

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series

Season 6, Episode 5: Dead Ideas in Intercultural Development with Tara Harvey

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.

[00:00:25] 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. I'm speaking today with Dr. Tara Harvey. Tara Harvey is a highly regarded specialist in intercultural teaching and learning in higher education.

[00:00:50] Prior to starting True North intercultural, Tara taught English in Spain, worked as an international student advisor at Texas A & M, and the University of Wisconsin Madison, taught intercultural courses at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities and the Middlebury Institute for International Studies at Monterey.

[00:01:10] And she was the inaugural Academic Director of Intercultural Learning for the Council on International Educational Exchange. In 2016, Tara founded True North Intercultural LLC to provide high quality professional development to higher education faculty, staff, and institutions to help them better navigate cultural differences and facilitate students intercultural learning, both at home, on campus, and abroad.

[00:01:40] So I am truly delighted to have Tara here today.

[00:01:45] **Tara Harvey:** Thanks so much for having me, Catherine.

[00:01:47] **Catherine Ross:** So let me just give you a little bit of background about why I invited Tara to speak with us today. You know, this season we've

been talking about research and why research on learning and teaching is ignored. Today we're going to dive into the research on intercultural development.

[00:02:09] Because having worked in this arena a little bit myself, there are many dead ideas that float around and haunt this area of work. So I just thought, I've run into some pretty entrenched beliefs that totally ignore the extensive research on the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of intercultural development, and I thought it would be wonderful to have an expert come and share with us sort of her challenges, but also her take on how she gets people to maybe pay attention more to the research.

[00:02:46] So the first question I have for you, Tara, is to define intercultural development for us, because I think some of our listeners may not be as familiar with this area of work in higher ed as we are. And then maybe you can share some of the major research sightings that might be informative for our listeners.

[00:03:10] **Tara Harvey:** Sure. So I'm glad that we're starting with the definition, um, because I think this is where some dead ideas start actually. Uh, so the way I think about intercultural competence or define it is the capacity to communicate and act appropriately, effectively, and authentically across cultural differences, both locally and globally.

[00:03:35] So to tease that out a little bit: effectively, meaning we're trying to achieve something, we're engaging with other people, and we need to achieve some goal, and we're effective in achieving that. Appropriately means we're engaging with people from different backgrounds, different experiences, different perspectives, and we are acting in a way that makes them feel respected, included, appreciated, and then authentically, meaning we are not caving in or giving up who we are in order to engage effectively with people who are different and locally and globally I think is a really important part.

[00:04:12] Oftentimes when we think intercultural, maybe even without realizing, our mind goes to international, to different countries and cultures. So intercultural learning is not just learning about other cultures, it's not just about engaging with people from different countries. It's really an ongoing process of developing this capacity to engage effectively, appropriately, and authentically across difference.

[00:04:39] And I think some of the research and literature that's least known about or maybe ignored kind of across the board, as you said, is this developmental aspect. It is a developmental process. It is not a couple of skills.

It is not knowing about other countries or cultures. That might all be a part of it, but it is gaining and developing transferable mindset, heartset and skillset, really expanding the complexity with which we're able to navigate cultural difference.

[00:05:14] So there are a lot of developmental models that a lot of your listeners are probably familiar with. It's all about moving from more binary ways of seeing and experiencing the world, us and them, good and bad.

[00:05:28] To more complex, nuanced ways of seeing and experiencing things. And the same goes for the intercultural field. There's something called the intercultural development continuum that I think it would be helpful if more educators were familiar with, because this can help them understand, you know, this process of developing the complexity with which we experience difference.

[00:05:52] And then think about how do you teach to students or to other learners by meeting them where they are. And another piece of research that I think is not widely understood or known enough has to do with research on intercultural development in intercultural experiences because we tend to just assume those experiences lead to intercultural development.

[00:06:16] Most institutions when they talk about their intercultural goals, I say, what are you doing to reach those intercultural goals? Uh, 80% of our students study abroad, for example, or, you know, we have 20% international students or 40% students of color. We have a very diverse campus with the assumption oftentimes not only unspoken, but not even realized that by being in contact with people who are different from us, we become more interculturally competent.

