Pulling the Trigger: Exploring the Debate on Using Trigger Warnings in Psychology Classrooms

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Summary
This workshop explores the topic of trigger warnings (i.e., written or verbalized alerts intended to warn students in advance of material that may elicit a strong emotional response) in the context of a university level psychology classroom. This workshop is designed for psychology graduate students, post-doctoral fellows, or professors involved in teaching. Trigger warnings are particularly relevant to the psychology classroom, as psychology is inherently focused on topics involving people and personal issues that could make students feel uncomfortable (e.g., mental health disorders, suicidal ideation, the impact of sexual assault). Although trigger warnings are increasingly used in classrooms to help students feel comfortable learning about topics that may elicit negative emotions, there appears to be confusion among course instructors as to what trigger warnings are, and if they are appropriate for the classroom. Thus, the goal of this workshop is to elicit a discussion about using trigger warnings in the psychology classroom and support instructors who are interested in incorporating them into their own classes. To achieve this goal, the workshop covers the origin and use of trigger warnings, as well as the benefits and challenges of using them in the psychology classroom.

Keywords
trigger warnings; psychology students; university classroom

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Mary B. Ritchie, The University of Western Ontario

SUMMARY
This workshop explores the topic of trigger warnings (i.e., written or verbalized alerts intended to warn students in advance of material that may elicit a strong emotional response) in the context of a university level psychology classroom. This workshop is designed for psychology graduate students, post-doctoral fellows, or professors involved in teaching. Trigger warnings are particularly relevant to the psychology classroom, as psychology is inherently focused on topics involving people and personal issues that could make students feel uncomfortable (e.g., mental health disorders, suicidal ideation, the impact of sexual assault). Although trigger warnings are increasingly used in classrooms to help students feel comfortable learning about topics that may elicit negative emotions, there appears to be confusion among course instructors as to what trigger warnings are, and if they are appropriate for the classroom. Thus, the goal of this workshop is to elicit a discussion about using trigger warnings in the psychology classroom and support instructors who are interested in incorporating them into their own classes. To achieve this goal, the workshop covers the origin and use of trigger warnings, as well as the benefits and challenges of using them in the psychology classroom.

KEYWORDS: trigger warnings; psychology students; university classroom

LEARNING OUTCOMES
By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:
- Define trigger warnings in the context of a university classroom.
- List and summarize the benefits and drawbacks of using trigger warnings in the psychology classroom.
- Explain the potential implications of trigger warnings on student learning.
- Develop and apply appropriate methods for conveying trigger warnings in the psychology classroom.
- Identify ways to incorporate trigger warnings into personal teaching approaches, and recognize situations when trigger warnings could be inappropriate.

REFERENCE SUMMARIES
Blackburn, J. (2016, December 17). Are trigger warnings helping or hindering students in the classroom? *On the Edge News.* Retrieved from http://otenews.com/are-trigger-warnings-helping-or-hindering-students-in-the-classroom/.

Blackburn (2016) uses an interview with Dr. Cobb, the director of personal counselling services at Edgewood University, to discuss whether trigger warnings help or hinder student learning. Blackburn includes quotes from several other professors, including those from an English department. Cobb argues that the benefits of trigger warnings depend on the content being discussed. Specifically, she sees trigger warnings as valuable when discussing topics related to mental health (e.g., depression, suicide). Cobb highlights that using trigger warnings does not negate discussion of controversial topics. She points out that after using a trigger warning, it is very rare for students to get up and leave the classroom. Instead of catching students off guard, trigger warnings can be used to inform students of potentially upsetting materials and prepare them for critically discussing said material in a comfortable and supportive environment. Facilitators should use this article to provide case examples and discuss the perceived impact of trigger warnings on student learning.

Boysen, G. A., Wells, A. M., & Dawson, K. J. (2016). Instructors' use of trigger warnings and behaviour warnings in abnormal psychology. *Teaching of Psychology, 43*(4), 334–339.

