

Does this lecture come with a trigger warning? The challenge of teaching sensitive topics

Dr Gillian Harrop

University of Worcester (g.harrop@worc.ac.uk)

Keywords: Sensitive, forensic, trigger warning, sexual violence.

The hectic nature of modern life requires each of us to find our own way to relax and put the challenges of work to one side. My distraction of choice is a popular internet discussion forum where readers can post on an array of topics, from the best way to paint old furniture to addressing the challenge of how to get children to eat more vegetables (for the record, I still have no answer to this). For as long as I can remember, it has been the case that you read the brief, and the rather general title of a thread and make a snap decision about whether to click into it, taking your chances that it is going to be something that is of interest to you. Recently though, there seems to be an interesting new trend in thread titles. Many now contain the phrases ‘warning’, ‘possible trigger’ or ‘sensitive’. Apparently, this is to warn forum users that the thread contains some information that some users may find upsetting, so they can make an informed choice about whether to avoid the thread in question. Issues such as child abuse, pregnancy loss and mental illness have all been subject to this signposting within the thread title. This appears to be a very positive step forward in terms of informing the reader and allowing them to make considered choices about what they expose themselves to. This increased emphasis on signposting resonates strongly with me as a lecturer in forensic psychology, where there is often a requirement to present extremely sensitive topics to students, and I wonder whether some of the signposting techniques used on the discussion board could inform the way that we address this issue.

The nature of forensic psychology modules at undergraduate level often demands that lecturers talk about sensitive topics on a regular basis and present these topics to students of all ages and backgrounds, many of whom have not been exposed to such issues before. Indeed, many of the students on these modules have come straight from school and being presented with such material can provoke a range of responses, from embarrassment and anxiety, through to a genuine enthusiasm to learn more about the subject. The challenge with any such class of students is finding the best way to warn them that there may be sensitive material in a class, while respecting their ability as an adult to make responsible and appropriate choices for themselves about what they are exposed to. My preferred way of dealing with this issue has been to incorporate a ‘sensitivity slide’ at the start of each set of lecture slides, which students can see when they upload the slides from

Blackboard beforehand. It is interesting to consider how many students actually access the slides, including the sensitivity slide, before the lectures, thereby allowing them to make a judgement about the material which will be covered. It is generally assumed that the majority of students do access these, although it may be useful to set up tracking on Blackboard to confirm this. From my perspective, producing this sensitivity slide was doing enough to allow students to make their own decisions about their participation. However, I have recently had cause to question if this is the best way to go about this and consider possible alternatives.

After reviewing the way that other Universities deal with this subject, I started to consider the possibility of a ‘trigger warning’. Perhaps we should be highlighting key areas of potential sensitivity to students before each session, much in the same way that you would identify keywords for an academic paper? This would allow students to identify any sensitive material that may act as a trigger for them in advance in order to make an informed decision about what material they wished to be exposed to. Yet I question what benefit this would offer them that they do not have from the current system of checking Blackboard slides prior to the lecture. In addition, this course of action seems to go against the desire for independence in our undergraduates. We regularly emphasise to students that they should be driving their own learning, particularly towards the end of their degree, and the notion of detailed ‘trigger warnings’ does not seem to sit naturally alongside this.

Other Universities have tried to implement such a trigger warning system, most famously Oberlin College in Ohio, USA, which provided a ‘Sexual Offence Resource Guide’ for staff (Flaherty, 2014). This asked them each to consider how they could make their classroom more inclusive for victims of sexualised violence, and required tutors to use trigger warnings for anything which they considered may potentially constitute a trigger. The challenge of course, is that the nature of triggers varies from person to person. Academic staff were concerned that this would mean giving the same class several times over, tweaking it each time to meet the needs of the particular student group in order to address all the triggers while still providing students with the knowledge required for their course.

To their credit, the staff at Oberlin who created the system did acknowledge the challenges that such a policy

caused, although they were not able to put forward any tangible suggestions to deal with these difficulties. The response of one Oberlin tutor particularly resonated with me, as they suggested that sensitivity and common sense work far better than a set of tightly bound rules, and working within looser confines would allow for an appropriate middle ground.

