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Trigger Warnings: Compassion is Not Censorship

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the pedagogical utility of trigger warnings in relation to fostering a *culture of informed learning* that creates an atmosphere of agency and accountability between educators and students, thus providing university instructors and administrators with an alternative framework to understand the value of such warnings. While supporting the use of trigger warnings as a pedagogical tool, we also aim to problematize the use of the phrase ‘trigger warning’ and question the value of adopting universal trigger warning policies.

Keywords: trigger warning, censorship, academic freedom, compassion, culture of informed learning

The adoption of trigger warnings in higher education classrooms, syllabi, and other scholarly forums has been the focus of much debate and controversy over the past few years. The framing of the ‘trigger warning debate’ is often accompanied by alarming headlines such as *The Coddling of the American Mind*

(Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Two principal organizations that represent the interests of professors in the United States and Canada – the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) – have both made official statements against the use of trigger warnings in university classrooms citing significant concerns about academic freedom and censorship within universities. For example, the statement from AAUP (2014) claims: “The demand for trigger warnings creates a repressive, ‘chilly climate’ for critical thinking in the classroom” (para. 3) and, similarly, CAUT’s (2015) statement concludes by asserting: “Trigger warnings are inimical to the academic enterprise because they encourage censorship, and the inappropriate surveillance of the classroom” (para. 4). A number of scholars, educators, student groups, and other concerned citizens have also weighed in on both sides of the debate, calling for more warnings to be used and expressing that trigger warnings are farcical (for example see: Essig, 2014; Hanlon, 2015; Jarvie, 2014; Shaw-Thornberg, 2014).

The purpose of this contribution is to highlight the pedagogical utility of trigger warnings in relation to fostering a *culture of informed learning*, thus providing university instructors and administrators with an alternative framework to understand the value of such warnings. While supporting the use of trigger warnings as a pedagogical tool, we also aim to problematize the use of the phrase ‘trigger warning’ and question the value of adopting universal trigger warning policies. Our stance on trigger warnings is informed by our feminism and our extensive experience using similar warnings in the classroom. Key feminist principles we employ in our teaching include: practicing intersectional approaches that recognize individuals in our classes have complex identities that include, but are not limited to, being “students”; countering paternalistic/maternalistic relationships between students and faculty that assume students are the only ones learning and faculty are the only ones teaching; and (re)centering the classroom environment on the concepts of respect, consent and reciprocal learning between all members of a class. These principles directly inform our approach to creating a culture of informed learning described in this paper.

Censorship, Academic Freedom and the Infantilization of Students

Conversations about trigger warnings are often reduced to an academic exercise removed from the material reality of the classroom; these conversations are frequently centered on issues related to academic freedoms, censorship, entitlements, and scholarly prerogative as evidenced in the statements by AAUP and CAUT. We argue that the conversation needs to be re-centered on the day-to-

day realities of teaching. This is not to suggest that critical, engaged dialogue about the utility, implications, and potential (un)intended consequences of implementing trigger warning policies is pointless. Academic freedom and autonomy are certainly important factors in this equation. However, as we argue in more detail below, upholding academic freedom and fostering a culture of informed learning are not mutually exclusive endeavors. Calling for the considered and careful use of trigger warnings is not tantamount to censorship and the elimination of critical dialogue, but rather an invitation for us to reflect on our responsibilities as educators. What scholar among us is not motivated by a desire to challenge our students, to push them in their thinking, and to explore controversial topics? These aspirations are possible because of the academic freedom afforded to us as public intellectuals and scholars. But this freedom does not exempt us from preparing our students for the emotional and psychological impacts of engaging in contentious and challenging dialogue.

A second common argument against the use of trigger warnings is that these warnings infantilize students. This claim relies on the assumption that instructors provide such warnings in an effort to protect their students—to shield, guard, or shelter them from what the ‘real world’ is like. For example, AAUP states: “The presumption that students need to be protected rather than challenged in a classroom is at once infantilizing and anti-intellectual” (para. 3). In this scenario, the students need to be taught about the ‘real world’ which is presumed to be tough and challenging, perhaps even brutal. Faculty members who use trigger warnings are imagined as quasi-parents, who are taking up maternal or paternal roles in relation to their students. Moreover, this argument relies heavily on an assumption that students haven’t experienced the ‘real world’ yet. Thus, not only are faculty positioned as parental figures, but students are envisioned as innocent, unknowing, and naïve, which discounts that students walk into university classrooms with decades of lived experience. The alternative is to recognize that students bring with them knowledge, awareness and information about what the difficult, sometimes brutal, world is like. We contend that it is, in fact, inattention to student experience that is infantilizing towards students. Our own use of warnings is not premised on the notion of protection but rather the logics of respect and consent.

