SALC Guidelines on Trigger Warnings/Content Notifications

What are Trigger Warnings/Content Notifications?

Inevitably, some of the topics that we cover in School of Arts, Languages and Cultures may be difficult, disturbing or potentially distressing. It has become common practice, both within academia and wider culture, to provide "trigger warnings" prior to covering such content and we recognise that colleagues in SALC may want to adopt this practice. There is, of course, no one size fits all approach to trigger warnings **and what we provide here is not prescriptive but is a set of guidelines only.**

Trigger warnings can be written or verbal and are usually delivered at the start of a course, or the start of a lecture or seminar, or both. Such warnings are not designed to censor or shut down debate, but rather they enable students to approach difficult subjects on their own terms and in doing so this can prompt a greater depth of respectful discussion.

The usefulness of the term "trigger warning" has received some scrutiny as we can never know what may be triggering for another person. As a result some approaches have advocated using the term "content notification" or "content note", although students may be more familiar with the term "trigger warning". Whatever you decide to call them, this short guide provides an overview about why they are value and some examples of how they might be used.

Why are they important?

Content notifications are important for ensuring that students can be prepared in advance for encountering distressing content. Including trigger warnings means that students do not have to unexpectedly confront difficult past events or disclose sensitive information to their lecturer if they do not want to. Trigger warnings do not aim to steer students away from discussing 'difficult' or controversial topics, merely to prepare students and to invite reflections on how those conversations are handled. As a result, trigger warnings are beneficial to all - by removing the element of surprise, they can help facilitate respectful discussion around difficult issues because students can prepare for these as they need. Further, they prompt everyone in a learning context to consciously consider the potential diversity of experiences within that context.

They can also play a role in indicating to students that racial slurs or discriminatory talk/behaviour in the classroom will be challenged. This allows students to know, even before entering a classroom, that a lecturer will challenge discriminatory behaviour, and thus that even if it does arise they know they will have an ally in a position of power.

Subjects that might require a trigger warning/content notification include (but are not limited to) accounts of genocide, violence (including sexual or racist violence), murder, sexual assault, transphobic, racist or homophobic slurs, miscarriage or infant death. You may also want to consider this for images relating to any of those subjects, including images of human remains.

How do I use them?

Trigger warnings/content notifications can be provided in writing, for example in course handbooks, in seminar handouts and in Blackboard. They can also be delivered verbally, at the start of a lecture or seminar. However, making an announcement at the start of a session then launching straight into the session offers no time for students to prepare themselves. Potentially such flags could be sent

out in an email well in advance of the first seminar of the course, as well as embedded within course materials. There might be a verbal warning at the start of a course in the first seminar (so long as the first seminar doesn't then launch straight into such themes).

Here are some examples of how they are used in SALC:

- ***Written warning at the beginning of asynchronous lectures – an example from R&T***

Trigger warning: some of the content for this topic discusses sexual violence, which some may find distressing. If you are concerned about engaging with this content, please email me.

- ***Written warning in Blackboard – an example from R&T***

In the majority of the folders on this site you may come across articles containing content that could be potentially distressing, because of the nature of the unit, and the material we cover. If there is anything that concerns you in the course outline, or any topics that you are unable to read or research during the unit, please do not hesitate to let contact me. There will be no need for you to disclose why you do not want to engage in particular topics, we will simply discuss other ways that I can support your learning on this unit.

- ***Written warning at the start of an asynchronous lecture (text used in Blackboard and in the video description in YouTube/Video Portal) - an example from Archaeology***

Trigger warning - one slide, between 17.36 and 19.37 minutes contains pictures of skeletal remains and between 20.26 and 22.26 minutes I discuss an example of infant mortality.

- ***Written warning in course handbook – an example from HCRI***

HCRI is committed to ensuring that our teaching environments (including all lectures, tutorials and seminars) are safe spaces for discussing difficult and controversial topics.

Safe spaces are not about limiting critical engagement with ideas, but about ensuring that students and staff from marginalized groups know that their existence will be respected in our classrooms. It is not designed to restrict people from sharing their views, but about ensuring that students know that the expression of openly discriminatory views will be challenged.

If you are concerned about how particular topics are being discussed during a teaching session, or how certain people are expressing them, you can approach your lecturer in the first instance, confidentially, either at the time or after. If you feel that you cannot approach your lecturer, or that your lecturer has not taken your concerns seriously, you can contact the course convener or your academic advisor, then the programme director.

Furthermore, on occasion, we will be engaging with potentially distressing issues and images. This is in the nature of our topics of research and teaching. These are not shown or discussed for gratuitous effect but in order to enhance understanding in the belief and desire that knowledge can help us work towards creating a world without violence and oppression. We will flag up potentially distressing issues and images before and during our teaching so that students can either opt out or prepare themselves. You can, if you would like to, absent yourself from a specific topic, lecture or teaching session because of potential distress over its content. You can approach your lecturer in the first instance, either in person or on email to discuss this. All communications between you and your lecturer are confidential.

These structures and mechanisms are designed to ensure that all students feel supported during their learning experience. HCRI is committed to building a collegial and safe environment for teaching and research.

- ***Verbal trigger warning at the start of a course – an example from History***

I tell students verbally at the start of the course that we are covering some extremely difficult themes, and request that students scan through the course handbook and if anything is on the agenda they are likely to find difficult, they can let me know they wish not to attend that class and we can always touch base about it in an office hour (though they do NOT have to tell me why that topic is 'triggering'). I also provide 'ground rules' for use of language in the classroom- so People of Colour/BAME/Black are fine (obviously there are issues with BAME, but broadly its better than some other terminology), and there is no need to vocalise racial slurs even if we will encounter them in some texts- they can be referred to obliquely, such as saying 'the n-word' rather than saying the actual word.

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Note: This document was evolved in conversation with the SALC EDI Committee and colleagues in Teaching and Learning as well as students