Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series
Season 3, Episode 6: The Power of Blended Classrooms with Denise Cruz
Center for Teaching and Learning, Columbia University

Catherine Ross ([00:00](#)):

Welcome to Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning. I'm Catherine Ross, executive director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Columbia. I'm speaking today with Professor Denise Cruz. As a quick reminder for our listeners in this podcast series, we explored dead ideas in teaching and learning, in other words, ideas that are widely believed, though not true, and that drive many systems and behaviors in connection to teaching and exercising what Diane Pike called, "the tyranny of dead ideas."

Catherine Ross ([00:38](#)):

Denise Cruz is professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia. She currently teaches the large lecture course in Asian American literature. Before Columbia, she taught at Indiana University and the University of Toronto. Welcome to our Dead Ideas Podcast, Denise, it's such a delight to have you as our guest.

Denise Cruz ([01:00](#)):

Thanks so much, Catherine. It's a delight to be here.

Catherine Ross ([01:04](#)):

I want to give our listeners a little bit of background on how this conversation came to be. Denise worked with the CTL through a provost innovative course design grant for her Introduction to Asian American literature course. In addition to wanting and needing to redesign the course with high impact blended learning strategies due to COVID-19, she was also quite interested in exploring more effective scaffolding, looking for ways to promote deeper exploration of the course material while also improving student engagement. And she wanted to enhance the development of critical analysis and writing skills for her diverse and differentiated learners.

Catherine Ross ([01:56](#)):

This course is now the largest course offered by the Department of English, with an enrollment of 110 students. And spoiler alert, her course redesign was so successful that she was awarded not one, but TWO teaching awards: the 2021 Columbia Presidential Teaching Award and the Mark Van Doren Teaching Award. Well, you know, it's really incredible to be able to talk with an award-winning teacher. What really fascinated me about the work Denise did with us, was the ways in which she confronted some very foundational and prevalent dead ideas about teaching. And that's what I'm going to be asking her about today.

Catherine Ross ([02:42](#)):

So with that, I will ask Denise if she could share with us a brief overview of some of the changes that she ended up making to the course, and what happened with those areas that you mentioned, that you wanted to target; the scaffolding and increased engagement that you had in your grant proposal? I'm curious, and I'm sure our listeners are too, to find out with those changes, what also changed with the

students' participation, engagement, skill development? And what changed for you as the teacher? It's a big question, so take it in any direction you like.

Denise Cruz ([03:25](#)):

Great, thank you. I was really curious about exploring new methods and developing what I like to call the "what, how and why" of the course and how I approach it. So just to take those and unwrap them a little bit, I started off by thinking about how a blended learning environment would allow me to experiment with the design of the course overall. And one of the things I worked with, our CTL designer Andrew Corpuz with, was the creation of modular format. So thinking about how the syllabus could be deconstructed for students in a way that would work through thematic units with embedded learning objectives. And that in turn allowed me to pay really close attention to the how, how I was teaching methods, or how I was working with introducing the toolbox that the students used to engage with the material. And then finally, I was interested in encouraging variety and creativity, in not just my delivery of course material, but also in terms of student participation and assessment.

Denise Cruz ([04:35](#)):

To give you some examples of some of the elements I included, in addition to the modular design, I worked to diversify how I delivered course material and how students encountered it. So that included recording audio versions of the readings in podcast form, along with framing questions. I also worked to develop scaffolding of instructional skills by creating videos, instructional videos related to analysis or writing. And a lot of these were modeled on popular YouTube genres that I knew the students would be familiar with.

Denise Cruz ([05:18](#)):

And finally, I tried to enhance forms of participation through multimedia formats, through discussion boards that weren't just text based, but encouraged things like image and audio production. And perhaps most dramatically, I changed the assessments of the course, moving away from high stakes assessments like a final paper or a final exam, to more open ended and creative models of assessments.

Denise Cruz ([05:47](#)):

You asked me about how the students responded, and I have to say that one of the best things about working with the CTL was developing a mode of assessment, not just for my students, but also for me as an instructor. And we were able to track elements of student engagement through, for example, looking at statistics related to the podcast recordings. And I found that students were listening to the reading up to rates that included, I think, 50% at one point in the term. I also found that they were doing so in different ways, or ways that I didn't expect. So they were listening to me read alongside reading the text, because they felt like it helped with attention.

