

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series

Season 7, Episode 1: Dead Ideas about the Role of Centers for Teaching and Learning and Institutional Change with Mary Wright

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 in teaching and learning.

[00:00:25] **Catherine Ross:** 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."

[00:00:38] **Catherine Ross:** Welcome, everyone. I'm speaking today with Dr. Mary Wright, the author of a newly released book, *Centers for Teaching and Learning, The New Landscape of Higher Education*.

[00:00:50] **Catherine Ross:** Mary Wright is Associate Provost for Teaching and Learning, Executive Director of the Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning, and a professor of research in the Department of Sociology at Brown University. She is a former president, from 2017 to 18, of the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education, which is the primary professional association for faculty and educational development in the U. S. Mary also serves as co-editor of the *International Journal for Academic Development* and the *Journal of the International Consortium for Educational Development*. Welcome to our Dead Ideas podcast, Mary. I'm just so delighted to have you here today.

[00:01:36] **Mary Wright:** Thank you for having me, Catherine. I'm an avid listener of this podcast.

[00:01:40] **Catherine Ross:** Oh, thank you for that. So as I normally do, I'll just briefly set the stage for our listeners. In this seventh season of Dead Ideas, we'll be exploring ideas and examples of systems and systemic change in the realm of higher ed teaching and learning.

[00:02:00] **Catherine Ross:** CTLs are now an increasingly integral part of the change ecosystem in universities and colleges. So Mary's new book is a really important lens into how CTLs view themselves and are viewed by others as change agents. So in our conversation, we're going to be uncovering some dead ideas, very dead ideas about CTLs that are unfortunately still commonplace in our workplaces, but also looking at how CTLs fit into the change landscape. So before we get into the, the dead ideas, Mary, can you give our listeners an overview of your research as it's presented in the book? Like what kinds of questions did you want to answer and, and why?

[00:02:53] **Mary Wright:** Thank you, Catherine. The book actually began as a project when I served as president of the POD Network, and at that time we were often asked by POD Network members or by the media about how many Centers for Teaching and Learning there are. We had a great understanding of individuals, the number of POD network members, but we really didn't have a good contemporary understanding of how many centers there were. And because I'm a sociologist, as you mentioned in your introduction, I'm very interested in organizations. And so it bothered me that we didn't have a good up-to-date count of the foundational organizational unit in our field. So I thought, well, as POD president, the buck stops here, and so I took it as my task to do a pretty thorough web search.

[00:03:45] **Mary Wright:** Which I then repeated over a number of years, um, to get an accurate count of the number of Centers for Teaching and Learning. And so in 2020, I found 1,209 centers, uh, which was an increase from the last published study of a little over 1, 100. This represented a little over of a quarter of U. S. higher ed institutions, um, but perhaps more significantly, the majority of U.S. students, or 60 percent, are studying in an institution that's affiliated with a center. So I had this list of websites, which is now up on the POD Network page, um, and in, in, looking through the websites themselves, it occurred to me that it would be a very good study. First of all, because there are a lot of dead ideas about Centers for Teaching and Learning, and so I saw things on these websites that I thought might counter those ideas.

[00:04:46] **Mary Wright:** And then my second key objective was that I thought it would be an opportunity to spotlight innovative work from Centers for Teaching and Learning that don't typically get highlighted. You know, centers that might be different, for example, from the ones that you and I work at, Catherine, that are research 1s and highly selective universities.

[00:05:08] **Mary Wright:** So from that then, uh, I, I did a study that looks at five key questions. So the first question are what are Center for Teaching and Learning aims? Uh, and here I look at, uh, changes in the constituencies that we hope to serve, um, as well as our formally stated ambitions.