Fostering a Culture of Informed Learning

Conversations about traumatic, harmful, and violent events are not simply an academic exercise. They are conversations that can directly reflect students’ experiences of the world. Discounting or ignoring students’ experiences of violence and trauma is not acceptable. However, the solution is not to eliminate,

dilute, or shy away from topics that might be considered traumatic or difficult. The consequence of avoiding such issues is that these experiences of marginalization, oppression, and injustice are minimized or, at worst, entirely erased. This would be censorship in its worst form.

The primary argument of this paper is that faculty can balance the above noted tensions through fostering a culture of informed learning where instructors respect student autonomy by providing information about topics and materials that are difficult, violent, and/or potentially traumatic. This information allows students to prepare themselves for what could be challenging conversations, while recognizing that the capacity to learn is affected by one's well-being and their personal sense of safety. Perhaps even more importantly, it gives an opportunity to those who have directly experienced violence and oppression to make informed decisions, based on their own life histories and current circumstances, about how best to participate in classroom conversations. A culture of informed learning creates an atmosphere of agency and accountability between educators and students where students have the power to decide what they need in order to learn. If one's ability to learn is compromised under conditions of fear and stress, then providing basic information about course content gives students the opportunity to ask the instructor for more information about what is to be covered, to leave part way through the class, to be present but not participate directly in the discussion, or even to skip a class. While we can never guarantee the classroom will be an entirely safe space, efforts towards recognizing these dynamics can contribute to *safer* spaces on campus.

The idea of a student 'choosing' whether to come to class may elicit criticism and concern about students opting out of classes and missing important information. However, it is the argument that instructors "always know best" that is profoundly infantilizing towards students. Let's be honest—students make the decision to attend or not attend class every day for a whole variety of reasons. As instructors we may deem some of these reasons as legitimate (athletic competitions?) and others as less so (attending a party?). We may provide incentives for coming to class, such as attendance grades, but we cannot compel our students to be present. They have made their own decision to attend post-secondary and, often armed with the knowledge of potential consequences (such as failing grades), make their own decisions regarding what their experience of post-secondary education will involve.

The intent of trigger warnings is not about providing the most comfortable environment possible for students, but rather about recognizing student autonomy

and giving students the information they need so they can make a fully informed choice about whether, and in what ways, to be present. In other words, it is about consent. It is about providing survivors of childhood abuse, intimate partner violence, sexual violence, colonialism, institutionalized police violence, racism, homophobia, transphobia, genocide, and war with the power to make decisions in their lives. Survivors, and those exposed to injustices, trauma, and harm are currently, and will continue to be, in our classroom ‘Knowledge is power’ is a classic feminist principle. As educators, we can provide students with the knowledge of what we will discuss, so they can decide what they need in order to be able to learn and fully participate in the classroom.

In addition to student empowerment through decision-making, this type of proactive engagement requires educators to develop and demonstrate empathy for the human condition. The act of issuing even a short warning about disturbing or alarming materials demonstrates an empathic and informed stance about realities faced by students, and indeed, by all members of an academic community. Through the acknowledgment of oppressive and damaging experiences of others we simultaneously bear witness to social injustices and provide students, ourselves, and others in our communities with an opportunity to practice self-care and agency as they navigate academic spaces. Indeed as Shaw-Thornberg (2014) states:

Telling students who come to our classes with severe traumas that often leave them with post-traumatic stress disorder to just suck it up is not a reasonable response to what trauma does to you. These students deserve the chance to take care of themselves. (para. 12)

The goal is to respect a student’s right to not be surprised by content that may cause distress. This is different from implying a professor is responsible for preventing distress; in contrast, by providing the class with a warning, students are given the opportunity to make decisions about their own well-being.

Furthermore, issuing a warning is just that—a warning. It is a caution; a purposeful moment created by the educator to set the stage for informed dialogue and discussion. This is very much contrary to Essig’s (2014) contention that “trigger warnings are a very dangerous form of censorship because they’re done in the name of civility” (para. 6). A trigger warning is meant to equip students and help them be aware of (un)expected emotional, psychological, or physical reactions. It is not about civility; it is about compassion. Trigger warnings demand that professors enter into conversations with an acknowledgement that a conversation about something such as rape is almost inevitably a material, lived reality of a person in your classroom. When the censorship argument is raised we

find ourselves asking: what is the *real* cost to us, as professors, to issue a few statements about the materials to be covered? Or to let students know that a video clip has images of dead bodies? Or that a novel describes a rape scene? How does the act of taking a few moments to acknowledge the difficulty of the material effect our ability to engage in critical dialogue in *tangible ways*? Bombarding students with difficult images, discussions, and written materials, without any acknowledgement of the potential impacts more accurately reflects the unexamined privilege of professors who have not faced similar realities.

