

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series

Season 4, Episode 7: Two Years Later; Learning through a Pandemic with Two Columbia Undergraduate Students

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.

I'm speaking today with two undergraduate Columbia University students who are serving as undergraduate teaching and learning consultants, as part of our CTL's Students as Pedagogical Partners Initiative.

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."

So we are joined today by Emma Fromont and Victor Jandres Rivera. They will now each briefly introduce themselves.

[00:01:09] **Victor Jandres Rivera:** Hi, I'm Victor. I'm a sophomore in Columbia College, and I am studying Ethnicity and Race Studies with a concentration in Human Rights.

[00:01:19] **Emma Fromont:** Hi, I'm Emma. I'm a senior majoring in Film and Media Studies and minoring in Sociology. I'm a French student, I'm part of the dual degree Sciences Po, which means that I've previously been studying for two years in France. And in addition to that, I have a degree in Physics and Chemistry from the University of Aix-Marseille, which I followed by distance learning, in parallel. I've just been learning in many different contexts and had some experience in remote learning, even before the pandemic.

[00:01:47] **Catherine Ross:** Great. Thank you both. Let me set the stage a little bit for our listeners. We've been doing this podcast for - this is our fourth semester. And I've been hearing back from a lot of folks, particularly instructors at Columbia, and they often tell me how much the episodes that feature the students, and the students' reflections on learning, are some of the most powerful and helpful for them in thinking about their own teaching. And obviously I couldn't agree more.

So I thought today we would check in with our undergraduate student consultants for this, sort of, end of a two year pandemic journey, that we are still on to some extent. Just to see how they have experienced, learned, and grown through all of the disruption; the multiple transitions from remote, to in-person, to hybrid, and back again. I think for a lot of instructors, have exposed dead ideas, and, and has really given us an opportunity to rethink how we do things like teaching. And I thought it would be really valuable if we could get

some of the student experience on how dead ideas might've surfaced for them in their learning.

I will start with a question about the various course modalities that I just referenced. So, as you are both thinking about these last couple years, I would love to hear how these experiences, these different modalities in different situations and contexts for learning, have shaped you as a learner. You know, are there some ideas, or beliefs that you had that have changed, um, over this time? Particularly beliefs about learning. Any dead ideas that came up for you, any sort of "aha" moments about your learning? What works for you?

It's a big question! You can pick any part of it, jump in wherever you want. Emma, why don't you start us off here.

[00:04:05] **Emma Fromont:** Shifting from an in-person environment to where, similarly to my peers, my peers - I had a big full schedule, to an agreement where it was only me and my computer that required to be much more focused on my learning and what I really wanted to take away from the classes. And it was very difficult. And I think I've been lucky to have encouraging professors, but it also made me realize how much I like having personal projects over just trying to learn binary things without any aim. Because the pandemic prevented the professors from organizing in-person exams, where it was only a book, showing that you learned everything. Projects, for instance, were encouraged. And this new form of assessment, which was more about pursuing my interest and using the class as a support for my own research and final paper, really changed the way I approach my education.

At first, it fostered any independent approach to learning. And with the professors who really embraced these first, new, facilities, I felt like trust was more prominent. And now that we are back in person, I really hope that this flexibility and trust, which was maybe the only good side of online classes, won't be lost.

I also realized that lectures did not have to be long, tiring and boring. I learn so much more with asynchronous material in-advance and shorter in class moments, which were more focused on questions and discussions. And some professors are trying to keep that. Now that we are back in-person, and recorded lectures are also such a precious resource, uh, because we can watch them at our own pace. And that's much more efficient, at least to me to actually learn.

[00:05:47] **Catherine Ross:** Right. So those are all really good points and things we've heard from previous students that we interviewed, particularly the, the trust piece has been really highlighted a lot, I think. Victor, would you like to add to this conversation?

[00:06:05] **Victor Jandres Rivera:** Yeah, so something that I took away from what Emma was talking about was, kind of going back and looking at education in another light. Mostly through the pandemic, I started thinking about how I would learn as a person, instead of simply looking at myself getting into school and then getting these great grades, and then that's another step to grad school. Because as I was thinking more about my position in the classroom here at Columbia, I feel like I experienced a lot of that imposter syndrome that a lot of students at Ivy league schools talk about. Kind of feeling like a small fish in a big pond. I started thinking more about what I wanted to get out of Columbia also.

