Editor's Page: Trigger Warnings

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Published online: 29 August 2015

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As another semester approaches, faculty members are busy tweaking courses in preparation for first-time and returning college students. Hot topics, like MOOCs and helicopter parents, are discussed as faculty members plan for an increasingly diverse student body. While not entirely new in higher education, “trigger warnings” are another hot topic. Trigger warnings are alerts placed on texts to give students advance warning that instructional materials may remind students of a past traumatic experience and could “trigger” a strong emotional response.

A quick search of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* revealed a number of opinion pieces on the topic in 2014 and continuing attention by journalists in 2015. A discussion of trigger warnings and their appropriateness has also garnered attention in the *Times Higher Education*; *The Huffington Post*; the *New Republic*; and only a few days ago in Australia’s most widely circulated national newspaper, *The Australian*, to name only a few of the outlets. Some writers suggest that texts that deal with issues such as racism, sexism, sexual violence, and poverty (to name a few) may be potentially offensive and could trigger an extreme reaction based on a student’s prior experience. Therefore, students should be alerted to these potential triggers by placing an advance warning on the course syllabus, if not directly on the text.

The interest in trigger warnings in higher education gained momentum when four students at Columbia voiced their concerns about a fellow student’s reaction to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and the treatment of rape in the text. At about the same time, students at the University of California at Santa Barbara passed a resolution calling for mandatory trigger warnings, and an office at Oberlin College in Ohio issued guidelines on the use of trigger warnings. It seems that the momentum has subsided, but not disappeared.

Advocates for trigger warnings believe that an increasing number of students enter college with troubled histories or some form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD usually associated with returning veterans), which can be triggered by instructional materials that touch on their past traumas. Thus, trigger warnings would give these students an opportunity to opt out of class during troubling discussions and to avoid materials that could trigger a reaction. Weighing in, some mental health professionals have noted that trigger warnings may actually

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create more dysfunction by encouraging those with need for treatment to avoid the very events that they must confront to deal with their past trauma.

At the risk of over-simplification of the online “discussion,” it seems that in the opinion pieces most faculty members were opposed to administrative policies requiring trigger warnings. The warnings were perceived as anti-intellectual, consumer-oriented, and in opposition to academic freedom. They were seen as undermining the purpose of a college education which should challenge our preconceptions, unsettle our thinking, and naturally create discomfort in coming to new ideas and knowledge. As some noted, the purpose of college is not to merely confirm prior beliefs and maintain the status quo of “comfortable” kids. No one, however, thought that students should just “suck it up.” Faculty members did recognize the complexity of student needs, the expectation that the environment adapt to students, and the polarization of ideological stances that kept students from dealing with ideas that are uncomfortable and not of their own choosing.

In August 2014, the American Association of University Professors adopted a report by Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure stating that trigger warnings are a threat to faculty academic freedom and judgement in the selection of course materials and instructional methods. Even voluntary trigger warnings used by individual faculty were seen as potentially counterproductive. For example, the report states that faculty members cannot begin to anticipate all of the potential triggers for students; and unsuccessful voluntary use could put faculty members at risk, especially adjuncts and other contingent faculty members with little protection from student complaints and the firestorm that can be created quickly online by the allegiance of like-minded individuals. Plus, warnings are complicated because many triggering events may be around topics that are politically controversial, like race and class. Are discussions of these topics triggering traumatic responses from past events or challenging long held and understandable emotional responses?

Trigger warnings also create the risk of reducing complicated texts to a single label, e.g., suicide might be listed as a trigger in a text, but this incident may only be a small part in a larger, more complex story; but, the short-hand label says “this book is about suicide.” To avoid risk, some faculty members may decide to avoid potentially sensitive topics entirely, if surrounded by requirements or subtle pressure to use labels, much to the loss of the education of the larger group of students. Some writers expanded the list of potential triggers so broadly that one writer noted that all courses in the arts and humanities (maybe half the curriculum) could be eliminated and students could just feel “comfy” in what they already know and agree to study.

The overwhelming number of faculty members are not mental health experts, and the classroom is not the place for full-scale intervention. Yet, if faculty members are teaching challenging topics, with trigger warnings or not, they need to know the resources and support services available on campus for troubled students. While these services may exist on campus, how many faculty members are introduced to these resources through faculty development activities or programs? If we are going to take students into challenging works and unsettling experiences, we need to be able to see them through to the other side, with the good help of campus services.