Risky Triggers

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Abstract: Risk-taking in honors education entails not only anxiety about grades and intellectually disturbing ideas but also painful emotional responses to course materials. Rather than censoring such "dangerous" materials, faculty should compassionately encourage vulnerable students to acknowledge their pain safely in an open and accepting classroom atmosphere.

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Andrew J. Cognard-Black is spot-on when he defends the liberal idea of intellectual risk-taking and searches for ways to help honors students feel "safe" both from grade stress and from philosophical "threats" to their beliefs. He aptly cites James H. Robertson's assertion that the "classroom experience must pose a threat" and that honors students want "to question and to reexamine."

In my college days, I was struck by a classmate's need to obtain special dispensation from his priest in order to take our French class because it included Voltaire's *Candide*. Was this novel so dangerous to Catholics—with all of Voltaire, it was then on the Index of forbidden books—because it included fornicating priests and corrupt Jesuits? Or because of its satiric portrayal of the Inquisition? Or because it questioned whether everything was ordained by God for the good? Here was an example of intellectual threat, and I, as a student eager for such threat, was unsympathetic.

Currently, however, other threats besides loss of status or intellectual discomfort have come to the attention of educators, especially in the humanities and social sciences. What if a student who has experienced sexual assault comes across a rape scene in a novel and feels a revivified sense of trauma? What if a case study in a sociology class triggers painful childhood memories of a sibling's death from a random gunshot? What if a political science discussion of

tribalism opens up an excruciating, emotionally devastating wound in a Rwandan refugee? What if an African American student encounters the n-word in a class text that is so offensive that s/he withdraws from the class?

As teachers we seldom know the extent of any such traumatic experience in our students' past. We may well include emotional "triggers" in our class materials and presentations that evoke painful reverberations in individual students. What are we to do? Obviously we cannot actively ferret out such hidden sensitivities. Do we act as if they do not exist? Do we continue the tradition of remaining willfully ignorant of them but respond sympathetically if a student reveals a hidden trauma in a paper or journal or even in class? Should we refer such a student to psychological services? Do we self-censor and exclude materials that might be disturbing? Do we take into account the possible existence of trauma, search our course materials for any "triggers," and, with well-intentioned compassion, warn students in advance with a sort of disclaimer? On a line in a syllabus below the listing for Toni Morrison's *Beloved* shall we warn students that this work "contains scenes of infanticide and extreme violence"? Certainly some administrators are beginning to ask for such advance warnings. But how can we cover all the bases, all the possibilities of offense or reawakened trauma?

Or do we have faith in our students' strength of mind? Do we create a classroom atmosphere in which a degree of intellectual distance or dispassion allows students to confront extremely painful material? Do we encourage students to be open even to hurt in order to grow larger, more expansive inside? Can we create a tone of safety for this freedom to explore, no matter where it takes us? Shall we openly discuss the issue of triggers at the outset of a course and during it as needed?

Cognard-Black again strikes a chord when he urges us to enter a course with the assumption that students can and will succeed rather than that they "must prove that they're not failures." In other words, we should create a climate of hope and nurture rather than fear. The result? Safety. Not only intellectual but also emotional safety. In such a safe environment, students can be free to read anything, hear anything, and voice anything. Let us bring explicitly into classroom discussion the challenge of potentially painful course materials.

Student blossoming in safe conditions became clear to me early in my teaching career when, in my freshman honors colloquium, I always required a creative project to be presented at the end of the year. Students enjoyed wide latitude in designing it but had to have a proposal approved in advance.

Because the students in the class had been together for the entire year, they had developed a degree of comfort and collaboration, the latter including producing a booklet of their best writing that also included some fun at my expense. Intensive reading, personal as well as analytical essay topics, and freewheeling class discussion—all in an atmosphere of acceptance and mutual encouragement—enabled some striking results in the creative projects.

One year a budding folksinger used the occasion to write a song and perform it with guitar for the class. It soon became dramatically apparent that she was using the song to come out of the closet as a lesbian, certainly a courageous act in the 1970s. Another year, two Korean American young pre-med students, who had always felt a bit different from the rest of the class because they were in an accelerated six-year BS/MD program and because they were culturally "other," collaborated and performed a traditional Korean dance with costumes and music.

The triggers that some students may encounter in a class they will also encounter in life outside the class, usually without advance warning. I prefer to trust their intelligence in dealing with their demons in a free, open, and nurturing learning environment, a space safe enough for them to take on emotional as well as intellectual risks.

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