



The Owl and the Accountant

Integrating practices of **academic freedom**,
collegial influence and **accountability**
in the **scholarship of teaching and learning**

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Background

Where I am coming from:

- Informatics: The Scandinavian Tradition of Participatory Design (Nygaard, Ehn, Bratteteig)
- Human Work Science: A Work Practice perspective (Wittgenstein, Garfinkel)
- Philosophy: American Pragmatism (Dewey, Peirce), thinking things out in relation to lived experience (Arendt)

Why I chose this topic:

- A growing need to understand “what’s going on”, i.e. how academic freedom, collegial influence and accountability play out in practice in higher education, as experienced over time from “below and within”

Background (cont.)

What sparked my interest in this specific topic?

1. In February 2016, *Academic Rights Watch*, an independent, non-profit watchdog organization with the aim of defending academic freedom in Sweden, published a very negatively formulated on-line case report about BTH titled “*The students have more power than the teachers at BTH*”.



Source:

<http://academicrightswatch.se/?p=2031>

Background (cont.)

Although I had not been involved in any way in initiating the ARW case report, I was contacted and interviewed by local press (BLT) about the reported lack of collegial influence at BTH.

Two aspects of this interview shocked me:

1. I thought I was one of several faculty members at BTH being interviewed for the BLT article, but it turned out I was the only interviewee. *(Why?)*
2. I could not develop an argument during the interview for why it is important for teachers to have collegial influence in the management of higher education, or how this is related to central concepts such as academic freedom, quality assurance and accountability. I found myself stupidly saying "Academics are like cats, impossible to herd..." *(Why? I had thoughts - but no words.)*

Background (cont.)

The more I thought about my lack of words for articulating why collegial influence and academic freedom are important, the more frustrated I felt!

Hannah Arendt argued that **freedom is located in the spaces between people, where political issues can be worked out** (Gunter, 2014:4).

But if we don't talk about these things in our everyday, lived lives, we cannot develop concepts and words to work with. And who should define central academic concepts, in words and in practice, if not "we" who constitute academia?



WHOOO?



WEEE!



So ... what is Academic Freedom?

In the Swedish National Encyclopedia (NE) , the summarizing definition of academic freedom reads as follows:

”the margin of freedom which institutions within the educational system enjoy above all in relation to governmental agencies, such as the Government and central bureaus, but also to the Church.” (My translation)

In the original, Swedish wording:

”den marginal av frihet som institutioner inom utbildningsväsendet åtnjuter i förhållande främst till statliga organ, såsom regering och centrala ämbetsverk, men även till kyrkan.”

So is it all about
institutional autonomy?



And is **institutional autonomy** in higher education always about **academic freedom**?

A close-at-hand example (given the venue for *Lärarlärdom*):

The proposal, a few months ago, by the Vice-Chancellor of BTH to investigate closing down Campus Karlshamn and concentrating resources to one campus, in Karlskrona.

The Minister of Education and Research, Helene Hellmark Knutsson, indicated, in a response to this in the SULF union journal *Universitetsläraren*, that closing the campus in Karlshamn was not in line with the current national policy for accessibility for all to higher education.

This in turn caused the Vice-Chancellor of BTH to recall his original proposal and resign in protest - which has now led to the early initiation of the process of recruiting a new VC.

Göran Bexell, professor of Ethics, and former Vice-Chancellor of Lund University (2003-2008), writes (my translation):

”The concept of autonomy understood as institutional, organizational, economical and other forms of self-governing freedom, can and should be perceived as a part of academic freedom, but this latter [*i.e. academic freedom*] should not be reduced to issues of autonomy, which can occur in current debate. [...] There is no necessary connection between increased autonomy for the academic institutions and increased academic freedom for teachers and researchers.”

(Bexell, 2013)

The contested concept of Academic Freedom



Michael Polanyi (1881 – 1976) argued that academic freedom was a fundamental necessity for the production of true knowledge.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academic_freedom

Today, we might contest the concept of "true knowledge" – but in this presentation I am focusing on "knowing in action", i.e. how academic freedom is played out in everyday work practice in academia.

The contested concept of Academic Freedom (cont.)

According to Wikipedia,

“Academic Freedom is the conviction that the freedom of inquiry by faculty members is essential to the mission of the academy as well as the principles of academia, and that scholars should have freedom to teach or communicate ideas or facts (including those that are inconvenient to external political groups or to authorities) without being targeted for repression, job loss, or imprisonment.”

This interpretation is, as we can see, more focused on **the individual faculty member’s right to freedom of inquiry** than on **the educational institution’s right to autonomy**.

The contested concept of Academic Freedom (cont.)

Henrik Berggren, Swedish author, historian and journalist, writes that there are (at least) four different sources of confusion concerning what academic freedom means, namely:

- The difference between German and American tradition
- The difference between individual and institutional freedom
- The balance between negative and positive freedom
- The question of what conditions academics need to live up to in order to invoke academic freedom

(Berggren, 2013)

The contested concept of Academic Freedom (cont.)

In the **German, Humboldtian tradition**, academic freedom has mainly been focused on institutional autonomy of higher education versus the Government and the Church.

In the **American tradition**, academic freedom has been more focused on faculty members' autonomy in relation to university management, the university board and external actors, other than the Government.

"Considering that Swedish and European universities have shifted from Government controlled towards increased autonomy during the transition from elite to mass education institutes, it may be worth taking in to account the idea that the university administration, the university board, industry and external actors can also represent a threat to the freedom of researchers, teachers and students." (My translation)

(Berggren, 2013)



It seems that academic freedom is a complex issue which needs to be continually negotiated in the context of teaching, learning and doing research in institutes of higher education.

Gradually, my focus has shifted from critique of NPM towards how collegial influence and accountability could be supported and enhanced in practice.

Maybe we could all gain from thinking and acting more co-constructively about how we can integrate the owl's and the accountant's perspective in our everyday work practices?



Acknowledgements

Despite the frustration I may have expressed in this presentation concerning reduced collegial influence at BTH in recent years, the environment here has always been inspiring – mainly due to great colleagues and a spirit of entrepreneurship.

I am grateful for the provocative question put to me a year ago by our Vice-Chancellor:

“What does academic freedom have to do with influence?”

I am still working on the answer, and learning a lot in the process.

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Questions & Discussion