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Social Work Education

The International Journal

ISSN: 0261-5479 (Print) 1470-1227 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cswe20

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To cite this article: Hyacinth Udah, Wili Suluma & Lucy Jordan (21 Feb 2026): Academic freedom as an ethical imperative: pedagogies for teaching across difference in social work education, Social Work Education, DOI: 10.1080/02615479.2026.2633210

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2026.2633210

Published online: 21 Feb 2026.

SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2026.2633210

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Academic freedom as an ethical imperative: pedagogies for teaching across difference in social work education

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ABSTRACT

Social work education requires more than technical competence. It demands ethical judgment, critical reasoning, and the capacity to engage constructively with contested social issues. This article argues that academic freedom is not an abstract principle but an ethical and pedagogical imperative for social work education as a regulated, practice-based profession. In the context of neoliberal governance, accreditation pressures, and ideological polarization, academic freedom enables social work educators to design learning environments where diverse intellectual traditions including critical, decolonial, Indigenous, liberal, conservative, and faith-based perspectives can be used rigorously and ethically for preparing socially responsive practitioners. Drawing on social work pedagogy literature, this article moves beyond theory to outline teaching strategies and assessment tools that enable educators to teach contested content ethically without coercion or self-censorship while meeting accreditation and accountability requirements. By offering a practice-oriented model for teaching across difference, this article demonstrates how academic freedom strengthens professional identity formation, critical thinking, and ethical competence in social work education.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 26 December 2025
Accepted 10 February 2026

KEYWORDS
Academic freedom; critical thinking; ethics and pedagogical pluralism; professional identity; social work education

Introduction

Social work education operates at the intersection of ethical commitment, professional regulation, and contested public discourse. As a practice-based profession grounded in social justice, human rights, and respect for human dignity (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2020; Canadian Association of Social Workers [CASW], 2005; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021), social work requires graduates who can think critically, reason ethically, and work effectively with those who are most vulnerable, marginalized, and historically excluded (Udah & Francis, 2021). In practice, social workers play essential life-saving roles, requiring not only technical competence but also ethical judgment, the capacity for critical thinking, reflexivity, and constructive

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engagement with contentious social issues (Carson & Kerr, 2020; Francis & Udah, 2020). Around the world, social workers are committed to challenging injustice, advocating for equality of outcomes and systemic change, and working with clients and communities holding diverse and sometimes conflicting values (Mapp et al., 2019; Udah & Francis, 2021). In this context, academic freedom is not a discretionary privilege but a condition for ethical professional formation.

However, contemporary social work educators face profound challenges in today's socio-political climate characterized by ideological polarization, regulatory surveillance, political contestation, state interventions in curriculum design, and contested truths (Lynch & Ivancheva, 2015). Topics central to social work's professional competence such as racism, colonial legacies, gender, religion, migration, child protection, family violence, and social policy are frequently contested in public and institutional debates. Educators who deviate from state sanctioned curricula may face pressures either to avoid or present them in overly constrained ways. In Australia, the United States, and Europe, neoliberal agendas increasingly undermine social work's core commitments to social justice (Robinson & Macfarlane, 2021). Voices that challenge systemic racism, while advocating alternative ways of knowing and doing, are often policed, delegitimised, or marginalized under the guise of neutrality (Udah, 2025). In some cases, they are silenced and exposed to significant personal and professional risks (Gatwiri & Udah, 2024; Khatib, 2025). Although this silencing often operates through soft power, it nonetheless exerts real influence (Lynch & Ivancheva, 2015) and risks undermining social work education's ethical mandate to prepare graduates capable of navigating moral complexity, disagreement, and uncertainty in practice. These pressures directly shape how educators design curriculum, facilitate dialogue, and assess students' engagement with controversial practice issues.

Despite social work's longstanding commitments to social justice (AASW, 2020), social work education remains anchored in epistemologies that position Eurocentric worldviews as universal (Udah, Tusasiirwe, et al., 2025). While British and American models continue to inform social work training and practice, Indigenous knowledge systems and alternative epistemologies are routinely marginalized. As a result, social work education often reproduces, rather than disrupts, colonial logics in curriculum design, teaching, and professional formation (Mills & Creedy, 2021; Morley & O'Bree, 2021; Udah, Tusasiirwe, et al., 2025). As educators, our responsibility extends beyond knowledge transmission to cultivating transformative praxis where reflection and action are directed at dismantling the structures that sustain inequality and oppression (Freire, 1970). Central to this mission is academic freedom, which can sustain conditions for diverse pedagogical approaches to coexist within a pluralistic learning environment. Without academic freedom, educators lack the pedagogical space to ethically introduce, compare, and assess Indigenous and alternative epistemologies alongside Western social work frameworks.

This article, therefore, focuses on social work education as a practice-based, regulated profession where academic freedom must be enacted within accreditation, ethical codes, field education, and public accountability. We argue that academic freedom is a practical pedagogical condition necessary for ethical, critical, and inclusive social work education. When exercised responsibly, academic freedom enables educators to teach contested content not through ideological conformity or silence but through structured intellectual

pluralism, transparent facilitation, and assessment designs that evaluate reasoning, and strengthen critical thinking, ethical judgment, and professional identity formation rather than political conformity (Udah, 2025). Throughout this article, we assess pedagogical quality by the rigor of ethical reasoning and professional judgment developed not by students' political or moral conclusions.

