

**Best Teachers Set their Own Limits on Speech**  
**Detroit Free Press**  
**April 30, 2006**

Let's face it. Professors say some outrageous things. Unfortunately, we do a poor job of explaining why we tolerate such apparent excesses under the auspices of academic freedom. What do we mean by that term and is there any limit to what a professor can or should say?

Indeed there is, but the limits are seldom what their critics would like. This issue surfaced in Michigan last week when an Islamic student group at Michigan State University demanded that the school publicly reprimand an engineering professor who wrote a February e-mail about "dissatisfied, aggressive, brutal and uncivilized, slave-trading Moslems" and said, "You are free to leave. I hope for God's sake that most of you choose that option." An MSU official said that while the professor's comments were "inappropriate," they were essentially protected.

Professors today, especially those who teach anything involving the Middle East or its peoples, need institutional protection. They are in an academic zone of danger where they are likely to be challenged, not just by their students (which is almost always a good thing) but by outside groups. Campus Watch, for example, encourages students to report on professors, and one group even offered to pay UCLA students to complain.

John Stuart Mill wrote in the 1800s that a bad idea, exposed to debate, will usually be discredited and the search for truth elevated. That makes sense, and universities consistently affirm that faculty can teach what they think students should learn.

But professors are not entitled to say anything they want. Consider three principles of academic freedom.

First, your comments must be within the range of your expertise and must be relevant to the subject of your class. You don't have the right to tell your students anything you think about any subject. If a history professor lecturing on the Roman policy of enslaving prisoners of war draws a parallel with American policy in Iraq, this may be offensive or wrong, but it is protected. If the same professor veers off onto evolution, it is a different matter since that has nothing to do with either Roman history or the professor's expertise.

Second, there is no obligation to present all points of view, although most professors try to acknowledge that different perspectives exist. In my class on revolution, students read Osama bin Laden's Declaration of War on the United States. At the beginning of that discussion, I note that Osama has done harm to our country but tell students that our task is to understand his

thinking, not to argue with him. I do not present the “other” point of view, which they have heard. They find this approach intellectually liberating.

The third principle of academic freedom is that you may not harm your students. Once, when discussing the Lebanese civil war and the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, I referred to the right wing Lebanese leader Bashir Gemayel as a “gangster.” One of my students had a look of great distress on her face. After class, she followed me to my office and told me she had known the Gemayel family. (He had been killed, as was his small daughter). She said people were dying for their beliefs and I had an obligation to understand their point of view.

That was the most serious rebuke I have ever received in my professional career, and the most deserved. I had failed to provide balance in my presentation and had compromised the trust of at least one student. But ironically, what I said was not beyond the range of academic freedom. I still think Bashir Gemayel did harm to his country, but now when I discuss him I make a point of explaining why he supported the Israeli invasion. And I remain grateful to that student.

What is never acceptable is for a professor to make a statement that damages the learning environment or compromises our ability to fulfill our educational role. A personal attack on a student is never in order. It is never acceptable to make sweeping statements about “you Jews” or “you Arabs.” Inflammatory words such as fundi or fascist or nazi do more harm than good, especially when directed at specific religious or ethnic groups.

Life is complex, politics are complex, and simple categories seldom work. Ultimately, a professor has to maintain credibility in the eyes of students. Many of us hate those politically correct, self-righteous-sounding words such as ‘respectful learning environment’ or ‘diversity of views,’ but they are very important words.

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