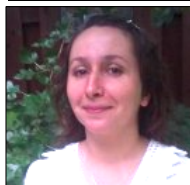




Exploration of students' thoughts about their right to freedom of education: "Terrified to love this way of learning, its idea of being free"



Olga Shugurova
University of Manitoba, Canada

Abstract

In this reflective paper, I respond to Dr. Matusov's (2020) eloquent philosophical exploration of "students' right to freedom of education. In doing so, I pursue a narrative inquiry (Bruner, 1987; Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2010; Clandinin, 2013; Hong, Falter, & Fecho, 2017) to explore my students' self-generated meanings of their educational freedom in our teacher education classroom. I wonder whether freedom of education can be presented as a transcendental concept of self-examination and taught as the student's right for it without a critical deconstruction of the tenuous and fictitious materiality of freedom. Also, I wonder what my students think when they are provoked to claim their right to freedom of education. This reflection reveals that students' right of freedom is not necessarily about their own self-examination, freedom is a creative force of self-expression. More specifically, freedom is the self-conscious act of discovery of itself (i.e., freedom) in everything my students do as a part of their classroom learning and education. All in all, freedom does not have any meaning at all since meaning emerges in the act of freedom itself, or rather in the creative act of being free.

Keywords: right to freedom of education; tenuous materiality of freedom; free learning; freedom; reflective teaching; reflective; dialogic pedagogy

Olga Shugurova graduated with a Ph.D. from the Schulich School of Education at Nipissing University in 2017. Her arts-based research focus was on a cultural and historical context of learning without schooling. Since 2015, Olga has been teaching as a sessional and distance course instructor in the Faculty of Arts and Education at the University of Manitoba. During this time, she has developed a keen interest in dialogic pedagogy in teacher education and interdisciplinary learning environments. Her current research focus is on innovative, creative dialogic pedagogy of freedom and education as art.



In this reflective paper, I respond to Dr. Matusov's (2020) eloquent philosophical exploration of "students' right to freedom of education." My original response was my full and unconditional agreement with his idea of freedom as "a critical self-examination approach [in which] the student is the ultimate author of the critical examination of their life, self, world, culture, and society, including their own education" (p. SF5), and I enthusiastically sought to respond with an energetic and optimistic paper on the importance of freedom of learning as the precondition for innovation and creative development (in process).

However, my writing process became too abstracted and disengaged from my own teaching experience; I felt I was betraying myself in constructing an idealized and utopian image of freedom. I

wondered whether freedom of education can be presented as a transcendental concept of self-examination and taught as the student's right for it without a critical deconstruction of the *tentious*¹ and *fictitious materiality of freedom*.

Hence, I decided to pursue a narrative inquiry (Bruner, 1987; Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, and Orr, 2010; Clandinin, 2013; Hong, Falter, & Fecho, 2017) to explore my students' self-generated meanings of their educational freedom in our teacher education classroom. In doing so, I wonder what my students think when they are provoked to claim their right to freedom of education. This reflection reveals that students' right of freedom is not necessarily about their own self-examination; freedom is a creative *force* of self-expression. More specifically, freedom is the self-conscious act of discovery of itself (i.e., freedom) in *everything* my students do as a part of their classroom learning and education. Thus, freedom cannot be taught in teacher education, because it becomes an externally enforced and imposed oxymoron that may cause students to suffer and struggle in search of personal meanings. All in all, freedom does not have any meaning at all since meaning emerges in the act of freedom itself, or rather in the creative act of *being* free.

My Stance

I agree with Matusov (in press) that "students must have the exclusive right to freely define their own education" (p. SF2). However, I suggest that all students should be able to *claim/define* this right at the beginning of each course and to dialogically *exercise* it throughout their learning. More specifically, I explore a tension-based narrative of students' thoughts about their freedom that was inspired by the concept of the Open and Opening Syllabus (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2017). I do not explore the specifics of my syllabus design and its provocations for freedom due to the length limitations of this particular paper. I purposefully focus and search for diverse tensions that emerge from students' claims of freedom in our course. Without these tensions, without these claims, the concept of freedom has no ontological meaning in their learning.

Yes, students' right for freedom in education should be recognized and sustained by their teachers, professors, and institutions at all times. Yet, freedom is always a creative act of being, not necessarily an act of self-examination, that produces a multiplicity of tensions and struggles for meaning.

