A Problem of Publics
and the Curious Case at Texas

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Publics are queer creatures. You cannot point to them, count them, or look them in the eye.
You also cannot easily avoid them.

—Michael Warner

The structures and practices of the academy... may also be profitably viewed by going beyond the inside/outside dichotomy and recognizing that the humanities always function in relation to the world and not, despite the myth of the ivory tower, in isolation from it.

—Rosemary S. Feal

Paul Butler recently argued in “Style and the Public Intellectual: Rethinking Composition in the Public Sphere” that composition studies suffers from a distinct lack of public intellectuals who can speak knowledgably and effectively to public audiences about what we do.¹ Although not his primary argument, for Butler, the turn to publics is essential because, otherwise, composition studies will continue to be defined by other people with public profiles but no tie to composition studies’ intellectual heritage (55–58). Butler’s conception of public intellectuals nods to a complicated relationship between academics, compositionists in particular, and the general public; it has become commonplace for compositionists to see publics aligned in opposition to the goals and expectations of intellectual workers.² Compositionists often recognize the value of public engagement, but also often find the movement from the academic sphere into the public one to be problematic.

For example, in “Going Public,” Peter Mortensen argues that

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"composition's struggle to build credibility within the academy has been a full-time job. At the end of the day, little intellectual energy remains for the serious and difficult task of going public with what we do" (182). For Mortensen, compositionists are isolated from two worlds: the vaunted, secret realm of esteemed academic disciplines from which compositionists are distanced by an unfortunate lack of credibility; and the distant public sphere in which literacy policy is hashed out in discussions among journalists, essayists, polemicists, and policy analysts (183). Many compositionists are eager to engage in both; however, they find themselves running out of steam while tending to writing programs and classes before they can enter the worlds in which other people exist. Inevitably, the conceptual split between academics and publics becomes a distinction of inside (the academy) vs. outside (the public sphere). 3 Academics exist inside their own world, secreted away from publics, and decide individually when, and if, they will leave the world inside to interject themselves in the world outside.

However, under even the slightest scrutiny, the inside-outside dichotomy is untenable. In spite of the abundant literature constructed around the inside/outside split, the intellectual, professional, and pedagogical domains of academics are always thoroughly imbricated in the outside world. And for composition studies, the inside/outside split is even less secure than in other disciplines because of the complex relationship that publics have always had to composition research and pedagogy. In this essay, I look back at one of the most notorious examples of composition studies in the public sphere, the battle over the first-year composition syllabus at the University of Texas at Austin in 1990—the so-called Battle of Texas—to explore the controversy as it developed both inside and outside the academy. Then, using the example of the Battle of Texas, I argue that the kinds of writing and pedagogy compositionists take as their intellectual domain are always already part of public conversations and that scholars in composition studies need to actively foster a productive ethos for talking about writing and pedagogy in the public sphere. Finally, I conclude that compositionists need to discuss more directly the various ways that they can "go public" to develop the necessary ethos to address issues like the one faced by compositionists in Texas and maintain the potential for positive outcomes when issues of curriculum,
academic freedom, and political indoctrination are raised in the public sphere.

"The Troubles at Texas"

In 1990, what Linda Brodkey terms "the troubles at the University of Texas" (Writing; 181) began to unfold when the first-year writing class, "English 306: Writing about Difference," became an unlikely lightning rod in the American culture wars raging at the time. The story of the ensuing curricular battle over the first-year writing course has been told in several places, including by Brodkey, a central figure in the controversy, in *Writing Permitted in Designated Areas Only*. Here's the story: in mid-1990, the committee that Brodkey chaired, the Lower-Division English Program Committee (LDEPC) in the English Department at the University of Texas, Austin, voted to overhaul the first-year rhetoric and composition course, English 306, because the committee found that "the then-current version of E306 was unsuccessful" (Friedman 6). After much consultation during the spring semester with faculty and graduate students, Brodkey formed an ad hoc syllabus committee which eventually unveiled the design for English 306: Writing about Difference, a writing course designed around several Supreme Court cases in which issues of discrimination were decided, with the goal being "to teach writing via sustained inquiry into arguments raised by cases concerning discrimination" (Brodkey, Packet). Although the course changes passed through several committee and department votes with but a few dissenters, and although the course was vetted through the proper procedural process established by the department and university, on July 23, 1990, in response to public pressure, the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, Standish Meacham, unilaterally postponed the course, in effect terminating it (Brodkey, "Making" 254). The course was never taught.

By the time E306 was postponed by Dean Meacham in July, the people involved in discussions about the course had essentially split into two factions. Proponents of Writing about Difference claimed that it would help students to think more deeply about important civic issues and write more reasoned academic arguments as a result. They argued that
the readings and course materials were chosen by a committee of faculty and students who were responsible for the course's content, and that it had passed through all the necessary channels of governance. In defense of the curriculum, Brodkey claimed that the revised E306 was designed to “teach students how to conduct civil discussions in class as well as how to identify and explore argumentative possibilities in the works they read and write” (Packet). Furthermore, the consequences of postponing the course, according to Brodkey, “egregiously jeopardized the right of teachers to teach and students to learn” (“Making” 255). Brodkey’s allies believed opponents were not even interested in the course or syllabus, and were merely engaging in demagoguery. Efforts to undermine the course were painted as circumvention of academic decision-making, an assault on academic freedom, and an ideological “pressure campaign” waged by “ultra-conservative faculty members and alumni, whose opposition appears to have been aroused by a very well-organized and well-financed campaign against the course” (Bizzell and Trimbur 225).5

On the other hand, opponents of the course argued that the new curriculum amounted to indoctrination and politicization of what should be a course in basic writing and rhetorical knowledge. “A Statement of Academic Concern,” an advertisement signed by members of UT’s professoriate, accused the committee of “subordinating instruction in writing to the discussion of social issues, and, potentially, to the advancement of specific political positions” (2). Likewise, in a response to an outraged donor’s letter expressing alarm regarding the course, English faculty member Alan Gribben decried the co-opting of the course for political reasons, citing it as an example of a department “which has lost all sense of tradition, direction, civility, and academic freedom in the classroom” (Letter). In an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Maxine Hairston equated the new curriculum with “[making UT Austin’s] required freshman writing class into a course on racism and sexism” (“Required” B1). People on both sides of the argument seemed eager to impute ill intentions to their rivals’ actions and grounded their assertions in students’ need to be defended from the tyranny of the opposition. If defenders of Writing about Difference saw their adversaries as anti-intellectual, ultra-conservative ideologues, opponents of the course perceived its defenders as politicized radicals guided by “an ideologized sense
of advocacy” that supplanted the traditional concern of academics for academic standards (Gribben, Letter). Following the July 23rd postponement of the course, the controversy garnered national media attention from left- and right-leaning outlets.

