

Student Initiated Confrontations in Social Work Education

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Peter Sobota [00:00:10] From the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, welcome to the inSocialWork Podcast. I'm Peter Sobota, and it's good as always to have you along. It's not a surprise to many that in our current moment, higher education faculty have frequently experienced a range of troubling student-initiated confrontations, from minor rudeness to deliberate hostility to even experiences of violence. Just take a look at the New York Times for accounts of an Oklahoma University teaching assistant placed on leave, and only this past summer, a Texas AM professor, dean, department head, and university president, all out the door following the backlash following student confrontations. Lest we ignore it, social work education is not immune to this term. Speak with social work educators or spend time at some of their faculty meetings, and you'll hear about experiences that in some cases result in fear arising from a number of different events and experiences with their students. These incidents create significant personal and professional challenges, often worsened by inadequate institutional support and limited training in classroom management. On today's show, our guest Thalia Anderen will discuss what she's learned from her research with social work educators, along with her own experiences in her professional career as an academic. She will describe what happens, how educators respond. And what the impact is on them. Dr. Anderen will offer recommendations for effective management of these confrontations and what needs to be done and put in place to prevent civil discourse and critical thinking from becoming confrontation and a battlefield in the classroom. Thalia Anderen, PhD MSW, is owner at Anderen Counseling and Consulting. She's also a social work educator and researcher. Hi Thalia, welcome to inSocialWork.

Thalia Anderen [00:02:12] Hi, thanks so much for having me.

Peter Sobota [00:02:14] Yeah, it's it's eight degrees here in the greater Buffalo area this morning.

Thalia Anderen [00:02:17] Yeah, it's a little bit warmer here in the Chicagoland area, but we're supposed to head where you are soon, so

Peter Sobota [00:02:24] All right. Well, thanks again for joining us. So today we're going to talk about let's see, how do we put this interactions and events that you have referred to as student initiated confrontations? And by the way, the the the people being confronted in this conversation are probably going to be social work educators mostly. But before we do that, I'm I'm really curious because I didn't we didn't find a lot of social work literature related to this, which was surprising. But so how did you find yourself becoming interested in this and then eventually study this topic?

Thalia Anderen [00:03:06] Sure. Well, thank you for asking. So I I would say my first experience with being in an academic role was probably around 2009. I was working, I I'm a clinical social worker by trade here. But I really wanted to get to to see what teaching was like. And so I took on the role of an adjunct at a at a school that was a lot of mature students, older students, mostly business students actually. So it wasn't even in the field. And I have to say I loved teaching. I loved working with it with all of the different students. I do remember I had one student in particular who gave me a bit of a hard time and apparently gave other instructors a hard time. So I didn't take it overly personally.

Peter Sobota [00:03:48] Yeah, that's comforting.

Thalia Anderen [00:03:49] Yeah, and it wasn't anything they, you know, it was more like around when when they were attending class and leaving and and that sort of a thing. So I really just chalked it up to an isolated incident. But fast forward and about 10 years ago, I pivoted completely from being in full-time clinical social work to taking on the role of a chair of a brand new undergraduate social work program. And really early on in my work there, I started noticing some concerning behaviors from students. And it was, I mean, it was a challenge for me. I mean, I'm trying to make a good impression. I was trying to keep situations from escalating and and getting onto the desk of the dean. And then I started hearing more and more similar stories from my instructors, from some of my coworkers. Then I started hearing similar stories from other people who were working in similar roles at other schools. And I remember specifically a colleague of mine who was in a similar position at another school saying, My faculty are being bullied on a daily basis, and I just don't know what to do about it. And that really started to get me thinking, right? Like it was validating to know that I wasn't alone. But then on the other hand, it was really concerning to think these kinds of things were happening when I would never act in that sort of a way. And so all this. Really led me to start thinking more and more that this was this was something bigger than just isolated incidents. This is actually a phenomenon. And and so why is this happening? What's contributing to it? Why isn't more being done to address these situations, right? Like if leadership is in this place of power and authority, then why why aren't they addressing it at a higher level? And so when I thought about going back to school for my doctorate, I thought this is an area of research that really needs to be looked at more closely. And that's that's how it all evolved.

Peter Sobota [00:05:47] Yeah. Well and and now we get to read about it on the front page of the New York Times and the Chronicle of Higher Education and Inside Higher Ed almost on a daily basis. So let's let's now lay lay out the playing field here. So what exactly are you referring to when you say student initiated confrontations? Like what what exactly are we talking about here?

Thalia Anderen [00:06:12] Yeah. So I wanted to come up with my own term when I was doing the research. And so that's how student initiated confrontation, or if you hear me say sick, I don't mean illness, I'm meaning student initiated confrontation. But I developed that term because when I actually was doing the literature, there were there were a lot of different terms out there, right? You see, I mean, you definitely see bullying, which which represents some of those more intense hostile behaviors. You see incivility, which was used a lot, and I think the two articles that I found that were related to social work focus more on incivility, and that can be more some of like rude incidental kinds of behaviors. Even terms like contrapower harassment, teacher target bullet bullying. And so while they had a lot of similar elements, they didn't all represent the same thing. So student initiated confrontations for all intents and purposes is really a range of behaviors that can happen

