

Educational “Asks” and Institutional “Tells”: trigger warnings, institutional responsiveness, and educational responsibility

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As I understand it, there are two dimensions to Greteman’s notion of an educational ask. First, there is the question of what students are asking for when they ask for trigger warnings, whether they are asking for the right things, and why institutions and educators worth their salt should be cautious about conceding too readily to student desires. These considerations get at the *educational* dimension of the “ask,” and Greteman is right to turn to the work of Gert Biesta for guidance here. But before we can get to the *educational* aspect, we have to tackle the formidable challenge of institutional responses that foreclose the sorts of difficult engagements that ought to be prompted by these kinds of requests.

In 2016, the University of Chicago sent a letter welcoming incoming first-year students to the storied institution but also letting them know, in no uncertain terms, that the university’s long-standing and controversial commitment to free inquiry and expression means that “we do not support so-called ‘trigger warnings,’ we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual ‘safe spaces’ where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own.”¹ Accompanying the letter, the university sent a brief account of the university’s commitment to academic freedom by institutional historian John Boyer.² The monograph tapers off just as the story would begin to interest incoming students – when the consensus between students and faculty on questions of academic freedom that prevailed until the 1960s breaks down and students urge the university to take stands on political and social issues concerning the Vietnam War and racial injustice. Boyer glosses over this schism,

explaining that he has addressed these issues elsewhere.³ In light of Greteman's contention that calls for trigger warnings are a sign of a new generation's desire to wrestle with "difficult knowledge and its embodied realities," it is revealing that the University of Chicago chose not to include those chapters in the reissued booklet. The University of Chicago responded to Greteman's "educational ask" with an institutional "tell."

Seemingly on the other side of the issue, is the very recent case of Augsburg University, a small liberal arts institution in Minneapolis, which responded too readily to student demands for trigger warnings by suspending a faculty member – a move that similarly fails to grapple with the "educational ask." Some details: Phillip Adamo, a professor and director of the Honors Program, was removed from his teaching and administrative duties in the wake of student objections to the reading out loud, by a student, of a racial slur in a passage from James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. According to coverage of the incident, students were doubly outraged that Professor Adamo reportedly "used the moment" to discuss the impact of hearing the offending word, repeating the word twice to make his point. They were further affronted by a follow-up email from Dr. Adamo, with two short op-eds making a case for the carefully constrained pedagogical value of the n-word even though the students had come to the opposite conclusion in class earlier that day.⁴

Word got around the honors college, and students who had taken Adamo's course previously assembled in the next class session to discuss what had ensued. An audio recording of the conversation posted on YouTube, shows Adamo to be a solicitous instructor.⁵ He thanks the students for being there, apologizes to them for not having been "100%" on the day of the class, and proceeds to listen without interruption to their concerns. Toward the end of the audio clip, Adamo admits to feeling tense, but tells the students that he is horrified to think that he has contributed to students feeling unsafe in his classes, adding that he "wants to resign to find somebody that is a faculty of color to run this program because it's time to do that." Despite his conciliatory stance, he has since been suspended from his position pending a "formal resolution process." The President of Augsburg University subsequently issued a statement

thanking students and faculty for their courage to listen and call for changes “that advance our equity work.”⁶ This ethos of consumerism dressed up as institutional responsiveness epitomizes the contemporary university – anxious to respond quickly to student “asks” with an answer that at best defers the educational questions.⁷

How could universities like Augsburg make it possible for teachers like Phillip Adamo to respond differently, which is to say, *educationally*, to student requests for trigger warnings and the like? Greteman’s starting point is exactly right. Instead of regarding requests for trigger warnings as symptoms of the psycho-social shortcomings of a generation of overparented youngsters, the educational response should be generous. After all, students are essentially “asking to join and reorient” a conversation in a world that they “did not create, but one they seek to make anew.”⁸ To this end, Greteman asks us “to listen to ... and refract such requests through the education relation – to help students interpret and make meaning within such asks.” This emphasis on refraction is important. It suggests that teachers ought not give students what they desire simply because they want it. The idea here is not to push back on the “ask” for the sake of preserving the status quo, but to open space for the type of discussion and reflection that might prompt the “uncoercive rearrangement of desires,” which Biesta defines as central to the educational task of orienting students to the world in a grown-up way.⁹