[00:05:29] **Mary Wright:** The second question I look at is, I call it, how do we get there? So given those aims for centers, what are the strategies that we will be using to help us achieve those goals? The third question looks at what tactics Centers for Teaching and Learning employ. So here I look, again based on the web analysis, at the most frequently offered programs and services, and how these have changed in time in comparison to some prior work on centers. The fourth question is how are centers organized? And so here I look at numbers of personnel, characteristics of leaders, and, uh, governance structures. I also look at what I call integrative emphases or the increasing move, uh, beyond a teaching and learning mission to also bring into centers units that are, have traditionally been found elsewhere in the academy. So these are things like, uh, Assessment, service learning and community engagement, instructional technology and online learning. And then the fifth and final chapter looks at how centers make our work visible. And so here I look at over a hundred annual reports and document the evaluation data and frameworks that centers employ.

[00:06:50] **Catherine Ross:** Wow, that's pretty major. I can only imagine the hours and hours you have spent on this. Um, can, just for a reference point, when was the last major study of CTLs published?

[00:07:05] **Mary Wright:** So the last study of the number of CTLs was published in 2010.

[00:07:09] **Catherine Ross:** Okay.

[00:07:10] **Mary Wright:** That was published by Jennifer Herman, and she found 1, 182 at that time.

[00:07:16] **Catherine Ross:** All right. So, so it's been a, it's been a bit.

[00:07:19] **Mary Wright:** It's been a decade.

[00:07:20] **Catherine Ross:** Well, thank you so much for stepping into that, that gap there. Um, so I do want to get into our, um, dead ideas and I want to start with a couple of related and, and really big I think, dead ideas about centers. And one of them is this notion that, um, college teaching is bad.

[00:07:46] **Catherine Ross:** It's always been bad. And it won't change. But this dead idea then means either that CTLs are powerless to make changes in higher ed teaching, which we already know isn't the case because we have well documented, um, efforts that have radically changed the teaching. Um. Or, um, some people have claimed that CTLs are ineffective and cannot demonstrate their impact or assess their work, which as you are about to share, I think, is also not true.

[00:08:21] **Catherine Ross:** Um, and I think the data in your book is a really powerful antidote to these two dead ideas. So, I'm going to just turn it over. to you to share what you have learned from your research, um, on CTLs in this arena of changing teaching, defining impact, and measuring impact.

[00:08:41] **Mary Wright:** I've been an educational developer for over 20 years, and certainly when I started out in the field it was the case that there wasn't good evidence about the impact of Center for Teaching and Learning work on outcomes like student learning and student success. In 2016, that really changed. At that time, there was the publication of the book, *Faculty Development and Student Learning*. And that book rigorously assessed the connection between educational development and student learning.

[00:09:12] **Mary Wright:** And there's been some wonderful scholarship since then that has also looked at the impact of educational development on student success, on equitable learning outcomes, on faculty retention, on faculty productivity, on faculty satisfaction, on graduate student job outcomes, and institutional change initiatives.

[00:09:35] **Mary Wright:** So in spite all of that research, there still continues to be some national reports that make the claim that centers for teaching and learning are ineffective or don't assess their work very

well. And I also think the field has been very hard on itself. So I was thinking about these tensions while I was writing other chapters of the book.

[00:10:00] **Mary Wright:** And then I read another book that came out in 2020 that I think helped me understand this better. So in 2020, historian Jonathan Zimmerman published his book called *Amateur Hour*, which is a book about the history of college teaching. And he writes about how since the inception of higher education in the United States, there's been a pretty constant perception that college teaching is failing our students.

[00:10:32] **Mary Wright:** And reading that helped me realize that this is a really powerful schema that not only impacts the perception of higher education, but also profoundly impacts the work of Centers for Teaching and Learning. Because we're premised on the idea of teaching and learning improvement. So on the one hand, we might be grateful for this schema because the dissatisfaction might account for the rise of centers. But I think on the whole, it's, it's negative for our field. Um, schemas are very powerful. And so I think that no matter what kind or how much evidence we have to bring, we may always be seen as falling short. If college teaching is always bad, then CTL work is always ineffective.

