

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning

Season 9, Episode 3: How to Rebuild a Broken Connection with Students with Kristi Rudenga

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 Executive Director. In this podcast series, we explore dead ideas in teaching and learning, 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 These outdated notions, as Diane Pike described, perpetuate "the tyranny of dead ideas."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.

[00:00:44] Welcome, everyone. I'm speaking today with Dr. Kristi Rudenga. Kristi Rudenga is the director of Notre Dame Learning's Kaneb Center for Teaching Excellence, as well as a teaching professor. She oversees the Kaneb Center team and is responsible for the center's strategy, partnerships, and initiatives, including the Notre Dame Inclusive Teaching Academy, Kaneb Center Course Design Academy, and Foundational Course Transformation Academy. She also consults with instructors on pedagogical approaches and facilitates seminar series and workshops on teaching and mentoring. Kristi teaches courses like food in the brain, pedagogy and practice in the college classroom, and the art and science of learning. She writes about pedagogy for The Chronicle of Higher Education. She served on the core committee of the POD Network, the national organization supporting educational development.

[00:01:42] Before coming to Notre Dame, she was Associate Director and Science Education Specialist at the Yale Teaching Center. She earned her PhD in Neuroscience from Yale University, studying central brain representation of taste and food reward. Welcome to our Dead Ideas Podcast, Kristi. I am so delighted to be talking with you today.

[00:02:03] **Kristi Rudenga:** Thank you. I'm so excited to be here.

[00:02:04] **Amanda Irvin:** So as we get started, I'm going to give a brief reminder to our listeners that on this season of Dead Ideas, we're exploring the

ways instructors can build community and a sense of belonging with students by confronting the dead idea that the world, quote unquote, outside of the classroom doesn't or shouldn't influence the world inside the classroom. And I am delighted to be chatting with you today because you have a recent article in The Chronicle of Higher Education that discusses ways to connect with students, or rather, ways to repair disconnection. And I don't want to spoil anything, but it seems like the way to repair disconnection with students is to get personal, to connect with them as human beings.

[00:02:45] So without further ado, why don't we dive in?

[00:02:48] **Kristi Rudenga:** Great. Yeah.

[00:02:50] **Amanda Irvin:** Kristi, your recent article is titled, "How to Rebuild a Broken Connection with Students." And you talk about how intergenerational misunderstanding isn't anything new, but that the past five years of tumult have supercharged the sense of disconnection. Could you talk a little bit about what you see happening in higher education right now?

[00:03:11] **Kristi Rudenga:** Sure. And I think one thing that's important to recognize is that everyone in higher ed, faculty and students and administrators have been through such a wild ride in the past five years. It's hard to believe, but was less than five years ago that we all had this forced overhaul and suddenly had to move everything online in the middle of the semester, in the middle of a traumatic pandemic, and then proceeded to have to figure out how to teach in, we called it "dual mode" or "high flex" with students in and out of quarantine, all overlaid by this national reckoning with racial disparities. And just as people started to realize just how burnt-out they were from all of that, AI swooped in and just upended everything that we do all over again. Honestly, it's exhausting just to think about all that's happened in the last few years.

[00:04:12] So none of us, again, not faculty, not students, were not coming into this year, as our best selves. And what's really struck me in the past year or so has been how many of the conversations I've had with faculty at Notre Dame, with faculty elsewhere, with educational developers elsewhere, have this theme of disconnection.

[00:04:41] So basically, if someone doesn't want to come in and talk about AI and their assignments, they want to talk about how distant their students seem. And I think the thing that sticks with me most from that is the tone of those conversations, which tends to be just sort of. sad and flabbergasted because

these are folks who have been teaching for a long time, are really successful at it.

[00:05:10] They work so hard to reach their students. They've historically been great at it, and they just feel like they've reached the end of everything they know how to do and are kind of throwing up their hands, but in a really heartbroken way. So on the other side, We've seen students who got accustomed to isolation and interacting through their screens.

[00:05:32] And obviously, plenty of people have written and thought a lot about that. And simultaneously, those same students are under more pressure every year to just achieve more and more in college, to the point where they kind of have to prioritize efficiency and be very strategic with their time. In a student's mind, if listening to my lecture doesn't seem like a good time investment, then yeah, they're going to work on their other homework during that time.

[00:06:07] It seems like so many students are treating their college coursework as an optimization problem. And to be fair, that's exactly what they have been taught and trained to do, and exactly what they are rewarded for doing in the currency of grades that we've set up for them. And so that does not lead students to come into class ready to connect.

[00:06:34] And then as another layer, this generation of students, the now traditionally aged college students, grew up being told to prioritize their mental health and to ask for help when they need it and ask for what they need to succeed, which is in many ways beautiful. But now they're navigating the question of how that plays out in adulthood.

[00:06:58] Well, many of us mid or late career faculty, especially, grew up with the mentality where you, you tough it out and you figure it out and you do it on your own. And even if we see value in this kind of newer take on mental health and asking for help, it's unfamiliar territory to us. And it's not always handled well.

