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Trigger Warnings and a Pedagogy of Trust

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Trigger Warnings and a Pedagogy of Trust

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As the director of both the creative writing and rhetoric and composition programs at Chapman University, [a mid-sized private university](#) serving 150+ majors as well as 1000+ general education students, it has now become a common and expected occurrence to have both students and contingent faculty come to my office expressing anxiety over course content. While the larger conversation about difficult content and trigger warnings is not new, the sudden need for urgently scheduled meetings with me did not begin until the COVID-19 Pandemic and our move to remote instruction. This seems to coincide with the [increase of online and social media interaction during the Pandemic](#), where the use of Trigger Warnings (TWs) and Content Warnings (CWs) on social media, particularly on Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, have made the conversation far more visible. After returning to normal in-class instruction, the concerns about TWs and CWs—and the in-person meetings with me as program administrator—continued, ranging from faculty fears of censorship to student complaints of offensive or triggering material.

On the one hand, I understand the faculty fear that censorship becomes a slippery slope, wherein attempting to “shield students from words, ideas, and people that might cause them emotional discomfort,” rather than encouraging them to confront those factors to understand why they cause discomfort, may undermine the shared goal of developing solutions to the larger societal problems the triggering content represents ([Lukianoff and Haidt](#)). Certainly there are plenty of anecdotes of students who don’t want to read or watch material that challenges, subverts, or offends their current world view and values. The [book banning events in Florida](#) and other conservative states are striking examples, but so are left-leaning censorship of [racial](#) and [patriarchal](#) texts, even when taught in critical contexts. On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge the real effect of content commonly associated with triggers of psychological trauma—sexual assault, homophobia, transphobia, war, bullying, suicide, and self-harm—where reading, viewing and even discussing representations of such events can trigger memories, emotions, or flashbacks that result in panic attacks or other forms of PTSD ([Klieber 3](#)).

For many faculty, the request for trigger or content warnings appears as an imposition of academic freedom. Rather than establish a context for *why* certain discomfiting content is necessary to study, they dig in their heels and repeat the “coddling” argument of Lukianoff and Haidt: in other words, that this generation of students have been shielded from tough subjects, leading to a hyperfragility inhibiting the pursuit of knowledge ([Klieber 4](#)). Reading about the history of sundowner towns and white supremacy *should* make white students uncomfortable, and most reasonable people would agree that [protecting them from that discomfort undermines efforts of cultural progress](#). But BIPOC students, [who make up 40% of my institution](#), may also feel distress as memories of their own repression surface through the representation of racist acts. Similarly, texts and content shedding light on systemic ableist biases in society may still cause emotional pain and distress to students in the disability community. So while we don’t want to shy away from distressing content necessary to confront societal problems, considering the effect

on students in the communities represented by that content should not be seen as a censoring imposition but part of a student-centered pedagogy of active learning. This is what has driven my approach as a teacher and that personal experience in turn informs my approach in advising faculty as a program administrator.

As the [University of Michigan guide](#) effectively puts it, TW and CW notices provide individuals with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other anxiety disorders “the forewarning necessary for them to make use of [coping] strategies that will decrease the harmfulness of encountering triggering material.” That’s not censorship, that’s empathy. When I first started as a WPA, the topic of trigger warnings came up in a pre-semester program meeting, and I distributed this guide for its helpful definitions and suggestions. Recently, however, I’ve focused on a particularly important section:

While it is impossible to account for all potential triggers, which could include smells or sounds that recall a past trauma, some of the most common triggers include representations of sexual violence, oppressive language, gunshots, and representations of self-harm. If you establish sufficient trust with your students and make clear to them that you will do your best to supply any requested trigger warnings, you can provide personalized notices about any material that may be triggering for them. However, trust can be challenging to build and takes time, so the inclusion of warnings for common triggers can be helpful to students who may not feel comfortable telling an instructor they barely know very personal information about their mental health and past trauma.

The key portion I highlighted, and what has changed my approach as a teacher, is the phrase “establish sufficient trust with your students.” The UM guide doesn’t describe how we might do this, other than making the effort to provide warnings. To establish trust with my students, I give a [confidential online survey](#) on the first day of class. This first started during our abrupt move to remote learning in March of 2020 as a means of understanding what my students’ needs were in that situation but was so helpful that I have used it in every class since. In this survey, I ask questions about name pronunciation, preferred pronouns, learning styles, accommodations, and possible triggers. Rather than being forced to take that difficult step of reaching out to an instructor, not knowing how they view learning accommodations or trigger warnings, students are invited to tell me about themselves in an accessible form. In turn, I can get a feel for the personality and needs of my class and design trigger and content warnings, as well as pre- and after-care activities that will help create the best learning environment for them.

