

REFLECTION FROM THE FIELD

Trigger warnings in university teaching

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I have been teaching courses in feminist theory and politics for about 16 years, and I have recently developed a new course called *Critical Victimology*, which explores the social construction of victimisation. Across these teaching areas I often address sensitive material, for example, topics about social difference and interpersonal violence, citizenship and sexual politics, systems of inequality and oppression, victimisation and victim-blaming, and the politics of reproductive rights. These are topics I would also want to describe as ‘moving’, and here I am invoking both the political and emotional sense of ‘movement’. These are topics around which many personal and political feelings gather, among students and of course within the political movements that make these matters visible to us.

Recent times have seen rising student demand for university teachers to adopt the use of trigger warnings when they are teaching on sensitive topics. Trigger warnings are statements alerting readers, viewers, or listeners to upcoming material that is potentially distressing or, more specifically, potentially ‘triggering’. This term is part of the language of post-traumatic stress and describes one of the ways in which someone with a trauma background can be re-traumatised. In university teaching, trigger warnings can be either written or verbal. They might be written in the course outline or in an email prior to a class. They might be spoken in class at the beginning of semester or at the beginning of a class. Trigger warnings provide a description of the potentially distressing/triggering content to ensure students are not caught unawares.

Trigger warnings are specifically for students with trauma backgrounds; for all other students, they are merely a courtesy. Trigger warnings – or, as I also call them, content forecasts – promote equality of access to education because they can allay the substantial disadvantages associated with being triggered, enabling students with trauma backgrounds to participate in their studies on a more equal footing with their peers. I have begun to incorporate trigger warnings into my teaching, and herein I describe my approach, hoping it will be useful to university teachers who are similarly open to listening to and learning from discussions with students about trigger warnings.

For me, student requests for trigger warnings have provided occasion to focus my efforts to address an equity issue in my classrooms, but I have noticed there is no shortage of university teachers who are vocal in their opposition to trigger warnings. Predictably, conservative pundits like Christina Hoff Sommers have been scathing in their opposition to trigger warnings, trivialising student demand for them as ‘fainting couch feminism’ (Sommers, quoted in Robertson, 2015, para. 3) and misrepresenting trigger warnings as harmful to freedom of speech. However, the most prominent critiques of student demand for trigger warnings have been voiced not by conservatives, but by US left-liberal humanities academics, and their views barely differ from those of Sommers. In a group of prominent and widely shared anti-trigger warnings blog posts written by academics across 2014 and 2015 (Cooper, 2014; Halberstam, 2014, 2015; Kipnis, 2015; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; Scholsser, 2015), students who demand

trigger warnings are variously depicted as oversensitive, manipulative, naïve, illiberal, and threatening, and trigger warnings are misrepresented as a form of authoritarian censorship and student ‘coddling’ that will ‘scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense’ (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015, para. 1). The idea that trigger warnings will empower students to edit syllabi according to whim is a serious misrepresentation. As I will clarify, trigger warnings are not about *removing* words, ideas, and subjects from the syllabus; instead they are about *adding* a system of warnings or forecasts about upcoming content. Trigger warnings are not about *what* we teach; they are about *how* we teach.

This negative response to student demand for trigger warnings is a disturbing echo of earlier institutional responses to claims concerning post-traumatic stress, which has always been a contentious and politically fraught concept. Halberstam (2015) is right to observe that student demand for trigger warnings is often led by expectations built in online interactions, where trigger warnings originated and are commonly used. Students are used to this system of warnings online and bring this expectation into the classroom. But, as Heer (2015) documents, the notion of ‘being triggered’ arose alongside the idea of post-traumatic stress in the 1960s within the folk therapy practices of anti-war veterans of the US war in Vietnam. Heer indicates the long history of euphemisms used to describe the trauma of war:

During the Napoleonic Wars, doctors spoke of “exhaustion.” By the American Civil War, the term of art was “soldier’s heart.” By World War I this was updated to “shell shock.” The label became “combat fatigue” in World War II’. (Heer, 2015, para. 7)

These euphemisms are strongly attended by victim blame: there is a long history of associating the negative psychic effects of war with poor character on the soldier’s part.

