

Trigger Archive: What Is a True, Impossible Teaching Archive?

Monique Rooney

RACHEL SAGNER BUURMA AND LAURA HEFFERNAN'S NEW STUDY *THE TEACHING Archive* both excavates and interprets the syllabuses and other classroom-related archives of ten tertiary English-literature courses, providing in the process what the authors call a 'true history' of the literary studies discipline as it was taught by a variety of English and American teachers over the course of the twentieth century. Through its textual tracing of a selection of classroom-based materials, methods and practices, *The Teaching Archive* brings to light a diverse methodological history, revising in the process critical assumptions and platitudes about the discipline that extend from the twentieth-century to our present moment. After reading Buurma and Heffernan we can no longer say, for example, that the pre-1968 Anglo-American classroom was the bastion of canonical reading and writing practices that—upholding antiquated, narrowly technical or formalist methods complicit with hierarchical structures—only began to unravel once universities and other tertiary-education institutions conformed to social diversity and inclusion policies. After 1968, so the story goes, the New Criticism, with its championing of the close reading method that had previously dominated the teaching of Anglophone literary studies, was gradually replaced by thematic or area studies approaches with their culture- or identity-based methods. Along with the move away from close-reading as the core literary studies method, the

post-1968 emergence of feminist and queer, race, ethnic and other area studies contributed to a movement away from the teaching of the English Literature canon.

Buurma and Heffernan reconceptualise existing histories of literary studies that focus on how the discipline has been transformed within twentieth-century higher-education institutions. With their reconfiguring of ideas about how and, indeed, whether the teaching of literary studies has altered that radically over the last century or more, Buurma and Heffernan depart from arguments by such high-profile critics as Gerald Graff and John Guillory that tend to narrate historical ruptures, with Buurma and Heffernan instead emphasising continuities between pre-1968 twentieth-century teaching and that taking place now. Identifying the self-consciously pedagogical yet distant methods of Graff and Guillory, whose theorising of changes within the literary-studies discipline demur from direct engagement with existing classrooms, Buurma and Heffernan create an alternative genealogy through their scouring of various syllabuses, handouts, reading lists, lecture notes, student papers, exam scripts and other classroom-based archives. In *The Teaching Archive*, the twentieth-century literary-studies classroom is both a socially diverse and inclusive place where students learn according to a variety of methods and where they encounter a range of both canonical and non-canonical texts, mainstream and more marginal authors.

Among its pedagogical examples are the experimental and data-based methods of Josephine Miles's courses at the University of Berkeley; the proto-computational practices of Caroline Spurgeon (Bedford College, London); and the syllabus of J. Saunders Redding, who, before he was appointed as 'the first African American professor of literary criticism in the Ivy League' (20), had been teaching from the 1930s to '50s in southern, historically black colleges, where he revised existing syllabuses, presenting American literature in the process as an encounter between Black and white (20). A chapter is also devoted to Acoma Pueblo poet, critic and teacher Simon J. Ortiz, who taught Native American literature to Californian community college students. In addition to revealing the practices of these lesser-known teachers, *The Teaching Archive* uncovers the student-centred practices and pedagogical improvisations or experiments of well-known critics T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards and Cleanth Brooks. The forbidding reputations of these 'New Critics' have become inextricably entangled with an idea of close-reading as a rarefied, antiquated technique privileging a select few practitioners who mysteriously acquire the capacity both to undertake and teach it. Against this idea, Buurma and Heffernan reveal the approaches of critics who are not the literary or cultural elitists they are often purported to be but rather are teachers whose commitments to collaborative, student-focused methodologies and diverse curricula fed back into their published criticism.