[00:06:46] And we actually now have research, uh, that shows people do not develop their intercultural competence consistently by just being in contact with, exposed to, or even immersed in other cultures. And that same research has discovered that when we intentionally, proactively skillfully facilitate intercultural learning, then that development can happen in conjunction with an intercultural experience or even without an intercultural experience. So I think that's some of the literature and research that is not widely known enough.

[00:07:24] **Catherine Ross:** I couldn't agree with you more, and I mean, it's very similar to developing critical thinking skills, right? Oftentimes in higher ed, we assume students are coming in knowing how to think critically.

[00:07:38] They're very often not, and it's not something they just suddenly by engaging with a text or doing some activity in class, they just suddenly start

being able to think critically. It has so many facets and skills. I think skills is the key term. Like you really have to develop not only a mindset, but those skills and a capacity to sit with ambiguity.

[00:08:05] I don't know if that comes up for you.

[00:08:08] **Tara Harvey:** Yes, yes. Sitting with ambiguity.

[00:08:11] **Catherine Ross:** Yeah. That's a really hard thing to do. And um, but I think sitting with ambiguity is, and not moving into judgment is one of the hardest parts for students to move towards becoming that intercultural person. I don't know if you wanna add anything to my little digression into the ambiguity.

[00:08:33] **Tara Harvey:** I just wish people could see me because I'm nodding and smiling. I, I love the comparison to critical thinking. I make that comparison all the time because how silly would it be if we said, some students have this one experience that's a semester long and that's where they learn critical thinking and some students don't have that experience.

[00:08:53] So I think it's so important to think about it, like critical thinking. It's something we should be helping students develop in a lot of different areas of our work. And you mentioned ambiguity. I often talk about how the world is becoming not only more diverse, but more volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.

[00:09:12] That VUCA term that many of us have heard. Intercultural develop helps us thrive in a VUCA world. And I think a lot of people don't necessarily think of it that way. They only think about it as engaging with people from different countries. But it helps us sit with that ambiguity, not knowing, approach, more complex problems, uh, more effectively.

[00:09:36] So, absolutely.

[00:09:37] **Catherine Ross:** Right, not just shutting down and being able to continue a conversation or continue an exploration through ambiguity, right. Not letting it stop you. What do you think is, and this might be just an impossible question to answer, the most ignored research. I know you already mentioned the one that I've encountered many times working with instructors who are going to be teaching abroad that intercultural learning happens automatically.

[00:10:06] Just if you send students overseas somewhere or to a different country, they'll just come back and be intercultural when we know it requires a lot of reflection, metacognitive activity, very intentional course design from instructors to facilitate that development. But I don't know if that's the most ignored or if there's another most ignored.

[00:10:29] And if you have any thoughts on why it's so challenging to get instructors and sometimes students to look at the research and engage with it, to know themselves, what has to happen, how do you deal with that?

[00:10:45] **Tara Harvey:** Yeah, and I mean, I wanna emphasize that I don't think there are a lot of people that are actively ignoring this research.

[00:10:54] It's more a lack of awareness and just the persistence of misassumptions. Like I said, when we think about intercultural, our mind goes to international. And it goes to international experiences. It's outside of our area of expertise for most people. So we kind of think of that as something that somebody else deals with.

[00:11:18] **Catherine Ross:** The study abroad office.

[00:11:21] **Tara Harvey:** Right? That's, that's the international education office maybe. Or some people might think that's the diversity, equity and inclusion office's job, depending on how they think about it. Again, do we relegate critical thinking skills to one office like that office deals with that and helps students with that?

[00:11:39] No, we think about it in different aspects of our work, but I think that educators, when they do become aware or when they are aware that intercultural learning needs to be intentionally facilitated, yet they think it's somebody else's area of work or expertise, and so they just don't really think that it's something that they need to know about if they do think they need to know about it, or we, the educators that do say, yeah, I wanna be involved.

[00:12:06] I would like to help students engage more effectively across difference, fear, overwhelm. You know, when you think about trying to facilitate difficult dialogues in a classroom, or help students, you know, talk about their differences, that can be really scary for not just educators, but for anyone. People don't wanna do or say quote unquote, the wrong thing.

