

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series

Season 4, Episode 5: The Impact of Student Perceptions of Instructor Authority on Resistance to Inclusive Teaching, with Dr. Chavella Pittman and Dr. Thomas Tobin

Center for Teaching and Learning, Columbia University

[00:00:00] **Catherine Ross:** 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.

[00:00:24] I'm joined today by my colleague, Rebecca Petitti, Assistant Director of our Faculty Programs and Services Team. Rebecca emailed me a couple questions that she wanted to ask our guests today, and our guests today are Dr. Chavella Pittman and Dr. Thomas Tobin. So I thought, why not ask Rebecca to join me as co-host so she can ask her questions?

[00:00:47] So, here we all are. As a quick reminder for our listeners, in this podcast series, we are exploring dead ideas in teaching and learning. In other words, ideas that are widely believed though not true, and that drive many systems and behaviors in connection to teaching, exercising what Diane Pike called "the tyranny of dead ideas."

[00:01:12] Chavella T. Pittman is the founder of a faculty development company that helps universities retain diverse faculty and students. As a Black woman academic, she has a 20-plus year success record of addressing the obstacles that hinder diverse faculty success. She earned a PhD in sociology and M.A. in higher education from the University of Michigan and is currently a professor at a private liberal arts college, with peer reviewed publications on higher education, interpersonal and institutional oppression, marginalized statuses and methods, and statistics. Her forthcoming book from West Virginia University Press details how women faculty of color can authentically navigate teaching despite institutional attempts to silence them, and how the scholarship of teaching and learning should shift to more deeply consider faculty identities. Chavella has a love-hate relationship with running, is a beer aficionado, recently cured her black thumb by growing cherry tomatoes, loves to learn, and believes Black joy is resistance.

[00:02:26] Thomas J. Tobin is a founding member of the University of Wisconsin, Madison's Center for Teaching, Learning, and Mentoring, as well as an internationally recognized scholar, author, and speaker on quality in technology; mediated education, especially copyright; teaching evaluation; academic integrity; accessibility; and universal design for learning. He holds masters and PhD degrees in English literature, a master's degree in information science, and certifications in project management, online teaching, quality matters, and accessibility. He recently completed the Penn State Academic Leadership Academy. Named to *Ed. Tech Magazine's* 2020 Deans List of Educational Technology Influencers, Tom serves on the editorial boards of *Insight*, a journal of scholarly teaching, and the online *Journal of Distance Learning Administration*. And he is the co-author and author of several books on diverse topics, from copyright to evaluating online teaching to UDL and alt. act careers.

[00:03:35] Welcome to my co-host, Rebecca, and welcome to our Dead Ideas Podcast, Chavella and Tom. It's such a delight to have you as our guests today.

[00:03:46] **Chavella Pittman:** Happy to be here. Thanks for inviting us.

[00:03:49] **Tom Tobin:** Yeah, we're grateful to be on the program with you. Thank you.

[00:03:53] **Catherine Ross:** So I'll quickly set the stage; Drs. Pitman and Tobin recently published an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* titled "Academe Has a Lot to Learn About How Inclusive Teaching Affects Instructors." And what they talked about in that article is how many of the inclusive teaching strategies that those of us in teaching centers encourage instructors to use, involve the instructor sharing power with students so that the students are empowered to make decisions about their own learning and to be a little bit more in control of that learning experience than they might be accustomed to. I think many of our listeners will probably realize that there's a good bit of literature on how resistance can come up in these contexts. Students don't always welcome this kind of power sharing in the classroom. It's generally something new that they're maybe not quite familiar with. But what Tom and Chavella were talking about, was how that resistance can take very different forms depending on who the instructor is.

[00:05:09] It reminded me that, as far back as 2013, - that was the first time I read about student resistance in Mary Ellen Weiner's book, *Learner Centered Teaching* - she actually has a couple chapters about student resistance, so I went back and reread that. And she does talk a lot about all the different types of resistance you can encounter and the various ways, as an instructor, that you might respond to that resistance. But what she did not talk about was this idea that the faculty member's, the instructor's identity, is a key element of how that resistance might play out and how it's enacted by the students.

