

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning

Season 9, Episode 4: The Present Professor with Liz Norell

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 These outdated notions, as Diane Pike described, perpetuate the "tyranny of dead ideas."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. Welcome everyone. Today, I'm speaking with Dr. Liz Norell. Dr. Norell serves as Associate Director of Instructional Support in the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at the University of Mississippi. She has spent more than 20 years teaching in higher ed, including stints in writing, political science, and statistics. Liz has a PhD in political science, along with master's degrees in journalism and library science. Her book, *The Present Professor, Authenticity and Transformational Teaching*, is published in the University of Oklahoma Press's brand new series, *Teaching, Engaging, and Thriving in Higher Ed*.

[00:01:24] Liz cares deeply about equitable, inclusive teaching, constructive conversations across difference and disability awareness. Welcome to our Dead Ideas Podcast, Liz. I am so delighted to be talking with you today.

[00:01:39] **Liz Norell:** It's a real honor to get to be on this podcast. Thank you, Amanda.

[00:01:42] **Amanda Irvin:** Oh, that's so nice of you to say. So I'll do a little setting of the stage for our listeners at home. As some of you know, in this season of Dead Ideas, we're exploring the dead idea that the world, quote unquote, "outside of the classroom" doesn't or shouldn't influence the world inside the classroom. That students are exclusively intellectual beings when they step across the threshold of a classroom space. And in my years of teaching in higher education and working with faculty, I've come to appreciate how pervasive this dead idea is, despite all of the important research and educational development work that demonstrates that instructors and students alike bring with them all of their experiences and challenges and identities when they come into the classroom space.

[00:02:21] So Liz, your new book, *The Present Professor*, focuses on the instructor's experience of presence in the learning process. Though as you encourage your readers to remember, the instructor experience and the student's experience are inextricably connected. So let's get into it. Uh, before we get too deep into our conversation, would you mind giving our listeners an overview of your book?

[00:02:50] In the introduction, you open with two statements, and these are quotes. First, "when you cannot be present, you cannot teach effectively." And then the second statement is, "what's good for students is good for us too." And you offer these as a way into a conversation about professor presence, which I really loved.

[00:03:11] Could you tell us some more about it?

[00:03:13] **Liz Norell:** So, when I think about presence in the classroom context. I think about trying to narrow the gap between how we would behave in our everyday life, if we didn't see ourselves in this role of performing and how we are in the classroom. So obviously we're not going to bring like our whole normal hanging out with my friends on Friday afternoon vibe into our classroom persona.

[00:03:43] But if we can try to don less of a persona and be a little bit more authentic, which I know we'll talk about. That can be really helpful. And I just want to say that the reason is that when we are moderating who we are for an audience, be that students or colleagues, or if we're on a stage, we are devoting at least some of our cognitive resources to monitoring our non-verbal communication, the words we're saying, the way we're acting, how we hold ourselves, how we move around a room. At least some of our cognitive resources are going to that self-monitoring and self-control. And that takes away

cognitive resources, which are very limited, from being attentive to what's happening in the learning space.

[00:04:31] So that may mean that we miss out on some really important non-verbal cues from students. Or that we're just trying to like fill up all the available airtime so that no one asks us a question that we don't know how to answer, which is what I did in my first few years of teaching, right? So this is true for us, but it's also true for our students.

[00:04:53] And if we haven't gone through the process to think about how we are bringing ourselves into the classroom and how we want to behave and present ourselves. Then we can't really have access to the ways in which students might be modifying their "presentation of self," to use Erving Goffman's phrase, in order to perform as student rather than engaging as being student.

[00:05:24] And for a lot of us, that looks like asking students to sit quietly, to make eye contact, to sit upright. to keep their hands not moving around a lot. I'm trying to avoid using any kind of triggering language here, but just kind of be attentive and sit still and take notes and hang on every word. But for many of our students, engaging in those kinds of behaviors means that they have fewer cognitive resources to actually pay attention to what we're doing.

[00:06:00] Because they're so busy performing attention in the way that we're expecting. So, this conversation about how we present ourselves and how we are present in the classroom is true for us, but it's also true for our students. And we have to start thinking about ways to meet one another on less confrontational of a field.

[00:06:25] And as. It's fully human, which is, you know, why I'm so excited to be part of this season's conversation because we can't leave that other stuff out. It's going to affect us.

[00:06:36] **Amanda Irvin:** You're, absolutely right. And one of the things I really appreciate about what you've just shared is you have brought into really clear focus the ways that like performing professor or performing student kind of works to disenfranchise both parties, because it can be exhausting to be self-regulating all the time and then also thinking about the persona. I think you called it self-moderating, the persona that we're projecting and, you know, maybe some of this is just like, some of what it means to be human, but when we think about the equation of learning, being able to set some of that aside and

just show up a little bit more authentically could be so freeing and rewarding, I think, for both instructors and students.

[00:07:27] **Liz Norell:** This is like really relevant to me right now because I got home fairly late last night from a conference. And so I'm a little underslept today. And that means that if I were to go sit in a seminar for two and a half hours. I would have to really be fighting the fatigue of my body, and I don't want to be disrespectful.

