

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.

Reviewed by Rejoice Nsibande*

In this book, Macfarlane engages with the notion of students' freedom to learn which he defines as personal freedom to live the way they want to live their lives, political freedom in that students contribute to decision-making processes without domesticating their voice, and the right to learn as they decide what to learn, when to learn and how. He argues, as adult learners, students should have autonomy over choices and decisions such as these. He views this autonomy as crucial to providing students an opportunity to better understand their world and control what they want to do with their lives. Macfarlane argues, "if students are to be able to develop their own capabilities as independent learners and thinkers, they need to be provided with the choices, opportunities, encouragement and conducive environment in which to do so" (p. 26). He bemoans that university practices aimed at supporting student engagement, though well intentioned, ultimately fail to support an environment where students are trusted as adults responsible for making decisions on what they want to do. In his view, university policies and practices fail to acknowledge students' individual differences and preferences, consequently alienating them in the process.

Strategically combining theory and practice (vignettes of students' experiences of policy and practices), the author develops and sustains his argument that university policies are impacting negatively on students' private lives. He draws his examples from higher education institutions across the U.K., U.S.A., Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa to show first, that policies demonstrate a lack of trust and respect for students as adults; and second, the extent to which the adoption of managerialism and performative culture has led to universities putting themselves at the centre, rather than the students. He says students are involved in academic activities as 'clients' rather than scholars capable of making decisions about what they want to do, decisions on university governance processes and the ability to direct their own learning.

In essence, Macfarlane argues, to expect students to conform to standards, suppresses individual preferences and autonomy. In Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7, Macfarlane provides detailed examples of what he terms "performative demands" on students to demonstrate his point. He categorises "performative demands" as follows: "participative performativity" that forces students to participate in activities that are supposed to engage them in the learning

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process and prepare them for the workplace, while excessively auditing learning through assessment; “emotional performativity” through forced reflections seen as a form of self-surveillance and invasion of privacy; and “bodily performativity” through forced class attendance. Macfarlane is not arguing against student engagement as a critical element for student development. However, he is challenging universities to think about the importance of enriching educational experiences. He contends that such experiences can only occur when students participate in activities voluntarily in an environment that is inviting and where they are trusted to make appropriate decisions. Students as legitimate citizens in universities should have a voice and they should contribute to decisions on which activities are worthwhile. This should be done as part of genuine recognition of students as adults with freedom and the right to learn. Student engagement (in- and outside of class activities) is gaining focus in most universities globally, with the more recent literature indicating how engagement supports retention, learning and personal development (Tinto, 2012). Macfarlane, however, shows how practices associated with student engagement are infringing on students’ freedom and rights, and how the practices support institutions to achieve set goals and account for daily operations to funders in line with the culture of “performativity”.

The book challenges institutions to think about how student engagement activities encourage deep participation and opportunities for capacity building. Deep thinking is required to rethink how these activities are constructed, with students as co-constructors, since students’ involvement in determining and shaping their activities is crucial to their enjoyment of freedom and rights to learn. Macfarlane concludes by calling for efforts to reclaim the Rogerian principles of student centredness to restore students’ rights to learn. He is advocating for processes and practices that foreground a participatory model in a climate of trust and transparency, and unconditional respect for students as autonomous adults. In his view, reclaiming student centredness is critical and possible, focusing on *the right to non-indoctrination, the right to reticence, the right to choose how to learn and the right to be trusted as adults*.

Although the book is well written, the author assumes that, since students voluntarily choose to participate in higher education, they are equally capable and should be given the opportunity to make choices and manage their learning. Literature (Mann, 2001) indicates that the majority of students participating in higher education do so as part of a process, rather than as a result of calculated decisions. Hence, the assumed students’ agency and capacity to make choices, and the ability to control their learning, may not hold at all times and for everyone.

The book presents an opportunity for institutions to reflect on current practices and the extent to which they align with opportunities for students to exercise their freedom and right to learn. Macfarlane’s views seem to be in line with students’ call globally, through protests, to be heard and recognised not as clients but as legitimate citizens with the capability to contribute as scholars. The book is valuable for leaders of institutions, academics, student affairs and staff tasked with student development. Practitioners are to reflect on the nature of student engagement practices to ensure that students’ freedom and

their right to learn are protected through opportunities for their involvement in decisions on which activities are worthwhile for their learning.

References

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