Boysen, Wells, & Dawson (2016) investigated how often trigger warnings were used in abnormal psychology classrooms by surveying 131 abnormal psychology instructors about their use of trigger warnings and the methods used to convey such warnings. The authors also examined the instructors' perceptions of the use of trigger warnings. Overall, the results of this study provide evidence that the majority of instructors do not favour trigger warnings. Those who favour trigger warnings, however, routinely warn against self-diagnosis based on the course information. These warnings are often provided verbally or throughout the syllabus. Finally, this study suggests that while 31% of the sample favour trigger warnings, 49% were against, and the remaining 20% had never heard of trigger warnings. Thus, while trigger warnings may not be a familiar topic to some, the majority do not view them as a necessary to teaching in a university setting.

This study provides some of the first empirical evidence regarding trigger warnings from the instructor perspective. The results provide useful information on how trigger warnings are viewed by psychology instructors and indicate a lack of awareness about the issue, thus emphasizing the need to discuss trigger warnings and teaching. This study is useful because it explores how instructors use trigger warnings in their classrooms, which is one focus of the workshop. Facilitators are encouraged to share this article with participants at the outset to demonstrate the relevancy of the workshop.

Gust, O. (2016, June 14). I use trigger warnings – but I'm not mollycoddling my students. *The Guardian.* Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2016/jun/14/i-use-trigger-warnings-but-im-not-mollycoddling-my-students.

Gust (2016) is a history professor who argues trigger warnings can be used without coddling students. He believes trigger warnings can be used as a way to prepare students to critically and carefully analyze difficult or disturbing subject manner. He also discusses how trigger warnings have bettered his teaching practice. Although this is a short article, it provides case examples, methodology, and relevant information regarding trigger warnings in relation to student learning that the facilitator can incorporate into discussions.

Lockhart, E. A. (2016). Why trigger warnings are beneficial, perhaps even necessary. *First Amendment Studies, 50*(2), 59-69.

Lockhart (2016) provides insight into why trigger warnings may be beneficial for both students and instructors in facilitating classroom dialogue. The article defines trigger warnings within the context of higher education at university. According to the author, trigger warnings originate from the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) literature, where it is believed that a reminder of traumatic events can trigger the onset of potentially harmful or negative reactions. Over the years, trigger warnings have been extended beyond the realm of PTSD concerns to the mention of any information in the classroom that could potentially cause an adverse reaction from students (e.g., topics of race, sexual orientation, etc.). Lockhart also provides up-to-date descriptions of the arguments against using trigger warnings and provides counter arguments for these issues. Overall, she maintains that trigger warnings are a beneficial way to increase classroom inclusion and engagement by preparing students for the content they will be immersed in. For the purposes of the workshop, the facilitator should use Lockhart's work to describe the origin of trigger warnings, provide some example applications, and outline the benefits of putting them to use in university classrooms.

Pettit, E. (2016, Sept 6). How 3 professors use trigger warnings in their classrooms. *The Chronicles of Higher Education.* Retrieved from http://www.chronicle.com/article/How-3-ProfessorsUse-Trigger/237691

Pettit (2016) brings the debate on trigger warnings "down to earth" by examining how trigger warnings are used in university classrooms through interviews with three professors from the University of North Iowa's department of religion, the University of Illinois's department of law, and California State University's department of government. These brief but relevant examples provide a contextual understanding of the circumstances in which trigger warnings may be beneficial to students. The paper also describes the methods in which these professors go about implementing trigger warnings into their classrooms. Pettit's work is beneficial to the workshop facilitator as it provides real-world examples of trigger warning communications in the university environment. The workshop facilitator should be familiar with this paper in order to describe additional examples to participants as needed.

Vatz, R. E. (2016). The academically destructive nature of trigger warnings. *First Amendment Studies, 50*(2), 51-58.

Vatz (2016) outlines the arguments against using trigger warnings in the university classroom. He proposes that trigger warnings work against (rather than protect) the mental health of students. Specifically, Vatz argues that trigger warnings have a negative impact on student learning as they prevent students from confronting and critically assessing unfamiliar or uncomfortable ideas. Further, Vatz suggests that trigger warnings ultimately violate the basic principles of higher education (e.g., academic freedom). He uses his own personal experience to support his arguments. Overall, this article provides a useful juxtaposition to Lockhart's (2016) paper and will be used in the workshop to explore the arguments against using trigger warnings in more detail. For the purpose of the workshop, this paper will provide the facilitator with some points of contention, and real-world examples from a university classroom.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

