Optimal conditions for academics teaching for the public good – exploiting academic freedom

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Intellectual freedom and autonomy lie at the heart of the academic career. While these values have varied interpretations (often hedonistic or self indulgent), most academics consider them to be crucial, even sacred, in defining their work and identity.

It is fair to say that many academics feel that this bedrock of their career is being undermined by current trends in higher education. Writing from the UK perspective (Nixon, 2001) notes that, "…*the institutional conditions of academic work are so tightly hedged in by reward and accountability systems that academic freedom, although still evoked, is in practice increasingly difficult to exercise. A freedom that rebounds negatively upon those that try to exercise it is not particularly liberating. It may be a consolation under these circumstances for academics to tell themselves that they 'enjoy' academic freedom. In practice, however, the enjoyment is becoming increasingly illusory.*"

Constraint and disillusionment are far from optimal conditions for nurturing hopeful pedagogy! Nixon goes on to argue that this state of affairs is in part due to an untenable conception of academic freedom as "freedom for the academic". He proposes that we need to re-examine the "moral base" of the academic profession. Certainly within the Hope Project Stellenbosch academics are being challenged to re-examine the moral base of our chosen profession. However, I argue further that we need to exploit academic freedom in order to create the optimal conditions in which academics can thrive.

It is a rare academic who does not care whether or not his or her teaching is effective and serves the public good. Most academics would happily debate their teaching struggles and successes with their disciplinary colleagues. However, it is still not common place for this to extend beyond the staff tearoom.   Where is the freedom in that?

If freedom in our profession is so highly prized it's outworking in the classroom needs to go beyond the lecturer's freedom to decide what and how to teach. If we claim that freedom is crucial in what we do then we need a far greater openness to interrogate and debate all facets of the academic profession. Why are our teaching activities not exposed to the same scrutiny, with our peers and colleagues, as our research?

There is no escaping the fact that Universities are changing. We need to nurture academic freedom as a deeper and more holistic concept than a freedom to pursue our own research interests and decide for ourselves at what time to leave the office! Academic freedom should be at the forefront of a democratic society, not the cornerstone of an ivory tower.

References

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