

## Into the Headlines\_ Episode 4: Discontent Warning

**Speaker 1: (00.04)** I mean, we're surrounded by content warnings every day. Made with peanuts, contains scenes that some viewers may find disturbing, parental advisory explicit content – what is generally accepted in most other walks of life seems to be the cause of great consternation – in some quarters at least - when it comes to universities. Content warnings on course materials have been in the headlines a lot recently, with so called 'woke' universities accused of helping to create – and I quote – “a generation of snowflakes unable to cope with the complexities of life”. Outrage makes for great clickbait, but is it justified? From the University of Aberdeen I'm Laura Grant, let's go Into the Headlines.

**Intro music: (00.47)**

**Speaker 1: (01.03)** Episode 4 – Discontent Warning. I'm joined today by Professor Chris Collins, head of the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture; Professor Tim Baker, who teaches the English programme at the School and whose courses have been targeted in the press for using content warnings; and Helen Whalley, president of Debater, the University's student debate society.

Welcome all.

**Speaker 2: (01.27)** Hi

**Speaker 3: (01.28)** Hi Laura

**Speaker 4: (01.28)** Hi

**Speaker 1: (01.29)** Chris and Tim, let's start with the basics. What are content warnings and are they different to trigger warnings?

**Speaker 2: (01.36)** So, yes. Content warnings are a way of letting students know what will be discussed in an upcoming class, they tend to be far more generic than what we call trigger warnings. Trigger warnings are a term coming from psychological practice to describe people with PTSD who may have specific adverse reactions to particular material. And triggers can be anything, so one might be triggered by a particular colour, or a particular environment, whereas content warnings tend to be about the topics that we are discussing and we try not to assume that we know what will affect our students adversely, rather we want to give all students a level playing field through the provision of advice about what they are going to encounter.

**Speaker 1: (02.26)** There seems to be quite a lot of misrepresentation about them out there so now knowing what they are, can you tell me what they aren't?

**Speaker 3: (02.33)** Well what they definitely aren't are stickers on every book in the library saying 'don't read this because you are going to be traumatised' if you do. These are subtle guidance, little bits of information that tell students what we're going to be discussing in class and what they will find in the literature that they read or the artwork that they are looking at and which just prepares the way for the conversation.

**Speaker 2: (02.57)** And I'd add to that they aren't things that we assume students will find troubling. It might be a very positive portrayal of a particular experience, so there isn't a value judgement attached to these sort of warnings where we're trying to put people off. They are not used as a disincentive to engaging with material.

**Speaker 3: (03.20)** And indeed one of the things that we find in the way in which the press has targeted some of this activity is that they will focus on things that they consider to be not worthy of a content warning. They don't object if we put in something that warns people that something is going to be very distressing. But our view is that it's not up to us to decide what a student will find distressing. So a content warning is just that, it's a note of what sorts of topics are going to come up in the class.

**Speaker 1: (03.50)** What's the principal behind them?

**Speaker 3: (03.52)** So the principal behind it is to create a space in the classroom where people are prepared for the topics that we're discussing and that advantages not just people who may be troubled by some of this content but actually the entire class because they then become aware of other members of the class and how they too might be troubled by it. So an important principal behind them actually is dignity. Dignity of everybody in the classroom situation from the staff to the students.

**Speaker 1: (04.22)** One of the arguments that comes up is that education should be challenging. That part of what the University experience is about is expanding your horizons and pushing your knowledge or understanding into areas that you maybe haven't thought about before or experienced before. Are content warnings a barrier to that at all?

**Speaker 3: (04.44)** Absolutely not, absolutely not. I would suggest that content warnings make it much more easy to discuss those challenging topics. We could just not discuss them, but what we do instead is we do discuss them and we prepare students for the discussion of them by telling them in advance that we are going to be discussing it. And usually there isn't a way of not discussing it. We're not saying that if this is something you don't want to do don't bother coming in. These are topics that are very often core topics to the discipline that we are studying and students need to engage with it and we want them to be prepared for that discussion.

**Speaker 2: (05.20)** Yes, and I think there are two particular myths in the media coverage of this that are really harmful. One is the assumption when we are working on particular material, I work in literature so a literary text say, that student should already know what's contained. So if we put a content warning on Sophocles Oedipus Rex for incest and murder, everyone will say 'of course, all students should already know what's contained in a Greek classic', which I think is an extraordinarily elitist argument. But I think the other thing that is tied with that is a lack of recognition that our students have really diverse experiences. They are not coming from the ether with no adverse experiences in life. So I think one of the things that you see very frequently is that content warnings are a way of getting students not to engage with the real world and, for me, one of things they do is say is, this is stuff that happens in the real world, it happens in the real world that is the classroom.