DURATION (MIN)	SUBJECT	ACTIVITY	PURPOSE
10	Hook: Post-it Parade	Ask participants to indicate by a show of hands if they are familiar with trigger warnings and if they have ever used such warnings in their own classrooms. Ask participants to write down a definition of trigger warnings and provide an example on two separate post-it notes. Sample questions are provided in the Presentation Strategies section. Have students place their post-it notes around the classroom. The facilitator can dedicate one wall to the definitions and another wall to the example post-it notes. Choose a few to share (the number can	Conduct a pre-assessment of participant familiarity with trigger warnings, while simultaneously catching the attention of participants by having them think about their own experiences.

		vary depending on time).	
5	Lecture: Origin of Trigger Warnings	Provide a definition of trigger warnings and explain the origin of such warnings in relation to the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) literature. Then describe how these warnings have made their way into the university classroom. Discuss Boysen et al. (2016) as an example of instructor familiarity with such warnings to emphasize the value of this workshop.	Provide participants with a definition and origins of trigger warnings. With this understanding, participants will be able to make more educated judgements of the pros and cons of using trigger warnings themselves.
10	Lecture: Presenting the Debate	Distribute the "Pros and Cons Matrix" handout (Appendix A). Ask participants to fill in the top quadrants of the matrix as the facilitator shares the benefits and drawbacks of using trigger warnings in the classroom. • In general, the facilitator should draw on Lockhart (2016) and Vatz (2016) for this activity. • Be sure to discuss how using or not using trigger warnings could help or hinder student learning by drawing on the articles written by Gust (2016) and Blackburn (2016).	Provide participants with perspectives on both sides of the debate related to using trigger warnings.
10	Lecture and Discussion: Trigger Warnings in Psychology	The facilitator should set the stage for the Buzz Group activity by sharing case examples of trigger warnings in psychology. Alternatively, the facilitator could prompt a few participants to share examples from their experience with the group before beginning the activity. This discussion will then segue into a discussion of potential methods in which trigger warnings could be applied in the psychology classroom or ways in which participants have applied trigger warnings previously. • Record the discussed methods on the whiteboard (or similar). • Sample questions are provided below in the presentation strategies section. • Use the Pettit (2016) article to add any methods missed by the participants or provide an example to elicit ideas if they seem confused.	Provide participants with an understanding of trigger warning use in the psychology classroom by providing specific case examples and drawing on participant experiences.

15	Activity: Benefits and Drawbacks in the Psychology Classroom	Begin by dividing participants into buzz groups of 4 people each. • Ask half of the groups to brainstorm the benefits of using trigger warnings within the context of teaching psychology and the other half of the groups to identify the drawbacks of trigger warnings in the psychology classroom. • Have participants complete the lower quadrant of the Matrix (Appendix A) associated with their assigned side of the debate (i.e., benefits or drawbacks).	Encourage participants to apply the general pros and cons discussion to a specific context. Have participants think about how they might incorporate trigger warnings into their future courses, and identify contexts in which they might avoid trigger warnings to encourage academic freedom and critical thinking skills.
15	Activity: Group Swap	Ask two participants from each of the benefits tables to swap seats with two participants from each of the drawbacks tables. Ask participants to share ideas from both sides of the debate.	Provide participants with the opportunity to listen and discuss both sides of the debate.
15	Discussion: Benefits and Drawbacks	Facilitate a large group discussion that takes up the benefits and drawbacks identified by the small groups. • The facilitator should create a record of these ideas on a whiteboard (or similar) and identify emerging themes as the discussion progresses.	Create space for the group to hear everyone's opinions and will be used to segue into the methods of using trigger warnings.
5	Reflection	Hand out the Personal Reflection (Appendix B). Give participants a few minutes to individually consider whether trigger warnings are appropriate in their home classrooms and, if so, the methods by which they could be applied.	Allow time to personally reflect on how they might use trigger warnings in their future teaching endeavours.
5	Summary and Questions	Provide a quick summary of the key information and give participants the opportunity to ask any final questions. Remind participants to complete the feedback form that will be emailed following the workshop. See Presentation Strategies for suggested feedback questions.	Bring the workshop to a clear conclusion and provide participants with the opportunity to ask any remaining questions.
Total Time: 90 minutes			