[00:11:20] **Mary Wright:** And so another dead idea or a pervasive schema that's somewhat related is that, um, Centers for Teaching and Learning are all, have very little reach. That we're always preaching to the choir. So I wanted to mention those two dead ideas as framing. Uh, because what I do in the book is that by looking at over a hundred Center for Teaching and Learning annual reports, I show that many do carefully document their impact, and also document that in aggregate, we have a reach of over half a faculty and substantial proportions of undergraduates and graduate students in any given year.

[00:11:59] **Catherine Ross:** Thank you for that, uh, data. Data is just so powerful, isn't it? But, um, and it actually leads us into the next question, um, which is another dead idea about CTLs, and that is, that CTLs are like all the same, we just do some work with instructors and the work looks pretty much the same across all, all institutions, right? We do some workshops, we run some programs, we provide services and consultations. What does your data say about that?

[00:12:34] **Mary Wright:** Well, in part of your question, Catherine, you talked about, um, constituencies. Um, and it, and it is true that the number one constituency named by centers is faculty. Over, uh, three quarters name faculty as a constituency in their statements of purpose.

[00:12:51] **Mary Wright:** And that has been pretty consistent over time. Um, but we also work with constituencies beyond faculty. So, over two fifths of centers name multiple constituencies, such as work with administrators or graduate students, undergraduates, or even those external to the institution, like patients or community members.

[00:13:16] **Mary Wright:** Uh, and there's been a significant rise over time compared to prior studies, uh, for centers naming students as constituencies. Um, I also found in my research, uh, adjunct faculty, part time and adjunct faculty, and external stakeholders mentioned, which hasn't come up in prior studies. So I think there's certainly a broad reach.

[00:13:39] **Mary Wright:** Your question also asked about programming ,services, and some ideas that, uh, those external dissenters have about our work. And, and it is true. I think centers are frequently criticized for a uniform approach. Uh, that all we do is workshops and one-on-one consultations and sometimes observations. If that were true, I think that would be problematic because we do have limited evidence about the impact of short term workshops. And while we do have evidence about the impact, the positive impact of consultations and observations, if we were just meeting individually, that strategy wouldn't align well with many centers larger scale change aspirations. So what I find though on websites is that there is a wide repertoire of tactics, of change tactics.

[00:14:35] **Mary Wright:** So I look at over 30 programs and services that I find on websites. I did find that workshops are indeed the most frequently listed tactic by centers, and over two thirds of center listed at least one workshop. But of those workshops, It's a little bit more nuanced because over a third listed a program type with the expectation that an instructor would attend multiple sessions over a time. So like a certificate program or a series, which would deepen the impact of that program. And then I think also on a strategic level, I think workshops are being used in alignment with centers, key aims and strategies. We'll talk about this probably later on, but, but their hub or coordinating function and student learning aims.

[00:15:27] **Mary Wright:** The second most, um, frequently listed program, though, are what I call dialogue and, or in learning communities, dialogue and collaboration communities. These are things like action teams or learning communities. And actually, these happen pretty frequently in doctoral institutions. Um, so because of these community building and longer term impact, um, that's a really good strategy for, for centers to be offering. And then the third most frequent program type is new instructor orientation.

[00:16:00] **Mary Wright:** I also want to mention that, um, centers are evolving to better meet their change aims. And so we're seeing a rise in tactics like, on different scales of impact, tactics like course design institutes and students as partners initiatives and large scale recognition programs like open classroom weeks.

[00:16:22] **Mary Wright:** So that's exciting to see those new programs being developed as well. Not static at all.

[00:16:29] **Catherine Ross:** Great. I, I mean, I feel like I'm cheating a little bit because I knew the answer, but I do want to get this information out there about, you know, how, how different many centers are from each other. Also, maybe from what they were a few years ago, we've all gone through major changes and CTLs are not static units.

[00:16:54] **Catherine Ross:** They are constantly questioning and growing and trying to better serve their campuses. Um, and I did notice from the data in your book, it seems that there are some interesting trends for CTLs around connecting even with institutional priorities and, and working in very system wide areas of organizational and culture change.

