Chapter 2
Criticality and Higher Education

Abstract In this chapter, we are interested in how a critical-social educational theory can most appropriately advance human existence. To this end, we draw on Seyla Benhabib’s (Critique, norm and utopia: a study of the foundations of critical theory. Columbia University Press, New York, 1986) re-articulation of Jürgen Habermas’s notion of critique to ascertain how the practice of academic activism ought to be amended. According to Benhabib (Critique, norm and utopia: a study of the foundations of critical theory. Columbia University Press, New York, 1986: 279), Habermas’s theory of communicative action is a justifiable form of critique as it re-establishes the relation between self-reflection and autonomy and it explains autonomy in communicative terms, that is, autonomy is not synonymous with self-legislation or self-actualisation or mimesis, but rather ‘the cognitive competence to adopt to a universalist standpoint and the interactive competence to act on such a basis’ (Benhabib, Critique, norm and utopia: a study of the foundations of critical theory. Columbia University Press, New York, 1986: 282). In relation to the notions of self-reflective autonomy and communicative autonomy, we examine what a philosophy of higher education looks like and what the implications of such a form of critique hold for academic activism.

Keywords Critique · Self-reflection · Communicative autonomy

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we conceived of academic activism as forms of reasoned human agency, actions or encounters – intent upon shaping and producing better humans and humane engagement and focused upon social justice. It seems apt to follow this conception with how a theory of critique – more specifically critical-social educational theory – can most appropriately advance human existence. To us, the matter of critique is a crucial one, especially so when it is seemingly omitted from the cultures and discourses of (South African) universities. While much attention has been given to the necessity of deliberative engagement and the cultivation
of decolonised pedagogical knowledge spaces, very little, if any, such concern has centred on critique, bringing into question notions of a thinking university.

Remaining with the interpretivist paradigm, established in Chap. 1, in this chapter, we turn to Seyla Benhabib’s theory of critique. Standing in the traditions of Kant and Habermas, Benhabib (1986) articulates an understanding of critique that makes a necessary connection between rationality and autonomy. That is, any form of analysis of the social world is an act of philosophy (of higher education) and that such an analysis is dependent upon ‘its commitment to the dignity and autonomy of the rational subject’ (Benhabib, 1986: 15). According to Benhabib (1986: 279), Habermas’s theory of communicative action is a justifiable form of critique as it re-establishes the relation between self-reflection and autonomy. It also explains autonomy in communicative terms – that is, autonomy is not synonymous with self-legislation or self-actualisation or mimesis, but rather ‘the cognitive competence to adopt to a universalist standpoint and the interactive competence to act on such a basis’ (Benhabib, 1986: 282). In relation to the notions of self-reflective autonomy and communicative autonomy, we examine what a philosophy of higher education looks like and what the implications of such a form of critique hold for academic activism.

Critique

Benhabib (1986) articulates an understanding of critique that stands in the traditions of Kant and Habermas: firstly, by making a necessary connection between rationality and autonomy in the sense that any form of analysis of the social world is an act of philosophy (of higher education) and secondly, that such an analysis is dependent upon ‘its commitment to the dignity and autonomy of the rational subject’ (Benhabib, 1986: 15). The mode in which social life appears, contends Benhabib (1986: 4), ‘is an indication of the extent to which individuals are alienated from their social praxis’. Certain groups of students at South African universities, for example, might have gained external access to institutions from which they have been historically excluded, but the manner (or mode) in which they experience these institutions might place them at a distance, rather than evoking a sense of belonging. Their direct experiences of their encounters with the space and discourse of the institution serve only to remind them that their physical presence is not an indicator of internal inclusion and recognition. That they continue to stand on the peripheries of their university experience – whether in lecture theatres or the social spaces of student residences – confirms that their historically reduced identities have yet to find resonance and a place of belonging within their educational spaces.

