LLS Departmental Guidance on Content Warnings

Content warnings (or 'content notes') are used to highlight content that could potentially be distressing to some individuals. Issuing content warnings might be appropriate in some teaching, e.g. an entire module might regularly deal with difficult subject matter, or there might be certain lectures/seminars or materials that this might be relevant for.

Content warnings are not used to constrain or censor what we teach, but give fair warning of difficult topics and help students take responsibility for their learning by allowing them to prepare in advance. It is not always possible to preempt which topics could be potentially distressing, but certain themes are likely to be particularly difficult for some individuals, e.g. violence, sexual assault, abuse, death, hateful language or behaviour (e.g. racist, sexist, homophobic or transphobic language/behaviour), suicide, mental health issues, miscarriages, abortion, and animal cruelty, among others.

Module-level (or course-level) content warnings

Certain modules or CPD courses in LLS regularly deal with difficult subject matter, e.g. materials from criminal cases, recordings/transcripts of interactions that took place in difficult circumstances, or materials relating to controversial societal issues. Such modules/courses lend themselves to a content warning. It would be useful to include this on the module information page (and in any module information videos) so that students are aware of this when selecting their modules for the following year. You should also provide a content warning at the outset of the course:

- In the module information sheet and the first lecture, give a written warning that the module deals with difficult material and describe (in general terms) the nature of this material.
- You might also inform students that you will endeavour to provide further content warnings before potentially distressing materials are presented (NB: we recognise that it is not always possible to predict when material will be distressing for someone).
- It is helpful to also advise students who they should approach if they need further support - i.e., the module tutor (for queries regarding the course content or attendance) or Open Door/Wellbeing Officers (for wellbeing support).

Material-specific content warnings

Even within modules that do not require a module-level content warning, it might be appropriate to give content warnings before presenting specific materials (e.g. texts, images, videos, audio files) that could be distressing to some students. In these cases:

- Give a brief written warning and (where appropriate) verbal content warning in advance of presenting the material.
  - If you know that a particular class will be dealing with material that could be upsetting for some students, you might wish to warn them further in advance, e.g. via a VLE announcement the week before, as well as at the start of the

session.
- Written warnings should be placed in a prominent place, e.g. on a lecture slide before introducing the content, and/or on the VLE site next to the content itself. ○ If the material you need to warn about is a reading, you can use the electronic reading list to add 'public notes' where you can add content warnings.
- When giving a verbal content warning, leave a sufficient time gap between the warning and presenting the material.
- Let students know that they can leave the session at any point if they need to. If it is an online session, you could let the students know that they are welcome to turn their camera off as needed.
- You can also encourage students to contact you via email or office hours to discuss the content.
- Allowing students the chance to access the materials in their own time afterwards is useful, as those who had to leave the session can return to the content later.

Examples of content warnings from the LLS department

<u>Module-level:</u>

This module deals with language as it is used by real speakers and writers in real-world situations. In many cases the language forms we will encounter in the module are taboo terms (slurs, insults, swearwords, slang terms, etc.) with the potential to cause offence. On other occasions it is the situation in which the language was produced, rather than the language itself, which is unpleasant or disturbing. Sometimes it is both simultaneously.

Linguists are language professionals who can and should be expected to work with language in all its many guises, just as professionals in other fields are expected to be able to cope with things they may at times find objectionable, unpleasant, or 'triggering'. The content of this module is such that participants will on occasion be exposed to linguistic material that relates to violent and/or sexual crime, discrimination of a variety of types (ethnic, religious, gender-based, homophobic, ableist, etc.), verbal abuse, spoken and written threats, and so forth.

It goes without saying that we wish to avoid inducing any discomfort, distress or trauma in module participants wherever we can. If during the taught sessions you feel that you wish to leave the meeting owing to particularly sensitive content, you are very welcome to do so. Please also let the module tutors know if you have found any content unusually troubling.

(Dom Watt, Sarah Lapacz & Paul Drew)

<u>Specific session:</u>

The practical session this week focuses on an excerpt from a US trial for rape, in which the victim is being cross-examined, as a witness, by the defense attorney. In preparation for the session, you're asked to identify strategies each uses. Although this phase of the

cross-examination is not about the alleged rape itself, nor even about the evening of the incident – the witness is asked about a time when she met the defendant, several months before – it is nevertheless about the kind of crime that you might, quite understandably, rather not discuss. If that is the case, you need not participate in this session. Please email [name], who can arrange with you how you want to handle things, e.g. you could submit your work on this task asynchronously instead, or you could discuss with [name] some alternative work.

<div align="right">(Paul Drew)</div>

Specific content:

This text is about domestic violence. Some of the injuries inflicted and the trauma suffered are mentioned in the text below. You may prefer not to read this text and not complete the non-formally assessed task. This is perfectly understandable. As the module covers a wide range of topics, rest assured that you will have many other opportunities to practice your reading comprehension as well as your debating skills.

<div align="right">(Géraldine Enjelvin)</div>

Caution: the paper contains material relating to the investigation and prosecution of a large number of murders and sexual crimes, and there is a possibility that you may find some of it disturbing. The text files provided for your analysis in Section A of the paper are transcripts of letters which are known to have been written by a hoaxer who had nothing to do with the violent crimes themselves, however. The invented transcription of the cross-examination of a witness in Section B is one you have been shown before. If you wish, we can provide an alternative version of the paper from which these sections have been removed.

<div align="right">(Dom Watt, Sarah Lapacz & Paul Drew)</div>

Further information

- UoY Inclusive Teaching, Learning and Assessment Policy
- For guidance on using content warnings in social media posts, see the section 'Consider whether you need a warning' on the UoY Library's Social Media Skills Guide

July 2021