

The Erosion of Academic Freedom

*by Michael W. Ledoux, Thomas Marshall,
and Nadine McHenry*

This article originated from a single question: do the restrictions that various accrediting agencies place on teacher educators limit, or entirely eliminate, academic freedom? Considering that question makes it apparent the problem is much broader than academic freedom. The issue has two foci: personal identity and the impact of market influences, and the attendant model of rationality, on education. Academic freedom itself is a slippery and elusive concept worthy of its own extended treatment; the argument here, however, is that restricting teacher educators' academic freedom really signifies a deeper and more-systemic problem facing society today.

At the heart of the problem is the tendency in contemporary American society to favor cost-benefit analysis (CBA) as the sole rational model for making value judgments. That approach to decision-making has its roots in Jeremy Bentham's hedonistic calculus (Bentham 1781/2000). Bentham thought decisions create the greatest happiness when they calculate what yields the greatest amount of pleasure over pain for everyone involved. The classic example is the lifeboat case. What would be the best, i.e., most-rational, course of action if there were a lifeboat capable of safely holding twenty people, yet thirty needed to be saved? One could try to save all thirty, but the odds are the boat would capsize and everyone would drown. On the other hand, one could employ some standard to determine which ten to leave behind and to embark safely with the other twenty. The hedonistic calculus would calculate the latter course of action as the most rational because it yields the greatest amount of pleasure over pain.

The hedonistic calculus was the prototype of the modern cost-benefit analysis model: the first comprehensive and systematic attempt to quantify essentially nonquantifiable qualities, in this case pleasure and pain. Bentham's detractors have pointed out several

problems with his assumption that pain and pleasure can be measured and quantified. Today we see the debate carried on in many fields, especially economics, a discipline that routinely assumes one can measure and quantify human feelings. The goal is to objectify decisions that affect society at large. From an economic perspective, such a model measures the effectiveness of a market intervention based on people's desires.

Today that thinking manifests itself in the belief that an objective model is the only rational one for making value judgments. The paradigm of the model is cost-benefit analysis. CBA judges the economic effectiveness of a market intervention or strategy by measuring how willing people are to pay for (benefit, pleasure) or to avoid paying for (cost, pain) something. Applied to education, CBA requires justifying every aspect of a field by its measurability. The influence of that assumption is now nearly omnipresent—not unlike the way in which Darwinism evolved into the much-broader and insidious Social Darwinism, with similarly bad effects. Arguably, the trend toward standardization has transformed the teacher educator from an academician into a technician. Rather than eradicate academic freedom, standardization can deny faculty the opportunity to develop self-identity.

Although academic freedom's history is elusive, the nineteenth-century introduction of the freedom to teach and learn (based on the Humboldtian concepts of Lehrfreiheit and Lernfreiheit) has allowed academicians the freedom to teach what they think appropriate using whatever pedagogical methodology they prefer (Altbach 2005). Tracing the history of academic freedom from Socrates' execution, to Bruno's execution, to Galileo's arrest, to John Scopes's trial, if a bit exaggerated, certainly demonstrates that educators have long been pressured to conform to accepted standards or face punishment. The ideal of freedom to teach what is considered appropriate goes to the heart of the academic vocation. The authors argue that teaching and learning are organic and dynamic activities; as with any living thing, they cannot be constrained by an artificial set of rules. Socrates is the paradigm here: he wrote nothing because writing is static while learning evolves with all the tentative investigation that leads, hopefully, to knowledge. Teaching should be a profoundly personal experience, one in which the students learn to teach themselves by imitating and going beyond the teacher.

The trend toward objectifying the classroom has also objectified the teacher. One forced to follow the mandates of some accrediting body, public or private, must also give up one's identity: a strong charge, but if a sense of professionalism is a strong motivator for

nearly all faculty, the claim becomes less objectionable. Among the many aspects of becoming a professional (Solomon 1993), a primary consideration is how it impacts one's self-image. Recognition as an expert brings an expectation that one is qualified to make judgments that few can undertake.

That is especially true for academics and academic freedom. To be constrained by the objectification of teaching is to lead to something like the following:

"Medicine, law, and engineering are professions," says Henry Mintzberg, a management professor at McGill University. They demand mastery of a core body of knowledge. Business is different. Business schools instruct students in the mechanical skills of accounting, financing, and marketing. But the essence of business—taking sensible risks, creating valuable products, motivating people and satisfying customers—lies elsewhere and cannot be taught in a classroom. "Leadership," as Mintzberg puts it, "is not a profession." ("What Good Are Business Schools?" Samuelson 1990)

One could imagine the title altered from "What Good Are Business Schools?" to "What Good Are Colleges of Education?" Samuelson says, "Business schools instruct students in the mechanical skills," while the true professions are said to lie in "mastery of a core body of knowledge." The point is obvious: forcing teacher educators to follow rigid standards determined by a large organization, be it the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Educators (NCATE) or some state board, equates teacher educators with technicians who practice mechanical skills mandated by the accrediting agency. Mastery of a body of knowledge is no longer necessary: one must simply perform specific tasks, in specific ways, in a specific order, at a specific time—little different from work on an assembly line. No intellectual skill is needed, only the ability to follow the routine correctly. Certainly academic freedom is no longer determined by the sponsoring institution but rather by outside pressures, in this case those of state and professional organizations (ACTA 2007).