Rather than framing academic freedom as opposition to accountability, we demonstrate how it can coexist with accreditation standards and professional ethics. In the context of debates around ideological plurality and accreditation standards, the article proposes diverse pedagogical approaches that include critical, decolonial, Indigenous, liberal, conservative, faith-based, and interdisciplinary perspectives. These approaches reinforce social work's mission to cultivate critically engaged practitioners capable of navigating ideological diversity, ethical ambiguity, and systemic injustice. Building on critical pedagogy (Freire), engaged pedagogy (hooks), and the pedagogy of ethical discomfort (Boler & Zembylas), the article introduces practical teaching strategies and assessment approaches for implementing academic freedom that are intentionally designed to be adaptable across diverse institutional and jurisdictional contexts. We conclude that defending academic freedom is a professional and pedagogical necessity, one that safeguards pluralism, supports accreditation standards, and enables transformative learning across diverse worldviews.

What academic freedom is and is not?

Academic freedom is the right of educators and students to teach, learn, research, and publish ideas without interference, while remaining accountable to professional ethics, accreditation standards, and legal obligations. It protects inquiry, dialogue, and critique in relation to difficult, unpopular ideas or contested social issues (Udah, 2025). Importantly, academic freedom is distinct from the imposition of any single worldview and should not be understood as a license for indoctrination. It also is vital for the independence of scholarly work (Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Jackson, 2023; Lynch & Ivancheva, 2015). Academic freedom is, thus, not only the right of individual scholars but also the right of communities of knowers to name their own world (Freire, 1970; Lynch & Ivancheva, 2015). For social work educators, this matters because it means being able to design learning activities, case discussions, and assessments that engage contested social issues without fear. It means also the ability to interrogate professional norms, critique policy, and engage with alternative epistemologies without fear of institutional sanction or interruption (Morley & O'Bree, 2021). This is essential for educators preparing students to work ethically with clients whose beliefs challenge professional or personal assumptions.

Academic freedom creates the space to listen and learn ideas that challenge entrenched assumptions, generate discomfort, and yet remain indispensable to ethical teaching and transformative learning (Jackson, 2023). Within social work education, academic freedom must coexist with duties of care, nondiscrimination, respect for diversity, and professional accountability. We, therefore, reject definitions of academic freedom that equate it with teaching only critical or decolonial perspectives, just as we reject definitions that restrict educators to so-called neutral or technicist frameworks. Instead, we define academic freedom as the pedagogical

condition that allows multiple intellectual traditions such as critical, decolonial, Indigenous, liberal, conservative, and faith-based pedagogical approaches to be examined and used side by side. For educators, this means designing learning activities where students analyze the same practice scenario through multiple theoretical lenses, assess the reasoning quality across different approaches, and develop their own professionally defensible positions rather than adopting a prescribed viewpoint.

Rethinking academic freedom, therefore, involves recognizing diverse pedagogical approaches and exposing the cultural biases of dominant intellectual traditions that constrain capacity to understand realities beyond Cartesian frameworks (Lynch & Ivancheva, 2015). This is because, as social workers, we often work with individuals, families, and communities whose beliefs and values differ from our own. Education that, embraces freedom and respectful engagement across difference is, therefore, essential preparation for ethical practice. Academic freedom enables educators and students to critically engage with complex, morally charged, and politically sensitive issues. It is, therefore, not simply a theoretical aspiration but a practical condition for preserving the ethical integrity of social work education (Udah, 2025). Free from unnecessary pressures or interruptions, academic freedom allows educators to expose students to diverse intellectual traditions, encourage critical thinking, and foster deep reflexivity (Chilisa, 2019; Jackson, 2023). Without such freedom, students' ability to think differently in contexts of moral ambiguity and systemic injustice is diminished (Francis & Udah, 2020). Thus, academic freedom is the enabling condition for diverse, transformative, and socially just pedagogies in social work education.

Positionality and reflexivity

Our pedagogical commitments are shaped by our diverse social locations and teaching contexts. The three authors were born and raised in Nigeria, Fiji, and the United States respectively, and now work in Australia. We acknowledge that the lands, on which we live and work, are unceded Indigenous lands. Rather than offering autobiography for its own sake, we frame our positionality as a pedagogical responsibility. While our journeys are distinct, they intersect through shared experiences of navigating migration, and the complexities of belonging. Together, our positionalities strengthen our commitment to building pedagogical practices across difference in social work education. We present our positionality to model for educators how reflexivity can be ethically enacted as a teaching practice rather than a confessional exercise.

In social work, we believe educators must model reflexivity, transparency, and ethical humility in how knowledge is presented, debated, and assessed. Reflexivity in this sense is not about centering the educator's identity but about modeling professional practice. By making positionality explicit and inviting multiple viewpoints, educators demonstrate how social workers can engage disagreement without coercion, moral judgment, or silencing. These are essential professional skills in societies where practitioners must work ethically across differences in culture, belief, politics, and worldview. As educators, we hold that academic freedom is not an optional extra in teaching. It is a necessity and an ethical imperative for ethical and inclusive social work education and practice.

Recognizing our positionality, we now turn to examine the necessity of academic freedom in social work education.

