Trigger warnings may not be enough: Cultivating a trauma-informed classroom

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Abstract

In 2014, a US college created a policy requiring faculty to provide trigger warnings for students sparking a heated debate across North America regarding the need for, and efficacy of, trigger warnings in higher education. We present the findings of our study on the opinions of students, professors, and trauma survivors in higher education regarding the use of trigger warnings in classrooms and discuss the need to be more intentional about supporting students and their mental health. A broader discussion about integrating trauma-informed practices in higher education will be presented with experiences, ideas, and approaches to supporting student mental health.

Key words: trigger warnings, trauma-informed, teaching, post-secondary

The term trigger warning is often used interchangeably with "content warning" – warnings that have long appeared at the onset of television shows, movies, on video game covers, and on the covers of magazines or reading materials. These content warnings are intended to alert the viewers or readers of content that contains graphic violence, sexuality, nudity, or offensive language, which may be inappropriate for younger audiences or may cause some upset or distress. The contemporary definition of a trigger warning is, "a statement at the start of a piece of writing, video, etc. alerting the reader or viewer to the fact that it contains potentially distressing material (often used to introduce a description of such content)" (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2017). The concept of being triggered is rooted in the after-effects of traumatic events, such as a sexual assault, where the trauma survivor reexperiences the trauma in some way when something triggers a reminder of the trauma experience (e.g., the scent associated with the person who committed the sexual assault). The formal use of trigger warnings appears to have originated in online feminist sites that deal with traumatic material that may trigger strong negative emotional and psychological reactions in trauma survivors (Jarvie, 2014). Trigger warnings in academia became more prominent in 2014 when a US college created a policy requiring faculty to provide trigger warnings for students (Davis, 2014; Jarvie, 2014). This action sparked controversy across North America regarding the need for, and use of, trigger warnings in higher education.

The post-secondary education trigger warning debate occurred predominantly in two opinion-based US higher education news journals that provided the data for the study we conducted and published (George & Hovey, 2020). By the time that this study was completed, and the trigger warning debate no longer dominated higher education media, attention appeared to be shifting toward the topic of student mental health in general. The

onset and duration of the COVID-19 pandemic appeared to have a tremendous impact on student mental health. Students of all ages were feeling the impact of not being in the classroom, not socializing with friends, and experiencing screen burnout (Toombs et al., 2022). As post-secondary students have returned to in-person classes, balancing mental health concerns and navigating the after-effects of the pandemic in the classroom has inspired us to re-examine our study findings that originally sought to clarify the purpose and proposed utility of trigger warnings that had been debated within higher education.

In this paper, we consider the application of trauma-informed approaches to teaching to address some of the themes concerning student mental health needs that came out of our trigger warning findings more effectively. We begin with an overview of some of the literature that contributes to the intersections of student mental health needs, post-secondary academic learning and teaching strategies. Next, we provide a summary of the key findings from our trigger warning study, specifically those relevant to the after-effects of the pandemic in the classroom. We then discuss trauma-informed principles and apply trauma-informed practice as a universal approach to student mental health and promotion of mental wellness in the learning environment, while situating the use of trigger warnings within this broader context. Examples from our teaching and classroom experiences illustrate how trigger warnings and trauma-informed approaches in teaching have been effective with social work students.

Background

Research on the experience of, and response to, an overwhelmingly negative event or series of events such as childhood sexual or physical abuse or violence (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2018), suggests that educators can assume that many of their students are entering higher education with their own trauma histories. In a sample of US college students, 70% reported that they had experienced at least one potentially traumatic event in their life (Cusack et al., 2019). A similar study with graduate social work students found that approximately 77% had one or more *adverse childhood experience* (ACE), and between a fourth and a third of students had four or more ACEs (Butler et al., 2018; Gilin & Kauffman, 2015). These rates are higher than those reported in the original ACE study for a middle-class adult sample (Felitti et al., 1998), suggesting, among other possible interpretations, that past trauma may be more common in students engaged in certain fields of study, such as social work, than in the general population.

