

Academic citizenship as a mediating mechanism

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Abstract

Various skills necessary to conduct mediation—a popular alternative dispute resolution mechanism—from effective trust-building to active-listening can be extrapolated and applied to defining and manifesting good academic citizenship. This essay suggests that learning how to communicate better, by understanding the interest of others while advocating for our own, is an essential—and often lacking—skill for many academics. Not only is communication a sign of respect that we are willing to engage with one another, but perhaps more relevant to the issue of academic citizenship, effective communication entails empathy and kindness, which fosters the willingness for the other side to reciprocate. This feeling of mutual respect and reciprocity are key ingredients to engendering safety and a sense of belonging, which often produce successful outcomes in mediation. This essay, relying on personal narratives, submits that these elements are currently lacking across many pockets of academia, where various instances of failure to communicate have created a sense of distrust and unnecessary acrimony. Learning how to mediate could offer academics a path out of this conundrum, which could also contribute to strengthening our collective sense of academic citizenship.

Keywords: effective communication; mediation; trust-building; weaponizing academic citizenship

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Introduction

Franklin D. Roosevelt once stated that ‘we cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future.’ With news of catastrophic climate calamities and violent wars perpetuated by delusional dictators saturating our headlines, perhaps Roosevelt was right about our inability to ensure a better future for subsequent generations. However, as a teacher, I firmly believed that we could nevertheless inspire and guide the youth of today to be resilient catalysts, capable of constructing and navigating a better future for themselves. Although I have found

this conviction to be waning recently, I am hopeful that academic citizenship could serve as a cure for this malaise, especially if elements of mediation—a form of alternative dispute resolution—could be incorporated into its manifestation.

Two entrenched oppositions

My ebbing enthusiasm about building our youth for the future comes partially as a result of my service on our university's diversity and inclusivity advisory council. There, I have heard one too many stories from our students (and staff) about how the university is not doing enough to provide a safe environment for its community and how it is failing to meet its DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusivity) goals: Their complaints vary from bullying based on religious beliefs or national identities, allegations of serious sexual harassment and assaults, lack of proper mental health support, management refusing to use inclusive language, outright racism, not enough effort being exhausted to prevent drug and alcohol abuse, curriculum that is not decolonized enough or that lack representation from the global South, and so on. To be clear from the onset, this essay is not about how academic freedom or scholactivism per se can remedy these issues (*Cf.* Heinich, 2021; van Gestel, 2021), but rather about organizational management and how universities and their stakeholders can attempt to better address these issues relying on academic citizenship as a galvanizing call for action.

Being an Asian-American in Dutch academia, I have my own personal experiences of feeling ostracized and othered (*e.g.*, whenever I see an all-white corona, which is a rather frequent occurrence, or when I am referred to as 'that Asian teacher'). My personal predicaments aside, the concerning number of issues raised by our students and staff have contributed to the erosion of trust in the institution's ability to effectively address these transgressions. While the university attempts to manage these cascading problems to the best of its abilities (Janssen, 2023), the victims and the marginalized nevertheless feel unheard, believing that their voices have been slighted.

What exacerbates these matters is when students or staff muster the courage to speak up about these wrongs, often against their best interests (Hadley et al., 2023; Edmondson, 2018), they are sometimes brushed off by the university. Their complaints are characterized as mere nuisances from disgruntled personnel and dismissed, or worse, their opinions are suppressed (Ahmed, 2021). Repeated exposure to having their voices ignored often forces the marginalized into taking more radical actions (*e.g.*, organizing protests, leaking scandals to media outlets in the hopes of inciting public outcry, etc.). The inevitable response from those in leadership to such 'drastic' measures is routinely the semi-sympathetic sentiment of 'why didn't you come talk to us first before unnecessarily escalating things?' Not

only is this response insensitive and oblivious to the many instances when the marginalized *did* try voicing their concerns only to no avail (Eddo-Lodge, 2017; Ahmed, 2021), but this unfairly places the burden on the victims, when the weight of that responsibility should have been on the university, or at the very least, been treated as a shared burden for all the stakeholders in the community.