Much has been made about the so-called “Battle of Texas,” including still raging discussions about the fragility of academic freedom, the place of politics in writing classrooms, the “content” of composition, and the relative value of teaching formal grammar and usage in composition classrooms. Writing about Difference became the focus for arguments about composition and culture that had been simmering for years, with progressives and conservatives alike laying claim to the moral high ground of teaching students to think and write, even as their prescribed methods for doing so differed radically. In the ensuing years, the Battle of Texas has maintained a certain fascination for compositionists, usually with regard to some of the previously mentioned discussions. Ben McClelland wrote that the matter of E306 caused WPAs around the country to “reexamine the place of rhetoric in college composition courses” (262). Sharon Crowley redacted the events in Texas in her book, Composition in the University, to illustrate the indeterminate nature of ownership of first-year composition curricula stemming from the universal requirement of the course. Mary Boland, in her 2002 dissertation, argued that the Battle of Texas occurred as a direct result of the rhetorical equation of writing with grammar, which effectively stripped compositionists of their freedom to teach anything in their classrooms but mechanical correctness (80–129).

The Battle of Texas, however, is not the first, and not likely to be the last, curricular battle over the intellectual territory of compositionists claim as their own. So what accounts for the magnitude of and continued fascination with the events surrounding Writing about Difference? One reason the Battle of Texas rose to such epic proportions is that it spilled out of the academy and into the sightlines of the general public. Maureen Daly Goggin sums up a common impression of the public exposure: “Outside public opinion prevented the implementation of the course” (191). One might infer that without public exposure, Writing about Difference would have been administered without remark, and the controversy would have ceased to exist.
The public factor in Texas is an interesting one, and one that I suggest has important implications for composition studies now, two decades later. In the wake of the Battle of Texas, compositionists who have written about it almost universally see the public turn as a negative one. Brodkey describes it as repressive and characterizes academics who publicize intellectual disagreements as abdicating reasoned argumentation ("Making" 243), and Ben McClelland advocates retrenching behind a "renewed adherence to internal university governance procedures in the face of external pressures to ignore them" (262). Similarly, Alex Huppé, reporting on debates about E306 at the 1991 CCCC in Boston, begins by stating, "the one topic on which all sides of . . . the controversy agree" is that "they lost control of their issue to the media" (8). In retrospect, and with few exceptions, people on all sides of the controversy saw the visibility it earned in the public sphere as damaging to their cause. However, the Battle of Texas offers a much more complex example of the interaction of academic and public spheres. Although important lessons can be and have been drawn from the accepted history as related above, there are also important developments that preceded the public controversy that are generally smoothed over in the standard narrative. In the following section, I report at length on the early developments of the course that took place prior to the course "going public" in order to situate the later controversy and to argue for a more complex understanding of the public turn.

Inside: Before the Troubles Began

Throughout the fall of 1989 and the early spring of 1990, administrators and faculty members at UT Austin carried on active discussions about the "need to educate students on diversity and related topics" (Brodkey, Memorandum). In response to the charge to redesign the first-year writing course, and with attention to the need of the university to expand diversity in the curriculum, Linda Brodkey worked with Dean Meacham and English Department Chair, Joseph Kruppa, to begin developing Writing about Difference. On March 20th, 1990, in preparation for a meeting on April 3rd about the proposed course, Linda Brodkey sent a memo to members of the LDEPC announcing her interest in making a
"substantial contribution" to the university's efforts to increase diversity in the classroom (Memorandum). She believed that Writing about Difference could be that substantial contribution. Brodkey discussed the need to train instructors to teach the course, and she acknowledged the need to develop a "pedagogy based on exploratory discourse, appropriate for examining and generating context dependent arguments." Finally, she introduced Paula Rothenberg's *Racism and Sexism: An Integrated Study* as the anticipated textbook and invited members of the committee to look over the book before the April meeting.

Over the next six weeks, in a series of meetings and memos, the LDEPC debated the course redesign and proposed materials. John Ruszkiewicz and James Duban, both members of the LDEPC, expressed serious concerns about the new course. In the April 3rd meeting, Duban "expressed personal reservations about standardizing curriculum" but the committee voted to adopt Rothenberg's text, to standardize the curriculum, and to require an orientation for all Assistant Instructors (AIs) assigned to the course (Meeting Minutes). The following day Duban sent Brodkey a letter expressing concern about the "unfortunate" precedent he believed Rothenberg's text would set "in its disregard for alternatives" (Duban).

Ruszkiewicz also expressed unease about the course and text to the committee. In a memo to the LDEPC, Ruszkiewicz raised three objections about the syllabus redesign: (1) major modifications to a university-wide required course should go through a more deliberate and extensive process of design, revision, and approval than the one E306 was going through; (2) any syllabus "should permit and encourage a diversity of approaches to teaching writing" and should not require experienced AIs to abandon texts and methods that worked for them in the past; and (3) the suggested text, *Racism and Sexism*, was too narrow to "challenge the assumptions of instructors and students alike" (Ruszkiewicz, Memorandum). Ruszkiewicz, like Duban, requested further council with the committee and appended a list of eight alternative texts which he believed were better able "to cover and balance controversial issues and situations" than the Rothenberg book.