When they protest against this displacement and alienation – as a manifestation of critique – their actions, following Benhabib (1986: 4), do not ‘merely disclose the dependence of thought upon social being, of consciousness upon material praxis’. Rather, their actions also criticise ‘this dependence from the standpoint of the struggle for the future’. The students recognise that their silence will serve not only as the
further entrenchment of their exclusion but will legitimise these practices as a permissible norm. Too often, students and academics alike resort to a language of ‘this is how things have always been’ as a justification for questionable behaviour.

Consider, for example, the widespread practices of initiation, often defined and accepted as the bedrock of universities residences. In 2001, the Minister of Education requested an inquiry into cultural initiations, following a number of deaths at schools and university. One of these cases involved that of a second-year student, who had been forced to participate in an initiation ritual at the university where we are based. After having his hair shaven off, being stripped naked and having his body painted, the student was dropped off outside of town and forced to walk back to the university hostel. While walking back, he was hit and killed by a car (SAHRC, 2001). The inquiry by the South African Human Rights Commission (2001: 16) found that although university administrators argued in support of the maintenance of initiation practices, ‘as part of the tradition and culture of the university’, such views were not articulated by student groupings and some staff members who spoke to the SAHRC outside of the meetings with the administration (SAHRC, 2001: 16). These student groupings and staff members favoured the abolishment of initiation practices. They described these processes as ‘human rights abuses and in conflict with a democratic culture, and as having more negative aspects to them than positive’ (SAHRC, 2001: 16).

At another South African university, an initiation ritual involved female and male students from residences devising a song and ‘serenading’ each other. While the initial intention was to enable students to get to each other, ‘song lyrics became increasingly suggestive, and sexy dance moves crept in, along with questionable dress requirements’ (De Klerk, 2013: 91). In a letter to the Dean of Students and the Vice-Chancellor, a student described ‘serenading’ as follows:

[L]ong compulsory evening practices demanding increasing levels of frenzy and excitement from performers; being sent out in pyjamas to watch boys dressed in T-shirts and boxers sing to them, accompanied by ‘pelvis rolling and crass lyrics’; being instructed to serenade a men’s res in return (‘we roll our butts like strippers, the boys cheer. We push our breasts out, shake our hips, and gyrate our pelvis. All in accordance with the routine we have been taught. And the boys yell, ‘Yeah!’ as their eyes pop’). … an ‘icebreaker’ session involving women’s room keys being anonymously handed to the boys…. (De Klerk, 2013: 91)

What initiation rituals serve to do is to clarify and establish the ‘rules’ of a particular residence or university; it serves to dictate the conditions for student acceptance, inclusion and belonging. What it entrenches is a divide between those students who participate, and are, therefore, included, and those who refuse, thereby confirming their ‘outsider’ status. Not only is it a highly exclusionary practice, but it sets into motion certain norms regarding how students are to be treated going into the future. When students, parents as well as academics and administrators protest against initiation practices, which, in many instances, are long-standing and considered as part of the traditions of the university, the resistance is not only against a present-day dilemma but against what the implications are for future generations of students, higher education as well as social and societal norms.
Firstly, to Benhabib (1986), critique aims to grasp the present as a contradictory totality in which different normative ideals lend ideological justification to a social objectivity that oppresses human beings and frustrates their human potential; the goal of critique is to further the autonomy of the subject. The autonomy of the subject cannot be furthered or extended without ‘the philosophical task of clarifying and reconstructing the norms to which criticism appeals’ (Benhabib, Butler, Cornell & Fraser, 1995: 64). As such, for social critique to be valid, and for relativism to be avoided, critique must appeal to some normative criteria that exist outside the critic’s own context. Critique, therefore, allows for the individuals to enact their autonomy and agency by bringing into question certain norms, certain taken-for-granted practices – such as institutional traditions or modes of engagement, as encountered in initiation rituals, for example. This is not necessarily an antagonistic process, as the purpose of bringing into question can sometimes be limited to simply making the other aware of a presumed practice, which has not been subjected to scrutiny before.