both in the classroom but also outside the classroom. In terms of emails or communication. And it ranges from some of those more incidental and rude types of behaviors like students coming to class late or leaving early, using their cell phones or laptops for non-class purposes, you know, just kind of ignoring their instructor or side talking, that kind of thing, to more hostile, aggressive, even violent kinds of behaviors, like threats, threats about grades, threats of going to higher levels of leadership, even the media, the president. I've heard I'm going to the president of the university. Anything that's really aimed at discrediting that person. You know, I've even heard stories of destruction of property of the professor, instructor, making threats about their personal family members and people in their personal lives. Oh, yeah, or even physical violence has been an issue. I mean, fortunately, the violence wasn't a thing for any of my participants, but again, it's it's really just about challenging their role and their authority and even sometimes their personal character. And I do want to clarify that questioning grades, feedback, content-I mean, that's not inherently wrong. And obviously, in social work, we want to encourage students to advocate for others on behalf of themselves, but it's really more that dismissive, hostile, or aggressive. Way that they're handling the situations, that's what becomes problematic for you know, the professors, educators, instructors, whatever term you'd like to use.

Peter Sobota [00:08:50] So I'm you know, I'm sure you're talking about students from other disciplines, of course. Yeah. But I I think it's I think it's fair to say that a lot of us believe, you know, that social work students are are well or they're special. And you know, they're they're drawn to our field because you know, they're attracted to our values and our mission and our code of ethics. And do you think that's a reliable assumption?

Thalia Anderen [00:09:24] Well, I mean, I may be biased as a social worker. I mean, of course I like to think that that we're all special and unique. I mean, certainly the helping professions can be, but I I think that's why it's been such a shock, especially when people ask, Oh, well, what's what was your focus of research? And I tell them, and people who are in the social work field, and they all anybody who's worked in academia is not surprised by this, but anybody who hasn't is absolutely shocked because they wouldn't think that someone going into this particular field would be in this kind of a way. Especially since usually you ask people why do you go into social work? Because they want to help people, because they want to advocate for change and and help those who are vulnerable. But yeah, some of the behaviors definitely don't align with our code of ethics, our standards of practice, et cetera.

Peter Sobota [00:10:16] Mm-hmm. Yeah. So maybe a little critical thinking. Don't make, don't make broad based assumptions. So I mentioned this earlier. There isn't, at least to my knowledge, a lot of scholarly writing about this kind of this phenomenon, if you will, in the social work literature. I, you know, there I I found a lot for K through 12, obviously. Why do you think that is? And and I'll I'll let you approach it either way. Why do you think that is? Why don't people like us write about this? I mean, this isn't new, I don't think, but is there something about our current moment culturally political that feeds either way, take it whichever direction you think is important, or both.

Thalia Anderen [00:11:08] I I yes, and I would say see all of the above. I mean, like you said, there is some literature out there. I mean, it definitely is not as researched as like peer-to-peer bullying or workplace bullying, that kind of a thing. And a lot of the research that I found was it's related to nursing programs. I mean, I found one that was geology, some were just very general across universities and not specific to a discipline. But I don't know honestly why, why this hasn't been more researched. I mean, like you said, conflict

between students and teachers has been around since the beginning of time. But I'm wondering if it's only more recently that academia or instructors are realizing that this is more than just some of those isolated incidents or these one-off situations and that this is part of maybe a bigger systemic issue. I also wonder if as it's become a little bit more common, if there's an it's just part of the job kind of a mentality. I know when I was interviewing my participants that a lot of them felt like leadership wasn't wasn't supporting them more just because it was sort of like, yes, it's an unfortunate situation, but it's just part of the job. You just have to learn how to deal with it. And so if that's the case, then maybe it's you know, it hasn't been researched. But I also wonder, there's there's and this is this is more aligned with what you were talking about in terms of shifts, is that This topic is a bit controversial, right? I mean, you're now talking about students who aren't generally seen as having as much power and authority as being these figures who do have power and they're maybe misusing that power in the way that they're they're responding to educators. And so, you know, when you look at maybe some of the the backlash or some of the implications that could come from doing this kind of research in general, I don't know if just social work, that there might not be as much support for research on this topic as maybe some other issues. And so therefore, and you know, especially for adjuncts who are looking to try to get in more full time or

Peter Sobota [00:13:21] Exactly.

Thalia Anderen [00:13:22] Full time instructors who are trying to get tenure track status, they may not want to touch this particular kind of a a topic.

Peter Sobota [00:13:32] Yeah.

Thalia Anderen [00:13:33] Yeah.

Peter Sobota [00:13:33] Yeah. Hmmm.

Thalia Anderen [00:13:37] I mean, I knew that was a risk in doing this research. I mean, I I literally had one participant who said, You know you're done in academia after this, right? And I said it's a risk I'm willing to take because I'm I feel that it's that important to get out there. So

Peter Sobota [00:13:52] Yeah, but but I but I think you're I think you're right. I mean, I I think we're I'm gonna ask you about this a little bit later, but let's just go there for a second. I mean, I when it comes to the impact, beyond just the like trying to figure out what to do right in front of you when it's happening, which is bad enough. It's kind of like, okay, now what do I do? How do I, you know, do I self-censor? Do I ignore it? I mean, you have a lot of options that sometimes, I'll be honest, sometimes they seem better. Especially when you have some of the circumstances that you that you mentioned as well. I you know, I was thinking about this myself. I I was wondering about your opinion about this. To me, there seems to have been a kind of a movement toward, you know, kind of a consumer driven orientation to higher education. And you know, with that that we could do a whole nother podcast, but you know, there's there's you know, I pay this much intuition.

