

# Teaching Sensitive Materials

September 2021

**Note:** This document revises a resource on trigger warnings that was circulated to instructors from the Dean’s Office and the Centre for Teaching and Learning in November 2020 following student concerns. In response to feedback from faculty and the ongoing work of the campus-wide curriculum review, the revision aims:

- 1** to recognize and better reflect the diverse experiences and knowledges that instructors and students bring to teaching and learning at UTSC;
- 2** to support the work of instructors whose courses focus on sensitive topics, and thus engage regularly with sensitive content, and whose work contributes directly to the necessarily difficult work of systemic change, particularly in areas related to equity, accessibility, anti-racism anti-colonialism, and anti-oppression; and
- 3** to encourage classroom environments that can facilitate productive conversations around sensitive topics and course materials, combining a trauma-informed and compassionate approach with recognition of the importance of engaging with challenging course content and of the difficult discussions that are generated as a result.<sup>1</sup>

While additional research is needed to confirm the effectiveness of issuing content or trigger warnings in an educational context, they are discussed here as one of many strategies instructors may consider when planning courses with proactive attention to the diverse experiences and knowledges of students at UTSC, particularly those from historically and systemically marginalized communities.

This resource concludes with some questions that instructors may consider as they are planning and preparing to teach a course.

## Diverse Classrooms and Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

A core strength of UTSC is the diversity of experiences and knowledges represented in the teaching and learning environments shared by instructors and students. Instructors and students bring their lived experiences with them into the classroom. These experiences shape individual engagement with course materials and collectively enrich our classes and challenge our thinking.

<sup>1</sup> “Trauma” is here understood as an emotional and/or physical response to the impact of a devastating experience. This might stem from a single event or from long-term and/or multiple intersecting experiences that can be ongoing, in the past, and/or across generations. While it is important to note that faculty and students will have varied interpretations of what constitutes “sensitive materials” in a course, the term is used here to refer to topics and course content that may prompt difficult discussions and strong emotions and that may also have the potential to re-activate trauma when that content intersects with students’ lived experiences. Examples might include, but are not limited to, sexual or gender-based violence and assault; racism or oppression; homophobia; Islamophobia; genocide; atrocities of war; police violence; suicide; eating disorders.

When planning courses, selecting course materials, and facilitating discussions it is important that instructors are working with these diverse experiences and knowledges in mind. This includes critical reflection on course content, pedagogical approaches, and disciplinary frameworks. It also includes careful consideration of the potential impact of course materials on students. UTSC is committed to developing courses that reflect the diversity of our campus community. Students at UTSC are primarily racialized, immigrant, working class, and first generation to university; many are also from historically and systemically marginalized communities. Finally, it entails attention to pedagogical approaches that foreground student access, well-being, and support.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of a pedagogy of compassion and care for students (see Rawle 2021). This includes the recognition that trauma is pervasive and closely tied to systemic injustices in which educational settings are still complicit, and which the pandemic has further illuminated. This encompasses individual trauma as well as the collective and intergenerational impact of systemic racism, settler colonialism, and violence on Indigenous, Black, and racialized students (Cote-Meek 2014; Imad 2020). Examples might include, but are not limited to, sexual or gender-based violence and assault; racism or oppression; homophobia; Islamophobia; genocide; atrocities of war; police violence; suicide; eating disorders. A trauma-informed approach to teaching and learning acknowledges that past and/or ongoing trauma may be a part of the experiences that students carry with them into the classroom. Recognizing that course content may reactivate such experiences for some students, a trauma-informed approach to teaching and learning emphasizes support; mutual respect; clear communication and planning that helps students anticipate course processes and content; compassion; and flexibility as intentional pedagogical strategies.

## Selecting and Framing Sensitive Course Materials

It is common for students to encounter sensitive materials in the context of a university course. In some instances, sensitive materials might constitute one or more stand-alone examples (e.g. a case study, an excerpt from a text, an audio or a video clip screened in class). In instances like this, instructors are encouraged to think carefully about whether such content is necessary and what it adds to the course. For example, if a primary learning outcome of a class session is to introduce students to a particular poetic form, is it necessary to choose a poem that depicts sexual violence or includes racist language?

