

Academic Freedom in the Classroom: When ‘Freedom’ Becomes ‘License’

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Abstract

Academic freedom, the foundation of higher education in a free society, can be a double-edged sword. Faculty members must be free to express their opinions in the classroom on issues relevant to their courses. However, some professors misuse the ideals of academic freedom; they view the classroom as a pulpit for personal opinion and socio-political propaganda. Many students report having been ideologically browbeaten, intimidated, and/or forced to endure inappropriately politicized courses. When does academic freedom become a license to “indoctrinate,” and what are the consequences to students?

This paper discusses how faculty’s academic freedom in the classroom can infringe upon students’ rights and upon the learning process itself. Through an analysis of current cases, this study explores issues of academic freedom relating to classroom conflicts between faculty members and students. The freedom to research and publish without fear of reprisal is at the core of acquiring and disseminating knowledge. But how does academic freedom apply within the confines of the classroom? Can an overly expansive understanding of professors’ academic freedom actually impede learning? The conclusion reached here is that successful higher education requires a balance between the rights of professors and the rights of students.

Introduction

If someone had told me a few years ago that I would be part of this national debate on academic freedom, I would have been quite astonished. This was not in my plans. With my son Kyle going off to college, I had hoped to do more bird watching and nature study. But things did not turn out that way. I had no idea I would be spending countless hours setting up and running a new nonprofit educational organization called NoIndoctrination.org.

A recent blog site entry about NoIndoctrination.org reads, “The site is the product of an overprotective La Mesa, CA. mother whose children snitched out their pinko UCSD profs to her, and she in turn began this electronic snitch list” [1]. The evidence presented in this paper should dispel this notion and explain how I came to believe that some professors are abusing the trust society places in them.

Education is my passion. I taught high school for eleven years but currently design and present science lessons to gifted students. I am also credentialed to teach biology and botany in the California Community Colleges. In addition I ran a nonprofit organization that promoted and rewarded academic excellence and improvement. Knowing that parents can be a real nuisance—interfering and even poisoning students’ attitudes about a particular course or instructor, I always remained vigilant against being that kind of parent.

Warren College Writing Program (WCWP), UCSD

College is a place to broaden one’s education, to explore new ideas and re-examine old ones, and I was excited for my son when he left home in the fall of 2000 for Warren College at the University of California, San Diego. My hope was that his college experience would provide the opportunity to delve deeply and widely in an atmosphere of open inquiry and free expression—the very hallmarks of higher education in a free society. Unfortunately, academia does not always live up to these high ideals.

Soon after my son was settled in the dorms, he sent an email that listed the five essays for the first quarter of his required freshman writing program; all five concerned race relations in the United States. Race relations is certainly a legitimate field of study, but this was a writing course, and four of the five essays concerned the toxicity of the white race—or in the words of one of the essayists, “the ruinous pathology of whiteness” [2]. The one dissenting essay was used as the straw man—ridiculed and discounted. While the reading list caught my attention, I suspected (and hoped) that the essays were just being used as examples to help students develop better writing skills. After all, what actually occurs in the classroom is of greater importance than a reading list.

My son’s experience in the class, however, confirmed my worst fears:

- We were told what to think and if our opinion differed, we were wrong. It was kind of like brainwashing [3].
- Many times she [the TA] also did not hide her belief that we should hold the same views. There were only 15 people in the class, so intimidation was often easy to achieve. On one occasion, she polled us on our views on the use of racial preferences and quotas for university admissions. Those who opposed (myself and another) were then asked pointed and

intimidating questions about our own stance. This was after the TA told us her own views. Then we had a “discussion” where she basically had the other students tell us why our ideas were wrong.

- This course is required of all students in Warren College at UCSD. It is intended to be a course on writing, but the only time the TA taught us anything about writing was when many of the students complained that they wanted to learn how to write better [4].

The bottom line is that more class time was spent pushing the “agenda” than developing the all-important skill of writing. The sociopolitical agenda was so heavy handed during the class sessions that the phrase “mandatory indoctrination” would be no exaggeration. My son’s roommates had various instructors in this writing program, yet all were disgusted with the proselytizing. One roommate got so fed up with the constant soap-boxing and thought reform that he dropped the required course—hoping he might get a less ideologically inflamed instructor some other quarter.

I am a pretty open-minded person, but something was terribly wrong here. Without telling my son, I decided to research this writing program on my own. I bought numerous course readers, and I used the California Public Records Act to obtain UCSD documents related to the program. To my dismay, I discovered that parents, students, and UCSD’s own faculty had been complaining about the excessive bias for years!

