

Trust Me, Trigger Warnings Are Helpful



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The year Alyssa Leader said she was sexually assaulted in her Harvard dormitory, she took an anthropology class on political violence with [Kimberly Theidon](#). Professor Theidon consistently warned the class before discussing sexual violence and other emotional material, and she encouraged students to request help should any distress interfere with coursework. These trigger, or content, warnings enabled Leader to delve into difficult material on her own terms, empowered that she had the support to succeed.

Later that year, Leader relied on this course for her thesis. She said the class was one of her most fulfilling intellectual experiences at Harvard.

Our national dialogue about trigger warnings has all but ignored experiences like Leader's. When professors give these warnings, provide alternative readings and facilitate respectful conversations about deeply personal issues, it is easier for all students to participate. Accusing students of being coddled or institutions of killing academic freedom is an extreme overreaction against those who wish to be valued and respected in class.

It is not that difficult issues should not be taught -- it is that they should be taught with nuance. Allowing a military veteran to skip a screening of Pearl Harbor or to opt for a less graphic version of a chapter about the Vietnam War is not succumbing to "political correctness" or interfering with learning; it is treating people with basic decency and respect.

We are in a period of revitalized storytelling activism, from [Black Lives Matter](#) to [#SayHerName](#). These stories are profoundly important because they open our culture's eyes to systemic injustices that have long been ignored. Thoughtful [facilitation from professors](#) is crucial in these heavy conversations. For instance, asking, "Does anyone have anything to add, or a different opinion?" in response to a classmate characterizing all veterans as Islamophobes or all rape victims as liars encourages students to question sweeping and harmful generalizations.

Individuals from communities that are disproportionately affected by societal injustices are sometimes hesitant to participate. For instance, though I am open about being a sexual assault survivor, many people are not, in part because of the stigma associated with it. And frankly, while sometimes I might be willing to engage with someone who doesn't believe that rape is "a real problem," many times, I would rather preserve my mental health. In this situation, I would be more likely to participate if I saw my professor debunk myths about sexual violence with statistics and

evidence-based research. When we silence marginalized voices by refusing to create a respectful atmosphere, we damage the educational experience for all of our students.