Furthermore, I argue that freedom should be an educational culture of all schooling institutions. By the term "educational culture," I mean a social, lived culture of students' ordinary experience and everyday learning in the classroom (Williams, 1989). It is also important to note freedom is an inseparable part of democracy. For example, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms states that the second fundamental freedom is the "freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication" (Constitution Act, 1982, 2b). This means that all Canadian students do have the constitutional right to pursue their education as the venue for these fundamental freedoms. However, all of my students, teacher candidates and 1st-2nd year undergraduates, tell me that they never had any academic freedom in their schooling nor in their post-secondary learning; their teachers decided for them what they should study, when, how, and in what context. My students share with me that the legal, constitutional fundamental freedom has never been a part of their social culture of education.

Even though many students think that some professors discuss the concept of academic freedom, students are never able to claim (i.e., activate) this right for themselves, to define it, and to experience what

¹ While I was writing this narrative, I invented the word "tentious," but I didn't notice my invention. Dr. Ana Marjanovic-Shane eloquently asked me about this word and its nonexistence in different dictionaries; she wondered if I wanted to coin it here. It is my privilege and honor to coin the word "tentious" that emerged as my response to Dr. Matusov's philosophical paper and my reflection on my pedagogic experience and Dr. Marjanovic-Shane's attentive awareness of its novelty and innovation.

it really means in their own lives. Often, the concept of academic freedom emerges when students want to discuss controversial, divergent, or contested topics that go against the cultural status quo. McCoubrey and Sitch (2002) also found that for Canadian students “freedom of expression issues arises in the school whenever a student expresses a view that is contrary to the educational goals of the school” (para. 3). Therefore, many students believe that to have academic freedom necessarily entails to have opposing views that “make you look like a trouble-maker” or someone who is not “one of our own” (personal communication with my students, 2018). Consequently, freedom of education has many negative meanings that imply conflict (Parker & Bickmore, 2012). Barrett et al. (2009) confirmed that the Canadian structure of teacher education discourages future teachers from “taking a critical democratic stance in their teaching” (p. 677). This means that preservice teachers are systematically taught not to question their status as obedient students and not to claim their fundamental freedoms of education (Ricci, 2005).

Also, my students teach me that freedom of learning is tenuous, and tensions are to be avoided, if they want to graduate without any problems. Thus, the concepts of freedom and tension go hand in hand which means that both are problematic and should be brushed off. Likewise, Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, and Orr (2010) found that tensions “have a negative valence, that is, tensions are something to be avoided or smoothed over” (p. 82). As a result of this folk belief and common resistance to tensions in education, students are reluctant to claim their fundamental rights to freedom of education because “having voice” or “having many voices” may result in having no place in a small town society and no job in the public school system (personal communication, 2018). Therefore, the concept of freedom in education is usually utilized only as a discursive tool to render tensions invisible and to silence original ideas, thoughts, and creative expressions.

In this light, my argument becomes a call for all teachers and educational institutions not to enframe freedom of education in a predetermined theoretical framework of controversy and compulsory tension-free monological teaching environment, but to develop their courses within the dialogic tension-based pedagogical context *for freedom* as the fundamental right of education, so that all students can define their own freedom, claim it, and practice it in the classroom, as well as reflect on this self-created concept of *freedom* as their education, as *their* learning experience. Without this critical ontology of tenuous education, the concept and discourse of freedom is an oxymoron in teacher education.

Narrative Inquiry

In my reflective inquiry, I compose a narrative of tensions that reveal students' thoughts and learning experiences. In doing so, I have purposefully sought to contextualize different pedagogical tensions through which students could negotiate, claim, and exercise their right for freedom of education. What I mean by pedagogical tensions are the key teachable moments in which the whole class transforms itself from a passive, silent audience into a “multiplicity and dissonance of ideas, opinions, and voices [that become] indicative of Bakhtinian dialogic research” (Hong, Falter, & Fecho, 2017, p. 26). These tensions are relational (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2010; Estefan, Caine, & Clandinin, 2016), they also provoke students to experience the freedom of expression and to construct their self-consciousness of freedom in education. As Bakhtin (1984) eloquently wrote,

The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined toward another consciousness (toward a thou)... Not that which takes place within, but that which takes place on the boundary between one's own and someone else's consciousness, on the threshold. And everything, internal gravitates not toward itself but is turned to the outside and dialogized, every internal experience, encounters another, and in this tension-filled encounter lies its entire essence (p. 287).

