

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast

Season 8, Episode 2: Teaching Development in Doctoral Education: Let's Ask the Grad Students!

Center for Teaching and Learning, Columbia University

[00:00:00] **Catherine Ross:** Hello, and welcome to Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning, a higher education podcast from the Center for Teaching and Learning at Columbia. I'm Catherine Ross, the center's executive director. As a quick reminder for our listeners, in this podcast series, we are exploring dead ideas in teaching and learning.

[00:00:25] 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."

[00:00:38] Welcome, everyone. Today, I will be joined in my hosting duties by my colleague from the Center for Teaching and Learning Graduate Student Programs and Services Team, Dr. Caitlin DeClercq, who is a Senior Assistant Director, and in her role, she manages the Lead Teaching Fellowship, the Teaching Development Certificate Program, and the Graduate Student Advisory Committee. And together, Caitlin and I will be chatting with three Columbia graduate students who are part of the Graduate Student Advisory Committee about the question of teaching development in doctoral education, continuing and expanding a conversation from our previous episode.

[00:01:23] Sara Jane Samuel is a doctoral candidate in the Sociomedical Sciences Department. where her research focuses on addressing the historical roots of vaccine hesitancy. When she's not finishing her dissertation, you can find her walking her toothless dog. playing pickleball, or baking allergy friendly treats. Anirbaan Banerjee is a PhD candidate in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. Anwasha Sengupta is a PhD candidate in the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies at Columbia University. She has taught as a teaching assistant in her home department and in the Department of Religion.

[00:02:08] Welcome to our Dead Ideas podcast, Sara, Anirbaan, Anwasha, and Caitlin. I'm so happy that we get to talk with each other today.

[00:02:20] **Caitlin DeClercq:** Thank you. Happy to be here.

[00:02:21] **Anirbaan Banerjee:** Thank you.

[00:02:22] **Anwasha Sengupta:** Thanks for inviting me.

[00:02:23] **Catherine Ross:** In our previous episode, we were chatting with four faculty about the need for doctoral education to include teaching development opportunities for graduate students. And one of the faculty mentioned that oftentimes when we talk about these kinds of you know, big issues in higher education, teaching and learning, we forget to talk to the students about what they think would be helpful and what they might like to see in terms of changes. So today we're going to address that and we're going to talk with the students about their thoughts on teaching development in doctoral programs. And I'll start us off with the first question before I turn it over to my colleague Caitlin. So I'm curious to hear about your teaching development experiences, your teaching experiences, and if you like, how you envision teaching playing a role in your future career? I think, Sara, you are going to kick us off on this one.

[00:03:31] **Sara Jane Samuel:** Yeah. Thank you, Catherine. Thank you, Caitlin. So glad to be joining you here today. I'll start by sharing, uh, a little bit about me as a student. I'm kind of a nontraditional interdisciplinary scholar. My degree is going to be in social medical sciences. So, I study both public health at the medical campus and history at the Morningside campus. So, I've taught undergrads, grad students. I've taught the humanities. I've taught social sciences. I've got a breadth of teaching experience, but all of my teaching training has been opt in, for the most part, through the CTL. And been a joy for that reason. I'll share a little bit more about my future career as I'm on the job market right now, later in the podcast. But I wanted to say one of the things I most appreciate about the teaching training I've gotten through the CTL is that sort of enforces a little bit of introspection upon you. It's really through the CTL, I've really learned, like, who am I? Who am I as a teacher? How do I want to express authority? And how do I work on a team? So, it's really shaped the sort of jobs I'm looking at now in a really productive and fruitful way.

[00:04:36] **Catherine Ross:** Oh, thank you for that. Anwasha, I think you were going to jump in here too.

