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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: The Controversial Issue of Trigger Warnings in Higher Education
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To Use or Not to Use: The Controversial Issue of Trigger Warnings in Higher Education by Diana Galarreta-Aima

The controversy over the use of TW (Trigger Warnings) in the classroom started when [four students from Columbia \(2015\)](#) demanded that instructors provide trigger warnings to sensitive course material. The idea of TW originates in the psychiatric literature on post-traumatic reactions, and TW have been used for many years on feminist websites in order to warn sexual assault victims of triggering material. Although most institutions don't have official policies regarding the use of TW in the classroom, [nprED \(2016\)](#) recently found that half of the instructors they surveyed use them before a difficult topic to prevent post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) responses or anxiety attacks in students. There isn't a consensus about what kind of material requires a TW, but [most instructors agree that graphic descriptions of sexual and racial violence need one \(2016\)](#). Moreover, even when an instructor decides to use a TW, there isn't unanimity on how to implement them.

TW have received pushback from academics and organizations focused on protecting free speech, like the ACLU. Among them, two of the most vocal opponents of TW have been Lukianoff and Haidt, the authors of [The Coddling of the American Mind \(2018\)](#), where they claim the cultivation of fragility and "safetyism" among college students is threatening freedom of speech and inquiry speech in higher education.

After the University of Chicago [sent a letter \(2016\)](#) to incoming students warning against TW and safe spaces, a polemic about the use of TW has reverberated within academe and beyond. These are some of the biggest criticisms against TW:

- they are a [form of censorship \(2014\)](#) that threatens academic freedom and free speech on campus;
- they create a [repressive climate \(2014\)](#) for critical thinking in the classroom;
- they aren't effective because [triggers are unpredictable \(2017\)](#) and avoidance of such triggers can make PTSD worse;
- they suggest [students are fragile victims \(2015\)](#) who shouldn't be engaged with ideas that make them uncomfortable;
- they prepare students poorly for [professional life \(2014\)](#), which often presents challenges to one's point of view;
- they [silence religious students \(2016\)](#); and

- they [threaten the jobs of tenure-track or adjunct professors \(2015\)](#) because these instructors can be fired if they offend students or if students complain about them.

Such criticisms about TW have received push back, however; those who favor their use argue that:

- they are [easy to implement \(2015\)](#) (e.g., a line in the syllabus or a verbal or written notice before a reading);
- they don't harm anyone: students who aren't triggered might even become aware of their classmates' traumatic experience and might [be more sympathetic \(2016\)](#) to them;
- they help students prepare for—and not skip—a difficult topic; people against TW postulate that exposure therapy is used by therapists to treat patients with PTSD by slowly exposing them to what triggers anxiety or panic attacks, yet [the classroom is different because this slow process doesn't happen \(2015\)](#);
- they help students [manage the possible distress caused by a sensitive topic \(2015\)](#); it is very difficult to engage in an intellectual conversation when having a panic attack, for instance; and
- they are an [opportunity \(2015\)](#) for instructors to stop and delve on the complexities of a text or idea, opening up interesting discussions.

I believe that ultimately instructors should be the ones to decide whether to use TW in their classrooms. They know their students better than college administrators and they can assess if the course material needs TW. Some colleges, like the [University of Michigan](#) and [Oakland University](#), offer clear and pragmatic recommendations on the administration of TW and a list of common content warnings. These are some ways instructors could use TW in their classrooms, if so desired:

- A written or oral notice the first week of classes about the challenging topics that the course will cover. Instructors can also offer resources on campus about how to deal with these sensitive topics;
- An email before classes start, warning students about the difficult material that the course will include and offering different alternatives to deal with them (such as completing an alternative assignment, leaving the classroom for the duration, participating by listening instead of talking, etc.);
- A written notice in the syllabus or course website; or
- A written or oral forewarning before the specific material (reading, video, etc.) that might contain triggers.

I personally use a blanket warning on the first week of classes by talking to my students about the main topics we will discuss throughout the semester, including sensitive topics like domestic violence and racial discrimination. I offer them opportunities to talk to me during my office hours if

they need to and share some of the JMU resources they can access, like the [Survivor Advocacy Program](#) or [Safe Zones](#). I prefer to describe my classes as [“brave”—instead of “safe”—spaces \(2017\)](#) where students’ ideas can be challenged, but also where students can learn—even if they don’t agree—about different ways to understand the world.

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