Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series
Season 2, Episode 4: Dead Ideas in Online Teaching and Learning with Roxanne Russell
Center for Teaching and Learning, Columbia University

Catherine Ross ([00:05](#)):

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 remotely today with Dr. Roxanne Russell, the Director of Online Programs at the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. Dr. Russell joined Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health in 2019 to lead their efforts in digital learning. She has more than 20 years of university level teaching experience, and more than 15 years of professional experience designing, developing, integrating, and evaluating online learning environments in higher education. She received her MA in English from Auburn University and her PhD in Instructional Technology and Design from Georgia State University. She has presented and published in the areas of digital learning and learning analytics in public, private, and nonprofit sectors in the US, India and China, and has been awarded a patent for a machine learning reading comprehension tool. Read Ahead, AI. Welcome to Dead Ideas, Roxanne.

Roxanne Russell ([01:25](#)):

Thank you so much, Catherine. I'm thrilled to be here.

Catherine Ross ([01:29](#)):

I'm very excited for this conversation. And I think online teaching and learning is certainly on everyone's minds these days. So I think our conversation will be very timely. Given your deep experience in the world of online teaching and learning. I'd like to hear some examples of frequently encountered dead ideas that instructors might hold about online teaching, whether as a response to the pandemic, or as part of a fully designed online degree program. And the second part would be the same for what about students? Do they also bring dead ideas into their first online class, or into their reactions to online learning, particularly in our current situation, when so many of them did not choose to engage in this modality and maybe never have used it, prior to this experience.

Roxanne Russell ([02:28](#)):

Yes. So I'll start with the instructors because there's certainly a dead idea that I've heard over and over again from instructors and that that is they can't connect with students in online classrooms because they can't read the room. And I will be the first to admit that I experienced this same feeling of the loss of the same kind of connection that I would have felt with students in person. But over the years, what I've come to realize is it's a difference and not a deficit. So in many ways, this difference pushes us to reflect on what we mean by connection. What are these connections? Is connection the adrenaline that we get from having a chance to speak passionately about topics we care about? Is it the delight we feel when we're listening to a student who is also passionate about the topic?

Roxanne Russell ([03:25](#)):

Both of these experiences, I think we can relate to as instructors. We all feel that way when we're in a lecture-based or discussion-based teaching environment, that's what feels good. That's what feels like

connection. And admittedly, it does feel more stilted in these online contexts like live sessions in Zoom or in asynchronous discussion boards.

Roxanne Russell ([03:50](#)):

So for example, right now one of the most frequently asked questions about online learning is whether or not students should have their cameras on in Zoom. So anytime the technology tool starts to be the center of the conversation, we have to remind ourselves to take a step back. What is it really? If this is about making connections, we turn to the process of design and ask what other types of connections are possible, besides the ones we are used to? Connections that would include more student voices, or may actually work better in an online environment. So if the focus shifts to active learning experiences and creating connections with students, we find that community building and making connections is actually quite strong online. There's plenty of evidence for that probably in our daily lives.

Roxanne Russell ([04:47](#)):

Now, when it comes to students, the number one dead idea for sure is that you have to teach yourself in online courses. And I don't know that this idea is as much dead as it is misled. Because yes, students will hopefully spend less time passively listening to lectures, and taking notes in a well-designed online course, but that does not mean they are necessarily teaching themselves. Because in a well-designed course, online or not, we should be offering scaffolded active learning experiences. And scaffolds are part of that teaching process. We create activities. We curate and create content, as well as plenty of opportunities for collaboration and interaction. And what I think is the number one part of teaching, and that is feedback where a subject matter expert could shine in giving personalized feedback during a student's crucial development in learning in their topic area.

Roxanne Russell ([05:56](#)):

So students are used to expecting that lecture style at universities, even though the studies show that they are not learning more just from hearing a superstar lecturer as they are in active learning. And I think the main reminder here online or in person is that when we do switch to these types of techniques, that may feel like students are teaching themselves, we have to communicate through them while we're doing it and how it's working.