The 1998 UCSD faculty review committee report [5] expressed the following concerns:

- The frequency of student complaints regarding the “politically correct” biases in the readings, often worsened by perceived biases in TA evaluations of student papers, is the understandable outcome.
- Students in the focus group also noted that as lower division students, they lacked the background to counter the views articulated in readings, and apparently there was little encouragement for them to explore alternative sources.
- On the face of it, and in the light of students’ comments, the committee worries that a pedagogical fallacy exists in this approach. In the absence of an intellectual context, in the absence of instructors sophisticated in social-science arcana such as “social construction theory,” and in the absence of encouragement and rhetorical tools in articulating possible critical reaction, lower-division students are bound to perceive the readings as agents of political indoctrination. This perception is quite sufficient to repel students, who, for the sake of expediency, may be willing to jump through the necessary hoops, but who do not treat the course or its subject

matter as intellectually serious. While remaining agnostic as to the merits of the program's reading selections and the validity of student perceptions, the committee concludes that the approach generally fails in its purported aim, which is to open young minds to other ways of interpreting social reality and, in the process, motivating them to become better writers.

- [The committee] concurs with emphasizing the importance of selecting materials with an eye to their contribution to developing student writing skills—including skills in writing that is *not* a “form of social and political action.”

A 1999 report by UCSD's Committee on Educational Policy discusses, “complaints about what some students refer to as ‘compulsory chapel,’ that is, attempts by Writing Program teaching personnel to indoctrinate them politically” [6]. “Compulsory chapel” is an apt term for using a required freshman writing program as a platform for advancing personal social or political passions. When national press coverage put the spotlight on NoIndoctrination.org, others came forward to express similar views.

A recent UCSD graduate wrote, “All my college friends including the most liberal ones thought that Warren Writing was utter nonsense. One outspoken friend used to just call it the ‘kill whitey’ course” [7]. Such a “course description” was surely not the intention of the WCWP Director Linda Brodkey, but it could not be totally unexpected given the classroom atmosphere. When sociopolitical agendas are crammed down students' throats, negative reactions are inescapable; even backlash becomes a real possibility. In fact during a 2001 faculty follow-up review of the program, there was a concern with “dealing with impolite or overly aggressive students in class” [8]. Warren Writing was a pass/not pass program until the 2003-2004 school year, making one wonder what would cause normally placid and studious UCSD students to have such outbursts.

A college professor emailed me about his wife's experience in the Warren College Writing Program: “Her essay on abortion called for legal abortion, but with restrictions. The head of the class called her into the office and told her that if she didn't revise her essay to support abortion in all circumstances that she couldn't pass the class” [9].

Little did I know, but simultaneous with my son's experiences in the course, a long-time lecturer in the Warren College Writing Program, William Weeks, had himself made a formal complaint about what he perceived to be widespread abuses of power in the program [10]. It was after leaving the program that he saw a story about my efforts in *The Baltimore Sun* and contacted me. Dr. Weeks, a self-described progressive, characterized Warren Writing as a “form of intellectual tyranny that was contemptuous to honest inquiry and diversity of opinion” [11]. Yet despite concerns from faculty, students, and parents, ideological thought reform (disguised as a writing program) was allowed to persist [12].

The Scope of the Problem

Further research confirmed that academic abuse is not confined to just this one program or just this one college. Ideological zealots have hijacked many courses and programs throughout academia. I wrote letters, and I spoke with students, faculty, trustees, legislators, alumni, and administrators. When shown my findings, most were appalled—and it did not matter where the person fell along the ideological spectrum. It must be stressed that the concern here is not about ideology; the concern is about education. The disappointment came when those with academic responsibility and oversight failed to act—citing “academic freedom.” But is academic freedom really the trump card? Research shows it is not. “Freedom” does not mean “license.”

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has in its *Redbook* many statements on academic freedom and professional ethics that apply to college classroom instruction, and as these statements make perfectly clear, academic freedom (like all freedoms) must be balanced with professional responsibility [13].¹ Most professors realize this. Their courses reflect the advertised course catalog description, and they serve as their students’ intellectual guides—challenging, but never exploiting or persecuting. While cherishing their own academic freedom, these professors realize that with the power and influence they hold over their students, they must also protect their students’ academic freedom.

