

Information and Tips on Handling Content Notes in Teaching



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What are Content Notes?

In university teaching, content notes provide information about sensitive, disturbing or unsettling content in teaching material and help to prepare students with traumata and psychological conditions for this potentially distressing content. Being confronted with accounts of sexualized or racial discrimination and violence¹ can cause strong emotional reactions, panic attacks or temporary dissociation in persons who have been personally exposed to such situations. Content notes therefore allow students to make an informed and conscious decision as to how best prepare themselves for such content.

Content notes help to build trust in the University as an inclusive place of teaching. If you as a teacher make it clear that you are committed to pointing out material that could potentially shock or retraumatize students, this will help students who due to personal experience may at first have inhibitions sharing highly personal details of their mental health or suffered traumatas with a teacher. It can indicate to students that their experiences are being taken seriously and are not being judged. Content notes thus help to break down stigmas and promote inclusion, allowing a seminar to be seen as a safe space in which students are willing to confront challenging content rather than avoiding it.

“Trigger warnings” for very challenging and distressing content that can potentially cause retraumatizing flashbacks in people with post-traumatic stress disorder are already widespread in visual media and on social networks. However, we deliberately use the term “content notes” as they are broader in scope than trigger warnings and avoid the word “warning” with its emotionalizing effect. Content notes not only indicate content potentially triggering flashbacks but also content which could be perceived as discriminatory, offensive or degrading and therefore could negatively impact an open and tolerant learning atmosphere. Employing content notes increases the likelihood of being able to discuss certain teaching content as well as difficult and sensitive topics respectfully and considerately, such as sexist-stereotypical gender roles in case studies and the use of the “N-word” in original source material. This helps to foster a more inclusive teaching environment, where “inclusive” is in the broad, intersectional sense of the word.

Content notes can also help lecturers consider in advance how they can prepare their content for students and whether it can be suitably adapted for students who might have difficulties accessing it. Content notes encourage teachers to reflect on how they choose teaching content and enable them to be well prepared for tackling critical debates which are essential parts of university teaching.

Suggested wordings for content notes

Of course, it will not always be possible to identify all potential triggers and notify students about them. If you as a teacher would like to use content notes, you should notify your students accordingly as soon as possible. For example, you can communicate content notes via seminar schedules or course information in BASIS, in group emails sent to all students taking a module, in reading lists, in personalized emails or verbally.

¹ There are additional categories which may cause discrimination, e.g. homophobia or ableism.

Suggested wording that introduces the issue of critical content in general terms:

Our seminar offers an open space for the critical and civil exchange of ideas. Some of the reading matter and other teaching materials on this course will contain themes that could be perceived as discriminative and/or (re)traumatic. I will do my best to inform you as my students about any potentially shocking content in good time. I would also ask all my students to help me foster an atmosphere of mutual respect and sensitivity.

Suggested wording for highlighting potentially unsettling content as part of a series on a particular topic:

The content of and discussions held on this course will inevitably deal with racism on a weekly basis. Much of it has the potential to be an emotional and intellectual strain, which needs to be addressed. I will be giving you advance notice of any particularly challenging or intense content that discusses or constitutes racism. I would like to ask you to help me create a space here in which we can address difficult content in a matter-of-fact way.

As event series and courses will not necessarily contain unsettling content in every session, it is a good idea to point it out explicitly or remind students of what has been said previously before the session in which the material in question is to be used:

In the next seminar session/lecture, we are likely to be discussing the sexual assaults depicted in the penultimate chapter of XXX. This content and its discussion can be perceived as shocking or may retraumatize. If you feel that you might be affected in this way, please do let me know.

If specific notes are required for certain material, an idea might be to indicate this on the seminar schedule next to the material assigned to it. You can do this by labeling topics to be addressed in a particular text, video, lecture or discussion.

Example:

August 16 – reading: reading matter XY, chapters 1 to 4

Tags: racism, racist expressions, violence

More strategies for handling sensitive teaching content

Needless to say, however, content notes are not the only way to address distressing or unsettling content. Measures such as the following can also help students to approach challenging content:

- Try to comprehensively introduce and embed potentially shocking or retraumatizing content, e.g. by elaborating on historical context.

- Give them the opportunity to look at the teaching material already before the actual course takes place. Students may find it easier to tackle it in a safe space beforehand rather than when they are surrounded by other people.
- Consider making subtitles available when showing videos: some content is easier to watch if you read the subtitles rather than listening to the sound.
- You can also use written descriptions of images instead of the actual visual content if necessary.
- When you are discussing unsettling content, it could be helpful to ask students from time to time whether they need a break. If necessary, tell your students to take the vulnerability of their classmates into account when preparing to give papers or presentations.

References

[Inhaltshinweise zu sexualisierter Diskriminierung und Gewalt als Thematik im Lehrkontext der Landeskonferenz der Gleichstellungsbeauftragten der Hochschulen und Universitätsklinika des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen – LaKof NRW \(Handreichung\). \[Guide to Content Notes on Sexualized Discrimination and Violence as an Issue in the Teaching Context of the State Conference of Gender Equality Commissioners of the Universities and University Hospitals in the State of North Rhine-Westphalia – LaKof NRW\]\(\). \(Handout\).](#)

Suggestions for writing content notes are based on the following:

[Inclusive Teaching University of Michigan \(2017\): An Introduction to Content Warnings and Trigger Warnings.](#)

[Centre for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo: Trigger Warnings. Online Ressource.](#)

Further Reading

Bentley, Michelle (2017): Trigger warnings and the student experience. In: *Learning and Teaching in Politics and International Studies*. Vol. 37 (4).

[Gust, Onni \(2016\): I use trigger warnings – but I’m not mollycoddling my students. In: *The Guardian*.](#)

[Hanlon, Aaron R. \(2015\): My Students Need Trigger Warnings – and Professors Do, Too. In: *The New Republic*.](#)

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