



AS I SEE IT

Dystopia is now: the threats to academic freedom

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ABSTRACT: A series of intersecting trends now threatens fundamental changes in the character of higher education. The gradual replacement of full-time tenured faculty with part-time teachers is the bedrock change, but it simultaneously serves the political impulse to defund higher education and makes it easier to impose the corporate model of instrumental education devoted narrowly to skills acquisition and job training. Humanities education should resist these trends with an alternative educational model.

KEY WORDS: Contingency · Tenure · Job training · Instrumentalization · Massive Open Online Courses · MOOCs · Humanities · Holocaust studies · Race

INTRODUCTION: THE CONTINGENT FUTURE

In my 2010 book, *No University Is An Island: Saving Academic Freedom*, I began by defining academic freedom, tenure, and shared governance as three legs of a stool, thus suggesting that the three principles are interdependent, such that the stool would tip over if any of the principles failed. One of the three cannot be put into practice without the other two; if one of the three is severely weakened, the other two will be weakened as well.

Most academics understand that one or more of these three supports is indeed threatened, but not all see their relationships to one another. Some academics have no personal investment in one or the other principle; others feel anger or contempt for one or more of the legs. Many have no personal experience of one, two, or even three of the legs or the practices that enact and sustain them. In the USA, over two-thirds of college and university faculty nationwide are contingent—or 'sessional,' in Canadian terms, 'precarious' in Mexican terminology—and many of them have little experience of academic freedom, no experience of job security, let alone what seems the elite privilege of tenure, and no experience of partic-

ipating in shared governance. Their tenured colleagues often enough have little sympathy for them and little inclination even to invite their limited participation in shared governance, let alone advocate for some form of tenure-like job security. Why should the most vulnerable teachers among us defend rights they do not have? Rallying troops to defend principles they may not even understand is no easy task. Hardly anyone, it sometimes seems, fully understands that these principles are at the very least nationally interdependent, that when the stool fails at one campus it puts all others at risk. Some higher education trends are international in scope. Moreover, only strong national organizations—the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in the USA, the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) in Canada—can articulate and defend the principles that are realized on individual campuses. Faculty, I believe, need the ability to negotiate legally binding contracts to secure their academic freedom, maintain shared governance rights, and maximize the applicability of tenure.

I now think that in the USA we have reached a tipping point. Runaway contingency has left all of us vulnerable, emboldening conservative legislators

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and unsympathetic administrators alike to try to replace the three-legged stool entirely with something else. As the most serious demographic change in faculty status in half a century, inflationary contingency has made all of us a target of opportunity. Unless they are organized and can secure their rights through legally binding contracts, these precarious employees are vulnerable to top-down mandated redefinitions of faculty responsibilities.

Most faculty members realize that at least one powerful force and trend is putting the existing system of balances at risk. What I think relatively few realize is that the forces threatening higher education are themselves interrelated, at least to the extent that they enhance each other's effectiveness and magnify each other's impact. Thus, the overreliance on contingent faculty intersects with the impulse to defund public higher education, which intersects with an instrumental, job training model of higher education, which intersects with a conservative agenda of eviscerating political critique within the academy.

THE ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY MOVEMENT

Few universities have yet fully confronted a threat to academic freedom initiated in secondary education and now spreading from it to shape the future of higher education—the assessment and accountability movement that proposes (1) to make course syllabi more uniform; (2) to force compliance with common pedagogical goals; (3) to give absolute priority to measuring pedagogical success by quantifiable means; (4) to decrease the diversity of educational experiences to which students are exposed; (5) to erode faculty academic freedom to design courses as they believe best and honor their individual pedagogical philosophies; (6) to sidestep the shared governance processes that lead to faculty consensus about common elements of multi-section courses; (7) to cede definitions of institutional missions to external political and economic forces. This is a multi-national trend, and it is likely to gain influence both in North America and Europe.

Few faculty have any idea what altogether assessment-oriented curricula look like, but they already exist. On 4 September 2013, I participated in a day-long 'Panel on the Future of Higher Education' at the University of Denver. In addition to myself, speakers included Paul LeBlanc, President of Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), and Stacey Ludwig

Johnson, Associate Provost at Western Governor's University (WGU). Both described their institutions in detail, followed by a discussion in which I and others were able to ask questions. SNHU and WGU are the leading innovators in online education in the USA.

