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Karen Campbell

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Book review: Save the world on your own time

Karen Campbell

Darden College of Education, Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership,
Old Dominion University, 2309 Education Building, Norfolk, VA 23529, USA

The author presents a contemplative review of *Save the World on Your Own Time* by Stanley Fish (2008). A methodical review of the book, by chapter, offers the reader insight into the controversial and Fish's thought-provoking views as he addresses the purpose of higher education and the job of the faculty. The author confronts Fish with reason and passion while offering additional insight to the presented challenges and issues in higher education which are subjectively displayed throughout the book. The seven chapters are summarized by highlighting key arguments discussed in the context of the book.

Keywords: Book Review, Stanley Fish, Higher Education, Book Critique, Response Criticism, College Teaching, Academic Freedom, Debates

Save the World on Your Own Time is a thought-provoking perspective about the power of pedagogy, the place of teaching morality and citizenship, and the overall purpose of institutions of higher education. Fish poses the idea that, as subject matter experts, the goal of faculty is to teach students without imposing personal opinion, judgment, or experience on the purity of the advancement of knowledge. He argues that teachers are to do their job, which (for many) include pedagogical issues that Fish does not deem appropriate, such as diversity, civic education, and social justice. He suggests that if faculty members do their job and not someone else's, then issues relating to the purity of academia would be resolved.

The book is divided into seven chapters with an introduction. In his introduction, Fish explains how he arrived at the need to write a book that would help the world understand the purpose of higher education. He admits that his "obsessive-compulsive" disorder has something to do with his need to put things in order. He writes not to solve problems, but hopes, in bringing understanding to the problems, that he will help resolve problems that do exist. He keeps the

solution simple—do your job. His book attempts to answer two major questions: What is the purpose of higher education and what are those who work in higher education specifically prepared to do?

In Chapter 1, “The Task of Higher Education,” Fish examines the mission statements of several universities insisting that, although they suggest the promotion of diversity of experience and the development of civic-mindedness in their students, moral character cannot be developed in a student nor taught at an institution. He suggests that learning to be civil does not make one so, nor does such material have a place in an institution that should promote and endorse the mastery of intellectual skills. In essence, for Fish, the task of higher education is to educate students; not for professors to act as moral, social, or political activists.

Chapter 2, “Do Your Job,” lays out Fish’s cardinal theme. The foundation for Fish’s argument is that institutions of higher learning must clearly define what their job is and do so within the context of their own definition. He contends that the mastery of a professor is to instruct students by introducing them to new bodies of knowledge and allowing them to think critically so that they are able to engage in independent research with confidence. He adamantly maintains that professors should teach from an academic perspective and refrain from sharing their own personal experiences to influence or persuade students. If faculty search for the truth and teach it, then they are indeed doing their job. His point is further explained by suggesting that undergraduate education should not include excessive extracurricular activities and it should not overlap with academic affairs. If activities are extracurricular, they should indeed be ‘extra’ and not an essential part of the academic development of students. Student affairs administrators and staff, if not previously offended, would certainly be after reading this chapter. Within this chapter, Fish (2008) defines “academicizing” and suggests that it is the proper way to teach.

To academicize a topic is to detach it from the context of its real world urgency, where there is a vote to be taken or an agenda to be embraced, and insert it into a context of academic urgency, where there is an account to be offered or an analysis to be performed. (p. 27)

An example of academicizing a discussion of stem cell research with a class would include analyzing the ethical issues surrounding the topic rather than discussing whether the use of stem cell research is a good or bad idea. Fish asserts the question is analyzed rather than debated.

Fish continues to reiterate that doing the job is simple—a professor does what is reasonable to do and leaves more “extraneous” matters (e.g., development of morality, values, etc.) to someone else. Fish’s perspective suggests that faculty members do reasonable service when they teach students to love the subject they teach. Fish summarizes his argument by suggesting faculty should aim to teach what they are responsible for teaching, nothing more and nothing less.

Chapter 3, “Administrative Interlude,” Fish discusses the responsibilities of administrators at institutions and how those jobs impact faculty and others. The

chapter is aptly titled in that it is short and almost seems out of place in the book. In it, Fish characterizes administration as an intellectual task. Acknowledging his role as an administrator at various points in his career path, he sympathizes with the administrator role and is able to define the tasks and strengths necessary to successfully lead in administrative positions. He offers advice to administrators and attempts to outline what their role should encompass in higher education.

The disappointment of this chapter is that Fish specifically addresses the academic side of administration (those who work with faculty), while ignoring the challenges of student affairs administrators. Describing the administrative role through the lens of faculty is understandable (especially given Fish's own faculty background), but his perspective is too narrowly focused. Overall, the chapter is awkward and almost unnecessary in the context of the body of his argument. The chapter simply allows Fish to speak of positions he held as a dean and department chair and acknowledges some of the frustrations he experienced.