Academic freedom, social work education and intellectual pluralism

In an academic and social landscape that often resists dissent, academic freedom is increasingly contested. In most places, academic freedom is not guaranteed but often conditional and dependent upon one's professional status and the wider political context (Jackson, 2023). This is because our universities[1] have evolved into corporate entities, represented by managerial elites and more closely aligned with state or multilateral agencies than with their academics (Lynch & Ivancheva, 2015). These institutional constraints directly shape what educators can teach and how they teach it. In Australia for example, changes to funding models have intensified political scrutiny of academic work (Morley & O'Bree, 2021), affecting curriculum design decisions, the selection of readings, and even whether educators feel safe facilitating discussions on contentious topics like Indigenous child removal or asylum seeker policy. In the United States, legislative bans on teaching critical race theory and diversity-related content have directly reshaped curricula (Jackson, 2023), forcing educators to navigate compliance requirements while maintaining their ethical obligations to prepare students for anti-racist practice. In the United Kingdom, neoliberal reforms have marketized service delivery and reoriented training toward technicist models of practice (Jackson, 2023; Lynch & Ivancheva, 2015), affecting what educators feel able to teach, how they can assess student learning, and how safely students can develop independent ethical judgment. Across these contexts, educators must navigate not only accreditation and competency requirements but also the political and institutional pressures that determine what can be taught, discussed, and debated.

As (Udah, 2025) observes, academic freedom creates the space to challenge exclusionary practices, interrogate power relations, and advance social justice, human rights, and systemic change. Yet under neoliberal governance in contemporary societies, social work education has been stripped of much of its critical edge, prioritizing technicist, competency-based, and evidence-driven models that often reinforce dominant ideologies (Morley & O'Bree, 2021). Although accreditation standards, professional codes of ethics, and competencies are important for maintaining public trust, they can unintentionally narrow pedagogical scope. In practice, this manifests when educators avoid assigning readings that critique child protection systems, hesitate to facilitate discussions about structural racism in service delivery, or design assessments that reward procedural knowledge over critical analysis. When educators resort to self-censorship out of fear of departing from accepted models, they risk reproducing rather than challenging hegemonic worldviews (Giroux, 2010). Students consequently graduate with technical skills but limited capacity to question whether current practices serve or harm the communities they work with.

We argue that academic freedom, coupled with critical thinking, is essential in social work education and training. If we are serious about creating a socially just and inclusive society, we must acknowledge and legitimize alternative epistemologies, interrogate exclusionary practices, and speak to the profound discomfort that accompanies the recognition of privilege. For example, a pedagogy of ethical discomfort (Zembylas,

2015) is crucial, compelling both teachers and students to confront how the Other is dehumanized not only in explicit acts of discrimination but also through everyday erasures, silences, and invisibilisations. Although, discomfort-based pedagogy has attracted significant criticism (Fenton & Smith, 2019), often because it is conflated with practices that shame students, assign collective guilt, or reduce individuals to group identities. We explicitly reject pedagogical approaches that rely on shame, blame, or identity-based moral accusation because they are inconsistent with social work's ethical commitments to dignity, nondiscrimination, and respect. For educators, this means designing reflective activities that prompt self-examination without moral judgment. For instance, asking students to analyze how their own assumptions about good parenting might differ from those of clients from different cultural backgrounds, and what implications this has for practice, rather than labeling students' assumptions as inherently problematic.

Also, scholars such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), Mignolo (2009), Quijano (2007), and others advocate for a decolonial turn in social work curriculum and field education, one that critically addresses the persistent manifestations of coloniality and re-centers marginalized ways of being, doing, and knowing. For social work educators, this translates into concrete curriculum decisions such as incorporating Indigenous perspectives when teaching family intervention models, analyzing how colonial histories shape contemporary child welfare policies, or using Ubuntu philosophy alongside Western developmental theories when discussing human growth and behavior.

Mignolo (2009) reminds us that decolonizing knowledge is itself a critical dimension of academic freedom. As Lynch and Ivancheva (2015) argue, what is needed is not merely a paradigmatic shift within existing disciplines but a reframing of the very questions we ask about the world. As educators, we enact this by moving beyond 'how do we assess this family?' to 'whose definition of family wellbeing are we applying, and who benefits from this definition?' This reframing changes not only classroom discussions but also the assignment designs, moving from 'write an assessment report' to 'compare two assessment frameworks and analyse whose voices are centred in each.'

In social work education, therefore, academic freedom must be exercised alongside accountability. Educators remain bound by professional ethics, accreditation standards, anti-discrimination obligations, and duties of care to students (AASW, 2020). Academic freedom is not diminished by intellectual pluralism; rather, it is strengthened when classrooms are designed to welcome and examine diverse pedagogical perspectives, so students learn to engage difference ethically and professionally. Accordingly, we define intellectual pluralism as a pedagogical commitment to structured diverse viewpoints (Jackson, 2023). Educators are encouraged to deliberately design learning that brings competing frameworks into dialogue, teach students how to disagree respectfully, and assesses the quality of reasoning and ethical justification rather than ideological alignment (Giroux, 2010). This approach is consistent with social work's professional mandate to work effectively with diverse communities, beliefs, and values in complex settings.

Pedagogical approaches for diverse thinking, teaching and training

Accreditation standards are essential for ensuring accountability and maintaining professional quality in social work and education. Accreditation standards

establish consistent benchmarks for professional training. However, when applied rigidly, these standards can restrict freedom and create problems between compliance and academic freedom (Morley & O'Bree, 2021). Pedagogical approaches that integrate diverse epistemologies are, therefore, important. Such approaches not only offer distinct perspectives that disrupt dominant paradigms but also fundamentally shift how students understand and reconceptualize social problems and imagine alternative solutions (Payne, 2020). Exposing students to such frameworks should, therefore, be viewed as core pedagogical responsibility, not an optional add-on.

