Why critique the sacred and the profane in higher education: In conversation with Professor Bruce Macfarlane

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Abstract

This paper contains a conversation with Professor Bruce Macfarlane, a key thinker in debates around what constitutes the sacred and profane in higher education theory and praxis. The authors co-developed questions to ask of Professor Macfarlane as a way to introduce the conceptual framework for the JPHE special issue on 'critiquing the sacred and the profane in higher education.' An emergent reflection from our discussion, and the paper that came from it, is the need to confront taken-for-granted dualisms, to stand back from concepts, and critically consider the work concepts that frame our academic lives as they become positioned as 'sacred' or 'profane.'

Keywords: sacred; profane; higher education; critical thinking; dualisms

Introduction: An interview with Professor Bruce Macfarlane

To foreground our special issue on 'critiquing the sacred and the profane in higher education,' we begin with a conversation. Our subject is Bruce Macfarlane, a Professor of Educational Leadership and Dean of the Faculty of Education and Human Development at The Education University of Hong Kong, who has previously held positions in the UK as well as visiting professorships in Australia, Japan, South Africa, and Sweden. Professor Macfarlane's scholarship explores the sociology and philosophy of higher education, where he theorizes how academic vocabularies and familiar concepts circulate and are given value within the academy. This has included specific work critically reflecting on concepts such as academic integrity, academic citizenship, intellectual leadership, and student performativity. In a 2022 *Times Higher Education* article, he offered the provocation that universities' uses of the sacred and profane to divide and define

academic praxis acts to blunt critical thinking and spaces for resistance. Our special issue is constructed as a response to this provocation and inspired by the same important debate concerning what is considered the sacred and the profane in higher education.

There is a dual rationale for this conversation. Firstly, Professor Macfarlane's intellectual contribution is central to the development of this special issues' themes and his work has provided the justification and framing for us, as editors and contributors, to critically interrogate how the 'sacred' and 'profane' have been re-shaped and what work this does in reframing academic practice, identities, and possibilities for criticality. Secondly, as we position the sacred and profane in continual dialogue and relation to each other, it is apt for us to offer these ideas as constructed 'in conversation.' We therefore invited Professor Macfarlane to reflect on some central themes of the special issue, respond to the contributions presented here, and narrate how these relate to his own empirical and philosophical work. In turning our conversation into what now constitutes this paper, as co-authors, we framed some initial questions to Professor Macfaralane via email. He responded in writing and then we had an online conversation following this to reflect and expand on the written answers. The co-authors used both the conversation and the written responses to construct the narrative that follows in this paper, which we sent to Professor Macfarlane to approve.

Authors: This latest special issue in JPHE is about 'critiquing the sacred and the profane in higher education.' Can you tell us how you are connected to this theme and what it means for you?

Macfarlane: I feel that there are certain words or phrases that we use that have been sanctified in the university and then they become, shall we say, less than sacred over time. So, I think one of the interesting things is words and how they shift their meaning—some that were popular or positive some years ago have turned into something more negative now and vice versa. I am interested in the idea of dualisms in higher education and have written about this previously (Macfarlane, 2015). The relationship between the idea of the sacred and the profane builds on and further exemplifies this ongoing thinking.

Dualisms often have a positive and a pejorative element, such as *deep* versus *surface* learning and *collegiality* in comparison with *managerialism*. They are attractive in enabling us to understand differences in academic praxis but are often overly simplistic in framing concepts as entirely one or the other. I also think it's interesting that dualisms can shift over time and across spaces, and the *profane* can become the *sacred* and vice versa. An example of this, for me, is *ivory towers*,

which, as a phrase, used to be positively associated with academic independence and freedom of speech but is now a profanity associated with privileged intellectual distance from 'reality.' The new sacred term for academic life might be *engagement* or perhaps even *impact*. A final thought that made me interested in the idea of the sacred and the profane is how certain terms, such as neo-liberalism, have become practically swear words and tend, as a result, to be used too easily in a dismissive and often inaccurate way to stand in for everything bad taken together. I was left with a sense that the sacred and profane as dualisms require further interrogation.

Authors: Can you say more about why is it so important to critique the sacred and profane in higher education and to understand how the value ascribed to certain concepts evolves over time?

Macfarlane: I think the history of how concepts are employed within fields of inquiry means that it is essential to interrogate the sacred and the profane as they emerge within critical higher education studies. I have already given the example of the *ivory tower*, a phrase that is now seen as an arrogant disregard for society but was not always understood in this way. Nor is it understood in the same way across different contexts, which I have certainly experienced, for example, in comparing academic identity across the international contexts I have worked in. Our attitudes to research have shifted as part of this change, I think. People used to take pride in saying that they were doing a piece of *independent research* based on their scholarly hunches and formed through philosophical or empirical endeavor but now such work is characterized by less positive language as *curiosity-driven* and *unfunded*. Again, such work is linked back to this internalized, self-absorbed gaze represented by the increasingly pejorative use of the phrase *ivory tower*. Only research in receipt of funding from so-called prestigious bodies is now accorded respect. Therefore, it might be important to ask why philosophic or curiosity-driven research, which is now generally looked down on as being something you should be ashamed, rather than proud, of doing and something very valuable and important even though it's not funded. It's also important to ask what kind of interests drive certain funding, for instance when the industry becomes a part of the picture. This is an example of the way that the changing conception of what research is has changed perceptions and our discourse about academic life. It is something I wrote about in a paper called the 'Spirit of Research' a few years ago (Macfarlane, 2021b). My interest in the sacred and the profane comes out of my increasing attention to how our collective values and attitudes within higher education have subtly altered over time and across different places and spaces. There is a need to turn attention to what happens to academic work, student life, and learning and to a wider understanding of the