Denise Cruz ([06:33](#)):

And in terms of their skills development, I have to say it was excellent. Students responded to the increased attention to methods incredibly well, in terms of developing over the course of the term. We saw this in their papers, in their analytical work, and in their astounding array of creative final projects for the course.

Denise Cruz ([07:00](#)):

Finally, you asked me about participation, and that was also incredibly high. I found that one of the challenges I've always had when delivering a large lecture, is how do you reach the people in terms of participation, who aren't necessarily people who feel comfortable doing so verbally? And in the past, I would work with this in the large lecture format by breaking them maybe into smaller groups or partners, and then asking them to contribute to the larger discussion, or we might do free writing.

Denise Cruz ([07:32](#)):

But I found that giving them a range of modes of participation really encouraged them to interact with the course in different ways. So at the high points of the term, I would have maybe 75% of the students responding via those multimedia boards. And they did so in part, because they knew that I would weave those comments into the lecture. So that was part of what I did with every single lecture is actually working to include their commentary, alongside the work of the theorists and writers that we were discussing for the week.

Catherine Ross ([08:07](#)):

Wow. That's amazing commitment on your part, especially making those podcasts of the readings. And I think I recall reading that you said you did that because students said they were just so screen exhausted from being on screens all the time. And so, you were trying to offer them another way to engage with text.

Denise Cruz ([08:37](#)):

Yes, that's true. And it was inspired by Michael Wesch from Kansas state.

Catherine Ross ([08:44](#)):

Oh, yeah.

Denise Cruz ([08:44](#)):

Mike has this wonderful series of YouTube videos about engaged teaching, and I watched them in preparation for the fall term. And I noticed that he said that one of the most popular elements of his revisions was the podcast audio version of the readings. And I started to think too, about how many people I knew in my life, or how I myself had become really interested in the idea of audio. It's perhaps appropriate that we're creating a podcast right now. But there's something so incredibly intimate about audio recording, especially when you're used to looking at a screen all the time.

Denise Cruz ([09:23](#)):

It was also inspired by the fact that I've read to my son since he was a baby. And there is something completely magical about someone taking the time to read to you, and I think the students responded to that, in a way. A lot of them have commented on the fact that they were amazed by the fact that I would be interested in reading to them. And I think, related to what happened after the pandemic in terms of - because I'm still using those recordings now in the fall 2021 version of the course - students have been really struck by how listening to someone read changes their analytical approach to the text. And it also changed how I approach teaching a work of literature, in part because I'm so attentive to dynamics of voice and sound.

Catherine Ross ([10:19](#)):

That's very interesting, that sort of whole body approach to learning, which I think neuroscience is coming out with a lot of reasons why we should be doing that. And I'm sure hearing the text is a very different way of experiencing it, than just reading words on a page, whether it's a digital page or a paper page. So I think that piece in particular was fascinating.

Catherine Ross (10:53):

When I read the summary of your report of the project, there were a couple things that really struck me, three areas where you upended some pretty powerful and very common dead ideas. Number one was that you relied on the science of learning, yay! That is not always a given in higher ed. And the ways in which you talked about reducing the competitiveness of students' engagement with the course, so this kind of balancing of competition and collaboration. Which speaks to one of the things Laura Rendon identified about American higher education, the ways in which competition is privileged over collaboration. And you kind of went the opposite direction on that, and found even new ways for students to collaborate on their learning.

Catherine Ross (12:01):

And then part of that, sort of related to that was that move you mentioned, away from the high stakes assessments of learning. So, I think it would be really helpful for people if you could talk us through those changes, and why. What were you thinking when you made these changes?

Denise Cruz (12:20):

Sure. To start with the science of learning, as I started to read more deeply into the field of, especially forms of hybrid education, or digital or online learning. I think it's fascinating because we sometimes forget, I guess when we're working as specialists in our field, about the research that's dedicated to pedagogy. It's stunning for me to say that now, especially to you, Catherine, but our colleagues in the field of education, who research in the field of education from pre-K, K to 12, higher ed, in terms of all different kinds of institutions, have done extensive research on how people learn, on the effective strategies that can be used to learn and to educate.

