Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series
Season 3, Episode 3: Dead Ideas in Faculty Evaluation with Kevin Gannon
Center for Teaching and Learning, Columbia University

Catherine Ross (00:00):

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. Let's get started.

Catherine Ross (00:23):

I'm speaking today with Dr. Kevin Gannon. Dr. Gannon is a Professor of History at Grand View University and the Director of its Center for excellence in Teaching and Learning. He is the author of a 2020 book Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto. He writes for The Chronicle of Higher Education, gives frequent talks in workshops and appeared in the Oscar nominated documentary 13th, directed by Ava DuVernay. Welcome to our Dead Ideas Podcast, Kevin.

Kevin Gannon (01:00):

Thanks, Catherine. It's great to be here with you.

Catherine Ross (01:05):

So the reason Kevin's here today is because on June 9th, I read his article that was published in the Chronicle of Higher Education titled, Faculty Evaluation After the Pandemic. It caught my eye because I've been thinking a lot about whether and to what degree the systems of higher education, by systems, I'm thinking things like grading, ranking students, evaluating faculty and even more specifically, evaluating teaching for say, promotion, reappointment, tenure, those kinds of things. So wondering whether the systems might be working against the efforts of CTL's to support faculty in engaging in inclusive, anti-racist, equitable and even radically hopeful, call-out for Kevin's book, pedagogies. And much like some of the other dead ideas we've discussed over the last year, the flaws that are embedded in these systems have been highlighted and exposed through the lens of COVID disruption. So I immediately thought that Kevin's article would be fascinating to discuss, and to my great delight, he accepted the invitation.

Catherine Ross (02:28):

So I think, Kevin, you and I agree that the current focus which we see everywhere on getting back to normal is a troubling way to think about the task ahead of higher education. Normal is exactly the premise I'm trying to dismantle through this Dead Ideas Podcast because normal practices like faculty evaluation are predicated on many dead ideas about teaching, learning, academic rigor and they're operationalized on a bedrock dead idea, which is that we must treat everyone equally. Would you like to unpack for our listeners your objections to this idea of the new normal and how you see its destructive potential, I believe you used the phrase, "A match tossed on a pool of gasoline" in the realm of faculty evaluation?

Kevin Gannon (03:28):

Sure. Catherine. And yes, we are thinking alike on this. I worry a lot about all this emphasis on back to pre-pandemic operations, back to normal, back to whatever and with the disclaimer that I understand the impulses behind it, they're very seductive impulses. However, we knew that normal, pre-pandemic normal, was certainly not sustainable for many of us, for many of our students, for many of our colleagues. And so while it's understandable that we might want to return to what things were like before COVID in terms of our own microcosm world of the classroom and the students of the familiar daily routine, the fact is that that normal, to use a technical term, sucked for a lot of people.

Kevin Gannon ([04:18](#)):

And what I worry about is in this rush to feel better about where we are now, especially in comparison to where we were at this point last year, that the emphasis will be so much on this idea of normal and this reassuring, comforting, but I would also argue sedating way. And we'll lose sight of what we felt was unsustainable and what COVID really illustrated as some of the fundamental problems within this entire system of higher education in which we're all trying to make.

Catherine Ross ([04:52](#)):

So following up on that point, can you elaborate a little bit about what you wrote on our need to re-examine existing policies and practices for performance evaluation broadly? And maybe if you wouldn't mind sharing a more in-depth look at the use of something specific like student evaluations of teaching in the process of promotion and reappointment reviews.

Kevin Gannon ([05:23](#)):

Sure. So as you mentioned in your previous question, we have the bedrock dead idea that everyone must be treated equally, that one size fits all, that some trimetrical vision of fairness mandates that nobody gets treated differently than anybody else. And I think that really misses the boat, there's the words equal and equitable are related, but not completely synonymous, and really what we're after is equity. And by after, I mean we need to be after equity with the admission of the realization that that has not existed in higher education in these spaces and certainly for many groups within our larger faculty and staff community. So the policies or practices that we have for what we might call performance evaluation, and even the word performance gives me pause, because it embodies that ultimately I'm being directed by others and others standards, as opposed to a more organic vision of what I know about teaching and learning and student success.

Kevin Gannon ([06:31](#)):

But this idea about re-examining these policies and understanding that what COVID showed us was that they are not operating equally or equitably either one for many of our colleagues. And so we saw for example, that the burden of domestic labor during the pandemic fell harder on female faculty members, particularly those who were mothers, in particular small children, than it did for male faculty members. We know that people at racially minoritized communities saw the impact of COVID far more disproportionately upon them in their communities than was the case in mainstream White middle and upper-class communities, for example. And so you can't realistically say we have an equitable system of faculty evaluation if you have not addressed those things, either during COVID. And now was we go to whatever post COVID looks like we've learned this, we cannot un-ring that bell. So we have to act in that knowledge going forward.