university when meanings of concepts become differentially valued or—more or less sacred—in these ways.

These processes of sanctifying or making profanity out of certain things that are occurring are going on in higher education all the time—and can represent a form of moral panic. For example, there's a lot of talk now about ChatGPT and chatbots and AI. There's a lot of people saying, well, maybe it's going to be the end of the world as we know it. Obviously, earlier we had a moral panic about the Internet. And, one that I remember as well is the moral panic in the early 1970s about the use of calculators in schools when it was said that this was the end of mathematics as we know it. Certain things stand out as concerns, and we tend to underestimate the importance of other things. Or, alternatively, these contexts produce a panic that what we hold sacred is now under threat.

Authors: JPHE focuses on the development of praxis in higher education. What might a focus on 'critiquing the sacred and the profane in higher education' open intellectually and practically in terms of praxis?

Macfarlane: I tend to think of 'praxis' simplistically as about academic practice. I used to be an educational developer some years ago and this gave me day-to-day opportunities to work with others on their academic practice and gain an insight into how intellectual ideas are translated into classrooms and students via academic teachers. One of the risks of the sacred and profane is that it might make academics unwilling to question received wisdom. One of the arguments I used to have with other academics was around the idea of *surface* learning with most accepting the idea at face value that they wanted their students to learn more deeply about concepts and ideas. Perhaps it might seem perverse to suggest this, but I used to argue that there was nothing wrong with surface learning and that, as academics, we should be less censorious about how students learn. After all, all of us are bombarded with too much information every day, so surface learning is an important life skill if we are not to be overwhelmed, and we need to strip out what is not necessarily of most interest to us as learners. But I remember that this was not always a popular argument, as I was arguing against something sacred—that only *deep* learning was valued and valuable. This is something drummed into new academics on teaching and learning programs. They tend to sanctify this idea of deep learning as opposed to surface learning. And what this embeds, is just a career-long disappointment with students for not being sufficiently in love with their subject.

Dualisms obviously make things understandable and oversimplify things at the same time. For instance, I co-wrote a paper quite recently about the use of

tradition as a word in higher education, and how people use it in a very casual kind of way (Macfarlane & Yeung, 2023). For instance, we often talk about traditional and non-traditional students. What's interesting is that people hardly ever define what they mean by *traditional* students, but always define what they mean by *non-traditional* students. That could be a working-class student, someone who's mature, an international student, someone working part-time, etc., etc. There are a dozen different ways to define this. People assume that everyone understands what the word tradition means, and what is given. But actually, it's often the *given* we should talk about. That applies to the sacred/profane too—we often take the sacred as a given, and we only intend to interrogate the profane. We make assumptions about what the sacred actually is because we internalize the idea too easily, too rapidly, and often not critically enough. We are guilty ourselves of sanctifying terms, particular writers, particular thinkers, and particular methodologies, I guess, as well. And that is often a barrier to intellectual thinking, flexibility, and advancement. I think that that's where this can be quite important because it is so important to question the status quo on things.

In all university-level learning, it is important to me to maintain a critical distance from concepts and ideas that frame our everyday working lives and not fall into what I regard as the trap of being an advocate. I agree with Stanley Fish that it is not the job of the university to advocate anything but to stay critical about all knowledge claims or, 'academic freedom urges the interrogation of all propositions and the privileging of none' (Fish, 1999, p. 40). This is not necessarily a popular position, though, as it questions how universities like to posture on social issues concerning things such as UNESCO's sustainable development goals. I am quite skeptical about the virtue of universities signing up for this sort of corporate activism (see Macfarlane, 2021a) because it creates constituent corporatized models of thought that decenter independent academic thinking. So, to me, there is a praxis concerning the way that academics work but also a wider one in terms of how this debate plays out at an institutional or corporate level.

Authors: The apparent gap in attention to the theme of the sacred and profane in the higher education praxis literature prompted this special issue. However, what related research and writing do you think is important in exploring this theme? While understandings of the sacred/profane can be applied in contextual ways, we recognize how these intellectual concepts emerged from a Western canon. Because of this, how might research from the global south expand understanding? Can you think of specific contributions?