For example, the book's Chapter Two, 'T. S. Eliot, Modern English Literature (1916-19)', disabuses us of the idea that the kind of disinterested or detached reading practices advocated by Eliot—and exemplified by his *The Sacred Wood* (1920)—necessarily accords with authoritarian or other top-down pedagogical models. Indeed, the chapter's account of Eliot's teaching of 'Modern English Literature' as well as courses in Elizabethan and Jacobean literature for an extension program suggests that the opposite was the case. During three years traversing World War I (1916-1919), on Monday evenings, Eliot taught three, year-long, tutorial-based courses consecutively at a Southall grammar school. He did so under the auspices of the University of London Joint Committee for the Promotion of Higher Education of Working People (47). These 'extension program' courses derived from the format of the Workers Educational Association (WEA), which were aimed at working people unable to attend university. In researching the published curricula of a range of WEA courses as well as the particular ones that Eliot taught, Buurma and Heffernan find a 'deeply collaborative' ethos at work where 'working adults were positioned as coparticipants in the discovery of unrecorded knowledge. Records show that before the tutor even set foot in the classroom, tutorials were convened through a process of negotiation: tutors offered a list of proposed courses, and students at a local centre would choose a topic. The extension delegacy would compare the tutors' offerings with the interests submitted by students and offer a tutor to a group of students for approval. Tutor and students then spent their weeks and months together reading a subject that they had collaboratively chosen' (51).

In and beyond chapter two, *The Teaching Archive* illuminates the significance of teaching and learning taking place beyond the university, particularly through extension education and community college courses catering to working students. Though I was not from a working-class family, a version of extension education facilitated my path to higher education. The seventh child in a family of nine, encouraged to read by book-loving, tertiary-educated parents and older siblings, I nonetheless did not achieve the marks in the NSW Higher School Certificate Examination needed to enrol at the University of Sydney where I wished to major in English literature. A few years later, while working as a library assistant, I contemplated enrolling in Australian WEA courses that the library for which I worked advertised. It was instead acceptance into the University of New England (UNE), Armidale's BA, which offered education by 'correspondence' or long-distance learning, that enabled me to study part-time while living out of home and working full-time. Receiving Distinction averages for my first-year courses in English and Philosophy at UNE enabled me to transfer to the University of Sydney, where I completed my BA with Honours in English before going on to complete a PhD in the subject. Buurma and Heffernan associate WEA and other extension education courses with deeply collaborative and equitable teaching methods and principles that, they imply, differ from the career- or status-based goals shaping

either more prestigious or traditional scholarly institutions. My initial enrolment in distant education courses offered by a regional university was motivated by my desire for accreditation. Nevertheless, like my interest in WEA courses, my experience of the UNE correspondence course stemmed from the wish to continue studying beyond high-school, despite my performance in the HSC. This indirect path to tertiary study then shaped my subsequent experience of learning, teaching and research in other universities.

Buurma and Heffernan also show how extension education courses have encouraged 'firsthand research' and 'independent study' in the students to whom those courses appealed. Working students leading busy lives are more able to undertake focused, specialised study than to get their minds across a broad-range of content (53). In making this claim, they cite a WEA's lecturer's report from 1919 written by A. A. Jack, in which is described the 'attemptive atmosphere' of the extension education classroom, where 'everyone was trying to get something out of it and to make use of what was being put before them' (53). According to Buurma and Heffernan, the principle behind WEA and other British extension courses was not the end goal of university accreditation for career purposes but, rather, the encouragement of knowledge for its own sake. In evening classes where teachers often taught students who were themselves schoolteachers, the 'deeply equitable' educational ethos of extension education had a self-proliferating effect, with many of WEA's students feeding back the lessons they had learned and teaching others in their own working areas, as the 'extension of knowledge through collective social life came to characterize the work and study of the students themselves' (54).

In the context of their elucidation of this extension environment and ethos, Buurma and Heffernan write that Eliot encouraged deep reading in his classroom knowing that his students' 'work lives often prevented them from keeping up with syllabuses' (53). *The Teaching Archive* proposes that Eliot's critical practice, far from propagating close reading as a result of elitist and/or authoritarian values, should be understood in the light of his extension education experience, wherein he came to both recognise and respond pedagogically to the lived situation of working students. With this argument about both the collaborative methods and practices integral to Eliot's extension-education experience, Buurma and Heffernan also briefly draw attention to Eliot's vexed relation to the American education system that he had left behind him. Noting that Eliot had decided against taking up an assistant professorship at Harvard University, Buurma and Heffernan write of how:

... entering the world of British extension education let [Eliot] reject the American system of formal education and the life scripted for him within it while joining an educational institution of a very different

kind. The first in a series of dissenting institutions that Eliot affiliated with over the course of his career, the extension school allowed Eliot to act as a source of culture for schoolteachers, copy clerks, and the occasional grocer while occupying a position at once marginal and central—marginal to the world of the Oxford or Cambridge common room but central to the extension school movement’s reimagining of the system of higher education. (55)

To my mind, this re-imagining of higher education according to the model offered by the WEA and other para-tertiary extension courses can be thought of as anticipating the versions of extension education offered by the web. Where Eliot saw his classroom as being a ‘source of culture’ for his working students (*The Teaching Archive* 55), it is the smartphone and other devices that connect us instantly to the internet and that are arguably helping to transform the classroom as it was known in the twentieth century, at least.