Thalia Anderen [00:14:57] The customer is always right.

Peter Sobota [00:14:58] The customer is always.... I mean, do you think do you think that's part of the the the mix here?

Thalia Anderen [00:15:05] Oh, absolutely. And if you yes, and if you look at the literature that's actually out there right now, that any research study that talks about why is this happening, what are some of the contributing factors, that consumerism is one of the first things that pops up, right? I paid for this education, so just give me the A. And when I was actually doing my participant interviews, one of my questions was, why do you think this phenomenon is happening? And consumerism and this, I'm paying for it, I don't need to work for it, just give me the A. This is really expensive. That that came up, I would say 15 out of my 15 participants, all mentioned something to that effect. Yeah. Now obviously there are a lot of other reasons too, but that that certainly has been a shift.

Peter Sobota [00:15:52] Yeah. And like you said, you know, instructors who are adjuncts who really rely heavily, I would guess, on their course evaluations, right? And also, you know, folks on the tenure track who aren't there yet, it becomes a cost benefit analysis, right? And yeah, and you're fighting sometimes something bigger than than you, it feels like, and toss in a little bit of grade inflation, maybe, and and and and and even maybe the lingering effects of what went down during the pandemic, and it's a like a perfect storm.

Thalia Anderen [00:16:27] Yeah. I mean, even when I was finishing up, or even after I finished my dissertation and was actually putting some journal articles out there, there were some studies that came in right at the the bitter end, you know, like in 2022, in early 2023 that were talking about this phenomenon from a pandemic perspective. But, you know, and I also want to say too, is it's not just the consumerism. I mean I mean, I think part of the issue goes back to K through 12, right? You talked about that there was more K through 12 literature, but there have been shifts in K through 12 education. There are a lot more accommodations. You're you're having a lot more everybody gets a good grade, you're getting multiple opportunities to hand things in. And so when there are that many accommodations, there's great inflation happening at the K through 12 level, then by the time students are getting to the higher education level, post-secondary, that those same expectations are there. And so if you actually do provide feedback that might be constructive, that might not be here's your automatic A, there's that coping ability just isn't there because they haven't been scaffolded earlier in their life to be able to handle any sort of critique, criticism, feedback that isn't this is amazing. This is the best thing ever. So

Peter Sobota [00:17:48] Yep. Yeah, I don't know about you, but I I guess what I just want to say out loud is I I really like teaching. And and you know, the vast, vast majority of students are very capable of being of of critical thinking, of speaking truth to power, of challenging. And and a lot of that is I think makes a course interesting. We encourage that in a lot of our syllabus. So you know, we're we're not talking with a about everybody, but it you only need one or two that can really like unnerve you, I think. And and so I just want to make sure that people you haven't done this, but I want to make sure that people understand that we're not talking about social work students in general. I think we're talking about maybe more frequent outliers, but certainly out outliers.

Thalia Anderen [00:18:39] Yeah, and I really appreciate you saying that 'cause that was one of the things that I wanted to mention too, that it isn't just everybody. I mean, there's gotta be a reason that people like you and I still wanna go back in there and teach and it really is just a handful of folks. So sometimes there can be one person and then they're maybe eliciting some other other people. But it's there are a lot of really amazing students out there. And I think this is it's just unfortunate that these i isolated incidents can bring about a lot of problems and and discomfort for the educators. And certainly educators, we you know, we contribute to this too, so

Peter Sobota [00:19:19] I think we're gonna we could agree on that. Yeah. All right. So all right, let's get to let's get to the goods here. As you have looked at these events and interactions, you know, I g I don't know how to ask it either way. What what kinds of things did people tell you about? What what what happens? What do students do?

Thalia Anderen [00:19:44] Well, one of the themes that came out of my interviews with participants was really that a lot of the behaviors are coming from a place of student discontent, right? They're feeling a sense of discontent around maybe grades, assignments, course content course content could even be aspects of of the professor, the instructor themselves. Sometimes it's personal, but also sometimes just who they are as a person or where they're coming from. And so certainly these confrontational behaviors could manifest as some of those more rude incidental behaviors that I mentioned before, like the, you know, coming to class late or, you know, you're using your your laptop for things not class related. I mean, even my own experience walking around the room and seeing two students booking plane tickets in the in the middle of an activity. So

Peter Sobota [00:20:31] They're multitasking.

Thalia Anderen [00:20:32] They're multitasking, some of those kinds of things. But really, what was more disturbing for them and what they were noticing was those more intense, kind of hostile, aggressive behaviors. So definitely threats. You know, instead of initiating a a problem solving kind of meeting directly with their instructor, that they're just going above them or saying, you know, I don't really care what you think. I'm going to go to the dean, I'm going to go to the president of the college, that sort of a thing. You know, any sort of lashing out, refusing to do all or parts of an assignment that they don't like. You know, you better take me out of this group presentation group and put me in another one, like those kinds of things. Certainly, like you said, course evaluations are being used, social media forums to disparage educators, but anything that's really about just trying to discredit them. You know, some participants talked about the students who were banding together to try to get them fired or disciplined, mob mentality, but you know, and and even when students were going above the instructor to other forms of leadership, rarely was leadership redirecting them back to try to make this more of a problem solving and it and you know, a professional kind of a scenario. So the instructors really were not feeling very supported. They weren't getting that that backing that they really needed. So yeah. Can come out in a lot of different forms.