Research demonstrates that pedagogies designed to provoke reflection can stimulate deep learning. For instance, Mills and Creedy (2021) illustrate how Indigenous health curricula, employing a pedagogy of ethical discomfort, prompt students to engage in critical self-examination of their ideological assumptions, leading to transformative learning experiences. Similarly, Nolan and Molla (2018) provide a framework for using critical pedagogy strategically as a tool to shift professional dispositions. In our own teaching practice, students reported increased reflective capacity when given scaffolded journaling opportunities. Below, we present some pedagogical approaches necessary to prepare students for the complexities of contemporary social work practice. These approaches can deepen critical reflexivity, interrogate epistemologies by, for example, asking students to analyze a case study using both Western social work frameworks and Indigenous relationality principles, and extend students' capacity for social justice-oriented practice. Translating the principles of academic freedom and intellectual pluralism into teaching practice, they offer educators practical pathways for fostering ethical reasoning, critical engagement, and professional identity formation in diverse learning environments:

Critical pedagogy through dialogical classrooms

Paulo Freire (1970) presents education as a political and transformative act. He advocates for a model that promotes critical thinking, dialogue, reflection, and action. At the heart of Freirean pedagogy is the conviction that learners are active co-creators of knowledge who must become conscious of their social conditions, recognize how power operates through the production and circulation of knowledge, and engage in praxis, a combination of reflection and action aimed at transforming oppressive structures. Freire (1970) criticizes mainstream education as a *banking model* in which teachers deposit and transmit knowledge to students without students becoming critical, engaged and decolonial. For Freire, education is never neutral. His problem-posing education frames learning as the practice of freedom, where educators and students work in partnership to investigate reality and imagine alternatives.

To respond practically to accreditation standards and classroom realities, critical pedagogical dialogical `strategies such as structured debates, Socratic questioning, case-based discussions, and student-led seminars on contested issues encourage students to question dominant ideologies, analyze social structures, and reflect on their own positions within systems of power and privilege. Thus, critical pedagogy is

grounded in critical consciousness (conscientização) and praxis. Critical consciousness emerges when learners reflect individually and collectively on the structural forces such as race, class, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability that shape practice. Praxis links reflection and theory to action, enabling educators and students to collectively identify problems, analyze their roots, design responses, act, and evaluate outcomes (Freire, 1970; Todić & Christensen, 2022). This cyclical process cultivates both analytical capacity and transformative practice.

Interdisciplinary teaching

Interdisciplinary teaching enriches social work education by expanding students' conceptual and analytical frameworks. Incorporating insights from other disciplines such as law, economics, anthropology, public health, and allied fields can introduce students to alternative analytical tools and use epistemologies beyond social work knowledge and practice (Fook, 2022; Payne, 2020). For example, joint seminars with law students provide valuable opportunities to explore the intersections of advocacy, policy reform, and systemic change. Such collaborations foster a deeper understanding of how social work and legal systems can both reinforce and challenge structural inequities, preparing graduates to practice effectively across sectors. Inviting guest lecturers from legal studies, economics, or anthropology exposes students to diverse perspectives and expand their analytical lenses by encouraging them to engage critically with policy debates, economic constraints, and cultural narratives that shape lived experiences (Dominelli, 2010; Ife, 2013). Moreover, interdisciplinary approaches cultivate professional adaptability and innovation. By engaging with multiple forms of knowledge, students learn to navigate complexity, collaborate across professional boundaries, and generate socially responsive interventions (Beddoe, 2019). Indeed, interdisciplinary teaching reinforces social work's commitment to social justice by equipping students with the tools to work collaboratively, think critically, and respond creatively to the interconnected challenges of contemporary society.

Critical self-reflection and reflexivity

Academic freedom requires ongoing critical self-reflection and reflexivity, involving the examination of one's positionality, privileges, biases, and responsibilities across teaching, research, and practice (Castillo, 2023). Educators must and should help their students interrogate how their assumptions, epistemological frameworks, and pedagogical methods shape both the knowledge they deliver and how students engage with it (Smith, 2012). Creating deliberate spaces for reflection enables students to scrutinize their own biases and positionalities, deepening their understanding of how race, class, gender, sexuality, and other intersecting identities that structure experiences of privilege and oppression. As Healy (2014) argues, critical reflection is foundational to ethical social work practice, promoting accountability and responsiveness to diverse needs. Similarly, Robinson and Macfarlane (2021) suggest that critical reflection allows educators to name and unpack the discourses and power dynamics at play within settings to more clearly and consciously generate alternative discourses based on social work values.

Reflexivity also demands epistemic humility, a recognition that knowledge is socially situated and that marginalized perspectives must be valued alongside dominant narratives (Smith, 2012). In practice, this requires integrating feedback loops, dialogue, and reflective exercises into course design (Robinson & Macfarlane, 2021). These strategies enable educators to act ethically and create learning environments where students critically evaluate their own beliefs and use both Western and Indigenous social work frameworks while cultivating empathy, self-awareness, and social responsibility. Embedding this practice in social work education models the values and commitments that students are expected to uphold, equipping graduates to engage authentically with diverse communities, challenge systemic inequities, and act with integrity in complex and morally ambiguous contexts.

Engaged pedagogy

Engaged pedagogy builds on Freire's critical pedagogy but demands more of educators. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (2014) insists that teaching must move beyond intellectual engagement to embrace 'the union of mind, body, and spirit' (p. 14). hooks (2014) frames education as a practice of care, vulnerability, and wholeness. Engaged pedagogy requires educators to teach with care, respect, and authenticity, creating conditions for transformative learning (hooks, 2014). Central to hooks' approach is mutual vulnerability. Students should not be the only ones taking risks; teachers, too, must share their lived experiences and stories.

