

255. Why teaching assistants should enjoy robust academic freedom

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Students paid to tutor other students or to lead discussion groups need a high degree of academic freedom if they are to do their jobs well. Their freedom as tutors or group leaders is best protected simply by university customs, especially when those customs are informed by a sound conception of university teaching and learning. The academic freedom of tutors and discussion leaders should also be protected, though, when possible, by collective agreements.

Tutors and discussion group leaders are teachers. Good university teaching, it seems to me, requires sincerity. But a teacher can be sincere, and known by their charges to be sincere, only when both their interaction with students and their approach to the material is guided by their own judgements. Since a teacher guides themselves by their judgements only when not constrained to follow another's dictates, tutors and discussion group leaders should enjoy robust academic freedom when engaged in their work.

Though we call tutors and discussion group leaders Teaching Assistants, they are not so much assisting the professor as collaborating with them.

A high degree of academic freedom for tutors or discussion group leaders does not relieve the professor of any responsibility for the course. The professor is the one who sets the syllabus and the pedagogical goals. The topics, the readings, the pace of the course, the marking scheme, the tests and papers, the standards for grading, the grades—all of these are for the professor to determine. (A professor may, of course, consult with a teaching assistant on any of these matters, or even allow the teaching assistant to assign readings or essay topics. But it's only with the professor's permission that the teaching assistant has these tasks.)

So the professor, as I've just said, sets the syllabus and the goals the course is to serve. But that is as much as to say that the professor sets the means and the ends. What's then left for the tutor's or the discussion leader's judgement? How robust could a teaching assistant's academic freedom really be?

Good university teaching will inform students about the ways of the world, or at least about interesting and powerful theories of the world. More than that, though, it will help students to evaluate the theories they study, that is, to criticize and to develop them for themselves. Teaching should eventually even help them to fashion powerful theories of their own. (Theories or interpretations or appreciations, I mean, depending on the subject matter and the point of engaging with it.)

Because teaching is about helping students to imagine and reason and criticize for themselves, the teacher must themselves be engaged in imagining and reasoning and criticizing,

and following their own judgement in doing so. If the teacher is seriously engaged in study themselves, then the student can acquire the form of study through appreciating the point of it all. Otherwise, learning is just a game of mimicking.

Within the space created by the professor's choices and intentions for a course, then, the tutor or discussion leader must be free to make their own pedagogical choices and to posit their own pedagogical goals. If the professor has, say, set as the topic of the discussion the thesis that free will is compatible with determinism, then that is the thesis the leader must discuss with the group, and discuss it in such a way that the members of the group attain an adequate understanding of it. But the precise way it is taught must be left up to the discussion leader. The arguments and objections through which the leader leads their students to their understandings is for the leader to determine. Otherwise, they are feigning teaching. Fake teachers rarely educate. Instead, they inspire contempt in their students for both themselves and the subject matter.

Moreover, while it might be the professor's intention to get the students to accept the compatibilist thesis as true, the tutor or discussion leader must be free to reject that intention. The leader must be free to teach that the thesis is false; they must be free to remain neutral.

The teaching assistant needs to be free to introduce the ideas and considerations that they judge will best promote understanding in the students, and they need to be free to take the approach they judge will best promote the development of academic skills. That is a lot of academic freedom, but tutor and discussion leaders need even more. They need as well freedom of manners and comportment, which is the freedom to express their respect for their students as intellectually autonomous, and their care and concern for them, as best they can. A discussion leader's use or avoidance of humour, how they will address their students and ask their students to address them, whether they will call on students randomly, use PowerPoint, or show video clips—all that must be left up to the discussion leader.

The professor enjoys, or should enjoy, all of the freedoms I have described, within the spaces created by the academic calendar and the academic programs, and the tutor or discussion leader should enjoy exactly the same freedoms, but within the space created by the syllabus and the general course goals. The tutor or discussion leader should enjoy the same freedoms for just the same reasons: these freedoms make possible good university teaching.

Now that a person is free to do something does not imply that they are free to do it without criticism. The professor might think the teaching assistant has made some bad choices. The professor is free to call the teaching assistant in for a discussion and point out the errors in judgement (according to the professor) that the teaching assistant has made. Indeed, the professor would be shirking a responsibility were they not to talk to the teaching assistant. The two would have a discussion, though; if the professor respects the role of the teaching assistant, the professor would not simply issue criticisms, but listen to the assistant's responses and talk them over.

What the professor cannot do is to issue marching orders to the tutor or discussion leader. To issue marching orders is to force the tutor or discussion leader to be false to their students. Better the professor respect the academic freedom even of the erring teaching assistant.