The student who wrote to the Dean of Students and the Vice-Chancellor to raise her concerns about ‘serenading’ did not enter into any disagreement or conflict with other students or the university administration. Instead, her point ‘was made forcefully’ by making the institution aware that ‘by turning a blind eye to sexist behavior which is heterosexually normative, the institution could be accused of condoning, if not encouragement, of such behavior’ (De Klerk, 2013: 92). As Marriott (2018) clarifies, ‘[c]ritique legislates the judicious use of reason by separating it from any metaphysical or dogmatic origin, so that any risk of being carried away by the fictitious or merely pleasing is curtailed by the rule of philosophical judgement’. It is only when philosophy becomes critique, he continues, that it is then able properly to articulate reason and what is essential to it. In this sense, critique is constituted as a defence against or a victory won over that of unreason: a victory that, conversely, shows critique to be always shadowed or at risk from the various lapses that would founder it.

For example, public schools in South Africa are given leeway in terms of defining their admission criteria for learners. Despite constitutional guidelines prohibiting any form or grounds for exclusion, a number of historically advantaged schools continue to employ criteria, which include granting preference to learners, who have historical ties with the respective school. In other words, applicants are explicitly asked as to whether previous generations of their family had attended the school. On the face of it, this seems like a rather mundane question, but in the context of South Africa’s segregated schooling history, this question has direct implications for learners, whose parents and grandparents would have been disallowed from attending these schools. When one critiques what the school might couch as one of its traditions, it is often startling to realise how the schools do not necessarily see this criterion as a potential means of exclusion. Instead, there is a vociferous defence of long-held traditions and customs, even when these are blatantly discriminatory and socially unjust. Attempts to question and reframe schools as cohesive and inclusive spaces are interpreted as disruptive actions or as ‘take-over’ measures to nullify historical codes and ways of being.
Similar expressions of critique can be levelled at initiation practices of certain universities, which are consciously tied to the preservation of traditions, which might hold unintended consequences of alienation or estrangement among students, who enter these spaces from different historical and social backgrounds. Only once the practice is explained from the perspective of those who do not have generational ties does the school or the university possibly begin to see the harmful effects. Of course, being made aware of something does not necessarily result in that practice being reconsidered or ceased, but what critique facilitates and brings to the fore is not only different perspectives and perceptions but the confirmation of multiple truths and lived experiences. In this regard, critique can be used and understood as a form of awareness, as a means of getting individuals to engage from the perspective of the other – hopefully with a purpose of detachment so that new forms of understanding might emanate.

Critique, when understood in this way, adopts an activist premise in that it is aimed at questioning for the sake of awareness and reconsideration; it is an active process not concerned with labelling something as right or wrong, but in bringing something into contestation for the purpose of reconceptualisation. Following the above, we would venture that the goal of critique is not only to further the autonomy of the subject, as contended by Benhabib (1986), but also to extend the perspectives and meaning-making of contexts – thereby broadening the scope for both participation and disagreement. When individuals or groups critique an ideology, or an institution and its practices, it invites or forces the institution to critically reflect on that which is being critiqued – with the possibility that new outcomes might be attained and that more voices might be taken into account.

Secondly, critique also aligns itself with ‘the struggles of those [people] for whom the hope of a better future provides the courage to live in the present’ (Benhabib, 1986: 15). In this way, critique is concerned with re-establishing the link between autonomous rationality and emancipation, that is, ‘of making good the unfulfilled promise of justice and freedom’ (Benhabib, 1986: 329). Her description provides an apt background to how those who are oppressed or discriminated against persevere – only because of a hope that their condition will change. There is a certain resignation of tolerating a particular struggle, but with the belief that the future will be different. By implication, what critique brings to a philosophy of higher education is a moral imperative that accompanies human interactions such as those grounded in a sense of community where human responsibility, care and solidarity are no longer just confined to the private sphere of intimacy but extended to the public sphere of needs and solidarity.

