

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning

Season 9, Episode 1: A Pedagogy of Kindness with Cate Denial

Center for Teaching and Learning

[00:00:00] **Amanda Irvin:** Hello, and welcome to Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning, a higher education podcast from the Center for Teaching and Learning at Columbia University. I'm Amanda Irvin, the Center's new executive director. Catherine Ross has passed the baton to me, and I'm excited to be your host. In this podcast series, we explore dead ideas in teaching and learning,

[00:00:28] or beliefs that despite being untrue, continue to shape educational systems and practices. These outdated notions, as Diane Pike described, perpetuate the “tyranny of dead ideas.” Join us as we challenge these misconceptions and explore innovative approaches to higher education. Welcome everyone. I am speaking today with Dr. Cate Denial. Cate is the Bright Distinguished Professor of American History and Director of The Bright Institute at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. Cate consults on teaching in higher education with individuals, departments, and institutions in the U.S., U.K., Ireland, Canada, and Australia.

[00:01:12] Her new book, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, is now available from the University of Oklahoma Press. Her historical research has examined the early 19th century experience of pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing in upper Midwestern Ojibwe and missionary cultures, research that grew from Cate's previous book, *Making Marriage: Husbands, Wives, and the American State in Dakota and Ojibwe Country*.

[00:01:38] Greetings, Cate, and welcome to the Dead Ideas podcast. I am so delighted to be talking with you today.

[00:01:45] **Cate Denial:** Well, thank you for having me. I'm delighted to be here.

[00:01:49] **Amanda Irvin:** So, before we jump in to talking about your fantastic book and the theme of this season's Dead Ideas podcast. I'm going to set the stage a little bit for our listeners, especially since this is our very first episode.

[00:02:03] In this season of Dead Ideas, we're exploring the dead idea that the world outside of the classroom doesn't or shouldn't influence the world inside the classroom. This idea that students are exclusively intellectual beings when they step across the threshold physically or virtually of the classroom space.

[00:02:22] It's been my experience in years of working in teaching centers and consulting with faculty in higher ed and I have come to appreciate how pervasive this dead idea can be despite all of the important research and educational development work that demonstrates that when we enter the classroom, instructors and students alike bring with them all of their experiences and challenges and identities.

[00:02:44] We don't check those things at the door. So, Cate, your brilliant, brave new book, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, seems like the very perfect way to begin our new season. Because you seem to argue, and we'll talk about this, but you seem to argue page after page of the strength and capacity instructors and students gain when they meet each other as whole human beings. So I'm really excited.

[00:03:06] **Cate Denial:** Great.

[00:03:07] **Amanda Irvin:** Great. So, let's dive in with question number one, which is going to give you a chance to tell our listeners a little bit about your book. Could you give us an overview of *A Pedagogy of Kindness*? In the introduction, you framed the book as an invitation, an opportunity to accompany you on your own pedagogical evolution.

[00:03:30] Would you like to tell folks a little bit more about this invitation?

[00:03:33] **Cate Denial:** Yeah, so pedagogy of kindness came out of my experiences learning to be a better teacher. As a graduate student, I didn't have the best training in how to be a good instructor in a higher ed classroom. And I had to learn on the job as I went.

[00:03:51] And then even when I thought I was really great at my job, I went to the digital pedagogy lab in Virginia in 2017, and was asked a whole host of questions about my pedagogy that I had not considered before, and that was really an aha moment for me in terms of thinking about my teaching in a new way. So this book is sort of the culmination of all of those years of learning on the job and then the aha moment and experimenting with my teaching since then.

[00:04:21] So, *A Pedagogy of Kindness* is made up of three things. It's made up of attention to justice, believing in students, and believing students. And the book takes on each of those three things in slightly different ways in chapters that look at the syllabus, that look at assignments, that look at being kind to ourselves, and look at what we're doing inside the classroom.

[00:04:45] **Amanda Irvin:** Thank you so much. That's, that's a great overview. And I loved your description of an aha moment. Um, I feel like when we talk with educators, maybe we have a series of aha moments over the course of our careers, but there seems to be at least one that we're like, "Oh, there's a different way I could approach this or re-see myself as an instructor or re-see the way I partner with students."

