



EDUC 500: Research Methodology in Education
Activities
Ethnographic Interview Guide: Academic Freedom
Stephen Petrina

Academic freedom for teachers is traditionally interpreted as freedom of expression. J. Kindred (2006) in the *Education Law Journal* defines the concept as “a right to raise new and controversial ideas in an effort to stimulate thought and the further pursuit of truth . . . a right to critically speak out against their [i.e., teachers’] employers” (p. 217). Clauses guaranteeing freedom of expression under constitutional law protect the freedom to acquire materials for teaching and more generally the professional autonomy to construct or select content, resources, and assessment or instructional methods that are responsive to courses, disciplines, and students. This includes the ability to make professional judgments without coercion or censorship. However, it is important to understand that the First Amendment basically stops at schoolhouse doors in the United States; teachers in Canada continue to be protected by section 2b in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Canadians have generally managed to address academic freedom at district and teacher union levels, or outside of the courts, but analysts describe an erosion of rights in Canada that parallels recent history in the United States, and Canadian judges invariably look south for legal precedent. Generally, academic freedom for teachers, especially in web 2.0 scenarios, can be summed up as a bundle of four freedoms:

- **Free Expression or Speech and Freedom of the Press (Can I Say What I Want?)**
- **Free Inquiry and Thought (Can I Investigate and Think What I Want?)**
- **Regulation of the Media (Can I Report What I Want?)**
- **Academic Freedom & Authority Over Curriculum (Can I Teach What I Want?)**

The purpose of this activity is to collect data on cultures and experiences of academic freedom through an ethnographic interview. Spradley (1979) describes the ethnographic interview as conversational:

When we examine the ethnographic interview as a speech event, we see that it shares many features with the friendly conversation. In fact, skilled ethnographers often gather most of their data through participant observation and many casual, friendly conversations. They may interview people without their awareness, merely carrying on a friendly conversation while introducing a few ethnographic questions.

It is best to think of ethnographic interviews as a series of friendly conversations into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants to respond as informants. Exclusive use of these new ethnographic elements, or introducing them too quickly, will make interviews become like a formal interrogation. Rapport will evaporate,

and informants may discontinue their cooperation. At any time during an interview it is possible to shift back to a friendly conversation. A few minutes of easygoing talk interspersed here and there throughout the interview will pay enormous dividends in rapport.

Work with some of these questions, draw from the Academic Freedom Survey instrument and quantitative data collected, and negotiate other questions.

Ethnographic Interview Guide: Academic Freedom

- **Protocols**
- **Sample questions:**
 1. What does academic freedom mean to you? What is like in your institution?
 2. Do you distinguish between intellectual freedom and academic freedom? If so, how?
 3. In general, what do you think of academic freedom in the schools?
 4. Do you think students ought to have academic freedom? Why or why not?
 - a. Ought they have freedom of thought?
 - b. Ought they have freedom of inquiry?
 - c. Ought they have freedom of expression?
 5. Do you think teachers ought to have academic freedom? Why or why not?
 - a. **Can you Say What you Want (of course within the law)?**
 - b. **Can you Investigate and Think What you Want?**
 - c. **Can you Write and Publicly Report What you Want?**
 - d. **Can you Teach What you Want?**
 6. Can you provide an example of where you experienced either a defense of, or limitation on, academic freedom?