At WGU (www.wgu.edu/?utm_source=1335), the entire curriculum is online, and every course has a list of learning outcomes that are enumerated and tested. The same principles apply to the online division at SNHU. Students do not accumulate credits for courses in the conventional way; rather, they accumulate the particular number of tested competencies built into a given course. The traditional 3-credit course is gone. In his Denver presentation, LeBlanc quipped that the 3-credit course is good at telling you how long someone has sat at a desk, but not at telling you what they've learned.

To WGU's credit, there is weekly phone contact with a mentor assigned to each student, but there is no face-to-face contact. The system becomes profitable, the faculty compliant, not only because of the hundreds of part-time teachers employed, but also—and even more fundamentally—because of the unbundling of faculty responsibilities. LeBlanc's term is 'disaggregation,' and he applies it to faculty responsibilities and identity. At SNHU, LeBlanc observed, 'we have blown apart the traditional faculty role.'

The person who delivers course content at WGU or SNHU is not the person who grades student performance. The person who does the phone mentoring at WGU—assigned by student, not by course—is yet a third employee, not the person who delivers content or evaluates performance. All student advising is done by yet other employees, perhaps by third party advising companies. The whole set of teaching responsibilities is unbundled. The person who creates an online lecture never meets his or her students. A 'course' can be divided into segments, and those segments can be designed by individual faculty. WGU shops the country to find people to design content. The administrators who run the programs do not design courses or assess student performance. Why, you may ask, would people paid to perform these tasks be preoccupied with academic freedom, tenure, or shared governance? They are paid to complete narrowly defined tasks.

Obviously, WGU has achieved the Taylorization of the academy. Frederick Taylor (1856–1915) developed his analysis of the industrial workflow in the 1880s and 1890s, and it had a major impact on the rationalization, standardization, and segmentation of the industrial workplace two decades later. It took a

hundred years for it to penetrate higher education. It has now come to fruition in an assembly-line version of higher education. Everyone is accountable for measureable performance. Everything is assessed. And it works, although WGU specializes in older students who are working at jobs and are clearly motivated to acquire new skills. WGU does not offer a philosophy major or anything else in the humanities; rather, WGU is divided into four colleges — business, teaching, information technology, and health professions. Students can earn a Bachelor's degree in nursing, business management, accounting, and other fields, and a Master's degree in science education, instructional design, or English as a second language. Everything about the institution is altogether functional and goal oriented. As a *New York Times* article reported in 2011, Obama's secretary of education Arne Duncan has said he wants WGU to be the norm, not the exception (Lewin 2011). In an August 2013 speech reported in the *Boston Globe* and elsewhere, President Obama himself praised SNHU's model (Jan 2013).

My problem, I should make clear, is not with WGU itself, or with SNHU. They are providing a service that people want. At WGU, it is equivalent to technical training and makes little pretense of offering a full liberal arts education, whereas SNHU is more ambitious and offers a wider range of degrees. My problem is with using enterprises like WGU or SNHU as suitable models for replacing a large swath of higher education.

LeBlanc suggested in his Denver talk that the present residential delivery model is outdated, although we continue to romanticize it. The market wants something different and more practical. However, disaggregation means setting aside the long-standing vertical integration of higher education in the form of full-time faculty members. At SNHU, the 'teachers' have no hand in creating course material.

LeBlanc, who is thoughtful and forthcoming, acknowledges that traditional faculty do and should feel threatened by such developments. As these changes are adopted, there will be winners and losers among categories of higher-education employees. Full-time faculty will be displaced. Thus, neither tenured faculty nor the shared governance process, he observes, are necessarily the best at managing the transition to competency-based education. As we move toward the new model, he adds, it may well also be time to rethink departmental structures. Current degrees reify departmental structures that get in the way of assigning and assessing measurable, enumerated competencies.