Kevin Gannon ([07:25](#)):

Because our colleagues of color, our female colleagues, have been telling us this for years, by us I mean, White guys like me and so I'm being very purposeful about that. We, White guys like me are implicated the most, not exclusively, but the most in this. Academia as a system that was built for people who look like me, academia was built for people who came out of very specific cultural and class backgrounds and even as academe diversifies in both students and the members of its faculty and staff community, the frameworks of the systems have remained in place. So if you've built something for one group and now you're trying to stretch it to wrap around other communities as well, we shouldn't be surprised that that fit has been imperfect at the very best. So that's a charitable interpretation.

Kevin Gannon ([08:12](#)):

And so student evaluations, I think is a really specific example of how this operates. We know from the research that student evaluations often tend to be very biased against again, women, younger faculty, faculty of color. And so if you're a faculty member who stands at the intersection of those three categories, for example, you are more likely to have students doubt your expertise, to question your credentials. You are more likely to receive those types of comments on student evaluations of teaching that people would put out in social media and have 20 replies that say, "Oh my God, I can't believe somebody said that." But yet these are now included in promotion and tenure packets and dossiers for evaluation and we know that these are not reliable measures of teaching effectiveness. In fact, they're some of the worst measures of teaching effectiveness that we have, and these biases are baked into the cake.

Kevin Gannon ([09:01](#)):

So if we are continuing to use these instruments, knowing all of those things, there's no excuse for that. We're academics, we're supposed to be smart people. And look at what happened during the pandemic year, a lot of institutions said, we're not going to factor in student ratings of instruction from the pandemic because we understand that this was a unique set of circumstances. So we did that and you know what? The world didn't end, higher education did not collapse, our institutions soldier on as we did before. And so I think what we've learned is that these seemingly permanent ways that we've always approached things aren't really permanent, they're actually fairly arbitrary and we could get along just fine without them.

Catherine Ross ([09:45](#)):

Yeah. I'm glad you brought up that example because I think that was a common response to just say, but I believe for a lot of schools, that response was limited to just the spring 2020 semester. And in many cases, institutions also suspended letter grades and went with pass, fail for students as a kind of equal treatment in that process of the very rapid and scary transition to remote teaching and learning in the middle of exploding pandemic. Do you think that was enough or should that have continued, should it still be in place?

Kevin Gannon ([10:33](#)):

I don't think it was enough, no. I think it's a hell of a way to start a conversation that needed to be had, but now that the conversation started, we shouldn't let it yet. I'm wary of one size fits all solutions, but I do think that again people will say it was an unusual year, it was COVID, it was pandemic, so pass, fail grades or interrogating the system of grading makes sense. Well, if you have a system of grading, if you have a system of evaluation, if you have a system of assessment that needs exceptions made to it, even if those exceptions are in a pandemic, it's still worth questioning, that system itself. Because clearly, by

definition now, it is not as consistent and impartial and immune to outside factors as you have argued that it is.

Kevin Gannon ([11:21](#)):

And so even though we had some of the most dramatically apparent outside factors shaping the conversation over the past year and a half, the larger point about, we need to question what are grades really doing? What kind of work is this really doing? What kind of work is our system of faculty evaluation in terms of reappointment promotion and tenure? Is it doing the work that we say it's doing or are we simply assuming it's doing that work because it has always been?

Catherine Ross ([11:48](#)):

Well, I would say of course, the letter, that's one of the reasons I'm asking you directly about it. I really appreciated the way you have unpacked the concept of fair and equal and the distinction between equality and equity. I think that's a conversation that hasn't been had enough when we think about things like grading students or evaluating faculty. How do you think a focus on equity could improve faculty evaluation? And if you want to use that same example again, of the teaching evaluation, maybe that would be a concrete way to think about it.

Kevin Gannon ([12:36](#)):

Yeah, I think so. And I think one way that focusing on equity could improve our system of faculty evaluation right off the bat is that we need to continue the interrogation of teaching evaluations at the first place. So if they weren't an accurate reflection of what teaching and learning was happening over the past year, does that necessarily mean that they were an accurate reflection of those things pre-pandemic or that they will be an accurate reflection of those things post pandemic? And I think the answer to that is no, no, it's not a guaranteed correlation at all. And so one of the things, like a first action that we might take as institutions, our first step, what pieces of evidence are we using when we talk about faculty evaluation? Is the only story we're getting about teaching effectiveness from these fundamentally flawed student evaluations of teaching?