As a recovering lawyer and a late-in-life convert to alternative dispute resolution, I have been preaching to the disenfranchised that they can be revolutionaries without being militant about their causes. Issues are not always so black and white, and they must also see things from the administration's perspective. However, after being exposed to an overwhelming number of scandals and disheartening events at the university, I have been more understanding of those that have resorted to taking more provocative actions. For too long, the marginalized have been appeased with the well-intended but unsatisfying catchphrase of 'be patient, change takes time,' only to see no meaningful or sustainable change materialize fast enough. I have even heard students being condescendingly described as being 'immature' for getting so angry about 'trivial' concerns, and in the process unjustly having their valid concerns reduced into something that is lesser.

To be fair, this predicament is not just about how the university treats its students or the manner in which some of the senior staff punch down on junior staff. I have also witnessed aggressions going the other way, where some students become increasingly critical of staff, and in some instances, are openly hostile and aggressive towards their teachers in an inappropriate, unconstructive manner. I know of colleagues that stay away from discussing certain topics in classes so as not to trigger any students and risk getting cancelled or have (false) claims of misbehavior lodged against them. This type of timid appeasement and self-censorship, I submit, are ultimately detrimental to the quality of the students' education and the institution as a whole.

This is the crux of why I find my conviction—that we can contribute to making our students resilient catalysts, capable of paving their own future—shrinking. I feel lost at times because I know all too well that change *is* indeed slow. Overcoming struggles and climbing over adversity are prerequisites for any meaningful growth that hardens our resilience. I know all of this, but at the same time, I think some of the problems, as noted earlier, require cooperation and more contributions from the institution, as we are dealing with systematic—if not societal—problems. While I have seen beautiful moments of fruitful collaborations at the university with multiple stakeholders involved, I have also seen the divide between the two warring factions widen over the last few years. With regards to addressing the latter, what I am advocating for is not for the university to militantly impose DEI initiatives or for it to remove all obstacles for the students and staff,

but instead, to suggest the two warring fractions (re)learn how to communicate and engage with one another.

This clash between the two entrenched sides and the rotten, acrimonious culture that it breeds—which ends up swallowing those in the neutral middle as victims along the way—is a problem that ‘academic citizenship’ could potentially alleviate (Fisher & Ury, 2012). However, in order for academic citizenship to become a galvanizing call to action that will encourage the two embattled fractions to once again trust one another and to collaborate, academic citizenship must serve as a mediating mechanism. I’ve already witnessed some confirmation bias setting in, with entrenched sides both adopting and continuously reaffirming their respective narratives (*e.g.*, ‘the students these days are overly sensitive and too woke’ or that ‘the staff are obsolete boomers incapable of changing’). This development makes it even more difficult to set the stage for a meaningful dialogue to take place (Harris et al., 2022), but this is precisely what must be done.

Weaponizing academic citizenship

Before elaborating on the idea of academic citizenship as a mediating mechanism, it is worth illustrating how academic citizenship has been defined and used, at least within my circle, to offer some context first. I have tried to change the sometimes-toxic culture that seemingly permeates within various pockets of academia, often under the banner of academic citizenship, through involvements with various groups such as our Young Academy initiative or the university’s Diversity and Inclusivity Advisory Council (Maastricht University’s Diversity & Inclusivity Advisory Council, n.d.). The Maastricht Young Academy, for example, has made a call for those within our university to ‘join the movement towards new academic citizenship’. In our call, we note that:

[A]cademic citizenship means that we all rise up and demonstrate leadership... It means leading by example, leading with empathy and seeing the individual talent of those that we supervise, cooperate with, and mentor. Academic citizenship also includes service: things we do for others, our colleagues and our students that are an integral part of what we do (Maastricht Young Academy, 2022).