Listening to the audio clip, I was struck by the students’ sense of certainty that their “ask” is for the benefit of all students. One of the students explains that she wants to ensure that students “always feel safe at Augsburg, especially if you are a first-generation student of color, you should never feel outed for that.”¹⁰ On the surface this commitment to inclusion is laudable, but it is also tone deaf to the object of Baldwin’s ire and ignores the complexity of his audience.¹¹ Baldwin’s letter is addressed as much to the white world – the “innocent and well-meaning countrymen” who deny their racism – as it is to youth of color who may well recognize Baldwin to be speaking to them with fierce love about the world *as it is* and not about who they fundamentally are. Baldwin writes: “you can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what

the white world calls a *nigger*. I tell you this because I love you, and please don't you ever forget it."¹² The white world is indicted here, which makes Augsburg's concern to cushion the blow deeply suspect and worth interrogating. It is an example of what Ta-Nehisi Coates calls "the politics of respectability," and it is essential that this not masquerade as educational responsibility.¹³

As Greteman suggests, the educational issues extend beyond the particulars to reflect the ways in which the language of learning has colonized the educational experience. When education is understood through the lens of "learning," students have the sense that they have signed up to learn something particular, and "so the provider must make sure that it is precisely this, nothing more and nothing less, which the learner will learn."¹⁴ This is evident on the audio clip when one of the returning students explains to the group that she is there to hold Adamo accountable for his agreement to issue a trigger warning prior to teaching the Baldwin text in future. This language of accountability is indicative of a contractual conception of the educational relationship in which the parties understand themselves to have entered into a transaction that promises to return them to themselves relatively untransformed. But why should the possibilities for an educational encounter with the text be held hostage to the decisions of prior students? What if Dr. Adamo is treating this new class as though it were a new generation, equally capable of experiencing the feeling of susceptibility that is part and parcel of subjectivity and the basis for taking ethical responsibility?¹⁵ These are the sorts of educational questions that might be fruitfully engaged if the conversation were conceived of educationally rather than quasi-judicially (the sense that Adamo is on trial is palpable, and he doesn't mount much of defense).

The virtue of Greteman's turn to Biesta is that it takes seriously "the subject-ness of the student," which resonates more with this generation of students than do appeals to abstract principles like "academic freedom" and "the pursuit of truth."¹⁶ The Augsburg case supports Biesta's contention that the way to disrupt the language of learning is through a rediscovery of teaching, even – or perhaps especially – when faculty themselves seem resigned to their fate. Instead of caving in to student demands in the name of institutional

responsiveness, the way to take the educational ask seriously is for the university to defend teaching.

1 John (Jay) Ellison, Dean of Students in The College "Dear Class of 2020 Student," The University of Chicago, 2016.

2 John W. Boyer, "Academic Freedom and the Modern University: The Experience of the University of Chicago," *Occasional Papers on Higher Education* 10 (Chicago: The College of the University of Chicago, October 29, 2002).

3 Ibid., 87. Boyer sums up the contrast between the two eras as follows: "Yet, the 1960s were not the 1890s or even the 1940s, with the most critical difference lying in the fact that the danger to the University now seemed to come from within the University community, from tensions between our students and our faculty, and not from sinister forces without it" (94).

4 Zipporah Hosei, "Do Racial Epithets Belong in the Classroom? A Professor's Suspension Sparks That Debate," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 22, 2019, A22.

5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1RVu4Ft0-8>

6 Robby Soave, "An award-winning professor Quotes James Baldwin, Who Used the N-Word. Now He's on Leave," *Hit and Run Blog*, February 4, 2019 <https://reason.com/blog/2019/02/04/phillip-adamo-baldwin-n-word-augsburg>

7 In the audiotape of the classroom discussion of the incident at Augsburg University, one of the students tells the group that they deserve to be safe "because you're paying for this." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1RVu4Ft0-8>

8 Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," *Between Past and Future* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1963), 177.

9 Gert J. J. Biesta, *The Rediscovery of Teaching* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 4.

10 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1RVu4Ft0-8>

11 Augsburg students might be interested to learn that a sanitized version of the letter appeared in *The Progressive* magazine in 1962, without the offending phrase. Now, it's possible that Baldwin allowed his essay to be censored, but it's more likely that Baldwin decided to be more pointed in his outrage when he revised the essay a year later.

12 James Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to my Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation," *The Fire Next Time* (New York: First Vintage International Edition, 1993), 4.

13 Ta-Nehisi Coates, "In Defense of a Loaded Word," *The New York Times*, 23 November 2013.

14 Gert J.J. Biesta, "Against Learning," *Nordisk Pedagogik* 1 (2005), 61.

15 Biesta, *The Rediscovery of Teaching*, 11-13.

16 Ibid., 20.