[00:04:40] **Anwesh Sengupta:** Thank you, Catherine. I started teaching during the pandemic, so it was remote. The first time I was teaching, it was on Zoom, and it was a completely new territory, and there was very little hand holding. It was a time when everybody was kind of figuring it out, and so was I. However, this experience trained me to be able to handle challenging situations and be more flexible as an instructor and think more in terms of methods and just be able to think on my feet. So, most of my teaching development engagements were after I had taught for two years. And this was also interesting because it allowed me to introspect and figure out the exact areas on which I wanted to work on and understand where I'm going. And I think this is invaluable because I intend to stay in academia and teach. So, I think this would be very useful for me.

[00:05:36] **Catherine Ross:** So, do you think that having that come after you taught was in some ways more valuable than if you'd had something before?

[00:05:45] **Anwesh Sengupta:** I, I think yes, because instead of just thinking in terms of hypotheticals, I was discussing experiences. I was able to bring that to the table and talk about this happened, that happened, and I tackled with the situation in a certain way. And do you think that is the better way of doing this?

[00:06:03] **Catherine Ross:** That's, that's very interesting. Anirbaan?

[00:06:08] **Anirbaan Banerjee:** Sure. Thank you for having me. I should say that I listen to the podcast all the time, so it's a pleasure to be able to be a part of it. It's an absolute delight. I'll start with my teaching experience because then the teaching development might make a little more sense.

[00:06:21] My teaching experience, I've been either working as a teaching assistant in my department, assisting professors in courses that they're teaching in English and comparative literature, or I've been teaching as an independent instructor of record for a course called university writing, which is part of the core curriculum at Columbia for undergraduates. So, the teaching development has been varied, but like most of us here, the majority was opt in. And a major chunk of it, I would say, was stuff that I sought out through the CTL. And my experience is a bit different in that I actually was lucky enough to bump into the CTL in my first year, but I can talk more about that a bit later. But it really has been super invaluable, mostly because I would always think about how to make sense of the time that I have in the classroom. What should I be doing practically in the time that I have? And how do I convey what I'm thinking to my students? And going to the CTL with those questions has been invaluable.

[00:07:22] I don't know what the future necessarily looks like, I don't think any of us do, but I can't imagine teaching not being a part of it because every time I'm a teacher, I'm a student and it's my favorite state of being.

[00:07:36] **Catherine Ross:** Another quick question before I hit it over to Caitlyn. I don't know whether your departments also had any kinds of, you know, teaching preparation opportunities, but it clearly sounds like you think that teaching centers do have a place in the ecosystem, even though we maybe aren't discipline specific in our approaches to teaching. Anyone want to jump in on that? Go for it, Sara.

[00:08:05] **Sara Jane Samuel:** Yeah. Catherine, I couldn't agree more. I did not get any formal pedagogical training from my department. There are amazing resources for first year teachers teaching in the core. which is the intro sequence that all incoming MPH students take at Mailman. And that was really fruitful as my first semester teaching. But I really think as I gained experience as a teacher, it became clearer to me what sorts of training I needed, and all of it was available at the CTL. So it's nice to have that resource to fall back on as you gain a little bit more experience as a teacher.

[00:08:36] **Catherine Ross:** Okay, thanks. And Caitlin? It's off to you.

[00:08:41] **Caitlin DeClercq:** Okay, thank you so much, Catherine. I want to continue with this line of thinking about the what and the why of educational development for doctoral students. So, here's my question. Each of you has engaged with the Center teaching and learning in different ways, whether through workshops or fellowships or of course this new Graduate Student Advisory Committee. So I'm wondering if you could share maybe one or two things that you've done with the CTL and of course recognizing that this type of teaching development is not mandated on our campus, what it was that prompted you to engage with the CTL. Anirbaan, could you kick us off please?

[00:09:19] **Anirbaan Banerjee:** Sure, yeah. Like I was just saying a little while back, I was lucky enough to find out about the CTL actually in like my first week of my first year, which I don't think is necessarily the case for everyone. And it was really fortuitously the result of a conversation with a grad student who was like towards the end of her time in the program. And she pointed me to the CTL amidst sort of the morass of many acronyms on campus that you're trying to work your way through in your first week.