And with online learning, I started thinking about how I was feeling very overwhelmed and frustrated at education, simply because I would take a quiz, take a test, get to the exam. I feel like I was cramming and then regurgitating this information, and then going to the next class and then feeling like I didn't remember anything.

And then, I remember once, a student was looking at my notes and they're like, this is all very meticulous! Like, you must be, like, so smart, like, you must be so prepared. But then I thought to myself, I don't really understand any of this, but I feel like I'm still going to get a good grade. And now, looking at my education, now that we're in person, I started to realize that - I'm enjoying learning more. Not only because it's in person, but because I feel like this semester I've really gotten to know a lot more of my teachers. I've gotten more involved into classes that have smaller seminars, classes in which I can actually collaborate with other students, classes in which I actually enjoy the material, because you can tell the professors are very passionate in the way they present it. That's not really possible with all of your classes, but I feel like it's something we can implement more in the classroom; this idea of students working together, and not just focused on, just, regurgitating information on to tests, and on assignments, and then going to the next step.

It's made Columbia a lot more enjoyable because I look at it more as an experience in which I can learn and grow, instead of looking at it as a stepping stone to, either where I want to be after Columbia career-wise, or just educational if I want to go to another school. And I feel like that's something that came out of online learning because when we had that transition from completely online to hybrid to completely in person, it made me look at myself as a student in my position.

And I'm actually kind of grateful for some of the things that have come out of it, just because I feel like we really got into experience the, the lectures online, and Zoom, and then looking at, having all these books and resources online. And then, getting to go to libraries, and doing it in person, and studying in different ways. And because of that, I feel like we have this great opportunity to look at ourselves as individuals and see, like, what helps us? And I think that's been really nice.

[00:08:48] **Catherine Ross:** Emma, I see you nodding. Did you want to add a little bit? It does touch on what you talked about, how the projects helped you learn more deeply and better than just exams, quizzes - the more traditional methods. And also the sense of community, learning with other students.

[00:09:08] **Emma Fromont:** Yes, I absolutely agree. And I had similar experiences as Victor - having to work on projects that you are truly interested in, instead of this feeling, that I also sometimes had, of studying, doing the quiz, and then not remembering anything. And I think what's really important, it was a great opportunity - and it was a difficult time, and I think it's important to state it - but I'm glad that we got to rethink some of these dead ideas, and some of those things that we thought should be done that way, and add to the, part of the school experience. And now it's no longer the case.

[00:09:45] **Catherine Ross:** And I think it gave you a, kind of, new lens on being on campus, and being with professors, and being with other students, right? It allowed you to enter that

space in a different way than you might have, had we not all had to have been online for that extended period of time.

So that's really interesting. I know that one of the most commonly mentioned takeaways from the online and hybrid experiences during the pandemic, is the importance of community for learning. And that creating community is something that students can do, but also instructors can support students in that. And instructors can also create community for themselves and students in their classes in this process, I think, of realizing that community is so important, particularly when you're fully online. It's even more important, right? To really try to do that very intentionally.

But as we were engaging in that work, I think issues around access and equity also became much more visible. And I think a lot of instructors really stretched themselves to think about issues of access, and issues of equity. Can you give us any examples of strategies that instructors have used - online, hybrid, or in person, right? - that have really supported your learning? I'd like to hear about that.

[00:11:16] **Victor Jandres Rivera:** Yes. So for me, something that I noticed early on when school shifted online, some professors began providing readings and resources and texts online. Themselves, just on the syllabus, or through the announcements on CourseWorks. And then also, I had a lot of teachers that had the zoom lectures, but they also had them recorded and then placed on canvas. Because of that, I started to realize that a lot of times I was learning more, and I retained a lot more information if I was able to watch the lecture, not during class time, but after the fact.

