

Space to Think: Defending Thought-Labor as Essential to Academic Freedom

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Abstract

Ever-increasing professional demands on the professoriate pose a threat to academic freedom by eroding opportunities for unstructured intellectual exploration and thought-labor, which are essential to the knowledge production and dissemination that higher education contributes to a democratic society. To defend space to think, first we must challenge academia's prioritization of work efficiency and highlight the competition of efficiency with work quality. Second, we must recognize unstructured inquiry through the same traditional rewards pathways that exist for other valued labor in an academic career, and acknowledge the value of thought-labor for the fundamental academic mission of teaching quality and contribution to the common good. Third, we must acknowledge that the four pillars of academic freedom (freedom of research and publication, freedom of teaching, freedom of intramural expression, and freedom of extramural expression) cannot exist without protecting their bedrock, space for thought-labor.

Making and protecting space to think is an increasingly neglected priority for the academic career, as the number of competing professional demands seem to incrementally accumulate for the typical professor (Menzies and Newson 2016). With the service, assessment, and administrative components of professorial jobs growing ever more bloated, the pursuit of unstructured inquiry has become deprioritized by institutions of higher education, administrators, and, most perniciously, even among academics themselves (Ginsberg 2011). In order to protect thinking as a core job function of the professorate, we must preserve space to think and define it as a principal value in the academic workplace, one that is integral to academic freedom.

Despite its critical role as a seedbed of ideas, unstructured inquiry is often unfairly seen as an inefficient use of time (Kline 2016). It is not funded, and it earns no sabbaticals. It is not a fundamental piece of the job description. Parodied in the satirical novel *Deaf Sentence* by David Lodge (2008, 88), the modern professor is "probably too busy attending meetings, and preparing budgets, and making staff assessments, and doing all the other things that professors have to do nowadays instead of thinking." The academic consumption of information and ideas, in fact, is not even reflected on the typical CV, as only production of some kind seems to merit even a brief entry. It is as if the majority of a career spent in studious labor should be relegated to the personal

life and not the work life (Wilson 2010). At best, it is seen as the most ancillary component of the academic world, as if ideas for research simply appear from thin air and land in the academic lap.

The production of knowledge, which is the endeavor of the professorate, requires more than infrastructure and funding for laboratory experiments, focused research, and the writing of manuscripts. The production of knowledge does not begin with research but with the asking of questions that might lead to research (Rockmann 2022). To learn which precise, useful, and important questions to ask is often the hardest puzzle piece of an academic's professional life (Lamont 2009). Allowing time to let ideas percolate and to seek inspiration has been recognized as essential to discovery and innovation (Vonnegut 1963). This consistent deficit of unstructured time across disciplines suggests a key need within the academic ecosystem. Most academics enter the profession due to innate curiosity about their chosen field; unfortunately, the mission creep of professorial employment is eating up this natural tendency, through a profusion of competing expectations (Gonzales 2012; Ginsberg 2011).

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Thought-Labor Competes with Work Efficiency

According to the AAUP's 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*, "The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition." Professors are not the arbiters of wisdom or knowledge in society, but they do inhabit something of a sacred space in terms of producing ideas for bettering the understanding of an informed public. The understanding of complicated ideas by the general populace is necessary for a vibrant democracy, the enrichment of the broader body politic, and a flourishing society. As James Madison (1882, 1) put it, "A popular government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or tragedy." This mission of inquiry is thereby both valuable in itself and as a means to an end; it begins not with the ability to teach, or to write, but with the professor's project of exploratory learning. When we enter "efficiency mode" in order to accomplish all the administrative, assessment-related, and other bureaucratic tasks of academia, the space for intellectual thought-labor necessarily shrinks (Berg and Seeber 2016, xi).

