

## Nurturing Critical Thinking and Academic Freedom in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century University

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Critical thinking and academic freedom are enduring tenets of the liberal ethos of higher education. However, whereas the former is normally considered as a learning process for students, the latter tends to be understood as a licence for the professoriate. If understood as rights and responsibilities pertaining to teachers and learners alike, the terms of inquiry and expression may be conflated within a single conceptual framework, serving not only the needs of the higher education community, but the progress of wider society. Referring to academic climates on both sides of the Atlantic, this paper argues that universities are failing to cultivate debate on contemporary issues, as the learning environment is stifled by ideological rectitude. The author appeals for a reinvigoration of critical thinking and academic freedom in higher education.

Educationalists have long maintained that the purpose of teaching extends beyond imparting fact and theory. Rather than passively accepting received wisdom, students are encouraged to think for themselves. This pedagogic principle can be traced back to the academy of classic Greece; fourth century philosopher Augustine of Hippo rejected the notion that pupils should merely learn whatever their teacher thinks. In the Humboldtian tradition, the modern university is a citadel of free inquiry, but it faces major challenges in maintaining this role. Firstly, utilitarianism dictates that universities deliver graduates versed in the knowledge and skills relevant to the current needs of society. With vast material for students to acquire, tuition inevitably gravitates toward lower order cognition through didactic methods, thus precluding the nurture of a creative and critical disposition. Definitions of critical thinking vary, but it is generally considered to entail a doubting attitude and an ability to scrutinize ideas and assumptions through reasoned argument. According to Paul (1992), critical thinking is not simply a benefit of higher education, but the overarching aim; for Lipman (1991), it is crucial to the survival of a rational, democratic society. Similar arguments have been made in defence of its cousin, academic freedom. However, such intellectual latitude faces a second threat, in the form of ideological bias. This paper considers the socio-political culture of the university and how free expression is being curtailed.

### Academic Culture and Bias

A common observation in the popular media is that the corridors of academe are pervaded by a “liberal intelligentsia.” The origins of this socio-political consensus can be approximated to the *Zeitgeist* of the 1960s, when a restless, youthful society rejected traditional mores and hierarchy. In American universities, a backlash from Senator McCarthy’s

“witch-hunt” for communist professors in the 1950s led to the ascent of a liberal-Left culture in the Kennedy-Johnson years. Radical students and lecturers saw the university as the base for Marxist revolution; in their uncompromising ideology, liberal education was a *bourgeoise* luxury of the capitalist system. Anti-Establishment fervour gained momentum in the 1968 riots by French students and demonstrations by their American counterparts against the Vietnam War. Immersed in protests and emancipatory causes, the campus propagated an egalitarian, social conscience in the educated classes. Many alumni would abandon their Trotskyite flirtations on graduating, but each contributed to an ideological legacy.

Idealism is the prerogative of youth. Yet students are not universally disposed to a questioning attitude. Many take a strategic approach to study, motivated by results rather than the opportunity to challenge the epistemological foundations of their subject. Young minds, as totalitarian states have exploited, may be ripe for indoctrination. In the USA, conservative critics claim that universities are engaged in politicization. The pendulum may swing, but the default position of American academe is unashamedly to the left of the spectrum, attracting polemics such as Ben Shapiro’s *Brainwashed: How Universities Indoctrinate America’s Youth* (2004). Such concerns led right-wing activist David Horowitz to found the pressure group Students for Academic Freedom (2006), which promotes “intellectual diversity” in teaching, research and appointment at American universities. Recently, internet campaigns have been waged against radical teachers, drawing counter-attacks from an academic mainstream quick to raise the spectre of McCarthyism, e.g., Cole, 2005.

To investigate alleged political propaganda, Neil Gross and Solon Simmons (2006) conducted a telephone survey of a thousand randomly selected American adults, with a representative profile of age,

gender, educational attainment, and political affiliation. Asked to name the biggest issues facing American universities, cost of tuition was identified by 80% of the sample, binge-drinking by 17%, lowering educational standards by 10%, and political bias by only 8%. However, when asked specifically about the latter, 38% agreed with the statement that this was “a very serious problem.” Positive responses varied from 27% of Democrat voters to 49% of Republicans. Overall, 68% believed that academe favors those who display a liberal-left mindset, while almost two-thirds of respondents believed that academic institutions spend too much time on political issues. If true, what impact might this have on the higher education journey?