Peter Sobota [00:22:04] Yikes. So I I don't know if it's even if this is a fair question, but do whatever you can with it. I or at least based on the the folks that you spoke with, is are there typical responses or from educators that you found like what what did folks tell you about how they dealt with this regardless of what it was?

Thalia Anderen [00:22:30] Yes. And that was really one of the main things I wanted to see was like to really hear the voices of what are you doing? How is this impacting? But honestly, I think that a lot of instructors are just trying to survive. They're just trying to, you know, as one of my participants said, we're just all trying to survive the semester without any sort of conflict with students, without backlash, without anything ending up in the dean's office. And because they're not getting that support a lot of times from at least higher levels of leadership, maybe they're getting that support from their directors or chairs, but once it goes further, so they're ending up doing pretty much whatever they need to do to avoid that conflict. So, you know, any sort of alteration of grading and teaching practices. You mentioned grade inflation. They might be changing around assignments so that there's maybe less controversy or things that will be triggering. I think

one of the biggest concerns is that all of them, and this is corroborated in the research too, were they were watering down certain content, course content or even avoiding content altogether that could be quote unquote triggering or seen as controversial, anything that might create some of that discomfort in the student that could then lead to that backlash. And then it in addition to that, there a lot of the participants talked about avoiding giving real constructive and critical feedback. Again with that grade inflation, that there were times in essays or papers and assignments that they wanted to be a little bit more honest about some of the things that they were seeing in these assignments, but they were just afraid that that was going to be reacted to negatively. So they just stopped doing it. And I mean, obviously there's some pretty serious implications with with doing all these different things. So

Peter Sobota [00:24:23] It sounds like fear. Yes. Yes. And it it's it's interesting because I think some students might push back, right? Some students might say, Well, you're the instructor, you have a lot of power, this is not a level playing field. You're just used to you you tell us in social work to advocate and to speak truth to power. And then when we do, you give us grief. I I know there's a nuanced response there, but I thought I'd I'd give you a shot at it and see what you thought.

Thalia Anderen [00:25:06] Well, it's interesting because I remember there was a participant who who talked about that very thing that especially a lot of assignments in social work are more reflective based, right? I mean, like you go into another discipline, you're going to get a lot of multiple choice tests and whatnot. But because there's so much reflection that if instructors provide constructive feedback to a reflective assignment, I think there's so much personally felt, right? That students can feel very like you're you're criticizing my personal experience as opposed to I'm not necessarily that's not what I'm doing. I'm I'm more providing some feedback around where maybe certain concepts could have been further developed, or you weren't referencing or you weren't really meeting the expectations of the assignment. And I think there was a lot of misperception around what the feedback is for as opposed to how the students are perceiving it. They're taking it very personally.

Peter Sobota [00:26:07] Yeah. Yeah, I'm I'm just having a lot of thoughts about why that is. Yeah. Because I I mean you would assume that we're a bunch of people of goodwill, right? I don't think, you know, I I'm sure there are some of us who deep down don't like teaching and and maybe don't like students and

Thalia Anderen [00:26:24] Mm-hmm. Just want to do the research part.

Peter Sobota [00:26:26] But that's not most of the people who I've met in in in social work education for sure. So I wanted to ask you, you you've kind of talked a little bit about the impact on educators' work and the choices they make. But I I think we have to acknowledge that underneath, you know, the educators slash professor role. You know, we're human beings.

Thalia Anderen [00:26:54] Yeah.

Peter Sobota [00:26:55] And did did folks talk about what the personal impact on them was? I mean, did y I'm I'm kind of I don't know if that's even a a fair differentiation, but I think you know what I mean. I do. Yeah, okay, so then I'll stop. Okay, go. Yeah.

Thalia Anderen [00:27:11] Yeah, because that was actually again, that was one of my questions was how how did these experiences impact you both personally and professionally? And I mean, with my participants, I had some who had experienced multiple types of student initiated confrontations. And I also had people who had had one experience, but that experience was just so impactful that they felt like they wanted to participate and talk about it. So I wanna put that out there. But there are definitely a lot of negative impacts and all of the things that my participants experience for have been talked about in the research, but clearly things like stress, anxiety, that like you mentioned fear. One of the major themes that that I talk about in in my research is this idea of fear that there's this fear that situations are going to occur or they're going to escalate. There's fear that the these situations are going to impact their careers, whether it's from getting another contract or being promoted. But a lot of people work in the field in different capacities. And so they are worried about how, especially if students were taking to social media forums and all of that to try to insult and make derogatory comments about them, how is that going to impact them in the community? So there was a lot of worry about, okay, this is only one aspect of my life, but how is this going to impact how people perceive me if I have a practice or I'm working in another organization?

Peter Sobota [00:28:35] Absolutely. Yeah.

Thalia Anderen [00:28:35] So I mean, I heard things like sleepless nights, terror, you know, I'm terrified to go back into the classroom each semester because of these sorts of things. I had I had a few people liken teaching to battle zone or battlefield. One person even said, every time I go into the classroom, you know, you have to put on your helmet, you have to put on your sword. And even it said, there are times I think it just might be easier to just be a retail cashier and have managers deal with these sorts of things so I can just do my job. So clearly there was a lot of a personal effect. PTSD was mentioned by a few. I mean, I even had one whose experience was so negative, and several ended up deciding just to leave teaching altogether, or at least for a part of a time. One person not only left the institution, left teaching altogether, and because they were working in a very small community, picked up and moved geographically to a completely different location. And when they were co-facilitating a support group, one of the group members happened to mention the town that this participant had come from. And she said she started having panic attacks and like actually had to leave the room for a few minutes because it just kicked up so much intensity and distress from her previous experience. Yeah.