By the beginning of May, it is clear that E306 garnered substantial attention in the English department, as well as in the office of Dean
Meacham. On May 1, Chairman Kruppa announced a department meeting to be held the following week to discuss the course. Attached to the call for meeting, Kruppa included a memo written by Brodkey in which she defended the goals and design of the syllabus. Brodkey followed the department memo with a letter to Dean Meacham the next day defending the course and acknowledging that it was the subject of some debate in the department. She writes, "While those of us who have been involved in the planning of E306 welcome [dissenters'] concerns and respect their reservations, we have been working with this curriculum for some time now" and "I have considered and dismissed a good many options" (Letter). It is clear, based on her memo to the department and her letter to Meacham that Brodkey understood the arguments raised over the syllabus. But her responses also demonstrate her understanding that the course would be implemented as expected once she assured enough people that Writing about Difference had been thought through carefully.

Things continued as planned in the department meeting held on May 8. Although several concerns were raised, Brodkey notes that "[i]he sense of the department meeting was overwhelming support for the revised course" ("Synopsis" 8–9). Shortly after the meeting, Brodkey drafted an ad hoc committee of twelve faculty and graduate students to formalize the syllabus with the understanding that the department and administration by and large supported the new course that would be implemented the following fall. To that point, negotiations and procedures regarding the course had been conducted entirely inside the academic sphere. Committees were formed, meetings were held, votes were cast. In essence, the proposal process was a paragon of academic deliberation. Had it remained inside the department, no doubt the course would have run as planned. But of course, it did not.

Outside: The Public Turn(ed)

On June 18, nearly six weeks after the department-wide meeting to discuss the changes to E306 and nearly fourteen weeks after the course redesign was introduced to the LDEPC, UT English Professor Alan Gribben sent a letter to the campus newspaper, The Daily Texan,
expressing his dismay that E306 was being redesigned for "explaining to presumably benighted UT students how they ought to feel about issues of ethnicity and feminism" ("New"). Gribben bashed the course and its materials, implying that Rothenberg's "one-sided" textbook was the focus of the course and dismissing the other unnamed materials, including six Supreme Court cases, as "a few handouts and a grammar guide" (4). Gribben called for students and professors to resist the politicization of E306 and "resist the presumptuous move to grade [students] on 'politically correct' thought in a required English course." Henceforth, discussions about the course, both private and public, became increasingly hostile, culminating in the course's cancellation.

Gribben's letter was the first in a long line of negative comments to appear in public media outlets and was to some extent responsible for the ensuing media circus that sprang up around the course. As I will discuss later, Brodkey bore responsibility for the earliest public announcement of the new course, albeit in a positive light. Nonetheless, in "Making a Federal Case out of Difference," Brodkey communicates her position on the public turn by her opponents in no uncertain terms: "Faculty members who publicize their intellectual disagreements in the popular press not only valorize received opinion, as translated by journalists, over scholarly opinion but also shift the terms of argumentation from reason to ethos" (243). For Brodkey, the change of venue represented no less than a change in values, the presumption being that academic deliberation should trump political ideology in matters of curriculum building—specialist consensus over non-specialist conviction. Brodkey characterized Gribben's abdication of academic process as disingenuous. She argues, "Above all else, Writing about Difference provided academic opponents an occasion to publicize long-standing grievances against the perceived hegemony of theory in composition and literary studies alike" (244). For Brodkey, the course was merely a pawn in the conservative strategy to redirect the conversation to one about liberalization in the academy.

And to some extent, Gribben concurs. In "The Education of Alan Gribben," he recalls that in 1987, three years prior to the cancellation of E306, he voted against an Ethnic and Third World Literature concentration in the MA program and found himself suddenly exiled as a racist and conservative. He claims he was snubbed by colleagues, and his working
environment was so uncomfortable that he requested transfers to other departments several times. Gribben subsequently turned to public organizations like the National Association of Scholars (NAS) to find a community of like-minded thinkers. His association with NAS helped him to establish the kind of public ethos—that is, ethos valued in the public sphere—that allowed him to be heard three years later in discussions about Writing about Difference. Gribben injected himself into the discussion about the course because he "had little more to lose in my department." He bided his time, remaining active in spheres where he gained some notoriety as an academic martyr, and finally addressed Writing about Difference because he recognized he could have an effect. That Writing about Difference never ran is a testament to how well he understood the rhetorical situation into which he entered.

Brodkey and Gribben both understood that rather than being about his concern for the pedagogy or the course, Gribben’s move into the public sphere and his continued participation in public discourses were calculated attempts to circumvent the institutional structures for decision-making. Brodkey offers Gribben’s letter to blue-ribbon donor Anne Blakeney as an example: Gribben “uses the course to justify what I take to be the impropriety of publicizing [suggestions about departmental governance] to someone outside the faculty without having brought a proposal to the department” (246). However, Gribben supporters believed that in such an environment, Gribben was not only justified, but compelled, to bring his story to the attention of a concerned public. As Peter Collier explains,

[Gribben’s] strategy was to enlarge the constituency of the controversy from the confines of the English department, where the radicals were bound to win. So he began a publicity campaign, writing about E306 in the powerful campus newspaper and then bombarding all the major newspapers in Texas with information about the course. . . . He appeared on radio talk shows and television newsmaker programs. When someone from a blue-ribbon alumni group composed of individuals giving at least $1000 a year to the University wrote him for information about the conflict, Gribben sent back an information packet with a cover letter saying that he believed the study of English at Austin was now dominated by a “highly politicized faction of radical literary theorists” and recom-
mended that the department be put into an administrative "receiv-
ership" while its intellectual priorities were sorted out. (9–10)

In a sense, Brodkey and Gribben agreed about what could be expected from taking the issue outside the university—chances were good that the public would take an active interest in determinations about the course, an outcome that was highly unlikely if those inside the academic sphere were left to their own devices.

