

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series

Season 5, Episode 6: Rigor as Skill Building with Larry Jackson

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.

[00:00:20] I'm speaking today with Dr. Larry Jackson, associate Dean of Academic Affairs and Director of the Center for the Core Curriculum at Columbia College. As a quick reminder for our listeners in this podcast series, we are exploring dead ideas and 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."

[00:00:59] Larry Jackson is Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and Director of the Center for the Core Curriculum at Columbia College, where he also teaches two core courses, literature humanities and contemporary civilization. Prior to Columbia, Larry held positions at the New School, New York University, and the City University of New York. Larry's writing has appeared in N+1, Diacritics, and the Journal of Speculative Philosophy. He lectures regularly on education and philosophy, and he serves on the advisory board of Conversations, a refereed academic journal focused on ordinary language philosophy and literature, particularly in the work of Stanley Cavell. Originally from Philadelphia, Larry was the first in his family to attend college. He has a PhD in Philosophy from the New School for Social Research where he also received two master's degrees in Philosophy and liberal studies, and he received his bachelor's degree in American Studies from Skidmore College. Larry, welcome to our Dead Ideas podcast. I am so grateful to be talking with you today.

[00:02:07] **Larry Jackson:** Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

[00:02:10] **Catherine Ross:** So listeners, as many of you already know, we've been talking about rigor throughout this fall semester and been seeking different

perspectives on the ways in which the notion of academic rigor can be defined and enacted across higher education settings. Um, we've heard from instructors already this season from astronomy, social work and medicine, and I thought it was time for us to talk to someone from humanities. And the core curriculum offers a particularly interesting context for exploring rigor in undergraduate education. But before I jump into the questions, um, I was wondering, Larry, if you could give listeners who may not be familiar with Columbia's core curriculum, a brief overview of the core and its place in undergraduate education at Columbia.

[00:03:03] **Larry Jackson:** Yes, thank you so much. So when we're talking about the core, we are talking about those courses that are required for all students at Columbia College. Many of these courses are also required for students in general studies in the school of Engineering. And we also have some students from Barnard College who take these courses on their own. So the courses that we're referring to are literature humanities. This is a year-long course that begins with ancient works from, uh, Ancient Babylonia as well as Homer's "Iliad," and we move right up through the 21st century and conclude with Claudia Rankin's "Citizen" and Mymung Mi Kim's text "Commons." Students also take a course called "Frontiers of Science." This is a one semester course that focuses on four different areas of the sciences. They're always rotating and rather than providing a kind of Biology 101 or Physics 101 approach to the study of science. The course is intended to train students in the scientific habits of mind by exposing them to cutting edge research in each of these four areas.

[00:04:06] We also have another year-long course called "Contemporary Civilization." This is a course that begins with Plato's "Republic", and then studies work of moral, political, ethical, philosophy as well as religious texts. Again, coming right up into the 21st century with units on race and sexual identity, as well as a unit on climate change. Then, we have two one semester courses and one is called "Art Humanities," another called "Music Humanities." These are not really art history or music history courses. They are really about helping students develop their skills in looking at the world and understanding the ways in which images and sounds create meaning. So thinking about their oral literacy and their visual literacy. Beyond these five courses that all of our students take, students also take a university writing course. They have a choice of some 200 courses in what we call the global core, where they take two courses that focus on non-Western civilization and culture. And then they also have other general education requirements beyond this, including a science requirement and a foreign language requirement.

[00:05:16] **Catherine Ross:** Great. Thank you. I think that'll be very helpful so that people can get the context for the thoughts you're about to share with us. So the first question that I like to ask is how you would explain to someone maybe from outside higher ed or perhaps new students just coming into the core what rigor means in a college course, particularly in the core and maybe also in humanities. You also if you feel like it, could talk about what rigor is not, are there dead ideas that students and instructors both hold about rigor?