In social work education, engaged pedagogy can foster empathy, support antiracist practice (Abrams & Gibson, 2007), and encourage students to reflect on privilege and their positionality (Nicotera & Kang, 2009). It provides the foundation for preparing students to advocate for human rights and advance justice, consistent with social work's professional commitments (AASW, 2020; Todić & Christensen, 2022). Engaged pedagogy prepares students not only to acquire technical skills but to confront structural injustice and work collectively for social transformation (Payne, 2020). For educators, this clarifies how care-based pedagogy can be enacted without compromising academic rigor or professional boundaries.

Decolonial pedagogy

Decolonial pedagogies are essential for preparing students to advance social justice and human rights. By centering Indigenous knowledges and alternative practices, decolonial pedagogies encourage students to examine their social positions while questioning how professional norms may perpetuate, rather than dismantle, systemic inequities (Smith, 2012). Engagement with Ubuntu Indigenous philosophy, for instance, exemplifies a humanizing decolonial approach (Udah, 2025). Ubuntu's core values of relationality, collective responsibility, communal accountability, social justice, recognition, and reciprocity provide a unique foundation align closely with social work's commitment to social justice (Udah, 2025).

As a pedagogical tool, decolonial approaches foster self-awareness, empathy, and relational thinking, enabling students to critically engage with systemic power dynamics (Udah, 2025). Many curricula remain grounded in Eurocentric frameworks, which can

be enriched through Indigenous and Global South pedagogies. For example, First Peoples pedagogies can enrich social work curriculum by incorporating strategies such as story sharing, deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge (Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009). Decolonial approaches actively disrupt colonial knowledge hierarchies and privilege historically marginalized epistemologies (Daniel, 2022; Pal & Nieto-Fernandez, 2024; Udah, 2021). Aligned with Fraser's (2014) framework of redistribution, recognition, and representation, decolonial perspectives equip students with conceptual tools to identify and address structural inequities while positioning knowledge production as a site of social justice intervention (Udah, Parada, et al., 2025).

Pedagogy of ethical discomfort

Integral to decolonial education is the pedagogy of ethical discomfort. Pedagogy of discomfort is a process of self-examination that engages students in critical inquiry regarding their values, beliefs, and ideological assumptions, which influence their perceptions of others (Boler & Zembylas, 2003), fostering intellectual humility and solidarity (Mills & Creedy, 2021). While it can unsettle students' taken-for-granted assumptions to promote transformative learning (Boler & Zembylas, 2003; Zembylas, 2015), for us and in this article, ethical discomfort in learning is not about shame, blame or identity-based guilt, but about cultivating professional capacity to speak truthfully, listen respectfully, and act ethically in complex practice contexts. Zembylas (2015), drawing on Butler (2005), argues that discomfort is not merely a cognitive or affective state but an ethical relation to others. Pedagogy of discomfort, therefore, is a necessary condition of relational learning and not for making students feel bad about themselves as individuals, nor for attributing historical injustices to students based on race, gender, religion, or background (Zembylas, 2015). Through it, students are decentered by perspectives that challenge their assumptions, prompting ethical reflection, empathy, and engagement with difference.

Pedagogy of discomfort is not a threat to wellbeing but a structured and intentional mechanism for growth and understanding of one's place in power dynamics within society (Mills & Creedy, 2021). Studies have shown that structured reflective discomfort paired with ethical facilitation, increases student empathy, intercultural awareness, and deeper professional identity formation (Smith, 2012). It is co-facilitated as part of self-reflection and ethical discomfort. By ethical discomfort, we refer to the reflective unease that can arise when students engage honestly with injustice, power, and ethical complexity in professional contexts. This discomfort is not punitive or accusatory; rather, it emerges as part of rigorous ethical inquiry and supports the development of professional judgment. Because classrooms involve power asymmetries, discomfort-based learning must be governed by safeguards such as (1) transparent purpose and learning outcomes, (2) consent-based participation options (spoken, written, small-group, private reflection), (3) trauma-informed facilitation, (4) clear anti-harassment norms, and (5) assessments that evaluate reasoning and ethical application rather than ideological agreement. Ethical discomfort, therefore, is oriented toward professional responsibility in the present, not personal guilt for historical wrongs. Before any identity-based discussion, students are invited to (1) opt-in, (2) use reflective writing instead of group work if preferred, and (3) explore multiple viewpoints rather than accept one ideological

position. It is consent-based, dialogical, and involves critical curiosity rather than accusation, and ethical reflection rather than moral condemnation. When educators create learning spaces that are safe (Harrison et al., 2019), discomfort becomes a generative force for self-reflection and ethical engagement (Mills & Creedy, 2021; Nolan & Molla, 2018; Zembylas, 2015).

