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Reflecting on Academic Freedom Through Fiction: A Theatrical Exploration of the Blurry Contours of the Freedom to Teach

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Abstract

This article aims at exploring the contribution that creative forms of research can make to the study of a little-known aspect of academic freedom in the Canadian context – academic freedom in curriculum development. It seeks to address the methodological challenge posed by research on academic freedom, that is, the fact that any academic writing on this topic necessarily draws initially, though not exclusively, from the researchers’ own experiences and perspectives. The article brings to life a fictional faculty meeting, during which questions about academic freedom in teaching are discussed. Although this meeting is the product of our imagination, its starting point is based on real-life events, that is, the implementation in some North American universities of a course developed and initially offered outside of academia by people closely related to a well-known personal development organization.

Keywords

academic freedom, arts-based research, ethnodrama, autoethnography

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Reflecting on Academic Freedom Through Fiction: A Theatrical Exploration of the Blurry Contours of the Freedom to Teach

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This article aims at exploring the contribution that creative forms of research can make to the study of a little-known aspect of academic freedom in the Canadian context – academic freedom in curriculum development. It seeks to address the methodological challenge posed by research on academic freedom, that is, the fact that any academic writing on this topic necessarily draws initially, though not exclusively, from the researchers’ own experiences and perspectives. The article brings to life a fictional faculty meeting, during which questions about academic freedom in teaching are discussed. Although this meeting is the product of our imagination, its starting point is based on real-life events, that is, the implementation in some North American universities of a course developed and initially offered outside of academia by people closely related to a well-known personal development organization.

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Introduction

Under its most basic form, academic freedom may be defined as having the autonomy to pursue the truth, regardless of where it leads. It is considered fundamental to the role of universities in democratic societies, and even “*the central value of university life*” (emphasis in original; Arthurs, 1995, p. 1). The purpose of academic freedom is to pursue “the meaningful exchange of ideas, the promotion of learning, and the pursuit of knowledge” (*Pridgen v. University of Calgary*, 2012, par 117), benefitting, in theory, all professors and other members of academia. Yet, while some members of the academic community conduct research on academic freedom, most professors rarely take the opportunity to reflect on the impact of academic freedom on their work. Taken for granted, it is only once academic freedom seems jeopardized that the subject is brought to the forefront.

Like other members of the academic community, we engaged from time to time in informal discussions with our colleagues about the impact of the decline of collegial governance and the rise of consumerism on universities and our lives as academics. Yet, although academic freedom remained an elusive concept to us, we felt little need to dedicate further efforts to comprehend it. Things changed in 2019 when we discovered that the curriculum of many programs at different universities in the United States and Canada included a course developed by a controversial figure in the personal development community. Under the name “Being a Leader,” this course, based on a three-day training offered by a private organization (Landmark International) under the name “Landmark Forum,” purports to allow students to live a transformational experience that will “(...) leave students ... actually being leaders and exercising leadership effectively as their natural self-expression.” (Erhard et al., 2012, p. 3).

Our initial reactions were of surprise and disbelief. It was hard for us to make sense of the fact that some universities saw fit to associate their names with Landmark, a company whose reputation is not untarnished. It was even harder to understand how an “ontological leadership” course could have been incorporated into programs of training such as optometry, medicine, and law, amongst others. We came up with various hypotheses to account for the presence of “Being a Leader” in academia, going from seeing it an illustration of the impact of neoliberalism on universities, to the result of an unfortunate lapse of judgment that would be corrected in due time. Eventually – most probably due to our legal background – our discussions came to focus on the relationship between the creation of “Being a Leader” and academic freedom. We wondered whether the creation of Being a Leader resulted from a legitimate exercise of academic freedom or not, and, if not, what could account for its entry into academic settings.

Answering this initial, essentially legal, research question entailed a detailed examination of the concept of academic freedom with respect to teaching. After researching the legal material available on this issue, we came to two realizations. Firstly, although teaching is arguably the most important aspect of the mission of universities, academic freedom to teach has been the object of very few inquiries and its boundaries remain elusive to this day. It was thus impossible to answer our research questions from a strictly legal perspective. Secondly, it was clear that, even if we strived for the highest levels of objectivity achievable in the pursuit of our research, we would remain unable to separate our research from our experiences as members of the academia. Our views, and the interpretation of those views by our readers, would unescapably be closely intertwined with their respective experiences as teachers, researchers, and members of academic institutions. For us, writing about academic freedom was nothing like writing on another legal topic falling within our spheres of expertise. It necessarily involved inquiring into our situations and positions and drawing from our experiences and perspectives. Rather than a limitation, we saw this as an opportunity to go beyond standard legal methodology and explore research methods that would allow us to make sense of academic freedom not as an abstract concept, but as a lived experience.

In the rest of this article, we present (a) the concept of academic freedom in teaching in the Canadian context and (b) information about the “Being a Leader” course that triggered our interest in this issue. We then expose (c) the research method – based on autoethnography and ethnodrama – we used to address the gap in the literature reviewed, before presenting (d) the dramatic work we produced through this method and discussing (e) the key learnings from the experience.

Literature Review

Academic Freedom in Teaching

Academic freedom is proclaimed in a variety of national and international instruments, including the *UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel*. While the Supreme Court of Canada, has recognized the fundamental mission undertaken by universities in our society and the role of academic freedom in the safeguard of their mission and “our continuance as a lively democracy” (McKinney v. University of Guelph, 1990, pp. 286-287) academic freedom is granted some protection as it relates to freedom of expression but is not considered a right specifically protected, on its own, under the “Canadian Charter of rights and freedoms” Academic freedom is understood to play at three different levels. At the institutional level, universities must have the autonomy – including from the State and the corporate sector – necessary to guarantee the proper fulfilment of the functions entrusted to higher-education teaching personnel and institutions (UNESCO,

art 18). In Quebec, the lack of constitutional protection of this fundamental freedom and recent events in universities led to the adoption, in 2023, of the *Act Respecting Academic Freedom in the University Sector* (L.R.Q. L-1.2). The act seeks to address several issues, exposed in its preamble, amongst which are the “need to see to it that such educational institutions are able to carry out their mission without doctrinal, ideological or moral constraint.” While aiming at protecting academic freedom, the act still raises serious questions about the protection granted at this institutional level (see e.g., section 7, respect the power of government to intervene).

At the individual level, academics must be free to teach and carry out research work without any interference, subject to accepted professional principles of professional responsibility, intellectual rigour, and scientific inquiry. This includes the freedom to pursue truth in teaching and research, the ability to be critical of one’s own institutions (also known as intramural academic freedom) the ability to participate in public life and express oneself freely (extramural academic freedom). Prerequisites to the effective exercise of those freedoms include tenure, that is, the job security needed to engage in the pursuit of truth, even when it entails engaging with topics or displaying views that are controversial, unpopular, or not in line with dominant thinking without fear of reprisal (Horn, 2000; Turk, 2014; UNESCO, 1997).