Peter Sobota [00:29:56] Yeah, I said, wow.

Thalia Anderen [00:29:58] Yeah.

Peter Sobota [00:29:58] We we we are human beings, yeah.

Thalia Anderen [00:30:03] And then think about what that does to your teaching, right? Like not only are you watering it down, but then like where's your motivation, right? People talked about they just felt a lot less motivation that they were exhausted and fatigued because all this, you know, dealing with student-initiated confrontation was taking away from time that they would spend trying to put together more engaging lectures or trying to be more supportive, be more accessible. So then they just felt like they'd really kind of lost some of their creativity and people who had said, Oh, whereas I used to go the extra mile for my students, now I don't necessarily have the strength and the energy to do it.

Peter Sobota [00:30:43] Yeah, I think you know, you and I it's very likely you and I have have similar backgrounds. I was a clinician, primarily a clinician for about 16 years before I moved into academia. And you know, one of the things that made me a I think better or continue to my professional development is I had a lot of good supervision. So my learning didn't stop when I when I received my degree. I learned a lot more by Getting great supervision. But I I was thinking while you were talking is at least for me, or at least the world that I move around in, you really don't get a lot of evaluation from peers or supervision from within your discipline about teaching. You don't even really get training.

Thalia Anderen [00:31:37] No. No.

Peter Sobota [00:31:37] On how to teach, or at least I didn't. And you know, so I think it's it's it's very weird for me to compare those two worlds because it was very comforting to be completely overwhelmed, maybe in a in a session, for example, and to know that I had somebody, especially who I trusted, that that helps. And that goes back to your comments about administrative support. But I could go back and say, man, I really I had no idea what I was doing. I was just like watching the clock, hoping that this would end. And and you really don't, at least I and the people who I move with, we really don't have that option in in higher education and teaching. And I think that's too bad.

Thalia Anderen [00:32:24] It is and that's what we're doing.

Peter Sobota [00:32:25] So how do you get better? And you you were afraid to ask, right?

Thalia Anderen [00:32:28] Yeah. Because you might look bad. Exactly. And and that was a an overarching theme was this not, you know, whether or not they were asking for help or they wanted to report some of the situations that they were in. But that that's where my research ended up really taking a different turn than some of the things that out there was I looked at training, I looked at How many people actually had any sort of teacher training at the higher ed level before they started teaching? I mean, some had a maybe half of a course in their doctoral programs, but not everybody who participated in my study has a doctoral degree. And so, I mean, you know, if you think about it, instructors, professors are hired based on their field experience, and they're hired based on their research interests and their subject matter expertise. They're not generally hired because of their teaching experience. And most schools don't provide much. Maybe they provide some some training around syllabus creation and some course content. But again, even that's not usually mandatory. I was lucky that when I first started as an adjunct, the school that I taught for made everybody go through several different steps before they were actually hired. And one of those was a four-week training course on teaching. And I I learned so much, but nobody else that I have talked to has gone through anything like that. And then dealing with these confrontational student issues. I mean, we know it's it's a when, not an if, but yet not one of my participants had received any sort of training or any real knowledge. Like they weren't given a heads up by by their leaders that this was going to be a thing. And and here's some ways of managing it. Here's some ways to deal with it.

Peter Sobota [00:34:16] Yeah, and then barriers to acknowledging it, right? Stigma or whatever. Yeah, it's it's boy, I'm thinking about a lot of things. And and so you're in this spot. And I think now I'm gonna speak about somebody like me who had some clinical experience. So so now you've got some clinic ex clinical experience or savvy and you know how to maybe deal with that from a clinical perspective, but you can't just dump that into a a course, right?

Thalia Anderen [00:34:49] No, no. And I think that's what what was frustrating for a lot of my participants is that they felt like because they were social workers and they had been trained in things like conflict management and de-escalating clients who might be in a crisis. Yeah, that that could just easily be transferred into the classroom, but students and clients aren't the same thing. And the kinds of situations that come up in the classroom and the reason that students might have some distress may not be the same thing. And so, you know, that leadership needs to be more aware that just because we have the training or we're perceived to have the training doesn't mean that we actually do. And some people aren't working frontline. So they they haven't developed those skills like maybe some clinicians have.

Peter Sobota [00:35:37] Yeah, I was I'm glad you said that because you know there are a huge number of folks who really spend either very little time or no time in the practice world. So and then you're you're teaching. Yeah, I it's a double edged sword because I think I I found myself in the in these like really kind of I I would call them for me volatile situations. I realized that I'm not this person's therapist, and this would be a very bad move to therapise them in this moment. But I have to admit, some of the training I had around group work. Saved me sometimes. But again that was an accident. It was I mean, I'm sure that's not everybody's experience as well.

