

Discussing Sexualized Discrimination and Violence in the Class Room: Why and How to use Content Warnings

Institutions of higher education are places of academic freedom where students and teachers come together as a community (*universitas magistrorum et scholarium*). The relationships between teachers and students are shaped by expectations of autonomy and a thirst for knowledge as well as (often rigid) rules and hierarchies. Teachers hold a position of power over their students. A community? Yes, but not a community of equals. This imbalance of power demands sensitivity.

Content warnings (CW) give agency to people with mental health issues or who have experienced trauma so they may navigate potentially difficult situations deliberately and voluntarily. In the context of teaching, CW foster a welcoming atmosphere, free of judgement, and provides a space in which difficult topics like sexualized violence and discrimination can be addressed, discussed and researched without inflicting further harm on students and teachers alike.

As authors of this pamphlet, we hope to help teachers who want or need to discuss sensitive topics like sexualized violence and discrimination in their classrooms, or who encounter students who have experienced sexualized violence and/or discrimination, by offering practical guidance for the wording and use of CW.

Inclusion of people with trauma and/or mental health issues

- Considering statistics on sexualized violence and child abuse, it is a sad fact that during their careers most teachers will invariably encounter students who have personal experience with sexualized violence and/or discrimination.
- The confrontation with sexualized discrimination and/or violence can trigger strong responses in people who have experienced it, from stress to panic attacks and temporal dissociation.
- CW inform students about potentially triggering contents before they enter into the situation. This can enable them to ready themselves and not be suddenly overwhelmed.¹
- Hence, CW give agency to the students and enable them to make autonomous decisions.
- Furthermore, CW signal to the student body that this is a space where the individually diverging experiences of students are acknowledged and accommodated. This is an important step towards broader inclusion and the dismantling of social stigma regarding mental health.

¹ In extreme situations this may mean that students select to be absent from certain sessions. While true that avoidance behaviour is counterproductive as a coping mechanism, only psychologist or psychotherapists are qualified to guide a patient through exposure therapy. Teachers are not authorised to make such a decision for their student nor are they equipped to handle the possible negative fallout, if a trauma episode were to be triggered during one of their classes.

Awareness-building in teachers and students

- Even for people who have not personally experienced sexualized discrimination and/or violence, engaging with the topic can still be difficult and emotionally draining.
- The phrasing of CW can be an opportunity for teachers to reconsider whether the chosen material is necessary and appropriate in the context of their class.²
- Teachers should be ready and prepared to discuss sexualized discrimination and violence, even if this was not the intended focus of the session.
- CW offer time and space to students to work through their emotional responses to difficult topics ahead of time. This allows a better focus on the topic itself instead of their personal responses to it in the class context. The session becomes more focused overall.
- CW also raise awareness in students who have not experienced sexualized violence and/or discrimination by showing that their own experience is not universal.

Content warnings – A contextualisation

- CW in various forms have been used for decades, especially for visual media like film, TV and video games. An example for that are Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle (FSK) or the rating system of the Motion Picture Association in the USA.
- Similar to CW, trigger warnings seek to protect people from experiencing emotional stress and re-traumatisation. The difference however is that triggers are highly individual. CW, on the other hand, focus on the material and its content as such. They are the result of the thematic reflection of the teacher concerning said material.
- CW are not censorship: on the contrary, they aid in preparing for emotionally difficult topics and hence might even help prevent self-censorship.

² Narrative interviews with victims of child molestation might be very interesting and methodologically well done; for a class on methodology alone, there might be an alternate example that works just as well.

How should I provide content warnings?

<p>When should I give CW?</p>	<p>In the context of sexualized discrimination and violence, teachers should give CW for rape, sexualized assault, but also child molestation, incest and paedophilia. When considering broader understandings of sexualized discrimination and violence, possible CW worthy contents might be transphobia, queerphobia or sexist behaviour in general. This list cannot be exhaustive. It can only be a jumping off point for a teacher's own reflection and judgement.</p>
<p>How should I provide CW?</p>	<p>The form of the warning is just as important as the content and the incorporation into the course. A warning that applies to the whole course is certainly less clear than one for a single text. In general, the warnings should state the content without going into too much detail. Offering to provide further detail upon request can be another helpful step. If the warning is only for a single session, it should be clear if said session is relevant for the course's exam. If so, students should be informed whether and how they may substitute the missed contents.</p>
<p>Examples</p>	<p>Continuous warning in the course catalogue: This seminar deals at various points with sexualized violence as well as trans*- and queerphobia. For further information please contact: (insert name)</p> <p>Isolated warning in the syllabus: The movie "XY" in our second session contains the portrayal of sexual assault (possible to add the time stamp). The movie is relevant for the final exam, but we can arrange for substitution. For further information, please contact me beforehand.</p>
<p>Who should give CW?</p>	<p>CW are first and foremost the responsibility of the teacher. Even when students participate in class content creation, e.g. through presentations, the teacher should check in with the student(s) and inquire if their contribution warrants a CW.</p>
<p>Where should I place CW?</p>	<p>CW can be communicated via: 1. Module/course description; 2. Teaching platforms; 3. Syllabus; 4. Mail; 5. In person. The content and scope of the CW, but also your style and preference may determine how you communicate the CW. You may also want to choose a combination of two or more.</p>
<p>At what time should I give CW?</p>	<p>As early as possible. Best practice should be to add CW in the course description, especially if they apply to the course as a whole. If that is not possible, the CW still has to give people time to appropriately react (i.e. to prepare themselves or retreat from the situation). A quick warning during the session at hand is not enough. Repeating a warning at the beginning of a session and before engaging with the content is a good reminder though.</p>

However, this too is not a perfect system. You will not notice all things that might be problematic for a student. If a student or a third party addresses that, do not get defensive. Acknowledge their experience and reflect on your CW and course plan. If a student or colleague addresses this topic with you or confides in you, this shows first and foremost that you have created a safe space where students feel comfortable enough to talk to you and open up about their experience.

Literature:

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