

IN HER OWN WORDS: Trigger Warnings Are a Disability Issue

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Dr. Katie Rose Guest Pryal

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As a rape survivor, I had a totally normal post-traumatic reaction to a movie about rape. (See "[Factsheets: Rape-Related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder](#).”) In fact, it took me another two viewings to make it through the entire movie. I didn't mind the emotional work it took.

In fact, I expected it: Before the screening, two people who helped make the documentary provided a trigger warning to the audience. They reassured us, stating that there was no shame in walking out.

Being warned in advance that I would possibly (even likely) experience the documentary as a triggering event helped me prepare for such a traumatic reaction, recognize it when it was happening, take care of myself—including forgiving myself—and return to the film prepared to continue learning from it.

Trigger warnings misunderstood as coddling

These days, there is a strong debate around the term “trigger warnings.” Much of the debate centers around academics and whether teachers should provide trigger warnings (also called “content warnings”) for students. Academics seem to either value trigger warnings or abhor them.

The debate over trigger warnings has gone beyond the small blurbs of text on syllabi or assignment sheets and into discussions of whether college students today are coddled, metaphorical infants incapable of facing emotional challenges.

What seems to be missing from the debate is just how much trigger warnings are not about coddling, but rather about disability. An anxiety reaction, a posttraumatic reaction or any other reaction to material (e.g., text, film, music) that causes an involuntary response in your brain and body is a disability issue.

As disability studies scholar and professor at Spelman College GA, Margaret Price wrote [in her letter to The New Yorker](#), published in the June 30, 2014, issue, “Trigger warnings serve to prevent panic attacks or flashbacks that impede one’s ability to engage in discussion.

... They are intended to enable everyone to remain present and alert enough to be challenged and discomfited.”

Contrary to the notion of protecting students from challenging material, trigger warnings, like the one I received before watching *The Hunting Ground*, can help students with disabilities participate fully.

But opponents of trigger warnings prefer the “coddled children” red herring (along with the “academic freedom” red herring). Indeed, you don’t need to read much past the *New York Times* headline [in its lead piece by Jennifer Medina on the subject](#) to get this impression: “Warning: The Literary Canon Could Make Students Squirm.”

Lisa Hajjar, a professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, was interviewed for the Times piece—at the time, UCSB was considering a campuswide trigger warning policy. Hajjar called trigger warnings “inimical to academic freedom.” Furthermore, “The presumption there is [sic] that students should not be forced to deal with something that makes them uncomfortable is absurd or even dangerous.” Her solution to in-class post-traumatic reactions is to point out that “[a]ny student can request some sort of individual accommodation.”

Besides revealing her misunderstanding of the nature of trigger warnings (how exactly do they limit academic freedom?) and her underestimation of her students (how would they be able to avoid discomfort and why would they want to?), Hajjar’s words also reveal the underlying disability-rights nature of the trigger warning debate. She casually tosses out the term “individual accommodation” as a viable solution. By suggesting that her students seek “individual accommodation,” she implicitly recognizes (1) some of her students have disabilities and (2) her class creates a disabling environment for those students.

This professor’s solution to put the onus on individual students to seek “individual accommodation” through what I’m presuming is the student disability office reveals not only a lack of empathy on the professor’s part but also a lack of understanding of disabling environments and what we can do to correct them. But first, we have to understand what it means to be triggered in the first place.

How triggers work

Angela M. Carter, in [“Teaching with Trauma: Trigger Warnings, Feminism, and Disability Pedagogy”](#) in *Disability Studies Quarterly* (35.2), helpfully drew the distinction between being triggered and being merely challenged in class: “To be triggered is to mentally and physically re-experience a past trauma in such an embodied manner that one’s affective response literally takes over the ability to be present in one’s bodymind.”

Carter’s words are reminiscent of Price’s letter to *The New Yorker* and her description of panic attacks and flashbacks as impediments to class participation. Carter writes: “When this [triggering] occurs, the triggered individuals often feel a complete loss of control and disassociation from the bodymind. This is not a state of injury, but rather a state of disability.”

For many students with disabilities of this sort, getting accommodations is not easy. First of all, students seeking accommodations for psychiatric disabilities are more often met with skepticism than those seeking accommodations for physical disabilities.

This skepticism has to do with disability service offices gatekeeping accommodations because they believe students will use such accommodations to cheat and because of the stigma still attached to psychiatric disability. Furthermore, due to this stigma, many students are afraid to seek accommodations, leaving a paper trail of their disability.

Which leads me to wonder: Do professors who insist that students create a paper trail of their stigmatized disabilities so that such professors can take a stand against trigger warnings on their syllabi need to reconsider their priorities as teachers and mentors?

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