Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series

Season 2, Episode 6: Community in Teaching: A Conversation with Columbia Graduate Students

Center for Teaching and Learning, Columbia University

Catherine Ross (00:05):

Welcome to Dead Ideas In Teaching and Learning. I'm Catherine Ross, executive director of the Center for Teaching and Learning At Columbia. In this series, we explore untrue ideas that are widely believed, and that drive systems and behaviors in the Academy, a phenomenon Diane Pike called the tyranny of dead ideas. I'm speaking remotely today with three Columbia graduate students, Ami Yoon, Diana Rose Newby and Thomas Preston. Diana Newby is a PhD candidate in English and comparative literature at Columbia University. She has held multiple fellowships at Columbia's Center for Teaching and Learning and in 2020, she received one of Columbia's presidential awards for outstanding teaching by a graduate student. Along with Ami Yoon, she is co-founder of the Columbia English Department's Pedagogy Colloquium, a forum dedicated to conversations and collaborations among grad students and faculty on topics related to teaching in the humanities. Ami Yoon is a PhD candidate in the department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University and a current lead teaching fellow at the Center for Teaching and Learning.

Catherine Ross (01:26):

Together with Diana Newby, she co-organized the English Departments Pedagogy Colloquium. She has taught courses in Columbia's undergraduate college, as well as in its School of Professional Studies. Thomas Preston is a PhD candidate in the German department at Columbia University. He held a teaching observation fellowship at Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning in 2019. And since 2020, he has been employed there as a teaching consultant. In this role, Thomas runs micro-teaching sessions with graduate students, leads in-class student feedback sessions, observes fellow graduate student teachers in action and enjoys plenty of reflective pedagogical discussion with his teaching consultant peers. Welcome to the Dead Ideas Podcast, Ami, Diana and Thomas.

Ami Yoon (02:20):

Hi, thank you for having us.

Diana Newby (02:23):

Hi. It's great to be here.

Thomas Preston (02:26):

Hello? Yes. Looking forward to the conversation.

Catherine Ross (02:28):

So let me set the stage a little bit about our conversation today. We're going to unpack what is a very common and very dead idea in the Academy and that is that teaching is somehow a solo act, something that happens only behind closed doors. This implicit belief stands in pretty stark contrast to the ways in which research and writing for publication work out in the Academy even when they are carried out as a

solitary effort, at some point, research and writing are shared with a community of scholars may be read by a mentor or read by peers who can offer friendly feedback. And certainly when ready for publication research is shared with peer reviewers and publishers, so that it becomes part of the disciplinary community scholarship. So this dead idea of pedagogical solitude has been around for a very long time.

Catherine Ross ([03:41](#)):

It's definitely not new as you will see, because my first question comes from an article written by Lee Shulman in 1993, titled "Teaching As Community Property, Putting An End To Pedagogical Solitude". Shulman argued that teaching should be a collaborative and peer reviewed endeavor at the departmental level. He believed that if teaching were viewed as community property, rather than something that happens behind closed classroom doors, there would be more value placed on teaching and more rigor in the evaluation of teaching.

Catherine Ross ([04:26](#)):

He also felt that this work should be centered in the disciplines as opposed to general use university-wide support like the kind that CTLs offer and like the kind in which all of our guests today have participated. So I'm very curious to hear from our guests about how they react to Shulman's article and his premise about teaching as community property. So here we go, Diana, Ami and Thomas, I would love to hear your thoughts on Shulman's article.

Diana Newby ([05:03](#)):

Sure. On the whole. I think I really agree with Shulman's proposal that teaching should be viewed as what he calls community property in order to see greater recognition and reward attached to teaching in the Academy. I think that centering and encouraging openness and collaboration in our teaching cultures not only improves the way teaching is seen and valued, but I think also improves our teaching itself. This seems true to me on multiple levels. So in the classroom, for instance, encouraging collaboration among our students has a range of benefits. It makes learning active, which improves engagement, retention, and transfer. And collaboration tends to help de-hierarchize the learning experience, whether that's happening between students or between instructors. So in this sense, I think collaboration has important ethical and political implications and that it empowers students to become producers of knowledge as a collective, rather than through the individualistic competitive and exclusionary modes of knowledge production that academic structures tend to automatically privilege.