In fact, members of the public did take an active interest in E306. On June 24, the New York Times published an article in the metropolitan section outlining the proposed "Civil Rights" theme for the course, as well as detailing the objections of Gribben and Ruszkiewicz ("A Civil"). By the 25th, in response to Gribben's articles and radio appearances, (see "Politicizing") citizens sent letters to Brodkey and her colleagues exhorting them to drop changes to the course and "to step aside in favor of folks interested in teaching Johnny to read and write for the business of tomorrow" (Wallner). One anonymous letter writer, identified only as "An irate taxpayer," made his or her feelings about the course perfectly clear in a letter to Kruppa: "Do not teach Behavior Modification [sic]." On June 26, letters and editorials began appearing in local newspapers, and by the 27th the course was thoroughly ensconced in the public sphere.

The ensuing public debate was mostly local, but it was heated. Several UT alumni wrote letters to editors of local papers, and editorials addressing the controversy appeared prominently in the Dallas Morning News, the Houston Chronicle, and the Austin American-Statesman. Gribben and the editor of The Daily Texan, UT student Kevin McHargue, exchanged attacks in the pages of the campus newspaper. Letters continued to pour into the English department and the President's office at UT Austin expressing outrage over the course and the Rothenberg text. On July 18, The Daily Texan published "A Statement of Academic Concern," signed by fifty-six UT faculty members, and Gribben requested that the Faculty Senate and University Council review E306. The following Monday, Meacham postponed the course.

E306: Writing about Difference was scuttled by an administration that had, less than a month earlier, expressed support for departmental autonomy in decisions about the course (Driver 1). By all accounts, the public outcry over the course was directly responsible for Meacham's
ultimate decision (handed down, Brodkey contends, by President Cunningham). It is not hard to surmise, based on this timeline, that outside opinion trumped the decisions reached through a deliberative academic process. According to subsequent accounts, the public, and by extension, the people who brought the issue to the public, were to blame for the termination of the course.  

The Course in Public

The July 18 advertisement, "A Statement of Academic Concern," has drawn a lot of ire from those in composition studies who view the publicity about E306 as a negative factor. In the months following the ad, the national press picked up the issue of Writing about Difference with enthusiasm, eliciting responses in various news outlets, including the New York Times and Washington Post, with supporters and opponents alike crying foul. However, as demonstrated above, the July 18 advertisement was not the beginning of the negative publicity about the course. Gribben's letter to The Daily Texan a month earlier was the first negative press about the course, but Gribben's letter was itself a response to publicity about the course that was already in circulation.

In fact, the first public announcement about the changes being made to E306 came out of the UT News and Information Service on May 30, more than two weeks before Gribben's letter. In it, Kruppa and Brodkey are cited explaining the goal of unifying the course around a single theme, in this case difference, which they argued provided students with a "dual advantage": it offered a "unified approach to the writing of essays," and "the difference theme, by its very nature, will encourage students to critically examine the ways in which the American judicial system deals with discrimination" ("English" 1). The story was picked up the next day by the Austin American-Statesman. On June 4, The Daily Texan reported on the proposed changes, again citing interviews with Kruppa and Brodkey. That same day, the Austin American-Statesman published an editorial titled "UT's Including Ethnic Study in Course a Good Step" which praised the course as a first effort in making the curriculum more culturally inclusive: "This is a small step, but a step in the right direction nonetheless"
(A6). Following suit a few days later, The Daily Texan published a glowing op-ed, calling the proposed changes “intellectually stimulating” and equating the new course design to “[t]he most popular and rigorous upper-division writing courses” (Hays). In each article, Kruppa and Brodkey trumpeted the virtues of the course and downplayed any criticism, and with the exception of the few people who voiced concern about E306 in committee and departmental meetings in April and May, the course generally inspired great praise.

It was not until nearly two and a half weeks after the announcement of the course in public that the first negative voice was sounded. Prior to Gribben’s criticism, the only public voices from the English department were Brodkey’s and Kruppa’s. In light of Brodkey’s obvious distaste for the public airing of academic disagreements, this is striking. Although she and Kruppa obviously found merit in Writing about Difference, some of her colleagues had vociferously objected to the proposed changes. And although Kruppa and Brodkey acknowledged the potential criticism of the approach as “a dilution of the traditional essay material taught in composition courses and an indoctrination to the liberal point of view,” they assert publicly that their critics were mistaken (“English” 1). Brodkey was even quoted in reference to traditional readings being removed from the course: “I don’t think anybody’s going to miss those old saws at all” (2).

In effect, prior to Gribben’s “enlarging the constituency,” Brodkey and Kruppa publicized the course in media outlets as a positive change, presumably because revisions had to be communicated to communities served by the course if it was to make a “substantial contribution” to fostering diversity at the University. By extension, however, Brodkey and Kruppa’s public turn essentially, if unintentionally, served to silence would-be dissenters by co-opting their protestation. Certainly, Brodkey and Kruppa felt justified knowing that the majority of the department was supportive of the new course, and Brodkey defends “academic popularization” as necessary, even as she loathes “the negative publicity about the course we developed” (“Making” 251). But regardless of intention, the effect was the same: Brodkey and Kruppa took the arguments over the course and broadcast them outside of the department. The public turn credited with defeating the course was instigated by E306 supporters.
Composition Studies in the Public Sphere

My goal in outlining the earliest publicity of the course is not to attack Brodkey and Kruppa for publicizing it, nor to defend Gribben's mischaracterization of the course that eventually defined the controversy. Rather, the Battle of Texas points to the persistently public nature of composition. In order for Brodkey to ensure that E306: Writing about Difference made a substantial contribution to the expansion of diversity in the university curriculum, she had to publicize the course to the people interested in expanding diversity. As Brodkey notes, "The times emphatically call for academics to explain, to interested members of the public, what they do and how they do it and even why they do it one way rather than another, seemingly more commonsensical way" ("Making" 251). She had little choice but to broadcast her vision for the course to the public if she wanted it to be the substantial contribution she sought. Discussions of expanded diversity arose, and were playing out, in the public sphere, and if she had implemented the changes quietly, without fanfare, the course might have run. However, it would not have engaged the public debates on which it was designed to make an impact. Furthermore, and more importantly for my argument, quiet implementation would not have protected the course from public scrutiny because it served a public audience—students and parents, most obviously. Quiet implementation might have delayed scrutiny indefinitely, but as long as the course ran materials that offended a vocal part of the community, the course would have been subject to attack on the same grounds raised by Gribben because it was a public concern. Brodkey's apparent distaste for the ensuing public controversy belies the fact that the course was always already a public concern.

