

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series

Season 3, Episode 4: Convergent Teaching with Aaron Pallas and Anna Neumann

Center for Teaching and Learning, Columbia University

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

Hello, and welcome to Dead Ideas and 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 ([00:22](#)):

I'm speaking remotely today with doctors, Aaron Pallas and Anna Neumann. Anna Neumann is a professor of higher education at Teachers College, Columbia University, where she conducts research on college and university teaching, professors in intellectual careers and research methods. Aaron Pallas is the Arthur I. Gates professor of sociology and education at Teachers College, where he also chairs the Department of Education Policy and Social Analysis. He studies the distribution of school resources, school and teacher accountability systems and how schooling shapes people's lives. Welcome to our Dead Ideas podcast, Anna and Aaron.

Aaron Pallas ([01:12](#)):

Happy to be here.

Anna Neumann ([01:13](#)):

We're delighted to be here.

Catherine Ross ([01:15](#)):

So I'm just going to set the stage a bit for our listeners, Anna and Aaron's book, *Convergent Teaching*, was published in December, 2019, and I just happened to learn about it from Aaron, with whom I was working on a subcommittee, exploring issues in the evaluation of teaching in higher education. Aaron offered a chapter from his book to the subcommittee as a resource so we could understand what the problems are with how teaching is evaluated in the academy. But I realized when I saw the book, that this whole book is dedicated to upending dead ideas about undergraduate teaching in higher education. So I invited Aaron and Anna to do this podcast. I would just love it if you could give our listeners a brief overview of the vast terrain that is covered in your book since we won't have time to delve into every part of it in this very brief podcast conversation.

Aaron Pallas ([02:15](#)):

Well, I appreciate your calling it a vast terrain. The book does have three major components and the first one tries to make a case for why we should care about undergraduate teaching improvement. And it begins with the idea that there's a crisis in American higher education, or at the very least an ambivalence about it in the eyes of the American public. Whereas higher education historically has been seen as the engine for the American dream and there continues to be high demand for higher education; there's ambivalence about whether a college education pays off in the way that it historically has, with a secure and predictable future, particularly in the context of a changing economy with fewer and fewer things that we can count on. The labor market is changing, costs and affordability are

persistent worries. And we don't always know that much about what students are actually learning in college.

Aaron Pallas ([03:16](#)):

So there's a fair amount of concern about higher education and some refer to it as a crisis. And that's led to a number of reform perspectives, ways of thinking about what to do with higher education. One which we call powering it up. A notion that the future of higher education hinges on the harnessing of big data and technological tools to improve learning in higher education. And it's a very optimistic view, and we might eventually get to that point, but I think we're nowhere near it at the time being, it unfortunately sounds a little bit too much like pop neuroscience for now. And although the pandemic has certainly put a wrench in everything, historically online courses and programs have not necessarily benefited the most vulnerable populations of students and may have been just as expensive as traditional face to face education.

Aaron Pallas ([04:27](#)):

There's another perspective which we call blow it up that argues that employers and students should bypass higher education completely. In part, because there's so little evidence that students learn important stuff in college. And it's a perspective that has a relatively narrow focus on the economic value of a higher education and not surprisingly that's resulted in a fair amount of pushback among those who see a broader purpose to higher education than simply preparing young people for work. And we call that the stay the course perspective. Defenders of colleges and universities as they currently exist to champion liberal education, which inspires critical thinking and the life of the mind. But what we note is that all three of these perspectives, power it up, blow it up and stay the course, don't talk about college teaching and we see college teaching as the heart of the education enterprise.

Aaron Pallas ([05:34](#)):

And we know that there's good evidence that college teaching matters in terms of the benefits for what students experience, what they learn as a result of good college teaching. So the middle third of the book then develops a particular approach to good college teaching that we call convergent teaching. And we'll have more to say about that, but there are three important pedagogical moves in convergent teaching that we devote attention to. Targeting the idea of carving out the specific subject matter that is to be learned, that is appropriate for a given course. Surfacing an approach that draws on students' prior knowledge and experience, both academic and non-academic and navigating the work that instructors do to help students move from what they already know to where they need to get to. And the final thing of the book deals with our sense of the kinds of policies and practices at the campus level and beyond to improve undergraduate teaching.