Diana Newby ([06:18](#)):

As for Shulman's proposed strategy to reconnect teaching to the disciplines, I think I'm of two minds about it. On the one hand, I do think it's important for departments to develop their own respect of pedagogical cultures and identities. From the perspective of a graduate student, I think it can send a strange message about teaching if too much of the labor and structure of pedagogical development for grad students gets outsourced to spaces like Centers for Teaching and Learning. That kind of arrangement leaves grad students without the specialized tools and vocabularies that they need for teaching in their respective disciplines. And it also leaves them feeling like they have to seek out communities of teaching outside of their home departments. But on the other hand, the CTL at Columbia has of course been invaluable to my own teaching development. And much of that value has come from participating in workshops and initiatives that are not just interdisciplinary, but in some senses non-disciplinary, which is exactly the kind of training that I think Shulman is saying is overly generic and technical.

Diana Newby (07:25):

So to my mind, the solution to this dilemma might be a hybrid one wherein departments and CTLs develop close and mutually sustaining partnerships around the production of pedagogical support and community.

Catherine Ross (07:41):

Thank you, Diana. That was quite interesting. And I like how you connected it to the ways in which students engage in classes as well and trying to move beyond that model of competition between students and the non-hierarchical aspect of it.

Ami Yoon (08:03):

I think I would add that the idea of community property brought up by Shulman was really interesting to me because I think an understanding of what goes on in the classroom as a community activity has certainly gained a lot of purchase since the time of Shulman's writing with increased attention to critical pedagogies, feminist pedagogies over the years. So we've become more used to thinking about community property as between the teachers and the students, but then less so among teachers themselves.

Ami Yoon (08:37):

And the pedagogic colloquium that Diana and I co-founded within our English department, which we began last summer, was intended to precisely open up discussions around teaching within that discipline. So for example, we've facilitated or organized workshops and panel discussions on things like multimodal teaching strategies, anti-racist teaching, feminist pedagogy or emphasizing how teaching can be engaged with undeveloped collectively and graduate students in our departments have responded really positively as well as some faculty. And they send in ideas, and requests for events and words of encouragement. So that's been really lovely to see. And I think the pandemic has actually been a major factor in people's receptivity to collaboration and teaching, as we've realized pretty viscerally, just how many of our questions, concerns, problems, and also pleasures around teaching are held in common so we have the idea of community property again.

Ami Yoon (09:44):

And I really do believe that this is an area of pedagogy where graduate students have a great deal to contribute and can crucially help to shape because we are still in the early stages of thinking about teaching and how we want to practice it.

Ami Yoon (09:58):

So we bring a sort of energy and the willingness to try out new tools and methods as we may not have yet consolidated our preferred methods. So that's been good and sort of overcoming any potential resistance.

Catherine Ross (10:15):

Well, that is really encouraging to hear how enthusiastically your department has received your efforts and engaged with you – along with you. So that's, I think, that's wonderful news.

Thomas Preston (10:30):

Yeah. I want to zero in on the point you made Catherine about Shulman's notion that kind of collaborative and peer reviewed endeavors will place more value on teaching and create more rigor and evaluation. That's something I find very interesting because I think that when you begin to share your teaching with peers, something changes in your relationship to your own teaching. When I held this teaching observation fellowship in 2019, I was in a pod with eight other graduate students and the idea was we'd spend a whole academic year really rigorously attending to each other's teaching. And something that arose which was very intriguing, was that all of us seem to share this sentiment that we felt our teaching was an extension of our personality; of ourselves. And we really relied on our traits of personality to do our teaching.

Thomas Preston (11:25):

And we all wanted to develop ways of getting beyond these relying on our personalities alone. And that really led me to think about how with this idea of teaching happening behind closed doors, it does become this extension of our personality. It's something that's very difficult to detach from ourselves. And it means that when we are observed it's a very anxiety inducing experience because we feel like our very character is being observed and judged. And especially in situations where you're being observed by your superiors or your supervisors then potentially negative, or feedback that highlights areas for development, shall we say, can nevertheless become like personally wounding to hear. And I think that when you are able to share your teaching with peers, with whom you have friendly relations, you're able to finally gain that critical distance from your own teaching because you know that goodwill is there, you know that kind of good faith is there.

Thomas Preston (12:31):

And you can yourself turn your teaching into an object that you can tweak, refine, develop. You can get a sense of where does my personality enhance my teaching, but where is my teaching also something that's independent from my personality that's informed by practices and strategies that I've reflected on with my peers. So returning to Shulman's notion that more value is placed on teaching through peer reviewed endeavors, I think this is definitely the case because it allows us to really focus on teaching as a practice, as opposed to teaching being an extension of our like self, our personality. And then as to his point that it should be centered in disciplines as opposed to general university-wide support the CTLs offer, I'd say I'd agree with the other two. I don't see why it has to be opposed. I think they can certainly compliment each other in this kind of hybrid model there. I think I'm stealing a term from Diana.