[00:07:21] And it's just very, very easy to grumble about. So I think with all of those things, it's easy to feel so discouraged and disillusioned about what it means to teach in higher ed right now. And as trite as it sounds, I really think that one antidote to that disillusionment is to find ways to foster human connection with students.

[00:07:46] Because if we can just recognize each other's humanity and connect in real ways, even if they're very small, that just makes teaching feel different. It

makes learning feel different and it can give us renewed purpose and honestly renewed enjoyment in our teaching.

[00:08:06] **Amanda Irvin:** I appreciate your reminder of an extension of empathy for students. That they are, because I, I have seen just some recent posts or articles come out about how students just aren't reading or students just don't know how to write anymore, that they're not engaged in the work of doing a discipline in the way that, you know, perhaps previous generations might have been, but you're correct.

[00:08:36] They're optimizing their time. It's exactly what they've been trained to do, like you said. One of the reminders that I liked a lot about what you said was that if your lecture doesn't seem like a good investment of time, they're going to strategically do something else during that time, which is a nice reminder to be transparent with students about why we're doing what we're doing to make lectures something that's, it's very clear what the value added is.

[00:09:05] **Kristi Rudenga:** Yes, very much so. Yeah, I think it's important to remember that, you know, students are doing what they've been trained to do, and we're doing what we've been trained to do. And no one is, in broad strokes, no one is coming into this with ill will trying to be rude to the other party. But, what we've been trained to do and what we're trying to do just aren't really matching up at the moment.

[00:09:36] **Amanda Irvin:** It seems to be a lesson in learning how to meet each other where we are.

[00:09:40] **Kristi Rudenga:** Exactly.

[00:09:42] **Amanda Irvin:** Both sides. So speaking of meeting each other where we are, you offered a wealth, shall I say, of practical and simple strategies for faculty to consider. And we'll talk about some of them in a minute. It was everything from learning students' names, which seems so basic but can be so fundamentally transformative for students when they realize you know their name, to inviting students to a community meal or even asking them how they feel about the class.

[00:10:15] Do you have a favorite? Would you like to share some of your favorite ways to help build connections with students?

[00:10:23] **Kristi Rudenga:** I have lots of favorites. So one thing that I feel very strongly about in every class, no matter the size, no matter the discipline,

no matter the level, is finding ways to get every student to open their mouth and say something to another human in the classroom, at least within small groups, sometime fairly early in every single class period. I think it really helps—well, it does a lot of things. It helps to ground people in the room and connect them with each other and connect them with the material, and I think it helps to signal that if I'm the professor, I'm not just here to transmit information from my notes into their notes, that we're here to do this thing together that learn and work as humans in the same space with each other. So that can take a lot of forms. Even just like a quick think-pair-share activity, I think, transforms a classroom, honestly, compared to just straight lecture with no interruption.

[00:11:35] For smaller classes, one of my favorite strategies that helps me overcome my natural introvert tendency to avoid small talk at all costs is to use name tents. And I wrote about this in the article, but I think from a slightly different angle. But one of the things that this really helps me with. to use name tents and hand them out to each individual student every day of class and then collect them at the end of class.

[00:12:06] That really holds me accountable to at least saying, good morning, Amanda. If nothing else, I'm going to say good morning to you by name and hand you your name tent and sometimes chat a little further with the student. But that keeps me from kind of tucking myself behind the podium to stay safe from small talk.

[00:12:27] And then, another favorite, I think, is this inviting students to my home to have dinner as a class. And I want to note that I'm very aware of all the layers of privilege that go into making that possible. I live close to campus. I have a family in that home. We have space in the house or yard for groups of students.

[00:12:53] So, I'm very aware that this isn't something that's easy for everyone to do, but I try to make a habit of it whenever possible because I always enjoy the chance to see students in a totally different environment and they can sometimes be pretty different people or pretty different versions of themselves in my backyard, jumping on the trampoline with my kids than they are sitting in a classroom. But most of all, I'm just blown away by the warmth among classmates in subsequent days of class after having them over for a meal. It's just a consistent thing that I observe from semester to semester that once they've spent this time together in a purely social way, especially in a home environment, they're just, tend to laugh more easily and kind of share an easier rapport throughout the class period. I, I think of one particular experience with a student who had been, you know, smart, but very standoffish and reserved all

semester long. It was tough to, to get her to talk other than when she absolutely had to. And she kind of accidentally showed up before any of her classmates did.

[00:14:10] She showed up right on time for this cookout and everyone else was a little late. So she and I spent some time just chopping vegetables together in my kitchen and chatted about her family and her hometown. And she was this completely different kid in subsequent days of class. Um, it was just like there had been some wall there, and she established some kind of trust or something and that wall came down.

[00:14:37] So seeing what it can do to spend time connecting outside of class with nothing to do with the course material has been really, really powerful for me. And I think so many of these strategies, and we could go all day, I love to spout teaching strategies, but so many of them are just about laying the groundwork for that human connection and obviously students have to meet us in that space.

[00:15:07] They have to do their part in this. But it is up to us to be the adults in the room and set up those conditions for human connection to happen and to take that first step of reaching out to students for that connection.