Catherine Ross ([06:45](#)):

Great. Thank you for that overview. And particularly for calling out the three camps that are talking about higher education. The powering it up group, the staying the course group and the blow it up group. And it was truly a revelation for me when I was reading your book. When you named the fact that all of this talk that you describe in your book about higher education and what it should be and what it shouldn't be, who it helps, who it doesn't help. All of that talk never, ever mentions teaching. When people talk about innovation, they don't talk about teaching. They talk about technology or some new thing, right? And so I thought that was just so powerful. I see this omission as a very glaring one in the conversations that I've heard in, for example, leadership development programs in higher education,

or in conversations about technology. I'd wondered if you could just maybe dive a little deeper into why it's so important that teaching be in those conversations?

Anna Neumann ([08:01](#)):

I'll respond to that. One of the reasons I think that it is important for teaching to be in the conversation is that, there's not much you can do about making things better if you don't name the problem in the first place. And one of my concerns is that teaching is something that we take for granted. We assume that teachers know how to teach. We assume that even non teachers know something about teaching and know the difference between teaching that helps students learn and teaching that doesn't help students learn. Now why is that?

Anna Neumann ([08:56](#)):

Interestingly, I think the development of a mass education system has created a situation where so many of us actually, all of us, are in fact exposed to teaching from the time that we are very young children until later on. At least in our society, at least in the United States. And given that exposure, I do think that we often forget that there really is something to teaching that it is not something that people are necessarily born knowing how to do. And so, the way I see this is that there's not very much we can do about teaching, about improving teaching, about elaborating on it, making it more meaningful, improving it, unless we give it a name. And that really is why I think that calling this out, making the invisible visible, the inaudible audible by giving it a name is so important.

Catherine Ross ([10:11](#)):

That's very powerful. Thank you for that, Anna. I think that that leads us right into the next question that I wanted to ask you, which is more about something Aaron briefly mentioned in the overview about your framework of convergent teaching. And I think it might be a nice point in this conversation to go a little deeper into that, if you could. I have a quote from your book where you talk about your framework and you talk about how it addresses. And I quote here, "The totality of what teachers think and do to support students learning as they encounter and engage with new academic ideas in the context of their prior knowledge and experience." End of quote. So I will turn it back over to you to make this part of it more visible as well for our listeners.

Anna Neumann ([11:11](#)):

Okay. I will tackle that one as well. Again, teaching isn't something that one just stands up and does naturally. And I am always taken by the idea of when somebody says, "I teach. I'm a teacher," that people immediately in their minds see someone in front of a classroom, being dramatic or reading from a book or in front of a pedestal holding things together. But that is just the top of the iceberg of teaching. They're so very, very much 90% of it is under the surface and unseen. It's unseen because a lot of it happened before the teaching. A lot of it happens after the teaching and a lot of it is happening in the teacher's mind to which one does not have ready access. In other words, teaching is both the doing of it, the activity, the being in front of the class, the being with students, the being with a text, if you will, but it is all so about the homework and the thinking, especially the thinking that goes on both before and during the teaching itself.

Anna Neumann ([12:44](#)):

And we sometimes forget that it doesn't come naturally. So with that, I wanted to talk just a little bit about the framework that Aaron introduced. We think of teaching and especially of good teaching, I

mean, for one thing, it's a very complex mass of activities and ways of thinking. So there's a part of me that doesn't like reducing it to three things, but I like to think of it as three moves that teachers can make or three movements in which they can engage. And the first one is what I would call targeting, as Aaron mentioned earlier. When a teacher sits down, a professor, a college instructor sits down to put together a syllabus or to prepare a unit or a lesson. The fact of the matter is that they cannot teach everything that a field offers.

Anna Neumann ([13:50](#)):

They cannot teach everything that they themselves know. And so one of the first questions is, "What am I going to teach?" The question of, what am I going to teach is incredibly important. It's not your favorite idea, and it's not necessarily what's in the textbook that you pulled off the shelf either. Targeting is identifying an idea in a field that in the words of Parker Palmer can be something of a microcosm of the field. In other words, you don't want to dump the whole body of knowledge on the student. What you might want to do instead is pick a particular idea that somehow holds in it some of the key ways of thinking or core ideas, we like to use the term core concepts that are foundational to the thinking that goes on in the field.