Pedagogy across intellectual traditions

Academic freedom protects not only critical, decolonial, discomfort, Indigenous and interdisciplinary pedagogies but also enables multiple intellectual traditions such as liberal, conservative, and faith-based approaches. These approaches allow students to explore diverse ways of knowing, being, and practising social work. Intellectual plurality is a foundation for ethical social work education and inquiry rather than ideological competition. When facilitated through ethical, reflexive, and consent-based pedagogies, these differences can strengthen students' critical thinking, empathy, and professional judgment. Rather than requiring students to choose one correct perspective, educators can use these different approaches as analytical tools for examining the same practice dilemma, helping students understand how different frameworks lead to different interventions and developing their capacity to justify their professional decisions regardless of which framework they find most compelling. To illustrate how this can operate in practice, the table below presents comparative pedagogical approaches that may coexist within social work education:

Pedagogy	Purpose and discussion topic	Sample classroom strategies
Liberal	Debate, welfare, individual autonomy and freedoms	Policy case study: rights & welfare. What are limits of state intervention?
Conservative	Family, continuity, responsibility, tradition	Ethical debate: family structure. How is continuity valued in communities?
Faith-based	Moral reasoning & spiritual care in practice	Guest practitioner from spiritual care unit. What moral obligations shape care?
Critical and decolonial	Power analysis, inequality, social justice	Ubuntu-informed collaborative reflection. Who benefits or is marginalised?
Indigenous	Relational and land-based learning	Story-sharing and yarning circles
Interdisciplinary	Complexity & systems thinking	Joint seminar with law or public health

Practice vignette for teaching across difference

Case Example 1

A student on placement reports discomfort when a client expresses faith-based views about gender roles that conflict with the student's values. The educator asks students to analyze the scenario through: (1) a rights-based liberal lens (client self-determination and anti-discrimination), (2) a critical lens (power and structural inequality), and (3) a practice ethics lens (professional boundaries, cultural humility, and duty of care). Students then write a brief action plan focused on ethical service delivery rather than ideological agreement.

Case Example 2

Also, in a unit exploring colonial legacies in Australian social work, students were first offered quiet writing time to respond privately to a case scenario. Participation in group discussion was optional, and ethical dialogue norms were established collectively by the class. Students were, then, given a choice of three theoretical lenses, Indigenous, liberal, or critical to analyze the case. The resulting discussion demonstrated how multiple pedagogical approaches can be cultivated through structured academic freedom rather than prescriptive ideologies.

In both settings, there is a need for educators to articulate clear professional learning objectives that foreground ethical competence and practice relevance, rather than promote political positions. This sets a common pedagogical foundation for exploring contested content in ways that support students' development as reflective, accountable practitioners. The approaches strengthen ethical reasoning, professional reflexivity, and the capacity to practise respectfully across difference without requiring ideological alignment.

Challenges, constraints, and possibilities

Educators face significant professional and institutional pressures, including accreditation and compliance requirements (Jackson, 2023; Lynch & Ivancheva, 2015). For instance, an educator planning to use critical race theory to analyze child welfare disparities may worry about complaints from students, scrutiny from administrators, or whether the content fits prescribed learning outcomes. These pressures often constrain academic freedom and reinforce standardized curricula, manifesting as educators choosing safer readings, avoiding politically sensitive case studies, or designing assessments that test procedural knowledge rather than critical analysis, which limits educators' willingness to use diverse pedagogies or engage with contested social issues. Yet academic freedom remains essential for advancing social work's mission of justice and human rights and for preparing students to navigate ethical and political complexity (Yu et al., 2024). Balancing regulatory compliance with exposure to diverse pedagogical approaches is therefore crucial. Educators must not only teach and engage openly with contentious issues but also cultivate respectful dialogue and produce graduates who are critical thinkers and ethically grounded practitioners (Fenton & Smith, 2019). Although, as Fenton and Smith (2019) note, social workers in the current regulatory climate often comply with behavioral codes 'for reasons of self-preservation rather than ethics' (p. 10), thoughtfully facilitated spaces of 'comfortable discomfort' can nurture professional identity and intellectual resilience. This is important, especially now, when our societies are becoming increasingly diverse and social work education is attracting students from increasingly diverse backgrounds.

While a wide range of perspectives can generate tension but also enrich collective learning, we argue that thoughtful pedagogical strategies are required to harness diversity productively, enabling students to engage across difference, confront their own assumptions, and build capacity to work with divergent worldviews (Fenton & Smith, 2019). In this way, the constraints of regulation and institutional surveillance can also become opportunities to reaffirm social work's commitment to strengthen the intellectual and ethical resilience of its graduates.

As educators committed to social work's mission, we argue that social work students must be thought ready for the realities of contemporary practice. To equip graduates to understand and disrupt inequities at the micro (individual and interpersonal), mezzo (organizational and community), and macro (institutional and policy) levels, social work education must center academic freedom and critical inquiry. Pedagogy in this context should be diverse, critical, engaged, liberal, faith-based, conservative, decolonial and interdisciplinary. By critical, we emphasize the development of critical consciousness, which is the ability to recognize how social structures condition but do not wholly determine human life, and act to transform oppressive conditions (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2010). By engaged, we suggest that educators must treat students as whole human beings, placing wellbeing, healing, and joy at the center of learning. (hooks, 2014). This approach values vulnerability, storytelling, and the development of authentic voices, challenging hierarchical norms within higher education (hooks, 2014). And by decolonial, we call for questioning the privileging of Western knowledge in culturally diverse contexts and articulating alternative, locally grounded ways of knowing and practising social work (Francis & Udah, 2020; Udah, 2024b). As Tuck and Yang (2012) remind us, genuine decolonization demands delinking from Eurocentric foundations and restoring Indigenous knowledges.

Accreditation standards and professional accountability do not require ideological sameness; they require demonstrable competence, ethical practice, and public trust. We, therefore, distinguish compliance (meeting professional thresholds) from conformity (enforcing a particular worldview). For us, accreditation can be met through transparent learning outcomes through ethical reasoning, critical thinking, cultural responsiveness, and client-centered practice, while heterodoxy is protected through pluralistic curriculum design and assessments that reward reasoned argument, evidence use, and ethical justification. This combination strengthens professional identity formation by teaching students how to practise with integrity in settings where colleagues, clients, and communities hold diverse and sometimes conflicting values.

