# Episode #02 Trigger Warnings with Adina Petre

Language of Conversation: English

Begin of Recording.

**Anna-Lena**: Trigger Warning. This talk contains talk about trigger warnings and about topics that might or might not warrant a trigger warning.

**Constance:** Good morning, Darian.

D**arian:** Good morning, Constance, and welcome back to our podcast ‘Woke as Science’. You we are here trying to unpack and discuss some of the many associations, misunderstandings and myths related to the term “woke” that we encounter in academia, or maybe a bit more specifically in our Dutch and UM academic context. We are here to combat the moral panic around so-called wokeness that is being stoked by some of the - no comment on who, members of our UM community and try to talk about these questions in an honest and open way. But at the same time being clear that we don't have many answers, and that's why we are asking the questions.

**Constance:** Right. Today's episode will be about one of these associations that makes people rather nervous in a classroom setting. And here I'm talking about teachers and students alike. And this is the trigger warning. By now, a seemingly commonplace courtesy for many students and a thorn in the eye of teaching staff concerned about either coddling students or censorship in education.

**Darian:** Yeah, I would add it's also completely baffling for some staff.

**Constance:** Yeah. I also think it's not just baffling in the terms of what does a trigger warning mean, but also how it should work in educational practice. And I must admit, when we were preparing this episode, it wasn't easy for us. We noticed our own discomfort a bit with a topic maybe because it is so baffling in the sense that we don't fully understand it. We feel it's important, but we don't get why, or we might even find it a bit problematic. So, we thought, why not just invest a whole episode to talk about the usefulness of trigger warnings in an educational setting? About what their purpose is or should be, what their purpose shouldn't be, and also about the question are trigger warnings about what we teach about the content or maybe also about how we teach.

**Darian:** I think there's also a kind of inner conflict. We have a sense of something being important to some members of a group that as educators we care about or we even feel we have a duty of care for. And on the other hand, we don't really understand this thing that we suspect they care about, or we think that it might be somehow deeply problematic. So I'm a bit baffled. You are critical. Then it's a good thing we've invited an expert guest to help us unpack this topic and hopefully generate some useful insights for our community members.

**Constance:** Yes, and our guest today is Adina Petre. Welcome, Adina. You are a psychotherapist, specialized in trauma here in Maastricht and some of our listeners might also know you because you coached our premium students during their research project.

Adina**:** Hello. Thank you for having me. Indeed everything you've said about me so far is true. I am a trauma therapist and I do coach some of the students from this prestigious university. I do have a bit of experience, let's say, working with your institution.

C**onstance:** It is great that you're here.

**Adina:** Thank you.

C**onstance:** Let's start with a basic question I think. What is a trigger warning?

Adina**:** It is good to have a bit of context indeed. I think you cannot talk about trigger warnings before you understand it's a concept that comes from traumatology. And to define a trigger, you must understand some basic things about psychological trauma because that's where trigger warnings come into play. So, one of the first things I want to share with you about psychological trauma is that aside from natural catastrophes, all trauma happens in relation to another human being. Therefore, in segregating that relationship, you also create an internal rupture inside the human psyche. So, the consequence of trauma is being split. And the need for a trigger warning is for that person to be able to gather those split little parts and keep themselves safe in the moment where something of a traumatic nature could be brought back into their awareness. So, the need for a trigger warning has a double protection in a way. It's there to protect the person that has a history of trauma to give them a chance to brace themselves against something potentially damaging. And it's also acting for the person issuing a trigger warning to shield themselves as a potential repercussion coming back from the person that is responding to that.

**Darian:** Thank you, Dina. That was very helpful. But can you give us maybe an example of what a trigger might be, and then maybe what a trigger warning might be in relation to that kind of trigger?

A**dina:** I think the easiest thing that comes to mind is that announcement that sometimes gets placed in news. *Caution, shocking images might follow*, for example, and this I think, is already an established trigger warning, giving the viewers discretionary use of their time if they are going to stay with the program or maybe change the program. However, in real life, you must know triggers are very fleeting, and it can be pretty much anything. It can be a smell; it can be a shirt print. It can be a loud sudden noise. It can be a perceived shift in temperature. So, I think this is something that makes it quite difficult for people to know when a trigger warning issue should be in place and for people who are in a heightened state of arousal, whether to respond or not to a perceived.

**Constance:** Thank you for the explanation. I think that is indeed very helpful. And the explanation you gave for a movie theater, for example, when we now take this into the educational context, how should an educator or a teacher then see a trigger warning and how do we deal with it in practice? How does it then look like? Because, you know, in a movie theater, you can indeed just leave if you want to as a viewer. In an educational setting, this is a bit more complex because we have attendance or because you want to be there and learn something.