[00:17:21] **Mary Wright:** Yeah. It's a great question because there are very interesting and I think complicated trends when you look at centers formally stated aims. And the way I do this in the book is I look through what I call centers statements of purpose. And so statements of purpose are a collection of a center's mission and if they have them also their vision and values and goals bundled together.

[00:17:48] **Mary Wright:** And I also look at trends, uh, since a book that came out in 2010, which is a smaller study of center missions, but the book is called *Coming in from the Margins* that has been pretty influential on our field in terms of thinking about our organizational

development role. So what I find in, in 2020 is that, first of all, a majority of centers list student learning as their key aim. And this is a very sharp increase from the 2010 study. To me, this shows that, uh, centers are supporting institutional aims around student success or assessment initiatives. And then the second most frequent aim is support for instructors professional learning. It's even higher in centers that are located in medical school and health related, uh, professions.

[00:18:46] **Mary Wright:** So again, I think this supports institutional aims around faculty productivity, retention, and satisfaction. But then I think it gets a little bit more complicated, uh, because the 2010 study found an increasing role of centers in supporting institutional aims. And, and my study actually showed, uh, a slight decline in the proportion of statements that claim for centers supported support of the institutional mission, the strategic plan or goals.

[00:19:18] **Mary Wright:** And at the same time, I saw a rise from a decade earlier of aims supporting change or innovation. Supportive change or innovation is actually a third most frequent goal for centers in 2020. And so in the book, I talk about why this might be, um, and what, what I speculate is that what I think we're seeing is a conversation amongst those who work at centers about ways to be situated in an institution.

[00:19:46] **Mary Wright:** In many cases, we are administrative units. But also pushing for change within that same institution. And so then I go on to talk about four distinctive change strategies of centers that we use then to leverage that position. I use a sociological lens to, to group these strategies. So I'm borrowing from another study, uh, that was done by three sociologists, Mitchell Stevens, Elizabeth Armstrong, and, and Richard Arum, and it's, it's organized around four metaphors. I like metaphors a lot.

[00:20:22] **Mary Wright:** So the first metaphor that I use to talk about a center's change strategy is hub. And this is the most frequent change strategy I see represented in center statements of purpose. That in a hub role, a center promote connection, it sponsors collaborative initiatives, it brings people together in learning communities. And then additional hub functions include coordination and consolidation of resources. So we see this even in the name, the centering function of Centers for Teaching and Learning. The second metaphor is SIEVE. And if you think about a sieve, a sieve or sieve, uh, screens out, it filters

out, and accordingly this change strategy is aligned with the value of evidence based practice. So sample programs that you might see used in service of a sieve strategy would be assessment or quality standards for online courses or the scholarship of teaching and learning. The third strategy is incubator. And so in an incubator role, centers support the growth and development of people and ideas. This historically has been the most traditional strategy for centers, uh, and programs associated with this strategy are ones like new faculty orientation, or even grant programs where you're seeding and incubating an idea. So hub is the most frequent. Sieve and incubator are about equally frequently expressed, kind of almost tied for two and three. And then fourth is the least frequent change strategy, um, but also pretty powerful, and that's called temple. And in a temple role, centers offer sanctuary, sanctuary, and sites for legitimation, um, and so the key aim for a Temple strategy would be to elevate the value of teaching and learning and educational development by providing spaces and opportunities for recognition and reward of these endeavors.

[00:22:34] **Catherine Ross:** It was really interesting for me reading those and seeing sort of the most common and that, you know, you noted that probably the one that, I don't know, maybe the, even the oldest strategy or the, the one that we always go to, the use of evidence based research to convince people that they need to change is not always as effective as we might want it to be. Um, but it's, you know, it's good to know these things. And I think the temple one, I was, I had often been very skeptical of early on in my career, I'm, you know, 25 years in at this point, and I do now see that there's a major role for, um, highlighting and showcasing good work by instructors who have sort of turned around or changed their teaching, um, and, you know, it's, it can be very powerful in swaying other faculty opinions of working with a CTL.

[00:23:41] **Catherine Ross:** So it's a, it is a great. tool to have called out distinctly as something that should be in our toolbox, I think.

