

Commentary



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All signal, no virtue: the spread of an ineffective and harmful pedagogical tool

Renaud-Philippe Garner

We are good, perhaps a little too good, but we are also a little stupid; and it is this mixture of goodness and stupidity which lies at the root of our troubles.

– Karl Popper

Trigger warnings don't work. In fact, they are counterproductive and their rise and spread are indicative of important institutional failures. There is compelling evidence that they fail to do any measurable good. Worse, there is also evidence that they do some harm. The rapid spread and ubiquitous use of trigger warnings point to failures by pedagogues and the institutions where they work.

Trigger warnings fall under the broader category of content warnings. Unlike the rating system for films that warns viewers that upcoming content is addressed to mature audiences, or warnings that signal that the content is inappropriate for certain contexts, e.g. something is 'not safe for work', trigger warnings are

addressed to a population defined by their vulnerability. Specifically, they are addressed to those who have already suffered some form of distress or trauma. They are meant to signal that upcoming content could ‘trigger’ the vulnerable, or to warn them that the material might cause them to re-experience symptoms of trauma or recall past traumatic events. A common example would be, “Warning: the following work contains descriptions of sexual assault”. The assumption is that it is better for those who are vulnerable to be warned than not. One scholar has even [claimed](#) that failing to provide trigger warnings in advance of potentially (re-)traumatizing material was analogous to throwing a spider on an arachnophobe.

In this light, it is easy to see why we should use trigger warnings. Trauma and post-traumatic stress are threats to human wellbeing and, ergo, there seems to be a straightforward case for tools that can help us reduce harm. This case may be even stronger when those at risk of harm are those who are already vulnerable. However, if trigger warnings are to be convincingly defended, then we need a clear grasp of the arguments, rather than a vague intuition that ‘this helps’. How, exactly, do they reduce harm? And what hard evidence is there to support that assumption?

The arguments for trigger warnings are primarily instrumental. In other words, they defend the use of this pedagogical tool by appealing to the results produced. Like chemotherapy or bulletproof vests, trigger warnings should be valued to the extent that they produce desirable results by either promoting some good, reducing some harm, or doing both.

“*The defenders of trigger warnings make two instrumental arguments.*”

The defenders of trigger warnings make two instrumental arguments. First, that we should value trigger warnings because they reduce harm. More specifically, by warning students of an upcoming threat, trigger warnings can give them a heads-up to employ coping techniques, and consequently suffer [less](#). This is the *coping argument*. Second, that we should value trigger warnings because they do some additional good. Some advocates of trigger warnings believe that not only will harm be reduced, but an additional benefit is that this will, consequently,

improve learning. If students who are warned in advance and use their coping techniques, then they can “[fully engage](#)” in class. This is the *learning argument*.

While the heart of the case for trigger warnings is the claim that they produce some desirable outcome, we can also find, in its subtext, what looks like a non-instrumental argument. Some defenders suggest that trigger warnings are also essential to the [equal](#) treatment of students. To fail to use them would amount to a failure to respect the dignity of all students, a form of discrimination.

Of course, the instrumental arguments succeed or fail on a question of the facts; if trigger warnings do reliably help us achieve something desirable then they are a valuable tool. If they do not, then we have no reason to consider them to be a valuable pedagogical tool. Thus, leading any thinking person to ask whether we have any studies on the efficacy of trigger warnings.

As a matter of fact, a series of empirical studies of the efficacy of trigger warnings, varying somewhat in design, have emerged in the past few years. For brevity’s sake, we turn to the first [meta-analysis](#) of this research, published earlier this year in the journal *Clinical Psychological Science*. This meta-analysis sought to determine what effects trigger warnings had on four outcomes: response affect, avoidance, anticipatory affect, and comprehension. The first refers to the effect trigger warnings have on regulating negative emotions – do they help students cope as the coping argument claims? The second refers to the extent to which the use of trigger warnings lead students to avoid the material to avoid unpleasant feelings of distress. The third refers to whether trigger warnings themselves cause distress by announcing distressing material. The fourth refers to the effect that trigger warnings have on student learning.

The meta-analysis’ findings are unambiguous. They are also damning. In 11 of the 12 studies analysed, no evidence was found that trigger warnings help students cope with psychological distress, or that they promote better learning outcomes. In fact, the preponderance of evidence points to trigger warnings being harmful to students. While overall learning results do not improve, this appears to be because those who have never been traumatised score well after a trigger warning while those who have been traumatised score poorly after the same warning. In other words, trigger warnings not only do not help the worst off; they may even harm them further. There is even stronger evidence that trigger warning reliably raise the anticipatory anxiety of students who have been traumatised. By announcing that something threatening is on the horizon, the traumatised are made to worry about what awaits them.

It is worth noting that few advocates claim that trigger warnings should promote the complete avoidance of distressing material, but even if they had, they would have found that they fail to do so. Instead, we find a *forbidden fruit effect*: students are drawn unhelpfully to the distressing material.