**Adina:** There's something I think we need, again, to go back a bit into the context and to remember something. For example, previously I said this thing about trauma being a human-to-human experience, right? What happens in that moment is that one human has disrespected another human's autonomy, therefore making their relationship or their interaction hierarchical rather than equalitarian, right? And in a teacher-student dynamic that is already in place.

So, if you want to be a bit extreme with it, just for the sake of understanding my example, the student teacher relationship already is triggering for the student because they are dealing with another person that is positioning themselves as an authority figure. So, it makes them more vulnerable in that moment when they're interacting with a teacher.

**Darian:** Hold on one second. Can I ask you to clarify that a little bit? So, when you say the student teacher relationship is hierarchical, I understand that completely. When you say the student teacher relationship is already triggering, do you mean for the student that has undergone some kind of trauma or do you mean for all students?

**Adina:** It can be pretty much for everybody because in my experience, I've not met a person who doesn't yet have an experience of a traumatic nature.

**Darian:** Okay, yeah.

Adina**:** So, to go back to your question Constance, when you ask about how this whole trigger warning situation in an educational setting is, I feel it is the responsibility of the person who is in the higher up position to consider in what way can they make the other person feel a bit more accommodated in their particularity. In a way, if you want, it's a matter of inclusivity, feeling that people who might have a traumatic experience in their history should also feel included in a safe way in the educational environment that they're in.

**Darian:** Okay, so you're freaking me out a little bit, I have to say. So as a teacher, as an educator, of course, I want to create an inclusive environment. Of course, I want to create an environment where everybody feels comfortable to express themselves, if not always comfortable with the material that's being discussed or comfortable with what other people are saying. At the same time, you told us a moment ago that the various kinds of triggers can be very fleeting, and of course as an educator you don't know what they might be. You said it could be a change in temperature in the room. It could be a word that brings out an association, that the teacher themselves might have no idea about, it could be the pattern of a shirt. So how is it that as a teacher, as an educator, we are supposed to be able to manage this situation to understand what might or might not be triggering for all the students in the room. And you told us a moment ago, everyone has undergone trauma as well. So, everyone is at risk of being triggered and those triggers could really be anything. How are we supposed to deal with this?

**Adina:** I think here it is about just focusing on that part of your responsibility as a teacher that you do have control over. Of course, you have no way of knowing what you are entering into a room. You yourself could be triggered by the behavior of one of your students. For example, their lack of interest could be very triggering for some of the teachers, right? And over here you basically focus on the things you do have control over. In your case, you have control over the type of content you are teaching to your students. You can start a lecture, which you know might have potentially a high emotional charge to just start it with a trigger warning. And that way you're also giving the students a heads up, but you're also shielding yourself from potential reactions against the material that you're teaching

**Constance:** Now you're freaking me out a little because when I say, okay, as a teacher, I have control over the content that I'm teaching and also the way I'm teaching that content, but let's talk about that later. But [I have control] over the content I'm teaching and now I'm getting nervous; does it also mean that if I know I'm teaching emotionally charged content, for example, is it also in the realm of my responsibility to consider should I not teach that content if I know it is potentially triggering?

**Adina:** Hmm. That's a very good but deep and complex question. Because on the other hand, of course, you have to consider can we forever shelter somebody from triggers? Can we forever make sure that everybody feels comfortable? Of course not. That's not realistic. I think here it's really about discriminating the level of discomfort that you can accommodate in that moment, and it's also about knowing that you will create a little bit of discomfort in other people and being able to take the responsibility for that. Going a little bit back to the definition of trauma, it's not always the event that has happened in the person's life, but it's more the aftermath of that. And when we are dealing with something deeply traumatic, most of the times people have been left alone with their experience. People's experience has been denied. They have been gaslighted into not owning that experience. Therefore, the power dynamic is that the person who was more powerful and inflicted trauma, they also didn't pick up the responsibility for the damage that they have created. So, a way for you to reverse that as teachers, even if you do issue a trigger warning, but it doesn't register with one of your students and they come at the end of a lecture and they accuse you of something, denying their experience or their reality is not the way to go, but taking that discomfort and that responsibility and say, yeah, I think that was a bit of a loaded lecture for you, I'm sorry that happened. That already brings back that equal interaction, that human bond that we need.

**Constance:** And the ‘I am sorry that happened’, I think that is what many educators are quite worried about because does ‘I am sorry that happened’ mean it will never happen again? Or does it mean, I'm sorry that this happened to you, and I will be more thoughtful next time when I teach this lecture to address it differently beforehand?

