



On Trigger Warnings

This report was drafted by a subcommittee of Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure in August 2014 and has been approved by Committee A.

A current threat to academic freedom in the classroom comes from a demand that teachers provide warnings in advance if assigned material contains anything that might trigger difficult emotional responses for students. This follows from earlier calls not to offend students' sensibilities by introducing material that challenges their values and beliefs. The specific call for "trigger warnings" began in the blogosphere as a caution about graphic descriptions of rape on feminist sites, and has now migrated to university campuses in the form of requirements or proposals that students be alerted to all manner of topics that some believe may deeply offend and even set off a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) response in some individuals. Oberlin College's original policy (since tabled to allow for further debate in the face of faculty opposition) is an example of the range of possible trigger topics: "racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, ableism, and other issues of privilege and oppression." It went on to say that a novel like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* might "trigger readers who have experienced racism, colonialism, religious persecution, violence, suicide and more." It further cautioned faculty to "[r]emove triggering material when it does not contribute directly to the course learning goals."

As one report noted, at Wellesley College students objected to "a sculpture of a man in his underwear because it might be a source of 'triggering thoughts regarding sexual assault.'" While the [students'] petition acknowledged that the sculpture might not disturb everyone on campus, it insisted that we share a 'responsibility to pay attention to and attempt to answer the needs of all of our community members.' Even after the artist explained that the figure was supposed to be sleepwalking, students continued to insist it be moved indoors."¹

¹ Jenny Jarvie, "Trigger Happy" at <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/116842/trigger-warnings-have-spread-blogs-college-classes-thats-bad>. Owing to an editorial oversight an earlier version of this statement failed to indicate the source of this paragraph.

The presumption that students need to be protected rather than challenged in a classroom is at once infantilizing and anti-intellectual. It makes comfort a higher priority than intellectual engagement and—as the Oberlin list demonstrates—it singles out politically controversial topics like sex, race, class, capitalism, and colonialism for attention. Indeed, if such topics are associated with triggers, correctly or not, they are likely to be marginalized if not avoided altogether by faculty who fear complaints for offending or discomforting some of their students. Although all faculty are affected by potential charges of this kind, non-tenured and contingent faculty are particularly at risk. In this way the demand for trigger warnings creates a repressive, “chilly climate” for critical thinking in the classroom.

Our concern extends to academic libraries, the repositories of content spanning all cultures and types of expression. We think the statement of the American Library Association regarding “labeling and rating systems” applies to trigger warnings. “Prejudicial labels are designed to restrict access, based on a value judgment that the content, language, or theme of the material, or the background or views of the creator(s) of the material, render it inappropriate or offensive for all or certain groups of users....When labeling is an attempt to prejudice attitudes, it is a censor’s tool.”

Institutional requirements or even suggestions that faculty use trigger warnings interfere with faculty academic freedom in the choice of course materials and teaching methods. Faculty might feel pressured into notifying students about course content for fear that some students might find it disturbing. Of course there may be instances in which a teacher judges it necessary to alert students to potentially difficult material and that is his or her right. Administrative requirements are different from individual faculty decisions. Administration regulation constitutes interference with academic freedom; faculty judgment is a legitimate exercise of autonomy.

There are reasons, however, for concern that even voluntary use of trigger warnings included on syllabi may be counterproductive to the educational experience. Such trigger warnings conflate exceptional individual experience of trauma with the anticipation of trauma for an entire group, and assume that individuals will respond negatively to certain content. A trigger warning might lead a student to simply not read an assignment or it might elicit a response from students they otherwise would not have had, focusing them on one aspect of a text and thus precluding other reactions. If, for example, *The House of Mirth* or *Anna Karenina* carried a warning about suicide, students might overlook the other questions about wealth, love, deception, and existential anxiety that are what those books are actually about. Trigger warnings thus run the risk of reducing complex literary, historical, sociological and political insights to a few negative characterizations. By calling attention to certain content in a given work, trigger warnings also signal an expected response to the content (e.g., dismay, distress, disapproval), and eliminate the element of surprise and spontaneity that can enrich the reading experience and provide critical insight.

Some discomfort is inevitable in classrooms if the goal is to expose students to new ideas, have them question beliefs they have taken for granted, grapple with ethical problems they have

never considered, and, more generally, expand their horizons so as to become informed and responsible democratic citizens. Trigger warnings suggest that classrooms should offer protection and comfort rather than an intellectually challenging education. They reduce students to vulnerable victims rather than full participants in the intellectual process of education. The effect is to stifle thought on the part of both teachers and students who fear to raise questions that might make others “uncomfortable.”

The classroom is not the appropriate venue to treat PTSD, which is a medical condition that requires serious medical treatment. Trigger warnings are an inadequate and diversionary response. Medical research suggests that triggers for individuals can be unpredictable, dependent on networks of association. So color, taste, smell, and sound may lead to flashbacks and panic attacks as often as the mention of actual forms of violence such as rape and war. The range of any student’s sensitivity is thus impossible to anticipate. But if trigger warnings are required or expected, anything in a classroom that elicits a traumatic response could potentially expose teachers to all manner of discipline and punishment.

Instead of putting the onus for avoiding such responses on the teacher, cases of serious trauma should be referred to student health services. Faculty should, of course, be sensitive that such reactions may occur in their classrooms, but they should not be held responsible for them. Instead, as with other disabilities, a student diagnosed with PTSD should, in advance, agree on a plan for treatment with the relevant health advisors who, in some cases, may want to alert teachers to the presence of a trauma victim in their classroom. The Americans with Disabilities Act contains recommendations for reasonable accommodation to be made on an individual basis. This should be done without affecting other students’ exposure to material that has educational value.

It is probably not coincidental that the call for trigger warnings comes at a time of increased attention to campus violence, especially to sexual assault that is often associated with the widespread abuse of alcohol. Trigger warnings are a way of displacing the problem, however, locating its solution in the classroom rather than in administrative attention to social behaviors that permit sexual violence to take place. Trigger warnings will not solve this problem, but only misdirect attention from it and, in the process, threaten the academic freedom of teachers and students whose classrooms should be open to difficult discussions, whatever form they take.