Anna Neumann ([14:53](#)):

So examples of core concepts that we've seen instructors use, Aaron teaches statistics from time to time. And one of the core concepts that I've seen him use is the idea of the middle of a frequency distribution. If you come to understand middle, you can understand a number of important ideas in descriptive statistics that really are stepping stones. The idea of a core concept is something of a stepping stone to other related ideas in the field. So part of it is just figuring out what the core concepts are that you might want to begin with. And that is part of what we mean by targeting.

Anna Neumann ([15:46](#)):

The flip side of targeting is the idea of surfacing which in essence is identifying material in students' lives that in some way or another resonates with that core concept. The question becomes, what can you pull out of what students already know personally, culturally, or otherwise that they are deeply familiar with that you can actually teach that mode of thinking in? The third step of convergent teaching or the third movement so to speak, is in essence, what we like to call navigating. Which in essence is bringing the two together. Now, navigating is in fact that part of... A lot of it is public, but that's not all there is to navigating either. Navigating is whatever a teacher needs to do in essence, to bring students to an understanding of that core concept, usually walking them from their prior knowledge to the core concept.

Anna Neumann ([17:06](#)):

And we could go on for another two hours about the kinds of things that go on in navigating. But one of our worries is that not enough attention has been given to part of the work that's done underwater, behind the scenes and that in fact cannot be seen, but that is not all that there is to teaching, of course. While you're doing targeting surfacing and navigating, which sounds, it's all cognition, it's all the work of thinking. There are other things that will always come up. Students' emotions – sometimes as you work with students prior knowledge, some very personal and emotional, personally meaningful things can be surfaced. And I see instructors as very involved in working with and through that. There are issues of identity that get pulled out as well. So the last thing I want to do is reduce teaching to three movements. There's so much more that can come into play even beyond what I have mentioned.

Catherine Ross ([18:22](#)):

Indeed there is. But I love the way that your framework powerfully makes visible that invisible work. I think that was just an extraordinary way to frame that work, name that work, and explain what it is to people who may not be in a teaching situation. I also really like your mention of the emotion coming into the classroom, as well as identity. And we're going a little off script here, but I think that's a powerful idea, sometimes a dead idea in higher ed, that those things don't belong in the classroom, right? That students just bring their cognition in and leave the emotions and identity outside.

Catherine Ross ([19:13](#)):

But I have seen over this past year with the pandemic, I've seen a shift in that thinking broadly across the context that I'm working in. Where I think more instructors became aware of how important it was to allow those emotions to be in the classroom and identities to be in the classroom and to deliberately intentionally build community around the endeavor that everyone was involved in, in these remote classes, somehow the being remote made it more apparent and the pandemic conditions as well, right? Made it more obvious that as instructors, we have to work with the whole student, not just the parts of the student that relate to cognition, right? I wondered if you've seen any shift in that direction as well?

Anna Neumann ([20:21](#)):

Well, I can speak primarily for my own teaching and I will, because I pay a lot of attention to it. There is no question that I've had to open up additional spaces for students to talk about their feelings, their fears, moments of respite, moments of joy, but moments of real fear and concern and worry. And I guess one of the things that I want to say that is so interesting and complicated with regard to teaching itself is that those moments of emotion, of deep feeling, matters of identity surround teaching. They infiltrate the classroom, they sit side by side subject matter, and teachers do have to work with them.

Anna Neumann ([21:18](#)):

What is also interesting is that there are emotional issues, that sometimes have their source in the subject matter itself. A student may read a text that once they deeply get into it, understand, connects to something in themselves that they had never thought about before. And so, in addition to that happening, which happens even in the best of times, we have all the emotional work that needs to be done around COVID and a very difficult time politically and otherwise in this country as well, and in the world for that matter. So, yes, I think teaching became something more over the past year and we may not have a full handle on it just yet.

Catherine Ross ([22:15](#)):

Thank you for sharing your story, Anna.

Anna Neumann ([22:19](#)):

I do want to say that in all this, the dead idea is that teaching is just standing up in front of the class and delivering knowledge. It is not.

Catherine Ross ([22:35](#)):

Appreciate that call out very much. Aaron, did you want to jump in here?