[00:05:55] **Larry Jackson:** Yes, absolutely. So, uh, I appreciate this question so much. One of the most frustrating experiences of my life was when I was a graduate student and I was studying for my comp exams and philosophy, and people I knew would just roll their eyes and say, why are you studying for this? It's philosophy. You don't have to study, right? You can just say whatever you want. Um, so when I think about rigor in the humanities, I really focus on two areas. One is critical thinking. The other is close reading. And these are two areas where I think we talk a lot about these things. We don't often define what they mean. So I'd love if I could just to say a little bit about what I think they mean. So when I think about critical thinking, there are really two great touchstones here for me. Um, one is Kant's Critical Philosophy and what Kant meant by the word critique. Um, and when he talked about critique, he was really talking about exploring the conditions of possibility of a phenomenon or an experience or an idea, and that meant also considering the limitations of that phenomenon, experience or idea.

[00:06:57] To give an example of what this might look like in the classroom, I mentioned that we begin Contemporary Civilization, one of our core courses with Plato's "Republic." This is a text about justice and the theme of justice comes up again and again and again over the course of that year. And we might ask questions about the material, social, intellectual conditions that are necessary to have a concept like justice. What makes it possible for us to even conceive of this notion? Can we speak about justice outside the context of society or law in, uh, a state of war as, as Hobbs in the Leviathan and very famously describes the state of nature? Can we talk about justice in a way that transcends our own personal perspectives? This is something that Socrates is always pressing his interlocutors to do in Plato's "Republic." Or can we only understand justice more narrowly from our own standpoint? Can we even speak about justice with a capital J or should we always be speaking about justice within very specific contexts such as economic justice, racial justice, environmental justice, uh, social justice, and so forth?

[00:08:05] So that's what I mean about thinking more about the limitations and the possibilities of a concept as a form of critical thinking. The other, I think,

great example that I see of critical thinking or of critique is just whenever I read really good criticism, it could be movie criticism, music criticism, art criticism, literary criticism, and part of what a good critic does is just elevate something that we might not have seen or heard in that work initially that helps us understand it differently. They make the invisible visible or the inaudible audible to us in some way. And we might do this through studying the history of a concept such as justice, looking at the different perspectives that different people at different times have taken competing perspectives. And that deepens our understanding of this concept. So we're no longer throwing it around in an unreflective way. So that's critical thinking

[00:09:00] The other area where I think there's a lot of rigor in the humanities is close reading, and this is another term I hear a lot and I often don't hear it defined. For me, I think of close reading as being very connected to the idea of attention, attention being a kind of openness.

[00:09:18] Simone Weil talked a lot about attention in her work, and she always defined it as a kind of stillness, a kind of receptivity to the ideas and the perspectives of others. And that's a real challenge sometimes when we're reading to maintain that level of attention. It doesn't mean however, that we simply forget about ourselves either. I think that this is the crucial part of it. That just as we are attentive to those works that are in front of us and the ideas that we are grappling with in those works, we have to be very attentive to ourselves and our own reactions to those works. And if we find the work boring or tedious, or we find that it's difficult, or we disagree with it, rather than simply ignoring those reactions or simply slamming the book and ignoring the work, following those reactions and thinking about them and trying to turn those reactions into a coherent and perhaps even rigorous critique of the work that we're reading, or at least coming away with certain questions that we might want to ask, that we might want to bring into conversation. So those are the two areas where I see rigor as being really key in the humanities.

[00:10:24] As far as what rigor is not, I think rigor is not jargon. I think that it's very easy sometimes for us to use a kind of shorthand in discussing concepts and ideas, and there's nothing wrong with that. But I think we have to be very careful not to get trapped in this maze of jargon that makes it difficult for us to communicate our ideas or to connect with people who are not experts. I think that rigor in the humanities is not necessarily having a specialized domain of knowledge. I think that when we're talking about literature and philosophy, and art, and music, we are talking about areas that help us to understand the world that helps to generate meaning, but don't necessarily fit into neat categories. And I also don't think that rigor is memorization. I'm not hoping for students to

come away from my class having memorized precisely what Socrates has said or one of the characters in Plato's text has said, or what Aristotle might have argued. I want them to come away with some of the skills that we hope to develop in the humanities rather than simply memorizing certain ideas or arguments.

