

On academic activism: a discussion by a (sometimes) academic activist

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I have always been drawn to the term 'academic activist.' This is because I find it to be a multi-dimensional term, for it allows us to be flexible in our activism. It demands that we should not be fixed in our position but rather, move along multiple political spectrums.

For example, there are times we should agitate for change and be radical in our demands. In my own context, when the Australian government massified university education it was met with resistance by academic colleagues who felt students entering higher education would not be adequately prepared. While this may occasionally be true and does come with many challenges, it also allows us, as educators, to join the front line of class relations: working to ensure that those who have been historically excluded from higher education flourish.

This can be a messy and difficult challenge with many students lacking the cultural capital when first entering the institution. As such, many academics have resisted such changes and draw on nostalgic visions of a university where all students were engaged all the time, came to every class prepared and constantly participated in events. This may have been true for the privileged few, but we must remember the vast majority that were excluded. As academic activists who can use such opportunities to break down the barriers, both cultural and social, that may hold these students back.

There are other times when being an academic activist requires one to be conservative: to protect dimensions of the institution that are being opened up to (pointless) change. There is much to learn from scholars such as Neil Postman (1921-1994) whose well-known works described teaching as both a 'subversive' and 'conserving' activity. Postman argued that education should not try and needlessly keep up with trends or fads – particularly when brought on by those who have not entered a classroom for years. We must assess any proposal on its merits and be brave enough to resist.

For example, at one time in my career I resisted the move to have 'all subjects delivered 25 percent online'. While I have always been an early adopter of technology, my argument was simple: some content can be fully online and other content is best delivered using more traditional methods. A random measure like '25 percent' has no pedagogical or practical benefits.

Being an academic activist can also demand of us to be centrists or neutral – refusing to take sides when it is demanded of us. As someone who is intimately involved in public engagements including a regular newspaper column and television segment, I find myself involved in some of the most controversial issues confronting contemporary society. In Australia, like in other parts of the world,

we are experiencing deep political partisanship and a series of 'cultural wars' focused on history, identity, education and many other facets of life.

While my own politics are instinctively progressive, I have made the conscious decision to position myself as a centrist and not become a 'cultural warrior.'

There are times that the simplest and most popular path is to attack those that I may disagree with – drawing on my own strengths in critical theory and networks of solidarity. I find such attacks add little to public debate and while self-serving, frequently exclude and antagonise even those who may be open to changing their minds.

My challenge to colleagues is to ask the following question: how do we ensure a progressive turn is inclusive?

As academic activists, the challenge is to contest ideas: sometimes these are conservative and other times radical. It is not the label that counts, but our role to work towards a more just and inclusive society. Such a goal requires us to also be activists against our own biases and even those we may agree with.

References

Postman, N and Weingartner, C 1969, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, Delacorte Press, New York.
Postman, N 1979, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*, Delacorte Press, New York.