Aaron Pallas ([22:41](#)):

I did. I do think that the positioning of students' emotions and identity and the shifts that we may have observed during the pandemic are certainly partly attributable to the pandemic itself and the way in which it has made students and their families so vulnerable coupled with the rise of racialized violence. But I think also has led to heightened this concern about the wellbeing of minoritized students. So those things I think are attributable to the times. It's an open question whether they will persist in how teachers incorporate students' emotions and identity alongside of subject matter once we return to whatever normal might consist of in the future.

Aaron Pallas ([23:43](#)):

So I think this notion of dead ideas in teaching, the idea that students identities and personal lives don't matter is one of those dead ideas. And certainly Anna and I try to make the case that through the lens of convergent teaching those personal lives, those identities are both feeding into navigating, but also the product of navigating. They shape what students think they already know and how they come to understand themselves in the world. And they are the objects occasionally uncomfortably so, of what teachers try to do in helping students move from what they already know to ideas that may, in some cases be dissonant with their lives and identities.

Catherine Ross ([24:37](#)):

Oh, thank you for calling that out, Aaron. That's I think a really important and insightful connection to add to this conversation. I appreciate that. So I just wanted to get at least one question in on the third big part of your book. There's a lot in there, but in one section you offer institutional advice on six ways to improve the teaching practices of college faculty. Could you maybe share just the top two that you think would be most impactful? I mean, I picked out my personal favorite, which is raise the profile of undergraduate teaching and its centrality to the mission. But I'd love to hear from you both about what you would do first, if you were in charge. If it was your world and you were remaking it, what would you do first or second?

Aaron Pallas ([25:37](#)):

Well, I'm grateful that I'm not the ruler of the forest. There are a lot of moving parts and sociologists often debate whether structure leads culture or culture leads structure, and it's clear that there needs to be both structural and cultural change. The kinds of structural changes that I think are important, include well staffed resources for improving teaching. And I'm sure Catherine's been waiting for me to say this, including centers for teaching and learning, that can reach into the academic core and good centers for teaching and learning, I think are very important. They often are understaffed and peripheralized, they're not central in the way that I think they can and should be. I think revisioning faculty recruitment and high stakes personnel processes to change the way we assess faculty teaching. And this is an issue that Catherine and I have, in fact, been working on. Thinking about ways to reduce reliance on student course ratings and to substitute other ways of assessing teaching performance for them, durable representations of teaching practice that often involve peer review. That is the review of teaching peers.

Aaron Pallas ([27:01](#)):

And finally, a third structural issue is as we've noted, many college teachers arrive in their college teaching classrooms without formal preparation on how to teach. And the question is whose responsibility is that? I think we can potentially argue that it is the responsibility of the graduate programs that are producing these college teachers, that professional development of college teachers

ought to be built into graduate study, especially doctoral study, but there are plenty of college teachers who have master's degrees as well. And so we need to be mindful of the full spectrum of people who wind up teaching in college classrooms. And there's certainly shared responsibility for professional development. The employing institutions also are responsible, but I think it should originate in the institutions and departments that are preparing college teachers to enter the college classroom. So those are some structural things. And culturally, I think I'm where you are, the notion of raising the profile of undergraduate teaching and its centrality to the mission is a cultural issue. And that's something that also can be worked on alongside of these structural changes.

Catherine Ross ([28:26](#)):

Great. Anna?

Anna Neumann ([28:30](#)):

I think that my favorite strategy is the one that Aaron ended with and that is building teaching into all of graduate education. And I actually believe that all masters students and all doctoral students should be taught to teach. The fact of the matter is that there are... I can't think of many professions where teaching isn't somehow built into it. When I think about my doctor, for example, I want my doctor to be able to explain to me what's going on or what I should do or not do, and why, in a way that I understand, or I think about a lawyer, I think about an architect, I think about any number of professions that are out there.

Anna Neumann ([29:27](#)):

As part of that, I really believe that this is going to involve some deep curricular changes in graduate school because it speaks to the question of where we find knowledge and how it can be represented. Both of those are pretty much set in stone currently. And I think that there's as much, call it scholarly inquiry, that can feed teaching as feeding the production of research, books, articles, whatever we're producing in the name of research.