In the wake of the US war in Vietnam, anti-war veterans were dissatisfied with the counselling services provided by government and ‘began to seek a way to deal with their violent memories’ (Heer, 2015, para. 8). The folk therapy practice they elaborated was akin to feminist consciousness raising in that it was structured around group engagement and politicising the personal. The practice subverted the authority of the psychiatrist: ‘[they] allowed psychiatrists into the sessions but only on the condition that they entered as peers, not as authority figures’ (Heer, 2015, para. 8). The practice drew the attention of ‘politically engaged psychiatrists’ Chaim F. Shatan and Robert Jay Lifton, who began to develop formal diagnostic descriptions (‘catastrophic stress disorder’ and ‘post-Vietnam syndrome’), arguing that ‘the traumas of war were not just physical and fleeting, but psychological and long-lasting’ (Heer, 2015, para. 10). These are the precursors of what we call post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) today. Veterans’ claims about their lasting distress were summarily rejected by the US military, which sought to flee its responsibility to acknowledge and compensate for war’s psychic wounds. It was not until 1980 that ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’ was included in the *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, 3rd edition* (DSM-III), forcing the US military’s hand. Since that time, post-traumatic stress has gained a broader application beyond the trauma of war and includes, for example, PTSD arising from sexual assault (Herman, 1992).

Using trigger warnings in university teaching means according reality to post-traumatic stress and acknowledging there might be students in the class who have PTSD. Judging by the raft of blog posts vilifying student demand for trigger warnings, at least some US university teachers presently occupy the same kind of place as did the US military in the 1960s and 1970s: a place of being called upon to acknowledge PTSD and of vigorously refusing to do so. In this group of blog posts, we also see an unfortunate recycling of arguments, positions, meanings, and contradictions that were forged in the culture wars of the 1990s when, as I have delineated elsewhere (Stringer, 2014), conservatives and left-liberals alike decried the purported descent

of radical political projects (feminism, anti-racism, anti-colonialism, socialism) into ‘political correctness’ and ‘victim politics’. In my view, it is time to break with these positions and forge new terrain with our students, and I would like to think there would be a different tone and different positions on the matter of trigger warnings here in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

For me, this group of blog posts is also striking because the scenario they describe – a rising tide of censorship led by a generation of millennial arrivistes – is completely at odds with my experience in the classroom. In my experience, students who call upon the lecturer to use trigger warnings tend to be also the students who most ardently want the lecturer to teach on the topic that might be triggering for them. They are pleased to see the topic given visibility in the curriculum, and they want more information about what to expect beforehand so they can mentally prepare. Students think about trigger warnings primarily in terms of mental preparation and not in terms of using them to block out selected topics or censor parts of the curriculum. One student highlighted to me the importance of recognising that trigger warnings are specifically for students with trauma backgrounds. They are not there for students who want to edit out material that is challenging, confronting, upsetting, or uncomfortable. They are there for students who, if they are triggered, stand to lose weeks recovering from it. This student taught me that understanding the need for trigger warnings means distinguishing between being triggered and being made sad. Trigger warnings can enable a student with a trauma background to avoid being triggered, thus to avoid needless and potentially very serious and time-consuming disruption to their studies and their healing. A student who does not have a trauma background may be made sad – moved – by sensitive material but will not on account of this go through the significant disruption that accompanies being triggered. The stakes are completely different for students with trauma backgrounds, and this needs to be recognised.

I say a student *taught me* this. In fact it is mainly students who have educated me about trigger warnings. My response to students’ advice about trigger warnings has been gratitude rather than defensiveness, and I suggest the vocal critics of trigger warnings in university teaching need to think about academic authority. Academics who are siding against trigger warnings are perhaps feeling their authority challenged, are perhaps exhausted by the need to develop yet another teaching skill, are perhaps unwilling to bow to another outside will in the context of their own intellectual work (having already given much ground to the corporatising metrics and technologies now circumscribing our research and pedagogy in the neoliberal era), or are simply mourning the loss of shock or spontaneity in the theatrics of teaching. Halberstam’s (2015) critique of trigger warnings shows this attitude of mourning – it closes with the question ‘Can we still dare to be surprised, shocked, thrilled into new forms of knowing?’. My question is, can we dare to give some ground to students on this question instead of trivialising their concerns?