Denise Cruz (13:20):

So, here's an example: before reading into material by people like, for example, say Michelle Miller, or Kathy Davidson, or work by Haystack - I think it's very easy to assume that our students are all what are called "digital natives," in terms of 21st century learning styles. But if you look into that research, it's quite clear that just assuming that the students' position as a digital native will somehow make them magically able to, for example, work seamlessly in various kinds of educational platforms, that's not really effective in terms of pedagogy. It takes time to learn, say a platform even like Canvas, one that we use every day. Say for example, they're working in Blackboard or some other educational platform in high school or at their community college, and they transfer in here and it's difficult for them.

Denise Cruz (14:26):

So, I think the important elements of working with research in higher ed, and K to 12, some of the elements that I learned in terms of researching those fields, was to pay close attention to the actual methods that have demonstrated effectiveness, and how it's important to be very intentional and thoughtful in terms of how we include, or change our practices.

Denise Cruz (15:00):

Regarding your observations about competition versus collaboration, and creative forms of assessment, I'd like to take the third part first, so the creative assessments, and then we'll go to competition and collaboration. You know, I think many large classes have privileged certain kinds of assessment, and have historically had to do so because of their size. So even in a humanities lecture, because of the size of a humanities lecture, I used to include a midterm and a final exam that required a certain level of memorization. For a while now, I've given students a study guide to prepare for the exam, so it wasn't something where they had no idea what they were going to encounter. So I tried to prepare them in that way, but the experience was still a timed exam.

Denise Cruz ([16:05](#)):

I did this even though I've known for a long time that in-class examinations, in terms of the production of a final project, while completely generative in a low stakes form for brainstorming or thinking, or working through ideas, that in terms of actually producing an excellent essay in a high pressure situation, but that doesn't lead to the best results. So I changed the assessments to include a take home, open note, lower stakes format, where they could check in with me basically over the course of three times a term, and where we would use these lower stakes assessments at the end of each module, or at the end of each major module.

Denise Cruz ([16:55](#)):

So there was more of a sense for me in terms of how they were learning or how their learning was developing over the course of the term. I also changed the format that they could use to respond to these assessments, so they could produce traditional text, they could produce a combination of word and image, or they could produce audio. And my students took up each of those options, depending on what their best mode of expression was.

Denise Cruz ([17:22](#)):

Finally for the final project, I gave them an opportunity to synthesize a keyword from our class, or to use a keyword that we had already studied, and from there to either pursue a longer essay if that's something that they wanted to work with, and some of them did choose that option, or a creative project that they could produce either individually or as a group. And the outcome of that experiment was stunning in terms of the range of activities that the students wanted to explore. So, anything from interactive modes of hybrid digital fiction, to graphic novel interpretations, to extensive video essays that were inspired, in part, by the instructional videos that we used in the class.

Denise Cruz ([18:12](#)):

So, it was amazing for me to see how the students took the opportunity to use their creative skills, or the skills they were interested in exploring, because some of them had to develop new skills to produce these projects, and to see the range that they we're able to create.

Denise Cruz ([18:31](#)):

To go back to collaboration versus competition, I find it fascinating that we sometimes discourage collaboration in higher ed, even though in most of our workspaces, or in the future of the lives these students will go on to live, they will be required to collaborate. That collaboration is essential to forms of innovation, to teamwork, and to partnerships. And so for me, collaboration - for example, this term, it looks like a whole class created an open note lecture bank, an archive of the lectures in which eight to 10 students per lecture contribute a set of notes.

Denise Cruz ([19:21](#)):

So this assignment was, for me, developed in collaboration with a colleague that I have at Purdue, Nush Powell, who is doing something similar. And I also worked with my spouse, who's in K to 12 math education, in terms of developing the pedagogical outcomes. And so, the lecture note archive creates a method of accountability, of access, of seeing a range of note-taking styles, and of synthesis. And one might think a collaborative note-taking archive would lead to, for example, decreased student attendance. It's in fact, not the case. I take attendance in my lectures through a sign-in sheet, and even last week at the height of midterms, we had 90% of students attending the class.

Catherine Ross ([20:08](#)):

Wow, that's all you need to know, right? I am curious though, and I think some of our listeners might be curious too, about with all these different forms of final projects, how did you handle the grading aspect of it? Because at the end of the day, we still have to submit grades. And did it make a ton more work for you?

Denise Cruz ([20:36](#)):

I'm helped by a team of excellent graduate student TAs, and so I do want to foreground this. And my work with TAs over the course of my career has been really generative in terms of the ideas they've come to the class with. For grading something like creative assignments, it does require a shift in terms of how one grades, and I think planning too. So because I work closely with the TAs when they evaluate, so they evaluate in consultation with me, we still do things like norming or evaluating to make sure that we're all grading as a group together. We created a rubric in advance of the assignments, so students would know how they were being evaluated.