[00:09:51] **Catherine Ross:** So true

[00:09:51] **Anirbaan Banerjee:** that's just, yeah, that was just like a godsend. And so because of that, I've had a chance to do more than one or two things with the CTL in my time here. So starting off with the very low commitment, one off workshop, just attending it and then going home and figuring out what I want to do with it to ending up in the lead teaching fellowship that was mentioned a little while back where now I was the one designing the workshop rather than the one attending it so it feels like things have come a nice full circle and I guess that was the benefit of discovering it early on. And in terms of the why, I think I just came into the program always thinking of teaching as being an integral part of what I was supposed to do in the program. So it never felt like an afterthought and so it just felt like I was already looking for a place like the CTL, and I just didn't know that it existed. So it seemed very straightforward to me to show up there and then keep showing up. And I guess the question that I had was how to go from reading a text to teaching a text and the answers to that weren't obvious to me. So that's why I showed up.

[00:10:56] **Caitlin DeClercq:** Thank you for that. Anwasha, what are your thoughts?

[00:11:01] **Anwasha Sengupta:** I have been part of the Graduate Student Advisory Committee, as well as part of the Learning Community for Pedagogies of Race and Oppression. None of these were mandated, but I got involved, I think, primarily because of my experiences of teaching during the pandemic, when I realized that the pandemic was affecting different students differently, and they were constantly looking for support within the classroom. And I felt that I really need to make myself more equipped to make the classroom more inclusive.

[00:11:33] And that was kind of what made me look for opportunities where I can brainstorm strategies where I can reflect on some of these experiences and build on what I had; I was going through.

[00:11:45] **Caitlin DeClercq:** Thank you. I love that the two of you are articulating this sort of innate curiosity or interest in just kind of the questions that drive your teaching. I think going into this question, I also have in the back of my mind that sometimes people find us at the CTL through this fear of, oh no, I'm about to be in the classroom and what do I do with this? And we love when we can convert this moment of fear to feeling the sense of agency or empowerment or this introspection you talked about, Sara, into this creativity and into this curiosity.

[00:12:14] So it's also lovely to remember that this curiosity is also what brings folks to our door as well. I do want to move us to my next question, which is actually more of a scenario than a question. And here it is. So, too often, graduate school is framed as this zero-sum endeavor where research and teaching activities in particular are seen as competing for limited time. So I'm curious what you might say to a graduate student who's being told that teaching development just doesn't matter or that it's less important than or unrelated to the task of research. So what advice might you offer? Sara?

[00:12:52] **Sara Jane Samuel:** Thank you, Caitlin. This is a great question because I feel like I'm not only speaking to other doctoral students, but also just like a past version of Sara. Yay for personal growth on that front. But I think there's two main things that come to me as I'm finishing my degree now. But the first is that teaching and research are not mutually exclusive endeavors. Like, I know I am a much better researcher because of my experiences in the classroom. And that's because there's the nitty gritty of teaching, right? I have to have read the things on the syllabus that I'm teaching. I have to be able to answer my students' questions that illuminate new aspects of my own research. But mostly I think my students are just cooler than I am, right? They're on bits of the internet that I'm not on. So as somebody, for example, who studies vaccine hesitancy and anti-vax communication, specifically my students introduced me to all sorts of anti-vax propaganda that now forms a critical evidence base for my dissertation. So, I owe my students a lot on that front, but also to anybody who's skeptical about the value of teaching as a part of your doctoral career. I just say that teaching is an exercise in effective communication, and that ability to communicate is useful no matter what sort of career you want in academia or outside.

[00:14:03] So when I presented academic conferences, um, international, national, scientific, historical, I use the same sort of format that I would use in the classroom. I prepare my slides the same way. I have the same sort of agenda and roadmap. Because it's all about distilling complex ideas, abstract data, sometimes it's boring, I'll be so real about that, into something that can be understood by an audience level that's less familiar with the thing that you do. So yeah, whether or not you're going to be a professor, I think the ability to communicate is going to serve you well at life.