Within this context, our task as social work educators become then to assess how students think, not what they think. Assessment criteria prioritize ethical reasoning, evidence use, and professional application over ideological alignment. Therefore, integrating these diverse pedagogical approaches create conditions for a transformative social work education that empowers students not only to practice competently but to act ethically, think critically, and challenge systemic injustice across multiple levels of society (Todić & Christensen, 2022). Additionally, as educators, we need to introduce pedagogies that provoke students to critically reflect on their assumptions, beliefs, and values so that they might move beyond frames of reference that limit how they make meaning of their experiences (Fenton & Smith, 2019). Our teaching ought to require and encourage students to take a stance and 'go public' with their knowledge claims and subject them willingly to the critical scrutiny of others (Fenton & Smith, 2019).

Empirical work on discomfort pedagogy and transformative learning suggests that when difficult content is scaffolded through reflective tasks, clear facilitation norms, and supportive dialogue structures, students demonstrate deeper self-examination and improved capacity to engage difference ethically (e.g. Mills & Creedy, 2021; Nolan & Molla, 2018; Zembylas, 2015). In social work education, these outcomes matter because

they translate into stronger ethical reasoning, improved relational practice, and greater readiness to work with diverse clients and communities.

Thus, understanding pedagogies for teaching across difference in social work education is essential and inevitable. For example, ethical discomfort provokes students to interrogate their taken-for-granted views and assumptions, values, emotions, and positions, equipping them to speak, listen, and act responsibly in ethically complex practice contexts (Mills & Creedy, 2021; Zembylas, 2015). When carefully facilitated, discomfort can deepen empathy, tolerance for ambiguity, and ethical reasoning. In the same way that contemporary young people should not be held personally guilty for historical atrocities, social work education must avoid guilt-based instruction and focus instead on developing practitioners' capacity to recognize structural conditions, respond ethically, and uphold client dignity in the present. For educators, this means carefully navigating the emotional dimensions of learning, particularly when teaching about First Peoples' experiences, colonialism, and intergenerational trauma (Mills & Creedy, 2021; Zembylas, 2015). Effective facilitation avoids both self-righteousness and therapeutic overreach, ensuring students experience discomfort as a catalyst for growth rather than alienation. Therefore, these possibilities illustrate that the constraints facing social work education can also be sites of transformation.

Counterpoints and risks

While we argue that academic freedom is an ethical necessity in social work education, it is also important to acknowledge the critiques and risks associated with academic freedom. For example, academic freedom can be misused to promote ideological positions, leading to the politicization of classrooms. To avoid paradox, we do not recommend practices that restrict academic freedom, such as compelled speech, ideological pledges, grading based on political alignment, or framing disagreement as moral failure. Academic freedom requires that students may dissent, question, or hold alternative views, provided they do so without discrimination, harassment, or professional misconduct, and with attention to evidence, ethics, and client-centered practice. Rather than indoctrination, academic freedom represents our ethical commitment to justice, human rights, and reflexivity. The distinction lies in how classrooms are facilitated and how ethical dialogue norms are established collectively rather than prescriptive ideologies. As such, educators must promote debate, dialogue, and critical engagement rather than prescribe singular correct viewpoints (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2010; hooks, 2014).

In addition, pedagogies of ethical discomfort, decolonization, and critical reflection can provoke resistance, defensiveness, or disengagement among students who feel challenged by unfamiliar or unsettling ideas (Mills & Creedy, 2021; Zembylas, 2015). For example, when introducing contested content on the Stolen Generations, some students may respond with defensiveness (my ancestors were not involved), avoidance (this is too depressing), or moral distress. Others may become angry at perceived implications about their identity or privilege. While such reactions are part of the learning process, educators must carefully balance discomfort with safety. Practical strategies include establishing dialogue norms before difficult content (e.g. listen to understand, not to judge or rebut), scaffolding the material by starting with narrative

accounts before policy analysis, offering multiple participation modes (written reflection, small group discussion, or individual consultation), giving students a choice of different theoretical lenses to analyze, and explicitly framing discomfort as professional growth rather than personal attack. Providing reflective support through structured journaling prompts, optional office hours, or peer discussion circles ensures that discomfort becomes a catalyst for growth rather than triggering shutdown or resentment that undermines learning.

Academic freedom does not mean abandoning professional standards; rather, it requires thoughtful alignment of ethical obligations with innovative pedagogy. Hence, to address these risks, academic freedom should be exercised with reflexivity, transparency, and accountability. Educators must model humility about their own positionality, invite diverse perspectives, and cultivate dialogue that honors multiple ways of knowing. When practised responsibly, academic freedom strengthens the integrity of social work education by equipping students not with rigid doctrines but with the capacity to think critically, engage ethically, and respond to complexity.

Implications: academic freedom as an ethical imperative

Academic freedom is not simply a privilege but an ethical imperative. It enables teaching to move beyond technical competence toward cultivating critical thinking, ethical judgment, and professional identity formation. As Freire (1970) reminds us, praxis is central to education as a practice of freedom. He defines praxis as 'reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed' (Freire, 1970, p. 126). In social work, this entails reflexive, relational, and justice-oriented engagement that equips students to interrogate their professional and social positioning and reimagine problems in more humane and redistributive ways (Mills & Creedy, 2021).

