Title: Deb Mashek and Musa al-Gharbi on the Past and Future of Heterodox Academy
Episode: 46

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Transcript

[From Heterodox Academy, this is *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, conversations with scholars and authors, ideas from diverse viewpoints and perspectives.]

Debra Mashek: Hi. I'm Deb Mashek, Executive Director of Heterodox Academy guest hosting for Chris. I'm joined today by Musa al-Gharbi, HxA's Director of Communications. Something different in store for today, an episode that's all about us, Heterodox Academy.

Musa al-Gharbi: We will focus on and reflect on our growth and accomplishments as an organization over the past year and give you a sense of what's in store for HxA during 2019. So let's dig in.

Debra Mashek: Musa, I thought we would start with a little volley. So let's go back and forth rapid fire, HxA highlights from 2018. Go.

Musa al-Gharbi: Well, for starters, we got over a thousand new members over the last year.

Debra Mashek: I'm excited that we became an official 501(c)(3) organization.

Musa al-Gharbi: We placed dozens of op-eds in mainstream media outlets and dozens more on the blog.

Debra Mashek: We added nearly I think 2700 Facebook followers and over 11,000 Twitter followers.

Musa al-Gharbi: We transitioned Open Mind, which was developed within Heterodox Academy into a standalone project at NYU Stern.

Debra Mashek: And the Gallup-Knight Foundation chose us to be a host of their data on free expression on campus. That was a nice accolade for us.

I must say what amazes me more than anything is what we've been able to do with such a small team. So I don't know if people know this about us. But we actually only have four fulltime staff and then of course Musa, you're our part-time Director of Communications and we've got a lot of obviously dedicated members and collaborators but I just want to say high five to the team. It has been quite a year.

When we look back, one of my questions for you Musa is what would you say are the most significant challenges that we have faced as an organization in 2018?

Musa al-Gharbi: Well, one of the big ones that has been a constant challenge I think is that – is this bandwidth issue, right? So we're a small staff and we do a lot. So we're always having to sort of differentiate between what we can do and what we should do given our resources. But we've managed to launch a number of new initiatives. We've had rapid growth and it's exciting but we always want to make sure that we're overextending and that we're really nailing the things that we are investing in. So that has been one big challenge.

Related to that, one thing we've been constantly trying to do is make sure that we're prioritizing what's absolutely essential and what we can save for later when we have more capacity.

Debra Mashek: So I joined Heterodox Academy really just a year ago and one of the things that has been striking to me is how the history of the organization, although short – we've only been really around for three years – we've really refined what it means to be Heterodox Academy. I'm wondering. You've been with the organization longer than I have. Reflect a bit on the history and how the narratives changed over the past year or so.

Musa al-Gharbi: Yeah. So when we started, we were focused mostly on just research and on problems related to research as a result of a lack of viewpoint diversity and what we saw shortly after we started, there were all these massive blow-ups on campuses, nationwide and a lot of media discussion about what's happening on campuses. What can we do to make campuses more productive?

So we extended our mission in the early stages to focus more on constructive disagreement, focus more on pedagogy. We brought in students, graduate students as members. So that was one big change and increasingly, as we've grown sort of – as we've grown more robust as an organization and more confident in our understanding of the problems, we've been shifting more from focusing on identifying the problem and talking about what the problems are facing universities to trying to help people with solutions to think through, "Well, what can we do about it and how?"

So that has been another big change for us as an organization.

Debra Mashek: And what about the problem of the grifters? I know we've talked about this internally as a challenge and I think it might be interesting for the podcast listeners to reflect on with us a bit.

Musa al-Gharbi: Yeah. I mean one challenge is – so Heterodox Academy, we're a non-partisan organization. Although we're concerned about political diversity as one aspect, a viewpoint diversity that's sort of underappreciated and under-addressed, that's not the only thing that we focus on and we're not a conservative advocacy organization. So we're not trying to increase conservatives' foothold on campus or promote conservative ideology among students or help the republicans or any other sort of right-leaning groups do better politically at the polls or anything like that.

We're about improving teaching, improving research. But there are a number of other organizations out there who do have a different agenda, who are like actively trying to advance a

certain political cause or a certain political agenda and who co-opt some of our language and some of our narratives. For instance using words like "heterodoxy" or "viewpoint diversity" as a – in a way to sort of sell their agenda and sometimes even making use of our own statistics and research to say – to bash universities or research or teaching and there are a number of organizations like that too.

So one challenge for us has always been, you know, on the one hand, we try to push back against this when we can and that's why as an organization, our first – the first statement that we ever made as an organization for instance was to condemn the professor watch list initiative by Turning Point USA.