[00:23:50] **Mary Wright:** Yeah. So each strategy has pros and cons, and I talk about those in my book. But I think the key thing is to be intentional about the strategy and then aligned with the strategy and programs and services or tactics that a center then uses.

[00:24:07] **Catherine Ross:** Yeah, and I think also, you know, looking at your mission statement and looking at your visions, um, and your goals for your center and, and thinking very intentionally about what

combination of those strategies and to what degree do we invest in those strategies to get us where we want to be. So I, I really appreciated that section of the book. It's really great to have that kind of toolkit to, to think about. So what do you want people to know about CTLs? What do you want them to take away from your book or just from this podcast?

[00:24:48] **Mary Wright:** I think I might, uh, select three takeaways, Catherine, from the podcast and the book. Um, the first one, I think it's important to acknowledge that Centers for Teaching and Learning are growing both in terms of number and scope of their mandates. And so centers are now playing a broader role in their campuses to support operational needs, strategic aims, and organizational change, as we just talked about earlier. Despite the name, there's trends that centers are going beyond teaching and learning. Um, to support assessment, to support writing, to support community engagement, career and leadership development. And so, I think, because of this broadened mandate, I think it's important for senior leaders to be aware of the potential strain about then, uh, over time I have not seen, uh, an increase in staffing in centers. I also talk about that in the book. And I saw functions that ranged from things like dual enrollment, and robot loans, and honors programs, poster printing, testing centers, the list goes on. So again, I think it's important for senior leaders to be careful what gets centered in the Center for Teaching and Learning to avoid that resource strain and help centers be most effective.

[00:26:05] **Mary Wright:** I think a second, um, dead idea that I hope my book undermines is this perception that I hear about very frequently that centers for teaching and learning are only preaching to the choir. Uh, and as I mentioned, I document, which is consistent with other large scale studies, um, that on aggregate, Centers for Teaching and Learning engage with a majority of faculty, substantial proportions of students in any given year, and also have a deep organizational impact as well. And then the final dead idea that I hope to, um, mitigate is that as we discussed earlier I document that centers for teaching and learning are much more than a collection of consultations and workshop services. But I do think, uh, for those in the field, I do think there could be more attention to strategy. And more attention to thinking about how one's, uh, theory of change aligns with our programs and services, which could then align with the evaluation approach, and I think would then help deepen our impact even further.

[00:27:11] **Catherine Ross:** Yes, and to your first point, I just want to share, uh, an anecdote, um, and that is this problem that you identified where sometimes senior leadership, um, keeps offering us more opportunities to engage in areas that were outside our original mission. Um, that I once attended a conference many years ago and heard a speaker from Great Britain saying, their center is what's called the dump cake model of a center, and that means that the same way you can make a cake by just going through your cupboards and seeing what's in there and dumping them into a bowl, people design CTLs.

[00:28:01] **Catherine Ross:** And then whenever they have something they don't know what to do with, they just put it in the CTL. And that can be a real challenge for centers, particularly if there's a lot of leadership change and the things in the cupboard keep changing and keep ending up on our plates. So I'm, I'm glad that you identified that as, as a challenge. I think that That centers need to be cognizant of as they're thinking about their strategies.

[00:28:32] **Mary Wright:** Yeah, I think, uh, dump cake is a great analogy for that, Catherine. Sometimes I, I talk about it in terms of the danger of being a clown car. That you just have too many things stuffed into that car, um, without some sense of coherence there.

[00:28:49] **Catherine Ross:** Yeah, yeah. So, well, onward we go and, um, we thank you for the book and for all the ways it's going to help us do this work better. So, thank you and we're just so grateful for your participation, um, in our seventh season of Dead Ideas.

[00:29:09] **Mary Wright:** Well, thank you so much, Catherine. I've enjoyed talking about the book with you.

[00:29:13] **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 is produced by Stephanie Ogden. Laura Nicholas, John Hanford, and Michael Brown.

[00:29:38] **Catherine Ross:** Our theme music is *In the Lab* by Immersive Music.