

Uncodding the American Mind: The Educational Ask of Trigger Warnings

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Over the last few years there has been growing attention to the work of schools – be it primary, secondary, or tertiary – as they provide (or fail to provide) students an education that is safe and inclusive. The rise of “safe spaces” and the development of practices that attend to the diverse student body have led to a veritable explosion of research, opinions, and debates about the contemporary state of education and its subjects. A central concept within this conversation is the rise of and request for trigger warnings. The “trigger warning” – a request for a pre-emptive warning about difficult material that could trigger past trauma – has often come to act as a stand-in that represents the larger fragile new world that places of learning have supposedly become. Students, within this context, have become snowflakes while faculty have become frightened of, or resistant to, students. However, rather than bemoan the rise of trigger warnings, so often done in op-ed pages and other journalistic sites, I argue that the request for trigger warnings by students represents an important educational ask. In this paper, I offer an argument that centralizes and unpacks the educational ask of trigger warnings, moving to the side of political and therapeutic discourses that have dominated how to receive the requests for trigger warnings. I do this to argue for the need for critical generosity in hearing the work of education in requests for trigger warnings.

With our 21st century moment asking for trigger warnings, there emerges a need to cultivate and utilize a language of education that pushes against what Gert Biesta named “the language of learning;” a language that still informs how many people interpret the work of school.¹ The language of learning, as he argued, was “the result of a combination of different, partly even contradictory trends and developments,” including new theories of learning, postmodernism, an explosion of learning technologies, and the decline of

the welfare state. These trends and developments were not all bad, offering important insights and inroads into thinking about the work of “learning,” as they interact with one another amidst the complex terrain of the contemporary world and its educational institutions. Yet, the language of learning – through these developments – positioned education as an economic transaction where the student became the consumer, the teacher the provider, and “learning” the commodity to be exchanged. “This is the logic,” Biesta argued:

which says the educational institutions and individual educators should be flexible, that they should respond to the needs of the learners, that they should give the learner value for money, and perhaps even that they should operate on principle that the customer is always right.²

In drawing attention to and raising caution to this language of learning, Biesta moved to offer an alternative language. Critiquing the language of learning was not enough. Instead, he asserted the need to “reclaim – or rather: reinvent – a language of education.”³ This language of education would push against and offer ways of reframing the work and purposes of education beyond economic sensibilities to attend to contemporary relations that exist within education as students become unique subjects.

ON TRIGGER WARNINGS

Schools in the 21st century exist less as places to get information, but as Charles Bingham has argued, as places where people meet and relate to the self, one another, information, and teachers.⁴ Students and teachers are meeting and their different relationships to knowledge are provoking contestations about such relations in schools. These contestations come in various forms and seemingly provoke a fair amount of hand-wringing and concerns about, as Lukianoff and Haidt, argue, a “coddling of the American mind.”⁵ A key object of such ire in contemporary education is the rise, request, and use of trigger warnings in classrooms; a trend that Lukianoff and Haidt take up and on to illustrate a crisis in the work of a liberal education. In their brief history

of trigger warnings, they show that the concept – while emerging post World War I to treat what is now called PTSD – came to mainstream attention around 2011, reaching an “all time high” as a search term trend in 2015.⁶ The rise of trigger warnings in universities followed a similar trajectory – making it a significant concept for the second decade of 21st century higher education. While they offer a paranoid look at the rise of trigger warnings as a component of the coddling happening on college campuses, I offer a different interpretation that reads trigger warnings as a key educational ask in wrestling with fragmented knowledges and the histories these previously subjugated knowledges and histories bring into the work of education. Lukianoff and Haidt, along with others, rightly point out concerns trigger warnings have had, in extreme cases, on freedom of speech, working conditions, and professional practices from the realm of political thought. They additionally illustrate concerns about mental health and student “fragility.” Missing however is an interpretation of what such requests “ask” in the everyday work of education. When students “ask” for trigger warnings, what do such asks illustrate about the work of education and its relations beyond the frames of politics and therapy?