So we push back against that sort of stuff when we can. But at the same time, it's important that we don't just sort of see this issue to the bad actors. So what we always try to focus on doing is articulating for us why it's important and what our values are and again sort of pushing back against the sort of non-productive actors in the space at the same time.

Debra Mashek: So I want to spend a little time talking about a point you touched on very briefly there which is – and I think it's a point that we're missing out in a lot of the discussions out there in the broader world about viewpoint diversity and why it's important on campus. That's about the relationship between viewpoint diversity and other valued forms of diversity because I know for the Heterodox Academy mission, we talk a lot about this trilogy of ideas, this idea of open inquiry viewpoint diversity and constructive disagreement.

When we talk about open inquiry, we're simply talking about the ability to ask questions and to share ideas without risk of social censure and then viewpoint diversity is just that when members of a group or community approach problems or approach questions from a range of perspectives, that that group has viewpoint diversity and we make the case that when this exploration in our classrooms, in our research. But when it takes place within the context of intellectual humility and curiosity and empathy, that it gives rise to this idea of constructive disagreement and I know we've talked about this. But I'm just going to be explicit here that we think that not only is it OK that we don't see eye to eye, but we actually value that difference because we can get some good thinking done together. It's because we see things differently that we're going to better understand the nuances and the facets of these things that we care enough to study.

I need you. I need to interrogate the world alongside you, so that I can understand it. How are these ideas integral to creating diverse and inclusive learning environments?

Musa al-Gharbi: Yeah, absolutely. So this is one way – actually, this is one way in which our thinking on a lot of these problems has evolved. So when we started as Heterodox Academy, we were focused – I would say we were focused pretty strongly on political diversity.

When we talked about viewpoint diversity, of course we recognized other forms of diversity were important like demographic or socioeconomic or et cetera. But we didn't necessarily focus on those so much in part because we thought that people already appreciated the value of like gender diversity or racial diversity and they didn't really understand that political – that the lack of political diversity was a problem and why.

But one thing that we've realized over the course of our time studying this problem and approaching the problem is actually just how tightly integrated a lot of these viewpoint diversity challenges are. So for instance, it's not possible to make or it's very difficult to make meaningful progress on say ideological diversity like political or religious diversity unless you're also increasing socioeconomic diversity or racial diversity or gender diversity.

I will give you – so I will drill in – and vice versa actually. It's actually very difficult to improve these other forms of diversity that people already care about unless you make room for greater ideological diversity.

Debra Mashek: So unpack that a little bit. Walk us through what you see as the interrelationship.

Musa al-Gharbi: Sure. So like – so one example that I talk about a lot is for instance Hispanics and African-Americans tend to be more socially conservative and religious on average than whites. So if you're creating a space that's hostile towards socially conservative or religious views, then that's going to disproportionately affect students of color rather than white students.

So we can't create a climate that excludes religious views and socially conservative views and then look around. Like where are all the students of color? Because those goals are at ends with each other. In order to – these are problems that are best addressed sort of together in tandem.

Debra Mashek: I know. You know, I come from a Liberal Arts background. I spent 13 years teaching on one of our elite college campuses and I got to say it breaks my heart to think that part of what I might have been doing there was telling my students of color, the students from historically marginalized groups that they were walking into my classroom but they needed to check a piece of their background about – a piece of their beliefs at the door and not represent those ideas in my classroom or on our campus.

Musa al-Gharbi: Yeah. It's tough especially – we've had a number of students of color who have written on our blog for instance like Christian Gonzales or Coleman Hughes who have talked about for instance as students of color, often there's this sort of pressure almost to – you're almost expected to toe a particular line in a lot of circles. So even if you don't necessarily agree with some of the prevailing ideas about race or politics or whatever that are on campus, it's very difficult to – it's even harder in some respects for students of color to challenge those than it would be for students who are not, in part because of the sort of social expectations around what people of color should think or should do.

Debra Mashek: So basically we're on a mission to advance these things, these things that we see as essential for learning, for knowledge creation, for growth of all learners and we're looking to do this both on our college campuses, but also in our academic disciplines.

Musa al-Gharbi: So in fact one of the initiatives that we're trying to work on this year coming up in 2019 is to help launch disciplinary-oriented sort of reform initiatives to help accelerate

reforms in certain disciplines where the problem seemed to be most pronounced, the social research fields where things seemed to – where these problems seemed to be most pronounced.

So there's a number of ways in which these problems sort of manifest themselves in different social research fields, in terms of things like committee decisions that are made for hiring and promotion or accepting students, classes of students in, in terms of things like peer review, in terms of – even the sorts of research questions that are asked and the sort of methods that are deployed.

So we're trying to look at a lot of these kinds of issues and provide people with tools to both understand and address them. Maybe you could speak a little bit more about sort of both the HxA's sort of general approach to a lot of these problems and some other things that's in store for 2019.

