I give my students lots of “heads-ups.”

For example, I tell them when I think an assignment might be harder than they’re anticipating and need more of their attention. I’ve warned them when grades (when I still gave them on assignments) might be lower than they’re used to.

For many years, I’ve also given students “heads-ups” about course content.

When teaching literature at Clemson, I used to warn students before we read a book of linked short stories called God Is Dead by Ron Currie Jr. The opening story posits a world where the Christian God appears in physical form (as a refugee), and is killed by people. As this news becomes known – God existed beyond any doubt, but we killed God – society fractures in interesting and disturbing ways that are explored throughout the book.

I warned my students at Clemson because I knew that a significant number of them were practicing Christians, many of them self-identifying as Evangelicals, and they would find a story that explores the literal death of God as unsettling, a challenge to the validity of their faith.

Of course, I chose the book because it is exactly that, challenging. The stories ask us to grapple with what binds humanity together, and makes one wrestle with the fact that the answer to this question may be, “not much.”

But I didn’t want the discussion to be focused on whether or not Ron Currie Jr. is a blasphemer (irrelevant), or if their instructor is an atheist (irrelevant) who is trying to brainwash them (definitely not). Because of the power differential in the room (me: instructor, them: students), I knew that they very well might take offense at the book, but not feel free to air those feelings for fear of retribution.

I wanted to warn them that they may be offended and they should feel free to feel that offense. But once they were done being offended, I wanted them to try to experience the text on its own terms.

For my students of faith, the result of reading the book was often a re-affirmation of their belief, rather than a challenge to it. I remember one student saying something like, “Even if I didn’t believe in God, I think I have to because without Him, we’re screwed.”

In essence, the warning is because I want students to be able to do the work, not because I want to excuse them from it.

Looking back, I guess it was my first “trigger warning,” though this was nine or ten years ago, so I don’t think I was familiar with the term at the time.

That term itself, “trigger warning,” seems to be a flashpoint for contention. As I consider how they’re most prominently used by faculty, I can’t see why. To me, they are “statements in preparation for maximal learning.” I learned the importance of trigger warnings when I assigned a story in a fiction writing class that involved graphic sexual violence rendered from the victim’s point of view. I received an email from a student saying they couldn’t attend the class discussion because of a recent sexual assault and the likelihood that encountering the material would cause emotional trauma.[1]

The student was having a friend preview all readings as a form of self-protection. This was a lesson for me. I figured I could do better by my student and endeavored to do so in the future.
I have witnessed post traumatic stress trauma. I do not wish to be the cause of it.

One summer during college, I worked at the local post office, which was largely staffed by Vietnam War vets who’d been given preferential civil service hiring upon returning home. One of my friends asked a mail carrier about whether or not he was going to see the 4th of July fireworks. The mail carrier looked very seriously at my friend and said, “If you’ve seen what I’ve seen, you wouldn’t find fireworks entertaining.”

Once, after a large tray of mail was dropped on the floor, making a loud, sharp noise, I saw one of the carriers grip his sorting station and tremble for minutes. These men were more than 20 years removed from their service.

I’ve had students who are veterans working through PTSD. I’ve also had students who have been beaten, sexually assaulted and raised in abusive home environments. I’ve had students in abusive relationships. I’ve had students who have survived traumatic accidents or life-threatening diseases. I’ve had students with depression, eating disorders and anxiety disorders. All of them carry these experiences around 24-hours a day, and some of them may need an occasional “heads-up” to keep their pasts from infringing on their presents and futures.

I do not believe these students to be weak or coddled. It's more like the opposite.

Of course, I cannot guard against everything. I had a student with severe anxiety who was at risk for triggering when I would pass out any assignment. This student gave me a warning, that if they were to suddenly leave the room, it was because of a rising sense of panic that could usually be quelled with breathing exercises the student would rather not do in front of their colleagues.

Indeed, at some point those previously subjected to trauma will experience a triggering event without warning. We cannot provide an impenetrable shield of protection or anticipate every need.

But how does this reality come to mean that I should do anything other than my best to not contribute to that pain?

It is a shame that a sound pedagogical tool has become a political football. If the “heads-up” wasn’t codified as a "trigger warning," perhaps it wouldn’t be so contentious.[2]

But “trigger warning” is the right term for people who re-experience trauma based on triggering events. Those of us who have not been subject to trauma should not be blithe about the pain of others. I have not been sexually assaulted or subject to sudden violence. I have not felt the sting of economic insecurity. My significant other has not threatened to kill me if I look at someone else. I am beyond fortunate and because of that fortune, I will not deny the reality of the experiences of others.

I have to ask, what is the pedagogical benefit of triggering trauma?

(For a much better exploration of these issues than I could ever offer, please read this essay from scholar/writer/instructor, Dr. Erika D Price.)

I would never advocate for mandatory trigger warnings on syllabi, or require all faculty to use them. If these demands are made by students, they should be heard in an effort to find a remedy to their complaints consistent with the values of the institution, but mandating faculty behavior in ways that conflict with academic freedoms is a non-starter.[3]

But I’m going to continue to give my students a “heads-up” where it seems appropriate, and at times those will fit the definition of “trigger warning.”

Just as there is a difference between anxiety (paralyzing) and discomfort (potentially useful), there is a difference between shock and surprise.

I want to challenge my students in every way possible, but I also want them safe while they’re tackling those challenges.
The way the student expressed this in the email was considerably more emotional and less clinical, something along the lines of, "If I have to discuss the story in class, I won’t be able to stop crying."

If you find the term "trigger warning" objectionable, maybe try using something like “heads-up” instead. I rarely label my trigger warnings as “trigger warnings,” and no harm seems to come.

Though, I must note that administrations often impose mandatory requirements, including on faculty syllabi. Perhaps the faculty ire at students is so strong because they realize they’re genuinely powerless in the face of administrative edict, but student demands can be swatted away.