Catherine Ross ([06:22](#)):

That is so interesting. And I'm so glad that you highlighted that point. I myself have seen in instructors end of course surveys, student comments, and these were not online courses. These were face to face courses, but when they switched to more active learning activities, students would often write, "We had to teach ourselves." And as you said, it is so critically important for instructors to have that dialogue with their students about why they're teaching this way, how it will benefit them, how it will benefit their learning to be more engaged in this way. And also it helps show how much effort an instructor has to put in to scaffold these activities and to really chart a course for engaged learning. So I am really happy that you brought that up because that applies beyond the world of online learning to any kind of change in sort of this very traditional mindset that some students bring with them when they come to college. And they picture that in their minds, actually as a professor lecturing, a famous professor lecturing.

Roxanne Russell ([07:40](#)):

That's right.

Catherine Ross ([07:40](#)):

So what are your thoughts about the perception that teaching online just isn't as good as teaching face to face. This is something I've heard at various institutions myself, when instructors are first sort of asked to start thinking about online. There is this kind of perception that somehow teaching online is less than teaching face to face. Is it even a fair comparison? Do you think it's related to the dead idea that you mentioned about engaging, that it's very difficult or impossible to engage students in an online environment?

Roxanne Russell ([08:25](#)):

I do think the comparison is fair, because we are trying to accomplish the same thing in a very different environment. So the question of comparable quality is bound to come up. And of course it's an important part of the work that I want to do is constantly asking myself, is this good quality learning that's happening online? So you asked also, if it's related to the common belief or dead idea that it's impossible to engage students in an online environment. I think that many faculty might believe that's what's on their mind, and it could very well be in many cases, but I've been advocating for online learning for a long time. And I have heard from many, many people and heard many perceptions, and it is my belief that a lot of these perceptions about quality are a little more complicated than that. I think that early on, online learning was associated with for-profit universities and so-called diploma mills.

Roxanne Russell ([09:29](#)):

And it has been very difficult for people to separate the two notions. So, because frankly, I introduce myself to new people a lot at conferences, even just in social settings, primarily in social settings. And they say, "What do you do?" And then online learning is in the name of my title. And so I know anecdotally from 20 years of doing this, what people associate with online learning and what those things are in the last five to 10 years, it's been MOOCs, massive open online courses. If I meet younger people or parents, I find that they associate it with dual enrollment, the process whereby a high school student can get college credit by taking online courses at their local state schools or community colleges. And it turns out that faculty and instructors are very similar in these ways. They mostly associate online learning with something that they know nothing about.

Roxanne Russell ([10:25](#)):

They really just don't know much about it, and assume it's not as good because it's not what they are used to. And because of the associations it has had in the past. Now it is truly my hope, this has been a really big year for online learning that cannot be overstated. I'm assuming. And I'm hoping that these old misconceptions will be largely wiped away because most faculty and students have had encounter online learning firsthand. And they must have quickly begun to realize that it's either for them or not, in some ways, but that the quality of teaching and learning is not only possible, but can be energizing in this new online space. So that's what I'm hearing from so many faculty and from students.

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

Well, that's really encouraging to hear that perhaps this pandemic has provided a kind of opening for online teaching to really take its rightful place in the university landscape and the higher ed landscape, and maybe lose that association, which I had actually never made. I realized when you said that I've never made that association with the for-profit piece of it. But yes, hopefully all the experiences we're having this year will create that space.

Roxanne Russell ([11:47](#)):

Just to say that it even came up in the first reactions that students had at Columbia University. Some of the things that we saw, they would say, "This is not X University." A well known for-profit online university. We don't want to go to school online. So it's pretty pervasive. Thank you for not making that association.

Catherine Ross ([12:12](#)):

That's too funny. Wow, that is really fascinating. I had not heard that, but I definitely had heard that there is this widespread perception that somehow it's less than. And yeah, we could go into that, but we won't, we'll stay on our main topic here. I'd like to really dive a little bit deeper now into the topic of interaction in the online context. As many of our listeners probably know there are sort of two major categories of interaction, a synchronous, or what you Roxanne refer to as live online interactions. And then the asynchronous interactions, which rely on discussion boards when class members are not meeting simultaneously. I think, I could be wrong and you can correct me that the live online format is probably more familiar to most instructors because it kind of resembles in some ways what happens in a face to face classroom. But the asynchronous interactions I think are less familiar and less understood, and therefore less utilized.

