

## Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series

### Season 5, Episode 7: Rigor and Assessment from the Student Point of View

#### Center for Teaching and Learning, Columbia University

[00:00:00] **Catherine Ross:** Hello and welcome to Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning, a higher education podcast from the Center for Teaching and Learning at Columbia. I'm Catherine Ross, the center's Executive Director. As a quick reminder for our listeners in this podcast series, we are exploring dead ideas and 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, exercising what Diane Pike called "the tyranny of dead ideas."

[00:00:39] I am speaking today with two undergraduate Columbia University students who have served as teaching and learning consultants as part of our center's Students as Pedagogical Partners Initiative. We're joined today by Maryam Pate and Olivia Schmitt, who will now briefly introduce themselves. Olivia, why don't you go first?

[00:01:01] **Olivia Schmitt:** Hi Catherine, my name's Olivia. I'm a junior in the School of Engineering, and I'm majoring in computer science and minoring in psychology.

[00:01:12] **Catherine Ross:** Great. Thank you. Maryam?

[00:01:14] **Maryam Pate:** Yeah. Hi, I'm Maryam. I am a junior in Columbia College, and I'm majoring in economics with a concentration in history.

[00:01:23] **Catherine Ross:** All right, let's get going here with our conversation. As many of our listeners may know, our theme this fall has been to reimagine the ways in which rigor can be and maybe needs to be redefined in higher education. For students, I think the most common and significant way that they encounter this idea of rigor is when they're taking exams, and tests, and of course getting grades. Dead ideas about rigor often surface in the ways in which instructors design their testing and their grading policies, and also sometimes in the ways students study for exams and focus on getting grades. Some examples of the dead ideas that might be driving some instructor

behaviors would be ideas like high stakes tests are the only rigorous way for students to demonstrate their learning, or that grades must be curved to control for how many students, you know, get A's and B's in a class, or that all tests, assignments and quizzes must be graded.

[00:02:36] We know from the research on learning that there are unintended consequences of these dead ideas. For example, students are highly motivated to get grades as opposed to being more focused on the learning aspect. And sometimes students even resort to cheating if they feel really pressured to get high grades on a test and they know that grades will be curved, for example. These practices of rigor in assessment can lead to inequalities in the learning environment. So I thought it would be really interesting to get the student perspective on how learners experience and understand rigor. So as students, when did you first realize that perhaps what might be called more traditional methods of testing and grading, some of the things I just mentioned maybe weren't really helping you learn or were perhaps pushing you to engage in poor study habits like cramming. What made you realize that maybe these practices, although often just considered normal pedagogical practices, weren't necessarily helpful for your learning. Who would like to start?

[00:03:55] **Maryam Pate:** I can start and say that I kind of made that connection when I took courses that didn't have such typical methods of assessment and instead, or maybe more discussion based or there were different opportunities to kind of build your grade. And in reflecting on that, I kind of realized. , it was in those classes despite however difficult they might have been. It was in those classes where I, you know, was able to step out of the classroom and continue thinking about what I was learning or just see my education in action more so compared to classes that I had taken maybe a semester prior and really hadn't retained anything. Um, so I think that was a really stark difference for me to understand the way that I, you know, you could take a course, but maybe not get the full extent of what you could out of it because you're so clouded by worries about grades.

[00:04:46] **Catherine Ross:** Oh, that's really fascinating, Maryam, and that dovetails very nicely with some of the research that's out there. But I don't want to go off topic here, so I want to let Olivia get a word in here.

[00:04:59] **Olivia Schmitt:** Yeah, I think my experience is similar to Maryam's in that I definitely cling to that dead idea of grading motivating learning, and I think that is kind of what I used to dictate whether or not I was learning in a class. And in a similar way, this was specifically in my major classes, I would move on to like the next class in the sequence, and then I'd look back and not

retain anything that I had previously. So I think that's kind of when the switch was made where I realized that just because I got a good grade in the class doesn't necessarily mean I really learned in the class. And so that kind of changed the way I worked in those classes.

[00:05:41] **Catherine Ross:** So in those classes, were you being tested in pretty traditional ways? Did the assessment also sort of foster that grade focus?

[00:05:51] **Olivia Schmitt:** Yeah, it was definitely very exam focused. I think most of my classes being in the engineering school are usually, um, midterms and then into finals, and those are just usual exam-based questions, so that's a pretty common experience. I didn't have many with like essays or discussions.

[00:06:12] **Catherine Ross:** So that's interesting. Maryam had those other kinds of experiences that caused her to think more about assessment and testing and studying for those things, and you had kind of the opposite experience as a catalyst to realize that maybe that wasn't working for you.