Bias is not inherently detrimental to learning. Hickey and Brecher (1990) argued that wherever coursework deals with values, neutrality is impossible. The teacher’s views in subjects such as economics, sociology, history, and politics are more likely to be detrimental if concealed rather than made explicit. Indeed, Hickey and Brecher saw bias as fundamental to the process of education; students should be encouraged to form, articulate, and defend their own position on relevant issues, “to cultivate a critical and reflective autonomy” (p. 308). Cogent argument thus replaces crude polemic. However, the authors failed to acknowledge the impact of lecturer partiality on the curriculum. Describing their politics course, Marxist ideas clearly dominated, and this was something they seemed keen to preserve:

The tutor has a responsibility to be biased in the interests of good teaching. It is properly immaterial to the degree’s Board of Study whether that bias exhibits a sympathy for structuralist or humanist or analytical Marxism, for Leninism or for Stalinism, or for Marxism as such against anti-Marxism. Indeed it would be entirely proper, were an adequately qualified and practised tutor to be available, for that bias to be unashamedly anti-Marxist, from a liberal or libertarian perspective (p310).

In a recent editorial promoting academic freedom, Jennifer Holberg and Marcy Taylor (2009) justifiably denounced intimidating actions of “anti-liberal” campaigners at American universities, but saw no contradiction in urging police investigation of the distributors of pamphlets warning of *jihad* activity on campus. Rather than displaying balance toward controversy, pursuance of “approved” causes is welcomed, while perceived reactionary views are suppressed. For example, the literature on research methodology is replete with feminist attacks on the prevailing scientific paradigm (Severiens & ten Daam, 1998); by contrast, right-of-center arguments have

limited outlet, whatever their resonance with public opinion. Arguably, higher education has an important role in challenging lay prejudices, but intellectualism remote from societal discourse may be disparaged as smug or lacking in common sense. Such sentiment was observed in American society by Richard Hofstadter (1963), writing at a time when universities were becoming a bastion of liberal orthodoxy. Today, political bias has become so entrenched in academe that a “conservative intellectual” might be regarded as an oxymoron. Greater irony may be found in liberal hegemony.

### Ideological Assumptions

The current predicament of freedom of expression in the university must be understood in relation to a prevailing socio-political outlook. This is commonly hyphenated as a combination of “liberal” and “left”: the former espousing liberty and opportunity, with the latter instrumentalist, placing faith in state intervention. Compromise between these overlapping yet distinct paradigms is apparent in two cherished principles in higher education. Firstly, there is egalitarianism. While most people working in academe would support an abstract goal of fairness, significant differences arise in interpretation. As Steven Pinker (2002) explained, one model – equality of opportunity – is diametrically opposed to the other – equality of outcome. Ability and aspiration are not equally distributed, nor are rewards. Indeed, a pure meritocracy, in which life chances are determined by talent alone, would create great disparity, as in Michael Young’s (1961) dystopian vision. For outcome egalitarians, social justice entails compensating for naturalistic or discriminatory imbalances in society. As the focus has shifted from individual to collective outcomes, identity politics has become the vehicle for change.

At the core of this issue is the nature-nurture debate. In the 1970s sociobiologist E.O. Wilson was castigated for claiming that human character and culture are subject to natural selection. He had contravened the doctrine of *tabula rasa*, whereby nothing in mind or behavior is inherited (Pinker 2002). An illustration of “blank slate” ideology is in the West End musical *The Blood Brothers*. A single mother in a Liverpool slum, pregnant with twins, earns cash as a maid for an affluent but sadly infertile lady, and they make a deal. The boy raised in the rough public housing estate becomes a petty criminal, while his adopted brother in the genteel suburbs goes to grammar school and earns a place at Cambridge. The message of this romantic fable is that life chances are entirely derived from experience. Denial of hereditary passage ignores scientific evidence (Watson, 2004), and it is ironic that while educationalists ridicule creationism, they

maintain the empirically refuted seventeenth century conjecture of John Locke.