Thalia Anderen [00:36:24] No, I mean again, if they're not working in that kind of clinical capacity, or maybe they are, but they're not very experienced facilitating any sort of group, then they're not developing those kinds of skills. And and you know, when you think about what are some of the reasons why students might be engaging in these behaviors, I mean, social work is unique too, is that I think sometimes there is a mis misperception on their part that because we're social workers, regardless of what our background is, whether we're clinical or not, that we're, as one of my participants said, we're social workers. We're supposed to be warm and empathic and touchy feely. And so therefore we're going to provide endless flexibility and and whatnot. And sometimes I think there's some confusion that students might look at us more as a therapist than as an educator and instructor. And then when we try to set some boundaries around that and make sure that they're being safe and how much they just disclose to us, then that's misperceived as we're being dismissive, that we don't care. And then that can be some of those. Yeah, we're back in the cycle again.

Peter Sobota [00:37:29] Oh, that's a rough. Yeah. So do you do you think that specific, for example, course content or context influences whether or not this happens? Absolutely. Okay.

Thalia Anderen [00:37:46] Absolutely, without a doubt, without a doubt. And and yeah, my par my participant responses certainly corroborated that. But, you know, a lot of the material in social work courses are, you know, it can be very different than material that you're going to see in other disciplines, you know, accounting, math, science, you know, things that are more evidential. And so I would say social work courses do contain a lot of content and material that can be considered triggering or distressing. I would say especially around things like identity politics, right? Students a lot of times for the first time in their life, especially depending on where they're coming from and their backgrounds, they're being forced to confront their own values and biases and even prejudices. And and things like racism, sexism, discrimination, anything that's around identity politics and all of that discomfort that students feel. For some of them, especially if they don't feel like they have adequate coping strategies to manage some of that distress and that discomfort, can now come out in, you know, some of those lashing out or problematic behaviors towards

the instructor. Or if it's the instructor is even I found like you might be presenting an idea that's not necessarily your own view or opinion, but anything, anything that might conflict with that student's can now take on a life of its own.

Peter Sobota [00:39:13] Yeah. And I think it it would be, I'm so glad you said that because I think it would be wise for me and for many of us to keep that in mind. Because I I think, you know, I've certainly been guilty of of of really kind of taking it a bit too personally. And like it it this is all something that I created or did. And and I think some of that's been true, unfortunately. But a lot of it is and and but my response to them was I don't think always sensitive to the fact that they're bringing a point of view. That I I maybe don't share or that I haven't even worse accounted for. So I think we're we're part of the mix too. It's like anything else you do in in change based work. I mean, we can do things that can promote the things that we're chasing or we can do things to drag people down.

Thalia Anderen [00:40:07] Well definitely. And I think like that's why I know a lot of times I'll say this isn't my view, but this is what this reading said or and and I think what's I don't know, maybe you felt this way. What's been kind of sad and frustrating for me is I've always been a person who likes to look at a situation from different angles. I mean, I think when you're in clinical work you're doing clinical work. That's the nature of the business is helping clients to look at situations from lots of different angles, not just one. And so if I say, okay, that's a great thought there, now what happens if this were to be the case? That sometimes that's being looked at as now, now we're trying to impose our beliefs and values as opposed to, okay, but you might have a client who's not going to have that opinion. What do you do if you're in this situation? What if you have a coworker, a supervisor who isn't sharing that same belief as you? How will you manage that?

Peter Sobota [00:41:06] In your in your research and and in your experiences, do you do you think social work edu I'm thinking about course evaluations. That this is where this is coming from. I've read some of this stuff, but do you think that women or instructors who occupy some kind of minority status get more grief than others?

Thalia Anderen [00:41:32] Definitely. I even remember one of my one of my participants who identified as a white male had said, you know, I I know that my female colleagues and also my colleagues who are persons of color, people who are coming from different backgrounds, are definitely more likely to get negative course evaluations to be on the receiving end of this. And that certainly came up in my my research as well. Is that I mean, there are more female people who identified as female in my participant study. But that they felt more targeted, especially females who identified as persons of color and those some of those intersections. And so it was all about non-dominant identities. And I think the other thing that sometimes isn't is a factor is that a lot of times students of all backgrounds and and and and whatnot, they're coming to higher education a lot of times with an image of what a professor, what what an instructor should look like. And then when that person walks into the room and they don't match that image, that that can create some some discomfort for the student. And then it's all about how do they how do they manage that?

Peter Sobota [00:42:46] Wow.

Thalia Anderen [00:42:46] Mm-hmm.

Peter Sobota [00:42:47] Yeah, I they've told themselves a story about what this will be. And lo and behold

Thalia Anderen [00:42:53] Sure, like yeah. I mean, if you know, I worked with a lot of international students who are coming from more patriarchal societies. And then when they're coming in and they're seeing women in positions of authority, they're standing in the front of the classroom. Even, you know, white male students who are questioning a female educator. Well, what's your credibility? Where did you go to school? How much experience do you have? Like they're. You know, we're fielding questions that maybe other professors might not. And sexuality too. I didn't ask specifically about sexual identity in my research, but it certainly came up that people who were identifying as queer are part of the the LGBTQ two S Plus community, they definitely felt like they were targeted. They were being called names like a sinner. They were being told that their their choices were wrong, that they felt, you know, that students felt like their own Christianity and heteronormativity was being called into question. And that created a lot of dissent and and dissension in the classroom.

Peter Sobota [00:44:00] Yeah.

Thalia Anderen [00:44:00] Yeah.