Is it then (im)possible to think of the internet as a classroom? If so, how might the corporate ethos axiomatic to the myriad online platforms and applications, as well as the networked logics and rhythms, of the internet be thought of as affecting how teaching and learning is now taking place? If we (impossibly or speculatively) consider the ever-fermenting and proliferating data that feed back and forward across online networks that can in turn trigger extreme sentiments and savage interactions, we might be tempted to think of the internet as an unruly classroom that has little to do in kind with the more sedate, educational programming that takes place in either sandstone or Ivy League universities. The presence of the internet has nonetheless begun to play a central role in reshaping how literary and other core-humanities teaching operates both within and beyond the traditional, bricks-and-mortar classroom. Para-academic and other educational courses now proliferate. Online environments are, in turn, impacting the traditional classroom, which space is not immune from what Jonathan Crary refers to as the non-stop production and consumption of 24/7 late capitalism as its digital networks reach into every aspect of life. Both high school and tertiary teachers rely on the internet for their teaching—a reality that has become particularly obvious during the COVID crisis. Social sensibilities jostle with seemingly high-stakes emotions and reactions occurring within an online space structured by commercial platforms and media.

If there is an ethos that might be said to be driving Buurma and Heffernan’s own collaborative (i.e., co-written) project it is one to do with the ‘value’ of student-centred teaching. ‘Once we see that students and teachers in these classrooms regularly gather around texts that are not traditionally canonical, we can see that literature classrooms are in the business of creating literary value, not merely receiving or reproducing it’ (5). But, if researching the archive is a way to attach

'literary value' to the space of the classroom, then what happens when we meet student resistance rather than enthusiasm or openness about such value creation when we teach elements of that very archive? As Derrida writes in *Archive Fever*, the root of the word 'archive'—the Greek *arkhē*—signifies both commandment and commencement. For Derrida, the *arkhē* of the archive is meaningful in that it is a reminder of an underlying first principle—*arkhē* as both beginning and commanding force—that holds and reproduces our ongoing, feverish accumulation—our incessant archiving—of informational- and narrative-traces stemming from both business and leisure. The archive is here not simply a creator of value but a vehicle for the reproduction of a certain idea—a commanding principle—that powerfully structures law and governmentality. How then does the very existence of a 'teaching archive' trace our ongoing commitment to the business of creating literary value? How might we think of student reception of teaching as a way of considering not only the creation of value but the possibility of either limits or human resistance to such feverish enterprises? And then there is the role of internet. If it can be thought of as a classroom, its archive is one that is ever-fermenting and updating and that shapes and feeds back particular sensibilities and values in its wake.

Internet-age environments have brought with them new sensibilities, practices and values, but also potential limits on what can and cannot be taught in the classroom, one of which is the 'trigger warning.' Requests for trigger warnings presumably did not arise for Eliot or his contemporaries. Trigger warnings are internet-born phenomena, which first drew widespread attention and sparked public discussion following two events on US campuses. The first event was at Oberlin College, Ohio, when Oberlin's Office of Equity Concerns issued a list of 'Support Resources for Faculty' that included encouragement of staff to implement trigger warnings in order to make classrooms accessible to students experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The second was at the University of California, Santa Barbara, when the student senate passed a resolution calling for faculty to list trigger warnings on course syllabuses. The 'trigger' of 'trigger warning' first came out of a medical context, following the diagnosis of PTSD in Vietnam War veterans during the 1970s, with 'PTSD' being the most recent label for a range of disorders associated with wartime trauma (PTSD was first registered in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* in the 1980s). In this military context, a 'trigger' describes the occurrence of 'disorder triggers' causing survivors to experience overwhelming emotional or physical responses, with triggering phenomena ranging from 'sunrises', 'sunsets' and a 'sensation on the skin' resembling the touch of a 'wristwatch' ('Trauma Triggers') to 'something as simple as a slamming door, a book dropping, a car outside the classroom backfiring' (Oltman and Leibhart). Alongside the rise of second wave feminism in the 1970s, it was discovered that not just war veterans but also 'women in civilian life' were victims of PTSD. A 1972 study argued that