Denise Cruz ([21:26](#)):

And for a creative project, they didn't just submit the project. They actually had to submit also what we called an artist's statement, where they had to explain and justify their choices. Because the idea was never that they would be evaluated for say, the skill of whatever creative object they produced. So rather than the skill in video editing, for example, what we looked at was the intent behind what they tried to produce, and how their ideas might be expressed in the creative format. And most importantly, how they were able to connect those ideas to some sort of analytical argument for the class.

Denise Cruz ([22:06](#)):

So in a way, we were still looking for similar skills. It was just that the mode of delivery was different and we had a different genre to work with. It did take more work on my part, and on the TAs' part too, because we had to do that shift. But once we got into the mode of responding, it was actually quite exciting, at least for me. So my TAs, they split the course, but I also ended up commenting on all 110 projects last term because it was so exciting for me to see the students' work, and I couldn't help myself. It was such a beautiful expression of their work over the course of the term.

Catherine Ross ([22:55](#)):

So I guess, the big question is, will you do the same this year?

Denise Cruz ([22:59](#)):

Yes, we are doin the same.

Catherine Ross ([23:01](#)):

Okay, then!

Denise Cruz ([23:02](#)):

And I know I'm going to be doing the same too, in terms of responding. So it's something that I feel like for the students at this time, especially since everyone's feeling still raw, and just uncertain, that I want to be able to respond to the risks that they take in this particular assignment.

Catherine Ross ([23:27](#)):

Well, good luck to you with that. It sounds fabulous. And I get from what you're saying, what an amazing experience that was as instructor, to see that creativity unleashed, around the same things you were always looking for. That's the interesting piece to me, you were still looking for the same results in some ways, but just so open to what format that took, or what ways in which that was presented. Thank you for that little digression there.

Catherine Ross ([24:07](#)):

I do know that one roadblock I run into sometimes when I talk with instructors about changing their teaching, is this idea that is kind of vague and yet very specific in higher ed, and that's the ideas around rigor, and how rigor gets defined, and how it's evaluated when looking at someone's teaching. And so, sometimes when we hear things, or I talk about things like flexibility and creativity in assessing learning, or having fun ways for students to participate in your class - like the way you use Padlet, for example - the way you created videos to scaffold your assignments on things like literary analysis, note-taking, how to develop an argument.

Catherine Ross ([25:02](#)):

Sometimes the reactions are that that's spoon feeding students, it's coddling, and it's not viewed as being rigorous. I'd love to hear you share your thoughts on the ideas of rigor, and maybe your own sort of journey with that term. Was there a point where you came to recognize that that term was dysfunctional in some way?

Denise Cruz ([25:32](#)):

There has definitely been a development over the course of my relationship to rigor. And I love that you began with the fuzzy definition of what rigor means in a higher ed classroom. Because one of the things, whenever I teach writing, I always encourage my students to define their terms. And so, when you think about rigor in terms of its, say, Oxford English dictionary definition, you'll see definitions that range from thorough, and careful, or exact, to severe or strict. And I think that the link between rigor and excellence, in its most generous reading is about thoroughness, or carefulness, or exactitude. But I do think it carries with it this desire that it should be hard, that learning should be hard and difficult, and that it's only in difficulty that a student can somehow emerge from a course having really demonstrated excellence.

Denise Cruz ([26:47](#)):

I really try to push against the equation of rigor with excellence. I've taught now... the first time I taught in an undergraduate classroom was in 2001, and it was when I was a TA. And so over the course of, I guess, two decades of teaching at this level, I've found that this idea of rigor as exacting or severe, that

doesn't imply a lot of the elements that I value about learning. Why can't we define excellence as related to curiosity, or innovation, and creativity or flexibility of mind? I think many people would suggest that these are the ideal tenets of an educational experience.

Denise Cruz ([27:44](#)):

So for me, I think that we can be certainly rigorous in the sense that we are careful, thoughtful and attentive, but why not apply that same kind of rigor or attention to our own pedagogy? Why not reframe rigor as just part of a number of qualities, that encourage the risk-taking that educational endeavors demand? So, part of this for me has meant over the course of my career, I've learned to reframe how I work with students by thinking about what do we ask for for ourselves, and what kinds of generosity do we seek?

