

Open letter from Nathan Rambukkana to Lindsay Shepherd

Nov. 21, 2017

<https://www.wlu.ca/news/spotlights/2017/nov/open-letter-to-my-ta-lindsay-shepherd.html>

Dear Lindsay,

I wanted to write to apologize to you for how the meeting we had proceeded. While I was not able to do so earlier due to confidentiality concerns, including your privacy as a grad student, now that the audio of the meeting is public I can say more. While I still cannot discuss the student concerns raised about the tutorial, everything that has happened since the meeting has given me occasion to rethink not only my approach to discussing the concerns that day, but many of the things I said in our meeting as well.

First, I wanted to say that when I was made aware of the concerns, I was told that the proper procedure would be to have an informal meeting to discuss it. In the process of arranging this, others indicated they should attend as well. This is one of the facets of working at a university, that meetings can often become de-facto committees due to relevant stakeholders being pulled in. My main concerns were finding out why a lesson on writing skills had become a political discussion, and making sure harm didn't befall students. However, in not also prioritizing my mentorship role as the course director and your supervisor, I didn't do enough to try to support you in this meeting, which I deeply regret. I should have seen how meeting with a panel of three people would be an intimidating situation and not invite a productive discussion. Had I tried harder to create a situation more conducive to talking these issues through, things might have gone very differently, but alas I did not.

Second, this entire occasion, and hearing from so many with passionate views on this issue from across the political spectrum, has made me seriously rethink some of the positions I took in the meeting. I made the argument that first-year students, not studying this topic specifically, might not have the tool kit to unpack or process a controversial view such as Dr. Peterson's, saying that such material might be better reserved for upper-year or grad courses. While I still think that such material needs to

be handled carefully, especially so as to not infringe on the rights of any of our students or make them feel unwelcome in the learning environment, I believe you are right that making a space for controversial or oppositional views is important, and even essential to a university. The trick is how to properly contextualize such material. One way might be through having readings, or a lecture on the subject before discussion, but you are correct that first-years should be eligible to engage with societal debates in this way. Perhaps instead of the route I took I should have added further discussion in lecture, or supplementary readings. But instead I tried to make a point about the need to contextualize difficult material, and drew on the example of playing a speech by Hitler to do it. This was, obviously, a poorly chosen example. I meant to use it to drive home a point about context by saying here was material that would definitely need to be contextualized rather than presented neutrally, and instead I implied that Dr. Peterson is like Hitler, which is untrue and was never my intention. While I disagree strongly with many of Dr. Peterson's academic positions and actions, the tired analogy does him a disservice and was the opposite of useful in our discussion.

Finally there is the question of teaching from a social justice perspective, which my course does attempt to do. I write elsewhere about reaching across the aisle to former alt-right figures as possible unexpected allies in the struggle to create a better more just society for all. But hearing all of the feedback from people and looking at the polarized response I am beginning to rethink so limited an approach. Maybe we ought to strive to reach across all of our multiple divisions to find points where we can discuss such issues, air multiple perspectives, and embrace the diversity of thought. And maybe I have to get out of an "us versus them" habit of thought to do this myself, and to think of the goal as more than simply advancing social justice, but social betterment and progress as a whole. While I think that such a pedagogical approach must still work not to marginalize some students, I think the issues are too complex to leave as a binary with protection of students on one side and protection of speech on the other. We should be striving for both, which is why I look forward to participating in Dr. MacLatchy's task force looking into these issues at Laurier, and I hope perhaps you might consider doing the same so we could together work towards an even stronger institutional future.

I'm sorry this came to pass the way it did, and look forward to moving past this and continue working with you as my TA and perhaps in the future.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Nathan Rambukkana