Students often experience trauma during their tenure in higher education. For example, Statistics Canada (2019) found that 71% of Canadian post-secondary students surveyed reported witnessing or experiencing unwanted sexualized behaviours in a post-secondary setting. Exposure to trauma may even occur as a direct result of educational requirements; for instance, students may be exposed to trauma directly or indirectly while completing field placements, conducting research, or through materials included in course curriculum (Butler et al., 2017; Carello & Butler, 2015; Didham et al., 2011; Goodwin & Tiderington, 2022; Knight, 2019). Among social work students, exposure to trauma-related content in classroom materials has been linked to reports of experiencing fear, helplessness, or horror in response to these materials and/or the recalling of upsetting thoughts and feelings from their own histories (Butler et al., 2017). In addition, adverse experiences during social work field practicums have been linked to disturbances in sleep, eating, concentration, substance misuse, and anxiety (Didham et al., 2011).

At the time that we conducted our study (George & Hovey, 2020), there was minimal research about using trigger warnings to help students manage their responses to emotionally challenging materials. However, authors reflecting on teaching sensitive topics were acknowledging the trauma experiences that some students may bring with them into the classroom and discussed the responsibility of educators to ensure a safe environment to teach sensitive topics (e.g., Cunningham, 2004; Durfee & Rosenberg, 2009) or prepare students to engage meaningfully with difficult course material without blindsiding them (e.g., Carter, 2015). Some authors were also grappling with how to use provocative materials safely to provoke thought, challenge students, and keep them interested (e.g., Nolan & Oerton, 2010).

Deciphering the Trigger Warning Debate: Summary of Key findings

Our *Deciphering the Trigger Warning Debate* study (George & Hovey, 2020) set out to determine the most commonly held opinions by the academic community in the online reader discourse regarding the use of trigger warnings in higher education classes. We conducted a content analysis of 1,573 reader comments posted by 710 people from 20 trigger warning-based articles between March 2014 and October 2015 from the Chronicle of Higher Education (CHE; 12 articles) and Inside Higher Ed (IHE; 8 articles). We found that 64.2% of the commenters, who represented professors (44%), students (almost 3%), or unknown identities (54%), had a clear position of either for (23.7%) or against (40.4%) using trigger warnings. The majority of professors and students represented within the sample came from the humanities, social sciences, and law; none identified as being part of a social work faculty. Of the total sample comments, 762 comments were identified as contributing to the debate and resulted in the following four major themes:

1. *Participation and learning in the classroom* (17% of comments) – Several within our sample expressed that such warnings equip trauma survivors by helping them to manage their emotions in class, giving them a choice about whether or not to engage with certain materials, and helping them to prepare to engage in class, as illustrated by this quote: *I would be useless for the purposes of the discussion, my heart would be racing, I'd want to be invisible, and hope no one would notice me, and I would probably hardly hear what was being said. If I knew the topic was coming, I can really contribute to such a discussion* (Student Survivor; George & Hovey, 2020, p. 12). Some felt that trigger warnings are not the answer to address the complex needs of survivors.
2. *Support for trauma* (17% of comments) – There was disagreement in the sample about whether trigger warnings were being requested as a means of catering to students who are offended or if they are being implemented to support trauma survivors, as articulated by this professor's quote: *Trigger warnings make sense for people who have genuine cases of PTSD. But for those who simply want to avoid uncomfortable topics, it's gotten way out of hand*. Some indicated trigger warnings do not provide any meaningful support.
3. *Impacts on academia* (35% of comments and largest theme) – Many opinions expressed concerns that students would take advantage of trigger warnings to avoid being challenged or to lessen their workload; that they may interfere with students' growth by coddling or infantilizing them, and leaving them unprepared for life after school, as suggested by this Unknown commenter: *I guess I wonder how some of these*

people will make it through life if they can't make it through school without trigger warnings. They definitely won't get them in their daily lives (p. 9).

4. *Implications for professors* (31% of comments) – Many professors voiced concerns that it is simply not feasible for faculty to mandate trigger warnings, as it is impossible to know what topics to warn against. Some believe trigger warnings might be a good idea, although mandating them is not. Other professors challenged the concerns that students will abuse trigger warnings. This professor's comment represents one such challenge: *I choose to give the benefit of the doubt to my students… because I would rather see a few slackers slip by than penalize a student who has already been traumatized*.

In summary, mandating the use of trigger warnings was not supported; however, many comments supported the discretionary use of trigger warnings. At the time we conducted this research, there were questions about the effectiveness of trigger warnings and these questions remain. As we considered these findings, it became clear that trigger warnings are really not enough as an approach to support student mental health in the classroom.