Kevin Gannon ([13:26](#)):

That's like trying to use a broken thermometer to tell the weather, it may be right, like the old idea about your stop clock being right twice a day. We may get that if we're lucky, but it seems to me to be very foolish to persist of this idea that these flawed measures as the main source of teaching effectiveness are going to tell us anything other than what kind of cultural capital a faculty candidate may have. And so just, again, we're smart academic people, we know how to do research, what are our sources? Buried evidence? Where are we going? What's our data? Is there any bias that's baked into those data? If so, how do we get other data sources? I mean, the same questions that we bring to our disciplinary work on an everyday basis need to be applied here as well. And so maybe the first step is thinking about, or committing ourselves to reassessing what evidence we're using and how we're using it and committing to be willing to jettison some of that flawed evidence should it not pass the tests that we have for it.

Catherine Ross ([14:27](#)):

Yes. I love it. I've been trying to lead some of that work here and it's been received pretty well so far. I think people are grateful when they see the research that is behind all of the things you're saying. That

there is extensive research in this area and research around better ways to do this work. So here's hoping maybe between the two of us, we can just keep pushing that out there into the universe.

Kevin Gannon ([15:04](#)):

Exactly. And what I would also say to folks who are a little dubious about what we're saying is just because we, as a country are starting to pretend that COVID is over and act as if we're moving on into this "new normal" that doesn't mean that let's say caregiving burdens are being reallocated equitably all of a sudden, that doesn't mean that people's domestic or family circumstances are all of a sudden going to snap back or revert back to what they were three years ago. I'm a historian, when stuff happens, you can't stir it back apart and so that all of these things have been stirred together and we cannot act as if, okay, now we're going to revert everything back because all these things that happened during COVID were limited to COVID, which, oh, by the way, we're pretending is over, but is it really? But please don't ask the city further about that, those assumptions begin to just completely unravel the more that you pick at the threats.

Catherine Ross ([16:00](#)):

There's still a lot of people whose lives have been upended and continue to be upended, which I think brings me to the next question. I really like your passage, which directly relates to what you just said, no, flexibility and compassion in faculty evaluation did not mean water down criteria. There will be those who leap to that conclusion, who see more flexible policies as weakening standards and accommodating the less deserving. Just as there were academics who insisted that flexibility and understanding during the pandemic, somehow devalued the teaching and learning that occurred as if some arbitrary definition of rigor were the sole determinant of learning. That to me just captures a whole bunch of things in there, you've just uncovered a lot of dead ideas, but it is a common argument that you hear because of people's dead ideas about weakening, coddling, lack of rigor as a response to things like inclusive pedagogy or universal design for learning or thinking about accessibility in your course.

Catherine Ross ([17:25](#)):

So I'm just curious, how you propose we get these systems, force these systems to stop using deeply implicit, dysfunctional, and very dead ideas about these things like rigor, for example.

Kevin Gannon ([17:43](#)):

That's such a great question or set of questions and something that just... I've spent a lot of time thinking and talking and advocating in these areas and the first thing I would pause is if you're someone who went through this classically defied rigorous, where the beginning of the class, the professor turned out to the students and said, look to your left and look to your right and only two out of the three of you will make it through the end of the semester. If that was your experience and you went through a really cutthroat and competitive graduate program, and now you're saying that we could continue to do the same because I turned out okay, I would submit that you did not in fact turn out okay. This is a cycle, it's a cycle of abuse.

Kevin Gannon ([18:30](#)):

And what I would challenge folks who would argue that it's a weakening of rigor or a weakening of standards, or it's just this bushy hippy dippy, sit in a circle and sing kumbaya rather than actual learning. When we talk about things like UDL, when we talk about things like inclusive pedagogy, that's a flawed premise for the very beginning because it posits that those two areas are mutually exclusive from one

another, whereas, I would argue that they mutually reinforce one another. How can we challenge students to do the heavy cognitive lifting that higher education at its best involves, which is questioning your prior or substance, becoming intellectually vulnerable, realizing that from a novice perspective, things look different than with an experts mind. All of that stuff is really hard and many of our students have not been asked to do that before.

Kevin Gannon ([19:23](#)):

And so if we're doing it in an environment where we're asking students to do something that they have not been asked to do before, the first time at it is probably not going to go very well. So when it doesn't go very well, our answer shouldn't be to ask them to do something even harder, but do it twice as fast, but yet that's where most of this conversation about rigor and standards and we're watering down content. I am not watering anything down, I'm just inviting more people into the water. I can't have-

Catherine Ross ([19:51](#)):

Let's not forget students aren't as prepared as they used to be.