[00:11:37] **Catherine Ross:** So, so then I want to make sure I understand. So the rigor then is in the work that the students have to do to develop these stances, attitudes, curiosities around interacting with texts and ideas that perhaps don't come naturally to all of us, right? And, and that's where the work is. That's where the rigor is in attending to these things and being willing to develop yourself in these ways.

[00:12:12] **Larry Jackson:** Exactly. I think that in an era of distraction when we're all looking at our devices constantly to set aside some time where we really sit down with the work that seems strange to us, that, uh, might not be clear to us, that might challenge many of our assumptions. I think that that is not necessarily the first thing that everybody wants to do.

[00:12:38] **Catherine Ross:** Right.

[00:12:38] **Larry Jackson:** And I don't think it comes easily to us. And then on top of that, to be attentive to the reactions that we are having in those moments and to hold those things in our minds simultaneously. That requires a lot of discipline, I think, and I, and it requires a lot of practice. I've been doing it for a very long time in my own studies and in my own teaching, and I'm still developing those skills. I'm still working on that.

[00:13:04] **Catherine Ross:** Right. And there's a huge, um, affective component of that too, right? You're involving your emotions when you react to something, particularly if it's the negative reaction, right? To, to learn or or develop in yourself the discipline to acknowledge your reaction, but not necessarily let it guide what you do next.

[00:13:28] **Larry Jackson:** Yeah. Or, or let it guide you, but to try to develop it further, to ask yourself the next question of why do I find this so tedious? What is happening here? Why am I reacting so negatively to this text? And then trying to develop that into an argument or a set of questions that you can bring into discussion. I'm often telling students that I want them to come into the classroom not with big, sweeping theories and generalizations, and that I want them to come into the classroom with questions and I want them to raise their hand and say, you know I found this passage troubling or I couldn't quite make

sense of it. I didn't know exactly what the author might have meant. How did others feel about it? This is actually an assignment that I give students. I'll have them journal, and I give them an example. I show them my notebook where I'm writing in pencil and I'm trying to work through a difficult text, and I might write out quotes from that text in my own misgivings about those quotes or what I don't understand, or what I do understand. I might bring in texts and quotes from other areas as well that help me make sense of it. Sometimes I draw things, even I consider some of the pictures that might help me make sense of some of these concepts, but I'll encourage students to journal and specifically to hand in assignments to me where they journal about a passage they don't understand.

[00:14:55] Because I want to see the ways in which they're being patient and in which they're trying to work through those difficulties and they're trying to come away with a set of questions that can be productive to conversation. And that's always more productive than a student coming in saying, oh, well obviously this is the first time in history that a philosopher ever proposed to this idea. And they come in with big theories. It's the questions are always much more interesting, but I think questions have, they demand a kind of rigor of their own.

[00:15:26] **Catherine Ross:** That's fascinating. I think currently some of the debates about rigor revolve around the tension between caring about students and supporting students versus standards. Becky Supiano in her Spring 2022 Chronicle article asks, don't most professors care about both their students and the standards? Do these need to be at odds with each other? And this certainly has come out in the last couple weeks with the story in the New York Times about the chemistry professor who was let go when students complained. And if you read the comments in that article, many people reference having standards. So it's very much still present. How do we change this perception that, um, caring and supporting students doesn't, you know, to convince people that it doesn't mean your course isn't rigorous?

[00:16:22] **Larry Jackson:** Yeah, yeah. I, I'm a big fan of Becky Supiano and, and she has a piece right now in the Chronicle about the chemistry class at NYU, and of course, this is dealing with STEM disciplines, which are well outside of my domain, so I won't comment too much on that. But there is a point that I take from the argument that she makes in her latest piece. It goes back to what I was saying earlier about attention and the kind of attentiveness that we have to bring to our reading. I think we have to have that same level of attentiveness as educators, and it means it thinking about not only the content of what we are teaching and what we hope students are going to take from that

experience, but also being very attentive to the reactions that students are having and thinking about the ways in which we might need to adjust our methods and we might need to adjust our timelines in order to respond to what students are getting or what students are not getting.

