Talking about Difficult Topics in the Classroom

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On Trigger Warnings:

Criticisms:

·         they are a [form of censorship (2014)](https://www.aaup.org/report/trigger-warnings) that threatens academic freedom and free speech on campus;

·         they create a [repressive climate (2014)](https://newrepublic.com/article/116842/trigger-warnings-have-spread-blogs-college-classes-thats-bad) for critical thinking in the classroom;

·         they aren’t effective because [triggers are unpredictable (2017)](https://www.apa.org/pubs/highlights/spotlight/issue-97.aspx) and avoidance of such triggers can make PTSD worse;

·         they suggest [students are fragile victims (2015)](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/) who shouldn’t be engaged with ideas that make them uncomfortable;

·         they prepare students poorly for [professional life (2014)](https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/trouble-teaching-rape-law), which often presents challenges to one’s point of view;

·         they [silence religious students (2016)](https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/08/silencing-religious-students-on-campus/497951); and

·         they [threaten the jobs of tenure-track or adjunct professors (2015)](https://www.vox.com/2015/6/3/8706323/college-professor-afraid) because these instructors can be fired if they offend students or if students complain about them.

Those who favor their use argue that:

·         they are [easy to implement (2015)](https://studentactivism.net/2015/08/25/trigger-warnings-for-syllabi-a-how-to-one-year-along/) (e.g., a line in the syllabus or a verbal or written notice before a reading);

·         they don’t harm anyone: students who aren’t triggered might even become aware of their classmates’ traumatic experience and might [be more sympathetic (2016)](https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2016/jun/14/i-use-trigger-warnings-but-im-not-mollycoddling-my-students) to them;

·         they help students prepare for—and not skip—a difficult topic; people against TW postulate that exposure therapy is used by therapists to treat patients with PTSD by slowly exposing them to what triggers anxiety or panic attacks, yet [the classroom is different because this slow process doesn’t happen (2015)](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/opinion/sunday/why-i-use-trigger-warnings.html);

·         they help students [manage the possible distress caused by a sensitive topic (2015)](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/opinion/sunday/why-i-use-trigger-warnings.html); it is very difficult to engage in an intellectual conversation when having a panic attack, for instance; and

·         they are an [opportunity (2015)](https://newrepublic.com/article/121820/my-students-need-trigger-warnings-and-professors-do-too) for instructors to stop and delve on the complexities of a text or idea, opening up interesting discussions.

Alternatives to Safe Spaces:

* Brave spaces (Arao and Clemens): space that fosters inclusivity and risk in challenging dialogues. The brave space concept has popped up specifically within service-learning and community engagement programming.
* Contested classroom (Ludlow): According to Ludlow, safety is a privilege because marginalized students can’t really be safe in the classroom. Moreover, instructors and students should be prepared for moments of risk, processes of giving up old ways of thinking and moments of awareness of their own privileges. (45) “By contested space, I mean a space that is not necessarily  
  defined by conflict, but which includes room for conflict.” (47) A contested space takes into account personal experience and identity politics, but it doesn’t close the discussion based on the kind of essentialism that sometimes comes with these categories. A contested space fosters discussions within systems of privilege and power. Ludlow challenges the notion of the safe classroom on the grounds that offering some students the privilege of safety and free self-expression comes at the cost of furthering the lack of safety experienced by marginalized and oppressed students.
* Classroom civility (Barrett): Barrett’s criticism of safe classroom is based on 4 factors: (1) The negative impact of safety on student intellectual development and critical reflection; (2) the impossibility of safety for students in marginalized and oppressed populations; (3) the challenges of assessing student learning in safe environments; and (4) ambiguity in defining safety for students.
* Pedagogy of discomfort (Boler, Redmond)
* Pedagogy of disruption (Leonardo and Porter): They argue safe-space race dialogues enact violence because oppressed students and students of color aren’t really safe in these environments. They advocate for spaces where understanding racism becomes the higher good rather than whether or not one leaves the dialogue looking more or less racist than before.

Arao, B., & Clemens, K. “From safe spaces to brave spaces: A new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice.” *The art of effective facilitation: Reflections from social justice educators*, edited by L. Landreman, Stylus, 2013, pp. 135–50.

Barrett, Betty. “Is ‘Safety’ Dangerous? A Critical Examination of the Classroom as Safe Space.” *Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, vol 1, Iss 1 (2010), no. 1, 2010. EBSCOhost, doi:10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2010.1.9.

Boler, Megan. “Pedagogy of Discomfort.” *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*. Routledge, 1999, pp 201-228. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,cpid,athens,shib&custid=s8863137&db=brd&AN=69003506&site=eds-live&scope=site.

Ludlow, Jeannie. “From Safe Space to Contested Space in the Feminist Classroom.” *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2004, pp. 40–56. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/trajincschped.15.1.0040](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/trajincschped.15.1.0040).

Leonardo, Zeus, and Ronald K. Porter. “Pedagogy of Fear: Toward a Fanonian Theory of ‘Safety’ in Race Dialogue.” *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, vol. 13, no. 2, July 2010, pp. 139–157. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/13613324.2010.482898.