

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast

Season 8, Episode 3: Why is There No Training on How to Teach Graduate Students? with Leonard Cassuto

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[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. 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] Welcome everyone. I'm speaking today with Dr. Len Cassuto, with whom I'm very eager to explore the dead ideas around teaching of graduate students and graduate classes. Dr. Cassuto has been interested in teaching since he was in graduate school, when he worked as a video consultant at Harvard's Teaching and Learning Center. Three decades later, as a professor of English at Fordham University, he's still interested, and concerned, about how academia does, and more often, doesn't, pay attention to how students are taught. He is the graduate education columnist at *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. And that writing has led to two widely read books, *The Graduate School Mess* and, with co-author Robert Weisbuch, *The New PhD: How to Build a Better Graduate Education*. His next book, which will be published in the fall by *Princeton University Press*, is called *Academic Writing As If Readers Matter*. Welcome to our Dead Ideas Podcast, Len. I am so delighted to be talking with you today.

[00:01:49] **Len Cassuto:** Me too, with a name like Dead Ideas how could I resist?

[00:01:53] **Catherine Ross:** That's what we hope for. All right. So I just want to set the stage for a second for our listeners. In today's conversation, we are continuing an examination of systemic changes needed in higher education to better support and improve teaching. And we're continuing a focus on graduate education. In this episode, we'll turn away from how we develop graduate students as teachers, and we'll look at how institutions overlook the need for preparing faculty to teach graduate students and graduate courses, and we will unpack the dead ideas that underlie this neglect.

[00:02:37] Our guest today has written many articles for *The Chronicle*, but we're going to pick one of those and chat about that today. So, Len, let's start off with the May 8th *Chronicle* article titled, *Why is There No Training On How to Teach Graduate Students?* Could you give our listeners just a brief summary of the, the issues that you've outlined in this article?

[00:03:02] **Len Cassuto:** Well, that piece starts with the idea that has occurred to me, often over the more than 10 years that I've been writing that column for *The Chronicle*, that namely that graduate seminars are some of the most important teaching that faculty members at research universities do. It's, they're also among the most desired teaching slots that faculty compete for.

[00:03:28] And yet there is no attention whatsoever that is paid to preparing faculty to teach them well, or just to think about what goes into them in order to teach them to, at the risk of using an already overused word, effectively.

[00:03:49] **Catherine Ross:** Great. I know there's a lot to unpack in this topic, so I'll, I'll get us right into the second question. You offered two assumptions that I would nominate as classic dead ideas, examples of dead ideas. And I want to take them one at a time here. So let's start with assumption number one, which is, you write, "any new faculty member should be able to acquire graduate teaching skills by pedagogical osmosis."

[00:04:23] **Len Cassuto:** Yes, so let's start with the word assumption, the idea of assumption.

[00:04:30] An assumption is already an idea that it's not only dead, it's been buried. And part of part of what I think we have to do with assumptions if we want to get better at, at anything that we're trying to do is dig them up, uncover them, expose them so you can see so that we can see what it is that we are assuming.

[00:04:53] If we're ever going to change what we do, we have to start with what underlies that. And so the assumption here is that any faculty member should be able to acquire graduate teaching skills, uh, just as though, as if by breathing the air. That, uh, that put me in front of a graduate seminar, I'll automatically know the best way to teach it.

[00:05:14] Well, we don't feel that way about undergraduate teaching. Why should we feel that way about graduate teaching? Now, there are, there are reasons for that and we'll be getting into them, but first let's start with what that means. It means that graduate students are essentially being placed into the company of faculty members who are being expected to teach them at this new and advanced level.

[00:05:38] Without any sort of, not simply training, that's absent, but reflection, reflection on any differences that might exist between the teaching that they're more accustomed to doing, which is the undergraduate level teaching, and this new setting, a new setting with a related but still new set of demands that this, this notion that Oh, graduate students are going to be fine.

[00:06:05] Oh, the faculty member is going to be fine. There's a way that this idea doesn't even qualify as being dead because it was never alive. It's an inanimate idea because it doesn't make any sense in relation to any skilled practice. So because really what's going on here. This is a disrespect of teaching as a skill, because after all, teaching is a skill.