[00:06:32] So what kinds of assessments in courses that you've taken have pushed you maybe to go even further outside your comfort zone and take risks or to radically change how you approached preparing for that kind of assessment? How did they encourage you to really engage and learn?

[00:06:54] **Olivia Schmitt:** Uh, specifically for me, I think the assessments that weren't, those exam-based types of assessment were really where I was able to kind of put more time into using it as a learning opportunity rather than just as assessing what I've learned, and I think in the classes that have focused on using assessments to learn is kind of where I've, that have been the most successful. So I had one class where we would have a revision essay was kind of like what we'd work on throughout the the semester, and then the final was like the least important, but it was because we were working on it and revising it, getting feedback from it from our professor throughout the semester. So that is assessment where I kind of pushed myself to go a little further because it wasn't my usual exam-based assessment.

[00:07:49] **Catherine Ross:** Interesting. Maryam, how about you?

[00:07:52] **Maryam Pate:** I think some assessments that come to mind are probably from my contemporary civilizations class. One assessment that we had, form of assessment, was having to lead one of the class discussions, and so it took a decent amount of our grade percentage and preparation for that was limited to just, you know, showing up to discussions every day, watching how

the professor kind of facilitates discussions, how to ask the right questions, and elicit meaningful responses from peers. I think that was an interesting learning experience that, you know, stood directly in contrast with maybe sitting in a library, studying a textbook, and then also, you know, a metacognitive final paper as opposed to a more typical final paper that you might write for another humanities class. And so just making sure again, like that throughout the semester, you're constantly connecting different texts, thinking about, you know, why are we reading this? How did these relate with one another? Made me feel that when the time came to perform on the assessment, that I was more than prepared just by, you know, showing up as a student.

[00:08:51] **Catherine Ross:** That's really interesting because that sounds like assessment that is being used as a tool for learning. So it was helping you learn some pretty deep skills, right? How to have and engage in good conversations that, um, draw on both what you have been engaging, the content you've been engaging with, but also with the other people in the room, and how you make meaning from that.

[00:09:20] **Maryam Pate:** Yeah, exactly.

[00:09:22] **Catherine Ross:** Could you say a little bit more about that metacognitive test that that peaks my interest?

[00:09:28] **Maryam Pate:** Yeah, so the assignment was kind of delivered as a list of questions that touched on different parts of the syllabus. And then, you know, we also had options to do more creative prompts. If you wanted, you could kind of pick and choose. For example, one was, you know, envision a conversation between two of the authors that we'd written and how they'd addressed this particular issue, um, and things like that. And so it was very much a free write format, but kind of just sat down and wrote without the stress of kind of, am I going to structure this in the way that's acceptable? And I think it was also just an especially fun assignment to write, especially because we could work with our professor, uh, as we were writing this final, because it was so focused on like the year in review and kind of every single thing that we'd learned.

[00:10:16] **Catherine Ross:** That's fantastic and very creative, right. It gets you to engage with the material in a whole different way similar to Olivia's experience, right. It's very supporting, very much supporting your learning and your development, improving your writing skills, improving your critical thinking skills, your deep reading, critical reading skills. So that's great. So

would you say, um, I don't know exactly how you understood rigor, say before you had these experiences, but would you consider these assessments rigorous?

[00:10:56] **Maryam Pate:** Um, yeah, I definitely would. I think there's an initial hesitation to consider them rigorous just because, you know, previously for me, rigor really meant just how much are challenged, but also like struggling to kind of reach whatever goal you'd set for yourself. And so there was a sense of, you know, doing as well as you might want to do is maybe impossible or it's not very probable. Versus in these experiences, I had never really felt like my success was out of reach or that, you know, I wasn't meant to succeed. I knew that the goal was for me to kind of demonstrate all that learning to the best of my ability. It made me realize that, you know, yes rigor is challenge, but when I now think about the most like meaningful challenges that I've kind of had in classrooms, I wouldn't necessarily say that it is the ones that, uh, align with like traditional assessments, but rather, you know, the challenge of having to completely shift how you think in a classroom or show up in a classroom in a discussion, for example.

[00:11:55] **Catherine Ross:** Wow, that's, that's wonderful to hear. I'm so glad that that's how it worked out for you. Olivia, what were you thinking?

[00:12:04] **Olivia Schmitt:** I think in my experiences, because I haven't had as many non-exam-based assessments, the exams that I have had where I found them to be most rigorous are those that are asking me to demonstrate how to think about a problem and not necessarily answer the problem to its completion, because that is what initially would be the rigorous aspect is like a timed assessment and getting that done. But I think in this new understanding of rigor, I've learned that really it's pushing your thinking to go a little bit further than what you've learned in lecture and what you've learned in class and actually applying it. And so in beginning to think that way, that's where you can kind of demonstrate that through the assessments. And like push your learning while you're, while you're being assessed.