A lot of students like to make jokes like, oh, I watch it on like two times speed, and all of that. And I feel like at first I was like, okay, so you just don't want to spend the time in class, and all of this stuff. But then I realized, I lose focus very quickly. I have ADHD. I can very much just start spacing out. A lot of teachers talk slowly, they have these very monotone voice, and that's on purpose. I can see how they do that to be heard in class, and so that students can understand. But for me, it's very distracting and it can cause me to space out. So when I did watch the lectures after the fact, on two times speed, I actually retained a lot more information.

I realized when we went in person, professors weren't doing that anymore. I thought, oh, they're trying to encourage attendance, I guess that's a good thing. The same thing with the online resources, they were telling us, you can now go get the books at Book Culture, or like, these resources, you can print them out - that's because, like, you retain information better when you write it down and when you are annotating on paper. And I feel like I just kind of took it as, like, oh yeah, I've always heard this. But I feel like now, I kind of realized - I don't learn better that way. And I always take the teacher's word for it. And I was like, why am I letting a professor tell me how I learn best, when I realized that this is easier for me? It feels like I'm doing something out of tradition, or doing something... because this is the way it's always been.

And because of that, I feel like at first, I looked at online learning as something in which we weren't connected at all. And it didn't even seem like school. But I think now, I'm just looking back and I'm like, some aspects aren't like how school was traditionally before, but that

doesn't necessarily have to be a bad thing. It can be really beneficial if a student realizes that, I learned better watching this lecture after. I don't think they should be punished for that, simply for not wanting to attend class in person. If they feel like that's the way they learn best, they should be able to do that.

I think a lot of times we're punished for wanting to stray away from traditional aspects of academia. But I think that COVID has allowed professors to modify their courses, and if students realize that those modifications are better, I think it's okay to stick with them.

[00:13:54] **Emma Fromont:** Yes. I mean, we are adults and we made the choice to pursue your education. I totally agree. If our main focus is learning, then it should not be a big deal to accept that sometimes, depending on the classes and on the students, recorded lectures might be better than attending one.

[00:14:13] **Catherine Ross:** Yeah, I think that's been, um, a theme I've heard from other undergraduate students that I've talked with. That they found those recorded lectures very helpful - both for the first encounter with the material, because you can pause, rewind it, listen to something again, right? It's tailored for you and your attention. Whereas sitting in a class, it just keeps going. And maybe you were still trying to process something that was said a few minutes ago, but you don't have that space like you have when you're controlling the pace of the recorded lectures. And also it's good, helpful for reviewing two, right?

[00:14:58] **Emma Fromont:** Having access to the lectures, or the material in advance, or asynchronously also allows to really have the class discussion, focused on questions, and on things that are really helping us learn. A lot of the time, especially before the pandemic, the lectures I attended were... I would gain the same thing from reading your book, because it was more about transmitting the material. And now that we've been through this pandemic and that we learned that it's actually possible for us to read the material and understand the class, and then use the time with the professors and our peers to actually discuss this material and ask questions.

And this, to me, it'll also be so much more efficient. And I think it's something that we should keep, now that we're back in person.

[00:15:51] **Victor Jandres Rivera:** Yeah. I feel like for me, something I also realized was, everyone was so frustrated. I feel like when the pandemic started in school, and I feel like even the transition into hybridized learning, people would be frustrated at, like, going back on to online, going back to in person. And I feel like no one's opinion on it was the exact same. At first, it always just felt so disorienting; trying to see, what am I doing now? But I feel like, that disorientation and that frustration - it was beneficial in the sense that I think it opened up conversations on how learning needs to change. Especially because, as teachers started to realize that we didn't feel connected when stuff was on Zoom, to students and to them, they modified courses.