The mushrooming Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) phenomenon, which evolves or mutates weekly, can obviously be adapted to the WGU model. Introduced in 2008 and becoming widely popular in 2012, MOOCs are online courses offered to a mass audience of thousands, generally not yet for formal college credit, although mechanisms to offer them for credit are under development. Unlike the WGU curriculum, MOOCs will eventually embrace the whole range of academic fields. MOOCs can also be offered to underprepared students from first-generation college-attending families. They herald cheap education for the poor. The only problem is that many underprepared students will fail at such programs, as they need more, not less, mentoring (Konnikova 2014).

Consider this: As of 2013, Coursera (<https://www.coursera.org>), one of the major businesses founded to distribute online courses from individual campuses to a worldwide audience, had accumulated all of the MOOCs necessary for an undergraduate computer science major. They didn't even have to plan a curriculum. They didn't go out to buy computer science courses like WGU did. They just built the highway and faculty came. Within a few years, Coursera expects to have a full complement of undergraduate courses in every academic field. So, buy an acre of tundra in the frozen north. Set up a shack with internet capacity and start a college. Or perhaps you already are a college, but you just don't happen to have a computer science department. Hire one part-time faculty member, or two or three, and offer a computer science degree with Coursera's MOOCs. I guarantee you it will happen. And then the competitive financial pressures will drive other institutions to compromise what were once independent degree programs.

Once again, it's not the arrival of MOOCs in and of themselves to which I object. As a form of broad, free public education, MOOCs are both revolutionary and laudable. Even a traditional residential undergraduate college could benefit from limited use of MOOCs under local faculty control, as the format can expose students to faculty from many campuses. Not that any full-time tenured faculty member would want to become merely a squire to someone else's knightly lectures. I object rather to hiring armies of part-timers to service MOOCs locally and to using MOOCs comprehensively for undergraduate degrees.

In this emerging world, there isn't much need for traditional full-time faculty, pedagogically self-sustaining departments, faculty research, tenure, shared

governance, or academic freedom, except of course for wealthy parents who want an education for their children that goes beyond outcomes that can be assessed with multiple-choice tests. On the other hand, those administrators, politicians, and businessmen who like to warn that the present economic model for higher education is unsustainable are very much in love with the idea of an unbundled faculty member and an automated curriculum.

What is unsustainable is the inadequate social and political commitment to funding higher education. As I argued in 'No University is an Island,' it has already produced immensely increased student debt and a higher education workforce that is exploited, underpaid, and deprofessionalized. Meanwhile, administrative positions multiply and the salaries of top administrators, like corporate CEOs, soar farther and farther from their impoverished employees. A frenzy

Box 1. A holocaust course

I can find no better example of what I mean than a seminar I teach on holocaust poetry. The poems are painful to read. Class sessions combine detailed analysis of the texts with opportunities to share the struggle to deal with both the historical background and the unique perspectives various poems offer. The issues we pursue are some of the most basic and troubling ones that arise from the 20th century's killing fields. What does it mean to be human? Can civilization guarantee any forms of human decency? Are any monstrous behaviors or organized forms of evil impossible in human society? What hope is left to us in the wake of industrialized mass murder? How do we take on the burden of poems that declare life is no longer worth living? Do we really want to enter into the inner world of concentration camp life? Are we capable of fully understanding horror? What purpose do acts of witness to the unspeakable serve for later generations?

To teach this poetry forthrightly, I argue, is to confront a world without hope, with no reason for confidence that humane values have any transcendent character or any hold on the future. Nothing is guaranteed. I believe it is fair to say that most citizens would prefer to believe otherwise, to retain some measure of faith in human nature, but holocaust poetry shows us we are no better than what we are made to be—and that we can be made to be absolutely anything. What remains if confidence in both human nature and providence is stripped away is reliance on our own actions, our responsibility to construct cultural values and meaningful will: optimism of the will and pessimism of the intellect, to borrow Antonio Gramsci's motto from his 19 December 1929, *Letters from Prison*.¹

Let me share just one Holocaust poem, Ilse Weber's 'A Nursery Rhyme from Theresienstadt', where Weber was held from 1942 to 1944, before being taken to Auschwitz and murdered that October. The poem reworks a traditional children's song. It is translated from the German by David Keir Wright:

Heave! Look out ahead!
Here comes the wagon with the dead.
Heave! Look out ahead!
The wagon with the dead.
We stop right here and stop right there,
We drive dead bodies everywhere.
Look ahead!
The wagon with the dead.
Heave! Look out ahead!