[00:05:52] So I'm really happy to have Tom and Chavella here today to share with us their experiences and what they wrote about in their article. I would love to have both of you share your experiences that led you to write this article. I was curious whether this was something you had in mind before you went into the classroom and tried these things out, or was it the result of the experiences you had in the classroom? You know, how did this conversation begin?

[00:06:23] **Chavella Pittman:** As a faculty developer who pretty much works at the intersection of the scholarship of teaching and learning and marginalized faculty statuses, I hear these stories all the time from diverse faculty. And essentially what the experience is, is that faculty members with privileged statuses have a huge megaphone, and they're touting some sort of practice that everybody should be engaging in. At the same time, they're shaming people who don't adopt it. But then, they don't have any awareness or any regard to the way that faculty statuses play into adopting practices. And this gets even more troubling when it's a practice that has to do with diverse students.

[00:07:04] So, on a fairly regular basis, people are saying; do this practice. You don't care about students, or you don't care about diverse students, if you're not doing it, not keeping in mind that faculty statuses come into play. And so, these things have been happening on a regular basis and I was venting and sort of sharing my frustration about it. But again, as a

faculty member, as a developer with marginalized statuses, a lot of times I'm yelling into the void because I don't actually have a megaphone.

[00:07:31] That's sort of how the article came about. I was venting to a group of people, Tom was one of those folks. As I was venting, I said, "well, hey. Is somebody willing to co-write something with me about this?" Because maybe this is a way to have my voice heard instead of it just going into the void.

[00:07:50] **Tom Tobin:** When we started that conversation, I had a moment of dawning horror because I was that dominant culture advocate. Your listeners can't see me; I am a cisgender, heterosexual white man with gray hair. I tick all of those boxes for unassumed and unearned privilege. I'm also an advocate for the educational rights of people with disabilities, and people from disadvantage backgrounds, and all of the kinds of learners whom we traditionally didn't serve well, or maybe aren't even serving at all. I'm an advocate for adopting practices like universal design for learning; assuming that our students have lots of different life circumstances and intersectional identities, and they come to us from very different kinds of levels of preparedness, cultural backgrounds, those kinds of things. For years I've been advocating that we need to share our power as instructors in the classroom. When Chavella framed her argument, I thought, you know, I haven't been thinking about that at all, from the instructor side of the conversation.

[00:09:06] Now, many of your learners - if you have small children, or if you were at one point a small child - might remember *Highlights Magazine for Children*. One of the features in *Highlights Magazine for Children* was an ongoing thing - every month they would have these two boys, one of them named Goofus and one of them named Gallant. Goofus never did anything right, and Gallant was the clued in one who did things in the, the socially acceptable way. And I had a Goofus moment - I thought, I've been doing this in an unexamined way for a long time.

[00:09:41] The conversation started with Chavella laying out, here's why I'm shouting into the void. That's what really got the article started - was trying to recognize, not only from the perspective of folks for whom the conversation is challenging, but also the folks for whom the conversation isn't even in their brains yet, folks from dominant culture identities, those kinds of things. That's kind of where we started. And we were fortunate enough to work with a couple of editors at the *Chronicle* who really helped us out. So, that's a little, little tiny nugget of where we got going with this conversation.

[00:10:19] **Catherine Ross:** That's great. And Chavella, I'm happy to have you speaking out on this podcast and, and hopefully not into a void.

[00:10:28] **Chavella Pittman:** Yes, yes, yes, yes!

[00:10:29] **Catherine Ross:** That has not been our experience - so I'm sure it will be well received by our listeners. So, my next question was around the four action steps that you have in the article. About what instructors can take away from the article, and ways to deal with, and this is a quote, "the very real inequities faced by some instructors," end of quote.

[00:10:55] Could you talk a little about those action steps and which ones you think are, I don't know, the most vital in addressing these inequities? Two of them seem more like individual actions, and two seemed a little bit more institutional level actions. So, I wasn't sure if there was any obvious first step?

