

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series

Episode 4: Columbia Undergraduates on Dead Ideas in Learning

Center for Teaching and Learning, Columbia University

- [Catherine Ross] Hi, everyone. Welcome to Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning. I'm Catherine Ross, the executive director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Columbia University. In this series, we explore untrue ideas that are widely believed and that drive systems and behaviors in the Academy, a phenomenon that Diane Pike called the Tyranny of Dead Ideas. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, I'm speaking remotely today with four undergraduate Columbia University students who have served as undergraduate teaching and learning consultants, as part of the teaching center Students as Pedagogical Partners Initiative. We are joined today by Mae, Haya, Jennifer, and Kalisa, who will now briefly introduce themselves.

- [Mae Butler] Hi, my name is Mae Butler and I'm a rising junior in Columbia College, majoring in comparative literature and society, with a focus in Latin American literatures, and a minor in education studies.

- [Haya Ghandour] Hi everyone. My name Haya Ghandour, and I'm a sophomore in the school of engineering and applied sciences majoring in civil engineering with a minor in Middle Eastern, South Asian and African studies. And I'm Zooming in today from Beirut, Lebanon, which is seven hours ahead of New York.

- [Jennifer Lee] Hi, my name is Jennifer Lee and I'm a rising senior in Columbia college. I'm double majoring in computer science and comparative literature in society. And I'm calling in from New York City.

- [Kalisa Ndamage] Hello, I'm Kalisa Ndamage and I'm a rising senior in Columbia engineering, majoring in chemical engineering and I'm calling in all the way from Maryland. Not so far away.

- [Catherine Ross] Great, thank you all. We started recording this podcast series before the COVID-19 pandemic drove us out of our classrooms. Now at the end of the spring 2020 semester we want to explore the learner's take on dead ideas in teaching and learning, in both the pre and post-COVID settings. Our focus for this episode is on bringing that learner perspective into our dead ideas conversation to explore which dead ideas resonate with the student experience and how dead ideas about learning may impact students under different learning conditions. You've all been part of an interesting experiment, in a way, right, due to the COVID-19 situation, because your semester changed dramatically and it changed dramatically for your professors as well. I'm wondering in terms of one of Diane Pike's dead ideas, the idea that grades motivate learning, and she's claiming that that's a dead idea and therefore it's not true. You went as part of this big experiment. You went from typical grading,

which is points and letter grades, to a pass/fail situation. So, I'm wondering about your thoughts on grades as motivating, whether there's a pre and post difference, or whether you don't think that was a dead idea to begin with. This is a sort of big question. You could tackle it in different parts. And if you think that grades don't motivate your learning, what does?

- [Jennifer Lee] I think I've seen a lot of things, like, on one hand, I think, and I think I've experienced this myself as well. like, suddenly, students have the freedom to spend as much time as they want on some classes and less time on others. And so I've really seen that students, like, given the chance to show how much they care, like, will go above and beyond like, the kinds of final projects I've seen students hand in, obviously like, for a lot of students right now, the semester is overwhelming, so they're not able to put in as much, but I've also seen students like, really do amazing things that they're sharing in like, some of my CS classes. And I think in some ways like, the freedom to not have to hit a certain mark in all their classes has like, freed up people to really like, devote a lot of time to things that they care a lot about, and then be less stressed about the classes that they're not as invested in. My friends are like, especially in group projects, they're like, well, like, it is pass or fail, but like, I care about my professors. I like, I couldn't hand in anything like, really, truly subpar to them. And so I think, yeah, like, I just haven't experienced students in groups who just suddenly don't care. And then I have had professors who like, despite the pass-fail system have asked us to self-evaluate our work and assign it like, a number grade, which is even more specific than a letter grade. And in doing that, I think not having the pressure to like, present everything as like, this was like, A work because I need an A, I think I and my peers have really been able to break apart like, in the reflection, like, what really succeeded and what did it in our final project without fear that that would make us look bad. And so in some ways I think this is allowed for an even finer grade level of attention to like, what things we have succeeded in learning and what things we haven't.