**Speaker 1: (06.27)** So again, one of the criticisms is that we are coddling students in some way and you've kind of touched on it there, the examples that have been used to illustrate this is some way are things like Kidnapped by Robert Louis Stevenson containing scenes of kidnapping. The advice for applying content warnings is to 'verge on the side of caution' – what's the thinking behind that?

**Speaker 2: (06.50)** One of the things that we try very hard to do is not to prejudge who our students are or what they will react to. So I often provide content notes for things that I personally do not find troubling. That I do not particularly expect any of my students to find troubling. And yet, if one student every 10 years finds it beneficial to know in advance that we will be talking about a particular topic, I would much prefer that that student be okay. So I really think that if we tried to be expansive, that creates a way in which we can be more

inclusive. But I think one of the things with that is also that most of us who use these will admit that we miss things. You know, almost always we will say, if there are other issues, if *you* see things in the classroom that you say 'next time you teach this course you should...' you know, it is a work in progress. It's not a perfect system but it is a way to have conversations that we might not be able to have otherwise.

**Speaker 3: (07.55)** I think the Kidnapped example is an interesting one as well, I mean that really illustrates Tim's point there that if someone has experienced some kind of kidnapping situation that's going to be pretty traumatic. I can't imagine that ever more that once every 10 years we're going to have a student that's experienced that horrific thing which thankfully doesn't happen very often but if they have I want them not to be shocked by that coming out in discussion in a class. And okay, it's in the title of Kidnapped and that's where the press, understandably, have made a sort of humorous story out of this and we accept it, we respect it, but better safe than sorry.

**Speaker 1: (08.40)** And as a University with over 130 nationalities in its community what I might read in school and have life experience of may well be different to what someone else has read or lived.

**Speaker 3: (08.52)** The argument that content warnings mollycoddle students can be exploded very easily because we have a duty of care and the press and the public, quite rightly, will take us to task if we fail in our duty to care. If we, for instance, fail to spot the early signs of a student having serious mental health difficulties, this is part and parcel of that whole process, this is about creating a caring environment. What is it that we can do in that short amount of time that we have with students to really support them and to make sure that they are safe and supported.

**Speaker 1: (09.37)** It's not just literature either that content warnings are applied to is it? What's the criteria, what do they encompass and how are they applied?

**Speaker 3: (09.45)** Well in the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture they are applied very widely across a wide range of different kinds of texts that can include music, opera, film. Of course that kind of content warning approach is commonplace in the film industry anyway, when you go to see a film in the cinema you have a pretty clear idea of what it is going to contain because of the rating that the British Board of Film Classification has given it.

**Speaker 1: (10.15)** Helen, student voices are really important in this discussion, what's the benefit of having warnings on course materials from your perspective?

**Speaker 4: (10.24)** I think the benefit is sort of twofold. I as somebody who doesn't get triggered very easily benefit from seeing content warnings because I know what we're going to be talking about in class that day and even if I'm not triggered by say mentions of assault, I do have an emotional reaction to it because I am a woman and because if I know that's a topic we are going to be discussing it's something I need to come into it with a degree or emotional energy and preparation that walking into a normal class on a Monday morning I wouldn't necessarily dedicate to it. I also think I know for a fact that I have peers who are triggered by material like this and who, if they do not have the time to prepare, it throws off their day, their week, and that, when you are in a university setting, is quite a big disruption because of how tight the turnaround for everything is and I want people I know, my classmates, my friends to be happy and safe and if that makes them happy and safe I definitely think that's a good thing. In terms of being coddled, I don't think anything about university coddles students and I don't think that content warnings coddle student either. I think that access to information and knowledge is something that's important to making an

informed decision, that's what university is for and we at Debater have recently started a push to make sure that we include content warnings in our speeches as well because we understand that it is something that is necessary to protect everybody and to make sure everybody gets the most out of it and I think that is what the University wants, is for the students to maximise the utility of their experience and I think this that makes this possible.

**Speaker 1: (12.15)** Well I was about to ask you, Universities are accused of patronising young people by applying warnings. It seems to me you don't feel patronised at all?

**Speaker 4: (12.23)** No, I don't feel patronised. I feel patronised by the Daily Mail saying that I feel patronised without asking me about it. I think it's a good thing to have, I think it makes us more prepared to engage in the material in front of us, engage in those themes, in those topics and raises awareness of stuff that people might not be aware of that is triggering or upsetting that they might not have experience with before that they should be going into that with more delicate gloves than usual.