Denise Cruz ([28:23](#)):

I used to, for example, have a very exacting set of now seemingly arbitrary late penalties for when students turned in an assignment late. And then I started to think about the number of times that I personally have needed an extension in order to produce better work. Or even approaching an exam, I ask my students to do an in-class exam, when my best writing occurs when I have my notes scattered everywhere across the table in front of me. So I think again, maybe using that thoughtfulness and carefulness that ties rigor to excellence in terms of how we approach our pedagogy and being more flexible. Because for me, that severity, that strictness, that kind of absolute, I don't think there should be an absolute pedagogy. Because I think once you operate in a world of absolutes, you lose that sense of innovation and creativity that ideally you came to the classroom with in the first place.

Catherine Ross ([29:33](#)):

Yes, yes, yes. I think that was one of the most eloquent takedowns of rigor, the other definition of rigor that I think I've ever heard, so I really appreciate that. And there's many questions I'd love to ask, but I want to leave some time for you. We've touched on just a few ideas from your work, is there something else that you would particularly like to share with the listeners that I haven't asked you about?

Denise Cruz ([30:09](#)):

I would say that there is tremendous value in remembering what it was like to be a student. And for some of us, for me too all the time, it's hard. And it's hard in part because we assume the role of a teacher, and have assumed it for a long time. So for me, it was really revelatory to watch my son in class, or to see him work with K to 12 educators who I think are practicing, in various ways, the value of playfulness, of curiosity, or of thoughtful experimentation in a fun way that's not coddling or just empty forms of what might be called "edu-tainment," but that's always linked very carefully to a set of skills. So how do you break down a lesson or a learning objective into discrete parts? I think that those building blocks are something that we can all experiment, and it's fun and challenging as an instructor to do so.

Catherine Ross ([31:17](#)):

That's perfect. I think anyone can think of just something that you hear all the time in higher ed, which is we teach critical thinking. And yet if you ask students, "are you a critical thinker? What does critical thinking mean?" Many times they don't really know, right? Because we don't always break it down into those discrete skills that make up the ability to think critically. So I thank you for sharing that, that's I think a really important piece of the work of teaching.

Catherine Ross ([31:56](#)):

So, my last question is what keeps you inspired? And you seem so much to believe in the possibility of change in higher education teaching, and you represent that kind of change in higher ed teaching. So what keeps you going in this?

Denise Cruz ([32:17](#)):

It is, without question, a difficult time to be in higher education for many, many reasons, especially related to diversity, equity and inclusion. For me, it's really meaningful to work with my students. And when we returned this fall, I heard my students speaking as a group, I put them into partners or small groups, and I heard the sound of their voices in the classroom talking about a text that we had read together for the first time in a long time. And that energy, and excitement, and connection was so palpable in so many ways. The embodiment of their presence in the classroom, the sound of their voice, the sound of pages turning.

Denise Cruz ([33:09](#)):

All of that was really palpable to me. But more importantly, when we returned back to whole group discussion and they were sharing what they had learned from each other, and we were - I was furiously writing all of their observations on the board. I was really struck by how thoughtful and generative they were in those conversations. And it's something that I experience every time I walk into a room with them, the power of the idea that many voices, or many kinds of experience, many different approaches to the texts, can enact and imagine a form of community. That the work of critical thinking can be valuable, not just for some individual experts, or some individual sage, but rather that a group can collectively participate in imagining our world anew. And it's so cliche, but in this world, I think my students really do remind me again and again, that this kind of intellectual endeavor as a community is not only possible, but that it actually matters.

Catherine Ross ([34:28](#)):

Well, I think that's very moving, and I want to thank you for this thoughtful and generative conversation today. I think you've given our listeners a lot to think about and have shared a lot of yourself and your ideas that will probably help people as they think about this whole period of returning, returning to what? And sort of feeling our way through this return to teaching in classrooms with our students. I thought your words were very poignant, and the things you noted about the return. So, all I can say in sum is just, thank you.

Denise Cruz ([35:16](#)):

Thank you so much, Catherine. And thank you so much for the work that you and your colleagues at the CTL do. It's been an absolute pleasure to collaborate with you.

Catherine Ross ([35:24](#)):

Well, thank you.

Catherine Ross ([35:28](#)):

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