

The Trigger Warning Dilemma

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Definition:

- A trigger warning is a warning presented to the class, either verbally or on the syllabus, about potentially upsetting material *for someone whose own personal experience of harm could trigger “painful memories, flashbacks, or panic attacks.”*

Jenny Jarvie, “Trigger Happy” March 2014

- According to Jenny Jarvie and others, trigger warnings got their start on feminist blogs over a decade ago, warning readers about upcoming discussions of rape, sexual abuse and mental illness.
- Since then, writes Jarvie, “the trigger warning is gaining momentum . . . at some of the nation’s most prestigious universities.”
- Oberlin college advised faculty members to “remove triggering material when it doesn’t ‘directly’ contribute to learning goals and ‘strongly consider’ developing a policy to make ‘triggering material’ optional. (The policy has since been tabled)
- “On college campuses across the country, a growing number of students are demanding trigger warnings on class content.”

What's the problem?

- Alerting students to potentially disturbing or upsetting material is respectful and leads to a more productive classroom experience for students
- Students appreciate it. They say so.
- So why did the AAUP (American Association of University Professors) issue a report in August 2014 stating that trigger warnings represent “a current threat to academic freedom in the classroom”?

- In an effort to be sensitive to student needs and experiences, universities across the country have been struggling with an unintended consequence: the idea that students can dictate course material based on their comfort level and/or beliefs.
- AAUP report: “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. . . . Indeed, if such topics [sex, race, class, capitalism] are associated with triggers . . . they are likely to be . . . Avoided by *faculty who fear complaints for offending or discomforting some of their students*. . . . Non-tenured and contingent faculty are particularly at risk.”

Weighing the Options

Pros

- Trigger warnings are important for the mental well-being of our students who have had traumatic experiences
- They can alert non-traumatized students to disturbing material and give them time to psychologically “prepare” themselves for what they are to encounter

Cons

- “Trigger warnings suggest that classrooms should offer protection and comfort rather than an intellectually challenging education.” “Some discomfort is inevitable in classrooms if the goal is to expose students to new ideas”—AAUP
- Some students request that they be allowed an alternative assignment to the one that makes them uncomfortable (not triggered) or that conflicts with their personal beliefs

Where is the line?

- Faculty narratives of trigger warnings and student experience
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