

**Freedom to Learn: The Threat to Student Academic Freedom and Why It Needs to Be Reclaimed**, by Bruce Macfarlane. London: Routledge, 2017, 139 pp., \$160.00 hardbound, \$53.95 paperback.

### Students as Adults

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Academic freedom in its various forms is, of course, a recurring theme whenever faculty meet to debate developments in academia. The freedom of students is given less focus, however, and in his new book Bruce Macfarlane argues that student freedom is mostly seen as a matter of the right to engage in political and social disputes. This became particularly evident to Macfarlane while he was a professor of higher education at the University of Hong Kong during the student

protests of 2014, and as a consequence he also came to see student freedom in a new light. *Freedom to Learn: The Threat to Student Academic Freedom and Why It Needs to Be Reclaimed* is the result. Macfarlane argues for the need to discuss students' academic freedom as freedom to learn, both in terms of positive and negative rights.

Bruce Macfarlane is currently professor of higher education and director of the Centre for Educational Policy at the University of Southampton in the UK. His academic background is in management and business studies, but he has since specialized in issues such as the ethics of higher education and leadership. *Freedom to Learn* is his eighth book. In his previous book Macfarlane examined the professoriate's responsibilities for intellectual leadership.<sup>1</sup> He covers similar topics in *Freedom to Learn*, but from the students' perspective.

Macfarlane's point of departure is that we must regard our students as responsible adults having chosen to take part in higher education, and we must acknowledge their right to be free members of the academic community. Here, Macfarlane is in good company: Karl Jaspers comes to mind, as do the writings of Martha

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce Macfarlane, *Intellectual Leadership in Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

C. Nussbaum, to whom Macfarlane also refers.<sup>2</sup> Macfarlane's main inspiration is the call for student freedom expressed by the humanist psychologist Carl Rogers, who was central to establishing the now ubiquitous notion of *student-centered* activities and learning.<sup>3</sup> Macfarlane argues that these efforts have taken the wrong turn, and that we have lost track of Rogers's claim that students should be allowed to learn at their own pace, following their own ambitions.

I can happily agree with this conception of students as adults. In an era when many in university governance regard students as customers, consumers, or as hapless victims intimidated by the overwhelming and elite monster of academia, it is refreshing to read Macfarlane's credo that our students deserve much better treatment than as customers. This is also the framework in which Macfarlane discusses what the freedom to learn could constitute and he does so by analyzing a number of practices he considers to be threats to their freedom. Here, it becomes more complicated.

For Macfarlane, the important point is that students must be allowed to follow their own ideas about how they wish to study. He believes that we impose far too many restrictions and regulations on students, which he discusses in terms of *performativity* of three kinds: bodily, participative, and emotional. Performativity refers to the ways, beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge, in which students are expected to behave in order to earn their degrees, in performative acts that are easily measured and assessed.

Bodily performativity, for example, means attending mandatory lectures regardless of their value for the individual student. Participative performativity includes the mandatory sharing of opinions in class, even if that makes students feel uncomfortable, or having to participate in group assignments seen as meaningless in relation to the student's interests. Emotional performativity is the expectation that students express particular views on certain issues, such as "global citizenship" and inequality—all based on more or less ideological perspectives, whether from a neo-liberal or leftist perspective. (Another example could be sustainability.) His point is that performativity not only restricts students but also can, at worst, manipulate them, such as when students confirm and express values they do not support. Here, Macfarlane also challenges the mantra of "active learning" and

<sup>2</sup>Karl Jaspers, *Die Idee der Universität* (Berlin: Springer, 1946). Translated as *The Idea of the University*, trans. H.A.T. Reiche and H.F. Vanderschmidt (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1959). See, for example, Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup>Carl Rogers, *Freedom to Learn: A View of What Education Might Become* (Columbus, OH: Charles Merrill, 1969).

“deep learning,” and claims that these theoretical notions are used in an oversimplified way, which reduces students’ options to choose their own strategies for learning. (Macfarlane has also discussed this in a recent article).<sup>4</sup>

Expectations of performativity are not restricted to current college students; they are described as part of an audit culture engulfing higher education itself—the same phenomena that Michael Power, P D Leake Professor of Accounting at the London School of Economics, examined in terms of the “audit society,” arguing that formal assessments, or audits, are used as tools for social organization.<sup>5</sup> Macfarlane argues that faculty reproduce this culture in their dealings with students, in what he describes as a “paradigm of distrust.” This is an important observation: It is reasonable to assume that faculty, knowing that they will be evaluated on easily measured criteria, feel an urge to show that they meet the standards expected from them, and have a good grasp of their students’ performance. In a similar vein, institutional management feels the need to exhibit control over faculty, particularly in those countries where national quality assurance agencies are

keeping a close look at educational quality.

I cannot help but wish that Macfarlane had expanded his arguments with a broader discussion of the purposes of higher education. In this, he differs from authors such as Jaspers or Nussbaum, who clearly relate their discussions of higher education’s purpose in terms of the development of the mind, for example, or the formation of citizens in a democratic society. In order to make distinctions between performativity expected for the sake of fair educational purposes and performativity as the result of faculty nervousness and educational fads, such clarifications should have provided a more nuanced discussion of the pros and cons of different forms of performativity.

Macfarlane argues, for example, that one purpose of higher education is to foster individual critical analysis and the ability to form an opinion, and he insists that the demand for emotional performativity in the classroom is at odds with the expectation that students take informed standpoints based on their own beliefs and values. But if we want our students to be able to argue their own opinions and show that they can analyze opposing arguments fairly, it might be perfectly reasonable to expect students to speak up in class, whether as part of their vocational training or a quest for *bildung*.

<sup>4</sup>Bruce Macfarlane, “Dualisms in Higher Education: A Critique of their Influence and Effect,” *Higher Education Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (January 2015): 101–18.

<sup>5</sup>Michael Power, *The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Macfarlane is concerned with students' academic freedom, but academic responsibility is also an issue that could have been given more attention in *Freedom to Learn*: academic responsibility, as in students' upholding academic standards in their work, is the other side of the coin of academic freedom. Thus, if students are to be regarded as adult members of the academic community, we have the right to expect them to take responsibility for all that follows from being in such a position (as they have the right to be regarded as able to expect this of themselves). It might be, as Macfarlane suggests, that a golden era when students were driven by the enduring quest for knowledge never existed, but that only makes it more important to express with clarity the responsibilities ensuing from being adult members of the academic community. We must also be able to identify the students who fail to meet these responsibilities and give them appropriate and necessary feedback.

But how many modern institutions of higher education are prepared to take the full consequences of these imperatives? Perhaps the performativity that Macfarlane identifies and criticizes is in fact a sad ersatz assessment, replacing a more genuine academic relationship between teacher and student, which should be characterized by responsibility as much as by

freedom. If this is the case, a wider discussion of student responsibility in this context is even more essential.

These concerns about *Freedom to Learn* should not necessarily be seen as problematic. While the claims that Macfarlane can make in relation to purpose and responsibility are limited and might weaken his case in some instances, the book compels readers to analyze their own practices and their own attitudes toward student performativity. In this, *Freedom to Learn* poses thought-provoking questions to all teachers, regardless of the purposes underlying their particular educational settings and objectives. While views on the purposes of higher education and student responsibility will differ, the notion of students as free adults in the academic community has deep roots in higher education, and if in the end we accept this view, it has implications for the expectations and demands we place upon them, as well as the opportunities we offer them—implications that we cannot ignore.

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