[00:12:31] Most educators never received a lot of training or teaching to help develop their own intercultural competence, let alone to facilitate other people's

intercultural learning. So I think there are a lot of layers to peel back between just an awareness that this is something that people need to think about what it is, and then help educators build the capacity to feel comfortable and confident and have the tools that they need to help develop intercultural competence. And that's really why I started True North Intercultural in my last job before I went out on my own. I was the academic director of intercultural learning for an organization called C I E E Council on International Educational Exchange.

[00:13:21] And so that was focused on what a lot of people think of as intercultural learning International Exchange, but even we realized, Well, we need to intentionally facilitate intercultural learning. So first that was create a curriculum, but then what we realized is, well, people have to know how to facilitate this curriculum.

[00:13:39] And it's not the same as teaching biology or teaching history. We're really facilitating someone's own reflection on their personal experiences, their background, their identity. And so I was training the faculty and staff around the world who were receiving students on study abroad in how to facilitate intercultural learning, and a lot of institutions were coming to me, hearing me talk at conferences and saying, we need that.

[00:14:06] Our faculty and our staff need to know how to facilitate intercultural learning, how to integrate it into what they do. And so that's what I do now, and I focus on that first. Raising awareness about what intercultural learning is helping people understand, start conversations on their campuses about it so that we're not making these assumptions that get us stuck in the mud, and then build capacity among faculty and staff.

[00:14:34] **Catherine Ross:** Wow. That's great. I'm so happy that you're out there doing this good work. I'm just curious, and I'm asking this question of everyone this spring, because I thought it might be fun. Do you have like a pet peeve, dead idea, that, that you would like to, um, get rid of once and for all?

[00:14:55] **Tara Harvey:** I mean, I've kind of mentioned them already because they are such pet peeves.

[00:14:58] Uh, I'll lead with those. Definitely this unspoken assumption that contact immersion, uh, experience with other cultures is enough. And we do this with our faculty and staff too. Oftentimes it's like, okay, we need something intercultural done. We're going to pick the person who's from another country or the person who did research in another country.

[00:15:20] We think because they have experience in another country, they are one interculturally competent themselves, and then two can facilitate others intercultural learning when none of that is necessarily true. Um, so I would really like to get rid of that, and I see it all the time.

[00:15:38] **Catherine Ross:** Right. I mean, having taught English to speakers of other languages for many years and then also having taught Russian in university settings, I was always struck by sort of the divide between the language teaching and the intercultural development. Like we didn't really incorporate intercultural development into these language classes. If we did, it was sort of these little anecdotes. Oh you know, Owen, you go to this country, this is what's going to happen, but never really unpacking it. And I think that's the result of the pressure of having to cover certain amount of content and get students to a certain level in the language and who has time to be facilitating this other skill and yet speaking another language and not having those intercultural skills is not a great outcome. In my opinion.

[00:16:40] **Tara Harvey:** Yeah. I mean, language and culture goes so hand in hand and are closely tied together. The way we think about time, for example, look at the verbs in English that we use with time. We spend time, we waste time, we save time. So we don't realize that, but that gets us thinking about time as a commodity and engaging with time a certain way.

[00:17:07] But if you weren't raised to think about, talk about time in any way that saw it as a commodity, you may have a very different relationship to time. Um, and you know, prioritize relationships over clock time, for example. And so we are all shaped from a very young age by many different things. And one of them is the languages that we speak.

[00:17:31] They require us to think about certain things. Like when I'm talking to you, do I have to think about the hierarchy involved in order to call you, "you"? In some languages to use the, the word you, you have to know is this a more formal interaction or a more informal interaction? I don't have to think about that when I speak English, and so I might not be as tuned in to hierarchy and power in in certain situations.

[00:18:00] **Catherine Ross:** Yeah, absolutely. Um, another question I have is that I think sometimes. When we think about dead ideas, it's very focused on teaching, but I also know that it can be difficult for instructors because students bring dead ideas about learning into classrooms, and particularly the kind of learning that requires sort of risk taking and isn't instantly gratifying, like it takes a long time to slog through some of these developmental processes. You

know, especially with critical thinking or intercultural development, the process is never, it's not linear or predictable. So I'm wondering if you have any tips for how instructors could work with students to help them embrace taking these steps towards becoming something that isn't always easy to see or easy to grasp.