In the recent #FeesMustFall protests, a number of students expressed their resistance and opposition to exorbitant university fees by not attending classes, not submitting assignments and not writing tests, as well as examinations. They knew that their actions would hinder their academic progress and, in some cases, compromise their registration in particular programmes. Yet, they persisted in their protests, recognising that unless the issue of fees was adequately addressed by the state and universities, future generations of students would be subjected to the same or greater financial burdens. These students understood that when students are turned away or
drop out of universities because of an incapacity to pay fees, they are facing similar kinds of exclusion experienced during apartheid. Although framed differently – as in not being tied to race and rather to finances – the effect and implications of exclusion are the same. The same category of students, who were historically excluded because they were ‘black’, are also being excluded in a democracy because they do not have the economic capital to access or to remain in higher education.

Yet, the reason for a lack of economic capital is directly connected to apartheid’s dispensation of racial inequality and inequity. It is for this reason that students experience anger and frustration – they see the democratic government as discounting the debilitating and residual effects of apartheid. These students are prepared to place their own studies at risk – not only for themselves but for all others, who might stand to benefit from a reduction in university fees. To them, the cause is greater than individual needs, and they see their opposition as a continuing narrative against the kinds of injustices perpetuated during apartheid. What this viewpoint confirms is that inasmuch as activism can be tied to self-interests, it can just as easily represent actions on behalf of others. There are broader social, political and moral issues at play.

Thirdly, for Benhabib (1986: 342), critique brings a communicative ethic to human relations based on ‘the belief that the exercise of human reason is essential to the attainment of moral autonomy and fulfillment, public justice and progress’ (Benhabib, 1986: 344). As she sums up her advocacy for critique, the ideal community of communication allows ‘the unfolding of the relation to the concrete other on the basis of autonomous action. Only then can we say that justice without solidarity is blind, and freedom that is incompatible with happiness, empty’ (Benhabib, 1986: 342). Put differently, critique is concerned with the creation of a ‘new self- and other-relations that lie beyond the logic of capital, and of administrative-bureaucratic and technical rationality’ (Benhabib, 1986: 343). By implication, critique relooks at emancipation in such a way that it is no longer just concerned with the ‘democratization of administrative decision-making processes but [also] the formation of communities of need and solidarity in the interstices of our societies’ (Benhabib, 1986: 353). In short, critique is concerned with both the cultivation of a self-reflective and communicative autonomy – as is evident in the actions of students who oppose exorbitant university fees and who are intent upon realising and living in a socially just democracy.

**On Self-Reflective and Communicative Autonomy**

Mainstream conceptions of autonomy, explains Friedman (2003: 87), share a common core understanding: first, reflection of some sort on relevant aspects of the self’s own motivational structure and available choices and second, procedural requirements having to do with the nature and quality of that reflection (as in being sufficiently rational and uncoerced). While Benhabib centralises the concept of autonomy in her writings, she emphasises that the subject is constituted through
social relations, as such, is embedded in a concrete lifeworld. Autonomy is not autocracy, she asserts, ‘but rather the ability to distance oneself from one’s social roles, traditions, history, and even deepest commitments and to take a universalistic attitude of hypothetical questioning toward them’ (Benhabib, 1999: 353–354).

To Benhabib (1985: 91), ‘autonomy is not only self-determination in accordance with just norms but the capacity to assume the standpoint of the concrete other as well’. She maintains that an individual’s autonomy does not simply exist. Rather, ‘the subjects of reason are finite, embodied, and fragile creatures, not disembodied cogitos or abstract “unities of transcendental apperception”’ (1994: 174). To Benhabib (1994: 174), it is only by learning to interact in a human community that the human infant becomes a self, a being capable of speech and action. The identity of the self, explains Benhabib (1994: 174), is constituted by a narrative unity that integrates what ‘I’ can do, have done and will accomplish with what you expect of ‘me’.