Peter Sobota [00:44:02] Being yeah, I I yeah, I being told that your your val your your statements aren't consistent with the values of the profession. I think simply telling somebody that is probably not enough. I think even there's gotta be more to it than that. And and I think that's again where where people like us, we we we just can't be white gloved about this, that we're not part of this problem that we're talking about as well. So I we've we've kind of addressed this, but I'm gonna ask one more time just to see if you have anything you'd like to add here. What do you think keeps social work educators and students where this is happening in this kind of feedback loop where they we just keep doing it? We just keep doing it and we can't find the step out or the solution, if you will, or the solution focused way out. I you've spoken about this, but I want to give you one more shot if you want to take it.

Thalia Anderen [00:45:08] Yeah, and and I do actually because I think a lot of the literature or all the literature out there really positioned this phenomenon as more of a dyadic sort of a a a

Peter Sobota [00:45:20] Yeah.

Thalia Anderen [00:45:21] Issue, right? That it's between the students and and the educator. So the students are the ones who are coming in and they're initiating these confrontational behaviors. And then clearly educators have a role. I mean, we know that professors who tend to be less accessible, who aren't as warm and empathic, or they're just boring, or you know, they're not very engaging in the classroom. They're they're more likely targets of this sort of thing. So, and I mean other vulnerabilities, right? Just not knowing how to manage these kinds of situations or not having training and teaching. So again, we're not we're not innocent in this either. Educators are complicit. And while students and educators certainly can, you know, establish, maintain, reinforce this negative feedback loop, they also have the ability to mitigate it. But my research actually brought a slightly new perspective and that it's not actually a diad, it's a triad. And that there's a third element, which is institutional leadership, that's also contributing to this. I actually used the metaphor of a wildfire, right? You need three elements heat, fuel, oxygen to sustain a fire. And with student-initiated confrontations, it's when leadership isn't supporting instructors, when they're not holding students accountable, when they're not

upholding policies, then that's allowing this phenomenon to continue to grow and and maintain as opposed to. Helping to to mitigate it more. And and I get it. I mean I understand. Institutions are a business. They need a lot of money to run. You know, you talked about is this a unique time with it political changes and and I think institutions are even more fear just like in you know, instructors have their own fears. Leadership has fears now. It's a good way

Peter Sobota [00:47:11] It's a good way for I'm sorry for interrupting. It's a good way for a university president to be unemployed.

Thalia Anderen [00:47:18] Yeah.

Peter Sobota [00:47:18] It's yeah, fascinating.

Thalia Anderen [00:47:20] Yeah. And so anything that they can do to avoid any sort of escalation with with student issues and problematic behaviors, they don't want the reputational damage. They don't want the financial consequences that could come as a result of that. So I I really understand, and given now that there have been some shifts in the Department of Education, but so it's those three things that can keep this loop going. But the good news is that they also have abilities to switch the direction and and try to really get more of a handle on on this situation.

Peter Sobota [00:47:56] All right, so we're bumping up against our time limit here, but this is this is going to be the natural swipe segue here. So we've we've kind of laid out the problem, we've talked, we've defined it, we've given examples of what it is, we've you know bemoaned it. But so now, I mean, really, what's you know, what based on your research and your experience, and and now you have a podcast platform here, what what needs to be done? What what are do you have some thoughts about what are those ways out? Yes, I mean I don't know what to happen. Like if you had a magic wand.

Thalia Anderen [00:48:33] If I had imagined well, I don't, but I mean I don't think that this problem is going to ever go away, but there are things that can be done at each level, right? I mean, students certainly have the power to approach situations with their instructors in a different way. You know, they they can certainly like like I said before, questioning grades, feedback, content, things that are confusing for them is important and they should do that. It's just they have the power to initiate that in more of a professional way and to do it in a way that aligns with social work values, like initiate a calm and conversation with the instructor. Approach it from a place of curiosity as opposed to animosity, right? And we also know that if students are feeling stressed, which being a student is stressful, and a lot of them are navigating other challenges like family commitments, job commitments and whatnot, to take advantage of some of the resources that schools have to offer, whether it's counseling service, mental health services. If some of that stress is coming from a place of just not feeling academically prepared, then taking advantage of academic success services and all those different things, right? And really just being more open and willing. And from an instructor perspective, right? Seeking out training and education or different ways to handle these sorts of situations and also how to be more dynamic, how to be more engaging in the classroom. And there are a lot of different prevention sorts of things, right? Like Setting really clear expectations. We know that instructors are more likely to experience backlash from students if students are confused about whether it's the syllabus or assignments, course expectations, you know, put everything in writing, because if students find any sort of loophole, then we don't really have much to stand on at that point. And then I think you you've mentioned before, try not

to take it personally. As hard as it is for us as instructors not to take things personally, to recognize that a lot of the student behaviors might be coming from a place of stress and distress. And so, not to justify the behavior, but how can we show up? How can we maybe be more accessible, come to class early, stay late? If you notice a student might be struggling, it doesn't take a lot to catch them after class or to send an email and say, hey, I notice you seem to be struggling. Is there anything I can do to further support you? So there are those things. And then from a leadership perspective, you know, leadership needs to do a better job of training instructors, especially new ones. People, you know, whether it be just basic teacher training, but also there needs to be more training around this phenomenon of student-initiated confrontation, making sure that they're constantly evaluating and reevaluating different student code of conduct policies, but upholding them. What good is having a policy if you're not actually going to uphold it? But you know, again, really it's about backing instructors, believing them, and that if this is if leadership are not part of a social work specific department, then I think it's helpful for them to have a better idea of what social work is. What are our core values, our mission, our standards of practice, so that they can see that if we're not addressing some of these student behaviors at the academic level, then we're just passing this off to practicums, to employment. And there's a lot of harm that can be done towards clients, which again goes against our core values.