Thomas Preston (13:28):

So yes, I think that both work very well. And I think that Columbia, for instance, we have programs, Lead Teaching Fellows as Ami and Diana, the role that Ami and Diana do, where you have people who are going from the Center of Teaching and Learning into the departments and creating communities there.

Catherine Ross (13:50):

Right. So it's really the best of both worlds in that case.

Ami Yoon (13:57):

If I could add onto that. And I think oftentimes I've seen that it is easier and quicker in fact to inculcate the sense of teaching as a community development, through collaboration across disciplines, because then that comes the realization that teaching practices can be shared or be made transferable regardless of disciplinary boundaries. And so that's why it seems to me programs like learning

communities and teaching observations such as the ones that our CTL fellows participate in can be so successful and illuminating.

Catherine Ross (14:35):

Thank you for that, Ami. I, of course, being from a teaching center tend to agree with you. I do think there is a case to be made for discipline specific kinds of knowledge and certainly teaching practices aren't going to generalize broadly across every context without some kinds of adaptations, modifications, but I do believe as you said, that there is so much in common and the challenges and successes can be shared to great advantage for everyone, regardless of discipline, even if you need to tweak it somehow or adapt it in some way. So, wow, really, really good points here. Thank you so much for your answers on this. Can you give us some examples of frequently encountered dead ideas, maybe practices or policies that graduate students who teach in their departments have to grapple with, especially maybe connected to this idea of teaching as a solo endeavor versus a community property?

Thomas Preston (15:53):

For me, a dead idea that I've encountered in my department is the model of observation in which you have one observation across the semester. You receive both summative and formative feedback. You kind of receive a numbered score, which has its benefits because you can look back across the previous semesters and see, "Okay, well, in this particular specific aspect, I have increased my three to a four." Nevertheless, it's the model that exists, but I'm certain through my experiences working with peers that another model can satisfy the same need for developing as a teacher, which kind of, as I spoke about before, has less of the anxiety that naturally comes with a graded assessment.

Thomas Preston (16:45):

It's of course also a very time efficient way to measure development for teachers, one observation across the semester. So I wonder whether you could create a culture of peer reviewing assignments across the semester within a department, and you could create pods of three teachers whose task it is to, across the semester, organize times to observe each other, three times, talk about their teaching with each other, because we learn so much from observing other people teach. When we are only being observed ourselves, we lose the experience of observing others and when observing others, through the observations you make in the classroom, there's so much to be gained. So I kind of personally think that a model within departments where teachers developments are far more formative and cultivated through mutual observation is a way to satisfy this need to be monitoring each other in a way just to check that people are doing well in their teaching, but also it would create a different kind of atmosphere.

Catherine Ross (17:54):

Yeah. I couldn't agree with you more having run communities where say, for example, for new faculty, where we set up exactly that model and over the course of a semester, they all visited each other's classrooms and then came together to talk, not so much about other people's teaching, but about what they learned from watching other people teach. And it was extraordinarily powerful, I thought. And they became a support group as well for each other, right? To share, "Oh, you know what? I saw that this was a little bit of a challenge for you in that class I was in, but here's what I did when that happened to me."

Thomas Preston (18:40):

Well, yeah, just to add to that, I mean, something we often talk about is as teachers is how important familiarity and trust is in the classroom for learning. And I think as teachers wanting to develop our own teaching that it's the same situation. When we have this relationship with our colleagues, which is kind of built upon familiarity and trust, we can enter really sensitive areas of our teaching, solicit feedback on things that really trouble others without this fear of being judged. And that is, I think, personally very transformative for us as teachers.

Catherine Ross (19:16):

Yes. I think so too, and far more transformative than a simple summative sort of score on your teaching. Yeah.

Ami Yoon (19:27):

I love this question. My answer however isn't necessarily about a dead idea per se but I do have an example of how something that is perennially framed as something liberating can actually end up being a bit inhibiting in terms of embracing teaching us communal rather than as solitary, which is that both graduate students and faculty frequently remark on how much freedom we actually have inside the classroom in designing our syllabi and lesson plans and such, but that freedom while it can be stimulating and drive all sorts of wonderful plans, focusing too much on the instructor's individual freedom to do with a course what they like, can reinforce the conception of teaching as a solo effort. So that's the contribution that I would make.

