

**UNC Asheville Center for Teaching & Learning
First Friday-on-Thursday, October 2nd, 2014**

TRIGGERS IN THE CLASSROOM: JOIN THE DEBATE

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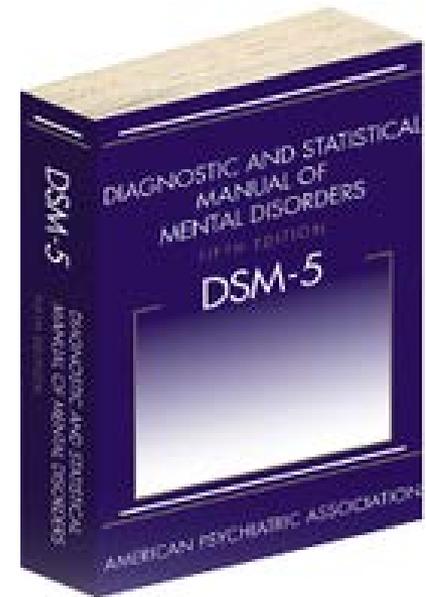
Lori's Trigger Warning on WGSS 100 Syllabus

Trigger Warning: Some of us have witnessed or been victims of discrimination, violence, or grossly cruel unfair treatment in our lives. It is very important to note that it is not uncommon for a reading, viewing assignment, or class discussion to bring to the surface difficult emotions. Since there is no way to know precisely which issues will be challenging for which students, I invite you to be aware of this possibility throughout the semester, and to do what is necessary to care for yourself and your fellow students (e.g., choose not to speak that day, talk with me privately, ask me for, or seek out your own resources for processing). You **may not** opt out of reading a required text, viewing a required film, and/or participating in any of the required in-class and out of class assignments.

(adapted from trigger warning statements by Lyndi Hewett and Heather Talley)

Acute or Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

- Initial exposure to trauma
- Intrusion symptoms & triggers
- Avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma
- Significant alterations in thoughts, mood, behavior, and anxiety



PTSD & Americans with Disabilities Act

- <https://oaa.unca.edu/registration-and-eligibility>
- What is the “current functional limitation” and is an appropriate accommodation possible?
- AAUP recommendation (2014): “The Americans with Disabilities Act contains recommendations for reasonable accommodation to be made on an individual basis. This should be done without affecting other students’ exposure to material that has educational value.”

Trigger or Discomfort?

- Does it matter?
- Desire for safe classrooms
- Balancing competing needs



Melissa's Strategies

- *I won't...* provide blanket warnings (but never say never!)
- *I will...* warn (prepare) for *specific* potentially provocative material.
- *I will...* think carefully about pedagogical goals when assigning potentially provocative material.
- *I want...* students to take care of themselves.

Lorena's Syllabus Statement

Critical engagement with literature can involve uncomfortable emotional responses. For the most part, readers draw on such responses for insight and understanding, but for some readers who are recovering from trauma, the same content might trigger significant psychological symptoms. Some of the issues our class engages include [sexual/racial/military] violence, suicide, and mental illness. Since there is no way to know precisely which issues will be challenging for which students, I invite you to be aware of this possibility throughout the semester, and to do what is necessary to care for yourself and your fellow students (e.g., choose not to speak that day, talk with me privately, ask me for or seek out your own resources for processing).

Excerpts from *Inside Higher Ed* essay

“We feel faculty and students are best-served by the following:

1. From faculty -- syllabuses and/or pages on course websites that include referral to on-campus resources available to students experiencing difficulties with course materials in ways that need to be addressed with specific expertise – counseling resources, support groups, advising, relevant student organizations, etc. If such resources do not exist or are insufficiently funded, we believe our efforts should be directed toward establishing and increasing support for them. Mandating trigger warnings should not be a substitute for this important work....
3. From faculty and administrators -- faculty development opportunities that will enhance our ability to recognize and respond appropriately to students’ strong emotional reactions to materials that ask them to witness or analyze violence, question their own privilege, understand their own place in structures of injustice, and undertake other psychologically difficult tasks.
4. From students -- awareness that the faculty who teach the very materials that help them understand and combat racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, etc., as well as trauma, violence, and practices of injustice, are often the most vulnerable members of their professional context. Administrations may use student complaints to marginalize particular faculty and particular topics, and/or use a trigger mandate/recommendation to delimit what can be taught in the first place.”

Excerpts from AAUP Report

“A current threat to academic freedom in the classroom comes from a demand that teachers provide warnings in advance if assigned material contains anything that might trigger difficult emotional responses for students....

The presumption that students need to be protected rather than challenged in a classroom is at once infantilizing and anti-intellectual....

Institutional requirements or even suggestions that faculty use trigger warnings interfere with faculty academic freedom in the choice of course materials and teaching methods....

There are reasons, however, for concern that even voluntary use of trigger warnings included on syllabi may be counterproductive to the educational experience. Such trigger warnings conflate exceptional individual experience of trauma with the anticipation of trauma for an entire group, and assume that individuals will respond negatively to certain content. A trigger warning might lead a student to simply not read an assignment or it might elicit a response from students they otherwise would not have had, focusing them on one aspect of a text and thus precluding other reactions....”

Resources & References

AAUP (2014, August). On trigger warnings. <http://www.aaup.org/report/trigger-warnings>

Abadi, P. (2014, May 29). *Ms. Magazine Blog*. Trigger warning debate ignores survivors' voices. <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2014/05/29/the-trigger-warning-debate-ignores-survivors-voices/>

Cooper, B. (2014, May 20). No trigger warnings in my class: Why you won't find them on my syllabi. *Salon*. http://www.salon.com/2014/05/20/no_trigger_warnings_in_my_class_why_you_won%2%80%99t_find_them_on_my_syllabi/

Halberstam, J. (2014, July 15). Triggering me, triggering you: Making up is hard to do. <http://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2014/07/15/triggering-me-triggering-you-making-up-is-hard-to-do/>

Inside Higher Ed (2014, May 29). Trigger warnings are flawed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2014/05/29/essay-faculty-members-about-why-they-will-not-use-trigger-warnings>

Johnston, J. (2014, May 29). Why I'll add a trigger warning. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2014/05/29/essay-why-professor-adding-trigger-warning-his-syllabus>

Medina, J. (2014, May 17). Warning: The literary canon could make students squirm. *New York Times*. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/us/warning-the-literary-canon-could-make-students-squirm.html?_r=0

Ideas from Discussion

- Creating safe space by discussing class “ground rules”
- Even if trigger warnings don’t “work,” they likely build trusting student-faculty relationships
- Trigger warning discussions can be educational and a consciousness-raising tool
- Faculty could provide alternative assignments for students as needed
- Title IX: Faculty who invite students to discuss triggering content with them must be honest about their obligation to report Title IX violations