[00:05:10] So yeah. Thank you for that. So you mentioned that there is a discussion of the syllabus and it just happened to be one of my favorite chapters in *A Pedagogy of Kindness*. You open by asking readers to consider, and this is a quote for everybody who's listening at home: "who is the student you're imagining as you write?"

[00:05:34] And I love this question because it asks readers to reflect on their assumptions about students in their courses. And then asks them to consider how the syllabus document invites students into the learning experience or maybe doesn't invite them into that learning experience. And the syllabus is just so important.

[00:05:53] It's sometimes a document that students interact with before they ever even come into the course. A lot of institutions ask faculty to post them online, you know. So could you talk a little bit more about how you see the syllabus document functioning as another invitation, but this time between instructors and students?

[00:06:15] **Cate Denial:** So the syllabus is one of the most important things that we write as teachers because it is this invitation into a relationship between students and ourselves. And it sets the terms of those relationships in really fundamental terms. So when at Digital Pedagogy Lab, I was asked, "who is the student you're imagining as you write?"

[00:06:38] I had to sort of step back from who I thought I was writing to, which were the students who were all around me and who I really loved interacting with and actually see what my words, my phrasing, my language choice, my design choices were actually communicating to those students. And what I found was that the student I was writing to was someone I didn't trust.

[00:07:02] It was someone who I thought was going to mess up. And my syllabus was a sort of quasi-legalistic document, where I tried to anticipate exactly where someone might go wrong and then outline the consequences of doing the wrong thing. That's a terrible way to write a syllabus. Because students get that sense from you of distance, of being this sort of distant authoritarian figure of the fact that you don't have confidence in them.

[00:07:31] And writing a syllabus that actually shows you do trust them and that you are invested in them is a radically different proposition. So, the invitation to my students in my new syllabus is, you belong, right? Come into this space, let's make a learning community together. You belong here. So that's done in lots of ways.

[00:07:53] My language choices are completely different. Small things like, I have a welcome on my syllabus now. I introduce myself and I say what my pronouns are to model pronoun use, so I don't require my students to tell me what their pronouns are, but model that I think it's important. I also then talk about my email policy, for example, very early on, but that is so that my students know I am reachable and I am approachable. And also I explained that I take time off from email. I have boundaries, right? So from the very beginning of the document, we're sort of building this sense of relationship together.

[00:08:33] **Amanda Irvin:** I love that. Thank you so much. I think when you write a syllabus document, or this is what I'm sort of taking away from what you just said, it's helpful if you imagine the people who are reading it, the students, as real people who are going to partner with you in this learning process, right?

[00:08:53] And to do that, they have to be real people. But you too, as an instructor, have to show up as a real person with things like boundaries and things like, you know, welcome and like, who are you and how do you find yourself in this classroom? I think, you know, it creates an environment to echo something that you said that fosters a sense of belonging for people, because when they can see you in the space, they can see themselves in the space, they show up as real human beings.

[00:09:22] And learning is so relational.

[00:09:24] **Cate Denial:** Exactly. Yeah.

[00:09:26] **Amanda Irvin:** Um, so the next question we have taken this idea perhaps a little further and it's one I'm really excited to talk about with you. So throughout your book, you advocate for students and instructors as whole

people. Uh, at one point you even say, and again, this is a direct quote because it's so well put.

[00:09:48] "Our students are not brains in jars, but fully realized human beings with multiple claims on their time, energy, and resources, emotional, physical, and financial." I love this because it just seems to be so plain to you that instructors and students alike bring with them their experiences and challenges and identities to learning.

[00:10:11] And so why do you think to go back to a little early in our episode, why do you think this dead idea persists, this conception as students as exclusively intellectual beings?

[00:10:25] **Cate Denial:** I think part of what is going on is the lack of really good training for so many people entering higher ed as instructors. So my experience is not uncommon.

[00:10:37] The idea that you sort of show up as a newly-minted BA, right? And then you step into a classroom at the beginning of your graduate career and suddenly you're the authority at the front of the room. And nobody's really preparing you for that. And so you have to do a lot of on the job training. There are places that do a wonderful job of training people to step into that space and feel confident in it.

[00:11:04] But for most people, that's not what happens. So then it becomes really kind of easy for people to say, I'm just going to deal with the intellects in front of me. We're just going to think about the people as brain in jars, right? So that it's less frightening. It is more controllable. It is something that we feel like we can actually step up and meet.