In Britain, unlike the mixed state and private provision in the USA, the university system is publicly funded, and a core strategy of government apparatchiks is the expansion of university education into the lower socio-economic strata. While many academic leaders accept a degree of affirmative action, doubts are surfacing. Vice-chancellor of Cambridge University Alison Richard used her speech at the 2008 UK Universities conference to attack social engineering of admissions, arguing that the primary concern of the university is not equality but excellence (*The Times*, 2008, September 10). Amidst alleged “dumbing down” of educational standards, students need assurance that it is their aptitude and application being assessed, not their appeal to redistributive justice. Collectivist intervention thwarts the primary focus of teaching: the individual student, each unique in attributes and potential. As the great libertarian John Milton (1667) penned in *Paradise Lost*, “if not equal all...all equally free.”

A corollary of identity politics is multiculturalism. In an increasingly diverse society, Kantian universal fairness has been abandoned in favor of the postmodern creed of relativism. Imposition of Western ideas on other belief systems is avoided, but in fear of causing offence, cultural sensitivity has led to tolerance of beliefs and activities that confront established causes such as the emancipation of women. Feminists, partly due to cultural sensitivity but also perhaps fear, have been reticent in responding to this existential threat. Absurdities of liberal-left paradox were highlighted in commentator Nick Cohen’s damning indictment *What’s Left* (2007); for example, gay rights are promoted, but so too are the religious beliefs of groups categorically opposed to homosexuality. Without logical coherence, moral pluralism creates a bewildering fog for students in which the easiest approach is to uncritically accept all “otherness,” while the *ancien régime* is attacked at will.

While attitudes and beliefs undoubtedly vary across the higher education workforce, the culture of the university, as in any occupational setting, emerges subtly through an interaction between the characteristics of people it attracts and the nature of the job. Political views are not overt recruitment criteria, but candidates at odds with prevailing ideology might best keep their views to themselves or seek employment elsewhere. Consequently, academe may not reflect the attitudinal diversity of wider society. To allege an Orwellian control of knowledge would be excessive, but arguably the revolutionary wave of the 1960s and 1970s has forged a new Establishment, keen to preserve its moral authority. Social historian Fred Siegel (1993) remarked that whereas intellectuals once spoke truth to power, they now speak power to truth.

### Censorship in Action

Recent incidents have provided ample evidence for ideological censorship, with some eminent academic figures silenced. One casualty was Harvard president Lawrence Summers (now courted by President Barack Obama), who suggested that the gender imbalance in professorial positions in mathematics and science is due to differences in predilection. Students reacted by passing a vote of no confidence in his position (*New York Times* 2005, March 16). In the UK, the prestigious Royal Society demoted its director of education Michael Reiss for suggesting that schools present beliefs conflicting with the theory of evolution (*Science*, 2008, October 13). James Watson, a Nobel Prize-winner for discovering the structure of DNA, was forced to abandon a lecture at Oxford University after a furor arose from his remarks on affirmative action for racial equality (*The Independent*, 2007, October 20). The “dreaming spires” also witnessed the Oxford Students Action for Refugees attempting to remove Professor David Coleman from his post, protestors having confused his interest in eugenics with Nazi racial supremacy (*Daily Mail*, 2007, March 8). Clearly, there are words that cannot be spoken, debates that cannot be held, in the supposed fortresses of free speech.

Political policing transpires in the activities of the associations for lecturers and students. A common theme, within a general loathing of Judeo-Christian heritage, is the vilification of Israel as a global symbol of Western oppression. A recent controversy in Britain was sparked by a narrow vote by the Association of University Teachers to boycott collaboration with Israeli scholars, due to their government’s treatment of Palestinians. In response, a group of twenty-one Nobel prizewinners wrote to liberal-Left newspaper *The Guardian* (2005, May 24): -

There is nothing more intrinsic to the academic spirit than the free exchange of ideas. Academic freedom has never been the property of a few and must not be manipulated by them. Therefore, mixing science with politics, and limiting academic freedom by boycotts, is wrong. We, scholars from various disciplines who have devoted our academic lives to the advancement of humankind, express our unequivocal support for the separation of science from politics. The Nobel prizes we were honoured to receive were granted without the slightest consideration of nationality, ethnicity, religion or gender. Any deviation from this principle should not be allowed. Supporting a boycott will undermine these principles. It is our hope that academic reasoning will overcome political rhetoric.