Trauma-Informed Practice

Trauma-informed practice is a theoretical framework with roots in the social services (Harris & Fallot, 2001; Knight, 2019). It is a lens from which the professional, such as an instructor or professor, understands and works with people (Goodman, 2017); a universal approach (Harris & Fallot, 2001). Broadly, trauma-informed practice means that professionals recognize that any person might be a survivor of trauma (Brown et al., 2013). It does not mean that trauma is assumed, but rather the professional remains sensitive to the possibility of trauma. It also does not require that the professional address the trauma directly. The professional practices in a way to avoid re-traumatizing the individual (Brown et al., 2013; Goodman, 2017; Harris & Fallot, 2001; Knight, 2019).

Knight (2019) outlines five principles that guide trauma-informed practice: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. *Safety* pertains to ensuring both physical and emotional safety of the individual. *Trustworthiness* is achieved by professionals upholding clear consistent boundaries while supporting the individual to trust themselves. Every individual must have some *choice* in how they interact or engage with others and the professional would facilitate choice where possible. The professional would work in *collaboration* with the individual as appropriate and facilitate a process that supports the individual to have *control* over their goals, for example, and approach to achieve them. By applying these principles and using a trauma-informed approach to teaching, professors and instructors would support student mental health in a far more substantive way than simply offering trigger warnings.

Applying Trauma-Informed Practice and Trigger Warnings in the Classroom

To apply the principles of trauma-informed practice in the post-secondary classroom, the professor or instructor should be aware of traumatic events, highly stressful situations, or crises that students may commonly experience (Carello & Butler, 2015; Sanders, 2021). Here are some examples that students have reported experiencing while in our social work classes: recent sexual assault, attempts or death by suicide by friend or family member or self, overdose/serious substance use issues of self, family member or

friend, death or serious illness of a family member or friend (often grandparents), intimate partner violence in relationships, break-up of long-term relationship, acrimonious parental separation, and major mental illness of a family member or self.

As a result of these traumatic events or crises experienced by students, the professor or instructor should know and be able to recognize some basic symptoms of trauma, such as having repeated disturbing memories, using strategies to try to avoid triggers to the memories; being easily startled or irritated, having strong physical reactions; difficulty concentrating, and seeming distant or isolated (Levin et al., 2014). The instructor would understand that some classroom behaviours may be a method of coping with trauma. Some examples from our experiences include: students who are withdrawn in classroom discussion, students who have recurring crises (e.g., substance use, self-harm) that may be impacting academic success; students who are defensive in discussions or meetings; students feeling attacked or persecuted; and finally, students who leave the room during content that may be unsettling.

Cavener and Lonbay (2022) conducted a thematic analysis of student and educator feedback on teaching and learning trauma-related materials to identify trauma-informed practices that can be applied in higher education classrooms and situated these practices within the five principles of trauma-informed practice: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. We build on those recommendations by offering our own reflections as well as those of others within the literature.

Safety

Exposing students to difficult content may provide valuable opportunities to provoke thought, develop understanding of potential future client populations, and challenge them to grapple with important concepts toward personal growth; in fact, depending on the field of study, such topics may be unavoidable (Agllias, 2012; Gilin & Kauffman, 2015; Scriver & Kennedy, 2016). Instructors can create an environment that helps students prepare for and control their exposure to trauma-related or emotionally challenging content by providing trigger warnings or information about course materials in advance of engaging with the materials or information (Boysen, 2017; Carello & Butler, 2015; Cavener & Lonbay, 2022); by pacing the exposure to difficult content; by debriefing, checking in, and discussing the experience of the material presented (Carello & Butler, 2015; Cunningham, 2004); and by providing students with information about support services and other self-care strategies (Cavener & Lonbay, 2022; Gilin & Kauffman, 2015).

Practice example. As a social work student (EG) in a class with Dr. Hovey (AH), we watched a film about shaken baby syndrome that caused some upset; however, Dr. Hovey provided us a warning of the content beforehand. Although several students found the film upsetting and difficult, all but one student were able to remain in the room for the film and work through the content in a discussion afterward. A film about the holocaust was shown in separate class with a different instructor without any warning – many of the students felt ambushed by the content, and some students found the film quite distressing. In this case, the students were not able to work through the content as meaningfully and remained in an unsettled state.

Trustworthiness

Key to establishing a safe learning environment is to develop and facilitate trusting instructor-student and student-student working relationships. This can be accomplished by establishing clear classroom expectations and boundaries through discussion of the students' and instructor's hopes, worries, and ideas about the environment needed to maximize learning (Cavener & Lonbay, 2022). The instructor can acknowledge that topics explored in class may affect students based on their personal experiences and emphasize the importance of communication between instructor and student to support engagement with difficult course topics. By being transparent about what is being taught and how it is taught, the instructor can facilitate trust and reduce the risk of re-traumatization (Cunningham, 2004).

