

BOOK REVIEW

Freedom to Learn: The Threat to Student Academic Freedom and Why it Needs to be Reclaimed by Bruce Macfarlane

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A while back, after listening to a formal presentation on student employability, I asked whether a graduating student who decides to become a hermit should be considered a failure. By reply I was told not to be facetious. I admit that the way I posed the question might have sounded facetious, but I was trying to ask a serious question. This new book by Bruce Macfarlane might equally be considered facetious, but he is asking a very serious question: Instead of encouraging the freedom to learn are we actually undermining it?

My guess is that this book will make more than a few people in education feel a little uncomfortable. And so it should. The book challenges us to consider a number of things we seem to be taking for granted. Of course students should attend class. Of course students should engage in group work. And of course students should see their college or university as a mirror of the workplace. But why, asks Macfarlane. Who is deciding that this is “good” for students (or learners, as students are increasingly called). And just how strong is the evidence? Since the work of Stephen Ball (amongst others), we have become accustomed to talking about teachers and academics suffering from the terrors of performativity (i.e., having to shape our behaviour in inauthentic ways to fit the requirements of regulatory agencies). What Macfarlane offers us here are clear examples of the ways that students are also increasingly required to act in similar ways in order to be seen to succeed. In case the point is not clear, Macfarlane provides us with a striking example of a student who felt uncomfortable writing reflectively about her own family in her assignments (as she was asked to by the tutor) and who responded by making up stories (and getting higher marks as a result!).

Macfarlane is measured throughout in his damning critique of a lot of what now passes as evidence of good practice in higher education. This review is short so I will be pithy in support of Macfarlane’s positions. If a student is shy or reticent what business is it of ours to make them more extroverted? If students find lectures boring and would rather be elsewhere why can’t they have that choice? Why are we so obsessed with forcing students to do group presentations all the time? In essence, we are speaking here of unwarranted demands for

students to engage in forms of participative performativity, bodily performativity, and emotional performativity.

Clearly, the title of the book harks back to Carl Rogers' original text with the same title, and I was worried at first that Macfarlane's critique would include Rogers himself. I've often thought that Rogers would turn in his grave if he knew what was now being done in his name, and I was quickly reassured that Macfarlane would appear to agree. To cut to the chase, students are now expected to perform and parade themselves merely in the name of student-centeredness, which at worst includes a moral marshalling of students to uncritically adopt politically correct positions, like global citizenship. And in case you're wondering, here is the answer to my employability question: yes, the hermit is a failure.

Reading this book has caused me to reflect on how the terms "student engagement" and "students as partners" might also be used simply to encourage students to participate, be active, and perform in ways which will earn them high marks and help market themselves to prospective employers in a process of self-commodification. I welcome this corrective, because it provokes us to ask what exactly we are asking students to be partners in. But, I would rather see terms like "student engagement" and "students as partners" sitting at the fulcrum of a see-saw, which at one end might encourage inauthentic forms of learning, but at the other might encourage a completely subversive critical interrogation of knowledge. The terms themselves therefore should be considered neutral, but their adoption in the name of various causes should always be questioned.

Furthermore, whereas I would agree with Macfarlane that there is an increasing tendency for related ideas, like "reflective practice" and "class contact," to be hijacked for the purposes of marshalling student behaviours in unwarranted ways (e.g., encouraging confessional forms of writing, and punishing students who don't turn up to class), this shouldn't lead us to believe that the underlying concepts of engagement and partnership are to blame. I say this in support of those who use reflective practice as the means to question the conditions of knowledge production, and in support of authors like Graham Gibbs who has been at pains to point out that there is sound research evidence that certain forms of class contact do indeed have positive effects on learning. Of course, this evidence does not include sitting passively in large lecture halls, and on that Macfarlane and Gibbs might well agree.

I used the word "passively" in the last sentence because I completely agree with Macfarlane on the hijacking of this word, particularly on the idea that somebody sitting quietly in a contemplative manner should be considered unengaged. Outwardly, perhaps yes, but they might be fully engaged in ways that cannot be easily measured, nor indeed, in ways that the person would want to be measured. This is freedom to learn, and I agree that this aspect of learning needs reclaiming.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

John Lea, *Association of Colleges, UK*, is the research director for the *Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Catalyst-funded Scholarship Project*.