

Untangling the Trigger-Warning Debate

Curating a Complete Toolkit for Compassionate Praxis in the Classroom

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Abstract

Trigger warnings in the classroom have caused great debate and faced even greater opposition. Overall, criticisms of trigger warnings are rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept and an assumption students are making bad-faith attempts to avoid discomfort. At the same time, supporters of trigger warnings frequently seek to apply their uses too broadly. Ultimately, educators can solve both of these issues with the wider concept of compassionate praxis, an umbrella term denoting responding to students with an ethic of care. The aim of this case study is twofold: first to untangle the debate surrounding trigger warnings by debunking common misconceptions, second to offer an overview of additional tools educators can use for compassionate praxis. Toward this end, we will use observational data from a sexual violence prevention unit as a case study to demonstrate compassionate praxis does not deter and actually enhances difficult discussions in the classroom.

Introduction

I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail.

—Abraham Maslow, *The Psychology of Science*

Recently, educational stakeholders have hotly debated the question of whether educators should be required to provide trigger warnings in the classroom. Commonly associated with subjects like eating disorders or

sexual violence, trigger warnings are brief warnings to alert the audience the material they are about to consume contains content which might cause them to experience a traumatic reaction. Depending on who you ask, trigger warnings are a threat to academic freedom (AAUP, 2014), a learning accommodation (Taylor, 2017), or a sign *kids these days* are far too coddled (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015).

This debate was spurred on in part because trigger warnings moved from a tool used mostly online to proposed institutional policy, therefore the discussion also took a turn from addressing individual traumas to righting societal inequities (University of Santa Barbara Associated Student Senate, 2014). When trigger warnings moved from online to the classroom, the definition expanded to include not only subjects like interpersonal violence, but also racism, colonialism, and classism. In this move, students began to apply trigger warnings much like Maslow's Hammer: no longer simply a tool to help people living with trauma, trigger warnings were now the silver bullet to address all social ills in the classroom.

The negative response to trigger warnings suggests a wider problem: a lack of compassion for students who may be struggling with trauma and the assumption students are acting in bad faith to avoid challenging subjects. This case study uses the idea of *compassionate praxis* as an umbrella term for rooting the educational approach in compassion. Trigger warnings are a starting point for this conversation, but they are not the only tool available. This case study will demonstrate that responding to students with compassion--through offering trigger warnings as well as using other tools—does not inhibit classroom discussion and in fact creates an atmosphere of trust to increase student openness. To this end, we will first untangle the conversation surrounding trigger warnings to demonstrate (a) what trigger warnings are, and (b) how critics of trigger warnings misunderstand their purposes. We will then turn to a discussion of a high school sexual violence prevention unit to demonstrate compassionate praxis in action. While discourse about trigger warnings have centered on the college classroom, we believe our high school prevention unit offers valuable lessons to resolve this debate. The case study ends with concrete recommendations for educators to apply compassionate praxis to sensitive materials in the classroom.

Authors' Position on Trigger Warnings

In the interest of transparency, we believe trigger warnings are a helpful tool for survivors of trauma. However, we also believe their function should not be extended to addressing wider social inequities. Other tools must be used to ensure teaching social issues does not recre-

ate oppressive power dynamics. Understanding the purpose of trigger warnings is crucial to their proper use, which must not overstate their role as a sort of “silver bullet” to ease all challenges of teaching difficult subject matters.

The Case Against Trigger Warnings

Arguments against trigger warnings can be divided into two broad camps: disagreements with the underlying philosophy of trigger warnings and disagreements with some aspect of the practice of trigger warnings. The former tends to generate conversations about how students need to grow a thicker skin, while the latter agrees with the notion of compassion for people living with trauma, but believes a different set of practices are more beneficial. We believe people in both camps show a fundamental misunderstanding of how trigger warnings operate, as Hanlon (2015) suggests.