The union relented, having incurred the wrath of the popular press and criticism by Prime Minister Tony Blair, but soon after, a similar boycott was approved by the University & College Union (2007, September 28), the biggest lecturers' union in the UK. The UCU accused universities of being complicit in alleged human right abuses of Palestinians. While sparing such piety towards tyrannical regimes elsewhere, the union sought a policy of "non-co-operation" with Israel, including a publication ban, and refusal to attend conferences in the state or to participate in Israeli-sponsored research (*Daily Telegraph*, 2007, June 2). General secretary Sally Hunt later declared, following legal advice, that the action would not proceed, as it would contravene anti-discrimination law (UCU website, 2007). However, the message from union membership was disconcerting to Jewish students in Britain facing an increase in anti-Semitism, and to whom rhetoric of "celebrating diversity" seems hollow (Union of Jewish Students, [www.ujs-online.co.uk](http://www.ujs-online.co.uk)).

Censorship by students is a growing trend. Throughout British universities, the National Union for Students (NUS) vigorously maintains a "No Platform" campaign to prevent an audience for groups or individuals who they do not like. Speakers contravening an inflexible tranche of opinions have been subjected to *ad hominem* attack, but extreme labels such as "fascist" are diluted when aimed, not at followers of the far-Right, but at scientists reporting inconvenient research findings. Physical violence has been threatened by those who believe they are fighting fascism, when unwittingly enacting it themselves. Facing the likelihood of reactionary backlash, it is perhaps not surprising that universities play safe over whom they invite to the lectern.

### **Institutional Policy on Academic Freedom**

The formal organization has the ultimate sanction of disciplinary action against any member of staff seen as bringing their institute into disrepute. In reality, few scholars are dismissed for indiscrete oratory. Nonetheless, there are powerful disincentives for stepping outside the confines of accepted ideology. Fear of social isolation or a juddering career halt may be enough to induce self-censorship in those of unconventional opinion. Responding to perceived constraints imposed by universities on free speech, a British professor, Dennis Hayes, founded the campaign Academics for Academic Freedom ([www.afaf.org.uk](http://www.afaf.org.uk)), inviting academic workers to sign the following statement:

(1) that academics, both inside and outside the classroom, have unrestricted liberty to question and test received wisdom and to put forward

controversial and unpopular opinions, whether or not these are deemed offensive

(2) that academic institutions have no right to curb the exercise of this freedom by members of their staff, or to use it as grounds for disciplinary action or dismissal.

According to Hayes, academic freedom is absolute. Free speech cannot be granted selectively, or it is not free speech at all. In Britain, this principle is enshrined in the Education Reform Act (Department of Education, 1988), which states that "academic staff have freedom within the law to question and test received wisdom and put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs." Protection of academic freedom has not reached Constitutional Amendment in the USA; accepted policy is based on a *Statement of Principle on Academic Freedom and Tenure* by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the Association of American Colleges in 1940. According to this statement, teachers should be permitted to discuss and publish controversial ideas within the confines of their subject. It balances such rights with responsibilities to their employer, students, and the wider community (AAUP, 1990, clause 3):

University teachers are citizens, members of a learned profession, and officers of an educational institution. When they speak or write as citizens, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline, but their special position in the community imposes special obligations. As scholars and educational officers, they should remember that the public may judge their profession and their institution by utterances. Hence they should at all times be accurate, exercise appropriate restraint, show respect for the opinion of others, and make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution.

