

BOOK REVIEW

Freedom to learn: The Threat to Student Academic Freedom and Why it Needs to be Reclaimed by Bruce Macfarlane

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Macfarlane's *Freedom to Learn* was a fascinating read for me. It concerns itself with various aspects of academic freedom and the main pitfalls of what we understand as the modern student-centred approach. This book calls attention to problems that are commonly disregarded under the banner of student consumerism and infringements of student freedom, be they political freedom, personal freedom, or the freedom to learn. Macfarlane spends time with each freedom in turn, providing nuanced arguments for his points, supported with many representative examples. Refreshingly, the book avoids the pitfalls of generalisation by providing historical examples from Western and non-Western contexts, making the text equally relevant in any country with a massified higher education system.

The book has a very compact narrative with chapters progressing logically one after another, and maintaining a grasp of key themes throughout. Occasionally, Macfarlane darts away from the subject to comment on related issues facing higher education that enrich the reader's understanding of the background or history of the main issue at hand. Each chapter is prefaced with a short essay that sets the mood for the upcoming chapter. This brief discourse often discusses a book or historical figure, and beyond making me interested in what was to follow, also served to expand the list of books on my to-read list. The book was written by and targeted at academics, but I would argue that the narrative provided is still useful for students, and I don't think I took away any less from it by being a student. In fact, the book provided me with a certain amount of previously undiscovered self-awareness of my own learning style. For instance, one of the main arguments of the book, that student-centred education shifted from allowing the student to make their own choices about their education to meaning that "anything that gets students more involved in university is a good thing" (p. 50), spoke to me on a personal level, as it mirrored a majority of my private feelings on the topic. A large portion of what Macfarlane pointed out as an affront to student rights and academic freedom I previously perceived as a deficit in my abilities as a student. Throughout my undergraduate studies, I often felt not "good enough" simply due to my dislike of activities such as class discussions or group

presentations. As such, this book challenged a lot of my innate ideals about higher education and my role as a student within it.

Some of the issues discussed in Macfarlane's book can be paralleled in the "students-as-partners" movement and thus deserve closer consideration. The book details the transformation of traditional principles of student-centred education and all the rights afforded to students and academics along with it into an entirely different beast, mostly due to the demands of mass education. Comparatively, students-as-partners programs are by definition small and individualised, making them nearly impossible to scale up without losing some of the core tenets of the initiative. As such, the student-as-partners movement stalls the same way that traditional student-centred principles do—when it finds itself at odds with massified higher education. Whilst the book doesn't offer too many practical recommendations to overcome this beyond a general "stay true to yourself" call, I feel that being aware of this shift is at least a step in the right direction and should help us develop large-scale students-as-partners initiatives in the future.

When I first received the book, I treated it like most other articles that I got to read during my undergraduate studies; that is, I took it to the outdoor café near my office building and binge-read it over the course of a couple of days whilst drinking numerous iced coffees, occasionally entertaining myself by surreptitiously watching my professors walk by. As I progressed through the chapters, immersed in the rhetoric of student academic freedom, I must admit that those glances became more and more furtive. I felt almost rebellious reading the paperback in the open on campus, which speaks more about the content of Macfarlane's book than any organised discourse that I could provide on the uniqueness of his arguments. The book made me consider the general state of higher education, as well as my own place in it. It allowed me to revisit some of my own internalised biases and let me understand them through a number of different lenses. In conclusion, I found Macfarlane's book a compelling read even though it was not written with someone like me in mind. I think that academics, especially those involved in course design and those interacting with students on a frequent basis, would benefit from the discourse offered here; similarly, students wishing to understand the more abstract notions shaping higher education today would do well to pick up a copy.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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