'early conceptualizations of the stress response patterns of rape victims are consistent with the diagnostic criteria of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) of the *DSM-III* with major category of Anxiety Disorders' (Colbert 9). Just as 'PTSD' has to an extent supplanted earlier terms such as 'war neurosis' and 'soldier's heart', it is argued that 'PTSD' as emanating from sexual assaults or disorders supplants the outdated term 'hysteria' (Colbert 8).

With the specific term 'trigger warning' now floating free of both military- and gender-based medical diagnoses, and playing a particularly prominent role in debates emanating from university campuses, it is worth repeating that the term is internet-born. As Sarah Colbert writes, '[w]hile movies, video games, and television games all come with a ratings system, it wasn't until the rise of the Internet as a method of communication and information dissemination that the trigger warning entered into the modern vernacular' (10). While tracing their first appearance on the internet is nigh impossible, the first trigger warnings look to have sprung up in 2002 in response to discussion about anorexia and bulimia on *LiveJournal*, a blogging and networking site. Trigger warnings began to appear around 2005 on feminist message boards in response to concerns about discussions of rape and sexual violence (Colbert 11). Since that time, references to trigger warnings now regularly appear on Twitter, Tumblr and many other social media platforms, blogs and websites and are reportedly most prominent in online discussions about LGBTQIA- and disability-activism. The browser extension 'Tumblr Savior' allows individuals to 'black list' certain keywords in order to prevent keywords from popping up unexpectedly as users browse (Colbert 11).

I have received multiple requests for trigger warnings for texts set on courses that I teach. Given these requests and the fact that I teach two research-led courses focused critically on the interrelations of literature, contemporary media and internet-culture, it has seemed particularly incumbent on me to think about the effect of trigger warnings and other digitally-born practices and behaviours from within the space of the classroom. I have thus spent considerable time reading and thinking about the literature that registers the pros and cons of incorporating trigger warnings into teaching. I have wanted to properly consider not only how students position themselves in the classroom with respect to learning materials, but also how best to facilitate their respectful and robust discussion with one another. How could I encourage my students to understand and take hold of their roles and responsibilities within a learning community while recognising and working with, rather than speedily moving on from, their own fears or limitations or drives—their own triggers?

I have now read various published arguments that are either for or against the implementation of trigger warnings or negotiate some place in between. Arguments against incorporation of trigger warnings include: scepticism about

the use of 'trigger', which label tends to be based on misinformation about what a medical trigger constitutes; the idea that they tend to reinforce avoidant behaviour and discourage students from taking up agency in the classroom while running the risk of coddling students; the concern that they tend to have contaminating effects, that is rather than solving trauma that might be triggered by uses of certain language, trigger warnings tend to create more triggers, with the very word 'trigger', which invokes imagery of weaponry, itself requiring trigger warnings (Colbert 12). Arguments in favour of the implementation tend to do so on the basis of warnings catering to sound access and inclusion practices, that they encourage and promote an atmosphere of courtesy, care and compassion and that they reinforce good pedagogical practice, including the promotion of agency and resilience in the classroom.

Of the literature I have read, I have found most compelling Gretchen Oltman and Kristine Leibhart's essay 'Lived Experiences of Military Veterans in the College English Classroom: A Case Study'. It is this essay's careful thought about both the limitations and potentials of trigger warnings that appealed to me, with its authors considering the set texts, critical thinking and affective ambiguities shaping their classrooms while remaining sensitive to the predicaments of students in those classrooms, including war veterans. I found moving the way in which this essay balances its sensitivity to the lived experience of students with its experimental thought about how to persist in the critical and close reading practices germane to the literary-studies classroom. Indeed, the 'content warning' (as I call it) that I finally came up with for the course I taught in semester one, 2021, is indebted to Oltman and Leibhart's concluding 'reflection' in which they set out the kind of warning that they now find useful in the classroom (228). For the course 'ENGL3021 American Literature: Nature, Retreat, Experiment', I posted front and centre of my online teaching and learning site the following content warning (as I call it) (see Figures 1 and 2).