- [Catherine Ross] That's very, very interesting. So it sounds like, then, that the pass/fail sort of freed you up. It broke the link to having to worry about the actual grade. And so your motivation for learning came from other places, which would tend to support Diane calling that out as a dead idea, right? Clearly a lot more than the grades that motivate learning. And in fact, in your example, maybe it's saying that grades sometimes dampen the learning because you wouldn't feel as free to unpack what was successful and what wasn't successful in terms of your learning. Doing the projects and things, and writing the papers. So that's really fascinating. What do others think?

- [Kalisa Ndamage] I think Jennifer made some really great points. I think I first want to say that I really don't think grading is going to motivate any type of learning, but rather especially on a curve, it's going to motivate competition, and it's going to motivate just purely getting a good grade. That's all it makes you good at doing. But then I think the two things that Jennifer said are very true, I think firstly, right now, with pass-fail, I feel like, students are doing things they are interested in. And I think what's motivating that interest, at least for me and my immediate friends is kind of the relevance of it or whether I feel like this is going to practically give me a skill that is valuable. So if I'm doing a certain project, I'll put a lot more into it. If I

feel like, I can use what I get from this in the future again. But if it just seems very frivolous, I don't think I put as much in. And then I think the second point Jennifer made about not wanting to disappoint the teacher and caring about them. I think a lot of people in some of my classes have really taken that to heart. They've been some projects that we didn't want to do but we're like, we cannot disappoint this professor and we put so much into it. So I really do think it's about how relevant it is and then how much we care about the professor and the relationship we have.

- [Haya Ghandour] I agree with everyone so far. And I think back to Jennifer's point a little bit, something that I think she touched upon is basically the systems that we work through are now changing. And I think obviously this isn't exactly like, the best measure for us to figure out like, as pass/fail the way to go because of all the other complications that come with the current situation. But I think like, coupling that with Kalisa's point, we're all kind of ever since, like, we started getting education, learning how to work through like, exams and how to write like, specific types of papers and all these things. And it really is only training you to be good at test-taking. And at the end of the day, like, you're are learning things along the way, but I don't think that grades and the way that we have them right now are the most efficient or most effective way for us to actually learn. And they, do not put learning at the core of the educational experience. So I think we're definitely having to challenge ourselves and our views as to what we value about our education, and what things do you want to get out of it, and what different ways we can really explore the things we're learning and apply them better. And I agree with what Kalisa was saying about, you know, if you're actually caring and you think you will learn these things you don't want to waste your time now, and kind of not submit good work. And then you're going to have to relearn this later again for like, that skill. So I definitely agree that this pass fail system is really allowing us to explore what possibilities we have and what things we should be asking for in our education.

- [Mae Butler] Absolutely, Haya. And I think to tie that into it, Jennifer and Kalisa were expressing, like, I heard two things. And firstly, I think Jennifer did a really important thing in distinguishing between like, receiving a grade and receiving feedback from a professor, or being able to participate in the evaluation process. I think at least in my experience, we are still getting feedback in terms of whether or not we've met learning objectives. We're not necessarily getting a number to go along with it, or a letter or whatever other metric professors use. But I think something they both touched on is how motivating the relationships that we form are. And I think that's something I've really noticed in my experience as a remote learner is not wanting to slack off because I still care so much about my professor or my peers, the people that I'm in a class with, or Kalisa even mentioned, maybe a relationship with a future goal or some other motivating factor, like, still wanting to develop skills so that I can practice something in the future. But it's interesting to see how how easily those have been separated from grades for me.

- [Catherine Ross] So that kind of takes us into the other big area that we were going to talk about, which was technology. Diane Pike had talked about technology in her paper. Clearly the technology did save us, but it also had impacts that maybe weren't as positive. So I'm just

curious, like, let's go a little more into technology and how maybe it's changed your role as a learner, your feelings about how you communicate with professors, whatever direction you all want to take it.

