



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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13 November 2017

Nathan Rambukkana, Ph.D.
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Dear Dr Rambukkana,

I am writing as president of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS), a national organization of university faculty members and others dedicated to the defense of academic freedom, academic culture, and reasoned and respectful debate. (For further information, please see our website at www.safs.ca.)

Christie Blatchford, in the *National Post* of 10 November, writes that your teaching assistant, Lindsay Shepherd, was told that by showing a video clip from a debate involving University of Toronto psychology professor Jordan Peterson, she was “‘legitimizing’ Peterson’s views about genderless pronouns.” (See <http://nationalpost.com/opinion/christie-blatchford-thought-police-strike-again-as-wilfrid-laurier-grad-student-is-chastised-for-showing-jordan-peterson-video>.)

Blatchford writes also that Ms Shepherd was told that in “not condemning Peterson’s views as ‘problematic’ or worse, she was cultivating ‘a space where those opinions can be nurtured’ and that discussion of Peterson’s views “creates an ‘unsafe learning environment.’”

If Blatchford’s reporting is accurate, Ms Shepherd is being directed to shield the students in the course from certain views or perspectives. The purpose of classroom discussion, though, is not to bring students into any particular set of beliefs or attitudes, but to help them to make up their own minds. Requiring teaching assistants to condemn views as problematic is in conflict with this purpose, as the teaching assistant would then be pressuring the students to reject certain views. If the student does come to reject a view, it should be on the basis of the student’s own arguments.

So far from creating an unsafe learning environment, showing a video of an academic stating an academic position can stimulate students to develop thoughtful responses to ideas with which they might disagree. This can promote intellectual resilience and independence.

It is not clear to us from the *National Post* article what discretion Ms Shepherd has in introducing material of her own choosing during her direction of regular class discussions. As the teacher of the course, it is entirely appropriate for you to discuss with Ms Shepherd what she shows to and discusses with the students. What concerns us is the academic soundness of the instructions you have given her, as reported in the *National Post* article. Not only do they seem to restrict Ms Shepherd's ability to offer her own interpretations, a freedom a discussion leader needs in order to model thoughtful discussion well for her students; they seem also designed to indoctrinate students into preferred attitudes and beliefs.

SAFS is also concerned that the meeting reported in the *Post* involved another professor and the university's violence prevent program manager as well as yourself. Instead of talking collegially with her supervisor her role in your course, Ms Shepherd may well have felt intimidated in such a situation.

SAFS looks forward to hearing from you. We will post this letter on our website. With your permission, we will be pleased to post your reply together with it.

Sincerely,



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