[00:11:17] **Chavella Pittman:** So, you know, I have my own opinions about what I think is the first step. And then I also have, you know, my opinions about, you know, whether or not you tackle institutional, individual things. I think the first step is really just to find trained help. I'll say that first, but I think we're going to come back and talk about that a little bit more.

[00:11:34] I think that it's an "and" question, I don't think it's an "or" question when it comes to the institutional or the structural level. The one thing that I suggest, we don't say this explicitly in the article, but, this idea of sort of understanding that your classroom choices may unintentionally affect our undercut a colleague - that's the one that we talk about broadly. But specifically, one of the things that I suggest that faculty do, is to have guidelines for classroom interactions, but it has to be a very strategic and intentional guidelines. It can't be this vague sort of like, oh, treat others as you want to be treated, and the golden rule. Like, that doesn't work for all the reasons that we talked about; the variability of students, the variability of authority. I, you know, always suggest that faculty with marginalized statuses have guidelines for classroom interactions, or student interactions, that will allow them to deal with some of those inequities when they pop up about marginalized faculty's practices. So that's the individual level.

[00:12:32] The meso level is; I teach people how to connect that to the current handbook. So, how to connect it to the current faculty and student handbook; that's the meso level. And on the institutional level, I encourage departments and administrators to adopt, sort of, unit-wide policies about classroom interaction. Not a one size fits all one, but one that reifies that faculty have the authority to make choices about these sorts of activities.

[00:12:59] So, in the article, I talk about faculty with privileged statuses already having a force field. All of the things that I suggest when I'm working as a developer - whether with an institution, or an individual - is all about force field creation. And you have to do that at the individual level, at the meso level, and at the institutional levels. For me, it's always an "and."

[00:13:20] I make sure that they're easy to do. Faculty are busy, and institutional change is long. I always find ways to do it so that they're very slight adjustments that get it done, quickly.

[00:13:32] **Catherine Ross:** Wow, I love that phrase. Faculty are busy and institutional change is long - that's a good one.

[00:13:39] **Tom Tobin:** Well, it's absolutely the truth as well. In the article, I talk about how I used to be... I wanted to be, sort of, the cool, hip professor. And so I'd have my students call me by my first name. What I didn't recognize was, that for my own classroom dynamics, that was a valid and defensible choice. And what was happening was my women faculty colleagues, my faculty colleagues of color, they don't get that automatic deference, culturally, that I get in a classroom environment. When they say things like, "call me Dr. Pitman," then

it's, well, why are you being such a stickler when Tom is more loosey goosey, and more easygoing? It was a matter for me in my department of understanding what the effect of my own classroom choices on the perceived power and authority of other people who were teaching.

[00:14:38] This isn't just a racial or cultural thing either. It's our full-timers, our tenure line folks, our contingent instructors - they have differing levels of perceived authority from the students. When we're thinking about moving from individual to structural changes, that's got to be the bridge. Chavella outlined it very nicely, that if you don't have allies among the people who are in those dominant culture, assumed authority sorts of roles, change isn't going to happen at the level of an individual course, or a department, unless there's conversation about the effects impact, and practices that are happening in individual classrooms. Bringing this stuff up in the department meeting is an essential piece of listening that has to happen.

[00:15:33] The other piece of that is when we start thinking about institutional change. The drivers for institutional change are persistence, retention, and satisfaction - the kind of stuff that keeps the provost up at night, right? Students who feel like their professor has control over and a clear direction for the course, they're much more likely to stick with us. They're less likely to challenge or question what's going on in the classroom environment. They're more likely to trust the instructor as someone who is capable and competent. The worst thing that can happen is we have instructors, to whom the students are seeing, that they *don't* have good control over what's going on. The students don't perceive them as being trustworthy or authoritative presences in the classroom. So it's to our advantage as an institution to make sure that *all* of our instructors feel supported, empowered, and equally capable of calling on backup and help, as well.