Catherine Ross (20:17):

Indeed very, very well said I think. Diana, what are your thoughts on this question?

Diana Newby (20:25):

I also loved this question, Catherine, and for me, what comes to mind here is an anecdote that I'll share from when I was a teaching assistant, I guess a year ago now for a Columbia graduate seminar that trains new instructors to teach first year composition in the University writing program. So grad students who are enrolled in this class are asked to create a few different teaching materials throughout this semester, beginning with a short demo lesson plan, up through the syllabus that they'll eventually use to teach university writing themselves. As the TA in this course, part of my role involves working one-on-one with members of the class as they designed these materials. And I was also uploading and managing resources in a shared folder that students were encouraged to draw on as samples and sources of inspiration.

Diana Newby (21:18):

But what I found as I was working with my grad student colleagues in this class was that many of them weren't actually drawing on that resource folder as they designed their own materials. And when I checked in with a couple of them, I discovered that they thought they weren't allowed to. Their impression seemed to be that those sample materials were there for them to maybe look at once or twice, but that at the end of the day, they still had to come up with something totally fresh and new and original.

Diana Newby (21:48):

And to me, I think that a few different dead ideas are represented in this experience. One is this idea that being a good teacher in effect requires reinventing the wheel. I think especially when we're new to teaching, graduate students feel enormous pressure to come up with unique and creative content that will wow, not only our students, but also our pedagogical mentors and peers. And it's effectively the same pressure that we feel in our research and scholarship, at least in the humanities where writing in publications aren't typically collaborative or at least named as such or credited in that way. The work we do is I think often taken to testify to our individual expertise, but of course then both teaching and scholarship, as you've already mentioned, Catherine, that attitude belies how necessarily collaborative all of our work always is. Even when a publication is single authored or even when we come up with a classroom activity that feels totally unique to us like something we've never seen before, where of course always drawing other people and other resources, however, unconsciously.

Diana Newby (23:03):

So I think it's crucial that we shift our mentality about collaborations so that first of all, early career instructors can recognize that they really are allowed, so to speak, and indeed encouraged to consciously draw on extent examples as they develop their teaching principles and practices. And then in turn, I think that the shift can help us create better systems for naming and crediting the collaborations that inform our teaching. So for instance, I've recently started including an acknowledgement section in my course syllabi, which is something that I had never thought to do until I started actively thinking about the role that collaboration plays in my teaching and wanting to make that role more visible to my students as well as my peers. So I think one thing that graduate students probably need from faculty in particular are better models for naming and crediting pedagogical collaboration, both in our tangible teaching materials and in the way we talk about our teaching more generally.

Catherine Ross (24:07):

I think that speaks very powerfully to the dead idea around competition in the Academy and that everything is done in competition with your peers, right? So of course, the idea of sharing – of using an idea somebody else came up with is, in many ways, feels so forbidden to us when we enter the Academy, but it can be very hard to overcome that feeling. So that's really interesting. And I'm delighted that you picked up on that when you were in that seminar with those grad students and that you were able to unpack it with them and share it with us, because I think that is one of those deeply implicit features of the culture of the Academy that everyone feels, but rarely does it surface to talk about it. So really thank you so much all of you for your insights on that.

Catherine Ross (25:21):

So we're going to move on to our final question here, the one I always ask people, which is to share with us, maybe something you've learned from your students or in your cases, from your peers as well, given the work you've been doing. Who would like to start us off? Diana.

Diana Newby (25:48):

I'll jump in here. I have some thoughts that I think build on everything that Thomas has been so nicely articulating about the value of observation. I think one thing that I've learned from collaborating with both my students and my peers is how to practice productive self reflexivity in my teaching development. As I think we're all getting at here, teaching is such a fundamentally social exercise. And so to learn and grow as a teacher, I've definitely relied on ongoing dialogue with my undergraduate

students and with my graduate student colleagues around my teaching practices and processes. Ami, in particular gets a lot of credit here. We've had many a conversation about our teaching and I've gained so much from that dialogue.

Diana Newby ([26:42](#)):

And I think for me, as far as dialogue with students goes, it really extends far beyond the anonymous evaluations that we receive at the end of a given semester, which for one thing aren't really real dialogues and are sometimes a mixed bag in terms of their use value. For me, as much as possible in my teaching, I try to bring my students into active conversation with me about the many different levels of course design from the beginning of the semester on.

