

Content Warnings in the Theatre Classroom: the unique relationship between educators, students, and challenging content in theatre education

Last Summer, I was enrolled in a graduate level course about Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) which required students to study several plays for audiences as young as 2 years old and up through the late teens and early 20's. All of the students in this class, including myself, are graduate students in a Theatre Education and Applied Theatre program. Most, if not all the students in that class, intend to teach at the K-12 or Collegiate level. One of the weeks of class focused on "Taboo Topics in TYA." Naturally, for that week, the instructor assigned plays with content that was meant to spark a discussion in the class about what is "appropriate" for various young audience groups. One of the plays assigned included a description of sexual assault and some of my classmates told the professor they were upset the syllabus didn't include a content warning. The professor heard the students out and agreed to offer content warnings for all other plays in the course. The professor also pointed out, though, that we had already read several plays in the course that included challenging content, and questioned why we had not asked for content warnings for those works (many of those plays focused on the experiences of BIPOC characters, most of the students in the class were white). They also pointed out that folks of color are often asked to carry a heavier burden in the content that's consumed than white students.

Personally, I didn't have a problem with the play in question. Yes, it was hard to read, but I felt that the intensity of the playwright's words matched the urgency of the problem and need for social intervention. I was moved to discuss the play with people beyond my classmates and research local laws and school policies. Isn't that the most ideal outcome - inspiring audiences toward action? I started wondering: Who really benefits from content warnings? What content necessitates a warning? How do the dynamics of content warnings change when a piece of art is assigned for a class, vs. a performance that audiences can opt in and out of? What best practices will I use in my own teaching?

A Brief History

If content warnings are a new idea to you, you can read past HowlRound articles [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#) about the topic. Essentially, content warnings (also known as trigger warnings) are brief statements informing audiences about the content in a piece of art that could cause a reaction in folks who have experienced specific trauma. Proponents of content warnings argue they protect folks who are recovering from trauma from having a serious physiological response, like a panic attack, in classrooms and places of entertainment (like theaters). The goal, in using them, is to protect the most vulnerable audience members and students. Some critics of content warnings believe that they prevent students from engaging with content or viewpoints that are important, but may cause discomfort. Some people believe that content warnings can reveal too much about a play in advance, or even deter audiences from fully engaging with the content.

Others argue they can never know what might “trigger” someone else, so what’s the point? Though, there are lists of common content that could trigger a reaction in folks who have experienced trauma, like [this one](#) and [this one](#). A mental health professional at your institution may also maintain a list of warnings to help you get started. It is worth noting that content warnings have been around for a long time in the film, video game, and music industries, just in a different format. Movies can be rated PG because a character dies. Video games can receive an ‘M for Mature’ stamp because of extensive violence. Music can be given the label ‘Explicit’ on streaming services because of certain language. Outside of content warnings, no such rating systems exist in theater to inform audiences of the content they are about to consume.

Special Considerations for Educators

But what happens when the challenging content is in the classroom? As I stated before, if a theater decides to put on a play, there is no requirement for anyone to attend (besides the actors, crew, front of house staff, etc. - but that’s a different essay for a different day). In a classroom setting, however, the rules are different. There is an assumption that if a play is assigned by an instructor, all students in the class will engage fully with that play and come prepared to continue that engagement in the classroom. There is also an assumption that the content for a course is assigned in good faith, and that the instructor believes there is significant educational and/or artistic value in selecting that play. The power dynamic between the instructor and student raises the stakes for a student coming face to face with challenging content in a play.

Not to mention, certain plays may be a requirement of the curriculum. High school educators may be bound by district or state mandated curricula. And I have a hard time imagining a collegiate American theatre program that doesn’t assign at least one Greek tragedy in Theater History, which are filled with death, violence, and sketchy sexual encounters. But, we also have some aesthetic distance from Sophocles that could disappear when engaging with contemporary playwrights who use contemporary vernacular and whose storytelling may align more closely with our everyday experiences.

And finally, what’s the purpose of educating theatre students at all? Shouldn’t theatre programs help students get out of their comfort zone? Especially at the collegiate level, shouldn’t we be asking our students to get a little uncomfortable with their preconceived notions and biases so their art can speak truth to power? At the same time, isn’t that mentality of ‘breaking someone down to build them back up’ the root of a lot of sexist, racist, ableist BS in our field?