Hence, tensions provoke students to form a self-aware and self-conscious approach to their learning. Bakhtin values tensions and “encourages us to see tension in all we do, and to embrace it” (Hong, Falter, & Fecho, 2017, p. 22). It is through these tensions that students begin to relate to one another, to their teacher, and to the course itself. In fact, Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, and Orr (2010) state that tensions “can only emerge from relationships” (p. 83). If there are tensions, then there are dynamic, active, and meaningful relationships that are evolving in the classroom. Without tensions, there are no relationships; there are no dialogues; there is no meaningful and conscious learning. According to Estefan, Caine, and Clandinin (2016), “Tension can be a generative space” (p. 25). Moreover, tensions make stories more visible and more intense, so that they can be entered, experienced, lived, and retold/transformed (Clandinin, 2013). This means that students can become more attentive to and aware of their individual and collective learning experiences, so that they can generate their self-conscious sense of freedom in my particular class as well as to articulate their self-authored right to freedom of education in general academia.

Yet, tensions are not ready-made findings; they are constructed through narratives that shape the classroom experiences (Bruner, 1987). For me, writing is a way of knowing and learning, constructing and deconstructing experience (Richardson, 2000). In my construction, I am aware of voices that I render, represent, and reflect on. Learning from Bakhtin (1984) I pay attention to “who is speaking, when, how, to whom, through how many intermediaries—and how these levels of authority are represented” (p. xxxvi). More specifically, my narrative inquiry of tensions has a holistic focus on key moments that emerged from our classroom discourse around the course syllabus co-authorship and its power dynamic. Thus, I do not aim to reduce any themes or codes for interpretation because “in a tensional approach, reduction is not necessary” (Hong, Falter, & Fecho, 2017, p. 28). Instead, I search for these moments of students' claims for their right to freedom and I recall our collective storied dialogues that unfolded during and through these moments. I do not use any instrumental procedures, rather I let these stories come alive on paper and take me along their meanings, discoveries, and imagination (Clandinin, 2013).

In doing so, I engage my teaching journal, course syllabus, anonymized students' feedback, and official anonymous students' surveys that are administered by the faculty leadership team and mailed to me at the end of each course. I represent the collective students' narrative below; each paragraph includes my students' voices in their own words. Some paragraphs embody one voice, while others combine 2-5 collective voices. I group them together because these students repeated what others have already said. Specifically, I gathered these voices from the anonymous, solicited students' surveys that are conducted at the end of my courses; I also included some of the written students' anonymized self-authored, self-assessments in their own words that they submitted as a part of our course evaluation. The collective multiple-voiced narrative is based on my interdisciplinary courses in undergraduate education. The limitation of this data collection method is that I do not know exactly the demographic since many of these responses are anonymous.

My teaching journal is a sketchbook of my reflections that I write before lessons and after lessons; also, I take my journal with me into the classroom and record spontaneous aha moments, utterances, conversations, and observations. These data sources are all stories that were told, retold, spoken, written, expressed, and imagined through oral dialogues, utterances, typed, and handwritten manuscripts. In fact, there is no single author of these storied data, as these were co-authored, co-constructed during the teaching and learning process. As Wells (2011) wrote, “Undoubtedly, a story, its construction and performance, and the circumstances under which it is told are reflexively inter-related” (p. 23). Reflexivity in this context is focused on my self-examination of how I let my students claim their rights for freedom and how I listen to their stories of learning. Hence, I agree with McGraw, Zvonkovic, and Walker (2000) who define reflexivity as “a process whereby researchers place themselves and their practices under scrutiny”

(p. 68). Thus, I focus on the key moments of my students' co-authorship of the course and its dialogic moments of tension with a focus on their own words and expressions.