**Adina:** Hmm. I see it as the latter, point that you made. I believe when we issue for somebody, ‘I'm sorry that happened’ it is not in any way bringing us into a binding agreement that it will never happen again. It's about giving us the opportunity to acknowledge somebody else's discomfort and just humanly partaking in that. It is the same thing when we offer somebody our condolences for the passing of one of their relatives. There's nothing we can do about them. We can't take that event back. We are just temporarily by these words partaking in the person's suffering, which gives us a good connection and as I said earlier, if trauma happens in a “bad connection”, air quotes here, then healing also comes from having good connections. So, in a way, when we take that responsibility and when we acknowledge the discomfort, we are just giving people the chance to create a good connection with each other.

**Darian:** That all sounds very convincing and I can imagine a situation where you say to someone, as we often do, “I'm sorry that you are in pain” or “I'm sorry that you are suffering”, but that seems slightly different from saying, “” in an educational context, right? Because when we say, “I'm sorry this happened”, so I'm sorry in this case that I as an educator said something or did something that was triggering to you, that seems to me to indicate that it shouldn't happen again. And I'm not sure from my end if I'm comfortable with that kind of statement. Of course, I'm sorry that someone undergoes trauma, undergoes pain, undergoes suffering. I think that's a very basic human thing, we shouldn't have much difficulty with that.

**Adina:** Mm-hmm.

**Darian:** That then we shouldn't do things that might be triggering in the way that you described seems to me an additional step. I don't think that's exactly what you're saying, but I worry that might be how it's interpreted.

**Adina:** Hmm. Let's see if I can make this from a different perspective. Do you see you as educators, both of you, I'm asking you, do you see the educational act as a one-way street or is it a back-and-forth process between you and the student?

**Constance:** The latter.

**Darian:** I think it's a back-and-forth process, of course. I'm the first one to say that education should be dialogical. Not even dialectical, but dialogical but I don't think it's an entirely egalitarian process either. So, I think that point you made at the beginning about certain authority or certain hierarchy and certain justification for that authority in hierarchy is also an important one.

**Adina:** Mm-hmm.

**Darian:** So, the first thing that you said about it was that we should be aware of that, right? And we should take steps to mitigate potential harms that come out of that. And can completely agree with that. Where I get little bit uncomfortable is going from saying, education should be about two-way communication, education should be dialogical, education should be about joint ownership of a learning process, of a learning space. All those things I'm good with, but I don't go from there to saying that there is no place for hierarchy or no place for some sort of authority or even expertise we might say within education, I think those are different things.

**Adina:** Mm-hmm. Sure. I'm not trying to change that. What I'm saying here is perhaps when a student is asking for a trigger warning, that is also a place for the teacher to learn something new. Something that they maybe didn't consider Maybe they didn't think that, something in the content of their lecture can have the potential of triggering some reaction into a student. So, at the end of the lecture, if that student comes and say, hey, that content was a little bit insensitive to me because insert here, whatever reason you might think of, I think that's a golden opportunity for the teacher to also learn something, oh, so students nowadays consider this thing to be triggering for them. How can we take that into account? How can we include maybe a trigger warning or a different type of style of teaching or a different example to illustrate the same idea while still carrying the educational act from the same place of authority and expertise but inserting this also very humane way of looking of how we carry through the information.

**Constance:** So that brings us back exactly to the point that maybe trigger warnings also sometimes refer to as content warnings are not that much about the content per se, but how we actually approach the content, how we discuss the content, how we maybe also lay some ground rules with each other of how we are going to talk about a certain topic.

**Adina:** Mm-hmm. I agree with that and I'm a firm supporter of it because, not just human dynamics but also language, they are alive. It's a perpetually changing thing. Nowadays, for example, in academia, here in the Netherlands where we are now talking, it is commonplace that a student will address a teacher by their first name. That was not the case where I grew up for example, in a totalitarian regime in Romania. My teachers expected me to address them not just by their last name, but by their title and their Mrs. or Mr. pronouns. This changed. Now it's completely different, and I'm sure education will keep evolving in that way to incorporate these styles of communication. And I don't think that's a bad thing.

**Constance:** So it's a style of communication, the trigger warning.

**Adina:** Yes. I think it's like a common courtesy thing. When, when I walk down the street and I see my neighbors, I have no formal obligation whatsoever to acknowledge them, but it's a common courtesy thing that I would look them in the eye and say, “good day”. Maybe they are going to have a shitty day. I don't know. It doesn't impact how their day is going to go, but my intention is there and even if my neighbor has the worst days of his life in that moment, he's just going to appreciate me as a human being putting a bit of common courtesy in place. I think this is how we can integrate trigger warnings in education. It's not going to take away the triggers for the students. It's not going to take away their bodily reaction to something that is revoking their trauma, but it is going to give them a layer of safety within your classroom that they are acknowledged.