At the collective level, faculty has the right to take part in university governance, to ensure that institutional decisions respect academic freedom and protect scholars against external influences. As Hearn (2016; interview) mentions, “[r]obust collegial governance protects academic freedom by ensuring that the people who are directly engaged in the core mission of teaching and research get to determine the parameters of that mission, and academic freedom protects the right of Faculty members to speak out when they fear the university’s core mission is being threatened.” Decisions regarding “policies of higher education, curricula, research, extension work, the allocation of resources and other related activities” are to be made in a collegial manner, “in order to improve academic excellence and quality for the benefit of society at large” (UNESCO s 32).

Since most Canadian professors are unionized, academic freedom is part of the negotiated employment rights contained in collective agreements. Those agreements, which represent the most important source of legal protection for academic freedom, contain their own definitions of what academic freedom is and what it protects. Academic freedom, and its importance for fulfilling the mission of universities, also figures in numerous statements adopted by universities across Canada, as well as organizations like the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) and Universities Canada, formerly known as the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC). Existing statements and collective agreements tend to define academic freedom in general terms, with varying levels of detail, all recognizing the three levels at play.

Academic freedom is also understood as imposing duties on its bearers. One important limitation concerns the duty of loyalty enshrined in professors’ employment contract (Daviault, 2002, p. 5) which generally requires employees to act in a way which will not negatively impact the employer, both in the course of their work and outside of it, including concerning the divulgation of confidential information and what they say about their employer. Academic freedom is also limited by the purpose for which it is granted in the first place, that is, the pursuit of truth. It comes with a responsibility for professors to exercise their rights in “in a manner consistent with the scholarly obligation to base research on an honest search for truth.” (UNESCO, 1997, p. 33). Academic freedom “must be based on reasoned discourse, rigorous extensive research and scholarship, and peer review” (Wallace, 2011) and “implies duties of honest and thoughtful inquiry, rigorous analysis, commitment to the dissemination of research results, and adherence to the use of professional standards” (Canadian Institutes, 2018, p. 5). Reliance on critical assessment and debates in the pursuit of truth means that faculty’s individual rights are inseparable from the collective responsibility of all scholars to question

and assess the value of the work produced by their peers, in good faith and following professional standards. The relationship between academic freedom, professional standards, and disciplinary norms raises complex issues. Applied too strictly, such norms and standards may make it difficult to challenge conventional scholarly wisdom and develop alternative views and stifle the evolution of disciplines. Applied without enough rigour, they prevent real debates to take place and knowledge claims to be properly assessed.

With respect to teaching, most of the literature on academic freedom relates to freedom of expression inside and outside the, the other dimensions of academic freedom – including issues about program and course design, teaching methods and student evaluations – receiving considerably less attention. Yet, faculty's freedom on questions about program and course design, teaching methods and student evaluations is not without limits. University regulations generally provide that teachers must evaluate students in an objective manner consistent with relevant academic standards. Policies or collective agreements may also limit individual faculty's right to choose the material used for teaching, as when the imposition of a specific textbook is required for the sake of uniformity when different teachers teach multiple sections of the same course. In addition, while teachers may determine how a certain course should be taught, they are not totally free to decide which courses they will teach, nor the conditions in which they will teach them. Factors such as the admission criteria used in one's institution, class sizes, and access to technological tools and support also limit the choices that individual teachers can make.

In line with the principle of collegial governance, many of the decisions that impact academic freedom to teach involve the participation of professors in the decision-making process, both at the department or faculty level and at higher levels in the governance structure. The boundaries of an individual teacher's freedom to teach are thus (at least partly) traced by the collective decisions made by faculty, considering a variety of interests. This includes building curricula and determining the content of each course within specific programs to ensure the conformity of what is proposed with professional standards and disciplinary norms. Disciplinary standards as well as informal norms about the exercise of collegiality are likely to have a considerable impact on the extent and nature of the debates. Since each faculty member remains ultimately free to engage or not in the critical evaluation of proposals, individual preferences and interests also matter. While in some departments, approval of new courses or programs may lead to lengthy discussions, in others, it might be seen as a decision better left to the chair, the dean, or the experts in the field. Individual faculty members remain free to teach how and what they please, as long as their teaching is in line with the course descriptions agreed on at the departmental or school level. As Arbitrator Picher concluded in the case of Professor Denis Rancourt, “[w]hile it is clear that academic freedom does not extend to allowing a professor to introduce changes which effectively contradict or radically depart from the fundamental concept of the course as originally established, there must be some latitude for flexibility both as to the teaching methods and specific content of a course” (University of Ottawa and Assn et al., 2008, p. 60).

In summary, the existing literature on academic freedom points to the existence of a wide consensus about the purpose and importance of academic freedom and its main elements. However, those general principles say little about what academic freedom entails in practice, and what it means for its holders. The overwhelming majority of cases involving disputes about academic freedom are settled, either informally or, in the case of unionized faculty, through prescribed grievance procedures, with very few cases proceeding to the arbitration stage, and fewer still getting adjudicated in court. There is also very little empirical data that could illustrate how academic freedom is experienced in practice by academics. Except for the few cases covered in the media and the small number of personal accounts published by current or former faculty members, little is known about the actual issues involved with academic

freedom that arise within universities. The paucity of information is particularly acute with respect to those aspects of academic freedom that involve collective decisions – including decisions about curriculum such as the ones that allowed for the incorporation of “Being a Leader” in academic programs. In view of the inherent difficulty of obtaining the type of data required to understand how such decisions are made in different settings, a good portion of what constitutes academic freedom in teaching in real life is bound to remain elusive.

This article represents an attempt to fill the knowledge gap due to the dearth of information on the practice of academic freedom in universities. By resorting to our own practical knowledge and understanding of academic freedom as a social construction and using an arts-based methodology, we aim at providing readers with a sense of academic freedom as a lived experience, rather than an abstract concept.

The Course “Being a Leader”

As mentioned at the outset of this article, our interest in academic freedom to teach was sparked by the introduction of “Being a Leader” in curricula and our attempts to make sense of it. Did it constitute a legitimate exercise of academic freedom by the professors involved? Was it compatible with the general purpose of academic freedom and the mission of universities? This question came to our minds because “Being a Leader” differs in many respects from other courses offered in universities in three main respects: (a) how it was designed; (b) the expertise of its teachers, and (c) the format used to teach it.