[00:06:28] We understand it to be a skill. When we talk about undergraduate teaching and learning, we're quite willing to admit that it's a skill.

[00:06:35] **Catherine Ross:** Some people are.

[00:06:37] **Len Cassuto:** Well, that's true, and I agree, but there is a body of scholarship that supports the idea.

[00:06:42] **Catherine Ross:** Yeah.

[00:06:42] **Len Cassuto:** It's a fairly thriving field, compared to some others. I think people who deny that undergraduate teaching is a skill are relatively marginal. However, the idea that graduate teaching is a skill, barely, it doesn't even qualify as a minority idea. It's not, it doesn't come up at all. And that's a profound disrespect of the notion that you need skill in order to do a thing well, and in the case of graduate teaching, another related assumption to this one is that charisma will carry the day.

[00:07:17] The charisma of the faculty member will substitute for any lack of experience or lack of reflection on what it means to do this thing. And charisma has a long history, in the story of research universities, going back to Germany and other, and other parts of Europe, the idea that the master is supposed to possess a kind of charisma that's going to attract students to his orbit.

[00:07:44] And I use the male pronoun advisedly. So charisma is even a technical term, in this sense. But we don't need to use it technically, we just fall back on the, on the colloquial usage, this idea that, oh, the occasion of the graduate seminar is going to bring out skills that the faculty member doesn't know they have, but should have the greatest confidence that they do possess.

[00:08:08] **Catherine Ross:** The idea is, it's just for them to talk about their research. That's enough, right?

[00:08:16] **Len Cassuto:** This gets to the second undead, buried idea.

[00:08:19] **Catherine Ross:** Okay.

[00:08:19] **Len Cassuto:** Or the second assumption.

[00:08:20] **Catherine Ross:** Go right ahead.

[00:08:21] **Len Cassuto:** This, this assumption is actually articulated in the history of research universities. And it is simply that teaching is not an important activity in research universities, compared to what was initially when research universities were being founded in the United States during the post-war era, in the decades—roughly speaking—the decades surrounding the turn of the 20th century. The research universities were founded on the idea that what was being called investigation.

[00:08:51] A science word, because science was gaining a lot of cultural capital. That investigation was the primary activity that was going to be conducted at the research university and instruction would be secondary and I am quoting, in a mosaic kind of way, from the, *The Statement of Purpose* that was written by William Rainey Harper among the founding documents for the University of Chicago in the years leading up to the opening of the university and Harper's views were entirely mainstream at the time. This was what research universities are for. They were for investigation. Teaching would be secondary. Secondary was Harper's exact word. And, in practice, this leads to the idea that, once again, in a different way, or from a different angle, we could say, teaching is a disrespected skill, or not even an acknowledged skill. And what that amounts to in practice, now we're talking about the long practice of the education of graduate students, graduate school as an institution is fundamentally faculty-centered. Now, we can say, oh, but it's school. Doesn't that mean that the students ought to be in the mix somewhere? Well, no, actually.

[00:10:09] Graduate school is a faculty enterprise. The students are a sidecar, and the faculty are the engine. If we want to talk about evidence for this, anybody who's in the humanities. If you've gone to graduate school in the humanities, then I know you've sat in a seminar that has some kind of recondite, relatively obscure title, and it has an invisible subtitle that doesn't get printed, but which everyone understands to be the case, and that invisible subtitle is one of two things. It is either my next book or my last book, and that's—the purpose of that seminar is to go over the faculty members research agenda, to go through it. If it's going to be the next book, then the students work is going to inform the faculty member's next book. In the sciences, the connection is even more fundamental and profound.

[00:11:06] That the dissertations that laboratory science students write are carved out of the faculty member—the advisor, the lab director, all these are the same person. The dissertation topics are carved out of the lab director's funded research agenda. And they are part of a body of work, published research, that's funded by grants, and will be used to get the next set of grants in order to enable the lab to keep going.

