Freedom of speech or as it is commonly referred to in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982), freedom of expression and opinion is a commonly accepted right in this country. Upon further scrutiny, one may quickly come to the conclusion that it does indeed exist from a legal perspective. However, as far as it existing from a practical or pragmatic perspective, that’s fodder for considerable debate.

Our society is made up of multiple organizations whether it be the companies/businesses/institutions we work for or entities that we are involved in from a volunteer or religious perspective. In my previous life I worked as a teacher and principal in the K-12 school system; my current situation finds me working as an associate professor of Educational Administration in a Faculty of Education where I teach teachers both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. I’ve had copious experience involving freedom of speech and this commentary stems from that experience which has been primarily of a frustrating nature.

An example which brought this freedom of speech situation home to me is detailed by one of my colleagues, John Hoben, in the following excerpt from his 2015 book titled *Learning What You Cannot Say: Teaching Free Speech and Political Literacy in an Authoritarian Age:*

In January, 2006 Mario Simon and James Dinn, two teachers from the Avalon East School District in Newfoundland, were suspended one week without pay for remarks

made at a teacher association workshop on teacher stress related to the absence of resources for classroom teaching and substandard professional development. Ironically, one of the members had criticized the Board for ignoring teacher concerns and for creating a climate where “teachers feel they cannot speak out on matters affecting them and fear addressing those issues with the Board”. The teachers’ public remarks were deemed by the Director of the District to be “insubordinate” and “derogatory”. Only after intense public pressure and the threat of protests were the suspensions lifted. (p. 5)

These “remarks” are ones that are spoken almost every day in staffrooms across this nation, albeit probably in the absence of any school/district administrators! What is particularly galling about situations like the one articulated above is that teachers are making these comments with an absence of malice and more so from an ameliorating perspective which is to try and improve education for our most valued clients, our students in those classrooms.

The academic literature on decision making and organizational theory suggests that when subordinates have difficulties with decisions taken by their superiors, they should voice those concerns in a professional and mature manner to those superiors. This is fine in theory but

does not always bring the desired result in practice. I recall having read some years ago that the

problem with this thinking is that very often, superiors when faced with legitimate criticisms from subordinates, do not always have the intellectual capacity/maturity and wherewithal to process those concerns in a reasonable and professional manner! I wish I had written down the source of that comment.

So what does all of this mean for teachers in our school systems? I’m particularly concerned for the new teachers we are sending out into those classrooms. The best case scenario is that they will be teaching several years in replacement contracts before they receive tenure-track positions which usually involve a 2 year probationary period. These individuals feel highly vulnerable and are petrified of upsetting any of their colleagues especially assistant principals and principals who are charged with conducting classroom evaluations on them. What might be my sage advice to those new teachers? Very simply put, I would tell them to be extra vigilant of any commentary they make in school staffrooms, in outside-school social situations and of course on the ubiquitous social media (i. e., Facebook, Twitter et al.). You might say we are teaching these new teachers to be passive and to conform to the status quo which is not great. True to some degree. However, what is the alternative? We can teach them to be “revolutionaries”, to take up the cause and to try and rally the troupes against what Paulo Freire (1970) would refer to as oppression. Meanwhile, life continues and great teachers are left behind. My thinking is that these new teachers need to be active in their teacher associations and they need to try and effect change in a methodical, incremental way. Slow and steady might just win the race.

And lastly, may I comment on this issue of free speech in the Canadian academy. If you think there is a preponderance of paranoia in the Canadian K-12 school system, multiply that paranoia by one zillion times to get an accurate reading of that same paranoia in universities across Canada. Here at the university level the stakes for newly hired professors is as equally high and as equally stressful as it is for newly minted teachers out there in the school system. In fact, there are times when I think it is higher at the university level but then I guess that depends on where one is currently working. Consider the fact that it usually takes new untenured professors 6 years not 2 years to become tenured or permanent in those positions. In most universities evaluation by a group of one’s peers usually referred to as the Promotion and Tenure Committee (usually comprised of 5 professors) takes place after a professor’s first year and continues every year until year 6. Much more specific, the evaluation consists of those 5 professors reviewing and evaluating untenured candidate’s work in 3 areas: teaching, research and academic service. I should add that there is a high degree of subjectivity in this process at the university level as it is in the school system. Keep in mind that in the academy the candidate has to deal with 5 professors, a dean or the head of the academic unit and the senior administration (usually the academic vice president and the president). It would seem that “pleasing” a minimum of 7 individuals would be more challenging and indeed more stressful that “pleasing” 2-3 individuals in the school system.

How does this “system” affect professors’ freedom of speech? I would contend the same, perhaps even to a greater degree, as what teachers experience. Professors have much greater autonomy than teachers, they have much greater flexibility re their teaching schedules, much more time to pontificate over matters academic and otherwise with the resultant amount of significant commentary on all matters that are good and all matters that are bad in the academy!

The bottom line here in the academy is that critical debate and discussion is muted, learning is impeded and improvements are delayed and sometimes prevented.

My musings on what I consider to be a very subject affecting us all. I welcome your thoughts at jdelaney@mun.ca.

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