Roxanne Russell ([13:27](#)):

I think that's right. As someone who began my career with online learning in a world that could only be asynchronous before this live streaming, live conferencing became so much more ubiquitous. I was used to designing online learning experiences that relied solely on interaction through text, on discussion boards, in group work, in reading or watching lectures, and then having questions answered and responded to through text communications. And this idea of being able to have everyone still meet as they do now, which is what everybody sees us on. I think most people associate with online learning now with these live sessions, and with Zoom in particular, even though a lot of schools have used a different tool they've started with the jokes of Zoom University.

Roxanne Russell ([14:28](#)):

But asynchronous interaction is an incredibly powerful possibility for teaching online. And the reason it was used to begin with, one of the reasons that online learning caught on early on was for working professionals or for people who needed more flexibility in their learning experience, because they couldn't take the time to get together all at the same time, or where students could learn across the globe and be in the same classroom with each other, but not be in the same time zone.

Roxanne Russell ([15:04](#)):

And so what asynchronous work does is offer us that flexibility, specifically when it comes to the interactions that you can create asynchronously. I think that discussion boards have gotten a bad rap. And I would hope that they could maybe come back into their own now that we are all living our social and professional lives through social media, very often through discussion board threads. Something that we used to have to teach people to do, how to thread a conversation. That was something that used to be a part of orientation for online learning. And now it's just a part of our daily lives. We are all communicating with each other through Slack, communicating with each other professionally in these types of textual boards. And so to use it in the classroom at this point should be easy. It should fit right into the habits that the students have. And the benefits that we get from that; our students, if they have

been given a discussion prompt, they have more time to shape their answer, to look into ideas and form full arguments and go into in-depth analysis when they're providing their responses.

Roxanne Russell ([16:19](#)):

You also make space for more student voices. So those people who were quicker on their feet in the classroom or louder, their voices were always centered. And now you have every student that can be asked to participate on a discussion board. I think those are the ones that come to mind first, but I would also say that one of the things that people don't realize is an amazing resource in a discussion board is that it's like a mine. It's a place you can go to and look at very carefully for ideas for the next round of your class. That's something that I don't think occurred to people as easily when conversations develop organically in an in-person classroom. When you have a record of the conversation that occurred on a discussion board, you can really analyze a discussion board prompt or a discussion question for what it produced.

Roxanne Russell ([17:24](#)):

Did it center your voice in the conversation? We can actually run learning analytics and do a social network analysis. Did most of the responses come back to you, the professor, or did you create a conversation among many different nodes of students? Did they gather around certain topics? One of the things that is a really great teaching practice online, or in person is to start by getting people past preconceptions and misconceptions. And now you have a really clear record of that, and you can actually introduce preconceptions and misconceptions right off the bat without having to take say, a whole week for everybody to dig theirs up. Let's go ahead and name them, and let's get past that and to the next step, is just one example of the way that mining these conversations helps you have really targeted and learning focused discussions.

Catherine Ross ([18:21](#)):

I would think that these asynchronous techniques and discussions that as you have pointed out can be quite rich, both for the students and for the instructor would also be a real boon to the in-class sessions. If a course is using both. Do you want to talk about some ways in which asynchronous activities could enhance and improve even, any kinds of face to face interactions, even through Zoom.

Roxanne Russell ([18:56](#)):

Without a doubt, without a doubt. I mean, I see faculty already doing that. I mean, our faculty caught on quick with these. They all wanted to have the opportunity to arrive in a live session, having some sense of how students were processing the asynchronous content that they may have put up for the first time. So one of the first things I think that many faculty did this year was learned to record a lecture and take the lecture outside of the class, and then want to use that time when everyone was together more productively. We know that this has been being pushed for years as a flipped learning model. Well, it started happening, and the asynchronous discussion board is a really powerful tool for that, because it's that same record that I was just talking about. They're able to see what bogged students down, what flamed them up?