For example, in one of my classes we play [an interactive text-adventure](#) that explores the author’s grieving process after his brother was killed in the 2017 terrorist bombing in Manchester, UK. Prior to using my survey, I had provided a TW and never had anyone approach me with concerns or questions, though I did have one instance where a student left the class abruptly during the discussion, telling me later that it triggered feelings about the recent passing of a family member. However, in the first in-class semester where I implemented the survey, I discovered that several students had experienced recent deaths of family members. I didn’t remove the text-adventure from my curriculum, but I did reach out confidentially to the specific students to discuss the upcoming content, and I also decided to incorporate pre- and after-care activities derived from trauma therapy, not only to help those students in question (all of which

decided to engage with the content and subsequent discussion), but any others who may not have reported a trigger, been aware of a trigger, or simply felt uncomfortable with the content.

My inspiration for turning to trauma therapy came from a former student who had entered a masters in therapy program. This student pointed me to readings and resources that included pre-care and after-care activities such as journaling, reflection, small and large group discussion, and mindfulness. I decided to have my students do a bit of in-class journaling about their anticipated response to a grief-process text adventure prior to playing it, with starter questions like:

- Do you tend to internalize emotional material and get flooded with emotions?
- Are you more likely to get numb and dissociate?
- Do you need to take breaks while engaging with the text-adventure?
- Will you find discussion about this content difficult?
- During discussion, do you need to prepare to leave the classroom for a moment?

After journaling, I offered the opportunity for anyone to share, and many did, including one of the students I'd previously reached out to. This led to an intimate and collaborative discussion that seemed to not only normalize the idea of course content being distressing and containing possible triggers, but also the act of talking *about* how and why this happens, how we deal with it, and why such content is still important for learning.

Typically after playing the text-adventure, I ask students to post a response in our online discussion forum discussing it in the context of the theoretical reading it was paired with. This time, however, I encouraged students to also talk about their emotional experience playing the game, following up on the pre-care activity of journaling and discussion. At least half the class chose to do so, and the reflection on emotional responses, rather than sidetracking critical analysis, actually deepened it by making connections between the rhetorical meaning behind the procedural narrative choices and the emotional responses students experienced. Students were able to articulate the necessity for representing trauma in this content in order to make a larger point about the social process of grief.

In [*The Body Keeps Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*](#), Bessel van der Kolk calls these pre- and after-care activities “emotional-regulation techniques” (244). Rather than suppressing or avoiding emotions, [emotional regulation](#) attunes us to our mental and physical responses to disturbing and discomfoting material and situations. Journaling and discussion activities promote active reflection and articulation of what makes us uncomfortable, what we anticipate we might feel, what we feel in the moment, and how we feel after the experience. We can also use [mindfulness techniques](#) of [centered breathing](#) and sensory observation to help students take a moment to calm their mind and emotions. I've recently begun to implement centered breathing before difficult subject-matter discussions in my class, and it seems to have actually increased participation in the discussion among my quieter students.

More importantly, it communicates to my students that I take both their well-being and the learning situation (including the distressing content) seriously. [Van der Kolk](#) tells us that triggered responses “are irrational and largely outside people’s control,” making them “feel crazy...As a result, shame becomes the dominant emotion” (74). By sharing coping mechanisms

and articulating possible intense feelings, we can validate our students' experiences with the material and hopefully create a community of support in the classroom. This in turn enables us to discuss triggering material in productive ways that meets our expectations of academic rigor and discourse.

So now when faculty come to my office with anxieties about content, about trigger warnings, and about fears of censorship or student pushback, I share with them my experiences and the information I've presented in this post, and we discuss how their pedagogy is preparing students for difficult or distressing content. What tools, like journaling, small group and full class discussion, and online discussion forums, are they already using? How might they build trust with students by communicating that they take student concerns and needs seriously? How can they incorporate concepts of emotional regulation into the activities they already implement in class? While composition instructors are not trained therapists, nor should we be taking on those roles, we certainly deal with course material and student writing that accesses potentially traumatic memories and experiences, or at the very least can cause distressing emotions. It cannot hurt us to learn more about the way the body responds to triggering and discomforting material.

By preparing our students ahead of time for difficult material, we treat “them as adults who can and should attend to their own wellbeing with all available information” ([UM guide](#)). We're not labeling anything as off-limits to teaching, nor are we “coddling” or “infantilizing” students by shielding them “from words, ideas, and people that might cause them emotional discomfort” ([Lukianoff and Haidt](#)). In fact, by employing a pre- and after-care pedagogy, including active discussions of trigger and content warnings, we are directly communicating with our students that we are not fortune-tellers, that we cannot anticipate how every student will respond to every possible distressing text, video, or discussion—but that we *do* care for their learning and their wellbeing. Both students with psychological triggers and students who are uncomfortable with distressing content can be helped by these strategies, which means both are less likely to become resistant or defensive, shutting down their desire and ability to learn. In the end, shouldn't that be our goal?

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