[00:11:28] Whereas, if we think about complexity and the messiness of ourselves and our students, it can feel overwhelming very quickly. I also think that sometimes we create, as faculty and instructional staff, policies and procedures that sort of distance students from us in a way that's not helpful. So boundaries are incredibly helpful.

[00:11:51] Everyone should have a marvelous set of boundaries at all times. But I think that in the way that we write things like our syllabi and our assignments, the language that we use, the ideas that we put forth, the sort of vision we have of who students are that's captured in those documents. It really can alienate students from us without us really understanding that that's what we're doing.

[00:12:17] So in much the same way that I talked about the syllabus and having to really step back and realize who I was writing to and what I was doing with the words that I was choosing. That's something you can do with all of the documents that you produce for any given class. So that you are welcoming students and you're welcoming that lovely messiness into that space.

[00:12:39] So, we are not dealing with those brains in jars, but we're actually dealing with whole human beings, including ourselves as whole human beings too.

[00:12:50] **Amanda Irvin:** So, it sounds like one of the takeaways is to embrace, embrace the messy, because learning is a messy process too. If only my learning through life were linear, my goodness, um, but it doesn't, at least for me, has never worked that way and I know that that's borne out in a lot of research.

[00:13:07] It's recursive and it's challenging and it's frustrating and, you know, growth gets born out of that frustration and in order to engage in the messy process of learning, sometimes we have to show up as messy individual who, you know, are tired and don't have a lot of time, or we're juggling multiple classes.

[00:13:27] Um, I, I think that you are right. Wouldn't it be seductively easy to imagine that, oh, I, all I have to worry about is the intellectual component, right?

[00:13:37] **Cate Denial:** Yeah.

[00:13:38] **Amanda Irvin:** Yeah. That the rest of it is, is, you know, something that can, can be left outside.

[00:13:43] **Cate Denial:** And I think we do ourselves a disservice when we think that way, right, that we do our own messiness a disservice.

[00:13:50] And most of us are going through enormous life changes as we move through our careers as instructors, right? You arrive as a new person, you arrive with a brand-new career ahead of you, you're learning so many things so fast, it's overwhelming. And to pretend that you are just some dispassionate brain in a jar yourself is not going to help you in that situation, right?

[00:14:15] And then you have life events, you have children, you have other kin responsibilities, you have aging caregivers that you must be a caregiver to.

There are all the financial challenges of our chosen careers, right? All of these things are going to take up energy and brain space. And we do ourselves a disservice when we don't allow ourselves to take those things into account.

[00:14:40] **Amanda Irvin:** No, I completely agree. I completely agree. I remember feeling very empowered when I realized that I could show up as a whole person to with boundaries. I'm a big fan of boundaries myself. Um, but then also with the knowledge that I didn't have to manage all of this alone, that there were lots of resources for students that I could connect them to, like, I, I don't know, I, I sometimes or more than sometimes talk to faculty or instructors who are like, well, I, I'm not really qualified to help somebody navigate their lives and further our boundaries to how much I can extend myself.

[00:15:24] You know, we're not therapists, we're not social workers. All of these things, but that the universities can offer support in lots of different ways and we can help connect. And I remember feeling very relieved and empowered that there were some other resources that we could use to support students, right?

[00:15:42] Because we, we are in class with students and we are facilitating these learning experiences, but we're not doing it in a vacuum, right? And I think that is the other part of the point is that there's a whole, a whole world out there.

[00:15:55] **Cate Denial:** I think that's exactly right.

[00:15:56] **Amanda Irvin:** Yeah. Thank you. So we were just talking about boundaries. It sounds like we're both big fans. You have a great discussion of boundaries in your book, and you make a point to remind readers that we have to acknowledge and plan for the unexpected, that, that there will always be more to do than there is time to do it in. And that these limits don't naturally occur.

[00:16:21] We have to create them. So do you have suggestions for instructors who are eager to support students, but who also feel like they need to protect their own time or their own peace?

[00:16:34] **Cate Denial:** I do. And as I have traveled around the country talking to people about a pedagogy of kindness, I have learned so much from other, uh, faculty and instructional staff who are wrestling with many of the same problems we all face, right?

[00:16:50] So, I have some places that people could start. The first, I think, is to set some really strict email hours. Those email hours are the hours when your students can reasonably expect a reply from you. But outside of those hours, of course, they can write you, and they can let you know what they need, but you may not return to your inbox until, say, the next morning, right?

