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Our double standards: freedom for academics, limits for students

Bruce Macfarlane on the intergenerational hypocrisy of scholars who monitor students in ways that they never were

Universities may claim to believe in traditional ideals of academic freedom and social justice, but the real test of that is how fairly we treat our students.

We may signal our commitment to an inclusive academic community by referring to students as "partners" or "co-learners", yet the evidence suggests that a series of double standards are in operation.

When students start at university, for example, they are bombarded with threats about the perils of plagiarism. They face severe punishment for failing to acknowledge their sources. But the very same lecturers who enforce such draconian policies routinely ignore referencing conventions when preparing their own PowerPoint slides and handouts.

The use of Turnitin anti-plagiarism software is ubiquitous, yet it is employed almost exclusively to catch out students. When academics submit journal articles or write books, how often are they subject to the same type of surveillance? This is rare in my experience, despite plenty of evidence that academics plagiarise too, and even copy and paste "teaching philosophy" statements into their own teaching portfolios. Why should the phrase "academic integrity" be virtually synonymous with rules governing students' rather than everyone's scholarship?

Another example of our double standards is the way many lecturers elicit responses from students in class by calling on individuals to answer questions or give an opinion. The use of clickers, hailed as an "innovative" practice across the sector, has much the same effect. This enforced participation contrasts starkly with the way academics treat each other at conferences, where we generally grant our peers the right to reticence.

Some academic double standards have been with us a very long time, but others have emerged more recently. There are now strict rules on attendance at many university classes and growing use of "class participation" grades as a means of rewarding so-called student engagement. These are reliant almost entirely on crude indicators, such as turning up or asking questions, rather than harder-to-observe measures of genuine learning.

Such compulsory attendance rules represent an intergenerational hypocrisy, since they have been developed and implemented by baby boomers who were never subject to such restrictions on their own academic freedom. How many academics who were students in the 1970s or 1980s would have graduated if their progress had depended on attending at least 70 per cent of the teaching sessions? Yet students at University College London, and at many other institutions, are now subject to such arbitrary and authoritarian rules.

Academics find surveillance measures irksome and an invasion of privacy. It should come as no surprise that this is what students think about compulsory attendance rules too.

It is too simplistic to place all the blame on institutions for these double standards. We jealously guard our own academic freedom without understanding enough about why student academic freedom is so important. Few object to the way that students are required to espouse institutionally endorsed values such as "global citizenship". Academics are relatively unaffected by these politically correct agendas, while students are assessed on the basis of their emotional compliance with them. But students also need academic freedom if they are going to get a chance to make up their minds about the causes that matter to them, rather than to us. Why do we seem increasingly content to assess them on the basis of having the right attitude, rather than the right quality of scholarship?

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The reasons underlying these academic double standards go beyond mere hypocrisy. The truth is that many lecturers are now encouraged to see students as customers. This diminishes our regard for them and provides a pejorative label we can hang around their necks, even though there is little evidence to support the myth that today's students are more instrumentally minded than previous generations. When a student asks for a grade to be explained or reviewed, it is easy to dismiss such requests as evidence that they now think like customers. Yet this allows us to blame everything on a consumerist mentality, rather than simply admitting that we don't like having our authority challenged. If students now act in a less deferential way and are brave enough to ask questions, this is all to the good.

Academics need constantly to remind themselves what it was like to be a student. It's all too easy to forget. At the same time, it is not just academics who are under growing pressure. The demands on students are also much greater now in terms of attendance, participation and levels of assessment. This change makes it harder to draw comparisons on the basis of our own, sometimes distant, student days.

If we are really serious about treating students as members of an inclusive academic community rather than as customers, we need to be far more careful about practising what we preach.

Bruce Macfarlane is professor of higher education at the University of Southampton. His book *Freedom to Learn: The Threat to Student Academic Freedom and Why it Needs to be Reclaimed* was published last month by Routledge/SRHE.