

# WLU censures grad student for lesson that used TVO clip

Prof compared airing discussion of pronouns to Hitler speech

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Wilfrid Laurier University masters student Lindsay Shepherd, who was censured for showing a TVO video clip on the pros and cons on whether to use gender neutral pronouns. - David Bebee, Record Staff

**WATERLOO** — A graduate student at Wilfrid Laurier University who taught students about different points of view on gender-neutral pronouns has been censured and fears losing her teaching job.

Lindsay Shepherd teaches tutorials on language use to some of the first-year students who are enrolled in an entry-level Communications Studies class.

When the textbook turned to gender and language, she wanted to show that it is a subject under debate.

On Nov. 1 she showed the students a three-minute video clip from the TVO public affairs show "The Agenda."

It presented two University of Toronto professors, Jordan Peterson and Nicholas Matte, discussing the issue from opposite points of view.

Students then debated the issue with interest, Shepherd said. "It was a friendly debate. I thought it went really well."

But later, someone complained. Shepherd was called to a meeting with two professors and an official from the university's diversity and equity office.

Shepherd, 22, was told it was "transphobic" and "creating a toxic climate" to expose students to the argument of Peterson, who has famously refused to use what he calls "made-up" gender-neutral pronouns like "ze" instead of "she" or "he."

She asked how many students complained but was told she couldn't have that information on privacy grounds.

During the conversation, which was recorded, Shepherd was in tears at times as she tried to articulate her point of view.

She told professors Nathan Rambukkana and Herbert Pimlott, and diversity and equity official Adria Joel, that in her opinion a university was the very place to expose students to different ideas.

But Rambukkana didn't agree that she should have presented both views neutrally.

"This is like neutrally playing a speech by Hitler," he told her.

Rambukkana also asserted that the Laurier campus was being "blanketed with white supremacist posters" and asked Shepherd if she would show a white supremacist point of view in a classroom.

Pimlott, who co-ordinates the cultural studies and social theory program that Shepherd is enrolled in for her master's degree studies,

said Peterson expresses his views in a way that is "academically suspect," like a denier of climate change or a white supremacist.

"To present as if there's two sides to a debate when there substantially is not .... that becomes problematic," he said.

"We are legitimizing positions that don't have credible evidence," he said

And he added: "I would find it problematic if my tutorial leaders were representing positions that didn't have any substantial academic credibility."

The discussion concluded with Rambukkana saying he wanted to see her lesson plans and graphics ahead of time, and he might sit in on her classes.

He added that going forward, "I'll have to talk everything over with my colleagues." "Hopefully everything can continue, and we can continue to have a working relationship," he said.

"Frankly some of the things we talked about are a little bit problematic and we need to process them."

Shepherd said she is concerned the professors will take away her teaching assistant job, which along with a scholarship is paying for her studies.

She had thought about a career in academia but "if this trend continues of radical leftist indoctrination, I'm not really interested in being a part of that," she wrote in an email to The Record.

"Universities are no longer places where ideas may freely circulate — they are places where if you even bring up the 'wrong' ideas (ideas they do not consider politically correct), you are labelled as some sort of public enemy. Universities are no longer places where one can engage with controversial ideas. They are echo chambers for left-wing ideology," she wrote.

"I now feel so completely alienated from the university as an institution."

Neither Pimlott nor Rambukkana responded to messages from the Record Tuesday. Joel responded that "the response to this issue is being co-ordinated at a senior level."

Asked for comment, university communications director Kevin Crowley pointed to a paragraph on the Laurier website that said: "The university is committed to fostering a learning environment that is open and challenging but also welcoming and supportive of all students."

The statement goes on to say that "the university is engaging a neutral third party to gather facts regarding the situation."

Other professors across Canada are taking an interest in the situation.

Mark Mercer, president of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship, expressed concern to Rambukkana about the way Shepherd was censured.

"Showing a video of an academic stating an academic position can stimulate students to develop thoughtful responses to ideas with which they might disagree," said Mercer's letter, which is posted on the society's website.

"This can promote intellectual resilience and independence."

Mercer invited Rambukkana to respond, and said the response would also be posted if it were received.

At Laurier, religion and culture professor Dave Haskell said he is "shocked" that so few other professors on campus are supporting Shepherd.

He said he sent a message to the president of the university asking what was being done to support Shepherd and "I've received no reply."

He had sharp criticism for the climate of "teaching students what to think, and not how to think."

When that happens, "you've ceased to perform the function of a university," he said.

"It's cult-like behaviour."

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