

Can Western be agent for change?

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By Jane Toswell

Thursday, October 30, 2008

Marginalized. Alienated. Embarrassed and unable to act naturally, unable to feel welcome.

Assaulted emotionally or physically.

Communities always have figures at the margins whose lived experience varies widely, sometimes shockingly, from the expected norms of that community. A university is no different; in fact, the video “Voices of Diversity: creating a culture of safety, respect, and belonging on campus” argues that universities – far from being on the cutting edge of societal change – are on the conservative trailing edge, places where changes that would be considered normal in other kinds of workplaces and educational institutions are not implemented, sometimes not even considered.

The video began its development as the fourth video project of the Women’s Caucus, following on from the famous “Chilly Climate” report and video in the early 1990’s.

What was initially a project to consider issues of sex and violence on the campus morphed gradually but inexorably into a documentary with five-minute sections on the experiences of racism, of ableism, of bullying and harassment, of homophobia.

There are sections addressing issues of safety on campus, the radically different and very inclusive feminist pedagogy of the Department of Women’s Studies and Feminist Research, issues of First Nations students and the very different approach to learning that is their cultural heritage, gendered behaviours in the classroom and the corridor, and the relationships between supervisors and their graduate students.

The complex ways in which academic freedom and tenure function on campus both as real powers and as mistaken notions of privilege, and the pressures on faculty members to publish and always to out-do their peers are also discussed. In short, the video opens for discussion the issues that marginalize and alienate individuals on the university campus, preventing them from accomplishing their best work.

The catalyst for the shift to a broader approach was the supposed spoof issue of *The Gazette* for April Fool’s Day in 2007. Women’s Caucus sponsored a town hall meeting to discuss the complaints that flooded the campus email systems and discussion networks in the wake of that issue, and during the town hall meeting it became very clear that steps had to be taken to find and maintain a culture in which all members could thrive to the best of their abilities.

Led by an initial grant from the VP-Research and supported fully by a grant from the Provost’s Office, the video steering committee of Women’s Caucus expanded its scope, drawing in experts and reaching across the campus. For example, particularly impressive work took place in Housing and Ancillary Services, which coordinated focus groups and found participants for the video.

The 14 women and men on the video steering committee have worked extremely hard to prepare this video. Their work exactly fulfills the terms of reference for the funds which Women's Caucus used as the seed money for this project: to act as an "agent of change" on the university campus.

Not all of the individuals speaking out in the video had experiences which resonated with my own. Some did. That seems to me quite right. The video opens issues for discussion. It will be sold only with a facilitator's handbook so that each segment can be considered, argued with, accepted, rejected, shaken apart, and reconstituted. That is what we do, when we are at our best on the university campus. This video offers us an opportunity to reach out and to change.

My own first, and I admit rather simple, desired change is this. Every morning and every evening for many years, I have walked through the concrete structure below Western Road which leads to the Springett Parking Lot.

On one wall of that bunker, in chalk, are assorted suggestive slogans and crude proposals. Currently a cartoon face of a woman sits beside the statement "Beaver Call." Perhaps this refers to our national rodent. Perhaps it refers to Huron's mascot. I find it offensive, and only one of many offensive things I have seen in that underpass.

My first desired change, then, is to see the entire concrete bunker become a gorgeous mosaic fresco, a mural in glass, an artwork, an installation. I would like to see something thought-provoking and intriguing every morning as I head into the campus, not something ugly and demeaning. I know it's a small change, but it's the first concrete change I thought of after watching "Voices of Diversity."

Jane Toswell is Associate Professor in the Department of English and a member of Western's Caucus on Women's Issues since 1989. Currently, she is president of the group.

Voices of Diversity

The video and facilitator's manual will be available for order at the Women's Caucus website, <http://www.uwo.ca/wcwi> in late November, or by email to caucus@uwo.ca.