Kevin Gannon ([19:55](#)):

Well, exactly. And I don't know if students were ever as prepared as our old idealized arguments about what the student preparation was, I think in many cases these conversations that we have are really with the archetype of our younger academic selves as the subject and we need to realize, that's always been a flawed premise. And I think what we need to realize is, it is possible to challenge students more, it is possible to ask more of students, it is possible to ask students to do a heavier lift cognitively if they are at a learning space where there is incentive for doing so. And one of the most powerful incentives is knowing that there won't be a negative consequence for taking the kind of risks that we're asking them to take. And so when we talk about inclusive pedagogy, when we talk about universal design, when we talk about accessibility, what I'm talking about is creating the only type of learning space where the truly challenging, not the weaponized hazing that often passes as challenging, but the truly challenging interrogated, critically reflective type of learning can take place.

Catherine Ross ([21:01](#)):

I love it. And I just, I love your passion for this work. I think it's just a wonderful thing to behold, and I'm glad that our listeners will be able to hear that too, when they listen to this episode. I think, go ahead.

Kevin Gannon ([21:21](#)):

Let me share one big about, and the reason I'm clearly worked up about this is I was not a great undergraduate student, I got to college out of a suburban high school where I had accumulated a lot of cultural capital. So I knew how school worked and I was able to do well enough in the high school to get into college, to get into the honors program at my university. And from there from when I stepped onto campus, that first year, I made a series of really horrible choices for about the next three years. I majored in partying, I was one of those students that professors complain about at the water cooler or the offices, I had BS excuses, I failed classes, I didn't show up or if, sometimes I did show up, I wasn't at a state to be there. I was one of those students. And I had faculty members who were able to see past that and realize that when I was ready to stop making poor decisions and start making better decisions, who supported me in that process as genuine advocates and as genuine mentors.

Kevin Gannon ([22:20](#)):

And so I know what it's like to be one of those students that gets written off, but yet at the same time have the opportunity to be redeemed from that to take another path and to be supported, because I could not have done that work myself. And so now as an academic, on the other side of that equation, when I see students who are written off by other faculty members, and yes, maybe those students have done really boneheaded things because that's what young people do, if we write them off or if we are creating spaces where those students cease to matter, then what doors are being shut?

Kevin Gannon ([22:55](#)):

And so for me, this is a personal question because I was lucky to have doors open for me when they should have been shut. And I asked myself how many of the students who were there with me and how many students since because of the way they looked or where they came from did not have that opportunity. And the doors were always shut, with no hope of them opening back up. So it is a deeply personal commitment, but it also informs my dedication to this idea that at its best, at its aspirational best, higher education is one of the most important social and cultural goods that we have. But if we're not fulfilling our promise to all of our students in this, then the game is not sustainable. And so I think this is an existential question for all of us to really sit with and to think about the work that we're doing and are we at the opening doors business, or are we in the shutting doors business?

Catherine Ross ([23:47](#)):

Do you think there's risk for instructors who go down this road, when we think about the systems we've just been discussing?

Kevin Gannon ([23:57](#)):

There absolutely is, and for early career faculty, for faculty of color, for groups that are historically marginalized or we see bias against, it is absolute because so much of this cultural capital has been loaded up with this idea of this is somehow weak, this is somehow non rigorous, non challenging. The only real challenging learning is a White guy yelling about stuff to students and failing them on exams. And so one of the ways that we start to untie that knot is by working for culture change and that involves in particular, faculty at a more secure position like me. I'm a tenure full professor now, how do I use this platform to advance it, to give cover for the colleagues who are doing this sort of work? What can we do institutionally to show our colleagues that we have their back, that we trust them as the highly qualified professional experts that they are to do this kind of work?

Kevin Gannon ([24:48](#)):

All of us are doing things like DEI statements, all of our mission statements talk about access and inclusion and excellence. And so if we're not backing those things up with action, this mission-driven work, then what are we really about? So that starts with faculty again, who have the more secure position to be advocates for our junior colleagues, to say the things that they may not be able to say in meetings or in working groups, to bring stuff up to the Dean or the provost level to really advocate for that kind of work. And to create space in our criteria for evaluation that affirms risk-taking, that affirms this idea that I'm going to experiment boldly in my teaching, in my scholarly work. If we are creating space to reward that, that it shouldn't surprise us that nobody's taking those risks.

Catherine Ross ([25:34](#)):

So you're saying that along with cultural change, there has to be structural change?