In 1970 the AAUP issued an Interpretive Comment on the statement (AAUP, 1990), but despite some helpful emphasis and clarifications, there remains room for interpretation of what might be considered legitimate. Academic freedom is a nebulous concept, but Barnett (1990, p136) offered this definition: "Academic pursuits, carried out in academic settings, by academic persons, should be ultimately directed by these persons.

If the scope of academic freedom is narrowed to formal areas of expertise, should letters from lecturers to newspapers on extracurricular issues such as nuclear energy or Palestine be addressed with the name of their institution? Perhaps this is appropriate if the writer

reflects faculty norms? A statement by the American Council of Education (2005) advised that “the validity of academic ideas, theories, arguments and views should be measured against the intellectual standards of relevant academic and professional disciplines.” Marginal views, however defensible, might not be tolerated by the sort of universities that Kors and Silverglate (1998) accused of imposing a pernicious cult of political correctness. Meanwhile, Fessel (2006) identified another indirect means of institutional control. Student evaluation has been introduced throughout academe, and while few educators would deny its merit, it potentially provides ammunition for dispensing with “poorly performing” staff. Debate may prove costly in a minefield of the readily offended. Stancato (2000) observed an increasing reluctance of faculty to facilitate discussion on sensitive yet core issues; according to Fessel (2006, p53), “hardly any campus has been left untouched by this trend toward suppressing the very controversial issues that can promote critical thinking.”

### Implications for Teaching

In the idealism of the universities founded in early nineteenth century Germany, knowledge was to be acquired through Hegelian dialectic. This culture of *Lernfreiheit* declined with the expansion of technical knowledge, and reliance on debate as the primary instrument for learning would be fanciful today. Yet the principle of critical learning remains relevant. Ronald Barnett, in his *Idea of Higher Education* (1990, p203), identified the following processes as fundamental to the student’s progress in higher education:

1. A deep understanding of knowledge claims
2. A radical critique of those knowledge claims
3. A developing competence to conduct that critique in the company of others
4. Involvement in determining the shape and direction of that critique
5. Self-reflection
6. Opportunity to engage in a process of open dialogue

Critical thinking has been described as more of an aspiration than a method (Browne & Freeman, 2000). Its nurture relies on the relationship between lecturer and student, with the former as mentor in an ongoing process of discovery. Socratic questioning may be used to pursue the basis and support for an argument, its conflict with alternative stances, and its implications (Paul, 1992). The teacher might usefully play the role of “devil’s advocate.” The author recalls from psychiatric nurse training a visiting lecturer asserting that prison or any form of incarceration have no place

in a civilized society. Although unable at the time to articulate a satisfactory response, this challenge to the student group’s assumptions stimulated deeper thought on why society deprives certain individuals of their liberty, and the rational trinity of public safety, punishment, and rehabilitation. This example demonstrates the benefit of critical engagement in a topic. As described by Entwistle (1988), whereas surface learning entails filtering of course material into facts to be memorized for examination, deep learning is to understand a concept within its wider context, leading to a richer, enduring cognizance.

By traversing the arbitrarily drawn boundaries of knowledge, critical thinking ultimately empowers students not only in their subject but in “the university of life.” In the problem-based learning model (Kwan, 2009), the teacher acts as facilitator of group work to tackle real world issues through discussion, thereby enhancing critical reasoning and problem-solving skills. Of current prominence in the literature on critical thinking is transformative learning. In a rapidly changing world, it is important not only to prepare students to become autonomous citizens, but also to be tolerant and inclusive. As Mezirow (1997) stated: “We have a strong tendency to reject ideas that fail to fit our preconceptions, labelling those ideas as unworthy of consideration – aberrations, nonsense, irrelevant, weird, or mistaken” (p5). In the transformative approach, students are encouraged to become aware of their assumptions and to think critically about their cultural frame of reference. However, while enlightened students may readily doubt the ethnocentrism and conservative values of older generations, are they also prepared to scrutinize other world views? The idea that criticism of a cultural stance is only permissible from within that culture is a relativist *cul-de-sac*.