The Peculiar Origins of BAL

Courses taught in universities are designed, developed, and taught by faculty members with expertise in a field relevant to the content of the course. This is not the case for “Being a Leader,” which is a copy, with only minor adaptations, of a course – entitled “Being a Leader and the Effective Exercise of Leadership” (“BAL”) – developed by Werner Erhard, a member of the personal development industry, and a former Harvard Business School professor of finance, Michael Jensen. BAL is based on the ideas developed by Erhard for the personal growth program he created in 1971.

Known as the *est* seminars (Latin for “is,” and an acronym for Erhard Seminars Training), the program was based on a combination of “techniques as varied as Eastern mysticism, Dale Carnegie and behavior modification” (Gordon, 1978). The popularity of the seminars, including among celebrities, quickly turned Erhard into a rich man and one of the most important figures in the self-help industry in the 1970s. In the 1990s, in the face of the substantial adverse publicity associated with his name, Erhard, sold his company to family members, who renamed it to Landmark, and moved to Japan, where he continued to offer professional development seminars and consultation services.

Jensen’s first contact with Erhard’s work came during a Landmark seminar in which he enrolled upon the advice of his daughter. This experience course had such a profound impact on Jensen that he quickly enrolled in other Landmark seminars and ended befriending Steve Zaffron, a long-term associate of Erhard (Lemann, 2019, p. 93). Jensen “became convinced [he] should work to get this kind of transformational material into the academies” (Haldeman, 2015). For Erhard, an autodidact with no academic certification, “Jensen, a devotee who had a very large independent reputation, was a potentially crucial ally” in gaining official intellectual recognition for his work (Lemann, 2019, p. 94). Jensen, Erhard and Zaffron then embarked on a major work that would capture Erhard’s ideas under a form allowing them to enter academia.

The first edition of BAL was offered from 2004 to 2009 at the University of Rochester, one of Jensen’s former places of employment, to groups comprising students, faculty,

administrators, and alumni of the school. (<https://www.erhardjensen.org/history/>). From Rochester, the course migrated to other academic and non-academic settings.

To facilitate the entry of BAL within academia, a series of initiatives aimed to emphasize the academic nature of the course have been designed, including the creation of a paper series devoted to the diffusion of work around BAL on the Social Sciences Research Network (SSRN). As of May 2023, 47 papers had been posted in the series, one of which, co-written by Erhard and Jensen, was published in a peer-review journal in 2017. The vast majority of the 46 others comprise course material (slides, readings, assignments, etc.) for BAL (<https://www.ssrn.com/link/Barbados-Group.html>). In addition, a non-profit organization was created in Texas in 2017 to facilitate the entry and diffusion of BAL within colleges and universities. (<https://www.erhardjensen.org/purpose/>)

According to information provided by one of the creators of the course, BAL is currently taught in different faculties of 15 universities in North America. For example, it is a required course in Rutgers' Leadership and Management major program where it is offered under the name "Executive leadership" and is offered as an elective course at Midwestern University's school of optometry and college of pharmacy as well as at the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication of Arizona State University. BAL is also marketed as a professional training, offered by about 60 firms from the personal/professional development industry (Erhard et al., 2020, p. 8)

Who Can Teach "Being a Leader?"

The expertise required to teach BAL is the same whether the course is offered in an academic or a non-academic setting. Would-be teachers first need to attend the version of BAL offered by Erhard, Jensen, and their collaborators, consisting in an intensive, 6-day training session, held about twice a year, for academic and non-academic attendees.

"Graduates" from those sessions can enroll in an additional workshop called the "Creating Course Leaders Workshop" (the "Workshop"). The objective of the Workshop is to teach attendees how to "powerfully deliver the content of the course." This includes how to "effectively deliver (read) the slides for the course, Being a Leader and the Effective Exercise of Leadership: An Ontological / Phenomenological Model" and "discover [their] own access to reading the slides fully effectively when you are "out here" where each of the participants' listening is located, and you are consistently engaged in climbing on the mountain of mastering the content of the course." (<https://www.erhardjensen.org/creating-course-leaders/>).

According to the latest version of the material used in BAL, the Workshop has been offered to a total of over 150 scholars and 200 management consultants since 2010 (Erhard et al., 2022, p. 6). All graduates from the Workshop are entitled to deliver BAL themselves, if they agree to use the official material provided for that purpose and follow the rules established in the Workshop. Thus, notwithstanding where and by whom it is delivered, all versions of BAL involve the use of the material prepared by its creators, including the official "textbook" comprising a 1000-slide deck to be used in class (Erhard et al., 2022), each slide bearing a mention that the copyright to the material belongs to Werner Erhard, Michael Jensen and Landmark Worldwide LLC.

The "Promise" and Format of BAL

BAL rests on the idea that leadership must not be confused with title, position, or authority. According to Erhard et al., leadership is "an exercise in language that results in a created future that the leader and those being led come to live into, which future gives them being and action in the present that results in the realization of a future (that wasn't going to

happen anyway) which future fulfills (or contributes to fulfilling) the concerns of the relevant parties, including critically those who granted the leadership (those who lead you and those you lead)” (Erhard et al., 2022, pp. 988-996).

The illegibility of this definition of leadership is far from accidental. In fact, it exemplifies the style used in BAL communications. This is because BAL holds that, like medicine, leadership is a world constituted by a specific conversational domain comprising specialized terms and carefully crafted statements that employ those terms. In consequence, the course is not designed to leave students with knowledge, but to have them master leadership as a conversational domain. As mentioned in the course, “when you have *mastered* being a leader and exercising leadership effectively as a *conversational domain*, you will be *used by* being a leader and exercising effectively.” (emphasis in original; Erhard et al., 2022, slide 30). It goes without saying that BAL comes with its own set of terms and expressions, many of which – e.g., rackets, integrity, honour one’s word, whole and complete, distinction... – are also all used by Landmark (see e.g., Lockwood, 2014 for an account of a Landmark seminar).

Learning how to be a leader does not involve “knowing” what leadership is and what leaders do, but actually “dwelling in” the world of being a leader and leadership. The promise made to BAL students is to leave them “being leader and exercising leadership effectively as their natural self-expression.” It is thought that, to fulfil this promise, training courses must be delivered in a precise and unconventional format. A good proportion of the time spent in class is devoted to the reading, word for word of the slides displayed on a screen by a “course slide reader”.

According to BAL material, this is necessary because, “[i]n order for [the course leaders] to deliver on what [the students] are being promised, what gets said in this course must be said by us with the rigour required to actually produce a conversational domain that constitutes being a leader and the effective exercise of leadership as a world, and which specific conversational domain when mastered leaves you in that world” (Erhard et al., 2022, slide 33).