In Chapter 4, "Don't Try to Do Someone Else's Job," Fish posits that faculty members must not try to do more than what their job is designed to do—to educate by teaching a mastery skill set without influencing students with personal politics and experiences in the name of education. Fish proposes that citizenship and development of student character should be left in the hands of inspirational speakers, preachers, political activists, and social workers. For a professor to incorporate moral development in the classroom and have political debates is "doing someone else's job."

Fish also addresses how academic freedom impacts the way faculty members teach and suggests that, although freedom to teach a subject in a manner that is digestible requires creative ingenuity, faculty should not teach outside of their realm of expertise. Fish adamantly believes that academic freedom and free speech should not be used in areas in which they do not apply. He submits both have their place and should not be abused by "indoctrinating" students (p. 68). Transmitting knowledge objectively is the job of a faculty member. Fish argues that academic freedom does not allow professors to bring their own personal agendas into the classroom in order to influence students; instead, they should bring their knowledge of their subject matter and teach it with vigor and truthfulness. He suggests that there is a line between academic and political activity and the latter should be done "on one's own time."

In Chapter 5, "Don't Let Anyone Else Do Your Job," Fish argues that higher education should be independent from outside constituents and stakeholders, once again suggesting that the job of the university should be nothing more than educating students. He advocates that the university is for educating students in the academic disciplines asserting as an example that outside

religious organizations can be responsible for moral development, but not universities.

He believes that institutions of higher learning should not define themselves according to the public interest nor allow others to define the purpose of those institutions. Instead, he unapologetically defends the core values of the academy—research, scholarly pursuits, and critical analysis. He admits doing so may not always be the best advice in practical terms, but confidently proclaims it is better to put your own foot forward than someone else's.

Fish also explores democracy within university settings, suggesting that there is a need in higher education to balance intellectual diversity (the presence of both liberal and conservative faculty) in order to ensure that truth is taught through equal faculty representation. Yet, Fish submits that balance is not needed if faculty members do their job; for truth is teaching facts and not pushing personal agendas and political beliefs.

Fish, in Chapter 6, “Higher Education Under Attack,” voices how the federal and state governments continue to regulate institutions while reducing financial support toward their sustainability. He insists institutions should only be accountable to its core values of educating students. He also believes that universities need to be proactive when speaking with public officials and demand what is right even if it means forgoing political correctness. In doing so, institutions of higher education position themselves to fight back.

The chapter concludes with a paradoxical display of thought about whether any of the previous provocative discussion is possible in a society built on the principles of diversity, democracy, and civility. On one hand, Fish states, “maybe the academy will just have to learn to live (and perhaps die) in this brave new world...” (p. 165). On the other hand, he vows that institutions of higher education should stand up for themselves and see what happens.

The final chapter, “A Conclusion and Two Voices from the Other Side,” summarizes Fish's arguments. Fish reiterates the importance of faculty doing their jobs (teaching subject matter in unbiased fashion) and refraining from doing the jobs that belong to other people and organizations. He then offers his audience a different point of view through the introduction of two authors—Mark Bracher, author of *Teaching for Social Justice: Reeducating the Emotions through Literary Study* and Anthony Kronman, author of *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*. Bracher (2006) believes that promoting social justice in the classroom will help students be more compassionate to the suffering that exists in the world. In contrast to Fish, he believes that moral development should be taught in the classroom and emphasizes the importance of cognitive and emotional change in an effort to promote compassion in students (Bracher, 2006). Kronman (2007) also opposes Fish's argument by suggesting that higher education needs to return to the earlier era where teachers helped students investigate the meaning of life and political correctness was not a constraining force in the classroom. He calls for a return to

the era where educators evoked questions of humanity, promoted self-discovery, and encouraged philosophical debate (Kronman, 2007).

The paradoxical and somewhat anticlimactic ending suggests that the purpose of Fish's book is to provoke discussion and perhaps educate the reader on theoretically plausible but often illusory possibilities. Unfortunately, those possibilities do not offer solutions or add to the discussion of other, more prevalent and dominant issues which surround academia today. Administrators of institutions of higher education are more concerned with affordability, accessibility, college readiness of students, retention, and graduation rates. In addition, the economic downturn has generated much discussion about tuition rates and enrollment caps. These are the issues that should be discussed with the passion and vigor that Fish illustrates in his book. Although Fish is idealistic in proposing a utopia in which education reigns supreme, he does nothing more than rant about the state of higher education through personal opinion and experience. The book offers an intellectualized and uncompromising approach to educating students; although honorable, it seems impractical in a society that increasingly values diversity, democracy, free speech, personal experiences, and politics. Reading *Save the World on Your Own Time* will stimulate intense debate about the current state of higher education and spark conversation about its overall purpose; however, it by no means ends the grand discussion about its lived realities.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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