

## Academic freedom and incompetent teaching

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Melody Torcolacci teaches a first-year course at Queen's University, in Kingston, on the physical determinants of health. One of the things Professor Torcolacci tells her students is that some vaccines cause more harm than they prevent—or, at least, that the research doesn't clearly indicate that they don't.

Students have complained, and now Queen's principal Daniel Woolf has directed the provost, Alan Harrison, to gather information about Professor Torcolacci's course.

But what is the provost seeking to discover? What does the principal expect to do with the provost's findings?

(Perhaps the quest is now on hold. Prof Torcolacci requested and was granted leave from that course for the rest of the semester.)

The provost cannot be seeking to discover whether Prof Torcolacci has endorsed false claims in her classroom. Who hasn't? Professors speak falsely quite often. Indeed, our freedom to teach falsehoods to our students is protected by the collective agreements under which we work. Whether Prof Torcolacci has falsely taught her students that the jury is still out on the safety or effectiveness of vaccination should be a matter of indifference to the administration of Queen's University.

As well, Provost Harrison cannot be seeking to discover whether Prof Torcolacci's teaching instilled in her students the false belief that some vaccines cause more harm than they prevent, or whether, by believing that they do, her students put themselves or others at risk of harm. That students might come to believe falsely because of a teacher's teaching and that they might put themselves or others at risk because of their false beliefs are risks inherent in any educational endeavour.

Remarks Principal Woolf has made suggest that Provost Harrison is to discover whether the evidence Prof Torcolacci presented in class was scientific and reliable, whether that evidence was presented objectively, and whether in communicating her opinions to her students, she let them know that they were her opinions.

So it appears that Principal Woolf's interest is in how Prof Torcolacci teaches rather than in what she teaches. But that's none of the university administration's business, either. Professors are free to determine for themselves what counts as scientific or reliable evidence and what counts as an objective presentation. And they're free to abandon science, reliability, and objectivity themselves, if they wish to.

Presumably, Principal Woolf thinks that if Provost Harrison uncovers that Prof Torcolacci didn't teach her course in the right way, the university can intervene to require that

Prof Torcolacci change her ways. But it cannot intervene no matter what Provost Harrison finds, at least not if Prof Torcolacci enjoys academic freedom.

Well, then, if academic freedom protects professors who teach noxious falsehoods or fail to uphold the standards of their disciplines, then too bad for academic freedom—or so at least runs a popular rejoinder. So why academic freedom?

It's a mistake to think that the goal of university education is to amass a collection of true beliefs: that gravitational pulls cause the tides, that Jane Austen wrote *Emma*, that vaccines today are safe and reliable. No, the goal of university is to help students to come to be able to reason well and to think for themselves. A university has succeeded when, but only when, students graduate as competent intellectuals, able to inquire into the world and to participate in intellectual community. But that goal is attainable only in an institution that allows (and encourages) the professors to think for themselves and to participate in intellectual community. And that is why professors should enjoy wide academic freedom with regard to teaching.

The problems caused by incompetent professors cannot, then, be solved by administrative decrees, not without corrupting the university. If they are to be solved, they must be solved using the resources of the university community itself. The resources to be used in this case are discussion and criticism.

If a professor has been teaching her students poorly, it is because she has failed to help them to become intellectuals—morally autonomous individuals able to inquire into the ways of the world. If she's failed, there's a set of reasons why she failed. What these reasons are is a matter that should interest the other professors, and through inquiry and discussion they can be discovered. Professors can talk to the bad professor, offering their views and suggestions. With luck, bad professors can be helped to become better professors.

On the other hand, when a professor is directed by administrators not to teach certain things or not to teach in a certain manner, classroom interactions between teacher and student and among students become manipulative and insincere. Since moral autonomy cannot be served in a situation that implies disdain for it, students will fare much worse in such a classroom than in one led by a factually ignorant but sincere teacher. The lesson, of course, is that no bad professor can be turned into a good one by administrative decree.

The worst thing that could happen in the Torcolacci affair would be for the administration of Queen's to require professors, including Prof Torcolacci, to teach certain views, or not to teach certain other views, or to teach in a certain way. What should happen is that Prof Torcolacci's colleagues explain to her that she is teaching poorly, if that is their view, and to help her to teach well.