One common critique of trigger warnings is the warnings coddle students. Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) argue the warnings insulate students from opinions challenging their viewpoints and therefore “coddle” them. Citing cognitive behavioral therapy, they argue trigger warnings promote avoidance rather than proper treatment, which is controlled exposure to triggering material. Manne (2015) challenges this analogy, stating failure to use trigger warnings is more like “occasionally throwing a spider at an arachnophobe” (n.p., para. 12) than providing controlled exposure by a trained therapist. The coddling argument demonstrates a misunderstanding of the purpose of trigger warnings, which is to allow students who have experienced trauma a warning in advance of difficult material. They also conflate students as a whole with students who live with Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD), discomfort with trauma, microaggressions with graphic violence, and therefore assume all requests for trigger warnings are the same. Underlying their argument (and others, see Chait, 2015; Essig, 2014; Jarvie, 2014; Schlosser, 2015) is the idea students requesting trigger warnings are operating in bad faith and to trying avoid discomfort.

In addition to the critique of trigger warnings as coddling, other critics claim trigger warnings pose a threat to academic freedom. In 2014, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) released a statement in opposition to trigger warnings in the classroom. Citing a previous statement by the American Library Association deeming trigger warnings to be a “labeling or rating system,” the AAUP argued against institutional policies requiring trigger warnings (AAUP, 2014). The AAUP statement then went further, contending even voluntary

trigger warnings posed a threat to academic freedom, asserting faculty should confront difficult topics rather than avoiding them, and writing “the classroom is not the appropriate venue to treat PTSD” (AAUP, 2014, n.p.). Two years later, in a letter to incoming first-year students, University of Chicago Dean of Students, John Ellison, insisted the university would not provide students with trigger warnings (Schaper, 2016). Both statements conceptualize trigger warnings as inherently avoidant and assume providing a warning ends a conversation, rather than begins one while letting students know what to expect.

Along similar lines, the AAUP misunderstands the purpose of trigger warnings when they suggest the warnings are a means to “treat PTSD” rather than to help students with PTSD cope with the risk of reliving trauma. McNally (2016) also suggests anyone who needs a trigger warning needs to seek treatment for PTSD. We do not disagree with this assessment, but it is also unrealistic to expect students with PTSD put their lives completely on hold while they seek treatment, and providing trigger warnings can help in the interim.

One final argument against trigger warnings worth examination is the claim they unfairly pathologize women, presenting trauma as a gendered construct. Doll (2017) argues trigger warnings are frequently tied to sexual violence, which is commonly associated with women, resulting in an image of women as frail. At the same time, Doll’s (2017) argument centers around the idea of trigger warnings as an accommodation for women rather than an accommodation for survivors of trauma.

The Case for Trigger Warnings

Supporters of trigger warnings are not unified in their application of the warnings. Trigger warnings have been framed as a learning accommodation (Taylor, 2017), an institutional policy (McFarland, 2017), and one part of a multifaceted strategy (Storla, 2017). Each of these arguments supports the general idea of trigger warnings but provides a different framework for how they should be approached. The logical conclusion to this disagreement is the question of where the responsibility for accommodation lies.

The accommodation argument centers around the idea of PTSD as a disability covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Taylor (2017) argues PTSD is a disability, therefore, students with PTSD are legally entitled to accommodations including trigger warnings. Without trigger warnings, students living with trauma would not have equal access to the classroom as their peers. As an individual accommodation, students with trauma would work with accommodation providers to

inform their professors of their needs. This means students would have institutional support in facilitating conversations about their academic needs. However, it also means students would need to have a formal diagnosis of PTSD in order to seek these accommodations and, even with a diagnosis, students may have to disclose information about their trauma with their professors.

Other supporters of trigger warnings argue institutions should make policies requiring faculty to provide them. McFarland (2017) documents a case in which a professor responded poorly to a request for a trigger warning, and used this opportunity to argue institutional policies should require faculty to provide trigger warnings for common topics associated with PTSD. While McFarland's story demonstrates the ways in which faculty assumption of bad faith makes it difficult for students to request trigger warnings, it also casts student/professor conflict as traumatic, potentially feeding critics' belief of trigger warnings as a method for avoiding disagreement.

Cares, Franklin, Fisher, and Bostaph (2018) conducted an empirical study of student attitudes toward trigger warnings both in general and in the specific context of their victimology classroom. They found slight to moderate support of trigger warnings among students, with additional findings to suggest trigger warnings did not negatively affect student engagement. Qualitative data in the study suggested students reflected on the use of trigger warnings as a resource for "people who needed them" and could acknowledge others might find them useful even if they were not personally needed.