**Darian:** So, you talk about it as a common courtesy and you give this analogy, neighborly civility that you greet your neighbor, you say hello to someone passing on the street. Of course, you're not obligated to do so, and they're not obligated to reciprocate or to respond to you. But we have a consensus that it is the polite, the social or the civil thing to do. In the case of trigger warnings, again, it seems to me to be slightly different insofar as I think many people wouldn't put it in those terms of common courtesy, right? Because of course I try to extend common courtesy to others. Sometimes I forget, but if they don't extend it back to me, I have to accept that as well. But I think at least the way that many people are thinking about this is that, no, this is something people have to do. This isn't a courtesy, this is an obligation, and if you don't fulfill this obligation, you are somehow not fulfilling your role as an educator properly.

**Adina:** Hmm. Yeah. I would nuance this a little bit. I personally don't polarize between very good or very wrong things. I think in between there are many layers here, right? One question I would address to teaching staff in general would be why, why do they not want to include a trigger warning in their lectures, in their teaching style? And I do remember something that you said at the beginning, that it creates a sort of discomfort, and it baffles some people. And even if that's the case, I would go a little deeper into that question from, of course, I'm a psychologist, so, we dig a little bit deeper. Why does it create discomfort in people? And my general hypothesis here is that it creates discomfort because it reminds us of the fact that we're vulnerable as humans, and that we are subjected to being wounded or hurt in relations. So, it's an attempt to avoid thinking about that. It's an attempt to disconnect us from our vulnerability. And it's an attempt to deny that about us as humans. Whereas the invitation to bring that forward is to remind yourselves constantly that we are human beings, that we are vulnerable and that we have a need for safe connections and safe relationships. So yes, it is a common courtesy thing, but to me it's also a natural state of being in contact with what it means to be human. Did I answer your question, Darian?

**Darian:** Okay. I think you're bringing me, you're bringing me along, but I still have some other doubts.

**Constance:** I was thinking about the same question last night. Why this discomfort with trigger warnings? I have multiple things and I think Darian is going to mention more of them. But one thing is that I think it brings with it a certain level of safety to discuss potentially triggering subjects on the level of abstraction that we discuss it in our classroom. That feels fairly safe, and it feels like we don't have to meddle with everything that you just explained. And I wonder whether this is one of the reasons why people are not so willing to go down the trigger warning road because it takes a subject from the level of fairly high abstraction to a different level.

**Darian:** Yeah, I think that could be the case. I mean, to be a bit cynical, another objection might be that many academics, I speak only for myself, sometimes I want to feel like that lecture hall Is my kingdom. That lecture hall, that seminar room is my fiefdom. I'm in control of the content. I'm in control of the way I deliver it. I have studied for a long time. I have earned my stripes and so I know what I'm doing, and I don't appreciate being told how I should or should not deliver the content or what content I should or should not deliver in an area that is really my area of expertise. So, let's say for me there's sometimes a bit of cognitive dissonance. I don't deny that I sometimes might feel some inklings of that. At the same time, I can completely understand how that kind of idea is deeply problematic. And it's also problematic in the context of what you mentioned before, so the changing way in which we educate in the changing context of education that shift from the professor as the baron of their fiefdom to someone who engages in this dialogical exercise with their students. And I think that transition in and of itself brings into question the authority of the professor or the teacher, the hierarchy within the classroom, which is something that we also feel vulnerable about. And it also brings into question the authority of the expertise that you have, and we are very much used to operating in this environment where we have authority as academics precisely because of that expertise. And I think this whole way of thinking about it a little differently brings that into question. And for me at least, I come along board so far, but then I can see why I get uncomfortable there as well.