So - and not only that, even stuff, like, outside of the classroom. Like, one of my professors realized that we were supposed to be in, like, this really small, intimate seminar environment. However, being on Zoom, there wasn't that much participation. It felt like we weren't really becoming attached to the material or each other. We were kind of just, like, strangers logging

onto Zoom, participating, and then logging off. So he started giving office hours outside of class. But those office hours weren't really spent just discussing the class and then talking about, like, how you want to write your essay. You can make an appointment for that, but like, these office hours are Saturday morning. At first, everyone was like, you're crazy for doing that. Who's going to come to these office hours on a Saturday morning outside, like under a tent, on campus? But then, once we started going, we realized they were actually really fun. We'd have conversations with each other. And even with the professor - we'd talk about things related to the books into what we were discussing in class, but it was more like our opinion, or our take on it. We didn't really feel like we had to do, like, a close reading. Like, it was us talking about discussion posts. It was just, like, our personalities coming out. And because of that, I felt like I really got to know the other students, and they got to know the professors. So when I had the opportunity to take the class again, this semester, a continuation of it, I did it. It was a very easy choice for me because I felt so connected.

And because of that, I'd actually want to read the material more, just so I can have that fun part on the weekend. And it sounds weird, because it's like, wow, office hours is so fun..? But I feel like the teacher was able to take problems he saw in the class, and then modify it. And then we were able to have something that we now enjoy out of it, something unconventional - these cute little office hours I like going to on Saturdays.

[00:18:15] **Catherine Ross:** So in this case, the instructor decided to build community by meeting with you in person, outside. And, and then that kind of worked backwards into the online classes. So it created a better feel. Everyone felt like they knew each other and were more connected.

[00:18:37] **Victor Jandres Rivera:** Yeah. At this point, classes were already hybrid, but I feel like because of how the pandemic was working, everything always felt so volatile. And I think, even though the class was in person at this point, he still understood that we didn't feel as connected just because there were so many restrictions on us being able to meet, commune, have these, like, study groups in class. So because of that, I feel like it was really beneficial. It supplemented the class a lot and it gave it this new intimate feeling I wasn't really experiencing in any other of my classes, even ones that were so much smaller.

But because of that, I feel like it was really beneficial to us, but also the teacher. I felt comfortable asking them for recommendations because it's like, this is the only teacher I feel, like, that's actually gotten to know me this much. It was great having that experience.

[00:19:21] **Catherine Ross:** So back to that theme of community, again, and being able to work with other people. Yeah, it's interesting because I know that some instructors use technology as a way to engage with students and have students engage with each other, as well as with the content of the courses.

One of Diane Pike's original dead ideas was; technology is either going to save us in higher ed - and this was of course in 2010 when she said this - or it's going to doom us, right? Because this was right when MOOCs were starting to come out, and everybody thought, oh, MOOCs are going to replace higher education. That's it... the business model's dead. They're going to be like newspapers, right? They're only going to be MOOCs now for teaching and learning. So there was this sense that technology is going to kill higher education, or it's

going to save it. And clearly in the pandemic, it did save us. Thank goodness we had it. But I was wondering if you have any examples of a way that an instructor used technology that really, really helped you learn. And maybe it was even new to you, a new experience of using technology in a creative way, or in a fun kind of way that supported your learning. And you would hope that, even in an in-person class, maybe you could still use that.

[00:20:48] **Emma Fromont:** Yes. In one of my sociology online classes last spring, we used a website called Peer Resolve, Peer Resol, I'm not sure.

[00:20:57] **Catherine Ross:** Oh! Perusall, yeah.

[00:20:59] **Emma Fromont:** Yeah. It allowed us to comment on the readings and read each other's comments. And more of the reading content was manageable, and that, that allowed us to really go in depth and understand the texts. And just, asynchronous work was very efficient and allowed me to make sure that I could make the most of the shortened lecture time. This professor will read our comments in advance and explain what we had found difficult, for example. So the class was tailored on these comments that we had done previously. I find the use of this platform, very efficient to make the most of the readings and really be able to understand them in depth, and work on them.

Because sometimes, in some classes, I will read hundreds of pages and not really remember them. Whereas, when you have the tools to actually work on them, you have to comment on parts and maybe read each other's comments, I felt more engaged with the, with the reading.

[00:22:00] **Catherine Ross:** In fact, it almost sounds like, that kind of engagement that it allows you to do is more like the ways that experts read texts. Because when an expert reads a text, they're immediately making associations - engaging, you know, mentally, cognitively - with what's in there and thinking, oh, it's like this, or I've... it's similar to this other author, or this is a theme we've seen before. And so using that platform seems to have engaged you in a deeper way.