The terms in which most compositionists have cast the controversy in Texas elide the always-already public nature of the conversation to which E306 was designed to respond. For example, as Brodkey planned and developed the course over the fall and spring semesters, she was compelled to position it vis-á-vis the local and temporal situation at Texas. Course evaluations had been steadily declining for E306, even as other courses' evaluations stayed relatively steady. Brodkey had been hired precisely to improve E306, and by extension, the evaluations. In addition,
UT Austin, as noted earlier, was making concerted efforts across the campus to expand diversity in the curriculum in response to demands by students, parents, and other interested public constituencies. At the same time, a powerful and vocal conservative movement including professors, newspaper editorialists, politicians, and members of the general public felt increasingly assaulted by those who would replace “traditional values” with multiculturalist, feminist, non-Western ideas. The conservative backlash in Austin was punctuated by two racist incidents over the weekend of April 7 during UT’s annual “spirit week.” In one incident, fraternity Phi Gamma Delta distributed t-shirts with a “Sambo” head on Michael Jordan’s body. In the second incident, outside of the Tau Delta Tau fraternity house, a car was vandalized and spray-painted with racist epithets. Both fraternities were subsequently reprimanded by their national chapters.

Although Brodkey did not design the course to address any one of the above issues directly, neither was the course detached from the situation in Austin and the national “culture wars.” If discussions about fraternity “pranks” were subject to national debate because of how they resonated within the political climate, so too was E306. The course redesign responded to a politically-charged public climate, so it seems reasonable to expect that the course was subject to public and political deliberation in spite of Brodkey and her colleagues’ intentions. If the course was to impact public conditions, it was unavoidably a public concern.

The vocal opposition to the course and the subsequent battle that played out on the campus, in letters, and in news outlets confirms that people felt strongly about the issues at the heart of the redesign, whether or not they fully comprehended the theoretical foundations of the new course. To put it another way, E306 was always already available for discussion in the public sphere, no matter what form it took and in spite of the academic governance structures through which it passed.

In addition, and perhaps more importantly, the evolution of Writing about Difference was meant to drive the nature of the debate as evidenced by Brodkey and Kruppa’s marketing campaign. In order for E306 to address the public debate about the relative merits of a progressive pedagogy that addressed issues of multiculturalism versus a concern for “the basics” and traditional academic standards in the classroom, which
Brodkey said was an important possibility, it had to be a public concern. The negative publicity was obviously unintended by the designers of the course, but it was always a possible response from the divided public sphere being addressed. As demonstrated, Gribben did not instigate the public deliberations over the course. Rather, the proposed changes to the course provided Gribben the impetus he needed to defend his ideological perspective in the public sphere—the course brought Gribben to the public, not the other way around. The cancellation of E306 in response to public input may ultimately say less about the course than it does about the near absence of public ethos available to Brodkey and her supporters. The controversy—including the subsequent resignations of Brodkey, Gribben, and Meacham—makes evident the fact that academic spheres are never removed from public ones, even if they may often seem so.

Conclusions

It is not for nothing that Brodkey saw composition teachers and scholars as embattled. In “Making a Federal Case out of Difference,” she writes, “Those of us who teach and study writing are accustomed to having our jobs explained to us by those who do not, often in terms that set our teeth on edge” (Brodkey, “Making” 252). That compositionists are accustomed to being dismissed as experts may not come as a surprise, but the dismissal of compositionists’ knowledge further exposes the always-already public nature of writing pedagogy and theory, and the lack of public ethos that compositionists possess. Many non-compositionists have influence and interest in defining the way writing is taught for a variety of reasons, with the most common concern couched in the perception that “good writers” are an increasingly scarce resource in business and industry. That the majority of the loudest objectors are not trained to teach writing does not mitigate their compulsion to lobby for a vision of writing instruction beyond the disciplinary and departmental boundaries that compositionists often construct for themselves. People with public profiles from Stanley Fish to Tucker Carlson weigh in on discussions about writing, as did Gribben in the Battle of Texas, because writing is a perennial concern for people regardless of political, academic, or professional affiliation. Brodkey’s
view of the public debate as an unnecessary burden on academic deliberation ignores the role that publics have played in defining composition studies since its inception, from before Adams S. Hill's "An Answer to the Cry for More English" in 1879 and well beyond Merrill Shells' "Why Johnny Can't Write."^{14}

The valuable message to be drawn from the Battle of Texas is not that publics are potential inhibitors of composition theory and academic freedom, but that composition, especially in the first-year course, is already the subject of widespread, heated discussions in the public sphere. So are pedagogy, academic freedom, and many other subjects that compositionists take as areas of expertise. It has become almost an annual occurrence for at least one diatribe to appear in *The Atlantic, The Chronicle of Higher Education,* or *The New York Times* surveying the dire intellectual landscape for first-year students.^{15} The system, teachers, and most often, students are blamed for a precipitous dumbing down of America as evidenced by young people's inability to write as correctly as their forbears. So the dilemma is not whether to bring composition to the public sphere, but how compositionists can more actively participate in the conversation over an extended period of time, in multiple ways, and for various publics. To put it another way, compositionists need to engage in sustained examinations of how better to engage publics, not if public engagement can or should be avoided until such a time as compositionists have defined a unified, coherent message.