The rest of the course consists of group discussions and assignments, including the creation of a “leadership project” aimed at the “realization of a future that wasn’t going to happen anyhow, which future fulfills or contributes to fulfilling the concerns of the relevant parties.” (Erhard et al., 2022, p. 10). Leadership projects vary in scope and nature and may involve endeavors of a professional or personal nature (e.g., writing a book, starting a business, or mending one’s relationship with someone).

Methods

The Research Method Based on Autoethnography and Ethnodrama

Our initial research question was whether the introduction of BAL in academia constituted a legitimate exercise of academic freedom to teach. Our literature review did not allow us to bring a definitive answer to this question. Nothing has been written on the BAL course from the academic freedom perspective. The legal analysis of academic freedom – described above - was not as fruitful as we hoped. The number of decisions we found on the issue of course and curriculum was so scarce, and the issues raised in other cases so remote from the one at play that we could not draw any conclusive interpretation relevant to the BAL case. Another challenge concerns the exercise of academic freedom within groups – such as departmental assemblies or committees - and the inherent complexity of collaborative decision-making processes. What does academic freedom in teaching imply when everyone around the decision-making table carries their own interpretation of what the concept entails, and these interpretations do not necessarily coincide with each other?

Aware of these challenges and the lack of theory surrounding academic freedom in teaching, especially in its collegial implementation, we realized we needed to resort to a different method than the one more frequently used to tackle academic freedom. We kept in mind two key factors in designing the appropriate method for what we wanted to do. First, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, our interest in this matter was sparked by the strong emotions that the presence of BAL elicited within us. Second, authors researching and writing on academic freedom in teaching as academic research are necessarily writing on a subject with which they have a subjective knowledge. Their views, and the interpretation of those views by their readers when these readers are from academia as well, are closely intertwined with their respective experiences as teachers, researchers and members of academic institutions. For members of academia, writing about academic freedom necessarily involves inquiring into one's situation and position, and drawing initially – though not exclusively – from the one's experiences and perspectives. Like these authors, we also had a cumulative experience as academics over several decades. Instead of considering this experience as a bias, interfering with the research results, it can be seen as data, introspection allowing it to be collected (Andrew & Le Rossignol, 2017; Danzak et al., 2021).

As consequence to these two factors, research on this topic thus seemed particularly well-suited for reflexive types of investigation acknowledging the role of emotions and subjective experiences on research design and findings. We decided to investigate arts-based research methodologies, since it has been argued that they are of significant relevancy to research endeavours implying high levels of reflexivity, as they invite researchers “to pay particular attention to impressions, observations, actions, irritations, and emotions in research processes” (Lenette, 2019, p. 34). As the “conscious pursuit of expressive form in the service of understanding” (Barone & Eisner, 2011, p. 7), arts-based methodologies have the potential to generate richer data and deepen the analysis. Creative research has been used to explore diverse aspects of academic life in the form of fiction, including in novels, short stories, plays, and dialogues involving faculty members as characters (Pachirat, 2018; Piette, 2015; St-Pierre, 2020).

In line with those works, we chose to use our collective autoethnography as a basis to engage in a particular form of creative research, that is, ethnodrama. Saldaña defines ethnodrama as:

A written play script consisting of dramatized, significant selections of narrative collected from interview transcripts, participant observation field notes, journal entries, personal memories/experiences, and/or print and media artifacts such as diaries, blogs, e-mail correspondence, television broadcasts, newspaper articles, court proceedings, and historic documents. (...) Simply put, this is dramatizing the data. (Saldaña, 2011, pp. 12-13)

Rather than offering explanations or specific answers to pre-determined questions, ethnodrama allows for exploring them in their various dimensions, from a multiplicity of perspectives. In our view, the form of creative writing we privilege offers a promising way “to disrupt, open, provoke, or present the phenomenon in a “dislocated form” (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2014, p. 28), and examine it in a way that goes beyond the linear exposition and assessment of contradictory arguments.

The idea was to create from scratch a dramatic scene reproducing a faculty assembly. The purpose of this method was to offer an opportunity to experience the complexity of moving from theory to concrete application, in the absence of clear and known guidelines, in the context of a collegial decision. Our objective was to mobilize the senses, making the reader "experience" the complexity and discomfort of collective decision-making related to the

exercise of academic freedom in university teaching. In doing so, we believed we were providing the reader with an equally relevant understanding of the issues, but at a different level. We did not want to dictate, in a normative way and by appealing to the intellect, what academic freedom should be in such a context.

Although the scene is fictitious, the events depicted being entirely fictional and not intended to depict actual events, it remains as realistic as possible because it was created with a view to faithfully reproducing the dynamics observed during the numerous faculty assemblies in which we participated. Thus, the characters in the scene are not real people, but rather archetypes of faculty members, embodying the types of contrasting attitudes and personalities found in academia, who might, in 2023, gather around such an assembly.

In addition, because our goal was not to offer an in-depth analysis of how decisions are made, we have chosen not to provide a resolution to the situation. That is to say, the scene drawn is not one in which the characters would conclude, which would have had the effect of suggesting to the reader a form of definition of academic freedom. Since our goal was rather to convey the complexity, the discomfort, the underlying tensions at play in the decisions surrounding the actual implementation of academic freedom, we preferred not to provide such a resolution and to stick to the introductory scene, so to speak.

In terms of the methodology we followed, we drew on what might be called autoethnography (Andrew & Le Rossignol, 2017; Danzak et al., 2021). We first discussed together at length how to approach the topic and how best to appeal to the reader's experience and background. We also shared our respective experiences with faculty assemblies and the exercise of academic freedom. We took notes on commonalities (many) and differences (few). From the very start of the project, and throughout, we kept a common logbook in which, according to the meetings between the two of us and our readings, we recorded, in a chronological way, our impressions, our reactions, our states of mind.

We proceeded to a review of the literature as well as to a caselaw research, for which we classified the results in a systematic way, in files for this purpose. We then began the drafting process. At this stage, we first wrote the theoretical part of the article, using the results of the literature search. Then we moved on to writing the fictional part. For this part, we first established together the characters representing the archetypes. We also discussed the location in which the action would take place, deliberately choosing to make it a generic location, but very similar to many Canadian faculties.