Macfarlane: The nice thing about the sacred and profane theme is that we can draw

on the truly multidisciplinary and global nature of higher education as a research field. I have already touched on the importance of history, something that I think is often neglected in the literature. But clearly, someone with a language and linguistics background and an interest in morphology could bring a lot to the analysis of the sacred and profane as well. The richness of higher education studies to me is always in the perspectives people bring from other geographic contexts or disciplinary fields of inquiry. Many of our leading thinkers and writers are sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, historians, and so on rather than simply higher education specialists. I think that examining the sacred and profane beyond the Western canon is another brilliant idea suggested by your question. Essentially this is about moving beyond artificial boundaries that we have collectively imposed on our thinking and also recognizing the limitations of our scholarly backgrounds. I know that my own is not even sufficient to fully appreciate the Western canon fully, let alone research from the global south as well. It is great to see higher education studies opening in this way though. Specifically in the special issue, it is good to see critical attention on how concepts are positioned as sacred or profane from multidisciplinary and different global perspectives.

It's also a question of what themes and thinkers are covered in the literature. At my university in Hong Kong, we are organising a 'Critical University Studies' conference with a group of international academics. A lot of people who write about universities in this kind of critical vein write about familiar targets for criticism such as neo-liberalism and modern managerialism. I think, from my point of view, academics can occasionally be hypocrites in writing about all the things that are wrong with the university but not with our own academic profession. We ought to upend our own pretensions and hypocrisy as academics a bit sometimes. Afterall, for all those academics who hate 'performativity,' we are a competitive group of people, and there are those who are complicit with this agenda, and their egos feed off it. Even the journal, focusing on praxis, is a classic example of a kind of sacred term that could be opened up to more critique perhaps.

Authors: Do you have any reflections or comments on the titles/themes and contributions contained in the special issue?

Macfarlane: I think the contributions are varied and fascinating. Degn et al.'s paper on the profanity of management made me think of some reflections of my own experience. For example, I rarely, if ever, tell people that I am a Dean of a faculty or, a senior manager. I normally just say that I'm a Professor at a university because, to me, this is more important to my identity as an academic. That gives you a voice. It's interesting how management has become such a profanity in the UK, and

possibly in other Western contexts and in Australia too. It makes it very difficult to work in those kinds of roles.

There are other examples in the special issue of the 'closure' of concepts through binaried thinking. The article by Barnett on 'Bildung' richly theorizes how recognized models of thought narrow possibilities for wider understandings of what the university is and could be. Laugesen and Grimm's paper similarly offers a rich theoretical framing for how we are understanding concepts that are sacred. Finally, Olsen-Reeder's work on 'tapu' is unique in exploring how only very narrow forms of post-Covid pedagogy are considered 'sacred'—again, resulting in closures and erasures for critical thought. However, the idea that teaching and learning has a new respect because of the pandemic is not an argument I find convincing myself. In fact, the way I look at it is that the pandemic has been an excuse really, to reduce the autonomy of academics around teaching and learning, so decisions that you would have made yourself, like scoping out how much time to spend on seminars and lectures and balance this sort of thing with assessment, have been taken away or at least interfered with in some way. And I don't know in the post-pandemic world whether people are going to get those things back. So, I'm not sure whether the freedom to teach has really expanded, if that was the argument of the paper. I believe it has diminished because of all of this because a lot of universities were pushing out very firm messages that constituted more than advice as to how much time you should spend doing X, Y and Z. And so that's my concern with this whole business. So, I don't know whether the universities really look at teaching and learning with a great deal of respect or those educational developers who support it. Anyhow, these kinds of reflections demonstrate that the papers in this special issue are offering critical attention to the dualisms of sacred and profane 'in action' and across different contexts. This is something that is generally missing from the field of higher education studies. They are all very different and diversity is important, too, in interpreting what is sacred or profane. There is no universal understanding here, and this is precisely why the fixing of practices as one or another is problematic.

Authors: When you are thinking of higher education in the future and the challenges ahead, why might critical attention to the sacred and profane retain importance?

Macfarlane: I think that the sacred and the profane will always retain importance as a theme that can be returned to as the nature of what is 'traditionally' thought of as sacred or profane shifts over time. We need constant scrutiny and possible revision. If this does not occur, then thinking will ossify rather than advance. I think

there is further work to be done in reflecting on how concepts travel 'across' places as well further to my interest in the history of what concepts 'used' to stand for. I notice, for example, how academic leadership is experienced and embodied very differently in the management roles I've held in the UK and Hong Kong. The latter context positions academic leaders as more 'sacred'—but with the possible result that things go unchallenged, which in the UK would not happen. Perhaps there is more to consider about how and why sacredness travels.

Closing reflections

As editors of this special issue, we owe our thanks to Professor Macfarlane for his reflections on the sacred and profane given in our conversation and within his ongoing scholarly work. We are inspired by his emphasis on the need to confront taken-for-granted dualisms, to stand back from concepts, and to critically consider the work concepts that frame our academic lives as they become positioned as 'sacred' or 'profane.' Moreover, we are struck by Macfarlane's call to 'move beyond artificial boundaries' specifically about what is deemed—put simply— 'good' or 'bad' academic praxis and to continue to critically confront how the language of higher education praxis constructs our work and identities.

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