

Teaching Arts Luncheon - November 9, 2018—Conversation about Trigger Warnings
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[Debates](#) continue about whether instructors ought to use trigger or content warnings in their teaching. Do they help or impede student learning? How are instructors to predict what might be triggering? Are there implications for academic freedom? What are current students' expectations regarding such warnings? Colleagues disagree about answers to these questions. For instance, Sarah Orem (American Studies) makes her case for using trigger warnings in this [essay](#), while Ellen Kaplan (Theatre) speaks against them in this [video](#). Come share your own experiences with and thinking about this topic.

Discussion Notes by Johanna Ravenhurst, Sherrerd Center Program Coordinator

Introduction to the topic by María Helena Rueda

- Spanish & Portuguese department had several discussions about trigger warnings and conducted some research on the topic, prompted by students' requests to include them for some materials assigned in classes.
- **Definition of Trigger Warnings**
 - The expression originated from blogs/online forums. Survivors of trauma used the expression "trigger warning" to warn readers of upsetting content
 - "trigger" – the content causes a reaction for people, perhaps they have PTSD or something similar
 - It is important that the term "trigger warnings" did not originate in the academic setting/classroom setting
- **Examples of arguments against the use of trigger warnings**
 - These warnings may result in students avoiding challenging content.
 - The idea that this contributes to a culture of "coddling" students
 - Could lead to censorship of materials that include perceived "triggers"
 - Impossible to anticipate everything (any warnings are inadequate)
 - The instructor is imposing their own interpretation of what might trigger students
- **Examples of arguments in favor of trigger warnings**
 - Accommodation for people who have experienced trauma or suffer from mental illness
 - It is empowering for such students.
 - Allow for inclusion of difficult material
 - Students are asking for them
- María teaches a course that involves difficult topics such as violence. Students are asked to watch films with violent scenes
 - In student course feedback forms, students began to ask specifically for "trigger warnings" for upsetting content

- Some considerations:
 - “Trigger warnings” → no equivalent expression in Spanish
 - The class is already set up as a “safe space”
 - Discussion with other faculty – how to incorporate trigger warnings, how far to go with these
- Ended up deciding on “**Content Notes**”
 - these are listed for every film assigned
 - This expression can easily be translated into Spanish and it does not imply that all of the notes include triggering content or that they address every possible trigger.
 - All students are generally expected to watch the films, but they can set up an appointment to discuss the film in advance or request an alternative assignment if needed.
 - In the first class, María explains why she added “content notes”

Floyd Cheung’s description of what he does

- Learned about trigger warnings a few years ago, students started requesting them for Asian-American Literature.
- Started using trigger warnings in one class, **inspired by Sarah Orem’s argument** that these warnings allow students to approach the material on their own terms
- Beginning of class – send around an **anonymous Google form** for all students to state what topics they would like trigger warnings for
 - This means the instructor is not imposing their own interpretation of what could be triggering
- **Collaborative Trigger & Content Warnings** – the students in the class fill in a spreadsheet with trigger warnings for their colleagues based on the requests from the anonymous form – they list page numbers for specific readings and the topic

Open Discussion - With regard to students' expectations for trigger warnings, what do you do? Why?

- Instructor does not introduce challenging material until later in the course → this means that the class already knows each other and has created a “safe space”
 - **Context is important**
 - **Self-care handout** before class involving topics that could be upsetting
- What if a course is generally not dealing with sensitive topics, but **there is one small reading/assignment/discussion that could be upsetting?**
 - It would seem like overkill to do the anonymous survey for a course with only one upsetting piece
 - Could try just warning students at the beginning of that particular day and reminding students that they can just get up and leave if needed

- Instructor has never had a request for trigger warnings, but is open to hearing student requests. However, they are concerned about over-preparing students for an upsetting topic.
 - **Could a trigger warning create a problem that is not already there?**
 - Response from someone else - **Students are asking for warnings, so the problem IS already there for some.** Instructor can choose to respond by ignoring the requests or adding some warnings.
- Think about the **larger pedagogical/psychological impact** on students
 - Is it better for students to engage with the material without a trigger warning?
 - Who decides what is too traumatic?
- Think harder about **complicated reactions to content** and whether we want to encourage these
 - It may cause a larger problem **if we reinforce the idea that students should not have a reaction to anything.**
 - This is a culturally significant question
 - Instructor should challenge the idea of needing a trigger warning.
 - Discuss how instructors deal with difficult content/part of life (MAYBE FUTURE TAL?)
- Current **political climate**
 - We are all being confronted with racial and sexist slurs in the news regularly now. Triggers are a part of our daily lives.
- Keep in mind that there is a **power dynamic** in the classroom
 - The instructor selects the readings/films/assignments and there is pressure for the student to do them
 - The instructor is responsible for helping students process the difficult content
- Remember that we are dealing with two groups of students here
 - Students who have experienced trauma – they don't need to be forced to relive the trauma. They have already dealt with the difficult reaction/content.
 - Students who have not experienced trauma – instructors can state that they expect all students to deal with the difficult topic/reading if they haven't experienced trauma related to it. **Honor code - don't avoid difficult content if you don't need to.**
- **Does insisting on certain course content exclude groups of students?**
 - Example of nude models in an art course – some students have dropped out because they object to this assignment. This could be due to religious reasons or maybe sexual trauma.
 - Want classes to be more diverse, but this assignment is important to the course content. When should content be eliminated to be more inclusive, and when should it be kept, even if it excludes some students?

- **Questionnaire at the beginning of a course**
 - Add question about trigger warnings along with questions about pronouns, etc.
 - Remember that we are talking about a small population of students who truly need trigger warnings → ask those students what they need
- **What about student generated work?**
 - Peer-review of work on a variety of topics that could include triggering topics
 - Maybe add guidelines for students to add trigger warnings for their own work? Part of the class participation guidelines?
- **Students may have a different idea of the purpose of trigger warnings**
 - Instructors want to add a warning if the content will prevent a student from learning
 - Are students requesting trigger warnings for the same reason?
- **Even with trigger warnings, content can still be traumatizing.** Think about how can we be trauma-informed rather than how to foster a sense of comfort. We want some level of discomfort with some topics, because that is how to foster learning.

Additional Resources on the Topic of Trigger Warnings:

- [Teaching with Trauma: Trigger Warnings, Feminism, and Disability Pedagogy](#)
Angela M. Carter, Ph.D. Candidate in Feminist Studies, University of Minnesota
- [Weepy Rhetoric, Trigger Warnings, and the Work of Making Mental Illness Visible in the Writing Classroom](#) – Sarah Orem (American Studies) & Neil Simpkins, University of Wisconsin-Madison
- Ellen Kaplan (Theatre) – [Video about why she doesn't use trigger warnings](#)