As I embarked on the process of incorporating trigger warnings into my teaching, Heath’s (2005) article *Encounters with the volcano: Strategies for emotional management in teaching the law of rape* proved to be enormously helpful. Rather than take the disembodied objectivity route and completely ignore that there may be victims/survivors of rape, or family and friends thereof, in the room, Heath began with the assumption that people affected were present, acknowledged the gravity of the subject, and developed a range of strategies to ease students’ paths through the material (and if you have ever looked at the law of rape and read the transcripts of rape trials, you will know this is not easy terrain). Heath cogently frames this as an equity issue:

Students with personal experience of the topic may feel that they are on top of emotional volcanoes while others have the privilege of distance. These students are not receiving an equivalent educational experience, and other students do not get the benefit of their contribution. (Heath, 2005, p. 130)

Heath argues that doing what we can to create a safe learning environment can help put things back on an equal footing. She advises that we establish class norms – norms of engagement with one another – with the aim of creating ‘a classroom in which it will be possible for us to interact sensitively with one another and still be able to have robust and engaged conversations’ (Heath, 2005, p. 136).

In the first run of my *Critical Victimology* class in 2015, myself and the 80 students taking the paper created a safe space policy as a class early in the semester. Through discussion we decided collectively what kind of learning environment we wanted and then drew this up into a living document that we could add to and alter as the semester progressed. Students put a lot of thought and energy into the discussion and creation of the document. A key task designated to me and also to student presenters in tutorials was to provide trigger warnings prior to lectures and tutorials using email. In the process, I came to refer to this practice as ‘content forecasting’. ‘Content forecast’ is not a rival term or substitute for ‘trigger warning’, but I find it useful to have a more benign and approachable term on hand. When I think of ‘trigger’ I think of ‘gun’, and when I think of ‘warning’ I feel a sense of threat, so I find ‘content forecasting’ a more approachable term and use the two terms together and interchangeably in my teaching. I tell students that content forecasts are like weather forecasts, only more reliable. My content forecasts are rather wordy and look like this:

In tomorrow’s lecture we will be looking at the origins of victimology in the 1940s. Our main task is to see their positivist approach and get a sense of the kind of victimological study they set in motion. But with the early victimologists there is sensitive content about victim-blaming in general, and we will look at an example of victim-blaming in the context of sexual assault.

In one section of tomorrow’s lecture there will be some graphs and statistics on victimization through crime in Aotearoa/New Zealand, observing gender and ethnic differences in rates of victimization; and discussion of gender and race-ethnicity in relation to stereotypical depictions of crime, the criminal, and the victim. Forms of crime featured in the graphs include interpersonal violence.

As the semester went on, I sensed the students were benefiting from having a say about the learning environment and knowing what to expect in lectures. But I was surprised when, in a survey at semester’s end, no less than 98% of students registered strong support for this aspect of the course. One student described it as ‘the most comfortable class I have ever been in. I never felt scared to contribute.’ Others said ‘The trigger/content warnings were great, it should be uni-wide policy’ and ‘I felt supported and not judged by everyone which was something especially important for me this semester. Thank you for creating this environment.’ There were dissenting students: 2% referred to feeling ‘overly safe’ and ‘coddled’. I will certainly keep the lines of communication open and continue to welcome discussion and debate about safety in class, but I do not find in this dissent any reason to be deterred. Having some students in my class feel ‘overly safe’ is far preferable to having even only one student feel endangered.

Finally, I want to point out that, while I would encourage fellow university teachers in the discipline of gender and women’s studies to incorporate trigger warnings/content forecasting into their teaching practice, I fully reject the idea that the problem of triggering is somehow particular to our discipline. Halberstam (2015, para. 14) writes: ‘But here is the irony of it all—the classes most likely to be affected by trigger warnings are also feminist or women’s and gender studies classes. Think about it—people are not asking for trigger warnings in biology or even political science classes.’ I can confirm that, at my institution at least, students *are* asking for trigger warnings in other disciplines. My sense is that students are more likely to get a hearing in our discipline, in part because we are not striving to maintain a tradition of disciplinary masculinity forged in tweed and emotionless rationality. I am also conscious

that, where other disciplines do already have systems in place that anticipate the emotional needs of students – such as the profoundly sensitive approach developed by the Otago School of Medicine to prepare their students for conducting human cadaver dissection (Trotman & Nicholson, 2010; see also Hancock, Williams, Taylor, & Dawson, 2004) – that is seen as legitimate and perfectly beyond reproach. Rather than being the only discipline standing in need of trigger warnings, it is more the case that our discipline is poised to lead the way in the use of trigger warnings in university teaching across the disciplines. Taking this up means putting front and centre the fact that this is – above all – an issue of equal access to education.

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