Finally, some scholars take an approach extending beyond trigger warnings. Storla (2017) provides an overview of how, despite using trigger warnings in the class, conversations were still uncomfortable. She then discusses the norms her class co-created to further discussion. Kafer (2016) positions trigger warnings as a matter of access, which she differentiates from accessibility as the latter is frequently enacted within the medical model framework. She questions the notion of the existence of fully safe spaces and draws on her experience in the classroom to note while her disability studies classes are a site of student disclosure, they are also a site of students demonstrating trauma-related difficulties. The framework of trigger warnings, she contends, is limiting because it positions trauma as temporary rather than ongoing. At the same time, she notes critics of trigger warnings often use ableist rhetoric to suggest students with trauma do not belong in the classroom.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Pedagogies

This case study uses critical pedagogies and ethics of care as a theoretical framework. *Critical pedagogies* are a school of thought which uses critical education to work against oppression within society (Freire, 1970). In the context of this study, critical pedagogies represent the possibility to approach difficult issues with a conscious effort to actively work against oppressive frameworks within society. Specifically, many of the requests for trigger warnings as a matter of institutional policy aim to address oppressive structures such as racism, sexism, colonialism, classism, and so forth (University of Santa Barbara Associated Student Senate, 2014). We take the position these requests are borne of the desire for the classroom to not recreate oppressive structures.

Critical pedagogies allow students and educators the ability to approach these subjects without replicating the existing power structures. Within critical pedagogy, the line between student and teacher is treated as artificial and often collapsed. In practice, this means students are given the opportunity to discuss the issue while practicing critical awareness of the ways in which power shapes society. Within the context of this study, students critically examined the ways in which sexual violence is normalized by society, and used this awareness when discussing sexual violence so as to not recreate cycles of victim-blaming within discussion.

Ethics of Care

Ethics of Care is an ethical school of thought developed by Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (2013), among others. Ethics of Care uses the idea of care as a central framework for ethical decisions. In the context of this study, care and compassion are a central feature when approaching such a difficult subject in the classroom. Through care and compassionate reflection, we balanced two important but competing concerns: the need to provide students with a critical education about sexual violence to keep them safe, and the desire not to (re)traumatize students as we discussed a sensitive issue. This care-guided approach within the classroom kept us responsive to students throughout the unit.

Sexual Violence Prevention Case Study

The *Mockingbirds* unit was a six-week sexual violence prevention program in two 11th grade AP English classes with a total of 36 students at a high school in a small city in Northwestern Ohio. Students

in the program were predominantly white and predominantly female ($n=27$) and were all 16 or 17 years old. The program, which took place in February and March of 2018, involved students reading the young adult novel, *The Mockingbirds*, while receiving direct instruction about sexual violence and completing photography, art, and action plan assignments. The novel *The Mockingbirds* is the story of a young woman who was sexually assaulted at her boarding school and sought justice through a student group called the *Mockingbirds*. The program aligned English learning objectives with learning objectives about sexual violence.

The program was overseen by the University of Cincinnati's Institutional Review Board (IRB), which required a full protocol, with signed consent from one parent and signed assent from youth in the program. The protocol included a safety monitoring plan that included outlining how students would report distress. Per the IRB protocol, students were introduced to support resources in their school, community, and online before the unit began. Students were instructed that if they experienced distress, they were to report it to the research team so that the research team can connect them with resources and an alternative assignment for the remainder of the unit.

This case study relies upon observational data from the program itself, as well as documents generated as part of the program, most notably students' shared values reflections. Observational data were collected each day in class during the program through the research team's extensive notes taken over the contents and tone of classroom discussions during the unit and follow-up reflections completed after each class session, which further examines the content as well as the tone of discussion, including student behavior in the classroom. This case study uses the experience of conducting the unit to illustrate approaching difficult subjects in the classroom, including strategies to be used in addition to trigger warnings. Additional data are drawn from interviews with 13 students before and after the program ($n=26$ interviews, two per student), and students' final action plan assignments. As we discuss students' responses to the unit, at times we avoid specific details that would identify students. Additionally, students are identified by pseudonyms.

In the week before the unit began, we held a pre-briefing. We began the pre-briefing by offering a verbal trigger warning: we informed students they were going to be reading a book featuring sexual violence, including several flashbacks involving sexual violence. We also told students we would be discussing the book in class, along with informational units about sexual violence. Students were informed of their right to request alternative texts and assignments at any time during the unit and that they would not be penalized for doing so.