[00:11:37] Because the lab is the main thing. The education of the student is something that's coming along. It's part of the product of the lab. So from these two examples, and there are many more, we can see that graduate school is essentially about what the faculty members are doing. The learning of the graduate student or the learning needs of the student are not

[00:12:02] Fundamentally important. Now, a faculty member could choose to introduce those needs, and I think that the best, most enlightened, most humanistic, in the larger sense of the term, teachers understand this and they can earn and deserve their reputations as excellent student-centered teachers, but student-centered graduate education is historically not the case in the United States or Europe, and it is certainly not the case today.

[00:12:38] That's an assumption that needs to be dug up, examined, and I think, changed.

[00:12:46] **Catherine Ross:** I couldn't agree with you more, and that's why I'm so happy to have you here today. I think your voice is really important in this arena.

[00:12:56] **Len Cassuto:** Yes, well, thank you. Uh, I've certainly found that it's sometimes a lonely voice, but it is less lonely now than when I, than when I started in this particular wilderness. But there was a graduate dean at Fordham where I do most of my teaching. And years ago, she said that there should be a core curriculum for graduate school and that core curriculum should be comprised of one course, and that course should be a history of higher education. And I have never forgotten that. And I have tried to teach such courses at every opportunity, and it's not always easy because there is no curricular place for them in the highly specialized enterprise that is graduate education.

[00:13:40] **Catherine Ross:** Right.

[00:13:41] **Len Cassuto:** And yet when graduate students learn the history of the enterprise, the history of the workplace that they are preparing to enter, that they're in. And also, I want to say to the unofficial polity of which they are claiming citizenship because we're academic citizens to learn about the society

that you are a citizen of, it makes you much better at it. So, it is not simply a matter of the fulfillment of civic duty, that any graduate student who takes the time to learn the history of the institutions that they are part of is going to get better at graduate school. And I say this with a sense of some regret because I, along with almost every other graduate student, never contemplated such a thing when I was in graduate school. I fell into the study of higher education. It grew out of my concern for the workplace, but only when I tried to understand what was around me did I realize that I had to learn how we got here. And how we got here was the long, complicated, messy path. But I tell every audience that I speak to about higher education, and I will now tell this one, that if we learn how we got here, we can do a much better job of facing the problems that we confront now that we are here.

[00:15:07] **Catherine Ross:** Yes. And this sort of leads into our next question, which is, you're saying that this training for teaching grad students is even more important today than it has ever been in the history of institutions. So why do you feel like now really is the time to do this?

[00:15:29] **Len Cassuto:** Well, it relates to the complexity of outcomes. for graduate students in today's graduate school, particularly in the arts and sciences. Once upon a time, long, long ago, uh, I'm not going to say in a galaxy far, far away because it was this galaxy. But in the 1960s, there was an academic job that was waiting for anybody who could finish a PhD. There were so many such jobs that, uh, one could even choose what part of the country one wanted to work in. It was a time of extraordinary expansion of the higher ed sector, and it was a uniquely abundant time.

[00:16:08] One particular statistic, and a tip of the hat to Louis Menand for coming up with this one, there were more professorships created during the single decade of the 1960s than in the more than 300 years of American academia altogether leading up to that decade. So The number of people who were being socialized into American academia during the 1960s was enormous. And for them, the normal idea, the normative state was you finish a PhD, you get a professorship. So it took quite a while. For that generation and the generations above it and also below it to realize that that decade of the

1960s was not normative, but rather highly anomalous and that the period leading up to the 60s and especially the contraction that followed.

[00:17:05] We're much more typical. The contraction that followed the 1960s when there was no longer a professorship waiting for anybody who could finish a PhD, that contraction grew over time, that is tightened over time. In 2008, with the financial crash, the academia had a more or less jobless recovery. There were, there have been some blips, but if we look at the curve from the 1970s through leading up to the present day, we are seeing a workplace that has become more and more straightened as academic jobs have become harder and harder to come by.