Brodkey's response to the public nature of the Battle of Texas and the ways that compositionists have subsequently written about the controversy suggest that some compositionists would prefer to avoid public exposure, believing it to be a perpetual impediment to their work. Others, like Mortensen, just do not see a way for compositionists to enter the public sphere, even if they accept it as a necessary move. But writing continues to be the subject of public debate, and compositionists still do not often possess sufficient ethos to make valued contributions to public discussions of writing.^{16} Other public voices continue to define writing and composition to outside audiences in self-serving and unflattering, and in many cases erroneous, ways.^{17} And compositionists need either to engage in direct and extended discussions about entering public discussions about writing as soon as possible or they must accept that outside constitu-
encies will continue to drive the discussions in ways compositionists find unacceptable.

Moving Forward

Currently, composition studies exists in the same sort of liminal space as it did in 1990. Compositionists are increasingly valued in the academy for their expertise, to be sure, but increasing academic value has not translated to influence in public discussions of writing, even as composition studies is still implicated in the public sphere in similar ways that Writing about Difference was. Indeed, within the public sphere, non-specialists continue to feel justified in defining writing and learning in ways that compositionists have largely rejected for thirty years or more. The limited opportunities compositionists have to address such audiences, usually in incidental conversations with individuals at dinner parties or on long flights, are woefully unsuited to changing such widespread presumptions about writing and pedagogy. To say it another way, compositionists who seek to engage positively in the public sphere often find themselves reacting to imbedded popular notions of writing instead of helping the public to better understand how disciplinary research over the past thirty years has changed what is known about how people write and learn. In essence, little has changed since the Battle of Texas with regard to how compositionists and publics interact. As a result, compositionists have become more adept at answering charges that writing teachers are doing something wrong than they are at explaining what scholars working in composition studies have been learning and teaching since 1970.

Still, even if the publics that compositionists need to reach are actively hostile to the messages compositionists desire to circulate, options do exist for compositionists to engage publics. At least three options have begun to emerge in recent years. One is that compositionists need to become visible public presences by addressing issues that interest public audiences. For example, Paul Butler believes that compositionists need to be more aware of, and amenable to discussing, issues that publics find compelling. Butler argues in particular that stylistic study was inappropriately jettisoned by composition studies as a feature of current-traditional rhetoric. But, he argues, publics are worried about style, which, according
to Butler, comprises such hot-button issues as grammar, literacy, syntax, and usage (62–64). He believes that compositionists’ inclination to reject style as a primary concern, subsumed by the importance of critical thinking, strikes public audiences as self-righteous and evasive. The result, according to Butler, is that publics turn to intellectuals like Stanley Fish, Louis Menand, and Heather MacDonald for “expert” opinions about the state of writing—scholars whose positions on stylistic concerns more closely resembles that of the publics they address, even if their intellectual affiliations are not with composition studies. If composition studies will reclaim style, Butler believes, it would provide compositionists with the common understanding to establish a public ethos, and would be a significant intersection of interests from which to begin dialogues about writing (76–77). Of course, it is impossible to predict how a focus on style might have impacted developments in Texas, but if style was a more visible concern in the E306 syllabus, it might have provided evidence to many of the course’s opponents that “the basics” were not being abandoned for a focus on politics.

A second possible option is for compositionists to continue working to expand and flesh out the research necessary to provide composition studies with the kind of scientific foundation of knowledge that publics find compelling, an argument that has found some traction in discussions among compositionists in venues like the WPA-L listserv, especially with regard to issues like class size, technology use, and assessment. From the example of the Battle of Texas, we might draw the conclusion that compositionists need to be better equipped to defend writing pedagogies with more and better research than Brodkey had or than composition studies currently has. Proponents of this view argue that composition studies still does not have the kind of evidence to convince public audiences that compositionists know what they are doing. In this line of reasoning, more empirical, replicable research will help composition studies make stronger cases to publics and administrators in much the same way the hard sciences have. It is hard to imagine empirical data that would have mollified Brodkey’s conservative critics, but if empirical data was sufficiently developed for compositionists to be taken seriously prior to the Battle of Texas, it is not hard to imagine that the controversy could have been avoided altogether. That is, if publics trusted compositionists and their
research prior to Brodkey’s revisions of E306, there may never have been any question that she was qualified and competent to revise the course in pedagogically effective—as opposed to politically indoctrinating—ways.

Still a third option, and one being explored by members of the Network for Media Action (WPA-NMA), sponsored by the National Council of Writing Program Administrators, is for compositionists to become more vigilant observers and participants in discussions about composition studies’ disciplinary knowledge by writing op-eds, letters to editors, and corrective responses in local media outlets. According to their website, “The WPA-NMA both monitors mainstream media for examples of [negative] stories [about writing and writers], and provides tips on how to begin entering the conversation about them on your campus and/or in your community.” By conducting the same sort of grassroots media campaign so fruitfully waged by Gribben and his supporters, though ideally without the ethical compromises, the WPA-NMA believes that compositionists can build a locally-grounded, situation-specific, public ethos to “change the discussion.” The intended effect, of course, is similar to that of focusing on style and producing empirical data, and can be applied similarly to the situation in Texas. If compositionists had been better at producing and communicating the kinds of information valued by administrators and publics, the Battle of Texas might never have been more than a blip in the history of UT Austin’s English department. Until compositionists become better at producing and communicating the kinds of information valued by administrators and publics, the Battle of Texas might be easily replayed at institutions across the country.