The assault on academic freedom is only a symptom of a deeper and more-insidious problem in higher education in general and teacher education in particular. As teacher educators construct syllabi, they no longer act as arbiters, based on expertise and competency, of the content and methodology of their courses and programs. Instead teacher educators must meet standards imposed by the various accrediting agencies. Such standards go so far as to impose dispositions that may not be shared by teacher candidates

(ACTA 2007). The implication is clear: accrediting agencies can deprive institutions, faculty, and students of academic freedom by attacking the individual's self-identity. Such pressure may presume to improve curriculum development and conceptual frameworks, but it can also harbor hidden personal and political agendas.

Putting the Syllabus Together: Action and Reflection

Syllabi in teacher education courses can currently range from thirteen to twenty-two pages long, including rubrics for each assessment. The standard items are all included: contact information, office hours, philosophy, and a schedule of lesson topics and readings. The basic assessment tasks, their weights, submission and resubmission guidelines, and the manner of grading are also included. Along with those are various standards that apply to the course and encouragement to reflect upon those standards using a portfolio assessment.

The structure of the learning-objectives chart tends to evoke teacher educators' most-profound reflections. Faculty feel forced to justify instructional methods and prove that objectives, which flow from the standards, are linked to activities, which are assessed according to rubrics (or scoring guides, as may be in vogue) to show levels of candidate proficiency. All the items are aligned for coordination among the levels so that candidates can easily read them. Each task has a rubric, which details how a student would perform for acceptable and distinguished criteria as well as for unacceptable performance. Those learning tasks must then be charted against learning objectives, which emanate from the standards of the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) and the Association of Childhood Education International (ACEI) and consider the applicable state standards in content for the methods classes.

Unfortunately, most of what teacher educators now do has been mandated by some outside accrediting agency. As Mill (1863) noted, moral rules that come from within are invariably more effective than those that come from outside. Admittedly, standardized objectives appear more connected to one another and the grading system, and one can see student progress across tasks and objectives. However, accrediting agency guidelines are not essential to achieving that objective, and in fact they can be lost when imposed on the merits of a well-constructed syllabus.

The reason for such intrusions seems clear: the accrediting agency's need to quantify education by imposing the larger business perspective on academia. The question, of course, is whether the uniquely human endeavor of teaching is quantifiable. We will address that point in our conclusion.

Application to Course Design

Teacher preparation courses often retain more flexibility in developing alternative forms of assessment than colleagues in other disciplines enjoy. Teacher educators tend to prefer *authentic assessment*. When the need for paper-and-pencil tasks arises, assessments can reflect social learning processes and case analyses. Those methods are chosen to assess students in a variety of ways that will tap the strengths and weaknesses of learners. In any methodology course, fieldwork, reflections, discussions, quizzes, portfolios, lesson plans, and presentations are integral to the evaluative process.

Some colleagues believe that a midterm, a final, and a paper are the assessments of choice. Imposed standards may compel them to dig deeper into the way they design assessments or to restructure the assessments to measure areas that conform to standards. Is that another encroachment on freedom? Or is it another way in which educators are learning to improve?

Faculty members might “feel” that such alterations represent intrusions on academic freedom. Of course, one might counter that the accrediting agency is only helping the institution, faculty, and students teach and learn better. Yet the agency’s imposition of standards can be construed not just as an infringement on academic freedom but also as an attack on the professor’s personal identity. After all, course design is based on the professor’s knowledge (both content and background), pedagogical philosophy, preferred methodology, personality, and other personal factors—exactly what the accrediting agency is trying to avoid. Rather than personalize education, the agency attempts to standardize it. However, most academicians have chosen to teach in higher education for the self-fulfillment their discipline provides.

The competing assumptions here are 1) that teaching should be standardized for the good of the country and 2) that teaching in higher education should be somewhat idiosyncratic because knowledge at the university level is more than mechanical. In the latter view, knowledge acquisition is a dynamic and organic process in which content forms the matrix for developing complex and sophisticated skills. In addition, skill development is not limited to the so-called academic skills: it encompasses the whole person. Such an educational gestalt can never be achieved through the objectification that accrediting agencies demand.

Standards and Standardized Syllabi Help Us Choose the Good?

Every university has its differing camps of professors. Some eschew any mention of “accountability” and its attendant intrusions

on their syllabi; others try diligently to align every classroom task to standards and objectives. Both approaches are problematical, for different reasons. The former group is basically resisting any attempts to improve their teaching; the latter group often simply goes through the motions, freed from the need to think about what they are doing.