Autonomy, therefore, following Benhabib, emerges from and takes shape through a dialogical engagement with others. The human infant, she explains, ‘becomes a person through contingent processes of socialization, acquires language and reason, develops a sense of justice and autonomy, and becomes capable of projecting a narrative of which she is not only the author but the actor as well’ (Benhabib, 1994: 174). Students, for example, do not simply embark on protests; there is a particular context of socialisation, of recognition and, more often, of misrecognition, which pushes them towards resistance. What the context is or how students arrive at a decision to voice their resistance is not necessarily a shared understanding. In fact, very often, that or those being protested against do not necessarily understand the reasons for the resistance due to a myriad of reasons. Sometimes, there is simply a schism between the lived experiences of the individual and the concrete other. While the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall campaigns took place at all universities in South Africa, the intensity of these campaigns varied in relation to the particular historical identities, as well as the presence of a critical base of ‘black’ students. The majority of ‘white’ students could not relate to the demands for the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes from the University of Cape Town. In turn, many privileged students have little understanding of food insecurity experienced by a significant number of students. The general perception is that when students receive financial support, they have enough funding to cover all their needs. Funding, however, has specific designations and limitations, and students are most vulnerable at the commencement of the academic year when they are waiting for funds to be released and at the end of the academic year, as funds are depleted.

At the time of writing, students at a few universities demanded the delay of the online academic programme, which has been forced upon universities due to the COVID-19 national lockdown. At first glance, and if one is unaware of the concrete others, one might think that any attempt to further delay an academic year, which is already at risk of not being completed, is an uninformed and frivolous call. But, upon careful consideration, the demand might not be that misplaced in light of the high number of students, who have access to neither digital devices nor the Internet.
How, therefore, can teaching and learning proceed when the educational field is so unequal? Other times it has to do with a deliberate oppression of the other, where there is a genuine belief of superiority, based on race, religion, class or culture, and hence a deliberate refusal of acknowledgement or equal recognition. Then, of course, there are indeed actions, which might not be considered as reasonable or justifiable, such as students embarking on wanton practices of violence and vandalism, as forms of protest.

However distorted and imperfect human reasons may be, such reasons constitute the basis of self-autonomous actions. In a way, reasonable analyses are not just literary criticism, aphorism or poetry but are enlightened or practical reasons proffered in justifying the legitimacy of social actions (Benhabib, 1986: 329). In other words, reasons have been thought through concerning social and historical contexts in which they manifest. In the case of students’ resort to violence, justifications stem from similar actions used to overthrow the apartheid government. And while the ideological context might have changed to that of a democracy, the experiences of apartheid remain present in the continuing unequal and, at times, hopeless lives of the majority of black people. Those who engage in the philosophical activity of claiming reasons on the basis of discourses of argumentation, disputation, debate and adjudication have actually used their self-autonomous agency to do so.

Following her take on such a Habermasian notion of self-reflective autonomy, Benhabib (1986: 305) contends:

Every agent capable of speech and action can participate in discourses … Everyone may problematize any assertion … Everyone may introduce every assertion into a discourse … Everyone may express his [her] attitudes, wishes, and needs … No one may be prevented from enjoying her above-outlined rights in virtue of constraints that may dominate within or without discourses.

Individuals, therefore, firstly, must have an equal chance to initiate and to continue communication; secondly, they must have an equal chance to make assertions, recommendations and explanations and to challenge justifications; thirdly, they must have equal chances as actors to express their wishes, feelings and intentions; and fourthly, they must act as if in contexts of action there is an equal distribution of chances to order and resist orders (Benhabib, 1985: 87). She explains that while the symmetry stipulation – captured in the first two actions – of the ideal speech situation ‘refers to speech acts alone and to conditions governing their employment, the reciprocity condition refers to existing social interactions and requires a suspension of situations of untruthfulness and duplicity on the one hand, and of inequality and subordination on the other’ (Benhabib, 1985: 87).