[00:17:20] This doesn't mean that we don't have standards. It doesn't mean that we're coddling students. It doesn't mean that we think students are snowflakes and all of the kinds of things that you read all the time in the media today, which I think are are totally hyperbolic and false. It's a recognition simply that students are complex, multidimensional human beings, and we have to recognize that they come into our classrooms. They don't leave their identities at the door. They don't leave their experiences outside of campus. They bring all of that into the classroom with them, and they come with a variety of backgrounds with different levels of preparation. Some of them are grappling with very serious challenges in their lives, traumas that they've had to deal with, workload, not just academic, but jobs that they have to have in order to be able to eat and to afford their books, and to afford to afford their tuition. So we have, I think, not only a pedagogical obligation as good educators to respond to them as those complex, multidimensional human beings. We have a moral obligation I think in this case as well. Uh, I think that if we're going to have standards in that education, we have to begin by recognizing the humanity of our students, and we have to begin by recognizing that they're all unique and they're all coming in with their own experiences and their own biographies. This is, I think, especially true in general, education, liberal education, humanistic education. You noticed the word I repeated there three times was education, not training. That, you know, education is really thinking about the person and it's really thinking about the person's development. It's not thinking about a special set of skills or a specialized area or domain of knowledge.

[00:19:01] And so I think we can't separate care concern those dimensions of our work from having standards. Because I'm teaching required courses, literature, humanities, and contemporary civilization, I'm working with students who most of them have studied literature before. I would say most have probably not studied philosophy before given what I know just about the choice of majors at Columbia College. Many of them are not going to go on to have further study in philosophy and literature, and that's okay. I'm not trying to mold them into scholars in my field. I'm trying to make sure that they develop those intellectual skills and those effective traits that we were talking about before that you can develop through the study of the humanities.

[00:19:54] And I want them to be able to apply those in whatever sphere they're working. Whether it's science and medicine or mathematics or engineering, I

think that there are great applications of the humanities in all of those areas. And I think they're going to be less inclined to make those applications, if I turn the study of the humanities into something punitive, if I'm taking a really hard line with them in everything that we're doing and we're divorcing the study of these works from the joy and the pleasure that we can get out of studying them.

[00:20:27] **Catherine Ross:** Well, that was an amazing response and it answered the next question as well which was about how with the return to campus last spring, many instructors were reporting a lot of disengagement. Even if students came to class, which many weren't, they were sitting in class and not engaging and that led to some people to say, we need to go back to the pre pandemic, hard deadlines and standards, mandatory attendance, those kinds of things. Um, but I think you just nailed it.

[00:21:03] **Larry Jackson:** Well, I'd love to say a little bit more about that if I could.

[00:21:06] **Catherine Ross:** Sure.

[00:21:07] **Larry Jackson:** You know, I think already, because literature Humanities in particular is a first year course for students. So I think even before the pandemic we were grappling a lot in the core with questions about engagement because students often are coming in and their experience of education, their definition of success was really set by their ability to absorb information and to demonstrate that they had to achieve some sort of mastery of that knowledge. And they're coming in and we're suddenly saying to them, no, no, this is a seminar. We'd like you to talk with one another. Pretend that I'm not here for a little while, and really try to engage with one another. Don't just look for my approval. And you know, we are still very guided. John Dewey was the major figure in the history of the core in its early years, and we are still very guided by Dewey's approach to education. This notion of progressive education where students are reflecting on their own lives and their own experiences and they're working collaboratively. So I think it's always something that we're very conscious of. Now we are coming back from a crisis that threatened the very thing that is most important in the core, which is community. And students have really missed out on many of the important developmental experiences that help socialize them as they grow older. And a lot of their interactions have been online or wearing masks, and a lot of their educational experiences have been online, which tends to be a slightly more passive experience.