After providing a warning with the information about the book, we shifted our focus to resources available for anyone struggling with the subject matter. A guidance counselor and a representative of the local family resource center both spoke about the services they offered and how to access them. Additionally, students were provided with a resource sheet highlighting school, local, and online resources. Students were then offered a brief explanation of the resources on the sheet to make sure they had some familiarity with them.

The conversation then turned to classroom norms, needs and values, allowing students to take the lead in the discussion about what types of classroom norms they would like to see enacted in the unit. We defined norms as certain behaviors to be either encouraged or discouraged, needs as anything necessary to students as they go through the unit, and values as specific qualities to be promoted throughout the unit. Table 1 shows a composite of values from the two classes. This activity was a modified version of Structured Ethical Reflection (Brydon-Miller, 2012; Brydon-Miller et al, 2015; Stevens et al, 2016). Students selected shared values to be used as row headers for the grid. Students then identified concrete actions they could take in class, in small group discussions, and in their writing to demonstrate each value.

Across two classes, students identified nine values they believed should guide the unit. They also emphasized needs suggesting mutual empathy and a desire to take the unit seriously. The students were given the list from Stevens et al. (2016) as an example of potential values they might select. In each class, students identified a range of values, which ultimately can be broadly conceptualized as values of caring and values of open discussion. The caring values—empathy, compassion, conscientiousness—promoted the idea of gentle behavior toward survivors. Student discussion was mindful of potential survivors in the class. Open discussion values—openness, self-awareness, critical thinking, and open-mindedness—promoted free and respectful discourse and safety to disagree. Two additional values, humility and respect, fit into both values of care and values of open discussion.

In both classes, students were engaged in class activities. In the smaller of the two classes ($n=13$), every student played an active role in the discussions. In the larger class ($n=23$) most students engaged in discussion, with quieter students using their journals and personal interviews as an opportunity to share their thoughts on the unit. Students never left the discussion, despite a few moments of brief discomfort. The norms activity created a climate in which students felt safe discussing sexual violence, as evidenced by both vigorous discussion as well as student feedback in post-unit interviews. Even when students

Table 1
Composite of Classroom Values Reflection from Both Classes

	<i>Class discussion</i>	<i>Small group / interpersonal</i>	<i>Writing</i>
Openness	Willing to hear other people out	Willing to share; Active listening	Don't be afraid to express your ideas
Conscientiousness	Know that your words will affect people, think about wording	Know that your words will affect people, think about wording	Understand that your perspective is different from others, write to reflect multiple perspectives
Humility	Realizing that our lives may be sheltered, recognizing that your ideas may contradict others, be humble to listen; Asking questions, recognizing that you don't have all the answers; Different backgrounds have different perspectives (gender, age, etc.)	Realizing that our lives may be sheltered recognizing that your ideas may contradict others, be humble to listen; Asking questions, recognizing that you don't have all the answers; Different backgrounds have different perspectives (gender, age, etc.)	
Empathy	Empathy for victims	Empathy for victims	
Self-awareness	Realize how conversations are affecting you and practicing self-care; Realize how your words could affect others	Realize how conversations are affecting you and practicing self-care; Realize how your words could affect others	
Critical thinking	Look at things with a fresh set eyes, take a step back and look at the big picture	Look at things with a fresh set eyes, take a step back and look at the big picture	
Compassion	Helping people feel supported	Helping people feel supported	Show you understand where people are coming from, no judgment
Open-Mindedness	Taking others views into consideration	Taking others views into consideration	Demonstrating that you understand more than one view on a topic
Respect	Respect other people's opinions, respect what others have been through	Respect other people's opinions, respect what others have been through	

Note: Redundancies reflect the overlap of values across two classes, in the students' own words. Duplicates were the result of students determining the same type of actions applied in multiple settings, some cells were left empty.

expressed disagreement, they did so in a respectful fashion. At no point in the discussion did students engage in victim-blaming.

