MetFilm School
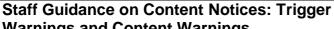**Staff Guidance on Content Notices: Trigger Warnings and Content Warnings**

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Introduction – A note on context

MetFilm School has a commitment to diverse and inclusive learning, teaching and assessment approaches, and to ensuring a culture of equality, diversity and inclusion, as set out in our policies and procedures. Under the Equality Act 2010, MetFilm School also has a legal and statutory duty to ensure students are not discriminated against on the basis of a number of protected characteristics, including disability.

The term **'Trigger warning'** was a term coined by researchers of sexual trauma, and gained currency in usage on the internet where it was used in online spaces to warn readers of what they could expect before accessing content. The terms 'trigger warning' or 'content warning' can be used in a variety of ways, and a more nuanced definition is included below, but generally both terms are accepted across higher education as forming an important part of an inclusive approach to teaching and learning.

Content notices, including trigger and content warnings, are an imperfect tool. Academic opinion on the positive impact of the warnings is divided, and generally speaking there is a lack of research into the effectiveness of trigger warnings as a measure to prevent what is sometimes known as re-traumatisation[1], a renewed susceptibility to stress and anxiety as a result of traumatic memories. Some studies

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[1] For those interested in learning more about academic research into this area, the following recent literature review is a helpful summary document of the landscape – note it is not open source and you may require additional permissions to access it: Pulling the Trigger: A Systematic Literature Review of Trigger Warnings as a Strategy for Reducing Traumatization in Higher Education - India Bryce, Nicola Horwood, Kate Cantrell, Jessica Gildersleeve, 2022 (sagepub.com)

even suggest that trigger warnings can be detrimental to student learning and can in fact themselves be a source of trauma.

On balance however, there is sufficient consensus in practice across the sector around the importance of including content guidance of some description to support students who have experienced trauma to engage effectively with certain types of content, and for some students a content warning will be a part of their Individual Support Plans (ISPs).

We are committed to ensuring students who have experienced trauma, whether formally declared or not, are adequately supported to engage effectively with the MetFilm School curricula and the content of their programmes of study. **When used in the classroom, content warnings and trigger warnings can empower students to take care of themselves.**

We therefore encourage the thoughtful use of content notices in the classroom and other teaching and learning settings.

Definitions of content notices, and recommended approaches to deploying them in different forms, are included below.

Definitions and common warnings

What are content warnings?
Sometimes also referred to as content notices, content warnings are designed to alert students to sensitive content covered in the teaching environment. Sensitive content may include but is not limited to; written text, video or audio recording or discussion points. Content warnings may be given in a written or verbal form. They are not intended to censor teaching material or content.

They are there to help students engage with the issues and themes covered in the material in a positive and supported way, not avoid them. They flag the contents of the material that follows, so readers, listeners, or viewers can prepare themselves to adequately engage or, in rare cases and if necessary, disengage for their own wellbeing.

Common content warnings are:
o Sexual Assault
o Abuse
o Child abuse/paedophilia
o Incest
o Animal cruelty or animal death
o Dissection
o Self-harm and suicide
o Eating disorders, body hatred or fat phobia
o Violence
o Pornographic content
o Kidnapping and abduction
o Death or dying
o Pregnancy/Childbirth

o Miscarriages/Abortion
o Blood
o Mental illness and ableism
o Racism and racial slurs
o Sexism and misogyny
o Classism
o Hateful language directed at religious groups (e.g., Islamophobia, anti-Semitism)
o Transphobia and trans misogyny
o Homophobia and heterosexism

This is not an exhaustive list. Individuals respond differently to different materials and we recognise that it is not always possible to anticipate all potential triggers.

What are 'Trigger' warnings?

Trigger warnings are a specific sub-set of content warnings. They attempt to forewarn audiences (viewers, readers or listeners) of content that may cause intense **physiological and psychological symptoms** for people with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other anxiety disorders. The content that is flagged for trigger warnings is often similar to that flagged in general content warnings.

How do warnings help?

Content warnings and trigger warnings are not intended to censor teaching content, nor invite students to avoid material that challenges them. On the contrary, warning students of challenging material can help their engagement by giving them the ability to take charge of their own health and learning.

When presented with a scene that depicts sexual violence, a student who has experienced such violence might shut down, have a panic attack, become angry, or otherwise disengage from the class as they put all their attention into managing the emotional and physical symptoms the triggering material brings up for them. However, if the student is forewarned that the material includes a depiction of sexual violence, they might prepare for it by seeking professional support or simply giving themselves more time to work through the material so they can process it under controlled conditions.