[00:19:02] **Tara Harvey:** Yeah, that's an interesting question because in my experience, it isn't that students have challenges with the fact that it's an ongoing process. For me, sort of the, the dead ideas that students carry into this, they think that experience equals learning. So I see this a lot on study abroad. I've been involved in many courses that were meant to help facilitate intercultural learning before, during, or after study abroad.

[00:19:30] And some of those at one point were required or mandatory. I am allergic to that word. That didn't work so well. And even if they weren't required or mandatory, a lot of students thought, well, I don't need this. I just need to have the experience. I don't need that facilitation that's just getting in my way.

[00:19:47] And yet, you know, students would sign up for these intercultural courses for various reasons, and 80 or 90% at the end would always say, this class should be required for all students who study abroad, or all students who x. And it's like, at the beginning, you didn't think you need this, and now you think everyone needs to take it.

[00:20:08] So I think just getting into the experience a little bit, getting a taste of intercultural learning and seeing that it's not what they often expect at all is helpful. Uh, there's also students who think when they hear intercultural, they think, well, I'm already open-minded, or, I don't stereotype. This isn't for me.

[00:20:27] This is for them. They need this, not me. And so there's a general thinking, like, I don't need this intercultural stuff. I think it's really important that educators take a developmental approach. They try to meet students where they are, you know, not tell someone that they need something they don't think they need, uh, but to reach out and try to try to start with things that will help students experience how they're making meaning.

[00:20:55] So I use a framework with educators. I use it in my own work, and I teach it to educators to use when they're thinking about intercultural learning. It goes through four phases. It's four areas where we're trying to either develop ourselves or help students develop.

[00:21:09] And the first phase is increasing awareness and understanding of our own characteristic ways of making meaning and acting in familiar and unfamiliar contexts. So I think doing things with students where they start to experience themselves making meaning, where they start to see, for example, what we just talked about.

[00:21:30] Like, oh, I didn't realize, I was thinking about time as a commodity. Doesn't everybody think like if you're 10 minutes late for something, that's bad, isn't it respectful everywhere to be on time. So for them to start to have a lens into their own values, beliefs, ways of making meaning and experiencing the world and realizing not everyone approaches things the same way, is kind of a developmental way to approach things.

[00:22:00] My experience has been, students really like to have an opportunity to learn about themselves. Most of the times in education, we're asking them to look outward, to learn about other things, and the students that I've worked with have really welcomed an opportunity once it's given to them and once they kind of understand, you know what this intercultural thing is.

[00:22:22] To really look inward and learn from themselves, reflect on their own experiences. For example, I once taught a course called Leading Across Cultures, and one of the first activities we did is I had them do a collage of what good leadership looks like. There were pictures all around the room. They had to think about an experience they've had when they thought good leadership was involved, whether it was them or someone else.

[00:22:47] So they had their ideas in their head about what good leadership is. They grabbed pictures that corresponded to that. They made a collage and then they had to articulate, uh, first to themselves and then to others what they thought good leadership looked like. And they suddenly realized not everybody has the same ideas about what good leadership looks like and that good leadership to them might not feel like good leadership to someone else.

[00:23:11] And that was very, uh, revelatory for some. That's where you're getting into more complexity than people are thinking, well, what is good leadership? Then I want the answers. And we have to play with that ambiguity, like you were saying, of well, what if there's not just one form of good leadership across the board?

[00:23:30] But I've found that when it's introduced to students in that way, they're very open and receptive and enjoy it, but they come in thinking it's

something else, thinking that it's something that they don't need, and so we need to change maybe the way we approach things.

[00:23:47] **Catherine Ross:** Yeah, that was my experience as well when I taught a course at my previous institution.

[00:23:53] It was a course that was split between looking at language proficiency and what that means and how it's defined and measured, and then the second half was about the same thing, looking at intercultural development and how it's defined and measured. And the students absolutely loved that second part of the course.

[00:24:15] We did a lot of activities similar to what you were just saying, and you know, to really get them engaging and experiencing, coming up right against those assumptions, right, that they make. And it was very powerful and compelling conversations that came out of that.

[00:24:33] **Tara Harvey:** Yeah. Which just underscores why this is such an important thing to help our students develop.