Aaron Pallas ([30:09](#)):

I want to share a personal academic horror story about my own intellectual journey, which I've actually never talked about. When I entered graduate school, I wanted to be a researcher. That's why I went to a PhD program. There were certain ideas I wanted to study about educational inequality and school organization. And I actively avoided opportunities to be a teaching assistant. The program I was in did have some undergraduate courses that employed TA's, that was low status. I didn't have any interest in it. I didn't do it.

Aaron Pallas ([30:44](#)):

Then of course, I became a faculty member and I regretted not having learned from the experience of being a teaching assistant and had to confront the fact that I knew nothing about how to teach. So I think that there are these entrenched ideas, sometimes artificial about the separation of research and teaching. And I think Anna, through her work, across the course of her career, has shown that faculty can learn a great deal about their subjects of study from their teaching. But again, it's an idea that is not familiar to a lot of people and there certainly are status structures. So in a research university, research productivity, it is the coin of the realm and teaching quality is paid minimal attention to. That's a cultural issue, I think that requires a lot of attention.

Catherine Ross ([31:46](#)):

Wow. Thank you, Aaron. I think that's our first true confession in this podcast. So I'm happy you felt safe sharing that. But I really appreciate the calling out at the end of the cultural norming of valuing research over teaching. That is endemic in the academy. And even in schools, which you might think are more geared towards really serving the students of particular communities say, your regional state colleges, places like that. It has even infiltrated those places. And, sometimes at the cost of instructors time to really focus on the teaching that is supposed to be their primary mission because of some sense that all these schools must be in this race to research and research productivity.

Catherine Ross ([32:51](#)):

So I think that's a really important maybe other thing to think about as we were talking about impactful changes to higher education going forward. So I think I want to close with a final question. I think the three of us have been working hard in this realm for many years and trying to change higher education, leave it a better place perhaps, from our work. And I wonder, sometimes it's tough going in my experience. You can feel defeated sometimes I think, but I wonder what it is that keeps you both inspired and that motivates you to keep doing this work in higher education?

Aaron Pallas ([33:46](#)):

I'll start. Anna will laugh at this, but there's a familiar cartoon of a guy sitting in front of a computer keyboard saying, "I can't go to sleep. Someone's wrong on the internet." And it's a joke about feeling an obligation to respond to everything wrong that you see in the world. There's a bit of that I think in me, where I've come to understand that there are things that I think are beliefs that are mistaken that I want to do my part to help correct. And that's related to I think, a broader sense of social justice in the world as well. So that's I think, one of the things that motivates me is seeing how much better I think things could be and wanting to work at that in part by debunking things that demonstrably are not true about our education system and its relationship to the broader society in which we live.

Anna Neumann ([34:48](#)):

So when things get really hard for me, and when I feel defeated, I try to put the brakes on and ask myself, "Why am I doing this? But why am I doing it?" And one of the first response that comes to mind, because it really is the core response is, you need to understand that I'm a first generation learner. I know that phrase gets used a lot, but neither of my parents even had high school. We are an immigrant family, both my parents were refugees and Holocaust survivors and learning for me was everything.

Anna Neumann ([35:42](#)):

Learning was where I went to become a person. And when I ask myself, "Why I'm doing this?" It's partly as recalling what learning was to me and a desire to make learning more available, more open and more meaningful to so many other people who I think are looking for the same experience. I think of teaching not as something separate from learning. For me, teaching is the advancement, support, propelling, enriching of people's learning. And so I go to teaching as that second part of what I believe in, which is that part of my role, part of the reason that I'm here, is in fact to help find people, find spaces where they can learn and grow and become.

Catherine Ross ([36:47](#)):

That is incredibly moving Anna. And thank you for that story. It certainly gives me a lot to think about on the days when I feel like I just want to pack it in and give it up. Both of you, thank you for sharing those

motivations and the ways in which you keep yourself engaged in this work. And thank you for the work that you do. I appreciate that you've taken this time to talk with us, the ways in which you've shared your work and your deep thinking that I hope will help move higher education to a new place.

Anna Neumann ([37:29](#)):

Thank you so much.

Aaron Pallas ([37:29](#)):

Thank you so much.

Catherine Ross ([37:34](#)):

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