[00:16:40] When Chavella started talking in terms of individual actions we can take, and then institutional actions we can take - it's absolutely right, they're definitely tied together.

[00:16:50] **Chavella Pittman:** I had a little bit of a follow up, um, to Tom. I don't know if I explicitly said, I mean, he's spot on - it can't just be diverse faculty that have these policies for classroom interactions. Allies have to do it too, because otherwise they look like the ones who are being ridiculous. As he stated, like, why does this person have this policy? Why is this person saying I have to be "Dr."? Those sorts of things have to be normed by the folks that have power. Again, they can't just have that loosey goosey policy of classroom instability - I have to be much more thoughtful and intentional about, how do you actually build authority in a classroom when it's assumed that you don't have one? So that their policies actually look similar to the ones of their, their diverse colleagues.

[00:17:35] **Catherine Ross:** Thank you for this powerful advice. This is great advice for everyone. As you said, it takes individuals, and departments, and institutions. Those are really great action steps and very doable, very doable. I think I'm going to now turn it over to my co-host, Rebecca, so that she can ask you her questions.

[00:18:01] **Rebecca Petitti:** Great. Thank you, Catherine. And thank you both so much. You've talked a lot about, really, I think Tom - you've talked about how this made you think in a new way, raise things that you hadn't thought of before. And so I'm really interested, given this article, what you both have learned. And having shared this experience in kind of a

large platform, like the *Chronicle*, I'm wondering if you might share what you might have done differently. Whether that's, you know, have you changed approaches to inclusive teaching in your course? Whether that's carving out space to talk about these dynamics... yeah. So if you could talk more about that.

[00:18:33] **Tom Tobin:** It's kind of odd, and Rebecca, I love the way you're phrasing the question. Because my "doing differently" is actually taking something I was already doing, and expanding its scope as an advocate for the educational rights of people with disabilities and other barriers in their lives - like working adults, and people with family and caregiving responsibilities, work responsibilities, military service. You name the barrier, and people have it.

[00:19:01] When I work with instructors as a faculty developer, I always say, "how do you know what kinds of barriers your students are experiencing?" And the answer is: ask them. We seldom, or too seldom, actually just put out an anonymous survey to our students and say, "what's the thing that's getting in the way of you being able to give your best effort to this course?" That kind of information gathering and listening was second nature to me in terms of helping to understand about what my students were bringing into the conversation with me in the classroom. What I recognized was that I needed to start doing listening beyond my classroom in the same way. To intentionally start seeking out the voice of everybody who's teaching around me, and then talk at a department level, at a school level, and eventually at an entire university level about, what are those baseline non-negotiables that help us to have solid and respected instructor presence in the classroom environment? Those are conversations that I'm still learning how to have.

[00:20:18] On the other side of that coin, as well, when I started listening to the stories that my colleagues were talking about, I started recognizing that none of us as instructors brings the same intersection of personality, preparation, skill, confidence, and perceived authority into the classroom with us as well. So the kind of diversity and the kind of variability that we recognize in our students is something we need to also recognize in ourselves, and act collectively rather than individually.

[00:20:55] So for me, it was making, making that listening do broader duty for myself.

[00:21:02] **Chavella Pittman:** I have to think about this one a second. I feel like, what I would be doing differently - I'm not sure. The first thing that came to my mind is, I wouldn't be doing anything different. I would be continuing to advise diverse faculty to be strategic about their inclusive teaching, right? I hear the pain and the difficulty that people experience when they, they're doing the thing that they're being encouraged to do, but they're getting worse consequences for it, or they're doing the thing that they're supposed to be doing, but their administration isn't supporting them. They don't have their back - their teaching centers don't have their backs, their deans, their chairs don't. So I think what I'll, you know, continue to do is to advise diverse faculty to be strategic about that. I'll continue to make those sort of differences and experiences apparent for ally faculty. I'll continue to encourage institutions to recognize and reward that labor that our diverse faculty are doing.