Debra Mashek: Yeah. So that has been one of the fascinating things is over the past year we've really dug into – to thinking through not just what is the problem but concretely what are approaches to fixing it and we really see four.

So one of them is that we try to increase public awareness to really elevate the importance of these issues on the campuses and in our disciplines. So this is – we're obviously doing the podcast and the blog and we're publishing op-eds whenever we can and trying to get the word out about why this stuff matters for our students for the creation of knowledge within our disciplines.

The second thing we do is we're really trying to develop tools and resources that our on-campus colleagues can deploy to actually assess and then improve their campus and disciplinary culture. So here we're thinking about the needs of our professor colleagues, our administrative colleagues and so on.

The third thing we focus on is trying to highlight the institutions that are doing this work well. So, so often when I talk to college presidents, they're telling me that, you know, "I'm worried about what I might wake up to in the morning, about who send some tweet that now the firestorm of the social media sphere is going to like come down and attack us."

So we're trying to be the light in that dynamic and really highlighting those who are doing it well and we will talk in a minute I think about some of our big initiatives for 2019. But one of those is a total revamp of our guide to colleges to help celebrate those institutions.

Then the fourth thing is just echoing what you said about the disciplinary-based initiatives. We're really trying to help people create communities that practice around promoting open inquiry within their classrooms, in their committees and so on.

So all in all, we're trying to create positive change in helping those on campus identify ways that they can actually do the hard work on the ground.

Musa al-Gharbi: Yeah, absolutely. One thing that we always try to do as an organization is to make sure that everything we're doing pulls in the same direction, so between the blog and the podcast and social media, our conference.

By the way, we didn't even talk about the awesome conference that we had in 2018.

Debra Mashek: Did we miss that in our rapid fire attempt?

Musa al-Gharbi: Yeah, I think we did, and make sure that our tools from our Campus Expression Survey to All Minute One and Open Mind, that all of that is sort of again pulling in the same basic direction.

Debra Mashek: Yeah. So here we are 2019. We're recording this with us today. I think the 20th and what we're looking to do is really built on these themes. So I'm over the moon excited about what we're up to and I thought maybe we could talk about just a couple of those things.

One, I just alluded to a moment ago, which is we're trying to – actually, we're not trying. We are totally revamping our guide to colleges and the existing guide is incredibly popular. It gets lots of visits. It gets lots of media coverage. But we have the concerns about it. We don't find the metrics particularly robust and we're concerned that we have a very restricted range of institutions.

So we're going to address this and we're going to answer two questions. One, on any given campus, what is the likelihood that a student is going to encounter perspectives different from their own? Two, to what extent does the climate of a given campus actually encourage and support constructive engagement across those lines of difference

So this updated guide is going to make – we're going to be able to incorporate all sorts of colleges and universities. Like anybody that has an IPEDS number, which will mean something to our academic colleagues listening to this, will be part of the new guide to colleges. So that's one thing we're doing.

Musa al-Gharbi: Thousands, right?

Debra Mashek: Thousands.

Musa al-Gharbi: And then one thing you're doing right now I know is you're going on a listening tour on different campuses to find out what different academic stakeholders are looking for and need from us.

Debra Mashek: Yeah. So I am talking to dozens of college presidents to get a sense of what's that really like on the ground and what do they need from us in this space. How can we be constructive partners to them? What kind of tools? What kind of resources? What kind of perspectives would they actually like?

Then we will be coalescing what we've learned from these various conversations into direction for our tool development so that we're creating the metrics that will actually be useful, the interventions that will actually be useful as opposed to us being a know-it-all outside organizations, sweeping in and telling other people how to do their job because that certainly is not a long term strategy for change.

Musa al-Gharbi: Well, and then also I mean one thing that has always set us apart as an organization is that we pride ourselves on being academic insiders. I mean where professors and students and administrators are members that – who are invested in these organizations, in these institutions of higher learning and committed to having them flourish and succeed.

On that note of trying to figure out what's happening sort of on campuses nationwide and getting a sort of finer sense of that, so one other initiative that I know we're doing this year is we're collecting nationally representative samples for our Campus Expression Survey that we developed.

Debra Mashek: That's right. We are committed to now – well, resources pending. We're committed to collecting each year two samples of national data of current college students enrolled at four-year colleges and universities to get a sense from them who is afraid to speak up about which issues and why. What are they concerned about? This is important for two reasons. One, we need to be able as an organization to understand how things are changing over time. But the second thing is we're really encouraging our on-campus colleagues to ask their students the same questions we're asking.

