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How trigger warnings shoot down free debate

To warn students that they're about to encounter potentially offensive ideas is to treat them like children.

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I collect examples of therapy culture in universities. I have dozens of photos of 'bibliotherapy' sections in libraries, 'puppy rooms', signs in toilets warning that 'Stress turns your brains off', and posters for courses on 'Overcoming Perfectionism'.

Among the hundreds of leaflets I have collected that offer students counselling and emotional support, there is one from a university that offered support for students who might find the content of their courses stressful or depressing. The message was this: if you study sociology, you might find that lots of people are poor; if you are studying nursing, you might discover that lots of people are sick; if you read history, you might read of terrible events. The student-support team that issued this leaflet obviously thinks students are so mentally fragile and morally feeble that they need counselling and support to tackle the content of the subjects they have chosen to study. It's one of my favourite examples of therapy culture on campus; you couldn't have made it up.

It's not only smothering support teams but students themselves who are now worried about the potentially stressful and depressing content of university curricula. In a recent article in the *New Republic*, Atlanta-based journalist Jenny Jarvie brought attention to the sorry fact that 'trigger warnings' are being introduced on course materials so that students can brace themselves or stop reading when potentially troubling material lies ahead.

Apparently, student leaders at the University of California passed a resolution urging officials to institute mandatory trigger warnings on class syllabi. Professors who present 'content that may trigger the onset of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder' would be required to 'issue advance alerts and allow students to skip those classes'. The demands for such warnings are growing on American campuses, and it is only a matter of time before students call for them here in Britain, too.

Soon, students who have been poor could be demanding trigger warnings on sociology curricula and texts. Those who have been sick might call for trigger warnings on nursing curricula and texts. Those whose families have suffered in the past will probably want trigger warnings on history curricula and texts. As for literature, which is full of consensual and non-consensual sex, heartbreak and tragedy, well, just label the lot: 'Too dangerous for vulnerable student minds.'

Trigger warnings started out fairly reasonably at the request of disabled groups. We are all familiar with the words 'this report contains flash photography' issued before a TV news item. They then spread, with the aim of protecting children, into the arena of giving 'parental' warnings about sex, violence and swearing before the broadcasting of a potentially offensive film or TV show. Today's increasingly Victorian-style feminists have now taken the whole idea to another level, suggesting trigger warnings should be given before:

- graphic descriptions of or extensive discussion of abuse, especially sexual abuse or torture;

- graphic descriptions of or extensive *discussion* of self-harming behaviour, such as suicide, self-inflicted injuries or disordered eating;
- depictions, especially lengthy or psychologically realistic ones, of the mental state of someone suffering abuse or engaging in self-harming behaviour;
- *discussion* of eating-disordered behaviour or body shaming.

Such trigger warnings clearly cover, not only depictions of certain difficult subjects, but even discussion of them. Even the label 'trigger warning' has been criticised by some on the basis that it could be an unsettling reminder of guns. To make such warnings more inclusive, some have suggested that they be called 'activation warnings' or 'stress warnings'. Whatever they're called, they only help to corrode free and open debate, the foundation stones of academic life, by encouraging academics to tread carefully and students to see themselves as too weak to be able to handle difficult material.

The only thing we need 'trigger warnings' about on campus are trigger warnings. I expect British satirical website the *Daily Mash* will soon start selling t-shirts with the words 'TRIGGER WARNING' on them. If it does, every academic worthy of the name should buy one and proudly wear it on campus.

Dennis Hayes is director of **Academics For Academic Freedom** (AFAF) co-author of the book, *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education*, published by Routledge. (Buy this book from [Amazon\(UK\)](#).)



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