Destroyed and gone—all that we had.

Heave! Look out ahead!

Destroyed and gone, I said.

The end of joy, our home's away,

Our luggage left the other day.

Look ahead!

We're coming with the dead.

Heave! Look out ahead!

They've hitched us to the cart instead.

Heave! Look out ahead!

They've hitched us up instead.

If all our pain were put on it,

We wouldn't even move one bit.

Look ahead!

A wagon full of dead.

My students send an email to the class every week reflecting on the readings assigned. Here are a series of brief quotations from some of the emails one student sent responding to different poems during the course of the semester:

- Death for these poems is not a torment at all. To have escaped, to have been spared, is to have been swallowed by an oblivion darker than the death into which those who were murdered disappeared... to have perished among one's own is more desirable than to have lived to experience the solitude that remains without them. The life that managed to evade death, if it can be inhabited at all, is unfit for living.
- How can one speak of being rescued when deliverance only transports those saved from abyss to abyss?
- The speaker's world is a necropolis, populated by the victims for whom no monument commemorates their grave. Within it, he answers to the call of the dead whose voices others do not hear.
- The survivors do not only live off their bodies; the life of their bodies is that which their bodies expel in order to live. They consume their own death.
- How can I fulfill my responsibility to the victims of the Holocaust when my responsibility remains bottomless?

¹Gramsci, Antonio, *Letters from Prison*, ed. Lynne Lawler (New York: Noonday Press, 1989)

²Weber, Ilse, "A Nursery Rhyme from Theresienstadt." In Andrés J Nader, *Traumatic Verses: On Poetry in German from the Concentration Camps, 1933–1945* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007)

of competitive building has drained reserves and has artificially increased costs at many institutions. My fear is that institutions will respond by reducing the integrity of their core instructional mission by following the instrumental model I've described.

THE FUTURE OF HUMANITIES DISCIPLINES

The group of disciplines least adaptable to an instrumental education devoted to job training are the humanities. There are collateral employment-related benefits to be gained from humanities courses. Humanities courses teach skills—from close reading of texts to writing well to problem solving and abstract reasoning—that all increase the value of employees. But these are sometimes secondary or supplementary to more fundamental learning processes. If a humanities defense relies on the plea that 'we can teach your child to write business memos' it starts down a path toward diminished funding and diminished academic independence for humanities departments. Limiting the humanities reason for existence to utilitarian services is the first step toward eviscerating the whole liberal arts model.

All humanities courses teach testable facts, but all of us know that many students rapidly forget facts they master only for tests. Students master facts best when they find subject matter compelling and develop a hunger for more information. Such devotion often comes from the pursuit of specialized topics, not from the general course content that all students share. I stopped giving tests 25 years ago when I realized I opted for tests only when I had failed a course's deeper aims. I realize that an accounting course may be more fully testable, which is part of why WGU can succeed.

In response to a question I asked, LeBlanc acknowledged that there may be some topics less well adapted to testing and assessment. He gave the example of students assigned an essay about whether torture can ever be ethical. But he argues that pressing humanities faculty to define their sometimes 'fuzzy' goals more clearly is beneficial. I agree, unless that pressure comes in the form of a formal assessment and competency regime.

I find that weekly posts, class discussion, and papers give me a reliable basis for finding out whether students are benefitting from a course. Beyond that, I am not interested in imposing a course's lessons on students. I care about whether the course matters to them and about whether it may spark long-term commitments, even whether a course may alter their

view of the world, but it is fundamentally up to *them* to decide whether to invest in what I teach in a fundamental way. My job as I see it is to place certain knowledge and certain challenging questions on the table that have the potential to engage deep commitment. If they do, I really will learn as much from the students as they do from me. But it is their choice to decide whether a course will become central to their lives. 'Has a course changed your life?' This is not a question for a multiple choice exam. I do not even consider it ethical to insist that students learn what I have to teach.