[00:12:55] **Catherine Ross:** I'm really happy to hear this because many times I think when you look at the research, for example on how undergraduates perceive rigor versus how instructors perceive rigor, undergraduates often think about rigor as what I think what you said Maryam like struggle and it's a lot like a lot of reading, and lots of pages of writing, and so it's tends to be thought of more in terms of quantity rather than in terms of that sort of intellectual or cognitive challenge that you both are describing and that the assessments were really the key to promoting that kind of intellectual engagement. So that's, that's lovely to hear about that.

[00:13:45] Were you ever actively involved in like creating an assessment in a previous or current course? Like how did the instructor engage and motivate students to think more deeply about how they might demonstrate learning? Do you have any examples you could share or any you thought were really effective?

[00:14:07] **Olivia Schmitt:** I actually had one class, it was um, an intro level physics course and we were asked to create our own exams, including the questions. So that was an interesting way to demonstrate learning, cause then you really had to know the concepts to even create a question. And it was, it was fun too. So I think that was, that was a good experience for learning.

[00:14:31] **Catherine Ross:** That is something I did in all the classes I taught. I always had students submit questions that could be used on the exam because just what you said, right. I knew that for students to write good questions, they had to really understand the materials. Oh, that's great. I love that. Maryam?

[00:14:52] **Maryam Pate:** Yeah. In my current, um, introductory econometrics class, uh, as our professor was preparing the midterm, he kind of like gave us a survey, uh, so we could answer to just generally how our progress was going in the class, but also like concerns we had about the midterm. And there was just an open space to share, you know, based on the practice exam that we had received, kind of like what we felt might improve it. So afterwards we were like able to see what everyone in the class had kind of written on or voiced out. And then also have a discussion with our professor. And for example, have more of a programming element added as opposed to it being like purely math or allowing us to have a note sheet during the exam because people felt that that would be useful. So I think the setup or structure of the exam definitely changed a lot before, like how it was supposed to be and after we had given our input as students. So I'm very grateful for that.

[00:15:47] **Catherine Ross:** Wow. That's really interesting and very powerful I think because what, what was happening there is you were being asked to think very metacognitively right, about your own learning and how you demonstrate learning vis-a-vis this test, right. You had the practice test. I applaud that instructor for being so open to getting that kind of student feedback, both even on the sort of content of the exam. That's really interesting. Thank you for sharing that.

[00:16:21] So you know, as I just mentioned, undergrads sometimes also have some very strong dead ideas about learning and how learning happens, as well as about more specific things like assessment and rigor that we've been

discussing. If you were going to give a peer or a group of your peers some advice on preparing for assessments. What dead idea would you target? What's a common dead idea that you hear your peers maybe talking about and you would want to help them maybe rethink it?

[00:17:00] **Olivia Schmitt:** In reading Pike's "The Tyranny of Dead Ideas," I think the one that really stood out to me was that students are not as prepared as they used to be. And I think looking at that from a student's perspective, it's interesting because that is something where it's like, if I'm not prepared, I just need to do more. I need to study more. I need to just put more time into it. And I think that's kind of where the dead idea comes in because it's, it is a relationship with your teacher and that's where the learning comes from. Yes, you can do more on your side, but having that communication with your teacher, if maybe there's something they can change. And there's a new route that will help your learning. I think that's kind of a, something I would want students to think about rather than putting that all onto themselves.

[00:17:48] **Catherine Ross:** So sort of thinking about how, what agency do you have as a student and how can you maximize that agency?

[00:17:58] **Maryam Pate:** I would definitely target the idea that, uh, more broadly grades motivate learning, but specifically that grades kind of carry any meaning at all. I think on, you know, both ends of the spectrum as far as grades. Whether you're doing better than you had hoped, or not as well as you'd like to be doing can become easy for all of us to walk away from an assessment after receiving a grade, feeling as though it's some sort of representation of, you know, our capacity to achieve in the specific major or field or representative of, you know, our standing amongst our peers.

[00:18:33] So I would definitely suggest to my peers to think a little more about all the different variables that can affect, you know, someone's performance on an assessment, but also just general performance in a course to understand that there's still room for increased equity in that classroom. So we can't take grades, you know, at face value and assign such strict meanings to them. Um, and then also, you know, even just looking at like the pandemic for example, and you know that things, things can change and people, you know, whether you're taking a pass/ fail course or whatever it is, you can still learn without necessarily having to have a grade attached to that. Um, so I think just like reminding everyone to entertain that possibility maybe a little more.

