Trigger Warnings: How We Can Be Aware

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Overview:

✔ Define trigger warnings
✔ Review their background
✔ Explore the uses
✔ Examine examples
✔ Discuss what we can do
Definition:

TRIGGER WARNING: An alert issued for something that can cause a strong emotional and/or physiological response.
Definition:
Warnings can be broad or may address specific topics individually or in a combination:

✔ Rape/Sexual Violence
✔ Assault
✔ Violence
✔ Images of War
✔ Racism
✔ Suicide
✔ Abortion
Background:
The idea that words or images can trigger memories of past trauma—and intense fear that it may be repeated—is not new.

Trigger warnings became prevalent in self-help forums, where they warned others who may have suffered traumatic events (such as sexual assault) about graphic content that might trigger flashbacks or panic attacks.

Networks use them in our entertainment and media:

How Do We Use Trigger Warnings in Academia?

Professors can issue a trigger warning if something in the course might cause a strong emotional and/or physiological response.

Trigger warnings give students a warning that upcoming content can “trigger” an episode for someone who has encountered trauma.

Warnings can be used in writing, such as a syllabus, or spoken in class.

Definition:

It is important to distinguish between a trigger warning and a “safe space.” (such as the controversy with University of Chicago)
Sample Syllabi Trigger Warnings:

“The content of this course will include topics that are difficult for some people to confront or discuss.”

“In this course, we will deal with sensitive material about controversial topics, and we may encounter adult content.”

“This course addresses sensitive content such as rape, violence, and abortion that may be difficult for some people to address.”

Example #1: **Southeast Community College (Nebraska)**

Scenario: In class, the professor usually uses “video clips with war scenes from Germany, Russia, China, and Japan.” She received requests from veteran students who have secured educational accommodations under the Americans With Disabilities Act asking a political science professor to “be sensitive to images of war and violence in lecture content.”

Professor’s response: She warns students about those videos ahead of time.

Result: Those students will “stay away or leave class on those days.”

- In one case, she had a student who researched written content on the same subject and wrote a paper in lieu of the class discussion

Example #2: University of Maryland at College Park

Scenario: A professor of sociology lectures on the statistics of abortion. A student leaves the class. She later told the professor that she wouldn’t be able to participate in class discussions concerning abortion.

Professor’s response: “We have to have that conversation in class; it would be malpractice not to.”

Result: He allowed the student to leave the classroom when she needed to.
- The professor later added a trigger warning, with the addendum “If there is a topic you are unable to discuss, please notify the professor so we can make alternative arrangements.”

Example #3: University of California at Berkeley

Scenario: In a graduate-level course on social-welfare policy, the topic of abortion is course content. In every section 15-20% of students are offended by the topic. Students retaliate on the course evaluations.

Professor’s response: According to the professor, in the way he is evaluated by his administrators, “sensitivity has become a more important criterion than intellectual challenge…if a number of students say you’re insensitive, the administration dings you.”

Result: The professor cut the lecture on abortion, and may eliminate a lecture on child sexual-abuse prevention.

Debate:

Are trigger warnings necessary to protect victims of trauma?

Or…

Do they coddle young adults who have become overly sensitive about life experiences?

What Can We Do:

Recognize the difference between a trauma that maybe triggered and a student unwilling to explore a topic (Duke University, *Fun Home*, references to sex, and morals)

Encourage professors to use trigger warnings as they see fit, with the common goal of protecting a traumatized student (Oberlin College, survivors of sexual assault, “unnecessary triggers” and academic freedom)

More…

What Can We Do:

Recognize that some student concerns may involve disabilities covered under the Americans With Disabilities Act
   - Also recognize that our Disabilities Support Services may be able to help

Bottom Line: What is best for the student?

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