For sensitive materials that contribute substantively to a course, instructors might consider including a content or trigger warning. In the classroom, a content or trigger warning is the practice of offering advance notice, whether verbal or written, of a particular topic to enable students to prepare in an informed way for distress that might be prompted by engagement with that material. Emerging out of feminist communities of practice, as content warnings have shifted into educational spaces they have become more widely applied in recent years, prompted also by student requests. This has provoked intense debate in academia and beyond.

When utilized in education, the goal of a content or trigger warning is not to exempt students from engaging with challenging materials in the context of a university course. Rather, it signals to students that the instructor cares about their past and ongoing experiences and their well-being. Content warnings and the compassionate framing of course materials can help students who have experienced corresponding traumas in their own lives to prepare emotionally for that material and, if necessary, distance themselves and seek out support. In some cases, instructors may also wish to consider alternative resources for affected students.

There is no conclusive evidence to support the effectiveness of content warnings (see Boysen 2017; Bellet et al, 2018; Sanson et al, 2019). However, when considered as a part of a broader framework for planning courses proactively with attention to the diverse knowledges and experiences represented in the classroom, such an approach can help to support student well-being, increase student agency and engagement, and remove barriers that contribute to student access and academic success (see Carter 2015; Stringer 2016; Dickman-Burnett and Geaman 2019). This is consistent with feedback the Dean's Office has received from students at UTSC. There have also been incidents when students at UTSC have been negatively impacted by distressing course content that was introduced without context or framework. As research continues in this area, instructors are encouraged to consider content warnings as one of many pedagogical strategies that can support students and acknowledge their experiences and possible trauma histories.

In some cases, courses may be centred throughout on discussion of sensitive materials. Topics in this area might include a course focused on queer literatures or a course exploring the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. A growing number of instructors at UTSC have been hired precisely because their scholarly and pedagogical work is helping to diversify curricular and pedagogical approaches across the campus, contributing also to the challenging work of systemic change, particularly in areas related to equity, accessibility, anti-racism, and anti-colonialism. Although there may still be instances where a text-specific content warning may be helpful, courses like these can benefit from a broader trauma-informed approach for the course as a whole as well as the intentional development of a classroom environment that supports students in sustained engagement with challenging course materials while also recognizing the intellectual and emotional discomfort that this engagement will engender.

## Brave Classroom Spaces

Instructors have a responsibility to supportively prepare a class for encounters with course content that has the potential to re-traumatize students whose lived experiences intersect with those materials. This does not mean, however, shying away from the intellectual and emotional discomfort that challenging course content generates.

University courses will and should invite students out of their comfort zones. In the case of courses that are challenging and reshaping existing narratives by illuminating histories and experiences that have too often been violently erased, there is also an individual and collective responsibility to wrestle with and confront uncomfortable truths. It is crucial that teaching and learning spaces at UTSC work to foster a sense of belonging for all students. But belonging can and should coexist with “brave” classroom spaces (Arao and Clemens 2013). Brave spaces recognize the necessary discomfort of equity-based, anti-racist, and anti-colonial work in the classroom while also ensuring that students—particularly Indigenous and Black students and students from other historically and systemically marginalized communities—are supported and heard in those difficult conversations.

Courses that focus on sensitive topics and materials can benefit from an overarching framework that is less a content “warning” than a recognition and anticipation of the kinds of issues that will be explored in the class. Of particular significance is the establishment from the outset of the course of clear and mutually agreed to expectations for a teaching and learning environment that recognizes and values the diverse experiences and knowledges represented. An environment that combines a trauma-informed and compassionate approach with a willingness to grapple together with difficult truths might include, for instance, the development of a shared discussion framework to which students contribute that helps to build trust, while also outlining clear expectations for respectful and open discussion.

## Some Questions for Instructors to Consider

As instructors are building and preparing to teach a course, it may be helpful to consider these questions:



**Whose voices are centred on my syllabus? Whose voices are missing? Do the texts, visual materials, and/or case studies I have chosen represent a diversity of perspectives?**



**What assumptions and values do the texts, case studies, and other materials in my course communicate to students about the topic and the broader discipline(s) of which is it a part? If those assumptions and values primarily reflects a viewpoint that is White, colonial, cis-gendered, financially privileged, able-bodied, and/or straight, how can I start to make adjustments so that all students, including Indigenous and Black students and those from other historically and systemically marginalized communities, see themselves reflected and feel a sense of belonging in my course?**



