



Sunday Review | OPINION

Why I Use Trigger Warnings

By KATE MANNE SEPT. 19, 2015

TRIGGER warnings have been getting a lot of pushback lately. Professors who have adopted the practice of alerting their students to potentially disturbing content in a text or class are being accused of coddling millennials. And the students who request them are being called “infantile,” or worse. In a recent story in *The Atlantic*, the authors Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt describe them as part of a movement, “undirected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense.”

I happen to be both a millennial and, for the past two years, an assistant professor of philosophy. I’ve been using trigger warnings in my teaching — in cases when they seem appropriate — since I began to lecture.

Trigger warnings are nothing new. The practice originated in Internet communities, primarily for the benefit of people with post-traumatic stress disorder. The idea was to flag content that depicted or discussed common causes of trauma, like military combat, child abuse, incest and sexual violence. People could then choose whether or not to engage with this material.

But trigger warnings have been adapted to serve a subtly different purpose within universities. Increasingly, professors like me simply give students notice in their syllabuses, or before certain reading assignments. The point is not to enable — let alone encourage — students to skip these readings or our subsequent class

discussion (both of which are mandatory in my courses, absent a formal exemption). Rather, it is to allow those who are sensitive to these subjects to prepare themselves for reading about them, and better manage their reactions. The evidence suggests that at least some of the students in any given class of mine are likely to have suffered some sort of trauma, whether from sexual assault or another type of abuse or violence. So I think the benefits of trigger warnings can be significant.

Criticisms of trigger warnings are often based on the idea that college is a time for intellectual growth and emotional development. In order for this to happen, students must be challenged. And they need to learn to engage rationally with ideas, arguments and views they find difficult, upsetting or even repulsive. On this count, I agree with the critics, and it is in fact the main reason that I do issue warnings.

In philosophy, we often draw a distinction between responses based on reasons and those that are merely *caused*. In the first case, our response has a basis in rational reflection. We can cite reasons that we think justify our opinion. But in the latter case, we find ourselves involuntarily caused — or triggered — to have a certain reaction.

Triggered reactions can be intense and unpleasant, and may even overtake our consciousness, as with a flashback experienced by a war veteran. But even more common conditions can have this effect. Think, for example, about the experience of intense nausea. It comes upon a person unbidden, without rational reflection. And you can no more reason your way out of it than you reasoned your way into it. It's also hard, if not impossible, to engage productively with other matters while you are in the grip of it. You might say that such states temporarily eclipse our rational capacities.

For someone who has experienced major trauma, vivid reminders can serve to induce states of body and mind that are rationally eclipsing in much the same manner. A common symptom of PTSD is panic attacks. Those undergoing these attacks may be flooded with anxiety to the point of struggling to draw breath, and feeling disoriented, dizzy and nauseated. Under conditions such as these, it's impossible to think straight.

The thought behind trigger warnings isn't just that these states are highly unpleasant (although they certainly are). It's that they temporarily render people unable to focus, regardless of their desire or determination to do so. Trigger warnings can work to prevent or counteract this.

As teachers, we can't foresee every instance of potentially triggering material; some triggers are unpredictable. But others are easy enough to anticipate, specifically, depictions or discussions of the very kinds of experiences that often result in post-traumatic stress and even, for some, a clinical disorder. With appropriate warnings in place, vulnerable students may be able to employ effective anxiety management techniques, by meditating or taking prescribed medication.

To me, there seems to be very little reason not to give these warnings. As a professor, it merely requires my including one extra line in a routine email to the class, such as: "A quick heads-up. The reading for this week contains a graphic depiction of sexual assault." These warnings are not unlike the advisory notices given before films and TV shows; those who want to ignore them can do so without a second thought. The cost to students who don't need trigger warnings is, I think, equally minimal. It may even help sensitize them to the fact that some of their classmates will find the material hard going. The idea, suggested by Professor Haidt and others, that this considerate and reasonable practice feeds into a "culture of victimhood" seems alarmist, if not completely implausible.

Mr. Lukianoff and Professor Haidt also argue in their article that we shouldn't give trigger warnings, based on the efficacy of exposure therapy — where you are gradually exposed to the object of a phobia, under the guidance of a trained psychotherapist. But the analogy works poorly. Exposing students to triggering material without warning seems more akin to occasionally throwing a spider at an arachnophobe.

Of course, all this still leaves the questions of how and when to give trigger warnings, and where to draw the line to avoid their overuse. There is no formula for this, just as there is no formula for designing classes, for successful teaching and meaningful communication with students. As teachers we use our judgment and experience to guide our words and actions in the entire act of teaching. We should be trusted, without legislation from college administrators, to decide,

ideally in dialogue with our students — whose voices are eerily silent in these discussions in the media — when (and when not) to use these warnings.

Common sense should tell us that material that is merely offensive to certain people’s political or religious sensibilities wouldn’t merit a warning. True, politics and religion can make people irrationally angry. But unlike a state of panic, anger is a state we are able to rein in rationally — or at least we should be able to.

There are several difficult issues that still need to be hashed out. For example, although I see a willingness to use trigger warnings as part of pedagogical best practices, I don’t believe their use should be mandatory. There is already too much threat to academic freedom at the moment because of top-down interference from overreaching administrators. But when it comes to the bottom-up pressure from students on professors to adopt practices like giving trigger warnings, I am sympathetic. It’s not about coddling anyone. It’s about enabling everyone’s rational engagement.

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