Peter Sobota [00:52:10] Yeah, and and you know what, we didn't even touch social work field practical, which would be, I think, another it would be another area, right? I mean, that's probably where some of this yeah, I really like what you said about some of the things that that we can do as well. I mean, I mean, is isn't it an interesting notion that we could model the very behavior that we're asking our students to to participate in at the same time?

Thalia Anderen [00:52:40] Yeah. I mean, I do a class norms activity at the beginning, you know, just like if you're doing a group, you know, you're starting a new group therapy group or support group, usually a lot of times we'll do like a group rules. But you know, we'll talk about logistics, about attendance and just, you know, being respectful to one another. But also, you know, if you have a question or you're concerned about something that I said as the instructor or one of your peers said, here's here's an appropriate way of handling that. Here's an inappropriate, right? Putting in those behavioral statements in syllabi to be able to refer back to you through throughout class and and whatnot. So

Peter Sobota [00:53:16] I've really noticed that movement toward making a lot of these ideas explicit in syllabi. I think I don't know about other disciplines, but social work syllabi are like mini books. They're like 14, 15, 16. But I yeah, I don't know. That's not all bad. I think the other thing that you know listening to made me think about was some of Loretta Ross's work around calling in rather than calling out. And I remember she said something like, you know, when when you ask people to give up, I don't know if it was I I think her word was hate and I don't think we're talking about that, but when you ask people to give up like their point of view or their widely or their strongly held value, you've gotta be there for them.

Thalia Anderen [00:54:08] Yes.

Peter Sobota [00:54:09] When they do that. And I just thought, okay, that makes perfect sense to me. Just if they do it, notice it, give voice to it, support it. And I think when you do that in front of a bunch of people, like in a in a classroom, I think the learning spreads out a little bit.

Thalia Anderen [00:54:29] It does. We want to maintain that credibility because if you, you know, if students see that they can essentially take advantage, or if you're not handling a situation right away, then your credibility is lost. Now, on the on the other hand, we want to be careful not to publicly shame a student either. So I think that's where if you we're lucky we have the the code of ethics and values to be able to refer back to. And if you do that class norms activity on day one, if you see something happening by an individual student to be able to look at it more holistically, like this is just a reminder that according to our class norms or according to what's in our syllabus, we would just want to make sure we are adhering to that and then pulling the student aside for a one on one so that the class knows that you're aware of it, but you're not actually making an effort to embarrass them either.

Peter Sobota [00:55:22] Yeah, exactly. Well, you know what? Thank you so much. I I have one more here for you. And we'll see. I I I don't mean to throw you in any way, but if you had a a message, we spent a lot of time talking about instructors and the dilemmas that they feel. What would be your message if you had one to students?

Thalia Anderen [00:55:46] It's interesting. Yeah, I actually did a a video for for a professor at another social work school who wants to show it at the beginning of every semester to try to avoid these sort of things. I think I don't know. I would just say like the classroom can be such an amazing place. And I know a lot of times we go into school, we want to just do what we need to do to get in, to get out, to get the degree and just start working and get out there in the field. But it's such a unique and amazing experience. And I think just to come in there with willingness and openness. And I think what I value from being a student, especially more recently, is having my views challenged and and leaving the classroom at times and going, maybe I haven't been thinking about this in in the best way. And so if you can come in just open and willing and not just looking to have your your own views validated, then I think you're going to have a much more fruitful experience. And remember that instructors, as you said, Peter, they're they're human too. And that we we don't know what's going on in each other's lives. And sometimes somebody might be a little bit short or this or that, but maybe you know, not to justify, but there's a reason. So

Peter Sobota [00:57:00] Sure. Well, thank you. I mean, I I asked that question for students, but while you while you were speaking, I think a lot of us would be wise to take that same advice and apply it right to ourselves as well.

Thalia Anderen [00:57:13] We would, and if I could just do like a very quick shameless plug. When you ask like what can we do? Absolutely. There's not a lot of training out there. And that was one of the things that my participants commented on is that even when they were looking for training on how to manage student-initiated confrontation, there was none. And so one of the projects that I I was lucky enough to be able to work on during my doctoral program was putting a a like a four or five-hour workshop together and can be modified on just understanding the phenomenon, understanding the impacts that we as instructors, educators can experience, but also more importantly, some different strategies, you know, a little bit more specific than what I mentioned here. That's for anybody, it doesn't have to be just social work, but I've certainly catered it to social work. So if anybody is interested in having me talk to them, I'm I'm happy to talk a little bit more to bring that workshop to their programs. So

Peter Sobota [00:58:09] Sure. Thank you. Thank you. Talia, thanks again for joining us. Really appreciate it.

Thalia Anderen [00:58:13] Thank you so much for having me. This has been great.

Peter Sobota [00:58:17] Thanks again to Thalia Anderen for joining us today. The team at the inSocialWork Podcast are Steve Sturman, our web and tech guru, Ryan Tropf, our GA production assistant and guest coordinator, and I'm Peter Sobota. We'll see you next time, everybody.