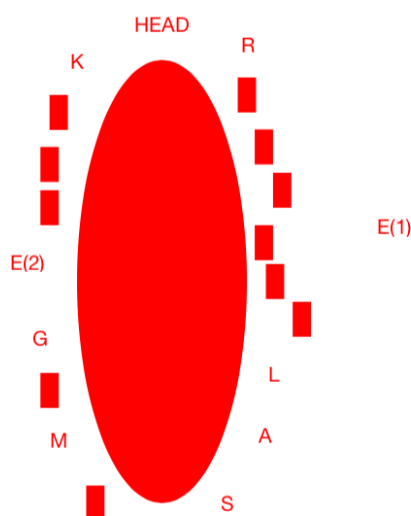
Afterwards, one of the authors wrote a first version of the fictitious assembly, with no other constraints than the fact that it had to include all the chosen characters and that it had to be set around the BAL course. The other author then read the resulting scene and modified it as she saw fit, also with complete freedom. Together, we had a few sessions of revising the fictional scene, fine-tuning it to make sure it included everything we wanted to see in it.

We then asked different readers, from diverse faculties and departments in different universities, to read the entire article and give us their impressions, focusing on the fictional scene. The feedback was unanimous about the verisimilitude of the scene and the accuracy of the dynamics depicted, regardless of the readers' respective academic discipline or affiliation. Some people even had strong reactions, feeling that we were talking about their own faculty, mistakenly believing that they "recognized" themselves or some of their colleagues. We considered the few comments made to improve the text and did a final reading, this time aloud, of the fictional scene to make the final changes.

The Play: "From the Discussion Comes the Light... Does It?"

The twenty professors present at the school assembly are all sitting around the table, except Eli who is pouring some coffee in a cup. The Head (directing the school) is presiding at

one end of the table. Close to the Head, Kim is sitting on the right side, and Ray on the left side. A couple of persons separate Kim from Gil, on the same side. Max is sitting further down on the same side. Lee is sitting diagonal to Kim, on the other side of the table. The next person beside Lee is Avi. Then, almost at the other end of the table, Sam sits on the same side as Lee, just in front of Max. The room is grey, with neon lighting and a whiteboard at one end. Its modern look is rather cold. Located on the eighth floor, one could expect a nice view. Unluckily, despite big windows on one side, the view is blocked by a large concrete building. The chairs are big leather conference chairs, rather comfortable, but which keep turning around too easily if they are not blocked appropriately. Everyone has a little plastic plate either in front of them or tossed on the side, filled with the remains of their unsatisfying and very light lunch. The conversation has been going on for a while, and we start at the end of the departmental assembly.



The Head: The last item on today's agenda is the implementation of the new course *Being a Leader*. As you all saw, you have received an email with the one paragraph course description and preliminary outline two weeks ago. It was just to give you an idea of the course. Anyone has comments or questions before we approve it?

Eli: (*Sitting back on the seat, handing a cup full of coffee*) Yes. I just want to make sure I understood correctly, the course is supposed to be added for the third year of study? Is that it?

Max: So, it's optional. That's the idea.

Eli: Well, it could be in the second year as well, and still be optional...

Max: Right. It could even be both.

The Head: This is a good question Eli. Maybe that is something we could discuss. The plan, for now, is to have the *Being a Leader* course be optional. So, I don't think there is a preferred year for that. My idea was to offer the option to students, and open it to anyone who has completed the first year. But I am open to considering other opinions of course.

Avi: As long as it's not in the first year, it's all good.

Eli: It couldn't be. It's an optional course. First year courses are all mandatory. And we don't have room for any other course in the first-year curriculum. So...

Avi: Maybe it could be mandatory —

Eli: — As I said, the schedule is already packed.

Max: What if one of the first-year course was displaced to another year.

Eli: I don't think that would be wise.

Kim: I am sorry to interrupt, but though I would LOVE to eventually consider the possibility of adding the course to the mandatory ones, I do not wish to impose on my colleagues who are teaching to the first-year students any changes in their schedule. I think we had plenty discussions about the first-year curriculum already amongst ourselves. My goal was not to have our choices put into question again.

The Head: Thank you, Kim. It's clearly not the appropriate time to review the entire first year curriculum, so let's not go down that path today. The question is only to decide, for the near future, if we should give an option to students as to when to take the course, between the second and third year, having in mind that the course, for now, is optional. Maybe we should simply go around the table, so everyone expresses their preference: second, or third? (*beat*) Or choice between the two.

Ray: I honestly don't mind.

Bob: I would tend towards third year. I feel they might be more mature, hence more ready for a leadership course.

Kim: Though I understand your concern about maturity, this course is really not a conventional leadership course. So, even the first-year students would have the maturity, as you call it, to experiment that course and be ready to live the full promise of the course.

Bob: Sure. I didn't want to sound critical or anything.

The Head: It's ok. You can express your preference. Third year is a valid option.

Kim: Well, you probably all guess my position: first, second and third... But for the benefit of this conversation, I will say I would give them the choice between second and third.

Cal: Choice.

Dan: Choice.

Gil: (*Hesitating a lot*) Hum... I... I... (*sigh as if there was no other option*) Choice, I guess.

Eva: Third year only.

Eli: Like I said, as long as it does not touch the first year, I don't have a preference.

Fay: Me neither. What suits you best will be good for me.

Guy: I think I would give the students the choice as well.

Lee: I have been listening to you for the past couple of minutes, and I am a bit concerned. All I am hearing is whether or not this leadership course should be offered to students in the second or the third year. But who said it SHOULD be offered in the first place? I don't recall any discussion as to whether it is appropriate to even offer this kind of course in our program.

Kim: (*Defensive*) What do you mean "this KIND of course?"

Lee: It's a leadership course. We are a School of Industrial and Labour Relations. I've been teaching here for 30 years, and we always have been opposed to courses that were too close with management... Plus, you said it yourself: it's an unconventional leadership course... I don't know for my colleagues, but I took the time to go over the course description and the suggested outline that were sent. I thank you for having done so. It was revealing to me: I am not comfortable with the notion of "ontological leadership," I have trouble with the idea of a "Law of integrity," I —

Kim: — You raise several interesting questions. Ontological leadership refers to the notion of "ontology," which deals with the nature and function of being. This course is about the nature and function of being, as it relates to leadership.

Lee: By uncomfortable, I didn't mean I don't understand it, I meant I don't think it has a place in a program like ours.

Kim: Then now, you're putting into question the content of the course...

Lee: (*Calmly and straightforward*) Oh, not only the content. The methods of teaching as well, as I understood them to be.

Eli: I mean, Lee has a point... You know... I feel the curriculum is already quite filled, and... I don't know, I guess... It's another course, probably very interesting, but still another one that doesn't seem like in line with the SHRM Certification requirements or anything, so I wonder, you know, if it's even relevant.

Sam: The very narrow view of the relevancy of courses through the lens of the SHRM requirements is problematic, and we discussed that over and over in the past few years. We agreed not to touch the first-year schedule for this reason. I suggest we stop referring to the Society to dictate us what we should or shouldn't add in our curriculum. This is university, not the SHRM...