Trigger warnings in many accounts – at least those in mainstream press – are positioned as signs of an overly fragile student body – “snowflakes” – and a weakening of the intellectual project of schools. The concern for education lacking intellectual rigor in favor of student well-being is not new. Arthur Bestor in *Educational Wastelands* offered a critique of mid-20th century public education that had, in his estimation, repudiated the position of the founders of American public schools.⁷ American public education, in his interpretation, had been founded on the principle that intellectual training was central to the democratic project. Yet, by the mid-20th century, public education had drifted, with public school administrators and professors of education turning toward ideas that decentralized intellectual training for other purposes beyond the intellect. For Bestor, “this curious line of argument can be summed up as follows: because intellectual training was once monopolized by an aristocracy, it retains its aristocratic character even when extended to the masses of men.”⁸ The rise of progressive education (variously defined) and “life adjustment” training, for

him, illustrated a weakening of the work of education and lowered the aims of school. This weakening and lowering of aims presented a serious threat to liberal education and its “deliberate cultivation of the power to think.”⁹ Schools in lowering their aims had become wastelands where education itself no longer happened. Instead, it might be said that schools merely “schooled” subjects.

More than a half-a-century after Bestor’s critique, 21st century critiques of education return to illustrate its weakening and, as Lukianoff and Haidt’s evocative phrase illustrates, a “coddling of the American mind.” Progressive education and life-adjustment training are no longer the culprit, rather various critical theories and modes of political activism – from feminism and critical race theory to queer theory and disability studies – are, it seems, to blame. These late 20th century interventions and intellectual projects have poked and prodded the archives and practices of schools to push against and expand what knowledge and whose knowledge counts as part of education. Such work has provoked a large amount of political controversy showing how these various “critical” approaches dangerously disrupt and dispute the romanticized founding principles of American public schools and undercut the idea of intellectual rigor devoid of politics. Yet, these critical approaches are themselves rooted in traditions of liberal education, offering expanded views on knowledge, ethics, aesthetics, and more. Additionally, they’ve worked to push against the standards and accountability reforms initiated in the 1980s that worked to straighten out and limit the work of education in schools to those forms of knowledge easily “assessed” and “tested.”

For Bestor, however, “schools exist to teach something, and this something is the power to think.”¹⁰ In his argument, this power to think is rooted in intellectual training, training that attends to disciplinary knowledge. Disciplines were less static entities, but methods for organizing knowledge out of “evolving experience” and engaging education as an intellectual project.¹¹ “An American public school system” he argued, “shall be educational.”¹² And the responsibility of this educational system is to transmit the power of thinking to younger generations so they can benefit from histories of knowledge development and add to such knowledges in their own time. Knowledge is transmitted not to

remain the same, but to assist new subjects to enter the world. For Bestor, “the older disciplines have emerged, and newer ones are emerging, as responses to man’s [*sic*] imperious need for that wide-ranging yet accurate comprehension which means power – power over himself [*sic*] and over all things else.”¹³ In the intervening years since Bestor’s argument, significant changes have been made in expanding the disciplines and cultivating new ways of thinking within school – including ways of thinking that question the centrality of man (as a universal subject) and his power “over all things else.”¹⁴

As such, I argue that trigger warnings are less a sign of the coddling of the American mind and more a sign of the continued challenges of doing the work of education as it comes to grapple with new bodies – literal bodies of students and their expanding bodies of knowledge. Trigger warnings, drawing on the expansion of who is in school, what and whose knowledge is taught, alongside the complex, often violent histories that are implicated in school, are central to uncoddling the American mind as it engages new and ever-emerging disciplines. This uncoddling is less about the minds of students who are in the midst of learning how to think and becoming subjects, but about adults who are unable to meet such requests as educational; interpreting such requests instead as political, as a sign of fragility, or a refusal to engage.

Trigger warnings may very well be political and therapeutic. However, there is also an educational ask present illustrating the role trigger warnings play in conserving the work of education. “Exactly for the sake of what is new and revolutionary in every child,” Hannah Arendt pointed out, “education must be conservative; it must preserve this newness and introduce it as a new thing into an old world.”¹⁵ Students coming into presence in the 21st century have access to information, representations, and more, differently than previous generations and this access is, in part, due to the expansion and proliferation of critical intellectual projects in the academy and beyond. Requests for trigger warnings are less evidence of “snowflakes” and a “coddling of the mind,” and more so evidence of decades of critical scholarship and activism coming into the classroom not only as “information,” but as ways of relating to the fragmentation of knowledge and becoming a subject of the 21st century. Such requests