It should now be clear that the instrumental arguments for trigger warnings are undermined by the fact that they fail to deliver the goods. Trigger warnings do not help students cope, nor do they help them learn. To the contrary, there is some evidence that they undermine the learning of the traumatised and even more evidence that they make them anxious about the material without any positive trade-off.

Finally, if we were to try to defend trigger warnings as a form of respect or non-discrimination, their inefficacy still poses a problem. How is it disrespectful to vulnerable students to refuse to use an ineffective tool that won't improve their learning? This would be like claiming that ineffective devices to aid mobility must be used to express respect for the disabled, even if they do no good for those with mobility issues.

One might be tempted to say that many teachers and professors had good intentions in incorporating trigger warnings into their lectures but were mistaken. However, education professionals who endorsed this ineffective and harmful tool did so uncritically. The sad reality is that trigger warnings began to spread long before the empirical evidence was out. In 2014, students in [California](#) insisted upon their use even though, at the time, there were no serious studies on their efficacy published. In the wake of such activism, in California and elsewhere, university-educated pedagogues and administrators flocked to endorse a tool that does no good and does real harm.

How did this happen? The explanation is based on both a failure of individual character and a failure of institutional design. Teachers and professors are not uneducated; they know how to find research papers and read them. They also know a little about what adequate evidence for a strong claim should look like. Either the advocates of trigger warnings genuinely believed that they worked, despite the lack of evidence, or they did not. If they were sincere, then they were naïve and failed to exercise the critical thinking they so often trumpet as a remedy to disinformation. But let us not be too harsh. Often enough, all of us must believe, in good faith, what others tell us. We trust mechanics and chemists, lawyers and nutritionists. Non-strategic conformism is something we all do; and something that any functioning community needs to survive. We

cannot continuously doubt and test each claim and bit of testimony offered to us by others – if we did this, we’d have no time for anything else.

However, it is unserious to believe that, amongst all these educated people, no one had any doubts about the usefulness of trigger warnings. Those who conformed despite seeing through the hype [conformed strategically](#); they said what others wanted to hear to avoid paying any social cost (i.e., being ostracized). This kind of conformism is particularly disappointing. Teachers and professors spend a great deal of time talking about thinking for oneself, about “speaking truth to power” and challenging every assumption. Yet, in the face of strong claims made without no empirical basis on a serious topic like adolescent mental health, we found a disquieting amount of conformism, both non-strategic and strategic.

But the failures of pedagogues to ask serious questions and apply the same standards of knowledge that they so readily used when discussing the pandemic or the use of vaccines, cannot solely be explained by their failures of due diligence or courage. They were not just going along naively with others or too scared to speak up.

“ *The final piece of the puzzle is the failure of institutional design.* ”

The final piece of the puzzle is the failure of institutional design. Schools, colleges and universities do not reward genuine independent thought nearly as much as they claim. While activities like scholarship or teaching have internal standards of excellence, the schools and universities that house these activities have [other goods](#) in their sights, including power, prestige and money. In other words, a good teacher is not necessarily a famous one and a famous one is not necessarily a good one. Books that sell are not necessarily those that make the greatest scholarly contribution. And good public relations and good research do not necessarily align very well. So teachers and professors face a hard choice within their respective institutions. Doing what they think is good or best as an educator or researcher can come into conflict what those who hire, promote and fire demand. It is hard to be principled when doing so might mean throwing away years of training and passion for one’s field of inquiry.

In addition to pressure from above, there is also a pressure to conform from below. Students and parents do not simply defer to the training and experience of teachers. Instead, teachers and professors are increasingly treated like mere service providers. The result is that students and parents do not judge pedagogues according to appropriate professional standards but based on whether they are happy or satisfied with the ‘service’ they received. If students and parents believe that trigger warnings are good, useful, or even morally required, then pedagogues will face pressure from below to conform even if they faced none from their colleagues or superiors. Recall that in 2014, in California, it was students who demanded trigger warnings. The world of [RateMyProfessors.com](https://www.ratemyprofessors.com) does not reliably produce informed and fair-minded criticisms.

The bad news is that the rapid spread of trigger warnings stems from a failure to exercise the kind of critical thinking that schools and universities purport to teach. The failure to speak out and question dubious arguments or the lack of supporting evidence is also explained by the fact that teachers and scholars tend to be risk-averse and that the institutions incentivise them to be conformist rather than courageous. The good news is that we know the arguments, we know the evidence, and the practical conclusion should be obvious: abolish trigger warnings. If student mental health is truly a priority, then it must be placed above the virtue signalling of educators. [MLI](#)

About the author



Renaud-Philippe Garner is an Assistant Professor of philosophy at the University of British Columbia's Okanagan campus. He is primarily interested in issues in political and moral philosophy. [MLI](#)

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323 Chapel Street, Suite 300,
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7Z2
613-482-8327 • info@macdonaldlaurier.ca



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