

HAS EVERYBODY LOST THEIR DAMN MIND?

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Some simple Q & As to clear up the present hysteria in Canadian Higher Education follow the sundry events at Wilfrid Laurier.

Do Teaching Assistants have Academic Freedom? No. Academic Freedom is a protection of faculty rights based (at least in theory) on disciplinary competence. TAs have rights of free speech of course, but those don't protect your job if you annoy your employer. In this sense, Lindsay Shepherd probably had fewer rights as a TA than she would have as a student.

So was Wilfrid Laurier University right to discipline Shepherd? Ok, everyone take a deep breath and repeat after me. "Wilfrid Laurier" didn't do anything to Lindsay Shepherd. One professor and one administrator at Wilfrid Laurier chose to make a big deal out of something his TA did. "The University" per se, knew nothing about action until it hit the newspapers.

*Alright, fine, was the ***professor*** right to discipline Shepherd?* Let's make a distinction here. The prof had the right to tell his TA how to teach a course. That is in fact his job. What seems to have happened in this instance is that Shepherd was given latitude to develop her own course material. If the prof didn't like what Shepherd did, it's at least partially his fault for not having set guidelines and approve lessons in the first place.

But given that, what are the ins and outs of this case? As I understand the facts of the case, Shepherd played a clip from an October 2016 episode of the TVO program *The Agenda*, in which the University of Toronto professor and noted gaping orifice Jordan Peterson made the case for why he opposed the use a number of different possible pronouns to refer to transgendered people.

"Gaping orifice"? Yes. [Cuddling up to neo-nazis](#) qualifies one as a gaping orifice. Even if one has tenure.

OK, continue. If so inclined, you can see the full TVO episode [here](#) – my impression (haven't been able to confirm) is that what Sheppard played was the first 5 or so minute exchange between the host Steve Paikin and Peterson. Peterson is doing his usual irritating mixture of belligerent arrogance and victimhood, but if the purpose of the exercise was to examine the question “how does language evolve”/ “how do politics affect the evolution of language” it's not a terrible clip to play. It's not “hate”, as some people would have it

That said, Shepherd can't be all that bright if she genuinely thought that playing this clip wouldn't trigger a reaction. Peterson has become a hero for people who want to victimize the transgendered (among others). So even if the ideas Peterson is defending in the clip are not hate, a lot of people are going to find it difficult to separate the presentation of these ideas from the rest of the Peterson image – quite a bit of which is tinged with hate – and take offense. It should not have taken much imagination on Shepherd's part to find a different clip to make the same point and generate the same discussion without waving a red flag at students.

(The issue here, by the way, is not one of “coddling” “sheltered” students. The students most likely to take offense are ones who have most likely dealt with a fair bit of abuse in their time – they are not in any sense “sheltered”. They do not need to be “exposed” to these views – this seems to be a common justification for Shepherd's actions – for the simple fact that they deal with it all the time. They would just prefer not to, and it's hard to blame them.)

All of that said, Shepherd's supervising professor, Nathan Rambukkana, acted ridiculously after the fact. Hauling a student (which is what Shepherd is, as well as an employee) into your office to (falsely) accuse them of breaking the law on hate crimes, with two other institutional officials present, without advising her in advance that she could and probably should have representation at that meeting was bad judgement of the highest order. He deserves most of the opprobrium he has received if not for the “stifling academic freedom/free speech” reasons that most seem to want to pin on him, then certainly for being a terrible manager. Literally, he could not have handled it worse if he'd wanted to hand a propaganda victory to Peterson and his ilk. Shepherd has a right to feel hard-done by.

What would have been the right way to handle the affair? Two options. One would have been to try to defuse things quietly. Have a one-on-one meeting to find out what happened, explain that a complaint has been made, maybe give her some advice about selection of course materials but to accept blame himself for not providing more guidance on this in advance. And then take up dealing with the complaint and complainant himself, since he was ultimately responsible for the class, not her. Or, if the complaint couldn't be headed off that way, then tell her in advance what the meeting was about and make absolutely sure she had representation with her.

Anyone else deserve opprobrium? Yeah, three. First, those people who stood up for “free speech” for Lindsay Shepherd but didn’t for Masuma Khan at Dalhousie. Hypocrites. Probably racist, dog-whistling hypocrites. Second, every media outlet that chose to generalize from n=1 about the state of Canadian higher education, especially the freakin’ [Globe and Mail](#), which really should know better. Rambukkana’s actions aren’t even generalizable to Wilfrid Laurier, let alone any other institution. Do better, all of you.

And third: university complaint policies. Another way to have de-escalated this problem before it got started would have been for the person who received the complaint (in this case presumably the university’s Sexual Violence Response Co-ordinator) to not have accepted the complaint in the first place. Surely to God it is possible to give a TA feedback (“the use of this material is offensive and here’s why”) without going straight into legalistic administrative tribunal mode. It’s possible Shepherd would have taken honest criticism to heart. Instead, she’s been delivered into martyrdom (a status which, judging by her twitter account, she is adjusting to with alacrity and, I would say, no little enjoyment).

Bottom Line? Tempest in a tea-pot. But everyone seems to be looking for a fight these days. It’s a depressing time.