There are some instructors, however, who step over the line of professionalism. They fail to abide by the AAUP statements. They have such an overly expansive interpretation of their own academic freedom that for them “freedom” becomes “license.” The classroom lectern is transformed into a pulpit to proselytize, and students are viewed as potential converts—converts to the various social and political crusades espoused by the professor. The Warren Writing program was just one example; many more exist that illustrate professorial abuse.

A Citrus College speech instructor offered extra credit if her students would write a letter to President Bush—but credit would only be given if the letter was written in opposition to the war. No credit would be offered if a student wrote a letter in support of the war [14]. There are thoughtful, intelligent, patriotic people on both sides of the war issue, but these students could only advocate their professor’s view—and this is exploitation.

During a scheduled lecture, hundreds of University of California, Berkeley students became a captive audience for a one-sided “teach-in” concerning the war in Iraq. In addition, a student reports, “He [the professor] will make comments for about 5 minutes

¹ The statements by the AAUP are generally recognized as the official statements on academic freedom, professional ethics, and professional responsibility. They have been adopted in whole or in part by a large number of colleges and universities. However, some institutions of higher learning have adopted their own statements. For a list of various higher education statements that apply to classroom situations, see <http://www.noindoctrination.org/acadf.shtml> .

each class when there is a new development about war, an anti-war rally, etc. At the end of each class he'll remind students to 'hope for peace' or to look into a method of dissent as discussed at beginning of class. I think using his position as a professor to preach his viewpoint on the war situation with Iraq is abusing the respect that he receives from the position" [15]. It must be noted that this was a course in the Molecular and Cell Biology Department.

Students taking a course in art history at the University of Massachusetts had class time allocated to writing a letter of protest to their representatives regarding possible budget cuts, and students were encouraged to join a protest. The professor made it clear which political party was to blame, and voter registration cards were passed out during class [16]. Was this a political rally or an art history course?

Although professors may be passionately partisan, professionalism in the classroom demands fairness. One must wonder how an instructor with the following attitude can ever treat all his students in a fair and just manner: "As a teacher I have to constantly ask myself not only who my primary responsibility is to but also what my primary allegiance is to. My instinct dictates that my primary allegiance in any classroom is to my colored students, my queer students, my working class students, the disenfranchised students, but then I immediately think of the colored Republican students and caution myself against assuming this essentialist position" [17].

Besides allowing sociopolitical passions to color one's classroom allegiances and responsibilities, these passions can also influence the curriculum in unprofessional ways. Instead of academic analysis, the curriculum becomes one of social or political advocacy. Teaching a course in Asian American social movements, a UCLA professor (who believes that "the role of students and teachers in ethnic studies is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable") mobilized his students in an immigrant worker campaign to unionize a hotel in Los Angeles' Little Tokyo district [18]. All too often, course and program syllabi include using students as street corner activists and organizers for various social struggles or political battles [19]. Certainly professors have a right to encourage campus organizations to become involved in activist causes, but it is wrong for professors to use their courses as activist recruitment centers for their personal passions and crusades. Even if students are eager participants, this is exploitation.

There are other ways "freedom" can become "license." Surely instructors can be forgiven occasional forays into unrelated material, but all too often these occasional forays become excessive. A student who signs up for forensic science should not have to listen to her professor's incessant rants about Iraq or his views concerning religion, yet the student reports, "The scheduled topics almost always took a back seat...there would be about 10 minutes left of class and he'd finally start talking about what he was supposed to be talking about" [20]. A student who signs up for "Art and Archaeology of Ancient America" should not have to sit through lecture after lecture hearing about Middle East oppression and terrorism. The student justly complains that, "...because the professor chose to use this class to impose his political views upon us (as opposed to teaching the

subject matter), we barely made it through the first book of two that we were supposed to cover” [21].

A campus newspaper article describes a student’s experience with a University of Colorado-Boulder course titled “U.S. History Since 1865.” According to the student, her Republican professor would, “often spout his little notions about dissolving social security and castrating our then president [Clinton].” But what the student found even more interesting was the reading material assigned by her Fundamentalist Christian professor: Charles Sheldon’s *In His Steps*, the “What Would Jesus Do?” book. The student commented, “...and who doesn’t love a little evangelism once in a while?” [22]. Evangelism has no place in an academic curriculum.