PRESENTATION STRATEGIES
To conduct this workshop, you will need a room with enough seating for 20 students. The desks must be able to move to be set up in groups of four (see Figure 1). You will also require access to a projector, post-it notes, and a whiteboard (or similar) to record information discussed as a group.
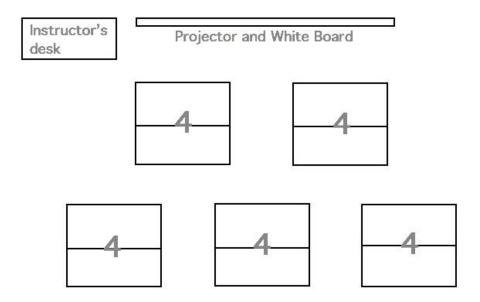

Figure 1. Room Setup

Hook: Post It Parade
The following questions are intended to engage (hook) workshop participants:
1) How many of you are familiar with trigger warnings or have used them in your classroom?
2) What comes to mind when you hear the word trigger warning? (Example responses could include: "controversial", "trauma", "bad", "coddling", "this is not high school").
3) What are trigger warnings, and how are they typically used? (Example responses could include: trigger warnings "alert students to difficult topics", "mean avoiding controversial subjects", "prepare students to view or discuss difficult material).

Benefits/Drawbacks Discussion
The following questions will help lead the group discussion on the benefits and drawbacks specific to the psychology classroom. These questions can guide the discussion of methods following the pros and cons debate in the general university classroom:
1) Based on the pros and cons of trigger warnings in the general university classroom, can you think of any appropriate methods of warning students about potentially upsetting material (e.g., course syllabus)?
2) Has anyone applied these methods in a classroom before? If so, were they useful? How did the students react?

The following are example responses regarding the benefits and drawbacks of implementing trigger warnings in the university classroom. Benefits include (but are not limited to) the ability to: (1) alert students to harmful or disturbing topics, (2) give students time to leave the classroom if they feel uncomfortable, (3) avoid offending students, (4) create a safe and comfortable classroom environment, (5) avoid unnecessary classroom problems, (5) allow students to prepare themselves to discuss

uncomfortable topics, (6) manage student reactions by providing warnings rather than catching students off guard, and (7) sensitize students to the notion that their classmates may find a topic difficult and to treat said topic with respect.

Drawbacks include (but are not limited to) (1) coddling students (e.g., avoidance is a bad way of dealing with trauma), (2) ignoring controversial topics, (3) hindering the ability to critically think, (4) not preparing students for the real world as they never leave their comfort zone, (5) giving a sense of false security if negative topics are never discussed, (6) making it difficult to take an informed stance, as students never hearing two sides to a controversial topic, (7) reinforcing fear by associating warnings with difficult topics, and (8) negating intellectual growth and emotional development.

Impartial Facilitator
Facilitators of this workshop should try and be as impartial as possible, emphasizing that there is no clear answer on the appropriateness of using trigger warnings. In other words, be open to listening to responses in favour of (and against) trigger warnings to create an environment in the workshop where participants feel they can openly discuss the debate. It is important that participants are able to take both sides of the debate into consideration and make an informed decision based on their own teaching practices and what makes them comfortable in their home classrooms.

Survey to Improve Future Workshops
Facilitators should consider creating and e-mailing a feedback survey after the end of the workshop. Remind participants to complete the follow up survey to ensure any necessary changes or improvements can be made for future workshops. Example questions are provided here. Did this workshop increase your knowledge of trigger warnings? What did you enjoy about this workshop? What do you think could be changed for future workshops? Did you feel the instructor created a comfortable group environment? What were the strengths and weaknesses of the workshop facilitator? Would you recommend this workshop to a friend or colleague?

APPENDIX A
Pros and Cons Matrix

Use the following matrix to record the pros and cons of trigger warnings in the general university context presented by the instructor, and the pros and cons of trigger warnings discussed in your buzz groups.

	Pros	Cons
General University Classroom (*Lecture notes*)		

	Benefits	Drawbacks
Psychology Classroom (**Buzz** *Group Discussion*)		

APPENDIX B
Personal Reflection

Please use the following questions to guide your personal reflection on the information discussed during this workshop.

1. Based on the information discussed, do you feel trigger warnings are appropriate for your psychology classroom? Why or why not?

2. Under circumstances where you feel trigger warnings may be appropriate, what methods could you use in your classroom to warn students of potentially upsetting information? Why would these methods benefit student learning? Why might these methods hinder student learning?