[00:22:02] Because the reality is, is when you look at the statistics, diverse faculty actually engage in these inclusive teaching strategies already more than dominant status faculty. It's just that they're not being heralded for it. They're being somewhat, sort of, punished for it.

[00:22:17] So I, I don't think I would really do anything differently. Maybe the thing I would do differently is yell louder. Maybe that's what I'll do - yell louder.

[00:22:27] **Rebecca Pettiti:** I like that. Yell louder, and then we can listen. I think kind of going back to what Tom said, right? So we'll listen to the yelling louder, and have that opportunity to do that. Thank you both so much.

[00:22:37] And I think my next question is really related to this. So you've both talked a little bit about some of the actions and thinking about these levels, less so at individual, but really the importance of collective action in the institutional level. And so in your article, that fourth action that you suggest is fine trained help. And I know, Chavella, you hinted at this earlier, as being like the most important one, or maybe the starting point. So I wonder if you could speak to, what can those in that trained help - whether it's CTLs, colleagues in the departments - what can they do to kind of best support that? You know, what are the gaps in work already being done? And what approaches are perhaps most helpful?

[00:23:14] **Chavella Pittman:** I think that, again, so not only do I work with a lot of diverse faculty, I'm also - I know diverse faculty developers. And a lot of their experiences are, they are being silenced and ignored in their own centers. So I think - of course, just because someone has diverse statuses doesn't necessarily mean that they will have the expertise for this - but I suspect that there are people in folk's centers who are looking at the intersection of faculty identities and the scholarship of teaching and learning. And I think it's to.. for people to listen to them. Listen to what they've been saying! Stop shooting them down, stop silencing them. Support some of the efforts that they're trying to engage in.

[00:23:53] If you don't have those people internally, look externally to find folks that do that work. I do that work. And what I see happen a lot is people will come to me, right? Because they need help and support, either retaining diverse students or retaining diverse faculty. And they'll decide, oh, we can hobble something together internally and do it, and it's a mess - because the arrogance of assuming that you have expertise in this area, or just because I'm an ally I can have these sorts of conversations - and then they usually engage in some other, sort of, cocoo misstep. And they're back on my step, like a year later.

[00:24:29] So I feel the main thing to do is to, to really listen to what those folks are saying. Pay attention to what they're saying and get the external help that you need in terms of where the gap is. The most obvious gap is, literally look at every single thing that you're doing, and ask yourself, have you considered faculty statuses in any way, shape, or form? Any way, shape, or form? And for the most part, I know the answer to that is no.

[00:24:54] Having gone to a lot of professional development things, that's the real gap - is that those conversations are not coming up at all. But they're crucial, because that's who's walking in the door. That's who's showing up online. There are a lot of assumptions about faculty statuses, so that's the real gap. But I don't think people have the capacity to fill that gap on their own at all, in any way, shape or form. And because that gap is an uncomfortable

conversation, challenges the status quo in which many instructors already feel a level of comfort and don't feel a need for change, instructors from dominant cultural positions can feel like they need to rush in and fill that space.

[00:25:35] **Tom Tobin:** In earlier conversations, I heard Chavella talking about dominant culture folks rushing in to fill the gap. You can kind of think of what that sounds like. Hey, I'm a white guy and, hey Black woman instructor, teach me about intersectionality, and that's tokenism, that puts the burden on colleagues who may or may not have space, authority, comfort or knowledge to be able to facilitate that conversation. That's one of the reasons why we advocate very strongly that it's good to bring in someone who is actually studying the ways in which people interact in social spaces so that you have a, a neutral and supportive outside voice, so that it's not, oh yeah, I talked to my colleague, who's a Black woman and she said we should do this, but that didn't really sit with me well. And then, you know, this sort of icy silence descends again.

[00:26:33] What we want to come out of these kinds of conversations, are ways to support one another. Ways to be intentional in our actions and to move away from performative action. There, there's been a big thing about land acknowledgements, that our colleges and universities are on first nation's territory. That's all well and good, you have a land acknowledgement at the beginning of your event. What are you actually doing that helps the tribes who are still there? That's moving from performative to intentional allyship. And I think that's where we want the article and the argument to evolve from where we started.