I describe a Holocaust course (Box 1) as belonging to the fierce humanities, and I have argued that it exemplifies the unsettling challenges that a liberal arts education can offer. For me that is what a liberal arts education is about. My aim is to make life more complex and difficult for my students, not to give them skills I can test. But I do not require them to step over the line into radical doubt and uncertainty. I give them the opportunity and a forum in which it is possible. The humanities are not unique in offering such opportunities. Science education should include an effort to understand the relationship between doubt and certainty in science. I do find that such questions can be defining in humanities courses and that that takes them out of the instrumental educational frame. The challenges that the poem 'Vesey's Nightmare' (Box 2) offer to students can neither be explored nor tested by the assessment model.

CONCLUSION

I stand on the side of those who argue we need a humanities, liberal arts, and educational offensive, not a reactive, apologetic defense of the benefits of higher education. We need to own the cultural, intellectual, and religious challenges an uncompromising education can bring to our students. Organized resistance to the destructive forces higher education faces is not futile. But that means taking possession of the cultural territory that we have claims on.

Such an educational offensive will include all of the work we can do as individuals. It will also require collective action, action best undertaken through collective bargaining when that option is available, but only if faculty unions are willing to embrace a broad social agenda—making academic freedom and shared governance central to collective bargaining agreements, fighting for fair compensation and benefits for all employees, reducing administrative bloat

Box 2. Teaching about race

I use the example of my holocaust course because it is particularly clear. But the situation is not notably different when I teach a series of poems about race relations in the USA. The poems do things that cannot be encompassed by a factual history of race in America. There is certainly history to be taught, from the slave trade through post-civil war reconstruction to the civil rights movement and beyond. But that is not the center of the course. At the center of the course are the poems and the challenges they offer.

The most ambitious and compelling poem about African American history by a white author is Aaron Kramer's 1952 26-poem sequence about plans for an 1822 South Carolina slave revolt. The title 'Denmark Vesey' is the name of the black man who planned the revolt. Following is one poem from the sequence, 'Vesey's Nightmare,' which is a vision of a banquet and ball held by plantation owners:

It took Vesey long to fall asleep that night.
Over and over he heard the minuet;
Till—tossing and turning—he fell into a dream.
It was Col. Prioleau's banqueting-room.

There stood the Colonel, bursting through his coat,
Flanked by half the legislature of the State
All busily sampling and praising the food.
Instead of an ordinary meal, they had

Young Negro bodies baked to the bone.
Their fountain of wine was a Negro vein.

The lovely brocade their ladies wore
Had once been Negro grandmother's hair.
The gems that blinked on their arms like stars
Were bright Negro eyes that had lately shed tears.

The drummer was beating a broad Negro chest,
And, instead of on trumpets, the trumpeters placed
Thin lips on the hole of a Negro throat
That made a lament of the minuet.

Now lightly, now heavily, dancers caroused
On black children's faces: moaning and bruised—
While one slave kept bending to mop up the blood.
For which he received many pats on the head.

The Colonel smiled proudly up at his lamps:
They were Negro souls, which he'd bought for worn pants.
Now they saw Vesey—they were pointing at *him!*
'Not I!' he shrieked, and fled from the dream.

Vesey doesn't wake up. He flees the nightmare, perhaps imagining fleeing the South. Is such a nightmare so unlikely for black men who lived in fear of being lynched? And is it not just the labor but also the bodies of the slaves that the USA consumed? The poet is obviously also linking slavery with the Holocaust and the Nazi willingness to make products out of Jewish body parts.

and student debt, and focusing higher education on teaching and research.

We all need to realize that our administrators will be under increasing peer pressure to unbundle faculty responsibilities, hire more contingent faculty, and adapt the curriculum to the outcomes and assessment agenda. In the USA, such peer pressure is supplemented by political pressure and increasing intervention by state and federal governments. That intervention has a special point of entry: state authority over secondary education.

The logic is that, if state governments have oversight authority for K–12 education, it stands to reason they can monitor, evaluate, and regulate the training of K–12 teachers in colleges and universities. But of course special teacher training courses exist not only in colleges of education but also in many academic disciplines. Those courses then fall victim to the assessment and accountability agenda. Soon the academic freedom that faculty have tradi-

tionally had to design those courses gives way to pressures for standardization. The balance of power needs to be recalculated so that faculty regain their authority over such academic matters. Resistance is not futile.

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