Roxanne Russell ([19:47](#)):

Where are the pieces of the puzzle that the instructor can now enter the conversation, provide some synthesis, provide some resources, clarify some things, ask more probing questions, and they're ready

for that. And don't have to take the time for maybe one student here or there to have their particular preoccupation become the preoccupation of the conversation.

Catherine Ross ([20:11](#)):

Right. I also really appreciated that you highlighted the equity piece of using these asynchronous tools and that even in a Zoom setting, we are often unintentionally of course, privileging students who process by speaking and oftentimes putting at a disadvantage, a lot of our students. So I think that's a very powerful recommendation for exploring these tools, just that alone piece. So I really appreciate you bringing that to us. I do know that there are some challenges in managing these kinds of online discussions, if you want to speak to that a little bit.

Roxanne Russell ([20:58](#)):

So the biggest challenge with the discussion board will be the reading burden that we feel. We sit down to a discussion board and you see that maybe it can be 40 to, I mean, in some classes it can probably get up to 120 posts have been made since the last time you opened the board and that feels overwhelming. And so I think the more we become accustomed to navigating those boards, learning how to cluster around topics, having certain and particular groups assigned to spaces where they get to have conversations with a smaller number of people so that it becomes more manageable for them to read, the better we're going to see engagement and learning happening on those discussion boards. Because the reading burden is for sure, a barrier to the adoption of discussion boards. And I would give this piece of advice for anyone who is listening and looking for advice for designing prompts. And that is don't just offer one, or you're going to read that answer however many times the number of students that you have, and nobody wants to do that? No one.

Catherine Ross ([22:09](#)):

Interesting and good advice. Thank you for that. I also think another question in many instructors heads is, when do you, as an instructor join those asynchronous conversations, how often, and why would you respond to student contributions in an asynchronous discussion? And how time consuming is that?

Roxanne Russell ([22:36](#)):

I think the instructor's voice is incredibly important in a discussion board, and that their presence should be established early on in that they will be there. It depends on the size of the course for whether or not you would choose to be highly active that first week, just so that you set up the expectations that students know you are there, it's really a matter of presence. You don't want your voice to overshadow, but you do want your ear to be apparent. You want them to know that you are listening in on this conversation and that you are a part of it. So in the early weeks, it's particularly important for you to be active. As the weeks go on, if you're having say a weekly discussion board, then it can become more strategic to review a board and look for ways to synthesize really important ideas.

Roxanne Russell ([23:31](#)):

And calling people out in these synthesis posts can be very effective, in the same way that you do that in the classroom when you say "So and so is doing really good work here by examining this." And being very on the board is a great strategy. But by no means, should any instructor feel they are not doing their job if they don't read every post on these boards. And that goes back to what I was trying to say earlier about the difference between the fact that students in some ways will use this just to process information. They're expressing and they're reflecting and they don't necessarily need a response. And it

was still a good exercise and still a good learning opportunity, but looking for places where your feedback could definitely help move the conversation along and probe into the areas that you know are important for their learning, then it is a very powerful tool for doing almost a slow release lecture. If you want to.

Roxanne Russell ([24:29](#)):

One of the efficiencies of online learning is that you could read a discussion board, you can write on a discussion board and take your own thoughts that you developed in response to students and save those for next time for how it might influence the design of your next prompt, or to respond that way again in similar ways to a student later.

Catherine Ross ([24:53](#)):

Wow, that is really helpful. A lot of helpful techniques in there, and ways to think about this. I know that in our conversation prior to the podcast, you also mentioned something that I found really interesting, which is the connection between metacognition and asynchronous discussion. And that was something I had never really thought much about. So I'd like to share that with our listeners.

Roxanne Russell ([25:20](#)):

First, it's a matter of convenience. There is a sense for faculty that I'm too busy, making sure they get all of this content to spend time on stopping to have them think about whether or not they're learning this content. And that's what we mean by medicognitive, is like how students spend some time thinking about how they learn, whether or not they're learning, what the quality of that learning is. That's the metacognition piece. And as we have more and more tried to introduce that to faculty as a good strategy that we know works to help students sustain their learning, they feel like there's no place to put it. Well, this is one place you can put it. This is a... Even an in-person class, a discussion board is a great place for that to happen because they get to read each other's, which is another layer of learning and reflecting and having aha moments about what others have done.