In fact the Campus Expression Survey is free. We can help you set it up, so you can administer it and with the national data, you would have a baseline. Administrators would have a baseline to actually compare how their college is doing and I mean frankly, you've got to measure it before you can change it and this is an opportunity where even if you don't think a campus is doing very well, kudos to those who are actually taking the risk of measuring it and see – actually getting the data.

Musa al-Gharbi: Yeah, absolutely. And oh, and then one thing that I mentioned earlier that maybe you could talk about a little bit more is that over the next year, one thing that we're really going to be prioritizing is helping our members connect more with one another.

Debra Mashek: Yeah. So this is cool. I hope I don't get in trouble from our director of membership and partnerships for talking about this because this pilot or this project is still technically in beta. But we've launched what we call the HX Disciplines Initiative and we're creating opportunities for people within a discipline who are interested in talking about these ideas and to actually get together.

So it's some really basic strategies like having Facebook groups and Google groups and encouraging people to meet up at conferences. They're all there anyway. So for instance, I'm heading to the Social Psychology Conference in a couple of weeks and we're going to have a gathering of the social psychologists who are there who are actually interested in talking about

viewpoint diversity within the discipline, get together and share a beer, a cup of tea and talk about what we might be able to do within social psychology.

Musa al-Gharbi: So speaking of conferences …

Debra Mashek: Yeah. So I can't give us an exact date yet because we need to lock down a couple more venue details. But this is the first official announcement that Heterodox Academy will again be able to do our annual conference. So it's annual and that we had one last year. So this will be the second incarnation of that. It's going to be in New York City in mid-June. Please keep an eye out for the formal save-the-day announcement. It should be coming very, very soon.

Musa al-Gharbi: Awesome.

Debra Mashek: Can I, before we move on to the next point, say one other big change or one exciting thing that I feel actually very conflicted about for 2019? It's that you're transitioning. So you have been our part-time director of communications and you've been doing this amazing job for the organization while also being a graduate student, while also writing a book and so you're going to step away from the director position. You will still be the editor of the blog and will be able to bring on a fulltime director of communications.

So I'm excited to be able to grow our staff. I'm a little saddened that your – that I won't get to work quite as closely with you on quite as regular a basis because you've really pushed my own thinking and understanding in this space and I'm incredibly grateful for that.

Musa al-Gharbi: Oh, thank you. I mean it has been an honor and it has been a pleasure to see how the organization has grown just in the year since you've stepped into this position. It has been just awesome.

Debra Mashek: So good luck to you as you take on the book and your dissertation and all that good stuff. So I think we're about out of time. So let's do our wrap-up. So what do you see as three key ideas that you want listeners to take away from today's discussion?

Musa al-Gharbi: First thing to understand is that viewpoint diversity and promoting viewpoint diversity is not a partisan issue. It's not something that is only important for conservatives or people on the right. It's important for the left and the right.

The second big idea that I think is super important that people don't fully appreciate is that promoting viewpoint diversity is not just something that benefits the majority. In fact it's people from historically marginalized and underrepresented groups who stand to benefit the most from promoting viewpoint diversity and who suffer the most when viewpoint diversity and open inquiry are undermined on campus.

I think the third big takeaway is that while the challenges facing institutions of higher learning are – you know, they're big, daunting challenges, there are solutions out there and we can make a difference and there are things that you the listener can do right now today to help make progress on some of these challenges. In fact, why don't you talk a little bit about that?

Debra Mashek: So as the executive director, I encourage people to donate to Heterodox Academy and so every dollar we receive does directly support our programmatic efforts to improve campus culture and the culture of disciplines and you can do that HeterodoxAcademy.org and then while you're there, if you're a professor, if you're an administrator, please apply for membership. It's fast. It's free and it's your chance to stand publicly for open inquiries, for viewpoint diversity and constructive disagreement in the academy we love and if you're not a professor or an administrator, call your alma matter and encourage your favorite professors to get involved for this cause and most importantly, I think in our daily lives, whether we're talking about in our interactions around the dinner table or online or in our classrooms, walk the walk and my advice always is very simply remember to ask how do you see it.

So Musa, thank you for joining me here at the table to reflect on 2018 and to look forward to 2019. To our listeners, thank you for being a part of the Heterodox Academy experience. Thank you for listening.

Musa al-Gharbi: Take it easy.

Chris Martin: Deb and Musa mentioned Heterodox Academy's first annual conference. You can find the talks from that conference on our YouTube channel. You can also learn more about the Open Mind platform that they talked about on OpenMindPlatform.org.

Deb mentioned our collaboration with the Knight Foundation. If you look up episode 35 of this podcast featuring Jeff Jones and David Askenazi, you can learn more about that initiative and for information on everything else that they talked about, you can visit our website HeterodoxAcademy.org or follow us on social media. Thanks for supporting Heterodox Academy and thank you for listening.

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