All three of the above options are important and, in my view, viable ways for compositionists to actively engage in the public sphere to effectively change public conceptions of writing. And each of these options has advantages and limitations, to be sure. For starters, the WPA-NMA movement is poised to address local concerns and situations in addition to bearing the official imprimatur of one of composition studies largest and most influential professional organizations. At the same time, the WPA-NMA seems destined to remain reactive to pronouncements already made by other people rather than becoming proactive drivers of the conversation. Alternatively, development of a more scientific, empirically-grounded research agenda has the potential to influence administra-
tors but does not necessarily solve the problem of how composition studies disseminates that cutting-edge research to concerned publics expeditiously, to say nothing of questions about how compositionists will be trained to conduct such research. And Butler's contention that composition studies needs public intellectuals suggests fruitful ways to find common ground with larger publics but fails to account for the fact that developing public intellectuals requires some measure of public goodwill toward intellectuals even for a common ground to be acknowledged. It is likely that if composition studies is going to make serious inroads into public perceptions of writing in ways that would have been fruitful for Brodkey and may still be fruitful for avoiding similar controversies in the future, it will require making use of the best aspects of all three of the above models. And the question needs to shift from, "What do we talk to the public about?" to "How do we establish a useful ethos for talking about, and eventually driving, the discussions that are already taking place?"

A final lesson for compositionists might be drawn from the events in Texas, in this case from opponents of E306. Whatever compositionists' feelings about Alan Gribben, he may actually provide an example of public intellectualism that could be useful for composition studies to better understand. Gribben began his campaign against E306 by writing letters to local newspapers—The Daily Texan and the Austin American-Statesman—and took every opportunity offered to comment about his concerns. He grounded his concerns in "common sense" notions of writing that resonated with non-academics, which helped him establish the necessary common ground with the publics he was addressing. He even included his curriculum vitae with his letters "to show that I have instructed 24 sections of courses emphasizing writing skills, 15 of them at the lower-division level, since arriving at the University in 1974" ("Texan"). And of course, Gribben was financially and ideologically supported by a national organization—in his case, the NAS. Gribben established himself as a credible and concerned authority on writing pedagogy well before he involved himself in the controversy over E306, and he recognized the kairos of E306 when it presented itself. And, perhaps most importantly, he provided his allies with the kinds of information and language that allowed them to extend his position to wider audiences. Where Gribben was lacking, and where composition studies might extend the successes of
Gribben's public profile, is in having the research data necessary to ethically support a given position.

Compositionists need to develop methods for finding common ground with concerned publics to address local and national issues in public forums, to conduct and present better and more useful research, and to capitalize on support and direction from national organizations. Ultimately, if compositionists hope to establish the kind of ethos necessary to be welcome and respected members of public conversations, particularly conversations about writing and pedagogy, compositionists also need to develop more rhetorically savvy understandings about how to engage substantively in public spheres—a lesson widely available to scholars of rhetoric. But the conversation is already taking place, and the longer compositionists take to develop methods for engaging actively in the conversation, the longer it will continue in the same vein apparent in the Battle of Texas. As the Battle of Texas demonstrates, to do any less leaves open opportunities for others to continue driving discussions about writing while we watch and worry.

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**Notes**

1. I want to thank Duane Roen, Maureen Daly Goggin, Paul Kei Matsuda, Sharon Crowley, and Linda Brodkey for their invaluable contributions to this essay, as well as Karen Fitts and an anonymous reviewer for their indispensable feedback.

2. Weisser and Long each offer compelling arguments about the importance of engaging publics, but neither attempts to push compositionists into the public sphere. Rather, their projects argue for pedagogies that teach students effective ways to engage publics. In "WPAs and versus Administrators," Rebecca Moore Howard reviews much of the literature WPAs have written about changing the public narrative about writing (11–12). Howard then offers her own suggestion, which involves making pathetic appeals to administrators that precede logical, academic ones.

3. Even some academics who are also respected public intellectuals read incompatibility in the relationship. See, for example, Bourdieu, Massey, McLaren, and Zinn.

4. Of course, dividing the people engaged in the debates over E306 into two factions does not begin to represent the complexity of the viewpoints expressed
by the students, parents, faculty, administrators, citizens, and others. However, since I am concerned with the public nature of the debate, I have maintained the binary established by accounts of the controversy.

5. Maureen Daly Goggin calls attention to possible confusion regarding the date of Bizzell and Trimbur’s letter. Even though the issue of Pre/Text in which the letter appeared bore a publication date of 1989, the issue was not actually published until 1991 (206n5). The letter itself is dated November 26, 1990.

6. See Appendix A for a timeline of events leading up to the postponement of E306.

7. It is worth noting that the grammar guide was The Scott, Foresman Handbook with Writing Guide, authored by UT English department faculty, Maxine Hairston and John Ruszkiewicz. Although their book was to be required, Hairston and Ruszkiewicz were both vocal opponents of the E306 redesign.

8. The National Association of Scholars is an ultra-conservative group of academics who “uphold the principle of individual merit and oppose racial, gender, and other group preferences. And we regard the Western intellectual heritage as the indispensable foundation of American higher education” (“Who”). The NAS is the parent organization of the Texas Association of Scholars, which funded “A Statement of Academic Concern” (Henson and Philpott).

9. See Ackerman, Ellis, Lewis, and Sanford for a sample of the discussions taking place within days of Gribben’s first letter.

10. No doubt the public nature of the controversy was significant because many of the concerned citizens were also generous donors. The outcome was probably predictable for just this reason. Whether or not one agrees that donors should affect curricular decisions, the fact is schools rely heavily on private donations and therefore can be expected to respond to donors’ concerns.

11. See, for example, Murchison.

12. Gribben had been making similar arguments in more specialized arenas for some time (see his “English Departments: Salvaging What Remains,” for example). Nevertheless, with E306 becoming a public concern, he had an opportunity to weigh in that would not have been previously available. E306 gave him a specific impetus to voice concerns that might otherwise have come across as ungrounded and unjustifiable.

13. If anything, it seems the course was ahead of its time. In a recent MLA Newsletter, MLA President Gerald Graff calls for more controversial course topics, arguing “Grouping courses in one discipline or more around more controversial issues could give coherence and point to a curriculum that too often simply mirrors the surrounding fragmentation of information” (4). Graff’s argument is remarkably similar to those made by Brodkey in defense of E306.

14. There is not space here for an extended discussion of the public nature of composition over the past 150 years or more, but as Robin Varnum notes in “From Crisis to Crisis” and Karen Spear argues in “Controversy and Consensus
in Freshman Writing," the first-year course has been continually redefined in response to public "literacy crises" which FYC was designed to fix. See Howard, "Public Intellectual, or Public Object?" for another powerful example of how public composition research is, whether compositionists intend it to be or not.