While I find this to be a noble—albeit a rather quixotic—vision worthy of manifesting, it is a task much easier said than done. For example, when I try to vocalize and amplify the concerns of students or that of our more junior colleagues to those in management and leadership, I am often countered with the response that while they also find these issues to be important, the management ‘must also

balance a number of other considerations,’ to which I am not privy (*e.g.*, I ask for more transparency in discussing allegations of improper conduct by senior staff, but am told that the privacy of the alleged offender must be respected) (Janssen, 2023). So in the end, I must swallow the decisions of management and trust that their actions are indeed what is in the best interest of the university and its community. To question this would be to solicit the frustration of management and leadership. For example, on more than one occasion, my attempts to mediate the growing gap between the two entrenched sides have not only resulted in me being respectfully brushed aside (*e.g.*, ‘you just don’t have all the facts, but we also can’t tell you all the facts’), but I have also witnessed firsthand how academic citizenship can be weaponized by the institution in order to preserve the status quo.

One specific example of this can be illustrated by my attempts to address the complex issue of implementing inclusive language within my faculty. The executive board of our university signed a policy document committing the university to using more inclusive language back in 2021. This entailed practices such as using gender-inclusive pronouns in official university communications, our course manuals, and in our classrooms. However, I’ve seen many instances of middle-management and other staff continuing to use non-inclusive language (*e.g.*, using *he/she* but not including the all-encompassing *they*) in their official communication (Lee, 2019), which gets posted on an assortment of social media platforms. I have repeatedly commented on these public posts, asking them to be more considerate of using inclusive language (in addition to speaking privately with the people who created the posts). So as not to be militant and bearing in mind that this is still a tricky issue for some, my tone is generally civil, if not self-deprecating (*i.e.*, I apologize for being a ‘DEI troll’) in these posts. However, as a result of my public comments, I have been accused of being disloyal to the institution and being non-collegial. This is how, in my view, academic citizenship can be weaponized: when management labels you as a bad academic citizen for speaking up against perceived wrongdoings. On one occasion, I was ordered by the management to take down a comment about the lack of non-inclusive language in our promotional material, which I respectfully declined to do. This eventually led to a meeting with the management, where I explained that I have the right—as a stakeholder of the institution—to voice my dissent in a civil and respectful manner. I tried to convey how I genuinely cared about improving the culture of our faculty and channeled my inner Henry David Thoreau, an advocate for civil disobedience to incentivize change. I showed them an excerpt of an email that I received from a student who responded to the comment that I had posted, which I share here as well, to substantiate that these small comments made meaningful impacts:

I just wanted to show my appreciation for your remark and integrity. Your comment on that clip may seem small, but for someone who has to fight

everyday against misgendering by classmates and tutors (despite my name tag always displaying ‘they/them’, in addition to my name)—your comment meant the world to me. I’m incredibly tired of fighting for the basic recognition of my identity every single day, and it’s moments like this that allow me to take a break and breathe. You made me feel seen. Thank you.

I even tried to be an academic about it too, noting that in postmodernist thought, language is an expression of power, and using the wrong word could be perceived as a form of oppression, especially when misused by those in authority (Rømer, 2023; Badger, 2022). I warned management that this is exactly what they were doing. When voices that raise concern over these oversights are censored, I added, it is especially problematic. The post in question, where I made my comment, was deleted by the faculty, only to be subsequently reposted without my comment.

At the end of this specific encounter, we agreed to disagree on some of the issues (*e.g.*, whether it was right to publicly speak out against your own institution and colleagues), but we agreed on the big things (*e.g.*, inclusivity is indeed an important issue worth paying more attention to and that it is not okay for those in positions of power to suppress dissenting opinions through intimidation). It was an extremely exhausting and difficult situation, but there were many important take-aways from the conversation: First, it is vital to keep communicating even with those we do not see eye to eye with, as refusing to communicate usually gets us nowhere. Second, speaking up against the alleged wrongdoings of the institution publicly can have serious costs, especially when there is a power imbalance and those in positions of power perceive you as a disgruntled employee (Ahmed, 2021), rather than someone who actually cares about improving the situation. Finally, I can now admit that while it was not my intention, I was perhaps more aggressive and defensive than I needed to be in asserting my arguments to management about the use of inclusive language. This was due in part to my overwhelming sense of self-righteousness (*i.e.*, that I was supporting a just cause) and this attitude made me portray the management—perhaps wrongly—as the villain in this story. In other words, I treated those that I did not necessarily agree with as the enemy and assumed their ill will, which was not the most constructive path towards establishing mutual understanding and institutional growth.

