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CRITICAL STUDIES IN TEACHING & LEARNING

Book Review

Macfarlane, B. 2017. *Freedom to Learn: The Threat to Student Academic Freedom and Why it Needs to be Reclaimed.* London: Routledge Taylor and Francis.

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Central to this book is the claim that creating opportunities for students, as adult learners, to have autonomy over choices and decisions on what to learn, how to learn and when to learn supports their freedom and right to learn. This autonomy provides an opportunity for students to better understand their world and control their future. However, current higher education policies and practices aimed at student-centeredness, though well-intentioned, violate students' freedom and right to learn. Interestingly, this position compels us to reflect anew on the purpose of the university – especially in the 21st century. Bruce Macfarlane challenges the current understanding of student-centeredness as reflected in the ways it is practiced in higher education. In Macfarlane's view, the current understanding focuses only on pedagogic approaches - mainly active learning as opposed to passive learning – infringing on students' freedom and rights in the learning process. He thus argues for broadening the understanding of student-centeredness as critical to ensuring and protecting students' freedoms of choice and rights to learn.

Macfarlane draws on his extensive experience to put forward a compelling argument on how students' freedoms and rights to learn are negatively affected when they are not given an opportunity to be autonomous as adult learners. He strategically combines theory and practice to develop and sustain his argument. Each chapter opens with a vignette (student experience) followed by other examples (policies and practices) drawn from universities across the UK, USA, Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa to illustrate the culture and practices that are impacting on students' freedoms and rights to learn. The discussion demonstrates how the identified practices deprive students of opportunities to make choices and self-manage as adult learners.

Using the backdrop of the higher education managerialism and performative culture, Macfarlane succinctly demonstrates how activities aimed at student engagement and enhancement of learning invades students' freedoms and rights to learn. In different chapters (4, 5, 6 and 7), he provides detailed examples of what he terms performative demands on students, especially at a micro level, showing how these processes and practices reflect a lack of sensitivity to students' capability to manage their own learning. The performative demands (including emotional and bodily demands) force students to participate in activities aimed to engage them in the learning process and preparation for the workplace. The author shows how current practices support institutions to achieve their goals in a culture of neoliberalism and performativity. He calls for efforts to reclaim Carl Rogers's initial (1969) principles of student-centeredness to restore students' rights to learn which are: independent learning linked to respect for students' freedoms and democracy; and acknowledging students as scholars in higher education. Chapter 8 makes a suggestion on how this could be done

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focusing on the following: *the right to non-indoctrination, the right to reticence, the right to choose how to* learn and *the right to be trusted as adults*. These are fundamental student rights which university policies, processes and practices should protect.

The argument presented in the book challenges our thinking, as universities have embraced the discussed practices under the banner of active learning dating way back to Chickering and Gamson (1987) and high-impact educational practices (Kuh 2008), all considered key to enhancing student success. Over the years active learning and student engagement activities have been encouraged and adopted in higher education, especially in South Africa, as a means through which student success (including preparedness for workplace) and throughput rates could be enhanced. In reading this book, though, there is an opportunity to reflect on current practices, the underpinning assumptions, and the extent to which they align with maximising opportunities for students to learn. As part of student-centeredness, universities need to think about opportunities for students to engage alongside academic staff as scholars. This is in line with students' call, globally, for change in higher education, the need to be heard and recognised not as clients but as legitimate citizens and scholars.

While the book is well written, one cannot help but think about what the ideas would mean in different contexts, especially with regard to students' assumed agency and the cultural capital students bring to higher education. Can we confidently assume that all students entering university have the capacity to make choices, control and pace their learning accordingly? This is important in contexts like South Africa where historical injustices have gravely impacted the social and education systems leading to differentiated preparedness for university. In these cases, it is crucial to think of the implications of freedoms and rights to learn for students entering university from contextual backgrounds that did not adequately prepare them for such roles. Could it be that universities need to create differentiated spaces for students to develop agency as scholars in higher education? Further, the book challenges higher education practitioners to think deeper about current cultures and practices to create opportunities for experiences that support students as autonomous learners and scholars. This has implications not only for reframing approaches and ways of thinking about higher education learning but also requires an understanding and appreciation of the notion of students' freedom of choice and right to learn in the context of the global south.

Overall, the book could support efforts to interrogate the assumptions underpinning the practices that we have grown to value and use over time to enhance student learning, especially in the period of transforming learning and teaching in higher education. The book is valuable for everyone in higher education, from leaders of respective institutions (both academic and support) to academics responsible for designing learning opportunities for students, and staff in centres that support professional learning of academic staff. The book could ignite conversations to grapple with the question of relevance and supportiveness of current practices to students' success in relation to freedom and right to learn.

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