, W. Scheick, W. Todd, M. Westbrook

FROM: E. Smith

Gentlemen, Colleagues, and Friends:

I read with bemusement your letter of February 25 to the Daily Texan alleging that E 346K, "lacking in real content, could at best offer students training in general belle-lettristic writing about (not in) science, a laudable goal perhaps, but certainly not what the course was intended to be."

I say "with bemusement" because, as far as I know, no extensive survey of the E 346K science sections has been conducted to ascertain exactly what is taught in each course. Indeed, I wondered when I read the above statement whether it did not more accurately reflect what you yourselves have taught (or would teach) in such sections, rather than what any section of the course could "at best" teach.

In my own section of E 346K this past summer, we did, it is true, all read for discussion the same material in biochemistry and genetics, but the students in the course submitted final papers (which they had worked on throughout the entire term, in various stages) in "discipline-specific" fields from petroleum geology to data processing to psychology.

How was I, a non-specialist in these fields, able to read and evaluate these papers? Well, partly because I had read each paper in several versions and revisions, so I actually learned something about the fields in the process. But the main reason was that the aim of the course was "to develop general writing skills in expository prose directed to the educated non-specialist"--and that's not just the description of my course, that's the official statement of purpose issued by the E 346K Committee.

I find it ironic that you should offer as a criticism of the course that it "could at best offer training in general belle-lettristic writing..." because I suspect that many of you hold the conviction that "good writing is good writing" (even though that tautology is often used to argue against teaching such "discipline-specific" courses. (And a further irony is that many of you serve on recruitment, promotions, editorial, and fellowship committees where you are constantly asked to read and evaluate materials in "discipline-specific" fields in which you are not expert.)

Letter to the "February Fourteen," p. 2

It seems to me that, given my understanding of the course's mission, you would agree with me that, as English teachers, we possess the skills to instruct student writers on how to communicate their major disciplines to non-specialist readers.

I am in complete agreement with the sentiments that I have heard expressed during this debate that E 346K needs to have a clearer set of aims and grading standards and that the writing requirements need to have administrative support from the University (i.e. money and personnel) if they are to have any impact.

It saddens me, though, to think that we will abandon our mission to improve student literacy, not because we are unable to do so, but because we do not wish to do so.

I have not sent this letter to the Daily Texan because I do not wish to increase the already growing bitterness and rancor in the Department, nor do I think it appropriate to conduct what I think should be an inter familia discussion in a public forum. I would, however, welcome your response.