Practice example. For the past 20 years, each course I (AH) teach containing difficult content begins with a discussion of the students' hopes and worries about the course. This allows us to articulate class expectations as a group. I also take the time to invite students to reach out to me directly if they have any concerns of a personal nature and then I am able to build in subtle supports, such as a quick email forewarning of content or modifying the approach I use (i.e., pairing the student with a teaching assistant for skills practice) to ensure the content is taught and all students can participate fully.

Choice

A trauma-informed instructor helps students to maximize choice by offering them options about how they participate in learning within the limits required to demonstrate sufficient knowledge of the material being taught (Carello & Butler, 2015; Cavener & Lonbay, 2022). This does not mean offering the option to not complete assignments; rather, instructors could be flexible about the timing and process of assignment completion. Choice can also include instructors offering students opportunities to exercise basic coping strategies that help them to manage their emotional state when engaging with challenging materials or completing assignments that elicit strong emotional distress (Agillias, 2012; Gilin & Kauffman, 2015).

Practice example. As part of my regular teaching practice, I (AH) encourage students to take breaks by stepping out of the classroom as needed rather than avoid difficult content entirely, returning when ready, and then I check in with them at the end of class or by email. My social work skills courses require students to address difficult content as part of their practice component. A few students always struggle with similar issues as presented in the content. In these situations, I offer to meet with the student and try to link them to our university mental health resources (if no support is in place), review and discuss their coping strategies, adapt the practice component to be completed with a teaching assistant or supportive peer, and check in afterwards.

Collaboration

The principle of collaboration is applied when teaching challenging topics with instructor-student and student-student interactions and through continuous feedback (Cavener & Lonbay, 2022). Students do not have to engage with emotionally difficult topics alone. The previous practice examples illustrate the important role of collaboration with instructors and students to develop strategies to successfully manage difficult course content and to create a safe learning environment collectively.

Practice example. I (EG) completed my social work practicum on an Indigenous-focused child welfare team. That spring, three Indigenous youth in our care died by suicide in quick succession. A fellow student, also on the team, was enrolled in an Indigenous social work course that required her to view a film on the historical experiences of Indigenous youth in the child welfare system and write a discussion post. The instructor had given prior notice that the film would be difficult viewing. My peer approached her instructor about completing the discussion requirement on a different topic in the short-term and revisiting the film later in the semester when the tragic events in practicum were not as fresh. Trust, choice, communication, and a trigger warning about the nature of the film allowed for student-instructor collaboration to meet course requirements while acknowledging the emotional state of the student.

Empowerment

Students in higher education can be empowered to engage with topics that they may otherwise avoid when their instructors and peers normalize struggle with these difficult topics (Cavener & Lonbay, 2022). Teaching students about trauma, vicarious trauma, and secondary trauma as a means of understanding the effect of trauma on practitioners can help to interpret the experience as a natural reaction (Agllias, 2012; Gilin & Kauffman, 2015). In this process, students can be encouraged to think of this approach to learning difficult material as an invitation to take ownership of their own learning within reasonable boundaries.

Practice example. The following excerpt from an email AH received represents how support can empower a student:

> *… I just wanted to thank you very deeply for helping me out when I was feeling very down. You single handedly are the reason why I am still in this program. During those two weeks I was very close to dropping out, as I felt like I could not manage. Your assistance and support made a massive difference… you meeting with me to assist with coping skills and mechanisms to get me through the rest of the semester and year.*

This student went on to complete her Master of Social Work degree.

Conclusion

Higher education is commonly believed to be a place where students will be challenged emotionally in order to facilitate personal and intellectual growth. For this reason, some courses require that students engage with trauma-oriented materials. While trigger warnings are a potentially useful strategy to help students manage these challenges, they do not adequately support students in balancing their learning and mental health needs. A trauma-informed approach to teaching expands the support students need to engage with distressing and emotionally difficult materials and complete course requirements. It does not require the instructor to be a mental health expert, but rather be able to intervene supportively and teach with the sensitivity needed to encourage student success. This paper presented some of the strategies recommended in the literature and from the authors' research and own experiences. We advocate that trauma-related and emotionally disturbing content valuable to student learning can be effectively taught in higher education

classrooms by applying trauma-informed approaches, including the use of trigger warnings.

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