**Adina:** Hmm. Well, couple of things I want to say here, or your answers make me wonder, what is the purpose of education? What is the goal for you as an educator when you're entering that classroom? And just to keep it very simple, I think in general it's passing on knowledge, right? Now, if embedding a trigger warning in your lecture would ensure the success of you passing on knowledge, wouldn't you want to adopt that as a strategy rather than put barriers between you and your students. In a way, this is how I see it issuing a trigger warning is a way for you to make sure that the minds of the people you're trying to shape in that moment are open and comfortable to receive that content. Because it is abstract in concepts. And when we're talking academia, I completely agree with you Constance. Most of that knowledge is very abstract. But for a person to have access to their cognition, their emotional life has to feel that feeling of safety that I was talking about earlier. When I was saying earlier that trauma splits you in pieces, this is one of the most common splits, by the way, cognition from emotion. And the third level is separating you from your body sensations. So, if you're trying to address somebody from a very high institutional point of view, from a cognitive point of view, you can't do that if they're not feeling safe in their body, if they're not feeling safe in their emotional spectrum, they can't hear you in that moment. So, you're basically setting up yourself for failure. That's why I'm advocating for including this in our teaching practices. And if you want, I'll go even a bit further. I'm a firm advocate of trauma-informed teaching because we live in the kind of world that we live in, because trauma is so prevalent amongst our students and amongst our teachers. This will just make it more efficient, to teach from that perspective where a person has access to their mental faculty in that moment, rather than having them bounce between regulating their breathing and absorbing some of these high concepts that you are proclaiming in your kingdom.

**Darian:** Do you think there's a risk though, that by being too accommodating, by being too sensitive to the kinds of questions that you're raising, the questions of trauma, the questions of vulnerability, we risk lowering the resilience of our students, of ourselves, and resilience to a world which is in many ways harsh and sometimes traumatic and often violent. And education is about passing on knowledge, yes. But it's also about the cultivation I think of certain types of persons, right? Persons who can discuss, persons who are able to argue, persons who are able to think in certain ways. Persons who are able to enter into a public sphere where there is contestation, there is verbal violence, there is conceptual violence. All of these things are there and they have to be able to function in that environment and not shut down and in a way build their resilience. My question is, do you think there's some risk of going too far here where instead of facilitating the growth of resilient students, resilient citizens, resilient activists, we are in fact doing the opposite?

**Constance:** Or could trigger warnings be conducive to that?

**Adina:** Yes, I believe trigger warnings can be supportive of building more resilience because you don't build resilience by pushing people way outside of their comfort zone. You build resilience by allowing them to exist in their comfort zone, and then gently inviting them to expand that comfort zone because resilience, the way some people take it as is some sort of an embedded toughness, but that's not how resilience should be looked at. Resilience is just having the capacity to come back again after you've been knocked down from your horse, and you can't do that in an environment that is pushing you into something that's completely uncomfortable. So yes, of course, higher education is also a place which shapes a person's personality. And we're also dealing with people that are very vulnerable in that developmental stage of their brain. It's only about after the age of 24, 25 that their neo frontal cortex is fully developed. So until then, you are literally dealing with very vulnerable adults.

**Darian:** Okay. I still have a lot of questions. I'm with you so far, I think, but I'm still wondering how broadly should we interpret this idea? I can think about certain examples where a kind of trigger warning may certainly be appropriate. The kind of examples that you started with, right? When you watch the news and they say, warning, there will be some explicit images of violence during this broadcaster, during this report. But on the other hand, in a certain way I find most discussions of foreign policy triggering. I find the way that those discussions are often carried out to be insensitive to people, for example, outside of the Western world, to be insensitive to the experiences of colonized peoples. Likewise, I find the way economics are often discussed to be triggering, in a sense, to be insensitive to some of the experiences that I might have had as a child, as somebody who didn't grow up surrounded by material affluence, so on and so forth. Do we then say that those discussions, those topics also require trigger warning even when they're talked about at what seems to be a very highly abstract, theoretical level?

**Adina:** You pose an interesting question here. I believe people will have a difficulty accepting that because issuing a trigger warning in those settings would mean for them to acknowledge that what they're doing and saying in that moment has this emotional charge that I was talking about earlier. And sometimes for people to be able to have such difficult conversations on such complex topics, they have to leave aside that entire emotional charge. Otherwise, decisions will take forever to be made and unfortunately, the kind of world that we have built does not accommodate that. However, that doesn't mean that we can't start slowly working towards changing it because the future of academia that you're shaping right here, right now with this conversation will look very different five years from now than it did five years ago, and I don't necessarily think that that's a bad thing.

**Constance:** What I hear you say is that as educators, the competencies to take on the emotional charge to discuss whatever topics we are discussing on the abstract level while not disregarding the emotional charge, whether we are aware of it or not, right? There might be situations where after the fact we are only alerted that something that we discussed was, potentially triggering.

**Adina:** Mm-hmm.

**Constance:** But you're basically saying that this is a competence that as teachers, we better learn and we better learn it fast in order to do what we are here to do. To have a dialogical relationship with our students and pass on knowledge.

