Trauma and Trigger Warnings

What are Trigger Warnings?

Trigger warnings are brief statements, written or spoken, that inform people of distressing content that may be coming in the material ahead. These statements originate from the recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the late 1960s among Vietnam War veterans. PTSD has now been used to diagnose the psychological after-effects of a range of traumatic experiences including war, domestic abuse, and natural disasters. “Triggers” were used primarily in support groups and entered popular discourse primarily through the Internet and social media sites such as through feminist publications, forums, and blogs.

Trigger warnings have become especially controversial in universities since Oberlin, Rutgers, University of California Santa Barbara, and others introduced trigger warning guidelines and advisory recommendations in 2014. In 2016, the University of Chicago declared that it does not support trigger warnings.

The debates around the use of trigger warnings include:

• Freedom of speech and academic freedom: Should universities, whether by the administration’s decision or by student government, provide guidelines on trigger warnings, including making them mandatory or rejecting them? How would guidelines, student demands, or even legal challenges affect professors’ academic freedom or their ability to teach students?

• Commodification of the classroom: How much control should students have over the classroom, considering that they are paying for their education?

• Political partisanship: How does this discussion on trigger warnings relate to wider conversations about political correctness, and to partisan tensions dating back to the “culture wars” of the 1990s?

• Framing trigger warnings: Should we treat trigger warnings as an issue of courtesy or as a disability issue?

Common Myths and Misperceptions:

1. Real life doesn’t have trigger warnings, so neither should college.

Real life does sometimes have “trigger warnings,” such as MPAA film ratings or caution tape around a graphic crime scene. It is a mistake to infer from the absence of codified triggers in the real world that there is an absence of a need for triggers or an absence of
people seeking them out. Indeed, many people do seek out indications of what various media, presentations, or discussions will be about and choose whether to engage on the basis of these indications.

2. **Students in college shouldn’t expect to feel comfortable all the time in discussion.**
   There is an important distinction between discomfort and trauma. Many experts now promote “brave” spaces instead of “safe” spaces in order to encourage students to take risks in class. However, testing ideas and provoking trauma are not the same.

3. **Giving trigger warnings just makes things worse for the student: they need to confront their fears in order to get over them.**
   While exposure may be beneficial in the long term, success depends on students’ choosing to expose themselves and doing so in controlled environments. Trigger warnings give students agency over whether to confront these situations. The classroom is not a controlled environment because the professor is not the student’s psychologist, nor is a setting where a student’s success is at stake necessarily the ideal time to seek exposure.

4. **The university administration should not require me to give trigger warnings.**
   While at least one university has banned professors from using trigger warnings, none currently mandate their use. A survey of faculty at various institutions has determined that about half of professors already use trigger warnings of their own volition.

5. **Trigger warnings are a form of censorship. They will prevent me from teaching significant material and will give students too much power over the teacher.**
   The goal of trigger warnings is to allow professors to use the materials they believe are best while still providing accommodations to students who need them. Material that comes with lots of trigger warnings can still be taught. Students requesting trigger warnings does not necessarily mean that they do not wish to engage with difficult material or material advocating for viewpoints other than the students’ own.

6. **Professors shouldn’t have to be responsible for doing all the extra work of adding trigger warnings, given that so few students will make use of them.**
   Some professors have found it more successful to provide a “blanket” trigger warning at the start of their course. This statement invites students to request specific warnings if necessary while limiting the amount of work the professor must do in advance. Additionally, even if few students will need any particular trigger warning, their presence on a syllabus can signal to students that the professor is thinking about these concerns and open to further discussion.

7. **Won’t my students try to get out of doing assignments or attending class by invoking the trigger warnings?**
   Professors might find it useful to offer alternate assignments or readings to students who miss class after heeding trigger warnings. This alternative work effectively curbs any temptation to use trigger warnings to get out of doing assignments while also ensuring that all students are still able to succeed in the course.
8. **Students are getting too sensitive – previous generations of college students didn’t need trigger warnings, so why do they need them now?**

The previous absence of trigger warnings is not necessarily evidence for the absence of a need for them. As conversations around mental health advance, new interventions will emerge to help with pre-existing issues that previously went unnoticed. People might have stereotypes about what type of student would request trigger warnings, but students of all identities can benefit from the presence of trigger warnings.

**Handling Trigger Warnings in the Classroom:**

**On the Syllabus or at the Start of a Class**

When designing a course or starting a class, should you include a trigger warning? How would you do it?

- Instructor should take into consideration what subjects/topics their course covers and their own teaching philosophy.
- Whether or not the instructor decides to include trigger warning, this topic should be addressed verbally during the first few weeks of class (see VPTL link below).
- If included, the trigger warning should be personalized by professor rather than a **stock statement**, and it should be included under classroom policies on the syllabus.

In a course you are TA-ing, a student refuses to engage with a majority of the texts as they are triggering for them. How should you accommodate this student?

- If this issue is brought up early enough you may determine in conversation with the student that it’s best they do not take the course. At this point, an alternative should be suggested or the option to create an independent study if possible.
- If this issue is raised several weeks into the course, you should verify they have spoken with OAE already or otherwise direct them to speak with them. You should then work in conjunction with the professor to accommodate the student to the best of your capabilities.

When you present your syllabus and go over trigger warnings, a student makes a snide remark that trigger warnings are for “babies” and that “real” college students don’t need them. Do you address this remark and if so, how?

- A dismissive statement such as this should be directly addressed, because if not, another student may feel you do not take this seriously and will feel scared to share their concerns with you.
- Acknowledge the student’s perspective and explain that as the instructor, you have seriously considered whether or not to include the warning and provide your reasoning for your decision.
Inform the student that if they wish to further discuss this with you they can come to office hours.

**In Class**

If someone unexpectedly reacts to a discussion in class, or the conversation unexpectedly turns to another triggering topic, what can you do?

- Actions will depend on the circumstances, e.g. the classroom context, the student.
- Be proactive and warn students in advance either through the syllabus or an announcement that a particular week might focus on more sensitive topics.
- Inform the student that they may step out if necessary, either temporarily or for the rest of class.
  - Depending on severity of reaction you may want to walk them to CAPS or contact the on-call clinician at 650-723-3785.
- If conversation turns to a triggering topic, steer back discussion to a relevant topic while addressing that deviation is non-tangential and sensitive.

**Resources:**


STATEMENT OF STANFORD POLICY/IN THIS DOCUMENT WE ADVOCATE FOR TRIGGER WARNING