Many colleagues in teacher education assert that standards will help improve the quality of teaching and learning in our classrooms. In their view, aligning accrediting agency-imposed standards brings needed objectivity to the university classroom, reduces wasted classroom time, and stresses important topics by removing the idiosyncratic nature of traditional college teaching. A standardized syllabus, following a template that uses professional and state standards, thus helps ensure a quality program with appropriate outcomes. Those are all good things, standards advocates argue, and if standards create better educators, then that may also make us freer. The argument is much the same as a determinist arguing that knowing one is not free makes one free: however comforting a thought, it is not easy to accept its logic.



The authors of this article, reflecting upon their own undergraduate education, conclude that it sorely lacked a standards-based approach to curriculum; the focus was more on process. Syllabi generally lacked standards imposed by outside accrediting agencies. They were concise, a page or perhaps two, outlining tasks, contact information, and a schedule but leaving the details to the professor to reveal slowly, as if by some Gnostic mystery. Curricula were developed, programs designed, and a planned alignment of studies begun. A much-broader interpretation of the content and skills included in each course was allowed. For better or worse, two students at the same institution, taking the same course taught by two different instructors, could undergo vastly different experiences in content and pedagogy.

Conclusions

Although teacher educators might have been less rigid about academic freedom, it would also have been less honest. There is something appealing in the sense of security produced by standards that lead to clear conceptual frameworks, to curriculum, to syllabi, to lessons all easily assessed. However, such security is fundamentally based on the knowledge that we are not responsible for what is imposed on us. Sartre (1943/1956) noted that kind of security and considered it an inauthentic way to live because it avoids the freedom that is the essence of human existence. Of course, one cannot escape existential freedom, and to follow someone else's rules is still a choice, even if one deludes oneself into thinking it is not.

Assume, for the sake of argument, that there is something appealing about outside standards. Nonetheless, that sort of teaching and learning still represents something restrictive and coercive. As we prepare candidates for an educational system that currently promotes standards-based curricula and high-stakes testing, the authors wonder if educators are undermining their own profession by acquiescing in such means of production. What of the storytelling and the "teachable moments" that occur within the context of a well-prepared class, even if they are unrelated to the precise objectives of the lesson? Obviously, educators lose the opportunity to follow the dynamic path that learning often takes when hemmed in by restrictions. In addition, they lose their self-identity as professionals with the ability, knowledge, and feel for when deviating from the planned lesson is appropriate.

Teachers in basic education are concerned that No Child Left Behind, with its focus on high-stakes testing, has whittled away at a broad-based curriculum that could tap into students' gifts and

talents. Freedom to interpret the local curriculum, supplementing it as students show interest and glossing over redundancies, may be lost. Those practices may not constitute academic freedom as enunciated by any statement of professional practice, but they have been part of the traditional autonomy of the classroom. Will teacher education standards narrow the higher education curriculum in ways that, in the end, deny educators not only academic freedom but also identity as academicians? That seems inevitable if policymakers continue promoting the business model that views objectifying the cost-benefit model as the only rational model for decision-making.

Sartre pointed out that *man is condemned to be free*. If teacher educators claim that they have academic freedom in light of state and professional requirements, they must do all they can to counter unwarranted intrusions into their profession. Certainly there will always be professional standards, but they must be interpreted by the individual. If not, teacher education will lose not only academic freedom and self-identity but also the diversity of opinion that makes academia vibrant, the birthplace of great ideas. In an open and free society theories must compete in the marketplace of ideas, but objectification can lead to a closed market with only a single choice. However, like Sartre, we may find death, at least programmatically, as the alternative choice in our quest for academic freedom.

References

- Altbach, Philip G. 2005. "Academic Freedom: International Challenges and African Realities." *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* 3 (1).
- American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA). 2007. Why accreditation doesn't work and what policy makers can do about it. ACTA policy paper.
- Bentham, J. 1781/2000. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Ontario, Canada: Batoche Books. Retrieved July 2, 2008, from <<http://socserv.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/bentham/morals.pdf>>.
- Mill, J. S. 1863. *Utilitarianism*. Retrieved March 7, 2008, from <<http://www.utilitarianism.com/mill1.htm>>.
- Samuelson, Robert J. 1990. "What Good Are Business Schools?" *Newsweek* (May 14).
- Sartre, J. P. 1943/1956. *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. Translated by H. E. Barnes. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Solomon, R. 1993. *Ethics and Excellence: Cooperation and Integrity in Business* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press).

Michael W. Ledoux is the Director of the Center for Education and the Associate Dean for the School of Human Service Professions; Thomas Marshall, a clinical assistant professor and the assistant director of the Center for Education; and Nadine McHenry, Director of the Science Teaching Center and Associate Professor, all at Widener University.