

## Academic freedom and office décor

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Does academic freedom extend to a professor's choice of office décor? Well, if it doesn't, it should.

The question is current because a University of Saskatchewan marketing professor has filed a grievance with his union against the university for requiring him to remove blow-up dolls and profanity-laced posters from his office.

Back in February, David Williams, of the Edwards School of Business, was instructed by his dean, Daphne Taras, to remove the dolls and posters so that students, faculty, and staff won't be offended or creeped out should they visit Williams's office.

Whether office décor is protected by academic freedom at the University of Saskatchewan is a matter of what the Collective Agreement there says, or at least a matter of whose interpretation of the Collective Agreement prevails. But either way, clearly office décor should be protected, as it falls under the headings of freedom of expression and freedom of teaching.

Let's discuss academic freedom with regard to teaching. Why should professors enjoy wide freedom of teaching?

Professors should be free both to set the goals they mean to attain through their teaching and the means they will use in attempting to attain them. Their goals for their students might be increased understanding of a subject matter or the ability to pursue research in it, or greater awareness of their own values and assumptions, or facility at thinking critically. Their means might be lectures, humour (or lack of humour), writing assignments, or having their students draw posters in support of positions they (the students) actually oppose.

They should be free to set goals and to pursue them as they choose, for their freedom in teaching enables them to experiment, either to try new things or to resist new fads, and to examine critically what they have been doing in the classroom and why. Only if they have this freedom to experiment and change can they bring to light for themselves and their students the ultimate point and purpose of the educative endeavour, at least if they are committed to liberal education. That point or purpose, in the end, is the liberation of the mind from received ideas and dogma, and the conscious creation of one's attitudes and values.

It is only by way of this liberation that a person can come to think for herself, to come to conclusions that are her own conclusions rather than inherited ones.

Necessary to university teaching for a liberal educator is sincerity, the sincerity of the teacher that his teaching is his own, that it expresses what he himself thinks effective and significant. Only if the student is aware that the teacher takes the course and everything in it to

be serious and important will the student be willing or able to uncover her own basic ideas and to examine them. If, instead, the student thinks the teacher is a conformist, an organization man who is simply following the procedures and rules handed down by others, she will be confirmed in her assumption that the course is just another time-consuming task to be got through in her pursuit of a credential and a career. She will have no urge to put her current identity at risk for the sake of becoming educated.

All well and good, one might say: but that's the course and the classroom. What does any of it have to do with office décor?

Dress, manners, office décor—freedom with regard to all of that is integral to the sincerity necessary for good, liberating teaching. These are all part of the professor's presentation of himself as a teacher, even outside the classroom. And that is why office décor should be covered in the Collective Agreement by which a professor works as part of his academic freedom.

But don't students have a proper expectation not to be offended or creeped out when they sit in a professor's office? No, they don't, not if what they are after is an education. A university cannot be both a safe space for one's identity and a place of honest and passionate intellectual community. Universities have got to do a better job informing students that a campus is a place of intellectual and emotional risk.

Of course, a professor might properly be criticised for his dress, manners, or office décor. His dress, manners, or office décor might hinder rather than promote his teaching goals, or maybe his goals are asinine. Other members of the university community, his colleagues, mainly, should make it their business to understand what is going on, and to explain to him the need to change, if they conclude that a professor should change.

Academic freedom with regard to teaching no more insulates a professor against criticism than academic freedom with regard to research or comment do. Indeed, our responsibility as free professors is to use our academic freedom to make our criticisms known.

Having heard the case his colleagues (or whomever) have made against his practices, the professor might well determine that that case has merit. That would be a learning experience, the sort of experience universities are meant to promote. Seeing it has merit, the professor would remove his dolls, or maybe not. But unless it is his choice to remove them, made for his own good reasons of expression and teaching, removing them would undercut his intellectual autonomy and, thereby, the sincerity of his interactions with other members of his community, including the students he teaches.

Again, academic freedom does not shield a professor from pressure. It does shield him from all pressures except those of argument and example, but those pressures it leaves to work as they will. Indeed, those of us who enjoy the protection of academic freedom have a responsibility to engage in critical discussions with our colleagues. We shirk our responsibility to maintain our intellectual community in good health if we do not make public our thoughts and our reasons for thinking them sound.

Dean Taras might be right that Dr Williams would do well as a teacher to redo his office, despite the fact that her own arguments, as they've been reported, are entirely unsound. (They might be sound were Dr Williams a dentist or a car dealer.) But that his décor gets in the way of his teaching or whatever is a point she should make in critical discussion, not one that, at a university, she is entitled to win by fiat.

Let me end by noting that administrators who seek to impose their wills rather than to engage in critical discussion endanger the educative mission of the university in deep but subtle

ways. One way is thereby to set themselves up as authorities to whom aggrieved members of the community might complain. And so we find ourselves living in a culture of complaint and policy, instead of in a proper university culture of discussion, criticism, and intellectual community.