Toward the end of the unit, a few students expressed feeling as though they were worn down by the subject matter. We decided the compassionate response was to give students a day for self-care. To do this, we gave students the next day in class to practice self-care as they saw fit: we began the class with a breathing exercise and then encouraged them to draw, rest, read, or talk quietly. This both allowed students a chance to rest as well as modeling how to practice self-care, which is beneficial for stress management. After taking a day for self-care, students showed renewed energy as we finished the unit. Allowing time for self-care demonstrated to students we cared about their emotional wellbeing. It also illustrated the importance of checking in with students on a regular basis, and making time to offer examples of self-care practices.

Apart from the fatigue expressed above, the unit was largely uneventful. Students demonstrated they understood the unit and the importance of the subject discussed. No students reported experiencing distress from discussing sexual violence and observation of the class found students engaged, attentive, and not showing any verbal or nonverbal signs of being troubled by the discussion. Through class activities, students demonstrated they had met both English and sexual violence-related learning objectives, suggesting trigger warning, ethics of care, and critical pedagogies do not detract from the learning environment.

At the end of the unit, we offered a debriefing to give students a sense of closure. We presented some positive news such as declining rates of sexual violence (Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network, 2019) and increasing consequences for abusers in the wake of #MeToo, the sexual violence awareness movement which gained national attention in October of 2017. The debrief also gave students an opportunity to ask questions or continue discussions from previous classes, and was a crucial step to avoid moving onto the next unit without addressing the emotional intensity of the unit. Overall, no students reported feeling traumatized by the process of the unit, and all the students' final action plans included an educational component, suggesting they wanted all students in the school to experience the unit.

Discussion

Balancing Care with Difficult Conversations

The program described above exemplifies the ways critics of trigger warnings frequently mischaracterize the warnings as avoidance of critical conversations. In this program, we did not shy away from a difficult

conversation, but instead balanced an ethic of care with addressing the problem extensively over six weeks. However, resolving the tension between compassion for survivors and difficult subjects is not achieved through trigger warnings alone.

The outcome of the unit suggests providing a warning does not deter difficult discussions, but rather it gives students comfort and makes the conversations possible. When educators suggest providing a trigger warning would make certain discussions impossible (AAUP, 2014), they show a fundamental misunderstanding of their purpose. Additionally, after receiving the warning, students were given the opportunity to opt out of the unit. Yet only one student chose to use this accommodation, and they remained engaged in the classroom activities, suggesting policies allowing students multiple options will not result in widespread disengagement due to laziness or avoidance, as critics of trigger warnings have suggested (AAUP, 2014). Indeed, even the policy allowing students to step out of discussion was never invoked throughout the unit.

Interestingly, the norms students identified balanced care with open discussion. Students were able to identify values related to care for survivors, as well as values related to free thought and discussion. Students did not see these values as intrinsically contradictory and were able to integrate them into the norms of the unit. The values students have chosen present an interesting perspective on the coexistence of care and openness. Critics of trigger warnings should learn from this example to consider how demonstrating compassion for survivors need not restrict the free exchange of ideas (or, perhaps more accurately: their commitment to the free exchange of ideas need not preclude them from responding to students with compassion).

Student Reflection on Trigger Warnings

In our discussion, we did not use the terminology of trigger warnings, even though we offered a warning. Still, one of the students, pseudonymously known as Beau, commented in her interview on the stigma the term has begun to carry. She discusses how students at her school joke about trauma:

They pretend to be the victim, they say something. Um... (pause) they say like whatever happened to them and then... (pause) they just like say it like, it's usually guys, so they say it in like a really girly voice... and then they like, and they probably end it like "*I'm so triggered about this because...*" "And they'll say whatever happened to them, and it's just taking away like the... feeling of safety for saying... (pause) for like even saying that happened, and even like saying, that like, like random events can like trigger your emotions to feel that way, so like, it's hard

to even like, cause I hear in jokes so many times, it's hard to hear the word "triggered" without thinking immediately of a joke rather than like someone's emotions or psyche breaking over something

In the passage, Beau notes the way trauma has been made into a joke, reflecting a fundamental misunderstanding of how trauma works. When people make jokes about being triggered, they are casting trauma as a matter of sensitivity, and by extension, a matter of choice. They are implying being traumatized is a laughing matter and people who experience trauma have control over their reaction to traumatic stimuli. The stigma these jokes carry makes it difficult to discuss for fear of not being taken seriously. Beau notes the jokes make listeners who have experienced trauma less likely to talk about their experience. Indeed, even writing this case study, we are aware of the stigma the expression "triggered" carries and work to avoid using it often.