Kevin Gannon ([25:40](#)):

Absolutely, because the two are so intertwined together. We can talk about, oh, we're making cultural change, look at our new DEI statement, look at our new statement of vision for this strategic plan cycle. Well, that's great, but how's that operationalized, how's that working out in practice? Let me give you one tangible example, at my institution we have, a thing with our promotion and tenure committee where a faculty member who's going through that process, if they have a class where they have made a significant pedagogical change, and we did a lot of development work around team-based learning pedagogy, which is really cool and has a lot of really great outcomes, but it's also one that students push back against sometimes. And so the question from our junior colleagues was, we're doing all this faculty development, you're encouraging us to use this model in some cases, but what's going to happen when the students push back because I'm going to get these evaluations and it's going to tank my dossier.

Kevin Gannon ([26:33](#)):

And so what our P & T Committee said is, if you're doing that kind of structural work at a class, then designate that in your portfolio and we will not use those student ratings of instruction, when it comes to evaluating your portfolio. You could use them for formative purposes, but they're not going to be anywhere near the evaluative piece of it. And that's a step I think, it's not the whole solution, but that was a great step for us as an institution to say, you know what, junior college you are right, you need the space for this and if we're going to ask you to take risks, then we need to support you in case sometimes things don't work out exactly as we might hope, because that's what happens sometimes.

Kevin Gannon ([27:08](#)):

And so it was an important statement in the one of the most important parts of our faculty work, evaluation towards tenure, that we will make room and provide a structure for you to take these types of risks and to dare boldly, without fear of it redounding negatively upon your dossier. So there are specific things that we could do to get at the larger cultural change.

Catherine Ross ([27:34](#)):

Yes. And I know of institutions that routinely do that for any innovative approaches to teaching, because we know that there can be student backlash because students have dead ideas about teaching and learning as well, so.

Kevin Gannon ([27:50](#)):

Yeah, we get mad about students, when we say, oh, they're just grade grubbers, well, whatever they've been told for 13 years before they've come to us, that these things are the be-all end-all.

Catherine Ross ([27:58](#)):

Exactly. How many chances are we giving them to take risks and have trouble and run into challenges and not get a failing grade for it?

Kevin Gannon ([28:07](#)):

Exactly. And we tell them, we want them to learn from failure, to learn from adversity, but everything they've been told up to this point has been that failure is that door closing, that that's the end of the story. So yeah, there's so much detox that has to occur with a lot of this.

Catherine Ross ([28:23](#)):

Absolutely. Which brings me to my last question. Would you mind sharing with us what keeps you inspired and motivated to believe in and write a book about radical hope, despite all the challenges we've just been unpacking here?

Kevin Gannon ([28:44](#)):

That's a great question. And one that I've been asked a lot, like, so you wrote a book on hope as everything slow motion, societal collapse just begun to unfold, and there is a risk of sounding like a Pollyanna, like say, I have hope that the future will be better and somehow assuming that that will be the case just because time passes. But one of the quotes I use in the book is for Rebecca Solnit, wonderful essay, Hope in the Dark, that she wrote back originally in 2004. And she defied, so she says, it's not a lottery ticket that you can sit on the sofa and clutch, just feeling lucky. What hope is, Solnit writes, is an act that you break down doors with in an emergency. And it's a commitment to the future however uncertain that makes our present in habitable. And so Solnit's formulation, I think is a really important one because acting for a better future, we don't know what that might look like, but we have to proceed on the hope that it's better than what's now.

Kevin Gannon ([29:43](#)):

And so how do I sustain myself in a present that seems to be working against any sort of sustenance in that regard? And that's committing myself to the work that I know can be brought about through the collective efforts of those of us pulling the same way in higher education. Again, at its best, at its most, at it's aspirational, we know what higher education can do and potentially do and so if we're not going to continue to work towards that, the opposite of hope is hopelessness. And so hopelessness is cynicism, is detachment, is apathy, is death in that regard. So I choose the other road, I choose sustenance, even if I can't tell you exactly what the payoff for all of that is now.

Catherine Ross ([30:28](#)):

Well, thank you. That is deeply inspiring for me personally and I hope for our listeners as well. I can't thank you enough, Kevin, for taking time to come and talk with us and sharing your work and your deep thinking to help move higher education to a better place and also for agreeing to be part of our fall 2021 podcast. Thank you.

Kevin Gannon ([30:55](#)):

Well, thank you, Catherine. It was a real pleasure to be with you.

Catherine Ross ([31:01](#)):

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 in Teaching and Learning is a product of Columbia University Center for Teaching and Learning and is produced by Stephanie Ogden, Laura Nicholas, Abie Sidell and Jon Hanford. Production support from Kate Tighe-Pigott, our theme music is, In the Lab by Immersive Music.