[00:17:15] That is an eminently reasonable limit to put on your time. I also think that having a day away from email altogether is so important so that we can recharge, we can refill our own resources. For some people that's not manageable because of many of the responsibilities that they juggle. So make sure you're taking an afternoon or a whole morning.

[00:17:38] Or take the little notification off your phone that tells you that there are emails coming in, so you can look them up if you want to, but you're not constantly being pinged to go and think about, Do I answer? Do I not answer? What, what am I going to do? I also think that taking time to eat, so take time for lunch or take time for dinner, whatever works with the schedule that you have, is so important.

[00:18:04] And this only really came home to me after I was diagnosed with diabetes a couple of years ago. Before then, I had subsisted on string cheese and mini-Snickers bars all day, every day that I was in my office. And when I finally sort of got, when I got this diagnosis, I realized I was going to have to take much better care of myself and be much more intentional about the way that I fueled my body.

[00:18:30] And then I realized, should we all be doing this? And it shouldn't take a diabetes diagnosis for someone to figure this out. So I really encourage people to put a meal on their calendar and make it a non-negotiable appointment with themselves. Do not schedule meetings over that time. Do not say you will be in your office and students can stop by. However, much time you need to actually fuel yourself, please take it.

[00:18:56] I also think that a good boundary is thinking about the energy that you have in a day and that that is a finite resource. So for those amongst us who have lengthy commutes, I always say, consider that part of your work day. You have, let's say, randomly eight hours of being on and being energetic to devote every day.

[00:19:17] Well, if you are spending an hour on the train or the bus or in traffic, then an hour of your energy is gone. And so it's not fair to ourselves to then be like, okay, the eight hours starts once I get to work, right? You're actually using

up your resources before then. One of the biggest tips I give people is to build in flex days in their syllabus.

[00:19:40] So at the end of my syllabi, I always have a couple of days that just say flexible day. What you call them is entirely up to you. Those are days I can move around my calendar as I need to. Maybe my students don't quite grasp a concept on the first try and we need to go at it again. Maybe we had a fantastic conversation and we want to keep going.

[00:20:04] Maybe we need some in class workshop time on a particular thing. Maybe we all need a mental health day. Whatever it is, I can move one of those days into place in my syllabus. And they're especially useful if I get sick, because then I'm not running to catch up and trying to squeeze everything into the remaining calendar days.

[00:20:25] I already have these flex days available to me. And the last thing that I tell people is that community is so, so important. Now it might be that what community sustains you is not on your campus. It might not be your department. It might be that it is other people who teach in very different places to you.

[00:20:49] But finding a community that sustains you and energizes you and that you can turn to is one of the most important things I think we all need. Isolation is crushing. And so one of the things that I have in the book are some suggestions for how you find that community and how you find that community even if you're someone who really needs to find that community online for any kind of reason, right?

[00:21:17] There are lots and lots of ways to reach out, to find opportunities to volunteer or opportunities to brainstorm or discuss books or whatever it is that will bring you together with other people. But that community component is really, really important.

[00:21:32] **Amanda Irvin:** Cate, thank you so much. Those are fantastic places to start.

[00:21:36] And I will confess that after reading your book, I added times to eat lunch on my calendar, and then over the last couple of weeks, I've gotten really bad at allowing people to schedule over them, and now I'm going to go back and protect that time.

[00:21:55] Okay, so we are nearing the end of our time together, and Cate, I cannot thank you enough for being so generous and gracious with your time and expertise. Your book is one of my favorite things that I've read in, in this year and I, I meant what I said at the very beginning, it feels very brave and I think it might inspire some, some bravery and kindness among the teaching community.

[00:22:22] So we are very grateful for your participation in our ninth season of Dead Ideas and thank you so much for joining us today.

[00:22:30] **Cate Denial:** Well, thank you so much for the invitation. I had such a great time being in conversation with you today.

[00:22:37] **Amanda Irvin:** Me too. Bye-bye.

[00:22:40] **Cate Denial:** Bye.

[00:22:43] **Amanda Irvin:** If you've enjoyed this podcast, please review our website where you can find any resources mentioned in this 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, Michael Brown, and Sarah Carswell.

[00:23:08] Our theme music is *In the Lab* by Immersive Music.