

# Can "Academic Freedom" Survive? \_\_\_\_\_

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Freedom for students to study controversial issues related to the social and economic problems of the day is part and parcel of the whole area of academic freedom of teachers. An analysis is made here in terms of principles of good teaching, supervision, and administration with suggested concrete adjustments to be made in school policies and curriculum. The author, Edward Krug, is associate professor of education, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California. Mr. Krug has recently gone to Stanford from the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin.

IT BEGAN as a whisper. Today murmuring is more audible. In some spots action has resulted, and at present the stage is set for an increasing chorus of demands for investigating the political and social beliefs of teachers.

How will this general atmosphere of suspicion and conflict affect our teaching? What will it do to those of us in the "controversial" fields? Will next spring find us continuing with a frank and honest study of social problems? Or will it find too many of us marking time, timidly and fearfully, behind the shelter of "safe" topics not involved in the vital issues of contemporary life?

The answer to the question of whether "academic freedom" can survive in a time of sharp social conflict depends partly on the way administrators and supervisors handle specific cases. Jittery superintendents quickly affect the poise and stability of entire faculties. *But the answer will depend far more on how teachers teach and how administrators and supervisors help them do good teaching.* The matter becomes, therefore, a special case of the principles involved in good teaching,

good supervision, and good administration.

## For Realistic Education

As one aspect of over-all academic freedom, the teacher deals with controversial problems appropriate to the learning maturity of students. The study of such problems by children and youth provides one of the very best means of developing the skills of reflective thinking, both on an individual and on a group basis. It gives to the school experience a sharpness and reality not otherwise easily obtained. To avoid such problems through fear, timidity, or other such reasons becomes neglect of duty—the duty which we owe not alone to the local school board, but to the entire American people.

It will be wise, we believe, to analyze the entire problem from the standpoint of principles involved in good teaching and learning. From such an analysis will come guides to action which are imperatives if a realistic education for boys and girls of today, as well as an atmosphere in which honest educators work with freedom and integrity, is to survive.

### **The Individual Is Important**

The first principle of good teaching which applies here is that the teacher accepts every student and respects every student's personality and his or her right to exercise freedom of speech in the classroom. The freedom of the student is the necessary accompaniment of the freedom of the teacher. Students should feel free to express their views without fear of the teacher's sarcasm, ridicule, or anger. This is a fact sometimes forgotten by the zealous teacher. To turn the tables on a student is easy. After all, the teacher is older, more experienced in controversial discussion, and better informed.

But such "victories" become cheap and dangerous. The offended student is likely to take home a distorted version of the discussion to present to the family at the dinner table. Respecting the rights of others to disagree with you is not only good teaching—it is the essence of good social relationships. If the teacher shows courtesy and consideration in controversial discussion, students get the idea too. They need also to learn to disagree courteously and to respect the personalities of those who disagree with them.

Another part of this principle involves the ability of the teacher to make good use in the discussion of every contribution offered by students. The skillful teacher can take a very confused utterance by a student and restate it in such a manner that it builds up the student's self respect. On the other hand, it is tragic when some diffident youngster offers his idea after days of working up courage to take part, only to have the teacher sharply point out that what he says is con-

fused, inaccurate, or "off the subject."

### **Understanding of Children Exists**

Good teachers try to avoid upsetting students emotionally on matters which involve them personally. They avoid unflattering references to racial, ethnic, religious, political, and social groups. During the depression the study of employment problems often brought needless pain to students whose parents were unemployed, or on relief in one form or another. Careless remarks and intended jokes can serve further to isolate youngsters who are already perhaps excluded from the group.

Of course, we do not avoid problems with which students are personally identified. Children whose parents are on strike will often want to study labor-management problems and should do so. Children of the unemployed can and should study unemployment. Boys and girls who live in slums should not be denied the opportunity of studying housing. It is not the study of such problems which upsets youngsters. It is the careless use of emotionally-tinged symbols which hurts all of us. We must also recognize that this is an individual matter. A remark which brings a laugh from ten children may hurt one child because of certain factors in his own background and development.

This means, of course, that we must know our students—their home backgrounds, personal problems, anxieties, and fears. So this becomes part of the larger principle of understanding children—individual children. It comes home to the superintendent and supervisor, as well, in terms of their responsibility in helping teachers secure the time and opportunity for this study.