Plot Twist

Around the time my TYA class was wrestling with content warnings, [a preprint of an unpublished social science paper](#) made its way around Twitter, rekindling the debate about content warnings. The paper was a meta-analysis of several psychological studies about content warnings in academic settings. The most incendiary finding claimed that content warnings do more harm than good because pre-warning students about challenging content raised their anxiety levels while they were reading as they waited to

encounter the content they were warned of. It's worth noting that I am 1) not a psychologist, 2) not qualified to adjudicate this study or any of the studies it mentions, 3) don't know the mental health histories of any of the participants in any of the studies, and 4) this meta-analysis has not yet been published via a peer review process. However, this roundup of studies does make me skeptical of the way content warnings are used in academic settings.

Moving Forward, Best Practices

It seems like, in the world of content warnings, you're damned if you do, damned if you don't. So, what can you do? Personally, I think there are a range of options, some are easier than others.

Easy Mode: Just Ask

Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater! You can simply shift your practice of using content warnings. First, and easiest, simply ask students "*Do you have any access needs I should know about?*" You could have students email these to you by the end of the first week of class, or have them fill out a little slip of paper on the first day. Students who know they struggle to engage with certain content can let you know, and then you can open up a dialogue with them about how they want to proceed with any content in the course that could cause a reaction in them.

Level 2: Survey

Similar to asking for access needs, but with an extra step, you can create a survey to send to you students at the beginning of the semester. (Google forms has a decent survey collection process, is easy to set up, and pulls analytics for you). Allow students to select any content warnings they might want and how they want to receive them (ex: verbally in class, written on the syllabus, an individual email, etc.). It's a little more work but, you could track the responses from semester to semester and it might teach you something about the students you serve.

Challenge Mode: Take time to teach about content warnings

It's not an educator's job to be a therapist and it would be totally unethical to provide therapeutic support to students unless you are trained to do so and doing it in a therapeutic context (i.e. not the classroom or office hours!). That being said, you might try drawing on psychological studies to help the young people you teach understand the nuances of accessing challenging materials. In [Theatrical Intimacy Education](#)'s "Consent in the Acting Classroom" training, Laura Rikerd introduced me to Dr. Dan Siegel's concept of the "[Window of Tolerance](#)." She uses the metaphor with her acting students to help them identify the types of content they can safely play. A classic [TIE quote](#) is "Theatre isn't always going to be comfortable, but it should work within your boundaries." And, if you fear you're walking too close to the therapist line, pause and look for resources at your school, institution, or community. Joyously and liberally share your university's mental health service email! Plaster your syllabus with mental health hotlines! Set meetings with experts and partake in trainings so you know how to best support students who

may unexpectedly stumble past their boundaries and need support.

Hard Mode: Do nothing, make the hard cuts, or lean in.

At the end of the day, the debate around content warnings and how they play out in classrooms comes down to pedagogical ethics. Ethics are personal and contextual so I simply can't tell you what is best for you or your community. Maybe you think long and hard about the content you assign and decide that making any changes to your syllabus or providing any warnings won't make a difference. Maybe, you realize an edgy play you adore just isn't serving the educational needs of your students and you have to eliminate it from your syllabus. Maybe you decide to eliminate all potentially triggering material to avoid ever needing to give a content warning. Or, maybe you decide that the light anxiety of a few is worth protecting the one or two students for whom the warning is useful and stack your syllabus with little **CW* notes. The hard thing will be deeply listening to your students and community, then deciding where *your* ethics intersect with and diverge from those groups. So, you have to listen, decide, articulate and justify.

At the root, regardless of whether you decide to use content warnings or not, I challenge you to think critically about the *how* and why behind your decision. Pedagogically, I believe it is dangerous to use (or not use) content warnings unthinkingly. You're smuggling in assumptions about your students and how your class works either way when you don't really listen to who is in the room and what they need.

Personally, I'm not ready to totally give up on content warnings. But, I do think my classroom practices will shift. I'm realizing that the content I worry most about is situated in my experience as a white, millennial, straight cis-woman who does not carry trauma into most of the spaces I occupy. I don't think that slapping a label on a play will entirely fix the problem, but I do plan to talk with students early on about the theatre's ability to question, inspire, and critique the world. I intend to ask them to consider what's gained and who is harmed when our world view is challenged. I will listen deeply to their responses and encourage them to do the same.

Here's my challenge to you: If you've been the first person to advocate for content warnings at your institution, approach your practice with more skepticism. If you're someone who hasn't used them, revisit your syllabus and find the places they may fit. And ultimately, listen to your students. Make a decision. Articulate your reasoning. Justify your choice. And be ready to be wrong.