[00:22:37] So I think the best way to try to address that is to find creative forms of interaction for students. I think I've been using a lot of group assignments

more than I ever did before. And I'm seeing that that's been a really successful way to get students interacting with one another and collaborating. I think also having more creativity in our assignments helps them have a little bit of fun with it, and there's nothing wrong with a little bit of fun in learning. And I think also more small group work in the classroom as well. This was something that I had used pre-pandemic with mixed results. I've been using it a lot more consistently. I continue to use Google Docs, actually. I will put students in groups. I'll create a Google Doc for them to work from so they are collaboratively constructing an artifact that they will have at the end of the semester, at the end of the year, maybe even years from now I don't know, that they can go back to, and they can look at as they're reflecting on what they studied and then trying to scaffold some of those conversations. So maybe smart, starting in a small group of two or three and then having them come together and build up what they've been talking about. So looking for those ways to create interaction, I think is the most effective way to grapple with some of those challenges around engagement that, that we have been seeing since the pandemic.

[00:24:04] **Catherine Ross:** I think it's really critical that you use the word scaffolding. I think that's exactly, I was going to say, you're talking about scaffolding, and I think, you know, sometimes we forget what it's like to be a student. Particularly the first-year students, we just assume that if we put them in groups and tell them to talk to each other, they'll be comfortable and they'll know how to do that. And they don't. They truly don't. And so I really thank you for sharing those ideas about how you scaffold those interactions to help the students adjust, learn, and be more comfortable in that space of collaboration with their peers. That's really important, I think. And so how do we, um, challenge students to really do their best with, without reverting to the kind of legacy ideas about rigor that we often hear about, like high stakes tests, only individual work counts, right? You can't collaborate on a test, super long reading lists as a kind of signaling of rigor or curving grades. Things like that. You know, students come in also with a lot of dead ideas about learning, right? How can we really challenge our students and not just revert to those things.

[00:25:31] **Larry Jackson:** Yeah, that's great. I don't have a lot of experience with curving grades. Many of the other things that you're talking about, we do see in the humanities as well. I just yesterday was hearing from a student about another class where 40% of the grade was dependent on one assignment. And that strikes me as a real missed opportunity. I think that you know what, that of course is going to, it creates a lot of stress for students, especially if it's coming at a busy time in the semester. It's really just inviting the student to not do their very best work, and I think they might be successful on that one assignment. But I think without multiple forms of engagement with the content of the

course, they are not going to have the kind of long-term retention and learning that we really hope comes out of taking these courses.

[00:26:23] So I try to give lots of different assignments without overwhelming students or overwhelming me with grading and comments, but to give, um, to give lots of different assignments. I have learned from the CTL. Thank you for this. You know, the difference between a more of a formative assignment in which we are helping students to construct their skills, develop their skills over the course of the semester, and also making clear what our expectations are, opportunities for feedback, and in a more summative assignment that might come later in the semester where they really are demonstrating the application of their skills and how much they have taken with them.

[00:26:58] I also think that having, I guess I would describe it as different registers or different modalities of assignments is really valuable as well, giving students opportunities to do something visual. giving students opportunities to do something that involves technology or involves social media, not just giving them a long essay to write. I want them to develop their skills as writers. There's no question. That's an incredibly important skill in life, but I want them to also to have multiple ways of engaging with the material and of working with one another. And I think that that's a really nice way to acknowledge that different students have different talents, different approaches, different ways of understanding the material. And I think it's very appropriate to the core. We, again, where we have literature, philosophy, art, and music. We're looking at the different ways in which meaning is constructed and is shared. We can do that within the confines of a single course, even within one discipline. So I tend to think that that's more rigorous than simply the one long paper at the end of the semester.

[00:28:03] Um, I, you know, I also think that shorter readings are much, much better way to go. I try to really get my readings in contemporary civilization. We don't read. Most of the works we don't read in their entirety. So I really try to find just what I consider to be the most important passages in the texts, and we really focus on those and we're not trying to learn everything there is to know about Aristotle's philosophy in two sessions. We're going to take a particular approach and perspective in our study of Aristotle. What that really enables students to do is to go a lot deeper. They're not going to be skimming, they're not going to be racing through the work, right. They're going to be looking a lot more closely at how a philosophical argument is constructed, and they're going to be looking a lot more carefully at the assumptions that Aristotle is making, the errors that he might be making also in his argument, they're going to have more opportunities, I think, to engage critically with that. It also enables

us to really spend time in class going over passages closely rather than simply trying to race through hundreds of pages of dense philosophical argumentation in two hours.