Faculty must be free to express their opinions (even strong opinions) on topics relevant to their courses—and students need to understand that. After all, the job of teachers is to stretch their students’ minds and to challenge them to look at difficult issues from a multitude of scholarly perspectives (even controversial or radical perspectives). However, it is not their job to compel or browbeat their students into agreement, nor silence respectful, thoughtful dissent. While it is probably impossible (and perhaps not even desirable) to have completely balanced or neutral courses covering all scholarly perspectives in the interpretive disciplines, a liberal education does require that students obtain a certain depth and breadth of knowledge—as well as the ability to think.

Some courses purport to emphasize or promote the important skill of “critical thinking,” but this becomes a sham when authoritarianism and intolerance define the classroom atmosphere. The catalog description for a sociology course at the University of California, Riverside reads in part, “You will be asked to think critically about these theories and their application, consider their similarities and differences, and identify their major strengths and weaknesses.” Yet the student finds this is not the case. The professor turns the Socratic Method into a “Socratic Mugging”—reserved only for those who question or dissent:

As a student who attempts to evaluate academic material through a critical, independent perspective, it was difficult and, at times, even intellectually insulting, to sit through ten whole weeks of such lectures, dumbstruck at the non-stop blatant bias the professor so openly exhibited each day. Concerning her actual interaction with students during the course, in general she openly encouraged, through soft condescending tones, knowing smiles and nods of affirmation, students who parroted her own beliefs and ideas, yet grilled the occasional student who dared to even remotely challenge the material in a critical way, with abrupt, defensive remarks of “How do you know that?”. If students chose to openly challenge her intellectual assumptions, her soft, “nurturing” style would promptly transform into one of antagonism. Clearly, the critical thinking her course description encouraged was only welcomed if it reflected the proper ideological direction of the professor [23].

Students who do not toe the ideological line may find their views ignored, discounted or ridiculed. The Free Speech Movement of the 1960's was supposed to issue forth a new era of tolerance, yet in some classes we find blatant hostility directed towards those who dare question the "correct" dogma. Questioning or not going along with the dogma can have serious consequences. Students at the University of Michigan are required to take a psychology course if they want to become an RA (Residence Assistant) in the dorms. Here is one student's experience in the course:

I spent the first half of the class avoiding trouble by keeping my mouth shut. We read many articles on victimization, oppression, etc. of minorities. But I had no choice when an activity called for full participation; we had to go around and talk about at least one way in which we have been/are oppressed. When my turn came up, and I answered that I have never been oppressed, the instructor corrected me, saying that I must have been, as I'm female. I persisted, saying that being female has never been anything short of a blessing for me. The instructor was relentless, insisting that I was necessarily oppressed at one point in my life. The instructor asked to speak with me after class. He was visibly shaken and angry. He told me that my classroom behavior was disruptive in the least (although I was never voluntarily disagreeing), and that I would be kicked out of class and would thereby lose my job and my housing for the next year unless I learned to be more cooperative [24].

Thanks to her instructor, she now has an example of oppression to share.

Here is yet another student's experience with academia's intolerance:

Academic freedom should be a street running both ways, but it isn't. There have been times when I have not only known a professor was wrong, but have been bullied into keeping my mouth shut knowing it would be held against me... At 18, I was unprepared to debate a man who held a doctorate degree in the field. A passionate professor, he yelled at, cursed at and mocked me in full view of the class and used the 'you haven't seen enough life to hold such views' defense of his own bankrupt ideals - I had the audacity to state that it's not my fault that other people live and die in ghettos. A professor winning a debate with an undergraduate student is about as impressive as beating a six-year old in a game of basketball [25].

Not only is such a lopsided debate “unimpressive,” it is offensive. Students are well aware of the balance of power in the classroom. They know that retribution is a real possibility when professors are intolerant and hostile. In such classes, students quickly learn to either shut up or face the consequences.

What Others Are Saying

People and organizations that in no way can be dismissed as overprotective moms or tools of the right wing are beginning to agree that there is indeed a problem in academia. For example, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) cautions that in a climate of intimidation and hostility, academia can no longer fulfill its mission:

An academic environment where inquiry and freedom of thought and expression must be championed cannot long survive in an atmosphere of inhibition and fear. Where hateful, sexist, ignorant, or offensive speech is concerned, the ACLU believes that more speech, not less, is the best revenge. The answer is not to punish the speaker, but to add speech exposing the problem. This is particularly true at universities, whose mission it is to enlighten. The goal is achieved by facilitating learning through open debate and study. Rules and policies that chill speech and thought are dangerous to university campuses, where all views should be heard, explored, supported or refuted [26].

