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English 10 Honors
29 November 2016

Trigger Warnings Mean Equality

If a professor offers a syllabus entailing what a course will include, is it not that same professor’s job to inform students of possibly harmful information that will be exposed to them within that very course? In today’s age of social media and inescapable discussion of topics such as and similar to those of rape, suicide, and abuse on a wider scale, it is inevitable for literature to be read, films to be shown, and explorative discussions to be held in a school environment (particularly colleges/universities) involving possibly sensitive and triggering topics for students. To provide education equality and opportunities for all pupils, it is necessary that alternate assignments be provided and students be forewarned of possibly triggering topics before they are exposed to them in the inescapable environment that is inevitably the classroom.

Though controversial due to their seemingly “pro-censorship-like” qualities, trigger warnings benefit those who have experienced trauma and are likely to experience PTSD or repercussions of a particularly disturbing event of their past. Colleges and professors argue against trigger warnings with their logic of the “lack of necessity for them”, the “crime of censorship”, apparent “disruption of the classroom”, and the pure “hassle and annoyance” of their existence. Yet advocates for the abolishment of trigger warnings continue to ignore the honest purpose behind their initial intention: to provide equal learning opportunities for those who have suffered uncontrollable, terrifying trauma. Trigger warnings are harmless to those
who do not feel the need to utilize them, and therefore stand strongly against opposition. The goal is not to censor learning material to the point where trigger warnings are no longer necessary, but to provide alternative assignments and warning before possibly dangerous material is presented to unknowing (and vulnerable) students.

Disregarding mental illness and trauma can be compared to and is as unacceptable as disregarding racism or homophobia. Posttraumatic stress disorder is a tangible, inconvenient, and potentially experience-limiting psychiatric disorder that can cause those diagnosed to have violent anxiety episodes. Because of this, those diagnosed learn to carefully monitor and avoid any reminders or triggers of the specific topic. It is therefore very important, and helpful, that trigger warnings exist, because it is only just that every student gets the proper opportunity to learn and help themselves enough to avoid these situations. Alana Newman, professor of psychology, explains that because she has implemented trigger warnings, priorly struggling students have reaped the positive benefits (Newman). She says that not only have students been able to prepare for possibly triggering topics, but have been able to actually talk with their therapists prior to discussions so that they can safely participate in the forthcoming activity (Newman). In giving students the opportunity to emotionally prepare themselves for the discussion of a potentially triggering topic, academic equality is granted. Any possible academic inability of students due to their “distress [interfering] with [their] coursework” is the heart of the problem (Karasek). High, crippling levels of anxiety should never disable a normally capable student to be able to produce the type of work they would normally be able to produce. Not only is fairness concerned, but the “wish to be valued and respected in class” is one that every student can relate to (Karasek). As for the basic rights of every student, it is essential that learning
opportunities are absolutely equal. With certain students feeling exposed, threatened, and/or experiencing fear, equal opportunities are not being presented.

Unfortunately, there are large numbers of young people whom professors, in refusing to implement trigger warnings, are essentially handicapping. When student and victim of sexual assault, Alyssa Leader, was warned of possibly triggering topics that were going to be discussed in class, she was able to take matters into her own hands and feel more in control (Karasek). It is necessary that every student feels the same amount of comfort and ability to succeed in receiving an education. Through a wider scope, it is evident that through uncontrollable experiences and trauma, students can involuntarily gain lifelong handicaps that can prohibit their learning and ability to succeed. Professors sometimes include unnecessary means into the definition of trigger warnings. Many think that by using trigger warnings, they must also “exempt distressed students from classes covering topics likely to trigger post-traumatic stress disorder,” (McNally). In order to let trigger warnings successfully play a role in the classroom environment, they must be used in a moderated fashion. This means that they must not be taken to the extreme and must be understood as a tool for students instead of as an unfair advantage. The degree to which trigger warnings are taken seriously translates directly into their effectiveness. If students are truly receiving equal learning opportunities, then alternate, equivalent assignments will be given. It is not equality if students get excused from an activity without proper substitution for that activity.

There have been several circumstances where the definition of trigger warnings has been exaggerated and taken to an unnecessary level. In this case, opposition is natural and necessary due to a multitude of reasons stemming from misconceptions. In instances where censorship seems to ride along the same wavelength as trigger warnings, opposition is valid, because the
two should not have a correlation. Trigger warnings should only be relevant to those who are willing and aware enough to take advantage of them. In order to create a fair learning environment, educators should not alter their lesson plan, essentially “censoring” it for a group of varying students, but should rather give prior warning to students who may struggle when presented with that information. The University of Chicago says, supporting their willingness to avoid trigger warnings that they have “been deeply committed to the notion that [students in college are there] to learn from one another and to learn from the world and to study things and to figure out the answers. And the best way to do that is to hear all sides of everything,” (Schaper). Trigger warnings are not a boundary for education and discussion, but rather to create a comfortable place for those to occur. It must be up to students to get the help they need within the boundaries of trigger warnings if they are provided for them. The same discussions in classrooms should still be held, opinions valued, and opposing sides respected and considered in the environment in which trigger warnings are given. Rather than acknowledging trigger warnings as a black-or-white, right or wrong controversy, educators must begin to consider trigger warnings as a tool that is available for students. Freedom of speech and opinion should never be sacrificed when trigger warnings are implemented. It does not have to be one without the other, because trigger warnings are meant to be merely a “heads up” for students, and not to any degree a form of censorship. In the opinions of parents showing concern for their kids, some cannot seem to “understand why a college campus would be the kind of place where people would police uncomfortable topics,” (Schaper). “Uncomfortable topics” should be thoroughly discussed at colleges and within classrooms everywhere, except when seemingly hostile environments are created for students. For example, when a documentary involving rape is being
shown and a student has a panic attack, unknowing of the presence of the topic in the film, academic equality is being disrupted and disturbed at it’s most primary level. It is a necessity that students know what is being presented to them in advance so that they know how to prepare and what to expect, and in certain circumstances, how to go about avoiding the subject altogether. Freedom in the learning space can be accomplished if everyone feels safe and able to discuss it. Causing individuals pain when learning cannot translate into a healthy, and ultimately “free” education space.

In their truest intention, trigger warnings are meant to aid individuals who cannot help themselves when exposed to information that, because of their past, affects them negatively. Just as a rating on a movie warns an audience of content, certain questionable topics within schools should also be labeled with something explaining content before it is actually uncovered. Colleges should be a free and safe space where anything can be discussed. In order to achieve this though, dangers of interruption, distraction, and uncomfort must be eliminated. Through the proper use of trigger warnings, education can benefit all students through simply respecting them to the same degree.
Works Cited