**Speaker 1: (12.52)** What about the argument that you don't get pre-warning in real life for situations?

**Speaker 4: (12.58)** I think first of all you do, because you have on a box of almonds may contain nuts, you have allergy warnings everywhere, you have your little small text at the bottom of advertisements, like you said, film ratings, specific genre delegations. You can go online and look at a very, very specific and long list of content warnings for pieces of media, like films. Also, why don't we create that world? I listen to true crime, my true crime podcast that I like to listen to has started putting content warnings before their stories and I think that is a good thing because it means that if I want to engage in some aspects of the course and not others, or I want to come back to it or put more energy into it, I can. We can make that world, is what I'm saying and I think that world makes people safer, makes people happier and so I don't see why not, you know. We're the leaders of the future as young people and having this as an example to follow I can't see why it does anything bad.

**Speaker 1: (13.57)** Does having a warning ever actually stop you from reading, listening to or being exposed to course materials at all?

**Speaker 4: (14.05)** Personally, course materials no. In terms of what I engage with in my free time in terms of what I choose to read or watch, it might, but I understand that the material is compulsory. I trust that my lecturers and my fellow students will come into it with empathy and compassion and if I do the same there shouldn't be an issue. It's never stopped me from engaging with material but I can understand why people might not want to engage in material if it is particularly triggering and I think that is something that should be possible.

**Speaker 1: (14.39)** Tell me a little bit more about how you use content warnings in a practical sense. What do you do differently?

**Speaker 4: (14.46)** It means that I take more time to think about why the material might have that content warning, what that content warning means and how it might affect the people around me. In Law we don't get content warnings in the way that you guys have described but we do get them and I think it gives me the opportunity to think about what it is I'm going to say, think about the real stories that are affected, the real lives that are affected by these stories, because stuff in literature, it's not just pulled out of nowhere and stuff in Law isn't being made out of nothing, there's real people and real harms there and it gives me a chance to prepare and engage in that. And also afterwards to make sure that I'm doing emotional aftercare, make sure that I'm looking after myself and I've given that enough energy and I've

given myself enough time to sort of recover from that and make sure that I am able to be the best possible student, basically.

**Speaker 1: (15.48)** How does it make you feel when you read some of the negative comments that people make about warnings being applied?

**Speaker 4: (15.55)** It makes me frustrated. I really wish that people who complain about this would have more empathy and put themselves in the shoes of somebody whose life is massively affected by triggering content, whose ability to function is affected by triggering content and it makes me frustrated and sad because, you know, this type of thing, like I said, is taken for granted elsewhere and I think it is just as important, if not more so, in an educational setting and I really wish that these people would actually talk to some students instead of just kind of assuming it's an attack on free speech.

**Speaker 1: (16.32)** Chris, a lot of the negativity is implying that warnings can never be justified, it's something you touched on earlier - especially in children's literature. This is quite an important point for you, isn't it?

**Speaker 3: (16.44)** It is and I think that the assumption that any kind of literature is just sort of innocuous because its children's literature, how could it harm anybody, we read this out to children, fails to recognise that we're not children and that we're a university and that we're not looking at this literature at the surface level. We're looking at the context in which it was written, the context in which it may have been received historically, what it means today in a different environment, how all of these things manifest themselves in the work – and the temptation to say, well this is about circuses or puppets and therefore its not about human beings completely misunderstands the whole point of art which is to explore the human psyche and to create great emotional experiences in the people who read, or watch or listen to it. So I do feel that a lot of this argument that is directed towards us really underplays the power of art to really change people's lives.

**Speaker 1: (17.49)** This isn't a new debate, research on the effectiveness of content warnings varies and seems about as polarised as people's opinions on them, but ultimately they are a tool for fostering critical thinking. What do you think would change if they weren't there?

**Speaker 2: (18.04)** I mean I think one of the things is certainly for me and most of my peers is that we have taught when they weren't there. That I spent a number of years teaching without it even occurring to me that this could be a good pedagogical tool and what I've found was certain students disengaging, certain students being unwilling to speak, certain students not coming to class because they did not feel they had been prepared. So in terms of being able to look at whether or not these are effective I think that if my students are coming to class, if my students are engaging with the material, if they are thinking through it vigorously, that means its working and I genuinely believe that that is what I have seen over the past decade as these become more and more common place.

**Speaker 1: (18.53)** The impact of them is not restricted to lecturer-student in the classroom, its student-student relationships are changing as well as a result of them, is that fair?