[00:14:35] **Caitlin DeClercq:** I very much agree. Thank you. I had communication written down in huge bold letters on my notes here, so couldn't agree more. Anirbaan, how about you?

[00:14:44] **Anirbaan Banerjee:** Yeah, I'll just add to what Sara said that the, the idea that research and teaching are disconnected, the evidence of that being a dead idea is in the documents, you can see something that starts out as a reading in an assigned syllabus ends up in the bibliography of a published research paper, or you'll see that something that starts in a bibliography ends up back in the syllabus because you want to keep thinking about something that you've already published. And even in practical terms, look at the requirements for jobs that, at least in the humanities, are being advertised. You need to submit a teaching portfolio, you need to have a teaching philosophy, you need to submit sample syllabi. You can't design those out of the blue, and they won't come organically out of your research if you haven't had some time to think about how you'll teach these things because it's not. entirely the same as researching them, although they are, like I said, very interconnected.

[00:15:37] **Caitlin DeClercq:** I think that's a really nice point. I'm thinking about the value of this teaching development in a competitive job market. And especially if we consider these sorts of additional, I guess, fringe benefits of, yes, you're learning about teaching, but you're also connecting to these interdisciplinary communities, learning how to communicate across disciplines, learning this reflective practice, this evidence base.

[00:15:57] Anwsha, is there anything you'd like to add here?

[00:16:00] **Anwsha Sengupta:** Sarah said reminded me of my mother, who was a high school teacher. She's retired now, but she used to say, if you really want to understand something clearly, teach it to someone, and it resonated with that idea that even when I was teaching, I realized that I was articulating themes and theories that I thought I knew really well, but when I was asked questions on it, I had to fall back on breaking it down in a way I would not do if I was teaching. And that was so useful. I see that reflected when I'm writing my own arguments. So, I definitely agree with what Sara and Anirbaan said on this.

[00:16:37] **Sara Jane Samuel:** I was just going to say that it's nice to be on the same pages and it's just mom.

[00:16:42] **Catherine Ross:** Love that.

[00:16:47] **Caitlin DeClercq:** I guess this the one thing I'll add here to what this makes me think of is I do a lot of work with grad students looking at teaching statements and diversity statements. And so often what happens in those conversations is that we get to this aha moment of -- Oh, actually the questions

that drive me as a scholar are very similar to or are in fact the same as the questions that I'm asking as a pedagogue, as a teacher.

[00:17:09] And so I think that that's an important reminder that grad students are in fact whole beings, right? That these things are not separate, that they co-inform each other, as I know we've just said. And, in fact, we see that play out in many different conversations.

[00:17:23] Let me move us along to the next question. Um, and this is reflecting back on some of the work and conversations that we've had in our Graduate Student Advisory Committee. In particular, over the last semester we've been focusing our attention on a common moment of teaching support, which is Graduate Student Teaching Orientation, as a way to better elicit and understand and respond to graduate student needs and interests.

[00:17:46] So this in mind, I'm wondering what you all think we could do differently for such orientations. How might we make such an offering more valuable for grad students, in other words? Anwasha, let's start with you.

[00:17:59] **Anwasha Sengupta:** I think in line with what I have been saying, the area where graduate student instructors need maximum support is having a place to discuss their experiences. I feel that no amount of like preemptive manuals or advices actually help when you're, when you're confronted with a very tricky situation, but having a place to go and talk about it is a far more valuable asset. So, one of the ways I can think of is maybe having like an online platform where its community run, the CTL sets it up perhaps, and then the students can just, graduate student instructors can go and ask questions. They can clarify doubts. They can even discuss tricky situations. And that form of support, I think is what graduate student instructors would benefit most from.