[00:29:17] **Catherine Ross:** Right. And what you're describing is deep intentionality around your teaching and the goals you have for your students because what you just described is that kind of deep transformative learning that will help them develop those skills you talked about in the very beginning of the podcast. Students learn what they do, and so they're doing it right. They're not just cranking out an essay at the last minute to turn in for a grade. It connects you, I think, more deeply with knowing who they are and what they're capable of, and knowing what they've learned in your course because you're deeply intentional in that way.

[00:30:01] **Larry Jackson:** Yeah, and we we're giving them the opportunity to improve. Uh, we give them feedback on an assignment, and now they have an opportunity to either make a revision or I, I try to always have at least two versions of everything that I'm doing. Maybe it's a little more challenging the next time around so that they have a chance then to practice again and to try again and to get more feedback from me again on the second version of that assignment.

[00:30:29] **Catherine Ross:** Well, there's that scaffolding again. Oh, thank you so much for that. I just want to say, I love the idea of giving students options around how they demonstrate their learning. That's so important for equity in learning and creating those equitable learning spaces. So that was a a very powerful example as well. So final question: what keeps you inspired and motivates you to, uh, believe in the possibility of change in higher education teaching?

[00:31:02] **Larry Jackson:** I love this question, so thank you very much for asking it. And I think for me, there is a short lecture that James Baldwin gave in 1963 called "A Talk to Teachers." And so this was a lecture that he gave to a group of New York City teachers. It was in October of 1963, which was about four months after the assassination of Medgar Evers, and it was about a month after the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, which murdered four young black girls. And that context is crucial to what Baldwin is talking about. He opens by, by talking about this era and the problems that America was facing at the time, and particularly racial inequality and anti-black violence problems that remain with us today, of course. But he goes on to talk about the responsibility that education creates in us to criticize and to change our society. One of the points that he makes that I think is a very powerful one is that the

paradox in all of this is that while education might set you at odds with your society in some way, your society needs, that society needs critics. If it doesn't change, society simply dies. It has to change. It has to grow, it has to evolve. So education is crucial. The next step that Baldwin takes, and this is where I really find great inspiration, is that he associates this responsibility not with any form of expertise. He actually goes on to say that adults are very easily fooled, that we're anxious to be fooled. It's actually children that Baldwin associates this kind of criticism, this with, he says that children see the world more honestly, and he doesn't allude to it directly, but I suspect he also had the children's crusade in mind, which happened earlier that year, may of 1963, when a group of students in Birmingham, Alabama were out leading civil rights demonstrations. And Baldwin ends on a very inspiring note when he says that we must follow the example of this child who sees the world critically and honestly, who's willing to ask the difficult, challenging questions that we may be afraid to ask ourselves. Knowing that I'm working not with children, but with young people who are coming here with their own experiences and their own questions, and are looking at the world differently and knowing that they can teach me. They can teach all of us to see the world differently and to do things differently and to maybe live our lives a little bit differently and to teach what we're teaching a little bit differently. That for me is the great inspiration that keeps me going.

[00:33:51] It is thrilling to know that there is a new generation here that I get to work with them and get to be inspired by their example and, and this is something that the philosopher, Stanley Cavell calls the education of grownups, and he associates this with philosophy. The way in which the questions and the new perspectives of young people can challenge our own perspectives and get us to reflect on them. That's my inspiration.

[00:34:19] **Catherine Ross:** Wow, that's so incredibly powerful and it really speaks to the dynamic of teaching that teaching is relational and that you, the teacher, are learning. with your students, from your students at the same time they're learning from you and with you. So I love that. That's really powerful. Thank you so much for sharing that. And thank you for taking this time out to talk with us and, uh, help us push higher education teaching to a better place, and for being part of this fall 2022 podcast season. Really, really appreciate it.

[00:35:00] **Larry Jackson:** Thanks so much for having me. It was great to here.

[00:35:07] **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 is produced by Stephanie Ogden, Laura Nicholas, John Hanford, and Michael Brown.

[00:35:31] Our theme music is *In the Lab* by Immersive music.