CONTENT WARNING

CONTENT WARNING FOR TEXTS SET FOR ENGL3021

A significant number of the texts you are required to read in ENGL3021 contain material that some students may find distressing. For example, in Week 5 we will be reading Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which is told from the point of view of an ex-slave and which contains both direct and indirect references to sexual and other forms of violence. Texts set in Weeks 8 through to 12 (*The Stranger in the Woods*, *Leave No Trace*; *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and George Saunders's 'Home') contain references to sexual and other forms of violence, war, PTSD and other potentially distressing content.

IF THESE TEXTS INCLUDE CHALLENGING MATERIAL, WHY ARE THEY SET ON THIS COURSE?

The nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been volatile periods marred by large-scale wars & other catastrophes, enslavement & other atrocities afflicting various people. Many texts written during these centuries—including those set on this course—not only bear either written or visual traces of these crises but also actively reflect on them.

Works from these periods have been selected for this course for two primary reasons. 1) They are texts deemed worthy of your sustained critical and creative analysis and in a way that befits a university level English literature course. 2) They are texts that investigate and experiment with 'nature' and 'retreat'—concepts central to the meanings and approaches that have, in turn, been designed by me with a mind to how you can grasp hold of their meanings while forming your own critical and creative impressions through work that I will be assessing.

If you anticipate that this material will pose too great a challenge for you, then my advice is for you to take another course. With that said, you can rest assured that I see the classroom as a safe place that, in allowing you to reflect thoughtfully and deeply on a range of topics, can help you better understand the meaning of texts the content of which may initially shock or provoke ugly feelings but that, with care and considered thought, can help you to think critically and creatively.

Figure 1.

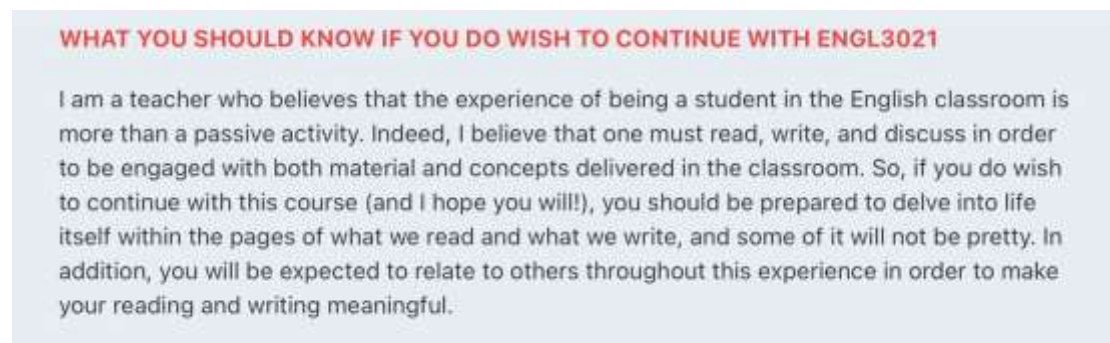


Figure 2.

In my classroom experience, trigger warnings have worked as reminders of the productive limits that draw attention to the always contingent nature of any teacherly ‘value’. The meanings that I attach to canonical and non-canonical texts, to close-reading and other methods can work against the experiences, practices and values of the students I teach, many of whom are resistant—for a myriad of reasons—to the texts and approaches that I deem important. Thinking about trigger warnings in the context of the online archival fever and the sensibilities that internet-spaces are programming means that I have had to hesitate, rethink and revise my own teaching position and methods. The impossibility of properly accounting for a true, teaching archive thus lies not only in what Buurma and Heffernan refer to as the ‘grand scale’ of the archive in one part of their text in which they performatively gesture to a place where ‘numberless teachers and students have gathered to read both an astonishing number and an astonishing range of texts together’ (2). This impossibly true archive is also a place where the enterprising teacher might recognise the limits of ‘togetherness’, especially when encountering resistance to the values afforded in her classroom.

MONIQUE ROONEY teaches courses in literature, film and television at the Australian National University, Canberra. She is currently writing a book provisionally titled *Program Era Aesthetics: Narrative Form and Educational Programming after 2008*.

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