In the case of a university engaging with students regarding gender-based violence, for example, the primary concern of the university cannot be about protecting the reputation of the institution, or about reformulating policies, when the issue at hand is the actual safety and security of students. Moreover, it does not help to engage with students in this regard as if the university has more information or has a better direct experience of the debilitating impacts of gender-based violence. If the scourge of gender-based violence is to be addressed, then there has to be an
institutional preparedness to reconceive it as a social justice issue, which impacts on the rights of individuals (not limited to women), to engage freely and without fear in the public sphere. In our opinion, what this understanding implies is that questions need to be asked about how the university’s public sphere and institutional culture are used to perpetuate sexist or exclusionary dogmas. What needs to be disrupted, therefore, are not only acts and perpetuations of gender-based violence but the systemic structures that allow gender-based violence to unfold, in the first instance.

Benhabib’s (1985: 87) third and fourth conditions of the ideal speech situation, namely, that individuals must have equal chances as actors to express their wishes, feelings and intentions and they must act as if in contexts of action there is an equal distribution of chances to order and resist orders, are especially pertinent for academic activism as a manifestation of academic freedom. Not only does her assertion that all individuals ought to be included, or afforded the opportunity for speech, but that this chance be availed equally. Despite its foundational centrality within universities, academic freedom remains a highly contested matter – with disagreements easily descending into disturbing patterns of ‘disinvitation’ of speakers or academics, or forms of disruption, involving heckling and ridiculing, which ought to have no place in a university. Moreover, it is often the case, by virtue of institutional hegemonies, that some individuals have more rights and, hence, more voice than others.

These hegemonies are as prevalent in the public sphere of a university, as they are in lecture theatres, or within the supervision process between an academic and his or her student. Students from minority groups often struggle to assert themselves among their peers, or they fear asking questions in case the question might be deemed as stupid. In turn, we are aware that ‘black’ students, and in particular ‘black’ students at our institution, who come from other parts of the African continent, might not enjoy the same levels of support as other students. Their presence at the university is not only constitutive of a minority group but is heavily laden with historical and contemporary politics, which make their navigation on campus and through the academic programme especially cumbersome. A number of African students are not only at our institution because they wish to pursue a degree at a South African university, but they are also there because of civil unrest, ethnic conflict and political upheaval, which make it near to impossible for them to consider higher education in their own countries.

What Benhabib (1985), however, is proposing in terms of countering any inherent inequalities is a presumption of equality – specifically phrased by her as: ‘the speakers must act as if in contexts of action there is an equal distribution of chances’. It is an argument similarly propagated by Rancière (1999: 19) when he describes equality as ‘empty freedom’ that everyone possesses. Rancière (2002) conceives of equality as a quality of the individual, rather than society. As such, the individual has the political agency and autonomy not only to counter inequality (without having to wait on society) but also to lay claim to equality, when this right is being deprived. As such, it should not matter that students come from different backgrounds, which historically might have been constructed along racial and racist
Relooking Academic Activism According to Critique

Integrating an ethics of critique, academic activism embraces a ‘politics of empowerment’ that seeks to combine ‘the logic of justice with that of friendship’ (Benhabib, 1986: 352). Here, we specifically think of doing ‘academic’ things together – reading, writing and talking – for the sake of not only producing justly spirited scholarly works, for instance, a co-authored text or edited collections, but also creating anew a community of friendship and solidarity that would allow such a newly found community to fulfil its emancipatory potential more prudently. Of course, academic activism does not assume only a politics of intersubjectivity as if anything and everything should be done in the interest of the community. Rather, such activism also assumes what Benhabib (1986: 351) refers to as ‘the politics of collective singularity’. In this sense, critique endorses both intersubjective and combined singular human actions that can empower and emancipate humans. Academic activism seen in such a light confirms not only people’s humanity but also their human individualities. When academic activists look at the claims of the ‘concrete other’, they ‘view each and every rational being as an individual with a concrete history, identity, and affective-emotional constitution … [through which] we abstract from what constitutes our commonality and seek to understand the distinctiveness of the other … [and] seek to comprehend the needs of the other, their motivations, what they search for, and what they desire’ (Benhabib, 1986: 341).

