



Pulling the Trigger Warning

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Some say that the guise of academic theory has taken our disillusioned millennial age by the throat, resulting in a sociopolitical culture that is fueled by a very problematic political correctness. Others relish in pride to see our peers display such awareness.

We have familiarized ourselves with the PC vocabulary needed to understand privilege, sexual ambiguity, microaggressions, and, now more than ever, the trauma that manifests itself into the red flag of a “trigger warning.” A trigger warning is a statement at the start of a text, video, or other form of media that alerts the reader or viewer of potentially distressing material. We were accustomed to the content warnings on media well before feminist message boards and forums adopted the phrase.

Historically, the world has looked at triggering material on a clinical basis from the trauma associated with the two world wars; the term “post-traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD) came into use after the Vietnam War. Since then, psychologists have been working on PTSD-focused research to aid those who suffer from the disorder. This research includes identifying “triggers” of sensory input the mind may recognize as an echo of the sufferer’s original trauma. However, these instances are by definition unpredictable and difficult to prevent.

Recently, trigger warnings have left the confines of the internet and found their way into the world of academia. Debates have popped up at nearly every major institution within the United States (including Colombia University, Rutgers University, University of Michigan, Oberlin College, the list goes on...) on whether or not professors should issue trigger warnings on material to which students are exposed. Advocates of academic trigger warnings say that warnings are necessary because certain topics may “trigger” episodes of emotional and psychological pain, discomfort, or, in some cases, PTSD.

The internet is unpredictable because there is an infinite breadth of message boards, user comments, and outright hateful material that can be found online. Quality control is needed for advocates who want these places to be safe areas for everyone. To many people, this sounds like censorship, an authoritarian device used to silence the “free speech” of those unaffected by triggering material.

The hyperbolic sentiments associated with this debate do not help the conversation move forward; they only result in misunderstanding the description of trigger warnings. An individual’s psychological and emotional turmoil is valid simply because they are the ones who experienced the trauma. This is why this conversation needs to happen from an academic and objective perspective, rather than a polarized one. Similarly, if we are to identify as compassionate “social justice warriors,” let us break with our homogenous ideologies for a moment and consider trigger warnings in this light.

Are we, as *The Atlantic’s* Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff say, “coddling” American students? Earlier this year, *The Washington Post* reported that four Colombia undergraduates wrote to the school paper, the *Colombia Spectator*, urging the university to implement trigger warnings.

The students, who are members of the institution’s Multicultural Affairs Advisory Board, wrote, “Ovid’s ‘Metamorphoses’ is a fixture of Lit Hum, but like so many texts in the Western canon, it contains triggering and offensive material that marginalizes student identities in the classroom. These texts, wrought with histories and narratives of exclusion and oppression, can be difficult to read and discuss as a survivor, a person of color, or a student from a low-income background.”

After receiving a mountain of backlash from their peers, faculty, and even journalists, the students were dogged for their “oversensitive,” counter-intuitive political correctness. Their critics claim that offensive material is a given for students who study literary, historical, and/or sociopolitical theory. Often, their eagerness to think about the heavy subject matter associated with theory clashes with their interest in defending trigger warnings by using gender/queer or critical race theory.

A report by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) highlights the dangers of merging theoretical studies with social sensitivity, stating, “Trigger warnings thus run the risk of reducing complex literary, historical, sociological and political insights to a few negative characterizations. By calling attention to certain content in a given work, trigger warnings also signal an expected response to the content (e.g., dismay, distress, disapproval), and eliminate the element of surprise and spontaneity that can enrich the reading experience and provide critical insight.”

Trigger warnings in higher education should be treated by faculty and administrators with the same seriousness and careful consideration as any other important campus issue. Unfortunately, most of the major institutions associated with trigger warnings (like Colombia University) have failed to address toxic campus issues like sexual assault. Slapping trigger warnings on syllabuses gives the illusion that these behaviors are not condoned or ignored by administrators and faculty. In reality, the issues themselves may go ignored.

Providing students with proper counseling resources and creating supportive campus communities is a start. Understanding the root of the issue by making the distinction between the preservation of emotional comfort and the consideration of an individual’s traumatic experience is even better. Administrators, faculty, and students must keep this conversation flowing on this relatively new and very nuanced topic, but we have to keep it flowing in a productive manner. That way, the freedom that comes with exploring difficult ideas does not have to be sacrificed for students’ mental well-being. ■