[00:17:48] So the idea that graduate school is simply an apprenticeship for a would-be faculty member, it was never a particularly tenable way to teach graduate school with the exception of that one decade. But it is a particularly untenable approach now because it does a great disrespect to the actual outcomes that our graduate students are going to face, that they're going to wind up in. If we simply run numbers, in the new PhD, the opening riff talks about an imaginary cohort of eight graduate students sitting around a table. It's their first day of graduate school. And so the eight PhD students. And if we look at those eight people, that if we use pre-COVID numbers—the post-COVID numbers, which are not fully collected yet, they are not gonna be better, I think we know that—pre-COVID numbers about half of those eight aren't even going to finish the PhD. degree. So out of the four who don't finish, two of them will leave early, which is not a disgrace because graduate school is a highly specialized activity and some people think that it's for them and then they arrive and they discover that it isn't. And that's no disrespect on either side.

[00:19:06] It's the job of the program to provide an easy off ramp for those people. But, the remaining two who don't finish are typically late stage finishers, and that's an ethical failure on the part of programs because if we allow graduate students to reach the late stages, we should be designing paths to completion, and we should have very few examples of late stage attrition, and yet we have, uh, fully 25 percent of cohorts on average nationwide. That's the subject of another podcast, but so four out of those eight are not going to finish. Out of the remaining four—and again, pre-covid numbers—approximately half of those are going to get some kind of academic job.

[00:19:51] **Catherine Ross:** So two.

[00:19:52] **Len Cassuto:** Yes, two out of eight. I'm not saying professorships either.

[00:19:55] **Catherine Ross:** Right.

[00:19:56] **Len Cassuto:** Professorships are on the decline, but some kind of full-time work on the teaching side of things. of the ball. So and out of those two who get full-time teaching jobs, something less than one of those two is going to get a job at a research-first university, research-centered university that is more or less like the one in which we find them in that, in this open, in the opening of this thought experiment waiting to start graduate school. So that is, less than one out of those eight is going to get a job that resembles the job of the teacher who's going to enter that room and start teaching those eight people at the beginning of this thought experiment. And yet, the curriculum of graduate programs is overwhelmingly geared toward the experience of that less than one person. Never mind that 75 percent of those eight people are not going to wind up in academia, on average. There isn't an acknowledgment of that diversity of outcomes. I'm going to say that there's more such acknowledgment now than there used to be, but there's not nearly enough. And if we're going to teach graduate students in a student-centered way, that is, if we're going to ask, what do our students need from us? And how are we going to prepare them for the outcomes that they are most likely to face, including academia, I want to say. Because the academic content, the academic career path, is not one that we should disrespect, otherwise we'd put ourselves out of business. But if we're going to teach from the idea that our students need certain things from this experience, in order for them to have happy, fulfilling, and productive lives, then we're going to have to do it differently than we're doing it. And we're going to have to do it more complexly than we're doing it. And so the teaching of graduate school, then, should involve an acknowledgment of the greater complexity of student centered education than it does. And that is what I mean when I say that The need to train graduate students for the outcomes that they're going to face is more important today than it ever has been because it's more complicated today and, uh, the urgency of the need has only increased over time.

[00:22:21] **Catherine Ross:** That's pretty powerful stuff, I think. Of course, you and I tend to agree on many of these things. But I think now you've set the stage, we have to tell people your four recommendations to break this cycle. that you've just described so, so well, and so thoroughly. So what are those four recommendations to make this kind of change that you've just talked about?

[00:22:51] **Len Cassuto:** Well, I have a lot of recommendations. We don't need to necessarily limit ourselves to just four. I modestly believe that there's no more, no more important thing that we should be doing today than trying to reform, not to say overhaul. I don't want to blow up the world here. I want to reform a practice which has done a lot of good over time, but is unexamined in ways that it needs to be examined.

[00:23:17] **Catherine Ross:** Yes.

[00:23:18] **Len Cassuto:** So I talk in the article that we're using as the locus for this discussion. I talk about something that I call the beach ball method of teaching a graduate seminar, and I don't mean this is a compliment, and I have been in seminars that run on, according to what I call, this beach ball method, where the students do the reading and the professor walks in and says: "so, well, what do you think?" And the students are expected then to carry the discussion like a crowd at a concert, bouncing a beach ball back and forth, waiting in the period before the music starts. It puts everything on the students. That's the first thing. And the second and perhaps arguably more important problem with this is that there is, there's no sense of direction to it.