Claiming Freedom

Dostoevsky, like Goethe's Prometheus, creates not voiceless slaves (as does Zeus), but free people, capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 6)

In my courses, I provoke students to claim their right for freedom of education, to define it, and to actively practice it from the very first day of class. In doing so, I define education with the help of Matusov and Marjanovic-Shane (2017) as “a part of the self, life, society, and the world” and freedom as “decision making about education itself” (p. E3). This means that I invite all students to become creative decision makers and develop the course syllabus together, including their assignments, topics of interest, readings, and self-assessment at the end. My inspirational provocation for them to imagine themselves as explorers and visitors of a new country, and on this journey they should “find their own places of their interests” (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2017, p. E4). Then, I project an expressionist painting by different, creatively provocative artists such as experimental Paul Klee or feminist artist Miriam Schapiro, and ask students to think about this course meanings through a lens of this painting or through any of their chosen artistic or creative lenses. It is important to note that I purposefully choose expressionist artists because their philosophy of art is ultimately about the freedom of self-expression and creative dialogue with the self, the unknown audience, and the world.

For example, Klee's sense of freedom is in his act of creative improvisation that allows him to turn experiences that *burden his soul* into a composition. In his diaries, Klee wrote that “working in this way, my real personality will express itself, will be able to emancipate itself into the greatest freedom” (1964, p. 232). Likewise, I ask my students to improvise and to think about something they really want to learn, something that burdens their soul, something that lets their real personalities, real life become a part of education. Thus, I encourage students to attend to their personal tensions and to reflect on their educational meanings. Improvisation becomes an act of meaning creations and storytelling that students want to share and to learn more about. Improvisation is not about any standards or presupposed templates, it invites students “to develop highly idiomatic personal and group styles” (Kannellopoulos, 2011, p. 178). Hence, improvisation is the claim for freedom; it empowers students to become free from scripted lessons and dogmatic thinking (Bakhtin, 1965; Stensaeth, 2015).

Similarly, Schapiro creates not only her paintings through improvisational self-expression, but also her community education as a collective self-expression through dialogue and art. For example, Schapiro (1972) describes her pedagogy (i.e., teaching method and art creation) with Judith Chicago as a circular dialogue that provides

a nourishing environment for growth... Classes begin by sitting in a circle; a topic for discussion is selected. We move around the room, each person assuming responsibility for addressing herself to the topic on her highest level of self-perception. . . the personal becomes the political. Privately held feelings imagined to be personal held 'hang-ups' turn out to be everyone's feelings, and it becomes possible to act together in their solution. (p. 268)

Schapiro's pedagogical and artistic vision creates a stage for students' questions about the course, its meanings, and possibilities of their personal freedom within it. Furthermore, students become excited

with the notion of soul searching and personal “hang-ups.” For many of them, it is their first encounter with their own freedom in education. Yet, I advise them not to take freedom for granted, but to claim their right for freedom of education throughout the course; it does not naturally occur, we need to *become* free people through education (Schapiro, 1972), we should not perish as voiceless slaves.

Collective Students' Narrative of Tensions with Freedom

*Thousands of voices are slipping through the veil,
These voices sound like the crackling of a fire*

- “My learning journey in this course started a little rocky but progressed to a very enlightened form. I was allowed to do whatever I wanted so that I could experience freedom in its most creative way. I felt welcomed to the course content and influential in the choices made towards my learning throughout our time together. I was terrified at first; I was scared, I was shy; I was terrified to love this course and its idea of being free.”
- “In my past, I have not been used to having an actual voice when it comes to discussing how things are taught or what you want to learn. The course was so different from all my other classes as I was given the power to make my learning meaningful and rewarding. In fact, I was always taught never to use “I” in my learning; I never imagined to have a say in any of the course outlines. Yes, I like the whole idea that our class is in control of our syllabus. However, I was confused at first and did not know what to do with this freedom, power and responsibility. No one was really certain what was expected. Actually, I will admit that I was apprehensive and in a sense rejected this course due to how open it was. I felt a little thrown off at the structure of the class, which was a lot more open and allowed the students to participate and discuss every part of the class as an equal. I just could not handle it; I wanted to give up.”
- “Honestly, I was not prepared for a course that did not provide concrete answers that I needed to memorise and regurgitate. I was in a sense nervous and frustrated due to how unfamiliar the structure of this course was. For the most part this frustration steamed from the fact that I wasn't sure what exactly I needed to do to receive a good grade then continue on with my degree.”
- “Once I realized that I was free to approach the course in the manner that we wished, I felt much more at peace. After several classes I began to understand the meaning of democracy in a classroom. We, the students, could change the way this course worked to benefit our learning. In my mind, being a student in a class meant being told what to do and how to do it, and then doing it exactly how the teacher wanted you to. But what I have now found is that Olga's goal was to help us think for ourselves, determine what was important to us, and to give us a say in this community.”
- “The main thing that stands out to me from this course this semester is the fact that it has been so different from every other course I have ever been a part of. This was the first time that a professor asked and gave the students power to decide and take ownership of the course and its outline. This was very liberating for a student that spent a majority of their life in school without any input to what and how they were being taught. No one was really certain what was expected of them. At first it seemed daunting but upon doing the assignments and discovering the freedom in which we could complete these tasks, I am sure I am not alone in saying that I realized how wonderful it is to