I can identify with the concerns of the Oberlin staff, particularly their fear that a requirement for trigger warnings would put too much responsibility on the tutor to identify potential sensitive areas. I have taught classes in the past where I have given verbal trigger warnings about upcoming discussions of violent behaviour for example, yet found that a student has become upset by something completely unrelated, which I would not have considered to be a trigger at all. This is where students may have to accept responsibility for ensuring that they know what topics are being covered (even in a very general sense), and have a strategy in place in case they do come up against a topic that they find upsetting. This could potentially form the basis of a student agreement or charter, where they would accept responsibility for checking the lecture material before each class and in turn, the academic team who taught on the module could state exactly what they would do to provide support through early provision of lecture slides, and a clear outline of what would be included in upcoming lectures, wherever possible. There is also an argument for including information about student support services into such a charter, to ensure that any students who became upset by any of the topics raised would know where to go to seek pastoral support.

Of course the challenges of teaching sensitive topics are not confined purely to protecting students from distress. There is also an important issue around student conduct. There is an expectation, as with all classes, that students will behave in a respectful and professional way for the duration of the session, and this particularly resonates when dealing with very sensitive or emotive subjects. Yet, I have given classes on subjects such as sexual violence where students have sat giggling, or whispering to one another, even as cases are being discussed and extremely sensitive details considered. The instinct of many lecturers, including myself, may be to ask those engaging in such behaviour to leave the class, yet this may not be effective in teaching students how to engage with this type of material in an appropriate way. While some of these behaviours are simply down to poor standards of conduct, I believe that tutors must also recognise that some are the result of nervousness or embarrassment at what is being discussed, particularly if students are not used to hearing this kind of information, in this level of detail. There is no way around presenting this information if we want to provide a valuable and informative learning experience about forensic psychology. If you are outlining the possible motivations

for a sexually violent act, for example, then it is vital that everyone in the class is clear what is involved in the sexually violent act (to an appropriate point). As a psychology team, we have worked hard to put together a course that is robust, challenging, appropriate and ethically sound. Nothing that is included could be described as salacious – it is all relevant and valuable knowledge for an undergraduate who is working towards a career in forensic psychology. Therefore it is vital that students are able to deal with this type of information and have strategies for managing emotions such as embarrassment in a way which does not impact upon their student conduct. There is perhaps an opportunity here to work with the student counselling services to develop such strategies and present them to the students, or even to take this issue to the psychology partnership panel within our University, where the issue could be debated by both staff and students.

So how do we go forward? Sensitive topics need to be taught in a way that protects students, while providing them with the required knowledge and helping them to develop an appreciation of professionalism and appropriate conduct. This is quite a challenge, but one which I believe we can meet through clear expectations for students, better signposting towards topics for discussion through Blackboard resources and clear guidance about upcoming teaching sessions, as well as clear expectations for student conduct. These expectations should include an acknowledgement that we as tutors recognise the challenges of dealing with sensitive materials, and the potential for nervousness or embarrassment to affect behaviour. We could also direct students towards strategies for dealing with these feelings and behaviours, such as those provided to trainee psychologists in the prison service. In this way, we also have the opportunity to provide students with skills and strategies that they can take with them into their future careers.

You might argue that the challenges of teaching sensitive materials mean that they simply do not lend itself to a teaching and learning environment, and that the obstacles are simply too great. Yet, I would argue that it is more important than ever that we develop our understanding of sensitive topics such as forensic psychology, and produce graduates who have the knowledge and skills to go on to become chartered forensic psychologists, offender intervention facilitators, criminal intelligence analysts and many other varied and challenging roles that a forensic psychology degree can lead into. Through understanding offenders and offending behaviour, we can catch them quicker, better assess their risk of reoffending and better select the most appropriate rehabilitation and treatment programmes, and from my perspective, this makes the challenges of teaching sensitive material definitely worth overcoming.

References

Flaherty, C. (2014) Oberlin backs down on ‘trigger warnings’ for professors who teach sensitive material. *Inside Higher Ed.* [online] 14 April. Available from: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/04/14/oberlin-backs-down-trigger-warnings-professors-who-teach-sensitive-material> [Accessed 20 January 2015].

Biography

Gillian Harrop's research is focused on forensic psychology, specifically criminal investigation, and falls within two main areas; the investigation of sexual offences and the link between domestic violence and abuse of family pets. Gillian is interested in the application of forensic psychology within criminal investigation, particularly major incident investigation and the potential for using analytical research methods to categorise offenders and link offences. Gillian's teaching is focused around Forensic Psychology, although she also teaches within Biological and Cognitive Psychology, and Research Methods and Statistics.