This is especially problematic when these acts can be ‘explained away’ in the name of defending instructors’ academic freedoms. As scholars, we hold dear the principle of academic freedom; we also contend that, as a group, university educators are privileged. This is not a denial of oppressive experiences that instructors may have faced, but an acknowledgment that, in relative terms, those who make it into the academy have often experienced a number of advantages as well. Moreover, it is instructors that are at the front of the classroom organizing the conversations, deciding on class content, and assessing students’ work. While there is no way to erase these power dynamics, it is important to acknowledge that this situation may give rise to an inequity, especially when academic freedoms are prioritized over student learning. By adopting a self-reflective stance, instructors have the opportunity to recognize when our right to academic freedom is being given more weight than the rights of our students to a safer learning environment. Again, safety in the classroom can never be guaranteed, and in fact may not be desirable when engaging in challenging conversations that are meant to push students’ thinking. But rather than demanding professors’ protect their students by guaranteeing a “safe” environment, creating a culture of informed learning respects the agency of students to make informed decisions about what constitutes their best possible learning environments. Giving students the opportunity to consent increases the likelihood that classroom spaces will feel safer, ideally contributing to students’ capacity to learn.

Finally, while Essig (2014) attributes her avoidance of difficult topics to the advent of trigger warnings, stating “...I more or less try to avoid showing anything too upsetting” (para. 1), it is more likely, as she self-described, that her attempts to provide them have not been well received. Thus, it may not be the utility of a trigger warning that is really at the heart of the matter, but rather professors’ abilities as educators and teachers to figure out how to adequately attend to lived experiences of pain, suffering, and ongoing trauma within the contexts of the university classroom. And this is something that, as university educators, we are rarely encouraged to develop as a skill; we are not taught the *value* of compassion

in the classroom. The basis of a professor's job is assumed to be the development of rational thought, and rationality is positioned as the binary opposite of emotion. Yet, it is important for all instructors, and especially those that teach "controversial topics like sex, race, class, capitalism, and colonialism" (as identified by the AAUP statement, 2015, para. 3), to develop an alternative view that understands emotion as informing rationality and vice versa. The development of critical thinking skills demands an ability to account for the human condition. In light of this, the charge of "anti-intellectualism" made by the AAUP (2015, para. 3) is particularly problematic because it upholds a Western, patriarchal notion about what intellectual spaces look like and what is valued as learning. We are concerned that the AAUP's version of intellectualism allows educators to speak about race, but not explore and account for the consequences of racism on the bodies, minds, and souls of their students.

Moving Away from the Term 'Trigger Warning' and Avoiding Universal Policies

While in favor of the idea of providing warnings to students about potentially difficult material, the phrase 'trigger warning' is problematic. The medicalization and sterility of the term 'trigger', and its connection to the diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD), is something that requires careful consideration. The phrase evolved in online forums and internet communities in an effort to prevent the harm that may accompany reading about traumatic experiences. The specific phrase 'trigger warning' has now found its way into the classroom and other academic spaces. However, as outlined above, it is a lofty (and even maternalistic) goal to imagine that by providing a trigger warning, professors can prevent a student from experiencing a traumatic response or re-traumatization. Nor is this our intention. Perhaps a more accurate term to capture the type of proactive engagement we are imagining is an 'advisory' statement; students are *advised* of the content to be covered rather than warned about being triggered. There are other possibilities as well. Dr. Frank Chalk, a faculty member at Concordia University, referred to his approach as providing a "safety valve" that gives students permission to leave any class if they are feeling uncomfortable or overwhelmed (Johnson, 2015, para. 5). We encourage others to imagine, create, and share new ways of naming and describing the work that is done when faculty members foster a culture of informed learning.

Finally, by writing this piece, we are inviting post-secondary instructors and others in academic communities to engage in ongoing dialogue about the use of written and verbal trigger warnings in university classrooms. However, we do not

recommend the uninformed adoption of trigger warnings in all classrooms or universal institutional policies about these warnings. Thus, similar to both the AAUP and CAUT statements, we do not endorse institutional *requirements* to use trigger warnings. Trigger warnings are decidedly context-specific. Figuring out what material may need a warning, the best way to provide that warning (verbally, written, online), and what information to include requires knowledge of the course, the students, the classroom dynamic, the instructor's approach, and the broader institutional and social contexts. As Hanlon (2015) notes: "While a miniscule number of colleges and universities have gone so far as to codify trigger warnings for professors, most trigger warnings exist as a pedagogical choice that professors make in situations over which we exercise considerable control" (para. 14). Universalizing policies can potentially blur the line between ethical engagement in the classroom and the sanitizing of scholarly thought and discussion. While we recognize this concern, we would also like to express significant apprehension that the statements made by AAUP and CAUT may go too far in the other direction, dismissing the value of continued conversations and engaged debate about the role of warnings in the classroom. We encourage university educators and administrators to engage with one another in continuous dialogues about what constitutes a balanced approach to utilizing trigger warnings within the context of their own institutions. It is these conversations that we hope will enhance a culture of informed learning for all members of our academic communities.

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