



Academics frequently complain that their freedom is being infringed by the scrutiny imposed on them by developments such as teaching observations, research assessments and annual appraisals. But we rarely reflect on the increasing surveillance to which students are also subject and the effect this has on their academic freedom.

There was a time when being a university student meant “reading” for a degree. Attending lectures and seminars was a matter of choice, and skipping classes barely raised an eyebrow. Now, attendance policies and class registers are the order of the day. Some lecturers even use draconian measures such as excluding students who are not punctual.

But the surveillance culture goes much deeper than that. There are an array of assessment-related proxies aimed at getting students to attend, including oral presentations, short tests and quizzes, cunningly scheduled for the beginning of classes including lectures, smaller group tutorials and seminars.

So-called “class contribution” grades long established in North America have begun to creep into the UK system. Often worth between 5 and 10 per cent of overall grades, these practices purport to evaluate the extent to which students contribute to class discus-



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behavioural expectations rather than develop them academically. This approach has been described by Leonard Holmes, reader in management at the University of Roehampton, as “learnerism”. At the heart of the discourse, which also underpins the learning and teaching certificates aimed at novice academics, is the idea that since learning needs to be a social process of knowledge construction, students must be active participants. It also chimes with employer needs for students with social skills suited for the workplace, while the justification of group assessment conveniently benefits the economics of mass higher education by reducing the assessment workload.

Ironically, learnerism largely ignores the right of students to learn in different ways and to be reticent. Research has shown that people learn through silence as well as discussion. Pedagogy should respect the autonomy of students and their cultural norms – it should not be like a game show in which they have to demonstrate

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some kind of personal transformation.

It is true that those who attend class are often more likely to get better grades, but forced attendance does not develop the positive capability of students to make choices as independent adults. They need to take control of how and when they learn if they are to develop genuine intellectual and life skills. We are increasingly creating a culture of presenteeism, and there is a big difference between attendance and engagement.

Bunking off class is nothing new. In many ways, students have far better excuses to be absent than they used to. They almost all pay tuition fees and have jobs to support their studies. Students (or perhaps their parents) are customers, whether we like the analogy or not, but they are treated more like naughty and untrustworthy schoolchildren than young scholars. Rather than blaming students for not attending, we ought to look harder at the quality of our own teaching.

One final thought. How many of us would have our degrees if we had been required to attend every class? As academics, we are quick to voice concern about protecting our academic freedom – and rightly so. But we need to put more energy into creating an environment that fosters student maturity and protects their academic freedom, too.

Bruce Macfarlane is associate professor of higher education at the University of Hong Kong. He will present a paper, “The Surveillance of Learning”, at the annual conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education, which takes place on 12-14 December at the Celtic Manor Resort in Newport, South Wales. *Times Higher Education* is the media partner for the event.

Be here now, or else: lamentable effects of student ‘presenteeism’

Forcing undergraduates to attend class retards their capacity to develop as mature, independent learners, warns Bruce Macfarlane

sion. Sometimes they are really just a glorified reward for turning up. Contributions to online discussion forums play much the same role. Where this consists of simply counting the number of postings, there is little connection to the quality of student learning.

Further layers of e-surveillance exist that testify to our lack of trust in students. These include the routine use of anti-plagiarism software and the requirement for students to sign quasi-legal authorship statements every time they hand in an assignment.

Universities assert that student absenteeism

is a problem because it is disrespectful to lecturers and other students, and a waste of public funding. Attendance and punctuality are considered to be important workplace competencies, and registers are said to be necessary to comply with the visa regulations affecting some international students. Yet in abiding by the law, universities should not treat students as potential criminals.

It might seem perverse to suggest that students should not attend and participate in class. But surveillance is an insidious trend intended largely to make them conform to