illustrate a need to reinvent a language of education that responds both to the knowledges of difference and the ethics of meeting in the 21st century classroom. Students are, after all, bringing new ideas – rooted in traumatic histories and violent presents – that challenge the old world and assert new and radical perspectives. The old world, of course, will not simply go by the wayside as “adults,” often teachers, have a responsibility to help usher in students to the world and assist in preserving their newness. Those concerned with the “codding of the American mind,” are not so much providing a defense of liberal education, but refusing to recognize the work of education that is being asked in the very request for trigger warnings. Teachers have a responsibility to not bemoan the asks of students, but to listen to and hear such requests and refract such requests through the education relation – to help students interpret and make meaning within the ask itself.

AN EDUCATIONAL ASK

Trigger warnings, when read as educational asks then, are less signs of the end of education, but central to the work of imagining the future of education as an encounter with knowledge between humans meeting in space and time of contested histories and politics. “Schools of the future, no matter what their origin or allegiance will be called upon to do more than what is loosely called ‘community service’” according to Maxine Greene as “young people need to be coached, at the very least, in the skills required to cope with institutions, agencies of various kinds, family illnesses”¹⁶ Trigger warnings become, at least in my encounters with them in the classroom, opportunities to relate to students who are grappling with difficult knowledge and its embodied realities that have come into presence more and more. As schools have been opened up to more diverse populations, arguably a key legacy of twentieth century education reforms and the work of critical scholarship, the work of education evolves as well. Trigger warnings become sites to ponder the relations of education and, as Greene argued, “to ponder about the future of the school can only be to explore such moments, to expand the spaces where deepening and expanding conversation can take place and more and more meanings emerge.”¹⁷

Moving to the side of hyperbole and journalistic flair that situate students as fragile “snowflakes,” I ask, how are trigger warnings signs of an emerging and reimagined educational project that students are asking to join and re-orient?

Biesta offered some building blocks for such a project with the hope that the language he proposed “may function as critical reminders that education is, can be, and should be about something else and something more than what the learning managers, the learning facilitators, and the technicians of the new language of learning may want us to believe.”¹⁸ The building blocks of language assist in the work of designing education. After all, as Biesta articulated, “the language or languages we have available to speak about education determine to a large extent what can be said and done, and thus what cannot be said and done.”¹⁹ As contemporary educators, students, and scholars grapple with the concept of trigger warnings – pedagogically, curricularly, emotionally, administratively – can a language of education assist in making sense of and attend to the educational realities that trigger warnings are a component? Language – the words and concepts we use to shape, frame, and build the world – is central to how we are able to educate. In utilizing Biesta’s proposed language, I seek to move away from the rhetorically heightened discussions on trigger warnings – discussions that often draw on extreme cases – to think educationally about the work “triggers” ask amidst educational relations in their everydayness, not defined by snowflakes and emotional fragility – language that delegitimizes the ask being made.

THREE COMPONENTS TO A LANGUAGE OF EDUCATION

Biesta articulated three particular components to this new language: trust without ground, transcendental violence, and responsibility without knowledge. I summarize each of these briefly to utilize them as the foundation of thinking through trigger warnings as educational asks. I build on his initial building blocks to explore an educational project that attends to student becoming, expanding knowledges, and teacher responsibility encapsulated by the trigger warning. Such a project has risks as it wades into a politically fraught issue in the “here

and now” of schools, but my hope is to do justice to this educational issue within and through the work of education as opposed to the more prevalent therapeutic and political discourses. When trigger warnings are framed by and around, for instance, politics, they are devoid of education. After all, as Hannah Arendt noted “education can play no part in politics, because in politics, we always have to deal with those who are already educated.”²⁰ With trigger warnings, students are making an educational ask of adults – who are positioned as educated, those who “know” more by being adults, to join the world – a world students did not create – but one they seek to make anew.

The components to a language of education proposed by Biesta are provocative, in that they provoke readers to contemplate language that is outside the usual language used in education such as “standards” and “accountability,” “assessment” and “annual yearly progress,” or “competition” and “consumers.” I utilize Biesta’s work with pre-service teachers and engage the ways these three components provoke students; often initially their skepticism and later their own experimentation with how Biesta’s language of education expands their thinking and practice – extending how they think about and through educational relations. My suspicion in talking with students is that the language of education disrupts the comfort they more easily understand and have experienced around “learning.” While they could critique abstractly this language of learning, particularly its relationship with economic ideas of education, it was more challenging to imagine and try out alternative ways to talk about and frame the work of education in their material realities.