Critical Pedagogies in Practice

Through allowing students to explicitly state the values enacted in classroom discussions, we demonstrated trust for students to be a part of the solution of sexual violence. Trust gives students an opportunity to think critically about existing power structures and how to avoid replicating them in the classroom. In practical terms, this means avoiding behaviors such as victim-blaming within a discussion of sexual violence. Paired with a curriculum discussing the ways sexual violence is normalized within society, students are prompted to think about how to avoid recreating those power structures while discussing sexual violence. Student-established values such as respect, empathy, and seriousness allowed a discussion to occur.

Every student interviewed contrasted our discussion of sexual violence with the abstinence-only framework of their high school and middle school health classes, and the subject arose at least twice in each class during in-class discussion. Students acknowledged the abstinence speakers wanted to protect students from sexual violence. However, students argued speakers' discussions of sexual violence, and sexuality in general, contributed to the ways in which sexual violence was normalized by implying sexually active women invited assaults. Students were also able to tie the normalization of sexual violence to institutional dress codes, which reinforced double standards for what is expected of men and women.

While the program was predicated on the idea students needed to learn about sexual violence, the discussion and participatory components of the program show a trust for students' knowledge and experience.

The action plan portion of the unit also demonstrated students play an active role in finding solutions to rape culture, and they offer a perspective we, as educators and researchers, do not have. Thus, we must work together toward a solution.

Many discussions of trigger warnings suggest those requesting them want something more than a warning for trauma: students want to make sure discussions of difficult issues do not replicate existing power structures which reinforce oppression. One need not look far to find examples of well-meaning discussions of racism or sexism leading to racist or sexist members of the class effectively being given a microphone at the expense of students who experience racism and sexism on a daily basis. In asking for trigger warnings, students are asking for trauma to be taken into account, but they are also trying to avoid recreating the conditions they believe necessitate warnings. Trigger warnings can provide students who live with trauma information to approach difficult conversations which may unwittingly further trauma. They cannot, however, prevent the sort of replication of oppressive structures students are trying to avoid. It is possible for an educator to provide a warning and still allow members of the class to behave in racist, sexist ways, undercutting the value of the discussion. Critical pedagogies allow students a central role in creating a classroom space to avoid these pitfalls. Our reflection activity encapsulates both using a warning for survivors of trauma while also allowing students to avoid the trap of replicating oppressive behaviors. The next section will outline recommendations for educators who want to use these practices.

Recommendations for Educators

While policies requiring trigger warnings can be difficult due to the complex nature of trauma, educators should be offered an overview of what they are and how they are used and encouraged to provide warnings if they are discussing sensitive subjects, particularly in the event of graphic or unexpected depictions of violence. Educators should be trusted to know their classes, and student requests for trigger warnings should be treated as good faith attempts to engage in an educational dialogue and addressed with compassion. It may not always be possible to offer warnings to the degree students request, but educators should not be antagonistic to these requests or assume students are attempting to avoid work or discomfort.

When educators provide warnings about difficult subjects, they should explain the degree to which the subject is discussed, the duration of the discussion, and other considerations, so students are informed about the

nature of the assignment. A student survivor of sexual assault may feel comfortable reading an essay about campus sexual assault policies but not a graphic depiction of sexual violence. Alternatively, perhaps they might be able to read a novel featuring sexual assault in which the author has signaled the assault scene in advance but not one in which it is a surprise. In these cases, a general warning stating, “you are going to read something about sexual assault” is unhelpful because it does not allow students the necessary background to make an informed decision.

In secondary school settings, many districts have a policy which allows students or parents to request an alternative text, which should make clear the context of such extended discussions as well. Educators should inform students of alternatives with reassurance there will be no penalty for requesting them. In our unit, we offered the option of having an alternative grader for subjective assignments so students would not have to worry about punishment for choosing an alternative text.

While it may seem obvious educators need to provide support resources, offering a mixture of in-school, local, and online resources gives students a choice of which resources in the event one set of resources is inaccessible for any reason. Additionally, it is not enough to simply offer a resource sheet. Familiarizing students with resources, and when possible, offering an introduction to resource people, also furthers the likelihood students will feel comfortable accessing resources. Additional copies of the resource sheet should be available electronically, so students can access resources at any time, even if they lose the physical copy of the sheet. It is also possible students who actively need assistance might not be safe having a physical copy of a resource sheet, and therefore benefit from an electronic copy.