Diana Newby ([27:13](#)):

So I invite them to help me set up the curricular structures that will make the learning space more generative. And I welcome their feedback at multiple intervals throughout the semester on what's working and not working and how I can adjust my methods accordingly and hear services like the CTLs mid-semester course review has been invaluable to me. As Thomas really nicely suggested with his foam roller metaphor, there are obviously pains and risks associated with inviting that kind of regular feedback from students as well as peers. I think it can definitely be uncomfortable to hear where there are gaps in our thinking or where teaching approaches aren't as effective as we thought they might be.

Diana Newby ([27:58](#)):

But this is a form of discomfort that I think is essential to a truly self-reflective teaching practice to achieve that critical distance that Thomas spoke to earlier. And it's valuable, I think, not only for our own development as teachers, but also for our students who get to see us model the kind of responsiveness to constructive critique and to communal needs that I think we really want to cultivate in them as well.

Thomas Preston ([28:38](#)):

Yeah. I like what Diana just mentioned about productive, self-reflexive... Diana, can you repeat that again for me?

Diana Newby ([28:46](#)):

Productive self-reflexivity.

Thomas Preston ([28:49](#)):

Productive self-reflexivity. I'm going to interpret that in my own way. And so that's also something I've learned from conversations in my peers is the value of finding ways to put yourself in the position of the student. This is something that I have primarily experienced through micro-teaching sessions, where you'll meet up with five people and take turns teaching for five minutes, the others observe. And all of a sudden you've assumed this position that you're not really used to as a teacher, which is being a student. We get very accustomed to being teachers and we forget what it's like to be as a student. So that really leads to valuable insights about teaching. And that leads, I think, to a reflective teaching practice, which I would be inclined to call productive self-reflexivity. I hope that Diana agrees with my interpretation there. And I think the only thing I'd add to this is, or another thing that I've learnt from conversations with students who aren't necessarily my own, because another thing I do as a teaching

consultant is lead mid-course reviews with students to return the constructive feedback to instructors that Diana was just talking about.

Thomas Preston (30:01):

And things are often going better than you realize in your teaching. Students often respond better than you think they will. Something I've seen leading feedback sessions is that students really recognize when a teacher is invested in their development. It doesn't mean that there aren't things to fine tune in your teaching, but I think that people, or I think that teachers need to see that default level as higher than they think it is. So often I encounter misplaced anxiety about teaching. And I'm always so happy to relate to the teacher that their anxiety is misplaced. And I think it just goes to show that we can be more confident in our teaching practice. We can believe in ourselves a little bit more as teachers.

Catherine Ross (30:52):

Right. And especially when you start to do that yourself, engage in that dialogue with your students, and ask students for that information yourself. You really feel the power of that.

Thomas Preston (31:06):

Absolutely. I mean, what I do is an anonymized feedback process, but I think that it goes to show how valuable actually opening that dialogue with our students can become.

Catherine Ross (31:23):

I think it's very enlightening for students as well. It pushes them to be metacognitive about their own learning and to not just say, "Oh, there's this person who seems to be in the front of the room, whether metaphorically or physically and everything that happens in this class is because of them," and gives them that sort of authority or agency, maybe is a better word, to say, "Oh, I have a role to play too in this class. And my role is to think about how I'm learning and what is working in this class for me to be able to learn. And is there anything that's happening that's not helping me learn and why is that? And how might I ask the instructor to maybe do it differently?"

Catherine Ross (32:14):

So it's an extraordinary opportunity, I think for students and one that in my experience of doing this, they very much appreciate. All right, Ami, I'm going to let you wrap us up.

Ami Yoon (32:30):

Thank you. Well, I think I would just echo everything about that Diana and Thomas have been saying about the real lesson I've gained from both my students and my peers is the idea of teaching as co-constitutive among students, among teachers sort of altogether in that communal relation and to think of teaching and learning both as a social mode of inquiry that's always ongoing. So that's been very generative and to sort of add on to what Thomas was saying about all of this instilling a good sense of confidence, I will add that it also makes for a pleasant sense of humility as well, because I constantly get to see just how smart and brilliant my students and my peers always are. They never miss anything. And so to be faced with that and be reminded of it regularly, is a really humbling and gratifying experience that makes me very happy to be in academia even when times might seem like it's quite averse to things that the Academy produces.

Catherine Ross (33:40):

Well, that is a wonderful note to wrap up our conversation on. Thank you so much, Thomas, Diana and Ami for taking the time to talk with us about dead ideas and about this particular one of community in teaching and learning.

Speaker 5 (34:03):

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