Stanley Fish, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, has addressed the delicate balance between politics and academics:

- Academic virtue is the virtue that is or should be displayed in the course of academic activities—teaching, research, publishing. Teachers should show up for their classes, prepare syllabuses, teach what has been advertised, be current in the literature of the field, promptly correct assignments and papers, hold regular office hours, and give academic (not political or moral) advice.
- It is entirely appropriate that special places and times (teach-ins, panel discussions, student rallies) be set aside for the airing of views on disputed matters, but such occasions should be understood in the strongest sense of the term as extracurricular; valuable and interesting to be sure, but not the point of the enterprise. Not everyone shares this understanding. Witness the instructor who included in his course description a request that conservative students go elsewhere, and the professor who, in the name of “openness,” requires her students to subscribe to the tenets of tolerance and multiculturalism.

- [T]eachers should teach their subjects. They should not teach peace or war or freedom or obedience or diversity or uniformity or nationalism or antinationalism or any other agenda that might properly be taught by a political leader or a talk-show host. Of course they can and should teach about such topics—something very different from urging them as commitments—when they are part of the history or philosophy or literature or sociology that is being studied [27].
- While it may be, as some have said, that the line between the political and the academic is at times difficult to discern – political issues are legitimately the subject of academic analysis; *the trick is to keep analysis from sliding into advocacy*– it is nevertheless a line that can and must be drawn... [28]. [Emphasis added]

While admitting that professorial misconducts can occur, the AAUP recently released a statement that is very explicit about who should be enforcing professional standards of conduct:

We do not mean to imply, of course, that academic professionals never make mistakes or act in improper or unethical ways. But the AAUP has long stood for the proposition that violations of professional standards, like the principles of neutrality or nonindoctrination, are best remedied by the supervision of faculty peers. *It is the responsibility of the professoriate, in cooperation with administrative officers, to ensure compliance with professional standards* [29]. [Emphasis added]

Conclusion

Most instructors understand the important balance between their rights and the rights of their students. Even though they may hold passionate views and present new or controversial ideas, they understand their obligation to promote open inquiry and uphold freedom of expression. Their classrooms, being a type of workplace, do not permit gender, racial, sexual—or ideological harassment. The Socratic Method is applied equally to all students, not just to those who challenge or question the professor's views. Indeed, this is to be expected of a professional educator. Unfortunately, this is not a perfect world.

A search through the archives of almost any campus newspaper reveals articles describing classroom abuses of academic freedom [30], and the student postings on the Web site NoIndoctrination.org (<http://www.NoIndoctrination.org>)² corroborate these

² Although the postings appear anonymous to the public, NoIndoctrination.org knows the name of each poster and has contacted each one by phone and/or email prior to posting. Postings are carefully checked, and approximately seventy percent are rejected. (Some are bogus; others do not provide enough detail or else they are from ideologues who cannot tolerate learning other points of view.) Professors are sent a

campus newspaper reports. When unprofessional professorial behavior is tolerated, the learning process is seriously impeded. But who in the academic community is taking this seriously? Where in academia can students safely turn when they believe their academic freedom rights are being denied and their education compromised? Who is “ensuring compliance with professional standards”?

Only when confronted with public outrage and outside pressure does academia seem motivated enough to address the issues of classroom indoctrination and intolerance [31].³ The nonprofit organization NoIndoctrination.org was begun precisely because the academic community is failing to enforce its own endorsed statements on academic freedom and faculty conduct [32]. The question then becomes: Who will rein in the abusers? The education of our future generations is at stake. Society deserves an answer.

The very autonomy that the university enjoys rests on society’s trust, but there is a price to pay for allowing classrooms to be hijacked by personal agendas, dogmatism, narrowness and intolerance. As U.S. Supreme Court Justice William Brennan once cautioned, "The classroom is peculiarly the ‘marketplace of ideas.’ The nation's future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to that robust exchange of ideas which discovers truth ‘out of a multitude of tongues, [rather] than through any kind of authoritative selection'" [33].

Should the academic community fail to rein in those who abuse society's trust, the university may very well lose its autonomy—and that would be a sad day indeed.

note encouraging them to rebut any specifics, and these rebuttals are placed directly beneath the student post.

³ One example is the UC Berkeley freshman writing course ("The Politics and Poetics of Palestinian Resistance") that had the following caveat in its course description: “Conservative thinkers are encouraged to seek other sections.” Another is the Citrus College speech course discussed on page 5.

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