Lee: On that, I couldn't agree more —

Avi: (*Overlapping Lee*) — Besides, I think leadership for Industrial and Human Resource advisors is pretty relevant!

Lee: (*Looking at Avi, a bit annoyed*) BUT I am putting into question the legitimacy of the leadership course within our School for reasons that are way broader than the SHRM requirements.

There is an uncomfortable silence around the table. Everyone is looking at Lee and Kim, alternatively. Lee is visibly hesitating to express the entire opinion out loud. Then, Lee takes a deep breath and goes for it.

Lee: It is nothing more than a personal growth training, probably useful for some people, but I don't see it fitting within an Industrial and Labour Relations school, because it has nothing to do with a labour relations course or a research course...or even a university course, for that matter.

Kim: (*Edgy*) While I don't wish to argue about your "personal growth training" stigma, because I think it would be a waste of precious time for our colleagues to start debating about what should fall or not under "personal growth," the fact remains! This course is a very serious leadership course. It's based on scientific and academic knowledge. It's taught, by ACADEMIC professors, in many other academic faculties. So, there is no doubt this course is academic in nature and has its place within universities' curriculum.

Gil: (*Speaking with hesitation*) I... am sorry... but I kind of see Lee's point: IF it is a personal growth training, then it should not be offered as an industrial relations course, with credits upon completion, with evaluation in grades, I mean, what would we be evaluating...?

The Head: Well... this is a rather harsh critic, you do realize that right? I didn't expect this kind of reaction...

Sam: This is absurd! I followed the Being a Leader course in California, and I have been so positively impressed by the course, its impact on participants, and we have been talking about it for a while, - there was even some articles written about this project in the university newspaper... - to implement the course in our faculty... I mean...

The Head: (*to Lee*) Are you implying this course should not be welcomed in our School?

Lee: Not only in our School, in other faculties and universities in general...I mean, I understand it's taught in other universities, somewhere, but that doesn't make it valid and academic by nature, because of that. For that, it needs to be, I don't know, based on scientific knowledge of some sort...

Kim: (*Annoyed at not being understood*) Well, to my point, it is! The content is based on an academic literature, which was published in several scientific journals, through peer review process, in several fields: neuroscience, education, psychology, management and leadership. Amongst the authors we refer to, to only name a few, there are Michael Jensen, Martin Heidegger, Thomas Kuhn, Noam Chomsky.... Maybe you would need to look at the course material, in length, to understand what I am talking about.

Lee: Thank you, but I already did after asking more information to Sam and --

Sam: -- and you didn't realize from the course readings I forwarded you the richness of the content?!

Lee: Not really. I was really glad you shared those with me though, because it allowed me to have access to the entire content. Everyone should have that before making any decision. Because I have to say that what I read didn't convince me at all. Quite the opposite.

Sam: Maybe it's because it's not the same type of conservative literature that you're used to. You know, this is exactly the line of arguments that was used at first against Feminist studies. You, of any, should recall.

Lee: (*Ignoring Sam's criticism and addressing the next comments to all*) It's not because an academic teaches something that it becomes academic by nature, or of any value. This course is nothing more than an amalgamation of different citations, yes from very serious researchers-

Avi: -- Isn't it what all our papers are? I don't want to seem cynical, but it's what we do: referring to authorities that have already written pieces that are valued to base our own arguments and views on one subject.

Lee: (*Continuing the line of thought pursued before the interruption*) -- but taken out of context. (*To Avi*) Hopefully, our research is more than that! (*And back to the others*) And, more than anything else, what makes it eventually valuable is it goes through a peer review process, which does not guarantee in all cases the scientific value of what is "found" ... or said... but it is still the more sound process to ensure a certain quality, or validity, of the research results as presented... What I mean is, this course, it's like they are trying to by-pass this process, because nothing of what is presented has ever been through this rigorous peer review process, and still is presented as if it has scientific value of any sort. And not only that! But even the method of teaching is problematic --

Gil: (*Spitting the words as if they were pushing to get out my themselves*) -- Ah! Yes! (*Realizing what was just said out loud*) Humm... I actually have a hard time believing we would expose students to that... I mean... come on... right?

Kim: Expose them to what?

Gil: (*Taking a deep breath before deciding to say what was kept for too long*) How on earth can we justify the requirement from the students to be "coachable" to attend the course, from the beginning to the end? It's just... I don't know, it seems wrong in terms of regular, or traditional or you know what I mean, academic course.

Sam: (*Very passionate*) Well on that, I can assure you, you're mistaken. I've had the chance to enroll in this course, and I have to say, it was life changing! The experience I had is just incomparable with any other previous course I've taken...ever! It made me discover the impact of ontological inquiry that invites me to experience myself... humm... just... in ways I've never did before. It helped me become aware of the limits I was placing, and still place, on myself and how those limits affect my effectiveness in all areas of my life.

Kim: Thank you, Sam, for sharing that with us, so authentically. Gil, when we refer to the requirements for students to be coachable, it really only means in the same way we do in all courses, taking the students from point A, when starting the semester, and leading them towards point B, at the end of the semester.

Gil: But then, if it's the same as any other courses, why specifying it and making it an explicit condition to participate?

Kim: Because! Otherwise, we cannot guarantee the participant will experience the full promise of the course.

Gil: Ok, so it's like there's a shift in the responsibility. It shouldn't be the students who should be responsible to be coachable. In other courses, it stays the responsibility of the teacher to offer a teaching methodology allowing to go from A to B. And the students can go along... or not. It's his or her own choice. The way the term "coachable" is used here feels to me invasive, as in "you have to be opened to participate actively, and to let us do to you what we want to bring you to point B," like it is done in personal growth training...

Sam: (*Not able to contain oneself anymore*) Who cares if it's a personal growth training?!

The Head: It's done with the sole intention of caring for students, allowing them to *experience* leadership. It doesn't go against their mental health. From what I understand, we are achieving the contrary with this course. (*To Kim and Sam*) Right? (*And turning back to everyone else*) And we all know how mental health issues of our students are becoming pressing issues nowadays.

Ray: It's true. We do need stress relievers for them.

Avi: Maybe we should think about implementing yoga classes at the same time.

Max: Or allow marijuana on campus now that it's legal...

The Head: Please!

Max: (*To oneself*) Well, it's not worse than pills...