For Biesta “trust” was the first component of building a language of education. The language of learning, more often than not, organizes learning in rather simple, easily defined ways that are predictable and carefully set out. Yet, in experience, learning always entails a risk – a risk that one will not learn what one hopes, that one will learn something different one did not realize one wanted to learn, or that one may learn something one wished one had not learned at all. Learning, as such, entails risk and therefore, “one of the constituents of the educational relationship and of education itself is trust.”²¹ In education, notably learning, one does not and cannot know in advance what one will learn,

requiring that one trust the process and those one is in relationship with in the process, notably teachers. “Trust is,” for Biesta, “by its very nature without ground, because if one’s trust were grounded, that is, if one would know what was going to happen or how the person you have put your trust in the would act and respond, trust would no longer be needed.”²² Trust is needed, but it is not a blind trust. Rather, it is a “trust without ground” that recognizes the risk always present within the work of education that cannot always and everywhere be calculated.

Critics of trigger warnings note the ways such requests seek to deny the risks of learning by limiting what can be said and/or expressed. Yet, such an interpretation of the ask assumes that students fully understand the complexities of what they are asking. It assumes that teachers are engaging students who are already educated, as opposed to students working to join and intervene in the world they inhabit. To deny the educational ask of trigger warnings by bemoaning students as fragile, fails to not only recognize the trust that students place in teachers with the ask, but also fails to trust students that they make such asks from a generous and educational space.

Related to this, learning and its risks ask that we reframe “learning” to the side of its possessive metaphors to “see learning as a reaction to a disturbance, as an attempt to reorganize or reintegrate as a result of disintegration.”²³ Learning is responding to difference, to challenges, and the ways such work assists us in “coming into presence.”²⁴ “To come into presence means to come into presence in a social and intersubjective world, a world we share with others who are not like us.”²⁵ Allowing for the idea that education is concerned with subjectivity or “coming into presence” asks that there is attention given to difference and the unpleasantness and difficulty that is involved. For Biesta, this suggests that education involves experiences of transcendental violence. “It is violent,” he argued, “in that it doesn’t leave individuals alone, in that it asks difficult questions and creates difficult situations.”²⁶ Transcendental violence, as such, opens up the necessary space to recognize the difficulty of becoming a subject within the social world amongst subjects – people – that are different and the ways such difference unsettles and undoes.

The risks entailed in education – risks that one learns “something” and do so in relation to difference as one becomes a subject oneself – illustrate that teachers within such a framework carry immense responsibility. This is not merely being responsible for meeting the needs of one’s students or transmitting the necessary information, rather, as Biesta argued:

If teaching is about creating opportunities for the students to come into presence, if it is about asking difficult questions, then it becomes clear that the first responsibility of the teacher is a responsibility for the subjectivity of the student, for that which allows the student to be a unique singular being.²⁷

Such responsibility, however, is without knowledge. Knowing assumes that one knows what will come or what one is being responsible for. In the midst of difficulty and coming into presence though, knowledge becomes a technology applied in an attempt to make known the “strangeness” of education. As such it is without knowledge that responsibility emerges.

Across these three components, Biesta illuminates the importance of the teacher. Outside of the language of learning that rests on simplified ideas and eschews risk, Biesta’s alternative language re-invigorates the possibilities of teaching and what teachers could do within their role. “To expose students, learners, to otherness and difference and to challenge them to respond,” as Biesta concluded, “is therefore one of the most basic tasks for teachers and educators.”²⁸ Teachers’ professional judgment is put back into the central mix in Biesta’s language, not at the expense of students or knowledge but as vital to the work of education, as a relational enterprise.²⁹ With Biesta’s concept of “responsibility without knowledge,” teachers are on the front-lines of engaging the myriad issues trigger warnings bring to the educational encounter for the student making the ask and their peers. How teachers interpret the educational ask of trigger warnings matters and it matters that such interpretations engage languages of education tied to our contemporary moment.