In her book *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life*, Zena Hitz (2020, 23) notes that "real learning is hidden learning [that] must be withdrawn from the pressure to produce economic, social, or political outcomes." In other words, the productive and useful fruits

of academic labor are built on a foundation of unstructured intellectual ambling, exploration, and interrogation of the world that surrounds us. Thought and contemplation, far from being an indulgence, are the heartbeat at the center of the academic chest. Whether prioritized or not, this labor does happen, but a threat to academic freedom arises when exploratory thought-labor is relegated a back seat to other growing demands upon the profession. In a survey conducted by MIT (2015), 78 percent of faculty responded that “no matter how hard they work, they can’t get everything done.” In the rush of a never-ending to-do list, it is nearly impossible to think clearly, deeply, and innovatively.

As noted by William Deresiewicz (2011), “The stereotype of the lazy academic is, like that of the welfare queen, a politically useful myth.” Not only are most academics overscheduled, but they are also most productive, in the intellectual sense, when they appear on the outside to be doing little. A central challenge for academia is how or whether we give any serious priority to nurturing the conditions of valuable insights and epiphanies, the broad and deep understanding that comes from being truly up-to-date on the literature in our field; it is central to the academic pursuit of knowledge production and should be recognized and rewarded as such.

Teaching Quality is Enhanced when Thought-Labor is Rewarded

We must foster unstructured inquiry as part and parcel of the professor’s workplace portfolio. Because of its unstructured nature, such inquiry is not easily quantifiable in the current terms of the corporatized university. The ephemeral and passing utility of such work can make it difficult to trace the pathway from a fanciful thought to an impressive item on an academic curriculum vitae. However, protecting this space to think may be more important than ever as technology, management, and other vectors of distraction steal the room for the exploratory reading and serendipitous conversation with colleagues that used to make academic life a vibrant place for idea genesis and a laboratory for innovation.

The current reward system of academia is structured around research productivity. Colleges and universities provide laboratories, research grants, sabbaticals, and research assistants to support the labor of directed inquiry. However, we must acknowledge that developing a research question itself often requires exploratory inquiry, broad reading, and sometimes being lost in thought. This space to think often precedes the development of a stout and defensible concept for research, research questions and methodologies, the thesis of a monograph, or other tangible work products. Exploratory inquiry informs the literature review for such work and offers the maker of any academic work product an interdisciplinary perspective for the work’s utility in the world. Such inquiry is thus essential not only to the inception of research projects but also for the effective dissemination of research results to a wide audience. The hyperspecializations encouraged by contemporary academic reward structures are thus antithetical to the ideological basis for academic freedom: the centrality of knowledge work to a vibrant society and its communication to the public through teaching.

The space for academics to provision their intellectual toolkit is increasingly relegated to hours outside of an eight-to-five workday, a dynamic that exacerbates already existing equity issues by compounding professional disadvantages faced by those with family responsibilities. And yet, as Professor Jack Schuster observed, “The extent to which higher education is effective in accomplishing its missions turns on the quality of the faculty” (quoted in Reichman 2019, xv). It is entirely possible that, either by accident or design, we have relegated the very activities that bolster educational quality to a space outside the walls of our institutions, thereby disincentivizing its pursuit entirely—as if professors complete their education when they receive their doctorate.

Good academics should always be learning, not only about the developing research of their field but also about the cutting-edge methods of instructional delivery. Given that many doctoral programs prize research productivity as the student’s survival metric, the cultivation of a strong teaching repertoire is often undervalued. The development of especially impactful teaching practices is left to a seminar or two, a workshop hosted by well-meaning “teaching and learning centers,” or informal recommendations from colleagues that take years to germinate. Teaching, although central to faculty quality, is often underrewarded, particularly when the practices in question require significant intellectual and emotional investment by faculty to cultivate. A recent piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* suggested that high-impact teaching that emphasizes emotional connections may help bring students back into the classroom in a more meaningful fashion, but it also acknowledged that high-impact practices “take faculty members’ time and commitment to design and execute” (Supiano and Fischer 2023).