Sam: The fact is: it's an incredible course and we should feel lucky we can offer it to our students. The fact that the course involves authentic sharing of one's own experience and listen to others is key. It allowed me to have first-hand access to my being and actions in those moments; and in having access I then have a choice to employ other possible ways of being and action. It's TRANSFORMATIVE in the most positive way possible. This course challenged me during and beyond the class to critically self-reflect, to consciously apply the material long after the completion of the course. It provided me with possibilities to translate the material into actionable change. Because now, I'm able to discover, and then examine, and loosen the constraints that limit me as a leader, I can experience myself more powerfully in the world. I am also able to continually make myself available to life's possibilities and create futures bigger than myself. I mean, you have to try it, maybe then you will understand!

Max: (*Jokingly*) As we say in French "*L'essayer, c'est l'adopter!*" It's like smoking, the taste is horrible at first, but it doesn't take long before you're hooked to it...

The Head: (*Trying to come back to a more reasonable line of thoughts*) May I suggest we consider the strategic position this course would give us. I would like to hear you all on that...

Lee: What strategic position?

Eli: Well in terms of our strategic academic plan for 2024-2029, it's clear it would give us an edge. That's undebatable!

Lee: Meaning?

Eli: Don't you see it? If we want to be innovative and embrace proactive modes of studying, this is the kind of initiative we have to jump on. I mean, from what I gather here...

Kim: Yes! This course is in right line with the strategic direction we want to take as a School in terms of transformational education. It is using a transformational approach to facilitate opportunities for self-reflection. It engages participants in a way that knowledge is not simply received by them, passively like it is the case often in courses given through lectures, but the course allows for the knowledge to be actively transformed, as the participants learn how to engage others in critical dialogue and be held accountable for their own views.

The Head: That is interesting information. No?

Lee: (*To Kim*) It's ironic you refer to critical dialogue and the necessity to be held accountable for one's views about this course, though, because from what I understood, the method of teaching involves the contrary: the students are not welcomed to question or criticize the course content.

Sam: You got it all wr--

Lee: — Let me finish! The “Rules of the game” to which students must comply clearly state that students must come with an “open spirit” and instructors have the discretion to intervene if some of the attitudes considered as diluting “the power and progress” of the course happens, one of which being described as giving “a comment, opinion, or counter-argument or criticism, disguised as a question” or saying something when presented like “an invalidation of what is being presented in the course rather than looking for a resolution.”

Kim: That is where you're wrong. Again! Participants must be committed, yes, but to ongoing learning, CRITICAL reflection, discovery and transformation. There is nothing obliging participants to blindly follow or agree to everything that is said. All that is asked is to adopt a positive attitude, to allow the course content to sink in, because we know it can be destabilizing for a lot of students, especially at first. So, as a participant, you need to give it a bit of time, and during that time, we simply ask you refrain from closing off, from adopting a posture of refusal, which would not allow you to go beyond that first step of possible shock or discomfort.

Avi: This is exactly what the coach was saying in the acting class I took once...

Kim: (*Trying to calm oneself*) I... I'm... Ahhh... I have to say, I am starting to feel rather disturbed by this conversation. Since when do we scrutinize the material and the way it's conveyed to students like that? I mean, we're all qualified professionals, to teach, to research. Academic freedom, does that ring a bell? I don't recall, luckily, any meeting here, with you all, about another course like that.

Lee: No, indeed. Never since I've been here! No other course like that. You know, academic freedom not only protects us, it also gives us the responsibility to base our research and its dissemination, even in the context of our teaching, on honest and thoughtful inquiry and rigorous analysis —

Kim: (*Overlapping*) — Are you implying I'm dishonest?!

Lee: (*Continuing*) — When a course content is delivered by an instructor, who is reading slides prepared by other authors, without the possibility of changing an iota of the course content... I see a problem there, in terms of authorship.

The Head: But this is not the first course like that. Don't we all borrow the material from our predecessors, as a starting point, when we give a course for the first time? We typically take the very same material, and it's only over time that we change it, that we put it into our words. I mean, what do you do with those courses where the material is even imposed on all instructors, when they are obliged to use the same textbook, so we can make sure the students all receive the same content, regardless of which section they were enrolled in and which teacher they got? (*In a tired tone, as if The Head is discouraged at the lack of honesty from Lee*) You know we do that, even here. Just take the Introduction to industrial relations course for instance.

Lee: (*Getting really impatient*) But this is done at another level! How can you be accountable for "your views" in such a context? When there is not a single one of those views expressed in class that is yours!

Kim: I don't know if it's just me... but it feels like bad faith from you now. Yes, the slides are common to all, but not what is said by the professor when presenting them. That goes without saying! Can't you show me the least amount of trust we owe to each other, amongst colleagues...

Lee: It's not about trust. I'm worried —

Sam: (*Interrupting*) — Lee, it's as if you're trying to stop Kim from giving the course... it's like censorship!

Lee: (*In disbelief*) Wow... hmmm... How can I answer that?

Gil: (*Realizing things are out of control*) Maybe you don't...

The Head: The word is strong, but... Let's not fall into the trap of accusing each other, please.

Kim: (*Trying to be calmer*) So, you're saying you're against creating this new course? That's what I get from your interventions...

Lee: (*Determinate*) Yes. Most definitely.

The Head: This course positions ourselves as an innovative faculty in a moment where universities are taking an important shift in the way learning is understood. (*Turning to Kim*) Doesn't it?

Kim: That's the point. Well, one of them...

Lee: I'm sorry, but I don't agree. It gives the course a strategic position, but not this School.

The Head: What do you mean?

Lee: I mean it provides a good exposure, and more credibility, to the course, which is good for its authors, who are not at all from this faculty by the way, but it doesn't give us, as a School, any comparative advantage as anyone who wants to teach this course can do so after, paying the registration fees and following a brief training.

Avi: This reminds me that my cousin took a course like this one once, in the private sector, and she was thinking about enrolling next year, here I mean. So that's kind of cool. I mean, she could get the course credited right? Since she has already taken it.

There is an awkward silence, everyone looking at Avi, not sure how to interpret the last intervention.

Avi: (*Misinterpreting the silence*) Euh... that is if we do end up deciding we will offer it, of course.

Lee: (*Deciding to ignore his remark*) What I was saying is that the strategic position in which it places us, as you say, is only for a brief period, while we do publicity and give credibility to a course conceived and controlled by external authorities.

Ray: (*Finally daring to speak*) I feel really bad to interrupt at this point... but my class is starting in five, (*getting up super stressed*) I need to go... So sorry...

The Head: (*Smiling encouragingly*) Of course.

Kim: I can't believe this! We need to approve and decide whether the course will be taught in second or third or both years before the end of next week, otherwise the deadline at the Senate will be done. (*To Lee*) You know it. Why do you do this to me now?!

Lee: I —

Gil: — Nobody is doing anything "to you." We are, for once, having a healthy conversation about a common decision to be taken, where we can freely speak our minds. It's about time!