[00:07:49] I don't want to be perceived as not attentive, so I'm going to devote the resources necessary to do that, but that probably means that I have very little available cognitive power to apply to deeply listening. And thinking critically about what's being discussed.

[00:08:07] **Amanda Irvin:** Yeah, it makes total sense. And I think about podcasts that I listen to when I'm on the train going to campus, and there's so much happening around me, and I'm so exhausted. I can tell you firsthand, and I think anyone who might have had this experience, like you go six stops, and you're like, oh wait, I have no idea what just happened in this podcast I'm trying to follow. So I don't think anyone's arguing like, show up, be disrespectful in class, you know, like we'll talk about boundaries in a minute, I think, um, but that being able to be a little bit more, um, present and authentic in that presence could serve both instructors and students really well.

[00:08:45] So let's talk about authenticity a little bit. In the first part of the book, you draw this connection between authenticity and transformational teaching. I mean, it's in the title. And I think authenticity can be a tricky concept, which, um, I'd love to hear you talk about and, and we'll talk about that in just a second.

[00:09:03] But I'm also curious how you think presence and authenticity might interact with this dead idea we're exploring because you seem to argue and we were just sort, I think we're getting there in our conversation that instructor presence in the classroom is a huge asset to both parties.

[00:09:24] **Liz Norell:** So I like to talk about authenticity as kind of a, a spectrum and not an either or. Because our fully authentic self, like we are when we're alone, is probably not how we are with literally any other person on the planet. So, I have been with my partner for 13 years. He knows basically everything about me. I behave differently when he's around. So, you know, I can't say that I'm ever fully, fully authentic in that sort of unguarded, unmonitored way.

[00:09:58] But if we can bring more of our authentic self into the classroom to the extent that it feels safe to do so, and that means that we have to think about our identities, any intersectional identities we might have. So if you are a queer or trans person in my current teaching context of the University of Mississippi, you may not feel like it's totally safe to be fully authentic in that space.

[00:10:26] Because of kind of the climate of the state that we live in, and that's not a knock on the University of Mississippi, it's just a reality of living in the South right now. Um, so, I don't want anyone to feel like they need to come into class as an instructor and just let all of their kind of personal identities fly freely, or that they need to let all of the things that are happening in their lives outside the classroom come into the classroom.

[00:10:55] But to pretend that we can suspend our lives when we walk over that virtual or physical threshold is to engage in some self-deception. Because, like, when I'm worried about my friend, or my partner, or my dog, or a student, I'm going to communicate that even if I don't intend to.

[00:11:20] Because I'm going to be a little less attentive, a little more distracted. And so, it doesn't mean we need to come in and say, oh my gosh, I'm, you know, my friend of mine is really in crisis right now. You can just say, like, there's some stuff going on in my life, and that makes it a little harder. And I'm sure that some of you are experiencing that too.

[00:11:39] Taking time at the beginning of a class session, or in an online discussion board to ask students like, how are you, and how are you really, because we tend to assume that when people say, how are you, they're looking for a fine, or good, or great, right? So then, okay, but how are you really? And genuinely wanting to know that, just so that everyone has the space to be a little bit more human.

[00:12:05] So I think that these things are obviously interacting with this dead idea, but it also is just an opportunity for us. To meet our students, and even ourselves, as more than brains on sticks, as so many people have described it, right? To recognize that we are these fully human people, and when we harness that, when we let that be okay, then we can engage in things like emotion, which turbocharges learning, and relationships, true relationships, not transactional ones. Which also are the foundation of transformational teaching and learning.

[00:12:48] **Amanda Irvin:** I really appreciate you talking through that, you know, authenticity. We've talked a lot on this podcast this season about kindness

and trust and cultivating those so crucially in our classrooms. And I have been thinking in these conversations.

[00:13:06] And, and chatting with folks about how not every instructor shows up with the equal ability to do that because it requires vulnerability. And especially folks from marginalized communities or positions, they come in and might already feel that the deck is stacked against them, right? That students are already questioning their authority or their presence are in the classroom space.

[00:13:27] And so to say like, man, things are really rough for me right now would be challenging. So I love the idea of the way you have described it as a spectrum. I have a colleague who does not feel as though they can be as authentic as they would like to be in the classroom, but are making small moves and they use, some of you might have seen like the cat pictures, like on a rate, this cat scale on one to nine, how are you doing today?

[00:13:54] And even just gesturing like I'm. That's sick. Like I'm that cat that's like holding on to the branch and maybe going fall a little bit, right? Signaling, it increases humanity that like we have lives outside of these classrooms and not just students like I do too. And that's a very small way to communicate that, but for them it has been like one of those small change big impact things. Because now all of a sudden students are you know, when we bring a little bit more humanity into our classrooms, we relate to each other differently. Like you said, emotion supercharges learning. Learning is a relational process, as it turns out, that we know from so many sources.