[00:15:22] **Amanda Irvin:** Yeah, absolutely. I mean, there are, we could have a whole podcast season about how power dynamics manifest themselves in a classroom community, especially trying to build a sense of belonging among students and connection between peers or connection between instructor and peers.

[00:15:43] But, a lot of it comes down to the instructor saying—to making the first step to taking the first step.

[00:15:49] **Kristi Rudenga:** Absolutely.

[00:15:50] **Amanda Irvin:** I appreciate you talking about how the strategies have to work for you. Like there are things that you know about yourself. Um, yes, perhaps consider yourself to be an introvert. So you have latched onto a strategy that helps you connect with students and not I think you said hide behind the podium, or invite students to your house for a meal. I can imagine, you know, those of us in the city with small apartments, um, meeting students in the park or having, you know, having a class meet in a different location, like outside can foster those more informal moments between students or between students and instructor. It's such a light lift, uh, but small change, big impact.

[00:16:37] **Kristi Rudenga:** Right. Exactly. Yeah.

[00:16:39] **Amanda Irvin:** This is, this is all so good, Kristi. And I know that we mentioned this when we first started talking today. But all of these strategies and this conversation is reinforcing this idea that connecting with students as human beings is the way forward. It's the way to repair any kind of disconnection that might have happened as a result of the pandemic or generational differences are just feeling burnout of having to adapt to another thing that's happening on our campus, like artificial intelligence, for example. And there's, there's something that you said in the article that I'm hoping we can, we can close with, and this is a quote that I'll read for our listeners at home.

[00:17:26] You said, "human connection is essential, both for your own job satisfaction and as an important precursor to student learning." And I happen to personally and professionally agree with you. I'm hoping we could talk a little bit about why human connection seems so key to the learning process and our enjoyment in it.

[00:17:50] **Kristi Rudenga:** Yeah, this is a question that's been on my mind a lot lately. I, I believe very, very strongly that, as you said, human connection is the way forward here. And I've been trying to articulate the ways that that matters in a world where you can learn a lot online and from books. And I think it comes down to a couple of different things.

[00:18:16] And one piece of this is from cognitive science, which tells us that students learn best when they are engaged and alert, but not overly stressed. And I think when we're learning in an environment of human connection, if we're students are working on a problem with their neighbor or sharing a laugh with their professor, that supports the level of engagement and alertness that it takes to learn and can simultaneously mitigate the stress of even very, very challenging topics.

[00:18:53] So when a classroom is rich in human connection, that really does lay the groundwork for learning in that way. Another thing we know is that humans learn skills, especially through repetition with feedback, which is great, but it turns out that feedback very often comes with feelings, sometimes a lot of feelings, sometimes challenging ones.

[00:19:18] And in order to actually learn from that feedback, we have to have our defenses down a little bit and trust that the feedback is coming from a reliable and trustworthy source. So if you're a student and you can connect with the person who's teaching you and giving you feedback and trust that they want

the best for you and they are here to help you learn, that can bring down a lot of the psychological barriers that might otherwise stand in the way of meaningful learning.

[00:19:50] And finally, eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds, and really maybe all of us to some extent, are still in the process of solidifying their prefrontal cortex and of figuring out what it means to be a human and how to interact with other humans. And I really believe that as professors or as instructors of whatever stripe, we have the responsibility of just being role models of adults who are excited about what we do and who care about other humans.

[00:20:29] And obviously we can talk about the important limits and boundaries and various inequities, um, that can come out of that. But I really think that coming into teaching with the disposition of being a role model as a human being matters a lot. And that students tend to pick up on that, whether it's conscious or not. And that that makes a huge difference in how it feels to teach and in how effective that teaching is.

[00:21:02] **Amanda Irvin:** I, I mean, the, the learning of what it means to be human and how to interact with other humans feels like a, a lifetime's goal of work.

[00:21:14] **Kristi Rudenga:** Yeah, just take care of that in your two thirty class and you'll be all set.

[00:21:18] **Amanda Irvin:** Great. Amazing. We'll have one module for that. Um, I think the, the, this disposition of modeling, especially we can model what it's like to be human, but certainly we see, I can remember lots of value in watching. Instructors and colleagues now model what it's like to do a discipline, uh, model what it's like to be challenged, be frustrated by the work, to fail and to recover.

[00:21:48] Those are, those are skill sets we want students to walk away from our classes with. And I, I think that watching someone do that and recover, watching people not know the answer can be just so instructive when it comes to being part of a learning community. It's a huge moment for sure. So thank you for reminding us all of that, because I certainly going to take that away with me.

[00:22:17] **Kristi Rudenga:** Well, thank you.

[00:22:20] **Amanda Irvin:** Kristi, it has been such a delight to talk with you today. We are so grateful for your participation in the ninth season of dead ideas. And thank you for writing your extraordinarily supportive and brave article to help us repair disconnection with students.

[00:22:39] **Kristi Rudenga:** Thank you so much. I love a chance to talk about these ideas and it's been really fun.

[00:22:47] 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. Our theme music is *In the Lab* by Immersive Music.