

Beyond the usual debates

Creating the conditions for academic freedom to flourish

Sharon Stein

University of British Columbia, Canada

Contemporary conversations about the state of academic freedom in higher education are an important subject of both scholarly inquiry, campus dialogue, and public debate. This includes concerns from all sides of the political spectrum that unpopular views are being shut down or shut out of campuses, as well as anxieties that the corporate, neoliberal turn of higher education and the resulting decline of tenure and precarity of many academic jobs has made academic freedom effectively moot in practice, if not in policy. These and other concerns point to incredibly important conversations that need to be had and that are engaged in with nuance and complexity within the contributions to this special issue. However, for the purposes of this afterword, rather than enter directly into these conversations on the terms that are already set, I suggest the importance of stepping back to consider what might be missing. Protecting academic freedom is a vital element of ensuring that higher education can serve as a site for deep, rigorous, multi-voiced, and socially accountable inquiry into complex contemporary challenges (including the challenges faced by higher education itself). Yet in our defence of academic freedom, we rarely ask: *What would be the necessary conditions for academic freedom to flourish?*

Conversations about academic freedom are never just about protecting the intellectual rigour of academic knowledge as an abstract object; they are also about the relational rigour of how, by whom, and to what ends that knowledge is produced, transmitted, circulated, and ultimately impacts both humans and other-than-human beings (Stein, in Lobo *et al.*, 2021). In this afterword, I suggest the need to balance intellectual, affective, and relational dimensions of how we approach academic freedom. Specifically, I ask how we might

create the conditions under which academics, students, and the communities they engage with can address *any* issue, but especially pressing issues of shared societal concern, with more sobriety, maturity, discernment, accountability, and respect. To do so, I consider what kind of intellectual, affective, and relational conditions might prepare us to engage on these terms. I also consider the difficulties of creating and sustaining these conditions. Although I separate these three types of conditions to discuss them in more detail, they are also interrelated and interdependent.

Intellectual conditions

What might be the necessary intellectual conditions that would allow us to have difficult conversations about complex and contentious issues of shared concern, and what might be the challenges involved in creating those conditions? Each field of study and discipline has its own internal norms of what constitutes deep and rigorous scholarly inquiry. Members of those fields and disciplines need to maintain the professional authority to adjudicate among their peers and students the extent to which those notions of rigour are met. Maintaining this depth and rigour is especially crucial in the current moment in which the effects of technology and social media have resulted in the production of information at an unprecedented rate. The inability to grapple with this information overload has led to selective and shallower engagements with knowledge based on what is convenient and consumable (Bauman, 2011).

While a field or discipline's norms might shift according to external influences, the shift itself should be negotiated

internally. However, it is important to note that what often happens in conversations among academics in different fields or disciplines is an un-reflexive tendency to apply our own notions of depth and rigour to knowledge that is produced within another field of study and assume that we can easily understand the knowledge that is produced within those other fields. Yet our expertise in one area of knowledge does not make us experts in every area. Part of this slippage of presumed expertise has to do with the tendency within modern institutions of higher education to position our own ways of knowing as universal and exceptional. While science, technology, engineering and mathematics disciplines might be well-known for their claims of universality and exceptionalism, this can be found in all corners of the university. This kind of academic arrogance (Andreotti, 2021) precludes both genuine curiosity about other perspectives, and genuine respect for those other perspectives.

Especially when the norms derived from western disciplines are imposed onto non-western knowledge traditions, it affects a renaturalisation of the presumed universality and exceptionalism of western knowledge, thereby preventing the possibility of a true equality of knowledges – or what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) called an ‘ecology of knowledges.’ For Santos, claims of epistemic universality result in the decontextualisation and devaluation of other knowledges, and in some cases the invisibilisation of those knowledges altogether (see also Ahenakew, 2016; Mika & Stewart, 2017).

By contrast, an ecology of knowledges is premised on an assumption that: all knowledge systems are both indispensable and insufficient; their relevance is context dependent; and their value should be measured not according to their alleged ability to offer a universally applicable description of reality, but according to what opportunities (interventions into reality) they produce. As a result, rather than approach knowledge from a position of absolute universalism, or conversely, embracing absolute relativism, an ecology of knowledges approach suggests the need to attend to the contextual relevance of any particular way of knowing. That is, certain knowledges are better suited to answer some questions than others, while at the same time, some questions are fruitfully addressed by drawing upon and braiding the insights of multiple knowledge systems. If we fail to ask how this ecology of knowledges might inform responses to contemporary global and social challenges, the academy is likely to reproduce ethnocentric imaginaries of sustainability, justice, relationality, responsibility, and change (Andreotti *et al.*, 2018; Stein *et al.*, 2020).