Often we find ourselves working with multiple contributors to a book, and through our activist stances, we seek to support contributors through which others feel recognised and confirmed as concrete individual beings with specific needs, talents and capacities. In a way, our differences in joint academic work complement rather than exclude one another. The norms of our engagement are constituted by solidarity, friendship, love and care. In turn, much of our work revolves around our encounters with our students – whether in lecture theatres in a teaching-learning scenario or as supervisors of master’s or doctoral studies. While teaching and learning involve its own set of processes and dialogical encounters, the supervision process has its own rhythm. While separate and distinct in terms of qualification and socialisation, both processes (teaching and supervision) speak to the emancipation of students. Both teaching and supervision are aimed at the evolution of something and someone new.

In the case of the Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) students completing the philosophy of education module, the intention is to invite them into a space of reflection, deliberation and hopefully disruption, as they detach from seeing the world in a singular fashion. Our activism as teachers is made visible to the
extent to which students feel empowered through engaging in their learning; it lives in pedagogies of simultaneous disruption and comfort as students feel safe in engaging with that which is unfamiliar and unknown. We have found that even in large classes, it is possible to create spaces of deliberation, friendship and emancipation, not only between ourselves and students. We find that when we venture into that which is less topical or makes students uncomfortable (such as the prevalence of racism, homophobia or xenophobia), students who ordinarily would not engage with each other often end up in debates. In engaging with and from different perspectives, they inadvertently emancipate themselves from particular perspectives, which might have narrowed their worlds, rather than broadening them. To Hytten (2017: 386), classrooms are activist spaces – it is where knowledge is contested, habits are developed and communities are created – even if teachers are not critically conscious of the impacts of their pedagogical choices, efforts and relationships.

Hytten (2017: 386) raises concerns, however, about the risks of indoctrination – when teaching becomes so partisan that it slips into the propagation of particular views and beliefs as if these are the only truths. When does activism cease and become indoctrination? While it might be good for academics to feel strongly about this or that issue, and while they might want their students to develop similar views and stances about these issues, there is a legitimate risk of an infringement of a particular worldview onto students. Indoctrination, states Merry (2018: 165), works contrary to education – ‘not only because it entails the inculcation of unshakable beliefs or commitments, but also because it involves the inculcation of unwarranted beliefs and commitments – that is, those unsupported by reasons and evidence’.

Quite differently, however, academic activism should not infer the inculcation of unwarranted beliefs. As forms of reasoned human agency, actions or encounters, it is continuously aimed at cultivating autonomous agents. Autonomy, as Callan (1997: 118) argues, ‘enables us to choose intrinsically good lives; autonomy confers that ability without creating a bias against any particular ways of life that might have intrinsic value’. The challenge for activist teachers, as Hytten (2017: 386) asserts, is to adopt moral stances, to frame curricula and to design pedagogical activities around social justice values and commitments, but without stifling students’ genuine inquiry. Students should feel neither compelled to buy into the particular views of an academic nor intimidated or afraid to disagree with an academic. In other words, academic activism should not fulfil the purpose of swaying students to this or that position. Instead, academic activism should make students alert to broad possibilities and perspectives and should be unconstrained and unregulated in terms of the positions or opinions they wish to adopt.