[00:14:33] **Liz Norell:** Yeah. If I may, I just want to tell a quick story. So I was chatting with this student a few days ago who is really having some kind of personality clashes with another instructor, and I don't want to say too much about how the class or the instructor, because, you know, it would be pretty easy to figure it out.

[00:14:50] But suffice it to say that this instructor is just sort of demanding certain behaviors from students that feel really threatening to the student. And they came to me and asked for advice. And I asked them to share a bit about the instructor. And it is someone who has these kind of intersecting, you know, marginalized, minoritized identities, and also is a first year faculty member.

[00:15:14] And so I asked the student, like, imagine that you were in that kind of constellation of identities, and you know, one of your students asked you this question. Is it possible that the instructor is sort of feeling defensive because

they get a lot of pushback from a lot of students? And I thought that that was a really interesting moment to have a bit of empathy on all parts, right?

[00:15:41] So for the student, for me, and then hopefully when the student, you know, goes and talks to the faculty member or someone else, you know, for them to kind of reflect on how identity is interacts with how we show up in the classroom.

[00:15:55] **Amanda Irvin:** Now, thank you for sharing that because I think it goes both ways. You know, the first time you run into a student in the grocery store, they're like, you get groceries too?

[00:16:05] Like as though we don't have human lives outside of the

[00:16:09] **Liz Norell:** We just go in our recharging closet after we finish teaching, right?

[00:16:13] **Amanda Irvin:** Um, and that was before AI. So, alright, so one of the things that we like to do in this season of the podcast, it seems, is to talk about how to like turn that corner from, you know, this authenticity in the classroom seems like it's great for learning, it's great for instructors, it's great for students, even if it might be tricky.

[00:16:31] And that is not to be understated. However, one of the things I really appreciate about your book is that the second part offers all of these tools that are dedicated to cultivating self-knowledge, which I won't pretend that I have read every teaching and learning book that's ever been published, but I have read a lot of them. And I've never seen something like this before. So I have to say that it's really unique. Could you talk a little bit about the types of tools that are included and what motivated you to include this as the second half of your book?

[00:17:11] **Liz Norell:** I didn't know what I was going to write when I started writing this book. But I think that advice to write what you know came to me often. And what I know is that It's a lot about how to do some of this self-reflection. And part of that is just because I'm an omnivore when it comes to learning. My political science research was motivated by this question of how do we come to adopt extreme political beliefs and what kinds of things can soften the hard edges of extreme political beliefs.

[00:17:43] And so I've always been interested in sort of how we become the people we become. So researching that has often been a little bit of me search of

how did I become the person I am? And so I've just kind of been exposed to lots of different kinds of tools in the book. I talk about going through the training to become a life coach, a phrase that still makes me cringe just a little bit because it feels very woo. And I'm very not woo, but these are different tools and they're meant to be a buffet of options that some people will find useful and others may not, but there are everything from mindfulness, meditation, to movement practices like yoga. And I go through the Yamas of yoga philosophy and talk about how they relate to teaching.

[00:18:31] There's a chapter about "Playing Big," which is a book by Tara Moore. There's some stuff about the Enneagram, with the caveat to all the psychologists listening that I know that personality tests are not scientifically valid. But I have found the Enneagram to be a really useful tool for self-reflection. Um, there's a chapter on implicit bias. Uh, I may be forgetting one, but those are the kind of the tools that I have found to be useful in interrogating my own way of being, my own identities, and the way I want to show up and be human in front of my colleagues, my students, my friends, my family, and ultimately with myself.

[00:19:14] So, I was really thrilled that I got to include these and you know, the way that I convinced the publisher and the editors to let me do this was by kind of relentlessly focusing on how each of these relates back to teaching. So it's not just like, here's a chapter about how great yoga is. It's here's why engaging in the kinds of self-reflection that yoga offers can help you with your teaching and how the philosophy of yoga.

[00:19:45] Shows up in our teaching. So I hope that people find this to be useful. It's an invitation. None of it is required, but. They're the tools that I found useful and I hope others will too.

[00:19:57] **Amanda Irvin:** Thank you so much. I, I enjoyed looking through them and I will say that connection to teaching was, you know, some of them were new to me and some of them weren't, but the connection to teaching was some of my favorite bits because it helped me re-see some practices that I have either used or considered in my own life, but in different parts of my life.

[00:20:16] Than teaching, right? And to translate that. And that was just really enjoyable for me, and I hope that it will be for others, too, to be able to make those connections between different parts of myself, which might be part of that whole authenticity thing that we're talking about in terms of presence.

[00:20:33] Liz, this has been such a pleasure. Thank you so much for joining us for our ninth season of Dead Ideas. This was just like the best way to spend an afternoon.

[00:20:45] **Liz Norell:** Thank you, Amanda. And again, it's an honor to be part of this season and this podcast, and I'm so glad that we got to talk about this as we're wrapping up the season for y'all.

[00:20:54] **Amanda Irvin:** Yeah. Thank you.

[00:20:58] 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.

[00:21:23] Our theme music is *In the Lab* by Immersive Music.