Similarly, there were lessons to be learned for the management side as well: First, those that speak up against an alleged institutional wrongdoing should not automatically be labeled as being a bad academic citizen or disgruntled personnel. Second, civil disobedience—even if it is in the form of something small like comments on social media—could be construed as manifestations of academic citizenship. Lastly, academic citizenship is not just about being cordial to one another, but for university management and leadership to create safe spaces for students and junior staff to speak up about a wrong without the fear or retaliation.

In the words of Zaki (2021), '[t]hose of us in power have a responsibility not only to be kind but also to create ecosystems in which kindness is expected and rewarded' (p. 143). Weaponizing academic citizenship by accusing those that speak up for being disloyal creates serious disincentives, which only contributes to the very problems that we are attempting to redress. This point is not just about the use of inclusive language, but also applies to the full array of issues noted at the beginning, from the increasing workload and caring for our people's well-being to making sure that we can work in a safe environment free of harassment and bullying. These lessons are important to bear in mind not just for the sake of fostering academic citizenship, but for ensuring quality research and good teaching. To paraphrase Maslow, there is no self-actualization or transcendence if there is no safety and a sense of belonging ensured by the institution first (Maslow, 1943). Without these prerequisites, researchers and teachers may refrain from being creative and be discouraged from producing innovative research lines or implementing dynamic teaching styles. This dilemma leads to the question of how institutions and their stakeholders can create such a culture, which brings us back to the main thrust of this essay, which is that academic citizenship ought to serve as a mediating mechanism.

Academic citizenship as a mediating mechanism

While I hesitate to layout my own definition of academic citizenship, I have suggestions as to what it ought to entail. In short, I believe that elements of academic citizenship can be extracted from mediation, a form of alternative dispute resolution. Moffitt and Bordone (2005) list the seven elements of mediation as follows: interests, legitimacy, relationships, alternatives, options, commitments, and communication (p. 280). Taking note of these elements, academic citizenship should be about communicating effectively and respectfully with others in the interest of better understanding different perspectives and beliefs, while advocating for our own views. Communication is a sign of respect that we are willing to engage with one another; at a higher level, effective communication entails empathy and kindness, which fosters the willingness of the other party to reciprocate. This feeling of mutual respect and reciprocity are key ingredients to engendering safety and a sense of belonging (Brackett, 2019). Refusing to communicate or attempts to snuff out dissenting voices, on the other hand, lead to distrust, which creates unnecessary acrimony. We are currently witnessing this scenario play out across various pockets of academia (Täuber & Mahmoudi, 2022).

While the objective of a litigation may be to beat the opposing party in a rather black and white fashion, mediation is a process where—through good communication—the parties identify the issues that are important to them and reach

a workable solution *together*. In doing so the parties can create a better working relationship based on mutual understanding moving forward (Täuber & Mahmoudi, 2022). Thus, mediation is not black or white, but multicolored. Active listening and empathetic communication between conflicting parties is particularly important when there is a power imbalance between the parties. For example, it is not uncommon for leaders to simply prescribe solutions when confronted with a problem, without really listening to the specific needs of those on the ground (*e.g.*, simply mandating allyship training to all). While well-intended, this may perpetuate the perception that the leadership does not *really* care about its people because they do not take the time to listen or understand. Worse, it is entirely possible that some managers simply prefer the status quo, and though they go through the motion of attempting to stimulate change, they are not inherently interested in promoting any (Phillips & Zuckerman, 2001). Keltner (2017) attributes this phenomenon to the power paradox, where those who rise to power sometimes fall from grace because they disconnect from the people once they are in positions of power. A situation like this is exacerbated when management acts only in the furtherance of minimizing their liabilities or avoiding unnecessary turbulence. Similarly, a self-righteous crusade by those that feel disenfranchised could equally prove to be counter-productive and risk snuffing out the embers of good academic citizenship.