In a postpandemic landscape, then, high-impact practices in the classroom remain deeply necessary for the professoriate to see results of their work at the local, regional, and national levels. However, the requisite effort competes for the zero-sum bandwidth of faculty energy. Given the especially deep emotional commitment that such highly personalized teaching requires, the potential for faculty burnout is higher than average. While rejecting requests for new tasks and projects may reduce exhaustion, a more tangible solution to faculty burnout would be to intentionally nurture contemplative time so that the pressure to always say yes to new demands is decreased. Without sufficient space to think through the potential of high-impact practices and how to implement them sustainably, demands on faculty’s intellectual labor create an accountability trap. Without sufficient “unstructured time,” innovations in teaching and learning cannot occur, yet the mandates of academic bureaucracies view faculty time in terms of percentages where the only acceptable result (one defensible to hostile state boards) is a greater-than-100-percent sum for all of the demands on faculty time. However, it is precisely when the sum of visibly accounted faculty time is less than 100 percent that creative solutions to long-standing problems result.

Shrinking Space to Think Erodes Academic Freedom

Academic freedom, as articulated and defended by the AAUP, stands on four pillars: freedom of research and publication, freedom of teaching, freedom of intramural expression, and freedom of extramural expression (Finkin and Post 2009). The weight of university bureaucracy can steal from the academic enterprise the very soul of intellectual inquiry: time and space for careful contemplation (Menzies and Newson 2016). Albert Einstein, who was an AAUP member for two decades, noted that “any restriction of academic freedom acts in such a way as to hamper the dissemination of knowledge among people and thereby impedes rational judgment and action” (quoted in Reichman 2019, xiii). The shrinkage of contemplative space is precisely such an impediment. Contemplative shrinkage has arrived in many forms. The threat of the professional axe hanging over the head of contingent faculty intimidates many faculty members into a career of quiet compliance and time-on-task only for what can be easily measured and directly rewarded. The shrinkage of contemplative space also occurs as the inverse result of deleterious growth of other-duties-as-assigned, which like a tumor, crowd out other useful functions for their own parasitic needs (Naidoo-Chetty 2021). The burgeoning of this detail work seems to be accelerating out of control (Ferreira 2022). Every new software purchased by the academic enterprise must be learned, fiddled with, and mastered. There seems to be no limit to the service and management components of the professorate, perhaps largely because expectations are sufficiently vague that tenure-track faculty never know when they have met the requirement (Susi 2019).

This dynamic crowds out the primary functions of quality teaching and research. It leaves little space for the core academic functions of reading to understand our specialty area better, consuming new and interesting developments thoughtfully and deliberately, and carefully considering new arguments, new ideas, and cutting-edge scholarship (Thornton 2009). Such work, when it does happen, is increasingly relegated to hours that otherwise would be dedicated to private life apart from the workplace: reading happens on evenings and weekends. The growing inability of academics to study their own craft shrinks academic freedom by making thought itself untenable and “unproductive” in an environment with so many other competing values. It becomes inordinately difficult to develop compelling research and pedagogical approaches if the time and space needed to accomplish these tasks are subsumed by functions not even envisioned for the academic job description twenty years ago.

One may say that by rewarding the production of scholarly articles and monographs, academia does indirectly protect thought-labor because in principle those articles require research. This argument, however, risks conflating research efficiency with research quality. Truly innovative scholarly outputs require epiphany, paradigm shift, and the challenging of prior assumptions—all of which take time. For academic freedom to exist, the profession must make space for the thought-labor prerequisites of that freedom.

The Problem of Qualifying Thought-Labor

Cal Newport, in his 2016 book *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*, explores the necessity of uninterrupted thought-time to cognitive productivity. Modern academia increasingly posits two barriers to this sort of productive thought-time: the expectation of constant connectivity, which makes it difficult to spend uninterrupted hours engrossed in reading, experimenting, or thinking; and the overburdening of academics with teaching, grant writing, administrative tasks, and constant committee work, a never-ending to-do list that makes it psychologically difficult to follow the serendipity of curiosity. As a result, deep thought is sacrificed on the altar of the Pomodoro Method: at best, twenty-five-minute slices of time to quickly knock out a task before you are on to the next thing.