While students may have experienced specific trauma, they may be unwilling to disclose this trauma to their tutors. Tutors do not know the past experiences that students have had, so using blanket content warnings in your teaching can help support **all** students attending teaching or accessing content in a simple way.

For individuals with **PTSD and some other conditions, like anxiety**, they can help with coping strategies. While individuals may not have control over what triggers them, but many have personal strategies they use to cope with triggers when they must be encountered. Those strategies work best when the trigger is **expected** and can be prepared for in advance. Trigger warnings give people the forewarning necessary for them to make use of the strategies that will decrease the harmfulness of encountering triggering material.

Implementing Content Guidance

How do I use Content Warnings?

Content warnings can be shared in lots of ways. What's important is that they happen 'before' the triggering content. Good practice can be to include them in Module Study Guides, on reading lists, spoken verbally in teaching sessions or before screenings. You can also send them out in emails, add them to a Canvas site or even build them into programmes for celebration screenings.

If tutors are aware of topics individual students may find challenging, they should, where possible, engage in open conversations with those students. You might want to advise students with something like this *'This module/seminar includes reference to/consideration of themes of x, y, z (see the common list above)/ or images of x, y, z, which might trigger unwelcome and distressing memories or thoughts for some students.'*

If a student makes a disclosure of content they may find challenging, be open to this. Engage, discuss and listen to the student. It will usually be appropriate to **signpost them to further support** from Student Support or the Wellbeing team for non-academic support if they need it.

Examples of Effective Content Notices

If most of the material in the course is going to include emotionally challenging and potentially triggering content, you can include a warning as part of your course description. You might write on your canvas page or in an email to your students, for example:

The content and discussion in this course will engage with racism in classical Hollywood cinema. There may be examples of racist hate speech in the films we watch over the course of the first three weeks. It is likely to be emotionally and intellectually challenging to engage with. I will flag especially graphic or intense content that discusses or represents racism in class and will do my best to make this classroom a space where we can engage empathetically and thoughtfully with difficult content every week.

You can also include them in a slide deck, and personalise them:

*I have done my best to identify the films with potentially triggering content. I have included tags for: **violence, suicide, misogyny, and self-harm**. If you have concerns about encountering anything specific in the course material that I have not already tagged and would like me to provide warnings, please come see me or send me an email. I will do my best to flag any requested triggers for you in advance.*

Before a screening of student work, you may want to embed some tags for content guidance into the film, for example: **Content Flags: Incest, blood and gore**

As per the example above, you do not have to refer to these warnings as 'trigger warnings' or 'Content warnings'. You can refer to them as content guides, content guidance, flags, tags or similar more 'positive' terminology.

No matter how you choose to implement content notices, it is important that students know what to expect and that they are put in a position where they can act in their own best interest without ridicule or unwanted attention.

Letting students know that they can excuse themselves from class if they need to can make the difference between a student missing a session entirely and stepping out for five minutes to collect themselves. It can impact their engagement and ultimately their success on the course. Avoid putting students on the spot if they look distant, distressed, or choose to leave the room.

Forgetting content notices
It is recognised that not all content notices will be picked up by teaching staff all of the time. Should this occur, it is something to **learn from, adapt teaching material** used in future and be aware of individual student's needs. While there might be frustration on both the side of the tutor and the student in this scenario, or the trigger might seem mild to a tutor, it is important to avoid becoming defensive, as this will not help the student with engaging. Try to gain a better understanding of the students needs. Do the best you can and keep notes for future iterations of the class.

Some students will have an **ISP with specific trigger warnings noted** as part of this. If you are not sure how to apply an ISP trigger warning in your teaching, reach out to the programme team and the wellbeing team for additional guidance and support.

Students Using Content Guidance

Students should also be mindful of the impact of sensitive content they may be disclosing to both their peers and teaching staff in a public teaching session. It is advised that students who may be disclosing sensitive content warn others before doing so.

Tutors should share this guidance document with students so that they become familiar with the list of common warnings and are better able to provide content guidance on their own artefacts for screening or other purposes as required.

Content notices are an increasingly common requirement for filmed artefact exhibition at festivals and in other contexts within the industry.

Additional Resources

Staff and students engaged in production might find the following industry resource useful: The Film and TV Charity's The Whole Picture Toolkit contains a range of support materials dealing with wellbeing in production.