[00:19:15] **Catherine Ross:** But it's hard, right? It's hard for people to walk away from thinking about grades, right? You have a scholarship that depends on

it or an internship you're trying to get, right? And, and it's competitive. Wow, that just opens up a whole big vista of things to talk about-- the meaning of grades. But I, I think it's great that you think you, you know, you want to convince your peers that grades aren't the be all and end all right, that you can learn apart from grades, and sometimes that learning whether or not the grade represents it feels deeper and more satisfying. Am I getting sort of the drift of what you're saying?

[00:20:06] **Maryam Pate:** Oh yeah, absolutely.

[00:20:08] **Catherine Ross:** Yeah. Have you ever been asked, I'm just curious, have either of you ever been asked to grade yourselves on an assignment or, um, on like participation? Cause that's something I ask my students to do all the time.

[00:20:25] **Olivia Schmitt:** I actually haven't had that experience, I don't think.

[00:20:28] **Maryam Pate:** Yeah, I haven't had it either. None that I can think of, but it sounds exciting.

[00:20:33] **Catherine Ross:** Just curious. My students did it once in a class. Uh, it was a small class, like 10 students, and I gave them a rubric around participation that talked about some of the things you mentioned, Maryam, like that you have to come to class prepared. You have to not only have read the material, but you have to have thought about sort of what takeaways or what things you might want to have to say about it. And you have to listen to what other people are saying and attempt to connect ideas across with your ideas, right? Those kinds of things. And I ask students, um, to grade themselves every other week. In the final course evaluations, they told me that they hated having to do that every other week. But on the other hand, it kept them really honest with themselves and motivated to do better when they felt like they hadn't done a good job. And most of the time they graded themselves lower than I would have. So that was interesting. Olivia, were you going to add something to what Maryam said?

[00:21:37] **Olivia Schmitt:** Um, yeah, I think I was just going to add into the idea that our dead ideas kind of go together in the sense that a lot of the times the feelings of needing to do more come from thinking you need to have a better grade. And so I think that's where the teachers and professors can come into that because they are the ones who are dictating what your grades are. So I think that gives them a lot of, a lot of ability to change that.



[00:22:06] **Catherine Ross:** All right, thank you. So why were you motivated or inspired to believe in this possibility of change in higher ed? Like why did you want to get involved with this Center for Teaching and Learning, and what are you thinking about the work you're doing there? .

[00:22:25] **Maryam Pate:** I think my motivation definitely just comes from the fact that I've seen on definitely smaller scales, kind of what? Like ungrading or alternative, you know, methods of assessment can look like. I've seen the impact that's had on me and the relationships that I have with my professors. And you know, it's like you said that the idea of getting rid of grades completely, for example, is a lofty task and it's not necessarily something that even seems possible. But I think in just focusing on kind of the benefits I've experienced as a student and the ways that I've seen myself grow so much in certain courses, especially in comparison to others, has just made me more confident that, you know, thinking more creatively about, you know, methods of teaching and learning is something that, you know, can be implemented simply because of the value that it can deliver students and professors. I, I hold on to that sort of confidence, um, and hope in that sense.

[00:23:22] **Catherine Ross:** That's great.

[00:23:23] **Olivia Schmitt:** Yeah. I think similarly. I definitely am excited by the possibility of changing and shifting to something that focuses less on grades, but I understand it's like a lofty task. Um, and I think what really motivated me to want to be a part of this change is understanding that even now students' experiences in higher education are just so vastly different. And I think getting that to a point where there's a little bit more of an equitable assessment is something that I really hope to work towards and something that excites me. And so I think that's just something that I'd want to work towards.

[00:24:07] **Catherine Ross:** Those are both really good goals and it really helps I think when students are willing to share their own experiences to say, this really helped me learn and it was really powerful for my own development and my own reaching my own goals. I think that's very helpful when you can share those ideas, and I agree. I think we all would like it to be a little bit more widespread in higher education. So it's not just sort of the luck of the draw if you get to have that experience with assessment or you don't. Right. So thank you for joining with the CTL to, to further those goals. We definitely appreciate it, and thank you to both of you, Maryam and Olivia, for chatting with us today.

[00:25:05] **Olivia Schmitt:** Yeah, thank you. This is exciting.

[00:25:06] **Maryam Pate:** Yeah. Thank you so much for having us.

[00:25:10] **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](http://ctl.columbia.edu/podcast). Please like us, rate us and review us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts. Dead Ideas is produced by Stephanie Ogden, Laura Nicholas, John Hanford, and Michael Brown. Our theme music is *In the Lab* by Immersive music.