The superficial understanding that many students have of reading, which is, you read the words on the page and you just keep reading the words on the page until you've read all the pages, right? And sometimes nothing sticks from that.

[00:22:48] **Emma Fromont:** Yes. And especially the fact that the professor made sure to read a bit of our comments, and to adapt the class on that.

[00:22:55] **Catherine Ross:** Right. So you were helping shape the conversation that occurred in class then. It's almost like a flipped model in some ways. So the students are really doing the work outside of class and around the content, but also your questions are then going to drive what's happening in the class, yeah.

[00:23:16] **Victor Jandres Rivera:** I think the way that tech has helped me the most in the classroom has been through the use of Zoom, but, teachers encouraging students to meet outside of class with Zoom for, like, projects, assignments, things like that, the smaller tasks, like, office hours - because I feel like I really do enjoy when it's in person. But sometimes if

you're only supposed to go to office hours, just something really quick, like, one of those, like, 15-minute appointment type things. Or if you're supposed to go even to the Writing Center here at Columbia, or if you're supposed to meet with a group for 30-minutes for a project, it's very difficult to find a time now, because we're all also busy and doing things. It's like, okay, I need to be at the philosophy building for this Writing Center meeting, but then I have to be in Lewison and for this other meeting right after, but then I need to go back to McBain right after. And it feels like it's really disorienting, but it also puts a lot of stress on us.

For example, the other week I was looking for an appointment for the Writing Center, and there were just none that worked. I was looking for, like, online ones, but all the Zoom ones were already taken. Because it wouldn't be possible for me to make the meetings and go back and forth the way I would need to. And because of that, I feel like I'm losing out on some opportunities. When before, when it was on Zoom, it's like, I'm at my desk, meeting, next meeting right after, next meeting right after... which seems horrible! It seems like you're just going through meetings on Zoom all day, but it's nice having class in person, maybe grabbing lunch with friends in person, and then you can have those few meetings.

I feel like this idea that Pike was presenting of, like, it can save us, or doom us all. I feel like there's this really, really rough dichotomy in which we have to choose, but I feel like we can marry all those aspects together. Technology is there to help us. It's the same thing we've been discussing with social media. Like, oh, social media is so toxic. It's ruining all of us, but at the same time, it connects all of those. And that kind of extends to Zoom also. I can't meet with certain people if it's not online. So do I just not meet them? Because someone tells me our relationships have to be meaningless it's for this 15-minutes on Zoom? I feel like we can still have a lot of collaboration and we can have a lot of meaningful discussions. And the fact that it's on zoom doesn't necessarily make it any worse. Sometimes it just makes it easier, and I feel like that can do better than just missing out on the opportunity.

[00:25:29] **Catherine Ross:** Thank you for that, Victor. That's a really nice insight. And I think many of us who've come back to campus are struggling in similar ways because now, I have meetings in person sometimes, and then meetings that follow right after that are on Zoom, and I can't get back to my office fast enough to get into the Zoom meeting on time because there's no travel time built in. And so I think it is a dilemma that has come out of all this hybrid work we've been doing. But I like how you delineated, like, in person is really good for these things, but maybe we don't just ditch Zoom - totally! We keep it for other purposes where it allows us to do things that we can't do if we have to do them all in person.

[00:26:19] **Emma Fromont:** I totally agree with you, Victor. Especially in the Writing Center, it is so much more practical to meet online, and share a screen and show what we wrote and work at the same time online, than meeting in person. And this is a really good example of what works best, I assume.

[00:26:39] **Catherine Ross:** Yes. So no technology's totally perfect for everything, or totally bad for everything. right? You have to find the right uses, where you get the best out of it?

All right. Well, let me finish up here with a big question. If you could reinvent higher education after these two years of all these different experiences, what would you wish for? I

know number one is that you could have more of your appointments on Zoom, but what teaching and learning changes would you keep? You've mentioned a couple, like the recorded lectures. Maybe there's a couple others you could, um, share with us. And are there any dead ideas that you hope we can leave behind for good?