Roxanne Russell ([26:18](#)):

But here's the number one thing that I saw as a trend in an online program that I helped develop and run for Emory University. It was the first time I noticed it and since then, I've seen it happen many times. And that is that students in an online program, if they are moving through the program and their semesters in, say they're in like their third or fourth semester, I start to get these requests for access to an earlier class. The number one reason they want to go back into that class is so they can go look at an old discussion board because they remembered having an aha moment, or they remembered having a conversation with their classmates, where they really had probed into an idea that now they want to probe further, for an essay in a later class or for a culminating project. And that has happened over and over again because these are places where they are reflecting and processing their learning.

Catherine Ross ([27:17](#)):

Wow, that's really fascinating. And speaking of aha moments, that's a really nice segue to the question I was going to ask you next, which is what was your aha moment in your own teaching that made you sort of say, "I am going to go into online teaching and learning."

Roxanne Russell ([27:37](#)):

I started my career as a freshmen composition teacher. And for years I struggled with helping students see the connection between their usual conversational dialogue, having a conversation with others about any particular topic, and what they would write in an essay. They would suddenly change their entire voice as they started to put words on paper for an essay. It was as if the two could never meet. How I speak when I'm in a conversation, and how I write in an essay. These are two different things. Well, when I began to teach online, as I mentioned earlier, all of the learning was happening on asynchronous discussion boards. Students were having to write out their ideas. So suddenly that connection was more clear because they could see their audience. They were talking to their classmates, they had to form an argument, think about the purpose of their argument, think about their audience in real time and write that by responding to this discussion board post.

Roxanne Russell ([28:48](#)):

It was an in-between space where they were having conversations in text. And this opened up a whole new world of possibility to me, this was not a way that I had seen students learn before. It was the reason that I got so excited about online learning. And it was also the sense that they were talking to each other without seeing each other. This was pre Zoom days. And I felt like the bias that we might have felt in other environments had dissipated somewhat. I made a very close relationship with the first faculty member I was in training with online after working with him for three weeks. And I found out we had a 40 year age difference. And I don't know that he and I would have related to each other as well as we did if I had seen him and thought of him differently.

Catherine Ross ([29:44](#)):

That is so interesting. Thank you for sharing that. I'd never thought of the writing aspect and how that develops in an asynchronous way for your audience, that you know your audience, but you don't know them in the same way that you would know them were you sitting in a classroom together with them. I'm going to have to unpack that for a bit. So thank you for sharing that. So one final question here to wrap us up, and that is to share something that you have learned from your students.

Roxanne Russell ([30:25](#)):

The earliest lesson I learned from my students is that they are not me, that my students don't learn the way I do and that I am not a good case study or example to refer to when I'm imagining how to design their learning experience. I have to admit, I struggled with this at first, I thought I like to read and I don't like to do busy work. So I assigned a lot of reading and I didn't require a lot of check-ins. I evaluated students through a few high stakes essays throughout a semester, and I pretty much learned that that's not teaching, that's evaluating.

Catherine Ross ([31:09](#)):

That is so interesting because you just uncovered another whole dead idea that I have encountered many, many times in my multiple decades in higher education. And that is that when we are teaching in a university setting, we are not the same as our students. And I mean, I've actually heard instructors say, "Well, I learn that way, so I don't understand why they can't learn that way." So your lesson learned is a very valuable one, I think for a lot of people. To just step back and check what assumptions you are making about who your students are. And instead, maybe try to find out why they're sitting in your virtual, or face to face classroom and what it is they hope to gain from this experience, and how they like to engage with these topics, your discipline, rather than just thinking, well, this is how I learned it, so this is how I'm going to teach it. So I think that's really, really powerful. And with that, we will sign off

and thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us about dead ideas in teaching and learning online.

Roxanne Russell ([32:32](#)):

Thank you so much, very energizing. I feel ready to tackle the next learning challenge.

Catherine Ross ([32:40](#)):

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