For us to create the intellectual conditions under which we can have the opportunity to have a generous and generative dialogue between different disciplines, fields, and knowledge communities, we would need to develop a deeper awareness

of the partiality and situatedness of each knowledge system, each scholarly field or discipline, and our own knowledge. We would also need to foster a sense of respectful curiosity about what we do not (and may never) know, and humility about our capacity to understand other knowledges and fields deeply or fully. Intellectual humility – or recognising the limits of what it is possible to know beyond one’s own area of expertise – is crucial here, especially as otherwise we tend to reproduce patterns of selective engagement (only with what is convenient or fits our agendas) and impose our own disciplinary ideas of depth and rigour onto others.

Affective conditions

In many cases, the topics that are addressed in conversations about academic freedom are highly politically charged. These are topics that many people feel passionately about in many different directions, which makes generative engagements with them from different perspectives extremely difficult. It also means that addressing these questions is extremely important – but again, the question remains, how can we address these contentious, important issues in sober, mature, discerning, accountable, and respectful ways? Part of the answer has to do with attending to the ways that these issues are not merely a topic of intellectual analysis, but also affective investments. In other words, we would need to attend to the ways that engagements around these issues tend to activate within us embodied emotional responses that can make it difficult to not only hear but actually listen to other perspectives. When we fail to attend to the role of affect in these conversations, we often short-circuit the possibility of genuine conversation.

To foster the affective conditions for academic freedom to flourish, we might begin not only identifying our own affective responses to engagements around different issues, but also taking account of the ways that these affective responses impact others and potentially block the possibility of relationships premised on trust, respect, reciprocity, accountability, and consent (Whyte, 2020). In relation to the former, we would need to become more attuned to our own embodied responses to certain topics of conversation. We would need to not only learn to notice when these responses emerge, but also to ask: Where is this response coming from? What personal anxieties, insecurities, fears, assumptions, hopes, desires, and defences might it be related to? Which of my own experiences, conflicts, and even traumas might be contributing to this kind of response? What structural and institutional issues of power, inequality, and systemic harm might be shaping these responses? Are these responses related to the content of what is being discussed, and/or the way it is being discussed, and/or my internal emotional state?

In asking these questions, it is important to not only approach the answers with curiosity but also to practise

'acceptance without endorsement.' That is, the first step is to accept that these responses are present, rather than try to repress or judge them. Only then might we be able to self-reflexively consider the effects of these responses on ourselves, on others, and on the possibility of generative, genuine engagement, especially across difference. By observing these responses in ourselves and taking account of their impacts, we can more soberly assess what and how we might need to recalibrate in order to have deeper engagements about controversial subjects. Taking responsibility for our own responses and their effects is *not* about compromising our integrity, agreeing with whatever is being said, seeking consensus or harmony, or avoiding conflict. Instead, it is about asking how we might each contribute to creating the conditions in which we can have difficult conversations without compromising collegial relationships.

*...how we might create the conditions
under which academics, students, and the
communities they engage with can address
any issue...with more sobriety, maturity,
discernment, accountability, and respect.*

Relational conditions

The contemporary moment is characterised by both hyper-fragmentation and hyper-individualism (Bauman, 2011). This is not only about the polarisation of different perspectives in what have been called 'echo-chambers', but also the increasing tendency for people to encase themselves in their own individualised virtual reality bubbles. This shift has been affected, in part, by growing social, ecological, economic, and political crises that lack clear solutions paired with the fragmentation of knowledge itself that makes collective responses to these crises appear increasingly impossible, and the idea of a common good and collective well-being appear increasingly abstract and out of reach. Academic knowledge production and teaching can be an important part of efforts to address current local and global crises and enable creative, sustainable responses that reimagine a common good and support collective well-being.

However, these are not problems that can only be solved with more knowledge alone. In part this is because, as addressed earlier, different knowledge systems and knowledge communities will not only derive different, often conflicting answers to the question of how we might achieve a common good and collective well-being, but also different ideas of what constitutes the common good and wellbeing in the first place. As Whyte (2020) notes, to derive ethical and effective collective responses among these different possibilities, especially in ways that attend to systemic, historical, and ongoing inequalities, we would need to 'establish [and] maintain relational qualities connecting social institutions together for the sake of coordinated action' (p. 3). Furthermore, the work of establishing and maintaining

relationships is not just between institutions, but also between communities and individuals.