[00:24:06] Nobody is imposing a goal on this, this beach ball bouncing activity, where are we going here? Well, the beach ball doesn't know where it's going. And what's the goal of this discussion? The professor doesn't walk in with one. The students certainly don't have one. And so the two hours pass and the professor says: "Well? Thanks. See you next week." And there's too much graduate teaching that relies on students to impose an order that they're not in a position to impose. It's fine to rely on students in a seminar discussion. You can expect them to be prepared, and you can expect them to be able to answer questions that are posed.

[00:24:51] That's the reasonable contract that sets up an expectation. But the expectation is mutual. The students have a right to expect that the teacher is going to come in with a plan. We've heard the term lesson plan before, and yet I think too many academics think of lesson plans as something that K through 12

teachers need, and that not just 13 through 16, but graduate teachers, why would they need such a thing? Well, because graduate students are learners too, and they're learners who have particular needs. So among the other practices that I'm gonna suggest here, every campus has people who are good at different kinds of things. There are good graduate teachers out there, and they are, and, and there are graduate teachers who are considerate of the needs of their students.

[00:25:39] I'm suggesting that they're not simply a minority, but they're a minority whose efforts are going unremarked upon and unrecognized. So if we are to try to reform a practice which is mired in unexamined buried assumptions, then the people on any campus need to identify the practitioners, the people who are engaging in best practice and allow them to become more visible so that they can be a source of wisdom, not simply lore, but of a kind of codified practice that goes forward because teaching's a skill. If it's going to be taught as a skill, then we need to be able to identify the people who are good at that and put them in a position where they can teach what they know. So that's another resource here. And the creation of resources is something that I think is profoundly important to any kind of reform practice that's going to be friendly and collegial. Reform that happens at the, at the tip of a spear, where somebody comes and says, you have to do something, do this thing differently or else, that's not likely to lead to reform in a faculty guild practice that's going to stick, because people will simply push back.

[00:27:10] You want to create consensus around a new set of assumptions and a new set of practices that can serve the need of students. So here's another idea. If you want to know what your students need—and this is a, I think, a particularly revolutionary notion that I'm about to mention for faculty members at universities—if you want to think about what your students—in this case, your graduate students—need, consider asking them.

[00:27:40] **Catherine Ross:** What a radical idea.

[00:27:43] **Len Cassuto:** It's amazing. It took years for me to come up with it. But that's because as part of my training, I was never asked, when I was a student, what might work for me. And when I was socialized into graduate teaching, it follows that I was in no way encouraged to consult with my students about what their needs might be so that I could try to teach to those needs.

[00:28:07] That if we want to become better graduate teachers and create a, uh, a teaching and learning community that's going to serve all of, all of its members, then we need to bring all of its members into a conversation because, well, what do you know? Students, they don't know every single thing that they need, but they know some of what they need and some of what they know, we don't know. And if we can get, if we can get into a place where we can learn the things we need to know in order to reform our practice, we'll be better off.

[00:28:41] **Catherine Ross:** I love that. I think that's one of the most powerful ideas that often gets overlooked in any kind of change in teaching. Is, like, have you talked to your students? And if you've made changes, have you talked to your students about how those changes are impacting them? How they're feeling about their learning? Right? To always be having these conversations, even if they're informal. You can learn so much when you ask your students what their experience is, and what they feel like would help them learn better.

[00:29:20] I think that's a really good ending point for us to just leave that sort of front and center. Talk to your students, regardless of what your role is in your department and who you're teaching. Talk to your students and learn more about who they are and what they need and what's happening in their lives.

[00:29:42] **Len Cassuto:** And I will say, too, that this is part of a larger idea, which is to create a culture. Departments are already cultures. Programs are already cultures. Graduate schools are already cultures. Well, if that culture is going to become student-centered, Then the students have to be part of it.

[00:30:00] **Catherine Ross:** Excellent. Closing the loop there. Thank you. Thank you so much, Len. We're so grateful that you were willing to participate in this eighth season of Dead Ideas.

[00:30:11] **Len Cassuto:** It was great to be here.

[00:30:13] **Catherine Ross:** Thanks.

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