

## Good teaching and academic freedom

The Cranky Professor

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Mark Mercer

Department of Philosophy

Saint Mary's University

Halifax, NS B3H 3C3

(902) 420-5825

[mark.mercer@smu.ca](mailto:mark.mercer@smu.ca)

Good teaching: sound educational ends pursued effectively.

The sciences can help us with questions of effective pursuit. They can even help us with questions of ends, though only indirectly. Questions of ends are directly pursued through philosophical or other critical or evaluative investigations.

How can a university best meet its responsibilities to encourage and nurture good teaching?

One thought is that a university can best encourage and nurture good teaching by setting up classrooms and labs, and offices and hallways, however the best evidence-based theory of university teaching says they should be set up. The institution should see that the physical spaces in which teaching happens, the equipment on hand, fenestration, lighting, and all the rest support those teachers who have adopted best practices. And it should see that what is and what isn't in the classrooms nudge the rest of the teachers into adopting best practices. (At least it should make it difficult for teachers to continue in their most ineffective ways.)

A committee, then, some members of which are up on the science, should be struck. Its charge would be to make the environment in which teaching occurs as conducive to good teaching as budgets and fire codes allow.

The problem, of course, is that good teaching has to do with sound ends as well as effective means. The committee and the research with which the committee is working assume certain ends, and these might not be the ends of the professors teaching in the spaces the committee has constructed.

Now it may be the case that some ends some professors pursue are not ends any professor should pursue, and it might even be the case that an argument could show a particular end to be an end not worth pursuing.

So the committee should, then, have a conception of sound educational ends and seek to construct teaching spaces in light of empirical research on how best to serve those ends. First call the philosophers, then call the scientists. Or, at least, that's one way of answering our question.

The practical problems here might seem insurmountable, but they're not. There's rarely competition among professors to be on committees. University presidents or other senior administrators can select committee members who share their (the administrators') vision of higher education. That would solve the problem of the multiplicity of conceptions of ends and the interminability of debate about them.

There's another answer to the question how a university can best encourage and nurture good teaching. The university can help individual professors to pursue the ends those professors have themselves selected to pursue.

A university concerned to help individual professors pursue the educational ends they've selected to pursue would do best by attending to both culture and classrooms.

On the culture side, it would sponsor discussions about philosophy of higher education; these would encourage professors to maintain a critical stance toward their commitments. It would encourage professors to talk about teaching with each other, even to criticize each other's teaching, just as professors talk about and criticize each other's research. A university concerned to help professors wouldn't have an official teaching evaluation form, for doing so imposes the institution's authority on certain teaching styles and conceptions of education's ends.

On the classroom side, it would seek to provide each professor with what she says she needs in order to pursue her goals effectively.

To sum up: the first answer is that administrators or committees should determine what educational ends professors are to pursue, the second answer is that professors should determine ends for themselves (in an environment conducive to thought about ends) and administrators should help them to serve those ends. How are we to choose between these answers?

We cannot do so neutrally. The reasons we give for our preferences will inevitably presuppose one or another of those preferences.

A deep reason to prefer a university in which professors set their own ends and administrators help them to realize them is that this arrangement both expresses and promotes the educational goal of enabling students to think for themselves and understand their actions as expressing their own values. Students who are aware that their teachers hold different, even competing conceptions of education, and who see that their teachers are committed to working out their differences only at the level of evidence and argument, not through administrative fiat, may acquire the habits and commitments of the tolerant and dispassionate investigator.

This is, of course, the central justification for granting professors wide freedom in teaching. The core value behind academic freedom is autonomy, the joy of thinking what one thinks and valuing what one values for one's own freely-accepted reasons. When a university administration seeks to direct or control teaching, it shows its disdain for both intellectual autonomy and the university's role in helping students to attain it.