This approach to relationships differs significantly from mainstream approaches premised on transactional, calculated benefits that treat relationships as an instrument toward achieving an end and seek a single predetermined pathway of change. The approach that Whyte suggests, along with many other Indigenous thinkers, is instead focused on the quality and integrity of the relationship itself. Ends are not determined in advance but negotiated and woven through the process of walking together differently. Such an approach to relationships decentres the individual and the presumed

entitlement to unrestricted and unaccountable autonomy, and suggests instead that, while we are all ultimately free to make our own choices, we are accountable for those choices and the impact they have on the wellbeing of others.

For instance, for Jimmy *et al.* (2019), this approach to relationship 'invites the surrender of individual entitlement for a greater good and calls for an ongoing stretch-discomfort within a container of relational interdependence that is unconditional in its generosity over time, but not open to abuse' (p. 15). From this perspective, creating the relational conditions for academic freedom to thrive entails looking beyond individual and even group interests to consider our different accountabilities (as people and as academics) to many different communities, and becoming attuned to the tensions and contradictions that arise among these different accountabilities. Accountability in this sense is not about deciding to whom we are accountable, but rather to acknowledging our interdependence with one another and all living beings on a finite planet.

Fostering these relational conditions is slow and often difficult work. It is particularly difficult to do in the context of relationships where trust and respect have been continually violated over long periods of time – for instance, between Indigenous and settler communities. To foster the conditions for generative relationships between these communities that have been in historical dissonance tends to require additional effort, including: understanding and accounting for the effects of systemic, historical, and ongoing harms, and not avoiding this fact out of fear of guilt, shame, or conflict; a shared commitment to work toward trust, consent, accountability, reciprocity, and respect, as well as an understanding that these mean different things to different people (Whyte, 2020); and a long-term commitment to continue doing the work of building generative relationships even and especially when it becomes difficult or uncomfortable, without compromising one's integrity or well-being (Jimmy *et al.*, 2019).

Concluding thoughts

Creating the above conditions for academic freedom is unlikely to be a straightforward, linear, or painless process. However, if we can create those conditions, or at the very least commit to the process of working towards creating them, then we might be in a better position both to practise and defend academic freedom in today's complex, uncertain, unequal world. With these conditions in place, any idea could be discussed with more prudence: in more sober, mature, accountable, discerning and respectful ways – especially ideas that are difficult, contentious, and controversial. This, in turn, would be conducive to ensuring that higher education serves as a key site at which we might support the coordinated co-creation of more equitable, ethical, and sustainable societies.

Sharon Stein is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia (Canada), and a Research Associate with the Chair for Critical Studies in Higher Education Transformation at Nelson Mandela University (South Africa). Her research examines the complexities, challenges, and possibilities of decolonisation, internationalisation, and sustainability in higher education. She is founder of the Critical Internationalisation Studies Network, and a founding member of the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective.

Contact: sharon.stein@ubc.ca

References

- Ahenakew, C. (2016). Grafting Indigenous ways of knowing onto non-Indigenous ways of being: The (underestimated) challenges of a decolonial imagination. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 9(3), 323-340.
- Andreotti, V. (2021). *Hospicing modernity*. Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books.
- Andreotti, V., Stein, S., Sutherland, A., Pashby, K. L., Susa, R., & Amsler, S. (2018). Mobilising different conversations about global justice in education: toward alternative futures in uncertain times. *Policy & practice: A development education review*, 26, 9-41.
- Bauman, Z. (2011). *Liquid modern challenges to education*. Padua: Padova University Press.
- Jimmy, E., Andreotti, V., & Stein, S. (2019). *Towards braiding*. Musagetes Foundation.
- Lobo, M., Bedford, L., Bellingham, R.A., Davies, K., Halafoff, A., Mayes, E., Sutton, B., Marwung Walsh, A., Stein, S. & Lucas, C. (2021). Earth unbound: Climate change, activism and justice. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1866541>
- Mika, C., & Stewart, G. (2017). Lost in translation: Western representations of Māori knowledge. *Open Review of Educational Research*, 4(1), 134-146.
- Santos, B. S. (2007). Beyond abyssal thinking: From global lines to ecologies of knowledges. *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 45-89.
- Stein, S., Andreotti, V., de Souza, L. M., Ahenakew, C., & Suša, R. (2020). Who decides? In whose name? For whose benefit? Decoloniality and its discontents. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 3(7), 1-6.
- Whyte, K. (2020). Too late for Indigenous climate justice: Ecological and relational tipping points. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 11(1), e603.