Depending on the kind of relationship between a supervisor and student, the supervision process can allow for more intimacy in terms of contact and time and, hence, a better sense of the other. The one-on-one construction of supervision lends itself to the potential formation of a particular kind of relationship, which can exceed the mere advising and promotion of this or that thesis. Of course, it is entirely possible for this encounter to be wholly mechanical – dependent on designated consultation slots, drafts, comments, revisions and more drafts. A supervision
encounter, as a form of academic activism, foregrounds the relationship between the supervisor and the student. On one level, the encounter suggests an implicit relationality, which necessarily hinges on responsibility and responsiveness from both the supervisor and the student. The student’s thesis writing requires supervision. As such, he or she is in need of a supervisor who will act responsibly in relation to the student by responding to the student’s writing.

In turn, in order to supervise, the supervisor is in need of a student who will act responsibly by first producing the text, and then responding to the feedback and guidance, as provided by the supervisor. The relationship does not only centre on getting to know each other through the exchange of texts, but developing a friendship in the Derridian sense. To Derrida (1997: 204), friendship is ‘a sort of trust without contract’; it consists of loving, rather than being loved or expecting to be loved (Derrida, 1997: 235). Friendship is constituted by extending oneself to another, without any expectation of reciprocity and without being befriended in return. To Derrida (1997: 62), friendship demands a ‘certain esteem of the other without genuine intimacy’; genuine friends are independent, autonomous and self-sufficient – that is, they ‘keep an infinite distance’ (Derrida, 1997: 63). In sum, friendship is neither relational nor mutually contingent. In extending friendship to the student, the supervisor actively works towards not only supporting and guiding the academic success of the student but also inviting and mentoring the student into an academic discourse and scholarship.

Accompanying this mentoring is a willingness to engage with students on matters beyond the academic project, to support in ways that speak to the personal circumstances of students, which make the supervision process more complex, but also potentially more rewarding. When academics or supervisors endeavour towards cultivating relationships with students, they do so on the basis of trust and a professional commitment to eliciting a relationship, or friendship, which will ensure the best options for students – whether in terms of academic achievement or human worth.

In the interest of our academic efforts of the community for the sake of need and solidarity, we do not encourage one another to abandon our self-autonomy to question the interpretive assumptions of work. Through reflexive questioning, we not only articulate our needs as individuals but also engage with others about their needs. In this way, our self-reflection (autonomy) does not take us away from looking critically at our own work but rather invites us to communicate and engage in deliberation with other authors about their work. In this regard, Benhabib (1986: 333) posits ‘[t]he linguistic access to inner nature [of our academic work] is both a distancing and coming together … that we can name and drives what motivates us, we are closer to freeing ourselves of its power over us; and in the very process of being able to say what we mean, we come one step closer to the harmony of friendship of the soul with itself’ (Benhabib, 1986: 333–334). Thus, for us, academic activism in scholarly writing is at play when our communication of that which interests us is open and reflexive in relation to our needs and cultural persuasions so that our autonomy as persons is for once influenced also by the standpoints of the concrete others in our academic projects.
As Benhabib (1986: 335) argues, ‘[a]lthough all finite agents describe their own well-being, each defines this well-being in a different way’. This implies that academic activism not only takes different forms and expressions, but the expectation is always there that these different perspectives of academic activism might come into disagreement and conflict. In this sense, while one academic or student might feel strongly about academic freedom as an unconstrained tenet of a university, others might feel equally strongly that this tenet always is conditioned and curtailed by the potential harm of such speech. In a recent example, it became apparent that an invited speaker at a university gathering intended to speak on the harmful effects of academic freedom. An activist group – comprising students and academics – wrote to the invited speaker, insisting that he reconsider the argument of his presentation. Oddly enough, the activist group did not conceive of their request as an infringement of academic freedom or as a constraint of the speaker’s autonomy. Ironically, in writing the letter out of concern for what the activist group interpreted as the speaker’s undermining of academic freedom, the group slipped into their own argument by insisting that the speaker aligns his argument with their views. The moment an individual’s autonomy is narrowed or limited, the concrete other is suppressed, which means that new ideas and arguments can neither unfold nor be challenged. Such an understanding or action is as contrary to academic freedom as it is to academic activism.

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