- [Haya Ghandour] It's definitely very complicated. I think I was initially super, super overwhelmed with like, the switch for multiple reasons. Obviously it wasn't just like, oh, we're doing this for fun, but I think I was intrigued to see how different professors would deal with it. But I was concerned as to how I would deal with it, because obviously we were used to integrating technology into our education, but I think similar to just in-person classes, I quickly discovered that like, if something is not done intentionally, then technology is harming, like, it's not really the means that we need to go by to go by to achieving a certain point. So I think whether it's using specific software, specific features of the software or certain delivery methods for different things, if something is not done intentionally I think it really carries through easily to the student that like, this is not the best way of not the best method of delivery, or that these things are just not what we need to be doing right now. I think that we have a lot to learn about which ways we should be doing these things if we are to carry some lessons from like, this pandemic in terms of technology use. And definitely, it's brought a lot of things about accessibility and different accommodations that people have been asking for that are suddenly super available. But at the same time it's brought to the conversation, I think the idea of in what situations is it best to assign things in a certain format and is this the best way to do it?

- [Kalisa Ndamage] Yeah, I definitely agree. I do think for me personally I quite enjoyed having the added flexibility of having online courses being able to go to the video library. I don't have to go to my 8:40 anymore. I can turn it into a 10:40. So I enjoyed being able to manage my own time. But then when I speak to some other friends, they found it awful. They preferred much more structure. And I think that technology can offer us both, but we just have to think about how we apply it to different types of people.

- [Catherine Ross] Right, and also depending on where they're located, right? I mean, it's hard to create structure around synchronous kinds of interactions if somebody is at a significant distance and the time zones are just too far apart, which is not technology's fault, right? It's just a limitation.

- [Kalisa Ndamage] Right, I think a more clear cut example would be professors who made assignments due at any point in the semester, like, I had a professor who did that, and I love that. I did all of them in a week and I was like, I'm done with this class. And some people said they hated it. Cause then they kept kind of procrastinating and they want to see a deadline. So I think an example like, that technology can be great but we just need to kind of think about the fact it's not, it's not the saving grace.

- [Catherine Ross] Yeah, right, right. I think as Haya, said, too, right, that we have to figure out the things that technology really enhances, right, the really good ways to use it, but it may not be good for everything we're trying to do. Yeah.

- [Mae Butler] I completely agree with that. I think something that comes to mind is the anthropologist Jean Lave said that learning is becoming a member of a sustained community of practice. And I think something that I've really faced this semester is having to renegotiate what community looks like. Because for me, that social bond and the community-based experience of learning is such a motivator. And I've found that in this case, technology, and especially remote learning technology has really compromised that, but I can also see how other applications or softwares, like Haya was saying, could be used to enhance that in a classroom. It's just difficult when we're put in a position where we're being asked to substitute other research informed teaching practices with technology. Whereas I would hope that they could be used to compliment each other in a different context.

- [Catherine Ross] Yes. I recently checked back in with Diane Pike since she recorded her podcast before we went on the COVID-19 path. And she said the one dead idea she would maybe talk differently about now is the technology idea. And basically what she said is what you all have so beautifully illuminated, is that technology, in some ways, did save us. It stopped us from having to completely end the semester in the middle, but it's still not, it's not going to save higher education completely. It's a tool that can be used in some ways that are very, very good for learning but it's not a tool that meets all needs for learning, right. So I think that's how she would have amended it post-COVID-19. And you all just gave great examples of that.

- [Jennifer Lee] I also think like, one of the reasons why like, all the LMS software we have is so bad because the people who create it don't have to experience actually using them. And the way it's purchased is as like, enterprise systems that administrators buy. And so it's like, sold in terms of features, as opposed to like, what do students in classes actually need? Oh, LMS software is like, learning management software. And so I was thinking that because of this, because suddenly so many people have experienced remote learning and remote education, that in the future, like, the people working on it and developing it are likely are to actually be a lot more invested in what the experience is like, and have a lot more resources to draw from and like, asking people how their softwares have been received. And so I've been kind of thinking and wondering wondering about like, the future of educational technologies and how they might enable for the obvious gap we're seeing between what exists and what's needed to just be improved in the future.

- [Catherine Ross] So if you all could reinvent higher education, if we could just say, okay, what would you do if if somebody said, how should we go? What should we do now, going forward? We're going to just reinvent the whole thing. For teaching. Let's focus on teaching the teaching and learning part of it. Like, what would you change?

- [Kalisa Ndamage] I think everyone would agree that we have some professors who are phenomenal researchers, like, world-renowned and super, super competent, but when it comes to teaching that is, I think they're just so intelligent that they can't imagine that we don't understand how to solve a partial differential equation. And so I think that if I could

reinvent it, I would create a clear distinction between professors who want to be great at research and professors who also really care a lot about teaching students because that doesn't always overlap, I think.

