



CUSU Disabled Students' Campaign

'Content Notes': Guidance for Faculties & Departments

Introduction

A content note is a verbal or written notice that precedes potentially sensitive content. Content notes flag content which may be distressing (to anyone – particularly to those with related experiences), and/or triggering (to those with PTSD¹ or similar mental health conditions), giving people the opportunity to prepare themselves in an informed way to engage with the upcoming material. Content notes are sometimes referred to as 'trigger warnings' or 'content warnings'; this guide uses 'content notes' (CNs) as a more neutral and general descriptive term.

Content notes are not intended to mark a particular piece of material as “do not read,” that is, to encourage disengagement with that material; on the contrary, the purpose of a CN is to serve a part of the goal of enabling all students to engage in their education on an equal footing, by indicating in advance to any student who might find

¹ Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, an anxiety disorder initiated by the experience of a traumatic event. The NHS England GP patient survey, as reported in House of Commons Briefing Paper 6988 (April 25th 2018), found that 3.7% of men and 5.1% of women screened positive for PTSD, but that this increases to 12.6% for women aged 16-24, suggesting that students with PTSD are likely to make up a notable portion of most cohorts.

particular topics triggering or distressing that such topics will arise in a given piece of material. These students are thereby enabled to take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that they are prepared to engage with a given piece of material safely and with minimal psychological distress².

It should be noted that there is a difference between 'psychological distress' and being intellectually challenged, and that the former is distinct from (and certainly not a prerequisite to) the latter. Arguments against the use of content notes tend to employ a rhetoric of "snowflake students" needing to be protected and coddled from the harsh realities of life; we hope it goes without saying that such rhetoric is, at best, entirely misguided. Students are best prepared to deal with intellectually challenging material when they are enabled to manage any emotional/psychological distress that such material may well provoke; content notes aid, rather than avoiding, engagement with intellectually challenging material. Moreover, the issue arising for a large number of students – particularly those with PTSD – is precisely that the traumatic content of material they engage with reflects traumatic experiences they themselves have experienced; rather than a need to be "protected from life's harsh realities", the problem is often that students are required to relive their own experiences³ of those very realities in the classroom without preparation or warning, simply in order to access their own education. The use of CNs can go a long way towards preventing or mitigating these often very avoidable instances of harm and distress.

² For further reading, we recommend this article by Nottingham University lecturer Dr Onni Gust: <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2016/jun/14/i-use-trigger-warnings-but-im-not-mollycoddling-my-students>

³ For those with PTSD, to 'relive' their experiences is often more literal than the term might imply; they may experience panic attacks, dissociation, and flashbacks which can involve extreme bodily responses along with the sensory and psychological experience of reliving traumatic events.

Legal requirements: content notes as a reasonable adjustment for disabled students

The Equality Act 2010 serves as a legal provision protecting those with 'protected characteristics' from direct and indirect discrimination. The part of the Act which is particularly relevant in reference to CNs is Section 20: Duty to make adjustments. Section 20 sets out that legally, there is a requirement "where a provision, criterion or practice puts a disabled person at a substantial disadvantage in relation to a relevant matter in comparison with persons who are not disabled, to take such steps as it is reasonable to have to take to avoid the disadvantage."⁴ The duty to make reasonable adjustments is anticipatory; as the University's Code of Practice states, "the University should not wait until adjustments are proposed, rather look to ensure, where possible, that alterations to policies, practices and procedures have been made in advance to prevent disabled students suffering substantial disadvantage. The anticipatory duty would extend to a requirement to anticipate specific adjustments which might be required for an individual student, including to examinations, without a specific request from them."⁵

Our position in the case of students with PTSD, and indeed with other mental health conditions arising from or linked to traumatic experiences, is that provision of CNs constitutes a 'reasonable adjustment' in the terms of the Act. Where CNs are not provided, students with PTSD may indeed face 'substantial disadvantage' in comparison to their non-disabled peers, in that they are being forced to face potentially triggering or otherwise psychologically distressing material without warning as part of their education. The anticipatory nature of the duty means that it is not enough to warn individual students only after they have requested this adjustment,

⁴ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents> - for further guidance on how the Equality Act 2010 applies in a Higher Education context, see <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/equalityact2010-technicalguidance-feandhe-2015.pdf>

⁵ https://www.disability.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/code_of_practice_17-18.pdf - updated yearly

but instead that CNs should be proactively put into place, taking the onus off students to repeatedly and unnecessarily disclose their trauma or disability. We recognise that it is impossible to anticipate every possible trigger which might cause issue to every possible disabled student, in that psychiatrically, many individuals with PTSD can be triggered by seemingly innocuous content; however, it is absolutely possible to recognise that certain obvious themes can reasonably be considered common and predictable as potentially triggering/traumatic. We therefore consider the provision of CNs for these themes a legal duty under the Equality Act 2010 as part of the anticipatory duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled students.

Beyond disability: a brief note on content notes as an equality & diversity principle

As part of a commitment to equality and diversity in teaching, we believe that content notes can play a crucial role in proactively helping to level the playing field for minority students of all kinds. Explicit recognition of the different standpoints and experiences from which different students approach particular topics and themes is important in recognising potential disparities; a text detailing graphic misogynistic violence, or violent racism, for example, is likely to be more emotionally taxing to engage with for female students or students of colour accordingly. It is, of course, essential to engage with these kinds of difficult topics in a wide variety of academic contexts. Content notes, therefore, can aid in providing a more equally accessible education for students who face discrimination of all kinds, by enabling them – as with disabled students above – to prepare themselves in advance to tackle topics which might naturally prove more emotionally challenging for them than for their peers from different backgrounds.

