

Controversy erupts after Laurier TA shows Jordan Peterson clip in lesson plan

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<https://thecord.ca/controversy-erupts-after-laurier-ta-shows-jordan-peterson-clip-in-lesson-plan/>

Lindsay Shepherd, a graduate student at Wilfrid Laurier University, as well as a teaching assistant in a first-year Canadian Communication in Context class, recently sparked a controversial discussion after showing her class a video clip of Jordan Peterson.

Jordan Peterson, a psychology professor at the University of Toronto, who has frequently publicized his views which criticize the use of gender-neutral pronouns such “they,” “zie” and “zher,” as well as his beliefs of the apparent dangers surrounding Bill C-16, which is now law as this past June.

According to Shepherd, the tutorial in which she showed the video of Peterson was based on the context of a grammar lesson.

“We talked about using ‘they’ in the singular. You could call that a current issue in grammar. A lot of people are arguing that you can’t use ‘they’ in the singular. And, ultimately, I said to them I consider it grammatically correct to use ‘they’ in the singular,” Shepherd said.

In order to further the discussion surrounding gender pronouns within the English language, the clip Shepherd showed was from a televised debate between Peterson and Nicholas Matte, a lecturer in sexual diversity studies at the University of Toronto.

By showing both Peterson’s views and, after, Matte’s views, Shepherd believes she adequately, neutrally showed the viewpoints of both sides.

“[Matte] was arguing that language affects the dignity of trans people and his argument was that Jordan Peterson was not really acknowledging that. So both viewpoints were presented,” Shepherd said.

Although Shepherd claimed she did not elicit her own views on the topic by neither agreeing nor disagreeing with Peterson’s views, she said that many of the students within her tutorial did speak out on behalf of their personal views.

“Maybe some of the views that were expressed in the class may have been perceived as transphobic ... when I hear stuff like that, I’m professional enough to know what to engage with and what to shut down,” Shepherd said.

“I made a point to not express my view ... but I think it’s still important to listen to other people and listen to what they have to say. That’s what university is about — dialogue.”

Ensnuing Shepherd's tutorial, she was asked to attend a meeting with her supervising professor, Nathan Rambukkana, assistant professor in communication studies at Laurier, Herbert Pimlott, associate professor in communication studies at Laurier and Adria Joel, manager of gendered violence and prevention and support at Laurier's Diversity and Equity Office.

"I think that there's a time and a place for discussions like these. For sure, you want to be able to have these discussions and talk about these views and also how they hurt people. That doesn't seem like type of discussion that she was trying to foster there. I think that there are definitely places to try and talk about these types of things but they are more specific."

Shepherd was told at the meeting that either a student or a group of students had brought forth a complaint about the class. The number of students who were unhappy and the specific details about the complaint were, allegedly, kept confidential from Shepherd.

According to Shepherd, the three present in the meeting allegedly iterated to her that there should be no debate in regards to whether or not Peterson's views are correct or incorrect.

"[They told me] the only acceptable way that I could have done what I did, was to completely condemn it before I even start playing the video," Shepherd said.

"They told me that there's no debate. They told me that this is not something that you can even discuss. And I find that dangerous. I find it dangerous to think that; here's a prominent figure in Canada that's in the news every single day, Jordan Peterson – I find it dangerous to think that there's no debate about that."

Furthermore, Shepherd claimed that those facilitating the meeting continued on to compare her actions in the tutorial to white supremacy.

"They were continuously making arguments or trying to compare me with white supremacists, which frankly really bothered me because I'm certainly in no way associated with that. I don't find what I did relevant to white supremacy," Shepherd said.

Overall, Shepherd stated that the meeting left her questioning whether she wishes to continue at Laurier.

"I don't necessarily want to be associated with somewhere that is stifling the circulation of thought," she said.

Alicia Hall, a student coordinator of Laurier's Centre for Women and Trans People – who was not present for the meeting with Shepherd – feels that the way the situation was handled by administration reaffirms Laurier's focus on inclusivity.

"I think that if you're talking about grammar, I don't quite see the relevance of bringing up Jordan Peterson ... unless they're specifically talking about gender and pronouns," Hall said.

"By showing this video ... they're legitimizing the idea that non-binary identities are not valid and that they don't need to be respected. And people coming to this class, they shouldn't ... need to be engaging with a discussion that's essentially saying your identity doesn't matter."

While Shepherd accepts that the individual(s) who complained may have felt harm, she disagrees that silencing the conversation is the way to handle the situation.

“I don’t really usually dichotomize between the real world and the university, but I don’t think it does a service to students who are treated as infants ... I don’t think that trying to insulate people and keep them protected away from things they might be uncomfortable with is helpful to their personal development or their intellectual development,” Shepherd said.

Hall reiterated that having discussions surrounding gender pronouns and similar topics is important, but should be kept for appropriate settings, such as panels or workshops, amongst other vehicles of discussions.

“I think that there’s a time and a place for discussions like these. For sure, you want to be able to have these discussions and talk about these views and also how they hurt people. That doesn’t seem like type of discussion that she was trying to foster there. I think that there are definitely places to try and talk about these types of things but they are more specific,” Hall said.

Laurier released a statement in response to the incident, which was first mentioned in a column published by The National Post:

“The university is committed to fostering a learning environment that is open and challenging but also welcoming and supportive of all students. The university is engaging a neutral third party to gather facts regarding the situation referenced in the column. Because of the privacy issues involved, we will follow established internal processes. It is important to understand that the issues involved in this matter are complex and affect all universities,” the statement read.

The Cord reached out to the three individuals present in the meeting with Shepherd but did not receive comments at the time of publishing.