Cornell Community Debates Merits of Trigger Warnings

By STEPHANIE YAN

On Sept. 11, 2014, Hannah Dancy’s ’17 chemistry professor demonstrated the chemical reaction that occurred in explosions during the 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers. Dancy, who is from Manhattan, said she felt uncomfortable with the in-class demonstration and said she thought “people in that room who might have lost someone” might have felt even worse.

“My mom and dad watched the towers fall,” she said. “My mom still has really bad [post-traumatic stress disorder] from it. I was like, ‘I didn’t want to see that.’”

Before Dancy’s professor showed a slide about the demonstration, she said he had not warned students that they were about to see potentially upsetting material. This type of notification — commonly referred to as a trigger warning — lets students know in advance about topics that could cause negative emotional reactions. The warning allows students to prepare themselves mentally or excuse themselves from discussing a triggering topic.

Garnering National Headlines

Trigger warnings have garnered significant media attention lately, with many articles focusing specifically on the role these warnings should play in higher education.

An article published in The Atlantic in September argued that protecting students from upsetting material “prepares them poorly for professional life, which often demands
intellectual engagement with people and ideas one might find uncongenial or wrong.”

Allowing students to see triggering material in classes without a warning could also act as exposure therapy — a process used to treat anxiety disorders by exposing people to their source of anxiety in small doses, the article argued.

However, responding to The Atlantic piece in an op-ed in The New York Times, Prof. Kate Manne, philosophy, defended her use of trigger warnings and said she has been using trigger warnings since she began to lecture.

By providing students a simple warning about potentially uncomfortable or sensitive topics ahead of time in the syllabus, Manne wrote that she hopes students are prepared for any emotional responses they may have and can better interact with course material.

“The thought behind trigger warnings isn’t just that these states are highly unpleasant (although they certainly are),” Manne wrote in the column. “It’s that they temporarily render people unable to focus, regardless of their desire or determination to do so. Trigger warnings can work to prevent or counteract this.”

Beyond the positive or negative effects of trigger warnings on the mental health of students, however, the debate surrounding trigger warning usage has extended to its implications with free speech. Some people worry that fear of showing potentially triggering material could hinder free speech, while others argued that trigger warnings create environments that better allow free speech.

In a meeting with reporters last month, President Elizabeth Garrett said while she “would never require” professors to warn students about triggers, she believes professors’ freedom to teach certain topics was inextricably tied to their freedom of speech.

“If they wish to do that, they have that right,” Garrett said. “If they wish not to do that, they also, in my view, have that right.”

‘This is the polite thing to do’

While Manne wrote that trigger warnings began on the Internet as a way to accommodate users with PTSD, Prof. David Pizarro, psychology, said that they have been around for a much longer time.

“I think professors have been aware that this is the polite thing to do for quite some time,” Pizarro said. “Ever since major academic institutions have had professors teach about things that are sensitive, kind and patient and good professors have tried to [warn their students].”

Explaining the use of the term “trigger,” Pizarro said it was used to account for a wide range of responses, but that the vagueness of the term had led to more debate on the topic.

“‘Trigger’ is a word we use to label when somebody does anything from becoming upset that a discussion is being had, all the way to having full-blown panic attacks or extreme anxiety,” Pizarro said. “It’s attempting to capture a whole wide range of discomfort.”

Prof. Julia Markovits, philosophy, specified that a trigger is linked to trauma.

A trigger is “a graphic or detailed depiction or discussion of a common cause of trauma … that may induce an extremely unpleasant, disorienting emotional and physical reaction in someone who has experienced such trauma,” Markovits said.

Student Reactions to Trigger Warnings

Just as academics and administrators have debated the topic, Cornell students have also remained split on the use of trigger warnings.

Sarah Zumba ’18, who defined triggers as something that causes “any kind of negative reaction, in your own personal version of what ‘negative’ means,” said she does not believe the argument against trigger warnings made sense. In particular, she said The Atlantic’s reasoning that trigger warnings were “coddling” the minds of college
students “doesn’t make any sense.”

“They don’t have control over what might be triggering,” Zumba said. “You’re not coddling them [by providing trigger warnings], you’re preventing them from going through an ordeal.”

Dancy’s chemistry class was one of many small incidents of professors bringing up potentially triggering material in class. Students also expressed discomfort with graphic slides in anatomy classes and discussions of mental illness.

Rowan Garrison ’17 also expressed discomfort over professors “brushing over racism and sexism” in class.

“Professors shouldn’t talk about mental illnesses or rape in class in a way that they think nobody in the class has been affected,” Garrison said.

However, Julius Kairey ’15, a former Sun opinion columnist, said students sometimes use the label of “trigger” simply to avoid topics they dislike. He added that discussing sensitive topics in class is an opportunity for students to expose themselves to a variety of viewpoints.

“It’s important that students deal with material that they might find objectionable, just so that they’re able to learn how other people think,” Kairey said.

“Trigger warnings are increasingly being applied to material that isn’t objectionable to a large percentage of students,” Kairey said. “They’re being used by just a few students to try and rid syllabi of material that they find personally offensive.”

While the debate about triggers has centered on the effect warnings may have on the quality of higher education and free speech, many professors and students argue that warnings should simply be a common courtesy in class.

Pizarro said that professors should aim to be able to discuss potentially triggering topics in a way that makes students comfortable.

“Any good professor ought to be sensitive to the fact that they might talk about distressing or disturbing things,” he said.

Manne also argued that while professors cannot predict every time some material may prove triggering for a student, that it was simple enough to avoid topics that are likely to cause stress or trauma for a student.

“It’s important to respect what other people want to see or can see without having some sort of panic attack or anxiety,” said Robert Chirco ’18.