BEYOND CODDLING

In the midst of a different moment, George Counts argued that “education as a force for social regeneration must march hand in hand with the living and creative forces of the social order.”³⁰ Trigger warnings – if understood through a language of education – are responding to the contemporary realities of living in the world that are implicated in histories that have invariably impacted different student populations in complicated ways. Trigger warnings, in my interpretation, are not simply an ask immediately embraced, but utilized to create conversations about how the rise of trigger warnings is responding to contemporary educational needs and realities. Decades of critical scholarship have not merely sought to coddle minds and protect students, but to help cultivate new expansive modes of interpretation and new intellectual projects that build on the old to create the new. For Michael Oakeshott, writing at the beginning of the 1960’s, amidst still different “interesting” conditions, argued:

Education properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversations. And it is this conversation which, in the end, gives place and character to every human activity and utterance.³¹

In my experience trigger warnings have been positioned within political discourses, which assume a relationship between educated subjects. Yet, students in schools are in the midst of their educations. In asking for trigger warnings, students are seeking to more fully join the conversations – bringing in their own knowledges and seeking to join, extend, and critique older forms of knowledge – but in a way that also attends to the impact such conversations have on the embodied experience. This ask is central to the work of education and such work entails risk, trust, and responsibility. The educational ask of trigger warnings is not an ask seeking to ignore truth or knowledge, but an ask implicating the relational realities of education; relations that include the content, the student, and the teacher working in and through information that has been fragmented

by, in the best sense, the proliferation of knowledges from the margins.

As students enter the old world via educational institutions with new methods and knowledges, so too do they enter with educational asks that attend to the need to change what happens within educational relations. For Maxine Greene, “The multiplication of dissonant voices and the proliferation of what used to be called ‘antisocial’ sub-cultures, the languages, the costumes, the symbolic codes and gestures, cannot be denied their reality nor their intrusive power.”³² Trigger warnings, far from coddling the American mind, are a tool, as yet fully formed, that attempts to uncuddle the American mind from its pasts so often romanticized or held onto, instead of revised and reimagined for twenty-first century relations that are more expansive and require new ways of becoming a subject. They intrude on existing power relations to think elsewhere and become differently within and through education.

1 Gert Biesta, “Against Learning: Reclaiming a Language for Education in an Age of Learning,” *Nordisk Pedagogik* 25, 54-66.

2 *Ibid.*, 58

3 *Ibid.*

4 Charles Bingham, *Authority is Relational: Rethinking Educational Empowerment* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009).

5 Greg Lukianoff & Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2018).

6 Greg Lukianoff & Jonathan Haidt, “The Coddling of the American Mind,” *The Atlantic*, September 2015.

7 Arthur Bestor, *Educational Wastelands: The Retreat from Learning in our Public Schools* (Urban, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1953).

8 *Ibid.*, 27.

9 *Ibid.*, 21.

10 *Ibid.*, 10.

11 *Ibid.*, 18.

12 *Ibid.*, 10.

13 *Ibid.*, 19.

14 See, for instance, Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984); Nathan Snaza & John Weaver, eds. *Posthumanism and Educational Research* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016); William Spanos, *End of Education: Toward Posthumanism* (Minneapolis, MN: University

of Minnesota Press, 1992).

15 Hannah Arendt “The Crisis in Education,” in *The Philosophy of Education: An Anthology*, ed. Randall Curren (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

16 Maxine Greene, “Imagining Futures: The Public School and Possibility,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 32, no. 2 (2000), 269.

17 Ibid., 258.

18 Gert Biesta, “Against Learning,” 64-65.

19 Ibid., 54.

20 Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education.”

21 Gert Biesta, “Against Learning,” 61

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 62.

25 Ibid., 62.

26 Ibid., 63.

27 Ibid., 63.

28 Ibid., 64.

29 See Gert Biesta, “What is Education For? On Good Education, Teacher Judgment, and Educational Professionalism,” *European Journal of Education* 50, no. 1 (2015): 75-87.

30 George Counts, “Dare the School Build a New Social Order,” in *The Curriculum Studies Reader* (4th Ed), eds. David J. Flinders and Stephen J. Thornton (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 46.

31 Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1991), 199.

32 Maxine Greene, “Imagining Futures,” 269.