The act of listening is also linked to better expectation management, which is vital in any successful mediation. As things stand, there is an expectation management problem in academia, where institutions sometimes misrepresent their credentials and advertise themselves to be more inclusive, diverse, and/or progressive than they actually are. Similarly, people speak of being an ally, but when it is time to step up, they speak of regulations and existing norms that prohibit them from acting on their convictions. It is this gap between what is proclaimed and what is actually accomplished that often leads to disappointments and frustrations. What a good mediation process does is it reveals the possible lies that we are telling ourselves and forces us to have a more honest conversation, not only with the other party, but with ourselves.

In the end, learning to communicate more honestly and transparently—as parties are encouraged to do in mediation—allows everyone to set realistic expectations, thus avoiding any unnecessary disappointments down the line. Applying this to the context of academia, universities must be more honest in their marketing materials that over-exaggerate how diverse, inclusive, and/or progressive they are. Similarly, managers must be better at clearly expressing the limits of their authority and what they can and cannot do instead of over-promising on something they ultimately cannot deliver. Perhaps a more sincere alternative would be to simply offer clear data on the university's composition and to highlight the key policies that it *aspires* to implement so that the (prospective) students and staff can draw their own conclusions about the organization. Offering up mere puffery and

misrepresenting our credentials only serve to artificially inflate expectations that will inevitably be deflated.

Restoring trust through academic citizenship

This essay started with the thought that we may not be helping the youth of today build a better future for themselves. I conclude here by submitting that perhaps academic citizenship may remedy this problem as it ought to inspire us to better guide our students and younger staff to become resilient catalysts, capable of constructing and navigating a better future for themselves. To this end, the task of the university is not to remove all obstacles for them, but to provide them with support and space, where they can figure things out on their own (Zaki, 2021).

We are in an academic environment plagued by serious issues related to diversity and inclusivity, mental and physical well-being, and the general lack of overall support. Some students and staff have unfortunately begun to see the university and its management as an obstacle they must endure or overcome rather than supporters of their growth. This dilemma has contributed to the formation of seemingly two entrenched and warring factions, generalized as the marginalized groups of woke students and junior staff seeking for progressive changes on the one side against the supposedly obstructionist management unwilling or incapable of meeting the lofty demands of the marginalized. Both caricatures are unfair and mostly inaccurate, but these two sides must learn not only to co-exist, but to work together towards a common goal once again. A possible solution to cutting this Gordian knot and to change the status quo is to treat academic citizenship as a mediating mechanism. What this entails is that we all have the duty to start having more sincere and honest dialogues with one another and to stop villainizing the other side. For the necessary mediating conversations to take place, we also have to dislodge ourselves out of the delusion that we are always right and that the other side is wrong, as I had to do with my own experience challenging management on the use of inclusive language. Self-righteous indignation and suppression of dissenting voices are not constructive instruments for good academic citizens seeking to right a wrong. Instead, as academics, we must bask in the opportunity to learn new things especially when we realize that our old way was wrong. In the words of Schein (2017), ‘organizations, their leaders, and all the rest of us will have to become perpetual learners’ to competently navigate a ‘different, more complex, more fast-paced, and more culturally diverse’ future (p. 344).

To quote Marcus Aurelius from *Meditations*, ‘[i]f someone can prove me wrong and show me my mistake in any thought or action, I shall gladly change. I seek the truth, which never harmed anyone. The harm is to persist in one’s own self-deception and ignorance.’ In order for us to go back to being more civil in our

discourse with one another and to work together in resolving our collective concerns, we need to stop being so angry at one another and refrain from being so disappointed when the other side fails to meet our lofty expectations. We have to stop automatically assuming that the other side is evil or that they have bad intentions, because very often, they do not. Being more understanding of others, while being kind and respectful even to those that we disagree with, is what I believe academic citizenship boils down to. So even when it is absolutely frustrating (and it very often is), we have to keep talking to one another, and perhaps more importantly, learn to listen better, because opportunities for learning are all around us. To relieve ourselves of the animosity that only contributes to further pain, all the parties involved would benefit from occasional reminders that we are only human after all, full of faults and capable of being wrong at any given time. The best cure for thinking oneself to always be correct is to constantly subject oneself to voices of opposition and counterpoints. To conclude, let 'academic citizenship' serve as our moral compass, reminding us to stay humble and to keep listening to one another so that we may learn to understand something that we do not yet know.

Author biography

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