**Adina:** I only invite you to listen to your clients. In that sense, your students, if we look at this, universities in general, they serve the client, and in this case, the client is the student. So, in that respect, when your client is telling you, I am a sensitive human being, I do have trauma in my history, and I do want to be protected so that I can learn from you better, this is an invitation. Whether you listen or not, it's entirely up to you, of course.

**Constance:** I think we are both triggered by the word protected.

Darian: Yes. I think that needed a trigger warning. You needed a trigger warning that you were going to invoke this sort of corporatist neoliberal way of thinking about education where the students are our clients.

**Constance:** That need to be protected

Darian: That needed to be protected also. And I think part of that for me is also that, you can tell from my accent, I'm From the United States and you know in the United States how we feel about clients, right? So, the client is always right. I think that's not the case in higher education. Quite simply put. So, I understand of course, that students have to pay something to attend university, at least in this country. In other countries it is different, right? In other countries I think we really would not say that students are clients of universities. I think there's something very dangerous about taking on this client mentality precisely for the reason I just gave, that we end up, they're the client, we should give them what they want. We need to give them what they like so that they will keep coming back so that they will become loyal customers so that they keep paying their registration fee. And I think that's a very dangerous idea in education.

**Adina:** But how do you reconcile that with the fact that we live in a capitalist world where education is monetized, where the person that has the most diplomas gets the highest job and the highest paying salary? So, in a way, this is a conflict and I'm with you here. For me, as a private practitioner, I have the same dilemma. I work with clients. We are no longer a psychologist. We don't call them patients anymore. We call them clients, and it's because of that willfulness they come with towards us to get that knowledge or to get that service. And yes, I know it can be a bit tricky. Where do you draw the line between serving your client and fulfilling your purpose as an educator? And I do believe that, again, I'm not advocating for an extreme positioning here, neither white or black. It's always somewhere in between and there are more shades than 50. And, and in that sense, it's something that I believe we as educators, start from our own interpretation of what is for me comfortable in that moment? What kind of emotional charge is in my content that I deliver? What am I comfortable owning? Because not issuing or issuing a trigger warning is a matter of accountability for the teaching staff. The way I see it, and for example, in my practice, a lot of my work is about psycho-education. I literally have to teach people how to feel their emotions, and that's as triggering as it comes. So, in that respect, it's a constant evaluation of can I own up to the fact that I'm taking this client in a zone in which they might be uncomfortable? Can I own that responsibility? And if it backfires, what can I do to fix that relationship and if it does go well, what can I do to make sure that I offer the same quality of standard of care to my next client? And I believe it's just a parallel to what I see teaching does. Yes, they are. You can look at your students as your clients, and you can also look at them as your future colleagues. Regardless of how you position yourself in this interaction, teaching, education, passing on knowledge from one person to another is a human relationship. And from that perspective, it is your responsibility to define how you enter in that relationship. Do you do it from this high position of authority? You can absolutely. You have the expertise, you have the knowledge you've earned your stripes, got your badges. And how do you still position yourself in that authoritarian, let's say, relationship with them? Do you want to be a merciful king in your kingdom, that that offers them a safe environment or do you want to be somebody that rules by the sword, let's say in a metaphoric way? Of course, because I sincerely hope you don't bring a sword to your classroom because that might be triggering for some people.

**Darian:** I can see how that might be triggering for somebody that just reminded me of an example I often give when I'm explaining sort of the development of our ideas of human rights and of the integrity of the human body, and I often give the example that I'm not allowed to hit students with a stick anymore.

Adina: Mm-hmm.

Darian: Maybe at a previous point in education, I don't know how many centuries ago that would've been allowed. But now I think that every student would see that as a violation of the human dignity. And I always say, I hope that if I did do that, you would go and quickly report me to whatever the relevant authorities are right now. Of course, in giving that example about the ways in which we are thinking about the integrity of the human body, the dignity of the human body, the dignity and the integrity of the individual have changed over the years, I can see how that example, might also be triggering to somebody. If you have been in an abusive relationship of some sort or another, whether it was with a parent or a partner, whoever, whatever it is. Of course, someone talking about violence, someone talking one person hitting another person with a stick in the classroom might be triggering, of course.

**Adina:** Mm-hmm.

**Darian:** Should I stop using that example? What, should I do in that context?

**Constance:** I actually think your example illustrates exactly the point that I think Adina just made, right? Your example is about a paradigm shift in an educational setting, right? Between teacher and student, for example. And I think what you are telling us is that we are in the middle of another shift here in which the emotional charge of whatever content we are teaching is like a stick, right? So that, and we must be mindful how we use that. So, in a sense, I think you can keep on using your example, but I do think it's also a metaphor for I exactly what you just said.