The pedagogical approaches outlined in this article demonstrate that academic freedom functions as a practical and ethical condition for social work education rather than an abstract ideal. When enacted through pluralistic curriculum design, structured dialogue, and transparent assessment, academic freedom supports the development of critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and professional identity formation in contested learning environments. Critical pedagogy, for example, deepens students' understanding of the political, cultural, racial, and gendered dynamics of social life, enabling them to link personal troubles to structural forces and envision more just futures (Cooper, 2015; Fujino et al., 2018; Todić & Christensen, 2022). Importantly, the pedagogical approaches outlined in this article show that accreditation and accountability need not require ideological conformity. By assessing students on the quality of their reasoning, ethical justification, and application to practice, educators can uphold professional standards while protecting intellectual openness and heterodoxy. Such pedagogical clarity enables social work education to prepare graduates to engage ethically with difference, disagreement, and complexity in contemporary practice settings, particularly where practitioners must work with clients whose values and beliefs differ from their own (AASW, 2020; International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2018). Classrooms shaped by this pedagogical clarity become sites of ethical and transformative professional formation. As Brookfield (2005) argues, such an approach develops critically reflective practitioners capable of questioning dominant discourses and contributing to a more equitable society.

By equipping students to think critically and act ethically, academic freedom ensures that social work education produces graduates who are not only skilled but also socially conscious and committed to meaningful change.

When integrated with critical and decolonial pedagogies, ethical discomfort can function as a catalyst for transformative learning (Zembylas, 2015). Learning environments that center Indigenous knowledges, and anti-racist scholarship may provoke unease because they confront legacies of racism and systemic injustice; however, this unease can support students to interrogate positionality, recognize structural inequality, and develop more ethically responsive professional dispositions (Nolan & Molla, 2018). At the same time, social work curricula must respond to ongoing calls for decolonization and Indigenous resurgence, particularly in settler-colonial contexts such as Australia, Canada, and Aotearoa New Zealand. This requires creating spaces for Indigenous and non-Western social work epistemologies (Francis & Udah, 2020; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Udah, 2024a).

Moving forward, advancing professional social work identity, and transformative praxis demands that educators critically revisit pedagogical approaches, teaching activities, and curriculum design. This means acknowledging how our own worldviews are shaped by colonial paradigms (Smith, 2012), integrating decolonial perspectives, and embracing discomfort as part of authentic learning. It also requires resisting massified, standardized curriculum delivery in favor of slower, more reflective approaches that prioritize depth, quality, and cultural responsiveness (Udah & Francis, 2021). Classrooms must move beyond knowledge transmission to embrace dialogical, decolonial, and reflexive pedagogies. By foregrounding academic freedom, social work education can foster not only skilled practitioners, but also inclusive, reflective, and socially responsible professionals equipped to challenge injustice and transform practice.

Conclusion

Social work education cannot fulfil its ethical mission of advancing social justice, human rights, and epistemic justice without defending and enacting academic freedom. In an era of neoliberal reforms, regulatory surveillance, and growing ideological contestation, academic freedom is not a luxury, it is essential. When grounded in intellectual pluralism, ethical accountability, and concrete pedagogical practice, academic freedom enables educators to teach contested content without indoctrination or silence. This approach prepares graduates not only to navigate disagreement, but to practise with integrity, humility, and courage in complex social contexts.

By reframing ethical discomfort, clarifying the limits and purposes of academic freedom, and offering practical teaching and assessment tools, this article demonstrates how social work education can defend academic freedom while strengthening professional identity formation. In doing so, it affirms academic freedom as an ethical imperative rather than a political slogan, one that equips future practitioners to engage difference responsibly and advance social work's commitment to justice, dignity, and human rights. The pedagogical approaches discussed in this article all depend on academic freedom to thrive. Together, they provide educators with practical and ethical tools to disrupt dominant paradigms, integrate Indigenous and global south knowledges, and cultivate professional practice grounded in equity, dignity, and relationality. Without academic

freedom, these approaches risk being diluted into tokenistic gestures, rather than transformative practices that reshape social work education and practice. Hence, we recommend:

(1) Social work programs must defend academic freedom institutionally as central to preparing critically engaged, justice-oriented practitioners.
(2) Critical, engaged, decolonial, and discomfort-based approaches should be integrated as core elements of teaching, not treated as optional or supplementary.
(3) Accreditation and regulatory requirements must be met without sacrificing critical debate or succumbing to self-censorship.
(4) Educators should model positionality, vulnerability, and epistemic humility, encouraging students to critically interrogate power, privilege, and bias.

Defending academic freedom is, therefore, both a professional and pedagogical imperative. It strengthens the intellectual and ethical integrity of social work education, equips graduates to challenge entrenched inequities, and ensures that the profession remains responsive to the communities it serves. By embracing critical, decolonial, and discomfort-driven pedagogies, educators can transform classrooms into spaces of praxis, enabling students to reimagine social work not simply as service provision, but as a liberatory practice committed to justice, dignity, and collective transformation.

Note

1. The history of universities shows that they have always been communities of scholars dedicated to defending academic freedom (Lynch & Ivancheva, 2015). Within 60 years of its foundation, the University of Bologna, founded in 1088, established a constitutional provision that guaranteed protections for scholars traveling for the purpose of study from the intrusion of all political authorities. This principle of autonomy later informed the Magna Charta Universitatum, signed in 1988 by 388 rectors from Europe and now endorsed by more than 770 universities in 81 countries, affirming academic freedom as a core value of higher education (Lynch & Ivancheva, 2015). These historical protections matter today because they establish the principle that educators must be free from political interference when making pedagogical decisions, a principle particularly relevant when teaching contentious social work topics like Indigenous rights, asylum seeker policy, or reproductive justice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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