be able to have liberties in the topics you learn on and the way in which you present them. So, I was able to resurrect and bring out my creative side when trying to complete assignments again. This was something that I have always loved doing, especially in my younger years. But as I grew older and because of the reactions I would get from teachers in my past, I slowly let it fade away. It feels really good to slowly bring that side out of me and reconnect with it. I know that as I continue to discover it again more and more, it will allow me to be more myself, which will greatly impact my teaching and my students. Now I know that freedom is creativity; it is in our own hands that transform our classroom space into an unexpected, unknown masterpiece that was hidden in the shadow of our being all along.”

- “I really enjoyed the course because it opened my mind to new ideas about freedom. Even though now I am a little more confused and unsure as to who I am as a teacher, it is not for bad reasons. It is actually a good thing because it will help me truly discover and meet the real teacher inside of me.”

Reflections as Conclusion

This collective narrative reveals that freedom is always an act of being that does not require any specific definition. Students learn what freedom means to them and how to claim it through their learning. These experiential tensions for meaning tell a deeper story about a creative awakening of their intrinsic interests, passions, fears, meanings, and their new sense of teacher-self. Without these tensions of being *thrown off* the dominant structure, being confused, being different, being democratic, and being creative, students cannot define, claim, and practice their right for freedom. However, I have to admit that these tensions are important, albeit difficult to cope with, when I try to co-author the course with all my students in a moment. The difficulty lies in some instances of students' perception of me as an outsider who wants to overthrow their way of life with my own, immigrant culture of teaching. On the first day of class, for example, one student specifically told me that “we don't do it this way here. It is all willy-nilly.” Immediately, I felt humiliated by the students' definition of my pedagogy for freedom as willy-nilly and of me as an immigrant minority. Hence, the tensions of freedom require teachers' patience to dialogize these spontaneous, impulsive reactions from some students who tend to resist the teacher as a person.

Also, these tensions grow over time, and they have to be dialogically explored through open and transparent class discussions, collective online blogs, and students' reflective journals. Not all students are willing to express their genuine feelings and thoughts on the first day of class; they want to build trust in our learning community before they can share these tensions. Yet, these tensions are inevitable and may become frustrations without dialogues about them. For example, one student specifically shared with me at the end of the course that she wanted to drop out because she was too shy to have an open discussion about her tensions of “being off” the cultural status quo, in an unfamiliar, alien space. At that time, she did not want to be free and controversial; her previously learned idea of freedom meant anarchy, sin, and disobedience. However, she shared with me, “It was upon having the chance to speak to you one on one that I was better able to understand the goal of this course. Based on these interactions, my understanding of this course changed. This course also created a place of open dialog between my peers and I, where we could share our ideas and better develop our thoughts and beliefs.” Freedom is not self-evident, and many students do not want to examine themselves, and when they do examine themselves, they feel inner tensions. These tensions are the inevitable pillars of students' right to freedom of education. Hence, students should not only be able to claim their right to freedom but also claim their right to experience and openly discuss their emergent tensions of freedom without any penalties in a negative form of grade/assessment, job placements, or in a form of religious judgements about their newly discovered sinful nature of freedom.

Freedom always entails tensions and change; students experience this change in a way they think about learning, teaching, and course design. Their thoughts change from the need for certainty and rigid structure of graduation to a constant discovery of freedom and their right for freedom in *everything they do*, everything they encounter in their education. In fact, this discovery of freedom becomes their education without any restriction from the authority figures and from the externally imposed curriculum. Freedom becomes a way of knowing the truth, freedom is the truth of self-realization.

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