**Adina:** Yes. I think if you remember correctly, those sticks that teachers used to punish students had also the purpose of pointing something on the blackboard. In the same way I feel we can use trigger warnings. You can, of course make an excessive use and mockingly say, oh, trigger warning here, trigger warning, there. And of course, lower the impact of, what you're saying. Or you can just issue a trigger warning at the beginning of your lecture and say, today I might be bringing some examples, which some of you might find a bit disturbing. And that's it. It doesn't alter the quality of your teaching. It doesn't discriminate against you in any way. It doesn't, tarnish your expertise in any way. On the contrary, it just makes you a teacher that is mindful of your student's sensitivity. And again, I don't think there's anything wrong with that.

**Constance:** I want to make things a bit more complicated,

**Adina**: Okay. Bring it.

**Constance**: In the preparation for this episode, we came across some research that, suggests that the growing consensus within a scientific community is that trigger warnings actually don't work. So, they don't work in a sense of that they reduce anxiety when confronted with content in those people that experienced trauma. Some of these studies even suggest that a trigger warning might do the opposite, so that you will get an anticipation anxiety plus the reaction anxiety. Can you tell us a bit about that?

**Adina:** Yes. Here, it makes me think back of the example with wishing my neighbor a good day. It won't have any effect on the quality of the person's day, right? It's just about the relationship. So over here I look at trigger warnings in a similar manner. Yes. A trigger warning literally will not help the person regulate their breathing if they get triggered by something. What it will do is that before the event triggers them, before the content has an impact on them, gives them a chance to see if and how they can show up for themselves. So, in that moment, you are giving a person the chance to literally, maybe they already have it in their toolbox. They have a behavior that can help them stay present for what's about to come. Because if trauma is about dissociating you then a trigger warning gives you the opportunity to gather yourself in that moment if you can if you have the ability to do so. And the reason why research, shows that it's not working, or it could even promote more anxiety is because a lot of people don't know themselves how to deal with triggers.That's still a skill that is being built as we speak in some therapist's office, I hope. And let's say right now issuing a trigger warning within your lectures is just promoter for what's to come, and that's just something where I feel education can actually contribute and extend a little bit outside of the classroom or the lecture hall.

**Constance:** And while establishing a positive relationship with the student or whoever is listening.

Adina: Exactly. Giving them basically a chance to gather themselves somehow and prepare themselves for what's about to come. That's just a humane thing to do.

**Darian:** I think there's also this idea, this doesn't seem to be something controversial, and I don't think it needs to be controversial either, and that's that a trigger warning or a kind of similar performative act is also a kind of virtue signaling that's directed towards a subset of students with particular concerns.

And it really doesn't always have that much to do with avoiding harm, but has to do with signaling to some students a kind of solidarity that you are in agreement with them about a particular political issue or particular social issue. And I don't think this is always a bad thing necessarily, but it is selective of course. So, if we're performing these trigger warnings or these content warnings in this way, we are of course doing it in a selective way. So, it's showing solidarity with some issues, some problems, and not others. Do you think it gets used in that way as well, or do you think that's a part of how it should be used?

**Adina:** I think that's how it should be used. As I said earlier, if I use it indiscriminately and I issue a trigger warning for everything that I'm about to say, then I think I will lower the impact of the trigger warning itself. I would just muddy the water so much, I would dilute its force so much that it becomes obsolete at some point. I don't think that serves its purpose because, the purpose of having a trigger warning present within a human relationship is to establish that that relationship is a safe relationship. It's a safe connection to have with somebody else. And in that sense, I do believe people need to be mindful of how and when they use that, and when I think in an educational setting, then the invitation here for teachers is again to see which part of the content I'm about to release is something that I can take full responsibility for from A to Z. Because there will be parts in which, for example, I'm sure this must have happened to you in your teaching. Maybe you don't stand by an opinion that you're teaching about. Did you say that to your students? Actually, if I remember correctly, I saw in your email when you invited me on this podcast, you said, I don't necessarily agree with this part of the conversation. So, in a way that was a trigger warning in itself. It's a, a disclaimer, so to say. And the way we have introduced disclaimers in our discourse, I think in a similar way, we can introduce trigger warnings. There will be some themes and ideas that we ourselves feel very discomforted about, so then we issue a trigger warning about it. And in this way, I think the classroom or the Aula can become a space in which students feel that their teachers are a bit more woke than they used to be.

