

G10 Denbig 1 Thursday 6 December 9.00 -9.30

Beyond The Trigger Warning: Staff and Student Experiences of Potentially Emotionally Sensitive Topics in Higher Education (0207)

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Learning is a fundamentally social phenomenon¹ which rarely occurs outwith the context of emotion². This is particularly apparent in the teaching of potentially emotionally sensitive topics (PESTs). To date, writing in this field has centred around personal accounts^{3 4}, alongside the polarised debate on the use of trigger warnings^{5 6 7}. Recent research on trigger warnings highlights that their use is often reserved for traumatic topics (e.g. child abuse) rather than sensitive topics such as socio-economic status⁸. It has also shown that students have mixed views on their use⁹.

Our research responds to the need for greater detail on which aspects of teaching are potentially or actually distressing for students, what actions staff take to support students, and which particular student cohorts might particularly benefit from such actions. It also addresses the question of how staff and students experience the teaching of potentially emotionally sensitive topics, across a range of different learning contexts.

1 Wenger, 2018

2 Hascher, 2010

3 Caswell (2010)

4 Rae (2016)

5 Gust (2016)

6 Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015

7 For helpful overview see Wyatt (2016)

8 Boysen et al., 2018

9 Bentley et al., 2017

Drawing on Hascher's¹⁰ framework of learning and emotion we developed a mixed-methods study of undergraduate and postgraduate arts, humanities, and social science (AHSS) students in one university, studying courses we identified as containing PESTs. Following Caswell (2010), we adopted the definition of a sensitive topic as one which "involves potential costs to those participating...go[ing] beyond the incidental or merely onerous"¹¹, mindful that this would include topics which may evoke previous trauma as well as those sensitive to particular groups. The research questions were:

- How do staff and students experience the teaching of PESTs?
- To what extent are demographic factors associated with the extent to which students perceive their courses as potentially or personally distressing?
- What support is put in place for students studying PESTs, and what are students' views on this?

Methods

Questionnaire

917 AHSS students taking one of 219 courses identified as containing teaching on a PEST participated. Data were collected via an online questionnaire gathering information on: demographics; the extent to which elements of the course were experienced as potentially or actually distressing; support that students recalled teaching staff offering; and views on ways this support could be further developed. Questions were mainly closed format, though there were opportunities for students to provide comments about their experiences.

Interview

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 staff and 15 students. Staff were tutors or course organisers for one of the 219 courses, from a range of subject areas, modes of delivery (online/ on campus), and in roles from postgraduate tutor to professor. The students similarly represented a range of disciplines, modes and stages of studying (undergraduate and postgraduate). They were selected from those who left contact details on the survey; balance was sought in terms of responses to the survey questions. All staff and 12 of the student interviews were face-to-face, the remainder were by telephone/Skype. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. They were analysed using a thematic approach¹². All team members developed the coding frame, drawing initially on the same four transcripts and this was then further developed through the constant comparative method¹³. Approval was received from the university's ethics committee.

10 Hascher (2010)

11 Lee & Renzetti (1993: 9)

12 Braun & Clarke, 2006

13 Miles & Huberman, 1994

Findings

Many students considered at least one element of their course to be potentially (84%) or actually (53%) distressing. The average level of distress was very low. Lectures and seminars were viewed as potentially more distressing than reading and assignments, although average distress levels were low for all elements. Of the 756 who felt that their course had contained teaching on PESTs, the majority (n = 627, 84%) reported at least one action that staff had taken (e.g. whole class warnings, information in course handbook, debrief, and information on support organisations) and only 129 (17%) said that no action had been taken. Some of these students reported that they felt that no action was necessary, as the topic had not been extremely emotionally sensitive, whilst a small number felt that action should have been taken. Comparison of female and male students showed that female students considered their courses as more potentially and actually distressing than did the male students. Potential differences between undergraduate and postgraduate students will also be explored.

Our analysis of the interviews shows that identifying PESTs was not always straightforward, though they included topics that were traumatic (e.g. sexual violence) and those which under-represented or misrepresented a minority identity. Multiple factors (e.g. group size, classroom environment, pedagogical approach) determined which particular teaching was experienced as emotionally challenging. Seminars and online environments were potentially problematic because of the behaviour/words of other students. The balance of staff and student responsibility in managing situations including PESTs was also highlighted. All students and staff thought Universities had a responsibility to teach important PEST topics, with nothing 'off limits', and some noting the importance of 'discomfort' in learning. There were multiple examples of tutors carefully considering PESTs in relation to course design, classroom atmosphere, and teaching approach, and many students reported skilful handling of the teaching. For both staff and students, 'safe space' meant a place where it was possible to express difficult or contentious views, and staff discussed how they managed these interactions. The use of trigger warnings in a nuanced, low-key way was seen by almost all as helpful, appropriate, and uncontentious.

Discussion

The dominant theme was of academic staff often highly attuned to potential issues and developing their practice in this area, all based on careful reflection, and a care for the students both emotionally and in terms of their academic development. This care was recognised by many students, although suggestions for development of teaching practice were highlighted. Contrary to what might be predicted from the recent media coverage of the topic, levels of student distress were often very low. However, for a very small number of students there was greater distress, for example related to previous trauma. Importantly, though, no topic that was considered 'off limits' at university by any member of staff or student. Indeed, there was a very strong view that universities are the one place where such topics can and should be discussed.

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