The problem is not new, as Jamie Kreiner (2023) reminds us in *The Wandering Mind: What Medieval Monks Tell Us about Distraction*. For the monks she discusses, the goal was religious, the uninterrupted contemplation of God. But both the religious of the ninth century and the academic of the twenty-first seek new knowledge through concentration, and for both, uninterrupted thought-work is essential. The friction between busy work and deep work transcends centuries but takes new forms. Newport points to the mid-twentieth-century work of Peter Drucker (1959, 25) in explaining the difficulties of quantifying knowledge work in a postindustrial society. In an economy based on the production and transportation of physical goods, output can be easily counted: number of rows hoed, widgets made, miles traveled. Knowledge work, of the sort undertaken by the professoriate—and an increasing number of other workers in the world—is far more difficult to quantify, or even see. A body moving can be observed from outside of that body; a mind moving cannot be observed, unless and until the person doing the thinking chooses to talk or write. In Drucker's prediction, which we would argue has largely come true, this physical invisibility of knowledge work produces supervisory anxiety for anyone who feels the need to prove that their workers are working. This anxiety then transfers to the workers themselves, who feel the need to constantly demonstrate that they are, in fact, working. Busy-ness, then, takes the place of widget making—if I look busy, I must be productive. If I tick many items off a long to-do list, I must be a good employee. If I answer my emails immediately, at all times of the day or night, I must be motivated and responsible and worthy of continued employment.

The problem with this system, of course, is that it privileges quantity of output over quality. In the academic context, this feeds the oft-cited problem of the overpublication of increasingly arcane articles and books (Altbach and de Wit 2018). However, we argue that this is also, paradoxically, a direct threat to academic freedom. If one must “publish or perish,” one will do the work that is most quickly publishable. This is antithetical to the sort of deep knowledge work that is at the core of the academic's, and the university's, value to a democratic society, and upon which the idea of academic freedom is founded.

This problem is compounded by the ongoing corporatization of the university, which has pushed the business language of “key performance indicators” and “return on investment” into the vernacular of many institutions of higher education. As Florian Gebreiter (2021) persuasively describes in his case study of the accounting department at a British university, an increasing emphasis on quantifiable performance measures in research led to a separation between teaching and research faculty, and ultimately a fundamental change in the academic content of courses and the nature of the degrees offered: “The school’s accounting department gradually transformed into a teaching-only operation which delivered largely standardized and highly technical accounting education.” First, in this case, the connection between thought-work and research productivity was severed through the emphasis on measurable performance factors; next, teaching was increasingly relegated to nonresearch faculty hired from industry, who then moved the curriculum from introducing students to the forefront of evolving knowledge to instead providing prepackaged technical instruction based on received knowledge. When this happens, not only does the quality of instruction decline but the fundamental role of the faculty, and the university, in a democratic society is also undermined. For a society to thrive, people must be provided the opportunity to think new things.

At our own institution, faculty evaluation criteria include consideration of nonquantifiable knowledge work. Our *Academic Policies and Procedures Manual* places “scholarly self-development” as the first item on a list of forms of scholarship; further items include “creative effort” and “adaptation of knowledge” (SOSU 2023). These descriptions provide ways to talk about the sort of thought-labor that is central to academic freedom and yet is often in short supply. The challenge, however, is that at our university, as elsewhere, actual promotion decisions often default to an enumeration of publications and quantifiable outcomes. Scholarly self-development may sound lovely on paper, but citations are still needed for tenure. The creation of transformative teaching models or the development of long-standing relationships with the community get thoughtful nods during committee meetings, but percentage breakdowns in teaching evaluations and budgetary restrictions still command the day. In the name of doing more transformative and meaningful things within the academy, academic institutions must make more time for the contemplative prerequisite of excellent research, service, and instruction.

Conclusion

Preservation of adequate time and space for thought-labor within the academic profession is crucial to the continued protection of academic freedom. The hurdles to its preservation include the increased corporatization of higher education and the accompanying focus on efficiency and production. Rewards systems in academia often fail to properly reinforce the importance of contemplation, partly because thought-labor is difficult to quantify. A healthy democracy relies on academic freedom, and such freedom is circumscribed when space for thought-labor is whittled down by accumulating professional expectations that effectively reduce teaching

quality. The relegation of professional development, broad reading, and inquisitive speculation to outside traditional working hours is emblematic of their deprioritization, and must be remedied.

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