- [Haya Ghandour] I agree a hundred percent. And I think to that point, a lot of it would be looking at our priorities right now and be evaluating what those are, because students' health and wellness is not always a priority in most cases. It really is not the priority in traditional classrooms. And I think we need to do better about that aspect and really figure out ways in which we can center like, equity and accessibility at like, the fourth, center that in education, more than just delivering content because if we do that, then sharing knowledge and really being able to think critically about our world would really become much, much easier task, I would say. If we are all made to feel important and that our ideas and the things we have experienced are as valid as the other person, and that we don't really have to sacrifice parts of ourselves or our wellbeing in order to achieve, like, certain status or a certain grade, and then be deemed respectable or given whatever accolade that is meant to show that we have succeeded in this broken system.

- [Mae Butler] Yeah, I really appreciate what Haya just said about teaching students to differentiate between sort of what an equity centered classroom might look like, versus a classroom that's based on a scarcity model, where there are only a certain number of credentials, whether it'd be like, an A or a pass or whatever it is that are going to be distributed. Because I think the difference between learning and credentials is something that we're not asked to think a lot about as students. And that's also just my experience growing up, going to a public school in the United States, a lot of the goal was was also based on this model of scarcity and learning. And that only a certain number of us are gonna get to go to a competitive college. And then only a certain number of us are going to get to graduate with a competitive degree from there and do something else. And I think maybe that type of transformation starts with admissions. Maybe we have to ask students to demonstrate learning in a way that's different than a high school GPA or a standardized test score. But I think that would be something that I would want us to focus more on.

- [Jennifer Lee] I think I would wanna focus more on independent learning. Like, I think this semester really shown me how much relationships with professors can motivate students, and the extent to which students are capable of succeeding at things that they chose for themselves. And I think, at least at the undergraduate level, like, and especially at Columbia where you're not required to do a senior thesis, there's not that much movement towards having students develop the capacity for like, independent learning which I think, this semester has really shown me, like, students are capable and desire that. And so I think, I wish like, that kind of experiential and like, student directed work were more integrated into the classroom or like, into the general or formalized curriculum in some way.

- [Catherine Ross] Wow, these are really powerful ideas. And I thank you for sharing them. And I think people who listen to this podcast will agree with a lot of your ideas. So, who

knows? Maybe in some years we'll see some of the changes that you all have brought up. Is there anything else you want to share with us before we sign off?

- [Haya Ghandour] I think, trust your students, and trust yourself as students as well, and be critical of everything that you do. And, yeah, it's a partnership at the end of the day and I think we're all here wanting to learn. Otherwise we would not be in these spaces. And I think if that's more recognized, that we'd all be better off as a society.

- [Catherine Ross] Wonderful.

- [Mae Butler] And I also, yeah, building off of what Haya said, I think something that's been really lovely to come out of this semester is the shared vulnerability between professors and students. And I think one of the reasons the professors have been so receptive or even proactive about soliciting student input or feedback has been because this is a new context, and they're not presumed to be experts in teaching. But I think as Kalisa has mentioned, not all researchers are expert educators, and that's okay. And I hope that that same willingness to cooperate can carry forward in the future, even when we're back in the classroom.

- [Catherine Ross] Well, I can't thank you all enough for being here and for sharing your thoughts with us today. We owe all of you, Mae, Haya, Jennifer, and Kalisa a huge thank you for this very rich conversation and the wonderful ideas that you have put forward. And best wishes for much success and happy end of semester. Stay safe and stay healthy.

- [Haya Ghandour] Thank you for having us.

- [Mae Butler] Thank you.

- [Kalisa Ndamage] Thank you so much.

- [Jennifer Lee] Thank you.

- [Catherine Ross] If you've enjoyed this podcast please visit our website where you can find any resources mentioned in the episode, ctl.columbia.edu/podcast. Please like us, rate us, and review us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts. Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning is a product of Columbia University Center for Teaching and Learning, and is produced by Stephanie Ogden, Laura Nicholas, Abie Sidell, and Jon Hanford. Production support from Kate Tigh Pigott. Our theme music is In The Lab by Immersive Music.