[00:24:40] It's not just about having skills for when we go there. It's about engaging at home every day on our campuses. In our jobs with people who have different perspectives, different backgrounds, different ways of going about things. If we wanna tackle complex problems, we need diversity of ideas, perspectives, skillsets, and we need to be able to work in teams with those people who have different ways of seeing the world, ways of doing things, backgrounds, experiences, et cetera.

[00:25:15] **Catherine Ross:** I just couldn't have said it better myself. Teamwork reminds me like that's another skill, right? That is often assumed when instructors use group projects, you're going to just put you in teams and you're going to do this right? But teamwork requires a set of pretty complex skills to navigate that and to be successful at it.

[00:25:39] So I think it's an another facet of intercultural development that bolsters the ability to work in a team and work with people who are different from you.

[00:25:50] **Tara Harvey:** And there's actually a study, um, I think it's by DiStefano and Maznevski, and they looked at teams working, uh, you know, in the professional sector, but they were looking at multicultural teams and more

homogenous teams and they found that some of the multicultural teams outperformed the homogenous teams as well as other multicultural teams.

[00:26:14] And they wanted to figure out what the difference was. And it was really that the multicultural teams that outperformed everyone else, they knew how to utilize their differences to utilize diversity of perspectives. Whereas the multicultural teams that were underperforming, they were trying to kind of tamp down the differences, you know, focus on this is the way our team is going to do things only, um, without really thinking about the positives and the diverse, uh, ways of going about things and thinking about things that they had on their team and how to really take advantage of that. We have great opportunities on our campuses to help students develop skills that will be highly applicable in the workplace.

[00:27:01] **Catherine Ross:** And highly desirable by employers.

[00:27:04] **Tara Harvey:** Exactly.

[00:27:05] **Catherine Ross:** Yeah. I've seen some employer sort of, you know, what do employers want? And that's right up there at the top, that skill. Mm-hmm. That capacity. Yeah. So final question. What is it that keeps you inspired and motivates you to believe in the possibility of changing teaching in higher education?

[00:27:26] **Tara Harvey:** This question is so easy for me because it's the educators that I get to work with every day.

[00:27:31] I get to work with educators who have said, I recognize the importance of intercultural competence and I want to learn how to facilitate it. And they're doing such cool things. I mean, one, they're committed, they're caring, they're dedicated. They want to help their students learn and grow. They want to make the world a better place, but then it's just amazing to see what they do with their own intercultural learning from their personal lives.

[00:27:58] And I run a 12 week a program called Facilitating Intercultural Learning, where every week when we get on a call together, I say, you know, what are your wins this week? How have you applied your learning? And there's always something little like I was talking to my kid the other day and I approached the conversation differently than I would have normally because of this course that doesn't relate to education at all, but they're thinking about and engaging differently in little ways.

[00:28:26] And then other people come in and. You know, I did this thing in my class the other day that I was kind of scared to do and it went really well. Or, uh, you know, I, I did this training for faculty in my department and they really loved it and said they want more of it. So they're doing really cool things.

[00:28:42] And initially I was working primarily with people in international education. It was those study abroad advisors, international student advisors. And I would say now at least 50% of the folks that I work with are faculty, and they're from fields as wide as graphic design, pharmacology, business, law, every area, every field.

[00:29:04] And in student services and administration, um, you know, have had everyone from Provost to folks in Career Services who said, I never realized like networking was a cultural phenomenon and now I'm going to think about it differently and talk with students from different backgrounds about the different challenges they might face in networking.

[00:29:26] So it's just really cool to see the things that educators are doing once they have the frameworks and the tools. And the confidence to engage with intercultural teaching and learning.

[00:29:37] **Catherine Ross:** Well, thank you for sharing that. I am so delighted to hear that. That's great news. And thank you so much, Tara, for taking time to talk with us today and for being part of our 2023 podcast season.

[00:29:52] **Tara Harvey:** Thanks for having me, and thanks for allowing me this platform to expose a few dead ideas to intercultural teaching and learning.

[00:30:00] **Catherine Ross:** Yep. We're all over it. Thanks, Katherine. Thank you.

[00:30:08] If you've enjoyed this podcast, please visit our website or 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 is produced by Stephanie Ogden, Laura Nicholas, John Hanford, and Michael Brown.

[00:30:32] Our theme music is In the Lab by immersive music.