Eli: (*Dissociating oneself from the drama*) Well, I have to go too. Some students are probably waiting now in front of my desk. Ah... these supervisions... hey...

Sam: Maybe you could tell us —

Eli: — I'm sorry, but I've really got to go. (*While leaving*) As I said, I let you decide, as long as the first-year schedule is not into question, I'll approve whatever decision you come up with.

Lee: I don't think we should precipitate anything.

Kim: Of course, you don't! You're not the one needing to meet this deadline!

Gil: The fact that we are last minute to decide on that issue is certainly not our fault and shouldn't influence in any way the way we take this important decision, COLLECTIVELY.

Kim: (*Finally bursting into tears, and while leaving the room in a rush, ashamed by the tears*) I've never felt such a distrust from my colleagues before. I... I just...

Sam: (*Getting up to run after Kim*) Kim!

Lee: Don't take it this way!

Max: Well, what did you expect?

Lee: (*Surprised by Max sudden wisdom*) I never meant to make it personal...

Max: And yet!

The Head: (*Very calmly and authoritatively as to both appease everyone's mood and make sure the message gets across*) Ok, let's stop here. Before the end of the day, you will receive a convocation for an extraordinary assembly, which we will hold within the next few days, so we can have a collective decision on the matter. Please make yourself available for that meeting, as there will be no other one on that issue.

Gil: Hum... maybe I could suggest the course content, the entirety of it, and any other relevant information, be communicated to everyone before that extraordinary assembly...

There is a tense silence, no one knowing how the Head will react to this suggestion.

The Head: (*Sight*) Of course. I'll make sure it's done. Thank you all!

Everyone exits, leaving the room empty, with only the leftovers and the plates lying here and there on the table.

Discussion on Key Learnings

The main objective behind the creation of BAL by Michael Jensen and Werner Erhard was to put Erhard's ideas - as encountered by Jensen in Landmark seminars - under a form that would allow them to gain recognition and spread in academic circles, by the intermediary of "academic course leaders." From this perspective, BAL might be considered an overt attempt to shoehorn a "theory" (or, following BAL self-description, a "discipline") in academia before it has established its academic relevance through traditional peer review processes. The incorporation of BAL in curricula thus raises some fundamental questions concerning the nature and extent of academic freedom. Instead of laying out these issues explicitly, in an intelligible way, and resorting to the rationality of the reader, we chose to resort to an arts-based method. This allowed us to produce a fictitious faculty meeting, anchored through our own experience in academia. Through this dramatization, we were able to lead the reader into delving into the issue of academic freedom in curriculum matters. Reading the play, one is confronted with many questions triggered by the dramatization: is a decision made to teach BAL in one's college an expression of individual academic freedom that ought to be protected? Should such individual academic freedom be understood as extending to any area in which they choose to teach, irrespective of their disciplinary backgrounds, or as restricted to matters pertaining to professors' areas of expertise? In the latter case, what level and kind of expertise is required for being able to invoke academic freedom as a sufficient basis for one's decisions? The numerous questions that emerge as to how academic freedom operates at the collective level also allow the reader to be struck by the complexity of collegial decision-making. Are collegial decisions approving the inclusion of BAL in curricula evidence of a failure to apply

rigorous disciplinary norms in the collegial review process, or of faculty's openness to embrace innovation and the bringing down of disciplinary and epistemological barriers?

The method we resorted to allowed for the transformation of our personal experience into rich data. Through introspection and journaling, we deepened our understanding of the impact of absent clear guidelines around academic freedom in teaching. Left with more questions than answers, dramatization was a way to offer readers the opportunity to be put in the shoes of the writers and can experience – in the absence of clear and known guidelines – the discomfort deriving from the conflicts of views, competing interests and lack of clarity. The issues “discovered” during the research were underlined in the play, hence allowing the readers to make observations and react emotionally to the actions and lines of the different characters. The play format also offers a more holistic grasp of the mechanisms at play, as the emotions of the reader are mobilized throughout the drama, bringing to life in a vivid way the human relations dimension crucial to collegial decision-making, which can be challenging to explain, while intuitively understood at the emotional level. Yet, this type of autoethnography has inherent limitations. It aims at authenticity rather than objectivity. Even though we had extensive discussions with friends and colleagues, both before and during the writing process, and received valuable feedback on our first drafts, our primary source of data was the only lived experiences to which we had a direct access, that is, our own.

One of the challenges we faced concerned the limitations of the written form. Reading a dramatic text and watching an actual play are two fundamentally different experiences. It proved difficult to convey the fiction as imagined in a form both understandable by and captivating for the reader. Having that in mind, and tapping on past writing experience, we explicitly included stage setting, such as the quick drawing of the table and chairs, to ensure that the reader had the same mental image as us while reading the play. The place where each character sits and/or stands in relation with the other characters is important as it has a role in the dynamics at play and the overall atmosphere. In the same spirit, information about the intentions of each character, and their mental state as they evolve during the meeting are provided throughout the play, to allow the reader to more easily “hear” each voice in the tone imagined by the authors. Yet, we think that future reflections on academic freedom could greatly benefit from producing the play and showing it to a public composed of academics. Such performance, followed by a discussion with the audience about the issues raised in the play, would allow for a better understanding of collegial decision-making in academic settings, and set the ground for a broader analysis of academic freedom as it is lived by academics.

One of our hopes while writing the play was to provoke thought and debate on how collegial mechanisms operate in practice, which otherwise remains somewhat hidden. Indeed, the personal accounts we have gathered from a wide range of faculty members in different institutional settings over the years suggest that faculty's willingness to discuss controversial matters and how such discussions are handled vary from one place to another. It is not rare for faculty members to see such discussions as opportunities for revenge or personal gain rather than to achieve better collective outcomes. Conversely, the co-dependency between colleagues that is associated with collegial governance might spur some people to avoid asking questions and expressing doubts or disagreements with their peers, even after they are granted tenure. Thus, one might wonder how frequent discussions such as those in our play are in academia.

In fact, our incursion into ethnodrama and autoethnography provided us with an opportunity to reflect more fully about the very conditions of possibility of disagreeing with one's peers in an academic context.

It goes without saying that we do not expect our readers to engage in a purely dispassionate assessment of our work. Our attempt to make our play as realistic as possible might turn up as a double-edged sword: some readers may be left with the impression that specific characters were modelled after themselves or someone they know, or “recognize” their

own words or institutions in our characters. Offences that were not meant might nevertheless be taken. Like the characters of our play, we find ourselves at the mercy of readers, who are free to engage with our creation as they wish and develop their own interpretation of what our objectives were (and whether they are achieved).

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