Inclusive teaching and learning: the current Cambridge context

The University's upcoming Education Strategy for 2019 onwards places a great deal of weight on issues of inclusive teaching and learning, with inclusivity and diversity among the core values set out in the Strategy. The Disability Resource Centre, General Board, and Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning are working in collaboration at present on the process of developing and implementing inclusive teaching and learning policy and practice and 'universal design for learning', facilitating a move away from the resource-intensive model of individual needs-based adjustments for disabled students.⁶ This development takes multiple forms, including a move towards increased recognition for areas of the University which show initiative and innovation in implementing policy and practice in line with inclusive teaching and learning principles. Within this context, the implementation of content notes can serve as an important part of a proactive effort on the part of faculties and departments to reflect and develop these principles within their own specific academic contexts.

⁶The impetus for this direction arises in part from the continual increase in students who have disclosed disability to the University. In July 2018 the number of students registered with the Disability Resource Centre stood at 3017, representing around 15% of the overall student body. 805 of these students disclosed a mental health condition, a category which rose by 35% between 2016-7 and 2017-8 in comparison with a general disclosure rise of 25%, indicating the importance of a particular focus on mental health conditions as part of developing inclusive teaching and learning practices, and further underlining the importance of content notes.

Practical guidance and recommendations

It's important to note that a vague/unspecific CN is often just as unhelpful as no CN at all. Warning for "distressing themes" or "upsetting content" or similar, with no expansion on what exactly these themes will be, does not enable students to adequately prepare themselves to deal with triggering topics. When given vague CNs, students must choose to either disengage (likely disadvantaging them in their education) or risk their wellbeing by engaging with a text/lecture/etc that they know might be triggering or distressing, without having been given enough information to do so in an informed and prepared way. For CNs to be effective, they must be specific.

Whether or not to provide a CN for any given content is often a common-sense issue, particularly in the case of graphic imagery or description. We've provided a non-exhaustive list of themes which are likely to need CNs here below. It's also worth noting that expanding slightly in your CN is often very useful; for example, a text which mentions sexual assault but does not go into particular detail might be flagged "content note: mentions of sexual assault," while a text with detailed graphic scenes might be flagged "content note: graphic descriptions of sexual assault." General themes of racism, for example, might be present in many texts; it's still worth providing a content note, but it's even more crucial to warn specifically for descriptions of representations of violent incidences of racism, racial slurs, etc.

Content which is likely to require a CN might include:

- rape and/or sexual assault

- abuse (both physical and emotional)
- child abuse/paedophilia/incest
- death (especially when distressing, violent, result of murder or suicide, etc.)
- representations of mental health issues such as self-harm, disordered eating (especially when represented in detail/in a graphic way)
- explicit sexual/pornographic content
- abortion and miscarriage
- discrimination/bigotry of any kind: racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, etc. (this might include specific warnings for slurs or specific incidences such as violent hate crime, or might simply flag the presence of these themes – discussed, or represented – within material)

There are a wide variety of ways to implement CNs, and some may be more or less appropriate depending on course structure and content, teaching style, material format, etc. Below are some examples of practices which may be appropriate.

- **Blanket notices** – an indication that a significant proportion of a paper, lecture series, etc. will deal with certain themes. It may be appropriate to include these on a departmental website and/or tripos handbook alongside course descriptions, include them in initial communications to students taking a particular lecture series before it starts, etc.
- **Text notices** – an indication of the themes covered in a specific text. These should generally be included alongside core and recommended texts in reading lists.
 - If a particular section of a text is significantly more distressing, it may be worth flagging this specifically, for example “content note for themes of

intimate partner abuse and sexual assault, including one graphic scene of sexual assault described over pages 50-55.”

- In certain cases, it may be appropriate to signpost students to alternative texts, or to provide a summary or overview of a particular section of a text so that students who prefer not to read a given section can still engage with the material as a whole.

- **Email notices** – if an upcoming lecture will include particularly distressing material, particularly video- or image-based, it is recommended to flag this in advance via email.

- **Verbal notices** – it may be appropriate to verbally flag content in advance during a class or lecture, such as noting that an upcoming slide will include particular content, or that the second half of the lecture will discuss certain themes.
 - It's important to note that in-class verbal content notes are most effective when a blanket notice or other advance warning has already been put in place. Students who find certain content triggering may be able to prepare themselves to tackle it in advance when they have already been made aware that it may come up in a certain class; however they may feel cornered if the material is warned for only once that class has begun, as they may feel unprepared but also unable to remove themselves from the class for fear of missing important material or of being singled out or judged for leaving or disengaging.

We recommend that this document, along with any further existing guidance that may be relevant, be circulated regularly (at least annually and/or to new members of teaching staff in the faculty/department), included in any teaching staff guidance already present on faculty/department websites or within Moodle, and added to existing faculty/department training of teaching staff. This document can also be accessed on the Disabled Students' Campaign website:

<https://www.disabled.cusu.cam.ac.uk/content-notes-guidance/>.

We further recommend that steps be taken to ensure that students feel enabled to contact teaching and/or departmental administration staff in the event that CNs are not being used correctly or adequately, as with any implementation of reasonable adjustments.

For any further information or to answer any questions, please contact disabled@cusu.cam.ac.uk.