[00:27:17] **Chavella Pittman:** I do want to be clear, I sure as heck was not suggesting you roll up on diverse faculty. I was highlighting the fact that there are diverse faculty developers out there, who, again, I interact with. So I know that they're being silenced and marginalized, you know, in a lot of ways. No one wants to listen to them because you know, they have a, a perspective that's different and people are silencing them in a range of ways.

[00:27:41] **Rebecca Petitti:** Thank you both so much. I really appreciate that. It sounds like listening is a key word that I'll take away from this today. But listening with intention, and listening to the folks that are doing this work and that are, that are perhaps...

[00:27:53] **Chavella Pittman:** With action. Listening with action.

[00:27:55] **Rebecca Petitti:** ...and with action! Yeah. And so with that, I'll turn it back to Catherine now for our, kind of, final closing question.

[00:28:02] **Catherine Ross:** Great. Thank you, Rebecca. This was just such a rich conversation, and I think it's going to be enormously helpful, especially for, I should say, for people like us who work in teaching centers, to really start to more deeply consider all of the wonderful things you've brought up Chavella. Thank you, we can't thank you enough for that.

[00:28:25] But that kind of leads me into my last question - what keeps you inspired? And motivates you to believe in the possibility of change in higher education teaching?

[00:28:36] **Tom Tobin:** There's one thing for me and it's real simple, and that is assuming good intent on the part of all of my colleagues. We all want to see our students, our colleagues, and our institutions be successful. Even those of us who sort of have our arms folded across our chest going, ah, you can't make me change what I'm doing, I have academic freedom, lodi-lodi-la. Even those folks who are kind of guarding the ivory tower, are doing so out of a sense of trying to preserve something that they value. And if we can have the conversation about, what is it that you actually value, about the interactions you're having with students, about the role you play as a scholar, as a colleague, as a teacher - those are the kinds of conversations that start to open us up toward identifying barriers, identifying gaps, and then addressing them collectively and together. So that's what gives me hope for what's coming next.

[00:29:37] **Chavella Pittman:** What keeps me sort of inspired and motivated - a deep, deep desire to ensure that diverse faculty's teaching doesn't get them pushed out of academe. All the research on diverse faculty's teaching shows that it's awesome. It's beneficial. They use all this great, innovative, effective pedagogy. You know, I have a faculty client now that I'm helping sort of navigate their institution trying to silence them. And when they tell me what they're doing in their classroom, I'm like, this is amazing. This must continue. Your students are benefiting so much, even though they're resisting and colleagues are resisting. It would be horrible if institutions lost the teaching contributions that diverse faculty make.

[00:30:18] So that's what, you know, keeps me sort of doing this work is a deep, deep desire to make sure that those folk's teaching benefits continue to occur, essentially.

[00:30:28] **Catherine Ross:** Wow. So powerfully spoken and happily received. I am really grateful that you find inspiration in that, both of you, in this work. We need all the help we can get, I think, for institutional change. So I really appreciate your efforts, and you sharing all of this wisdom with us.

[00:30:52] So all I can say is, thank you again, Chavella and Tom, for taking this time to talk with us, share your work and your deep expertise, to help move higher education teaching to a new and maybe better place. And for being part of this spring 2022 podcast season, thank you.

[00:31:15] **Tom Tobin:** It's been a pleasure to be on with you, Catherine and Rebecca. And thank you listeners for spending time with us too.

[00:31:20] **Chavella Pittman:** Yes, thanks so much for inviting us, and listening to all of the things that I'm normally yelling into the void.

[00:31:31] **Catherine Ross:** If you've enjoyed this podcast, please visit our website where 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's Center for Teaching and Learning and is produced by Stephanie Ogden, Laura Nicholas, and Jon Hanford.

[00:32:00] Our theme music is *In the Lab* by Immersive Music.