

279. Bad Words at Ottawa U

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How should deans and other academic administrators respond when hurt and offended students complain to them about their professors or courses?

In late September, in her course Art and Gender, Verushka Lieutenant-Duval mentioned the word “nigger” as an example of a word used to denigrate a class of people that was then taken up by those people themselves. Dr Lieutenant-Duval called this phenomenon “subversive resignification.”

A student let Dr Lieutenant-Duval know that they (the student) were upset at hearing the sound “nigger.” Dr Lieutenant-Duval expressed her regret at having upset them. Dr Lieutenant-Duval then invited the class to discuss whether people should avoid mentioning or using that word though they are not intending to insult or demean anyone by speaking it. The invitation to discuss this question upset the student and some of their classmates even more. “She kind of opened it up as a discussion and made it seem like it’s something that can be debated” the student reported.

On Thursday 1 October, the University of Ottawa, through Media Relations manager Isabelle Mailloux-Pulkinghorn, announced that it was investigating Dr Lieutenant-Duval’s actions to determine whether, in speaking the word “nigger” and then in proposing that the class discuss speaking it, she had violated anyone’s “right to an environment free of discrimination and harassment and to be treated with dignity and respect.”

On Friday 2 October, Faculty of Arts dean Kevin Kee issued a statement that said, both presumptively and falsely, that “This language was offensive and completely unacceptable in our classrooms and on our campus.” Dean Kee went on to repeat that “Everyone at the University of Ottawa has the right to an environment free of discrimination and harassment, and the right to be treated with dignity and respect.”

Dean Kee put Dr Lieutenant-Duval’s class on hiatus while he thought about what to do next.

The class resumed Friday 16 October (a newspaper report said that Dr Lieutenant-Duval “returned to work” that day). The class failed to meet for at least a week, more likely almost two weeks.

“The leadership of the faculty of arts proactively met with students and established a new section of the course in question to serve students who did not wish to continue their classes with their original professor,” explained [U of O president Jacques] Frémont. “This was a necessary step to accommodate and respect the rights of all.” I’m quoting from a student newspaper (<https://thefulcrum.ca/news/u-of-o-president-breaks-silence-on-n-word-incident-involving-faculty-of-arts-professor/#:~:text=Professor%20to%20keep%20teaching%20at,%2Dword%20during%20a%20class.%E2%80%9D>).

Soon after, thirty-four professors at the University of Ottawa wrote of their disgust at the administration's treatment of Dr Lieutenant-Duval, and over five hundred Francophone professors and teachers from Quebec and Ontario added their names to a separate expression of disgust written by two Cegep teachers. (Both groups are to be commended for the quality of their analysis and evaluation and for their wisdom and courage in speaking publicly.)

President Frémont has issued two statements so far, and U of O rector Daniel Jutras has issued one.

That Dr Lieutenant-Duval did absolutely nothing wrong in using “nigger” as an example, and then in inviting her class to discuss who may and who may not say that word in what contexts, has not yet been affirmed in any U of O statement or document of which I am aware. Instead, President Frémont and Rector Jutras have followed Media Relations manager Mailloux-Pulkinghorn and Arts dean Kee in speaking about the right of members of the university community to dignity and to an environment free of discrimination and harassment.

But no students were subjected to an indignity, intentional or not, not even to a mild one. No rights were violated or threatened, no one was harassed, no one was discriminated against. In fact, no one could have suffered an indignity or have been harassed or discriminated against, for they were in a class with a teacher engaged in the intellectual investigation of a matter at hand.

President Frémont, Rector Jutras, and Dean Kee seem to think that when the complaint arrived on their desks, they were confronted by a clash between academic freedom in teaching and dignity or respect. They seem to think that in engaging intellectually with a matter at hand, Dr Lieutenant-Duval might have or might have verged on treating someone disrespectfully. But that's pure nonsense.

In his statement, Rector Jutras wrote, “...but each must also be attentive to the unforeseen, sometimes unexpected, effect of their own discourse on others.”

Rector Jutras's claim is fundamentally wrongheaded. What he recommends is a recipe for insincerity; following it would defeat candour and spontaneity. To worry about the unforeseen effects of one's words on others is to treat those others as less than free and equal autonomous agents.

Adding a second section for students who wanted to continue the course but not with Dr Lieutenant-Duval is perhaps the worst decision an academic administrator could make in this situation. President Frémont is wrong to think there are any rights in play that need accommodating. Creating a second section suggests that students who felt hurt or offended were correct to feel hurt or offended; further, it expresses disdain for Dr Lieutenant-Duval.

I wonder about the professor who will teach the parallel section. Do they possess the academic freedom to speak the word “nigger” in conducting their classes? Or are they constrained by wrongheaded notions of propriety or proprietorship? (And who the hell would have agreed to step in? Are professors *that* corrupt?)

So what should have been done? Well, as soon as he heard that a student had been upset by Dr Lieutenant-Duval's class, Dean Kee should have clarified for anyone listening the nature of academic discussion (free, open, candid, unabashed, critical, reflective, directed toward articulating and understanding the matter at hand) and explained that no one's dignity is compromised by serious academic discussion (on the contrary), no matter what is said during it.

Leaders at the University of Ottawa have yet to explain publicly that a teacher mentioning the word “nigger” does not thereby insult or demean anyone. Anyone hurt by hearing the word “nigger” mentioned (or even used, when not used to denigrate) is not attuned to the academic project of trying to understand the things of the world. Those who are hurt by hearing a teacher

speak a particular word need to be initiated into the world of academic endeavour; they don't need to be mollified or coddled, and they shouldn't be.

Academic leaders must also say plainly that no topic is off limits to discussion and that no position with regard to that topic is off limits, either.

Not all Canadian universities have a proud tradition of protecting academic freedom and freedom of expression on campus or even of maintaining an environment of free and open critical discussion. I suspect only a small few do. In case after case, academic administrators have been eager to set aside freedom of expression on campus when it appears to put at risk any other value, even though the risk be small. The idea that discussion needs to be tempered by respect (in fact, discussion expresses respect) is, sadly, written into policies and official statements on most campuses.

As well, since the killing of George Floyd, university people in Canada have been making the false (sometimes phony) claim that our universities are places of systemic racism and even places marked by racist behaviour. The idea that racism—systemic, unconscious, or overt—is a prevalent feature of Canadian universities has now primed academic administrators to accept it as the cause of this or that student's being upset.

And that is why it is hard to be confident that academic leaders at our universities have the commitment to the academic mission of the university that they need to have in order to respond as educators and intellectuals to those students or others who complain when academics go about their jobs as they should.

Of course, it is true that academic values are only one set of values among all the others and that other values might need to take precedence over them occasionally. Students being upset and complaining of racism is not such an occasion. Those students who cannot hear the word “nigger” without becoming too upset to participate in class any longer, like those students upset by depictions of rape, torture, or murder in art, literature, or film, can decide for themselves to avoid triggering situations—or they can seek to change their reactions, so that they are able to approach their studies in the spirit of academic investigation.

Deans at our universities should sit down with their academic vice-presidents or provosts and formulate how they will respond to whatever complaints those who have little appreciation of or affection for our academic ways might bring to them. Those plans must put the academic mission and the academic ethos of their university first. They must embody a robust and accurate conception of respect (and not the conception often found in safe-and-respectful-campus policies). In responding to complaints, deans and others might be able to help the complainants to understand and appreciate our academic ways; but most important is for them to affirm and protect those ways.