15. These diatribes seem always to be written by anonymous writing teachers, disgruntled graduate students, or public intellectual untrained in composition theory. See for example, Professor X, Kugelmass, and Bauerlein.

16. See Hesse (343–44) for a discussion of compositionists’ failure to make a national impact.

17. For example, Stanley Fish has argued that students should not be asked to write about content because it distracts them from form. He makes this claim in a variety of forums, and it inevitably sparks criticism from compositionists. Those critiques notwithstanding, Fish communicates to an audience of millions in ways that they seem to find compelling regardless of how uninformed he may seem to compositionists.

18. See Haswell for a critique of composition studies’ body of research.

19. This argument has been a major part of composition studies since at least 1963 with the publication of Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Shoer’s Research in Written Composition. See Goggin (76–78) for a discussion of the impact of Research in Written Composition on the trajectory of composition studies’ research agenda.

20. One possible solution to the public intellectual dilemma might be drawn from Sven Eliaeson and Ragnvald Kalleberg’s Academics as Public Intellectuals. They make a key distinction between the role of public intellectual and the role of expert. They argue that academics function separately as “intellectuals with citizens, popularizing specialized knowledge and use of such knowledge in public discourse” and as “experts with clients and customers” (4). Often when authors, including Butler, encourage members of a given field to engage in the public sphere, the intended outcome is to become a reliable expert to speak on behalf of the field, but Eliaeson and Kalleberg’s notion of a public intellectual opens up spaces for interested compositionists to engage as public intellectuals without the pressure of having always to be experts in every type of engagement. Engaging publics as intellectuals—not necessarily as experts—may provide opportunities to build the ethos necessary to be valued as experts in discussions about writing.

21. Gribben’s notion of writing pedagogy was grounded in the “common sense” beliefs that students who have to take first-year writing are already behind, that they have to learn the basics (usage, grammar, spelling, and punctuation), and that until they do, students cannot possibly comprehend and contend with more sophisticated discourses like difference. Crowley argues that “common sense” of this sort underpins most attempts by non-compositionists to drive the pedagogy of first-year composition (255–56).
Acknowledgments


——. Memorandum to the Lower Division English Program Committee. 20 Mar. 1990.


“English Department to Change Content of Rhetoric and Composition Course.” UT News. UT News and Information Service, University of Texas at Austin. 30 May 1990: 1–2.


———. Letter to Anne Blakeney. 9 July 1990.


Ruszkiewicz, John. Memorandum to the Lower Division English Program Committee. 6 Apr. 1990.


Wallner, Norman R. Letter to Dr. Joseph Kruppa. 25 June 1990.


**Appendix A**

**Fall 1989–Spring 1990:** Brodkey, Meacham, and Kruppa redesign English 306.

**March 20, 1990:** Brodkey sends memo to LDEPC introducing changes to course including Rothenberg’s *Racism and Sexism.*

**April 3:** LDEPC meets. Duban expresses reservations about adopting *Racism and Sexism.* Ruszkiewicz does not attend. Committee votes 4-0 with 1 abstention to continue with course revision and adopt *Racism and Sexism.*

**April 4:** Duban reiterates his objection to *Racism and Sexism* and asks that the minutes from April 3 reflect his series reservations.

**April 6:** Ruszkiewicz writes memo expressing disapproval over redesign, especially the adoption of *Racism and Sexism* as unbalanced and unsuited to course goals.

**April 10:** LDEPC reconvenes. Ruszkiewicz and Duban express concerns about E306.

**April 15:** Brodkey responds to Ruszkiewicz’s memo, refuting his objections about course fidelity, pilot testing, and bias in *Racism and Sexism.*

**April 17:** LDEPC rejects motions to slow course development, reconsider text, pilot-test, and allow AIs to opt out. The committee votes all AIs must teach one semester of E306.

**May 1:** Kruppa distributes memo from Brodkey in which she defends the pedagogy of E306. Kruppa calls a May 8th department meeting.
May 2: Brodkey defends decision not to pilot test E306 in a letter to Meacham.

May 8: The department meets about E306. According to Brodkey, approximately 100 people attend, of which five express objections. Notably, Gribben does not raise objections. Brodkey believes there is broad support for E306.

May 30: UT News and Information Service distributes information about E306.

Early June: Several articles and op-eds in the *Austin American-Statesman* and *The Daily Texan* support changes to E306.

June 18: Gribben writes *The Daily Texan*, calling changes to E306 “politiciization.”

June 20-27: Gribben gives two radio interviews to protest changes to E306.

June 23: Gribben writes to the *Austin American-Statesman* calling the course “the most massive attempt at thought control ever attempted on the campus.”

June 24: *New York Times* runs article about changes to and controversy about E306. Kruppa, Brodkey [sic], Gribben, and Ruszkiewicz are cited.

June 25: Citing cost, pedagogy, and uneasy colleagues, Brodkey scraps *Racism and Sexism*.

June 26: The first in a spate of anti-E306 op-eds appears in *The Daily Texan*.

June 27: *The Daily Texan* announces cancellation of *Racism and Sexism*. In the article, Meacham “endorses the decisions made by the English Department” (Driver).

July 9: Gribben writes Blakeney to thank her for support. Duban and Ruszkiewicz write Brodkey asking to be kept up-to-date on syllabus changes.

July 10: Brodkey communicates her plans to keep LDEPC, including Duban and Ruszkiewicz, up-to-date.
July 11: Duban and Ruszkiewicz resign from LDEPC. University President William Cunningham writes a concerned citizen assuring her the course is cancelled, though no official announcement had been made publicly or to members of the English department.

July 18: "A Statement of Academic Concern" appears in The Daily Texan. Gribben urges Faculty Senate and University Council to review E306.

July 23: E306: Writing about Difference is postponed. The course never runs.