**Darian:** For me, that helps me to understand something else that I was baffled by and a and a little bit curious about. I've seen quite regularly in recent discussions about sexual violence that the word rape, for example, is not written, with all the letters. So, an asteriscs or some other symbol is used to substitute for one of the letters. And I have to say I was quite baffled by this because I thought, certainly writing it slightly differently doesn't change the signification of the term. It means exactly the same thing. It needs to mean exactly the same thing for anyone to understand what's going on in this context. And I imagine that putting the asteriscs or putting whatever other symbol in there doesn't make it less painful to talk about the phenomenon. But what it does do for a reader, I guess, is signify that they are in a community or a setting where this and what it refers to, are taken very seriously and because of that, it might make it easier, to talk about. So, I think the explanation you just gave for trigger warnings in that sense, was really helpful for me also in understanding this other phenomenon, which I was a bit confused about. I guess, again, the question is how far do we go with this idea, right? Is it insensitive for a lecturer to put the word “rape” or “murder” or “genocide”, on a slide or in a syllabus without making some kind of performative gesture? And if we say yes, that is insensitive to do that, no, you need to make this performative gesture. If we are attaching this sort of normativity to it, then we arrive at the idea that not doing it creates a problem and not doing it warrants a kind of rebuke as well. And there I start to get uncomfortable again.

**Adina:** Yeah. It's definitely not a “must be this way”. We don't have consensus on this yet, and I think honestly, this is also part of what keeps us in a state of discomfort. The fact that nobody has yet the right way of doing it, right? Even in psychology, we find, articles that support the idea that trigger warnings are good, and then we have literature that support the idea that they're bad. So, there is no consensus, which is why I reflected back to the teacher and their discretionary advice here is to figure out for themselves what can they do? How much can they do in that respectful manner of honoring that teaching is also a deeply humane act. And I think what you said earlier about the asteriscs in certain words has exactly that capacity to show that somebody is mindful about the impact that such a word could have on somebody else, and already knowing that somebody has thought about this, the person that may or may not get triggered by it already knows that at least there is somewhere out there an invisible ally that is there for them to ensure that there is safety in this process of learning and teaching,

**Constance:** I think this will be quite interesting for teachers to think about this further, how to translate this knowledge into the competencies that we need in order to create this kind of classroom in which we can take all students along in an environment in which they feel seen as a whole person and not just as a student to discuss something abstract today, but as a whole person with all of the experiences. I think that is, I don't want use the word challenge, but it is definitely something that adds, to the skillset that as teachers we have or should have.

**Adina:** Here, I would dare just invite all teachers out there who are maybe now listening to this and feeling triggered by this. Just the question or the, the invitation for reflection. Why did you become a teacher in the first place? Because I believe deep down inside there is an authentic, genuine need for having this human experience passing on the knowledge from one human to another human. Bonding with a student in a deeply academic or philosophical way. There is something deeply humane about the choice of trait to be a teacher in the first place. This embedding the trigger warning into your lectures is just an invitation for reminding yourself to be that human that you once wanted to be.

**Constance:** And as you said before, to also have access to your conversation partner.

**Adina:** Yes, exactly. To make that knowledge exchange, to facilitate that knowledge exchange in the smoothest way possible.

**Darian:** Adina, thank you so much. That was really triggering for me. Um, but also really helpful and enlightening. I think we come away with a lot to think about, and I have to say, I was much more skeptical about this topic and about the idea of trigger warnings coming into this than I am coming out. And I think one of the nicest things is that you explained really well that this is not a sort of monolith topic, monolithic discussion. It's not binary, yes or no. It's really about, as you put it so nicely, the ways that we think about what we're doing when we are educating what we're doing, when we think about the kind of atmosphere we're trying to create in the classroom. So thank you. That was really helpful.

**Adina:** Maybe to give you a bit of a positive conclusion, I always invite my clients to look at the triggers as little fireflies in the forest at night. It may be scary that you're in the forest and that it's dark. But they can show you the way, they can show you things about yourself that maybe you need to further explore. Maybe you need to further question or understand about yourself. So, I'm not really sorry that you got triggered, because I think it's a place for you to grow further.

**Constance:** Thank you, Adina. I think that's actually pretty fitting. When I said in the beginning this was not an easy episode for us to prepare. I think this sitting here together was for us also a bit of a session to exactly reflect on why it was so difficult for us to prepare. And I think we got a step further in this and I think we have lots of food for thought how to move on from here. So, thank you very much. I think it was very enlightening, hopefully to our listeners, certainly to me, I think also to Darian and we will take our fireflies with us.

**Adina:** Thank you for having me and for bringing up this conversation. I really feel it's very important, so I am grateful to have had the chance to carry this with you.

**Constance:** with you. Thank you.

**Darian**: Thanks.

**Constance**: Goodbye everyone.

**Adina:** Bye!

End of recording.