Table 2 offers an overview of these recommendations with examples from our unit to illustrate how, in concrete terms, these recommendations were put into practice. Obviously, this approach is not one-size-fits-all and educators might need to adapt to their specific context. The appendix offers a template for the value reflection activity.

Because this case study demonstrated compassionate praxis in the context of discussing difficult issues in the classroom, the structures of these tools have been outlined in a regimented fashion. Compassionate praxis has applications when discussing difficult issues, but we would also encourage educators to consider compassionate praxis even if they are not directly discussing challenging topics. For example, as we write this case study, sexual violence has been in the news quite frequently. Many survivors of sexual violence, and women in general, are struggling in this moment, and educators have a responsibility to express gentleness and compassion, even if this does not directly relate to classroom

content. Ultimately, compassionate praxis provides a toolkit educators may use to navigate difficult times.

One final consideration worth mentioning is personnel who serve as gatekeepers to school resource people need to be informed of student needs as well. Students frequently discussed how they trusted the resources present in the school, such as guidance counselors, but felt if they tried to access these resources they would be “yelled at” by the people who could grant or deny them access, such as receptionists. While secretarial staff in a high school do have a challenging job, if they are going to stand between students and resources, they should learn to recognize signs of distress and be encouraged to be flexible and kind toward students in general, so as to avoid turning away students who have been victimized.

Table 2
Recommendations for Discussing Difficult Subjects in the Classroom

Recommendation	Example
1. Provide a specific warning about what students will encounter	Provided students with an overview of the subject matter, length of unit, and the level of intensity of the book
2. Make alternatives available, clearly expressed, and stigma-free	Clearly articulated alternatives were available at any time and students would not be penalized for choosing an alternative (and could request an alternative grader for subjectively graded assignments)
3. Provide resources and make sure they are clearly outlined/provided a physical	Brought resource people into the classroom, and electronic resource sheet so students could always access, verbally outlined resources
4. Demonstrate your commitment to norms of empathy	Established we would allow students to leave the room if needed without asking questions
5. Collectively establish norms, needs, and values	Collective activity to establish classroom norms and values with students driving the conversation
6. Check in and promote self-care	Checked in with students, offered a class for self-care
7. Debrief at the end of the unit	Ended unit with a debrief to give students an opportunity for closure
8. Be flexible	Flexible deadlines for assignments, allowed students to modify assignments as needed

Limitations

While this case study illustrates strategies for tackling difficult subjects in the classroom, there are some limitations to the scope of inference. First, the unit focused on sexual violence, therefore, we cannot speak to the effectiveness of this approach with other issues. We do believe a care-centered approach would be beneficial with any difficult issue. Furthermore, sexual violence is one of the least controversial subjects associated with trigger warnings. In practice, this means the discussion was already primed to be taken seriously in ways other subjects might not. Additionally, this approach was designed because we planned an extended unit discussing sexual violence. The time taken in this approach was significant, but given the prolonged nature of this unit, it was worth the time investment. This approach may not work in educational settings in which the topic only appears briefly or arises in discussion. In those instances, taking an entire class period to warn students is often not possible. Beginning the year with a discussion of needs, norms, and values is beneficial regardless of whether difficult discussions arise, but cannot entirely mitigate potential harm of triggers if they come up.

Finally, this study is limited to two classes of advanced students. As such, students may have taken the unit more seriously than other groups of students. A larger, more systematic study of trigger warning use is worth further exploration. Still, *The Mockingbirds* unit offers a case study allowing for some observations on the subject, especially given the number of critiques of trigger warnings based upon conjecture.

Conclusion

Trigger warnings are a useful tool from a framework of care, but they should not be the only tool in the critical educator's toolbox. Opponents of trigger warnings misunderstand their purpose, while their supporters run the risk of treating them as a Swiss Army Knife and using them for far more than their intended purpose. Instead, we recommend educators pair trigger warnings with other tools: classroom values and norms to promote student agency and thoughtfulness, and critical pedagogies to ensure oppressive norms are not recreated. With a full toolbox, educators can work with students toward a future in which difficult issues are tackled through education.

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