**Speaker 2: (19.03)** Yes, absolutely, and I'd like to bring Helen is as well but I think one of the things is that it helps students understand that the topics they are discussing, from whatever sort of discipline of whatever sort of background that these are things that their peers may have experienced, that they are things that that they themselves might experience, so I think again one of my criticisms of this 'there are no trigger warnings in the real world' is that sometimes being able to talk about a topic in a space where the student

themselves has agency over that conversation is way to prepare for traumatic events that might happen later in life. And I think that question of agency is really important because one of the things that I see very frequently is this idea that all students look at content warnings as a sign of danger to come. And one of the things is that not all students use content warnings, some students choose to ignore them entirely because they do not feel that they are needed. Some students will read a course guide several weeks before the course begins and say, okay, I know that in week three the topic we're going to discuss is one that I have to prepare myself for, but week three is the only week that I'm concerned about; some students will look at them every week. But I think that idea that students are thus able to be more in control of their own learning is a really important one so it really isn't lecturers going and saying you must do so, its students taking control themselves and being aware of their peers.

**Speaker 4: (20.49)** I agree. I think it makes a classroom discussion safer for everybody involved whether you would feel that a content warning is relevant to you or not. I think it increases the feeling of trust that the people around you are going to approach a delicate issue with the delicacy it deserves and that if anybody is upset that they will be treated with compassion and not with sort of bafflement or dismissal. I think that's all incredibly important because university is a very emotionally taxing time for students, the content is very emotionally taxing. We don't need to make it harder for young people who are trying to find their place in the world to do so, and I don't think that it makes anybody's learning experience so significantly worse that, on the weighing, I don't think it's something that's bad, I think it is a very, very good thing and I think that it means when I walk into a discussion I trust my peers have done the preparation.

**Speaker 1: (21.51)** Does having content warnings allow you to skip some of the preliminaries and allow you to go deeper into the issues behind it more quickly? And if the answers no, say no, don't try and give me an answer to appease me.

**Speakers 2, 3 and 4: (22.04)** <Laughs>

**Speaker 4: (22.08)** My experience in Law with content warnings is much more limited than I think it would be in literature just because a lot of it is 'what's legislation' but when it has become particularly relevant, a course I did last semester called Gender War in Society, it did allow you to skip some of the basic stuff and dive into the issues more deeply.

**Speaker 2: (22.27)** In some ways I think that is a hard question for me to answer because content warnings don't occur in a vacuum. They are part of a great raft of material that we are providing students with, discussion questions in advance, even things like course guides and syllabi, you know, so it's part of a package of how we make sure that students come into the classroom ready for discussion but I don't think of them as separate to the other elements of that process. So to me, saying, there will be this particular topics discussed next week, is no different from saying 'and I want you to make sure to read chapters two and three of this particular book, or whatever it might be.

**Speaker 3: (23.13)** The sense I have from students is that students are here to learn and students know that they are here to learn and they don't learn well in an environment where things are thrown at them that they are not expecting. And the argument that you don't get trigger warnings in the real world, well I can't argue with that. It's true, there's lots of nastiness out there in the world, why on earth would we want to replicate that nastiness in our classroom. We can talk about it, and that's absolutely right because the world's problems are solved by talking, but they are solved by talking calmly, not in an environment that does not give dignity to everybody contributing to the discussion.

**Speaker 1: (23.57)** One last question from me. Why do we think that content warnings make people so angry?

**Speaker 3: (24.02)** I think there's a tendency to equate the provision of content warnings with the idea of censorship, which it is not, it is the exact opposite of censorship. It's creating an environment in which we can talk about really challenging topics. But I understand why people would feel unhappy about censorship. We're just not doing censorship, that's not what this is.

**Speaker 4; (24.32)** Yeah, I think that people just don't understand what they are, how they work. They misinterpret them as being some more invasive than how they work in practice and when you don't understand something it's quite easy for that to be used to make you afraid or any and I think that has to be the reason because when you look at it properly, from a more academic perspective, you can see that it's probably a good thing to have and shouldn't make anybody feel angry.

**Speaker 2: (25.08)** And I think that one of the things with it is that if you look at the media coverage, it tends to focus on the arts and particularly literature but other arts, and some on the humanities, sometimes history or something like that but it's very rare that psychology studies, which will also include those, are targeted in this way and I think part of that is a current distrust of arts education as not fitting people for the real world. And I guess one of the things that we are doing with something as simple as content warnings but many, many other tools in our pedagogic repertoire is we're saying this work does matter in the real world, this is part of human experience and it is relevant to everything our students will be doing after they leave university.

**Speaker 1: (26.01)** And I don't think we'll find a better place to finish our chat than there. I say this every week but this has been really interesting discussion so thank you very much for your time.

**Speaker 2 and 4: (26.09)** Thanks

**Speaker 3: (26.10)** Thank you Laura

**Speaker 1: (26.11)** And thanks to you out there for listening. If you are enjoying these podcasts please give us a like, a share or a rating if you are feeling particularly generous. I'll be back soon with another look at the stories behind the headlines but if you just can't wait, you know what to do, visit [abdn.ac.uk/news](http://abdn.ac.uk/news) to find all the latest updates from the University of Aberdeen.

**Outro music**