**Are there texts or examples in my course materials that could re-activate traumatic experiences for my students? Examples might include, but are not limited to, sexual or gender-based violence and assault; depictions of racism or oppression; homophobia; Islamophobia; genocide; atrocities of war; police violence; suicide; eating disorders.**



**In addition to specific texts or examples, are there ways in which my course and/or my discipline relies implicitly or explicitly on the violent erasure of particular histories or experiences?**



**Are there places in my syllabus where a text, video clip, or other assigned material could benefit from a content warning?**



**If I am teaching a course that focuses throughout on sensitive materials, how will I introduce and frame that content and the kinds of questions the course will raise to students? How will I invite students to engage in open communication about these materials?**



**What steps am I taking in my syllabus and in the first class to create an environment that is supportive of students but that also recognizes the importance of “brave” and uncomfortable conversations that challenging course content generates, particularly in areas related to equity, accessibility, anti-racism, and anti-colonialism?**



**What kind of expectations and structural frameworks are in place for class engagement and discussion? How will I invite students to contribute to or co-create those frameworks?**



**How does my syllabus, the content of my course and my assessments, and the teaching and learning environment I share with my students communicate support for their well-being and the value of the diverse experiences and perspectives that they are bringing into the classroom?**



**Are there opportunities for me to check in with my students to get their feedback about the course and course materials and their experience in my course?**



**Are my students aware of campus and university resources that are available to support their well-being?**

## References:

Arao, Brian, and Kristi Clemens. "From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: A New Way to Frame Dialogue Around Diversity and Social Justice." *The Art of Effective Facilitation*, ed. Lisa M. Landremann (Stylus Publishing, 2013), pp. 135–50.

Bellet, Benjamin W., Payton J. Jones, and Richard J. McNally. "Trigger Warning: Empirical Evidence Ahead." *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, vol. 61 (Elsevier, 2018), pp. 134–141.

Boysen, Guy A. "Evidence-Based Answers to Questions About Trigger Warnings for Clinically-Based Distress: A Review for Teachers." *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 2 (American Psychological Association, 2017), pp. 163–177.

Carter, Angela M. "Teaching with Trauma: Trigger Warnings, Feminism, and Disability Pedagogy." *Disability Studies Quarterly* vol. 35, no. 2 (2015).

Cote-Meek, Sheila. *Colonized Classrooms: Racism, Trauma, and Resistance in Post-Secondary Education*. Fernwood Publishing, 2014.

Dickman-Burnett, Victoria L., and Maribeth Geaman. "Untangling the Trigger Warning Debate: Curating a Complete Toolkit for Compassionate Praxis in the Classroom." *Journal of Thought*, vol. 53, no. 3/4, pp. 35–52.

Imad, Mays. "Leveraging the Neuroscience of Now." *Inside Higher Ed*, 3 June 2020.

Rawle, Fiona. "A Pedagogy of Kindness: The Cornerstone for Student Learning and Wellness." *Times Higher Education*, 20 August 2021.

Sanson, Mevagh, Daryn Strange, and Maryanne Garry. "Trigger Warnings Are Trivially Helpful at Reducing Negative Affect, Intrusive Thoughts, and Avoidance." *Clinical Psychological Science*, vol. 7, no. 4, (Association for Psychological Science, 2019), pp. 778–793.

Stringer, Rebecca. "Reflection from the Field: Trigger Warnings in University Teaching." *Women's Studies Journal* vol. 30, no. 2 (2016), pp. 62–66.

## Further Resources

Imad, Mays. Webinar on Trauma-Informed Teaching (2020). (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqcTbipuFDQ&t=37s>)

Inclusive Teaching at the University of British Columbia (<https://inclusiveteaching.ctlt.ubc.ca>)  
·Includes a module on Difficult Conversations: [https://canvas.ubc.ca/courses/31444/pages/1-introduction-to-difficult-conversations?module\\_item\\_id=1523434](https://canvas.ubc.ca/courses/31444/pages/1-introduction-to-difficult-conversations?module_item_id=1523434)

Inclusive Teaching Principles, Strategies, and Resources, Centre for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan (<https://crlt.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/inclusive-teaching-principles-strategies-resources>)

“Navigating Microaggressions in the Classroom” (Centre for Teaching and Learning, UTSC).