[00:27:25] **Victor Jandres Rivera:** Yeah. One thing that came out of this whole conversation with school being very alienating, or kind of holding onto this idea that in person is the only way to have these, like, humanizing and, like, meaningful conversations between us. I feel like there was this aspect that Pike mentioned, like, the grading. That one is very controversial to me. Because going to Columbia, a lot of us just come here to get good grades, get a good GPA, get a good, like, LSAT or MCAT score.

And a lot of times, like, it seems like validation is completely rooted in this idea of grades and numbers. But I think, something with Zoom I realized, was that a lot of times, it just felt like you were getting numbers. Like, that was your only interaction. And now I'm kind of realizing that there are ways to do school, there are ways to approach teaching and learning that don't involve grades. So I have one professor that, um, does, like, check marks. Check plus, check minuses, has a bunch of, like, comments and, like, meaningful edits and insights that they applied to, like, the assignment that they're grading. But it's not tied to, like, a specific number that goes into our grade.

You have this progression in which, you know how you're doing so that it benefits you on the graded assignments, because then you can go back and be like, this is what I need to change. But you don't have this constant anxiety over whether this is going to tank my grade. Oh, now I need to get this, so that my GPA is that, because it's focusing on the learning, and focusing on helping you. Instead of having that anxiety, kind of, cloud your experience in the class. I feel like it's really helped me.

It's, it's a controversial one. I feel like, because it's kind of like, what's the point of school if you don't have grades? But it's like, maybe the point of school should be the learning part. It's something that came out of this conversation and working with the other consultants. Yeah, I feel like I'm still trying to grapple with it, so it's difficult to articulate that.

[00:29:08] **Catherine Ross:** Yeah. The whole notion of grading and what purpose it serves in higher ed, and maybe that's a really good one to be revisiting in which many instructors are. Because we did a podcast interview last year with Jesse Stommel about "ungrading," and he unpacked a lot of the things you're saying, right? And it goes back to Diane Pike's initial that idea that grades motivate learning, which we know isn't entirely true. Grades motivate getting grades, typically, right? So I'm glad to hear you, your experience in that way.

That's, um, a very powerful example. Emma, what would you change?

[00:29:49] **Emma Fromont:** It's funny because when I heard your question, I also immediately thought about assignments and grades, which is...

[00:29:55] **Catherine Ross:** Interesting! Very interesting.

[00:30:00] **Emma Fromont:** This has been a stressful part of our education. I would definitely focus on smaller, but regular assignments, and various types of assignments. And if there must be a grading system, I would make sure that it is a very clear and explicit. So that we, as students, feel like we know the rules of the game. To me, being clear on expectations and grading scales is a way to demonstrate consideration, and also establish this trust we've been talking about, when I know what to expect of what I do.

And I think final essays, or projects, prompted very early in the semester is also strategy that - because in that sense, it has gives me plenty of time to think and organize myself, and to truly seek feedback. And whereas, having prompts only two weeks in advance is mostly stressful, and leads to less engagement with the assignments also, in my experience.

And to me, a dead idea would be that having the students in person, in front of us is always better - that's what we've been discussing. It really depends on the students and on the classes. And I think there are no magical teaching recipes. We all have very various experiences, even though there are some points where we agree or similar experiences.

[00:31:22] **Catherine Ross:** Wow. Really some good thoughts there. I hope a lot of people listen to this podcast so they can hear what students are thinking, and that students are thinking about these things. What is the value of being in person versus being in a hybrid, or online space? And what purposes do these different modalities serve? And why are we insisting that there's just this one modality that everyone should be doing all the time, as the answer to every learner? Very interesting.

Thank you both so much. Um, thank you for being here and thank you for helping us wrap up our Spring 2022 season with your insights, and being so willing to share your experiences and your thoughts. I wish you both a lot of success with the rest of your semester.

[00:32:18] **Emma Fromont:** Thank you so much for inviting us.

[00:32:21] **Victor Jandres Rivera:** Yes, thank you so much. It was actually a great conversation.

[00:32:27] **Catherine Ross:** 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's Center for Teaching and Learning, and is produced by Stephanie Ogden, Laura Nicholas and Jon Hanford.

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