The ascendancy of the constructionist paradigm in pedagogy and social sciences is a profoundly humanistic riposte to scientific determinism, but the phenomenological ontology of multiple truths could lead to critical laziness. If students remain in their comfort zone, the extremist escapes scrutiny by peers, while the mindlessly tolerant does not learn how to reason against radical or prejudiced ideas. Barnett (1990 p205) asserted: “The emancipatory conception of higher education is ultimately founded on the right to criticise, and on the right to dissent even from the idea itself.” Therefore, no religious, ethical or political idea is beyond critique. As Lee (2006, p202) remarked: “It is not much of an overstatement to say that an unexamined belief is not worth having.” Debating contentious issues enriches learning, because students begin to generate principles from conflicting ideas. It is only human to find some views upsetting, but attempting to understand why people hold disagreeable beliefs is more constructive than pressing the mute

button. Otherwise, an opportunity for personal and intellectual growth is wasted.

Just as one may confront another person's views, one must be prepared to receive criticism. Some may find this intimidating, but critical thinking relates to an argument - not the person presenting that argument. As ten Dam and Volman (2004) stated, not all students flourish in adversarial debate. To avoid critical thinking being misconstrued as a destructive process, they urged a more inclusive process of collective interpretation. Lee (2006) urged teachers to not only embrace freedom of expression, but to actively enable students to work through issues, supporting those who take risks and who receive criticism. An important aspect of critical thinking is self-reflection (Halpern, 1999). Participants in debate should be guided in reviewing their contribution and impact on others, thereby learning to show discretion, and to present their case in a way that stimulates rather than alienates the audience. While being challenged may help the absolutist to soften his or her stance, easily offended individuals should be helped to understand the place of free speech in wider society, and the immortal rationale of Voltaire (1694-1778), "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

### Conclusions

Academic freedom and critical thinking are interrelated components of the academic mission of liberal inquiry and debate. They entail rights and responsibilities, and are shaped not so much by policy but by the attitude and conduct of all who study and teach in higher education. As Barnett (1990) argued, academic freedom should be expanded from its narrow definition of staff immunity from censorship towards a universal mandate to present and to criticize ideas. Equally, the concept of critical thinking may be broadened from a stage of learning to an ongoing scrutiny of theoretical assumptions, with students and teachers alike recognizing the fallibility of knowledge. This reconceptualization may be seen as liberating, egalitarian, and culturally inclusive.

It is ironic that while many developing countries are now embracing free speech (Altbach, 2001), commitment in the West may be faltering, as societal discourse is sanitized by political correctness. Janet Collett, biologist at Sussex University, claimed that "sharp critical thinking and fostering independence are no longer the hallmarks of British university education" (*Sunday Times*, 2009, March 8). Yet the tradition of creative and critical learning remains an attraction for Western universities competing in a global market. Societies of drilled acquiescence do not offer a launchpad for individuals seeking to push back the frontiers of knowledge. Moreover, the flow of foreign students

brings mutual benefit. Multicultural diversity offers a rich tapestry of differing perspectives and insights, particularly in the humanities, where interpretations and values are in perpetual flux. Epistemological entropy can be seen as an opportunity or a threat in academe. Universities would do well to embrace critical thinking and debate as a means of navigating uncertainty and competing moralities. A clear message appeared in a statement by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (2006, January 6), titled *Focus Less on Political Views of Faculty and More on Teaching Students to Make Informed Judgments in the Face of Conflicting Views*.

Teachers are less likely to encourage free expression by students if deprived of this right themselves. As power shifts from a relatively independent professoriate to politically astute administrators, academic freedom is rarely on the agenda. Fessel (2006) urged universities to issue clear statements affirming their commitment to academic freedom and controversial debate. As Knight and Trowler (2000) argued, teachers and students need room to take chances in a climate of mutual respect. Expression should be governed not by taboo or disciplinary measures but by social consequence, as the maverick realizes that he must compromise to avoid isolation. Tolerance has limits, but should extend to reasoned argument, however challenging to faculty norms or the general socio-political paradigm of higher education. Reflecting on a career in scientific academe, James Watson (2007) looked forward to political correctness being left to the politicians. The university does not exist in a vacuum, but to remain a seat of intellectual integrity, it must cherish and defend its hard-won freedom.

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