### Planning Is the Rule

Problems or topics for study are selected and organized through pupil-teacher planning rather than accepted by students because "teacher says so." Pupil-teacher planning, of course, involves good teacher pre-planning and teacher guidance and leadership. In a pupil-teacher planned experience, the work goes forward with interest and enthusiasm. There is more emphasis on learning about the problem and less futile arguing of the "it is—it isn't" variety.

On the other hand, the teacher who arbitrarily decides on problems to be studied and who dominates the group throughout the study of the problem often irritates students. This irritation may lead a student to criticize the teacher as a "communist" or a "fascist." What he really means is that the teacher is a classroom dictator! It is a democratic responsibility of the teacher to practice good, democratic human relationships in the classroom.

### All Views Have a Place

A good teacher regards himself as a democratic group leader whose views should be evaluated along with those found in newspapers, books, and other media. He is not as an oracle who must have "all the answers." This principle provides a means of dealing with the old question, "May the teacher express his own views on a controversial topic?"

The ideal situation, of course, is approached when the students and teacher use a wide variety of sources—newspapers, radio broadcasts, motion pictures, magazine articles, books, and community resource people—and learn how to evaluate the ideas offered from

all. If the teacher then expresses a viewpoint on a controversial topic, students should use it as they would material from other sources. The teacher is obligated continuously to remind the students of their responsibility to evaluate his views; otherwise even the most alert students may fall back into the pattern of accepting something because "the teacher knows more than the students."

Some will point out that the teacher should know more about his subject than the students. This is undoubtedly true, but so should the authors of newspaper and magazine articles and other "authorities" consulted in the study of a problem. This does not do away with the need for evaluation. We must remember that evaluation and reflective thinking need not degenerate into the smart-aleck, carping negation which sometimes, but not always, characterized the propaganda analysis study of the 1930's.

According to this analysis, *teachers* can best exercise their obligation of "academic freedom" by: (1) respecting the personalities of their students; (2) knowing as much as possible about the personal and emotional problems of individual students; (3) by practicing pupil-teacher planning; (4) by emphasizing reflective evaluation of all viewpoints, including their own, and avoiding the oracle role. *How can administrators and supervisors help?*

### Atmosphere Is Contagious

First, the good administrator shows that he respects the personalities of the teachers with whom he works. He welcomes discussion and honest disagreement. This atmosphere is con-

tagious. Teachers who work in that pattern can learn by example how to respect honest disagreement from students.

The study of children's problems and needs is also encouraged. Study and discussion groups such as those presented in The Commission on Teacher Education report, *Helping Teachers Understand Children*, are made possible. Improving methods of gathering more significant information about children and means of keeping adequate records are the concern of all. More time is made available in the school day for teachers to study their students as individuals.

In regard to pupil-teacher planning, the administrators and supervisors "live" a flexible policy of curriculum development. In such a school, bulletins are guides, not prescriptions. Emphasis is placed on the making of resource units and other aids to good pre-planning. And leaders furnish a good example by using cooperative planning with the teachers and students in developing school policies.

#### **Materials Are Abundant**

On the fourth point, that of developing reflective evaluation of many viewpoints, those with special leadership responsibilities help teachers secure a wide variety of materials. This does not preclude the use of a textbook or basic reference. Nor is the matter dealt with entirely by providing three or four different sets of textbooks. The only adequate policy is to help the teacher secure many kinds of materials—audio-

visual aids, newspapers, magazines, as well as textbooks and other books. This means ample budgetary provision for materials. Of course, the good teacher and his students go out on their own and add much to the materials provided by the school. And, if all materials are used reflectively, there is no reason why schools cannot accept the free materials produced and distributed by interest groups.

#### **Spotlight on Cooperative Planning**

These are important responsibilities of the administrative and supervisory staff. But there is one more. The administrator takes his part in building the policies of the school on the basis of group discussion and study in the community, involving *both the professional group and the lay public*. Basic questions and issues must be aired openly with all who are concerned. Administrative policy based solely on "selling" a program or on keeping "things under control" provides a setting in which tensions about teachers' loyalties and opinions may easily develop. But a community where the people feel at home talking things over with *teachers and administrators* is one where good teaching can flourish. Questions may be raised from time to time, but they will be discussed and studied on a basis of working things out. It is within this setting of community participation that "academic freedom" becomes not a personal privilege of the teacher, but a means of more fully achieving the ideals of our democratic faith.

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