[00:18:49] **Caitlin DeClercq:** I think this is a really interesting point and one that, one that jumped out to me as well, this idea that we might think about an initial orientation as a cohort and how do we find these moments to check in later on, this sort of longer tale of orientation, if you will. Could this also be office hours or sort of themed discussions?

[00:19:08] **Sara Jane Samuel:** Thank you, Caitlin. I just wanted to echo what Anwasha is saying, because it's something that our Graduate Student Advisory Committee is like puzzling through together, and I love the idea of having an asynchronous and synchronous sort of longitudinal, extend the idea of orientation to begin with. It's not just a thing you do like the day before you teach or something like that, but something that extends throughout the course

of the beginning of your teaching career. But there's one thing that I know the CTL does great, but I'd love to amplify, perhaps in a synchronous way, is to sort of induce that introspective moment I alluded to earlier to showcase that there is multiple models of really acceptable teaching, of really fruitful pedagogical ways to interact with your students. I know personally, I was really nervous to teach my first day. I was terrified to be up in front of a classroom of 20 students who were older than me at the time, and I'm a woman of color, and I, I had some structural disadvantages that I was looking to overcome, but couldn't be overcome by having an excellent lesson plan or having read every footnote of every meeting that I had been assigning that day.

[00:20:16] So I'd love to be able to showcase these are what all the models of teaching look like. Pick one that works for you, and I think most importantly, you can make mistakes, you can fail, but the CTL and whoever is sponsoring this orientation will be there to support you, because these people have failed before you, and they'll be there to help pick you up when you make mistakes in the classroom again. I think it's really important to normalize that, that fear, but also that moment for success.

[00:20:44] **Catherine Ross:** I just want to jump in here and thank you for that because I think there is a very common dead idea that teaching centers are prescriptive in some way, that we're going to tell you how to teach and that's the way you have to teach. So, thank you for opening up that space, Sara, to say, no, no, that's not what it's about. It's all about getting you to figure out what's going to work for you in your context, in your classrooms, with your studies. So, thank you for, for just knocking that one out of the park.

[00:21:18] **Sara Jane Samuel:** Happy to. Like I said, it's a mistake I've made before, will make again, but it's nice to be able to fail safely in a place like the CTL.

[00:21:28] **Caitlin DeClercq:** I do think that's an important thing that we could also model as a CTL, that imperfection is sort of part of teaching, and how do we embrace those mistakes or those challenges that happen in the classroom? It also makes me think about just how might we tap into the emotional landscape of teaching. We think about emotions in the classroom often from the student perspective, but especially if we're thinking about this moment of orientation, there's excitement, there's joy, there's these questions of curiosity that many of you talked about before, but there also can be fear and how do we hold on to both of those and make space for both of those.

[00:22:02] Anirbaan, I wonder if you want to jump in here?

[00:22:06] **Anirbaan Banerjee:** Sure. Yeah, I'll reiterate things that have been said previously. I think it's really important for these orientations to meet graduate students where they're at, because sometimes they're going to have questions that you don't even know are questions that they had.

[00:22:22] I can, for example, speak to the fact that my first time on campus at Columbia was also my first time on a campus in the U.S., on a liberal arts institution that operates in the very specific context of the U.S. So there are rules and norms that you don't even understand are applicable and sometimes the undergraduates will know more of it than you will.

[00:22:42] So being able to go to a space to ask some of those questions or being able to get that information from your grad students, when you're figuring out what to address in your orientation, that would be really useful. And I would feel sort of heard in that space if room is made for addressing my specific life and learning context that I'm coming from.

[00:23:02] **Sara Jane Samuel:** Yeah, I love to hear that from you, Anirban, because I'm sure your students are going through something similar, and it's nice to see that emulated in a teacher. Makes for more comfort in the classroom.

[00:23:13] **Anirbaan Banerjee:** Yeah, I'll just add to that that my, I guess my first year of teaching was really interesting because I almost felt like an undergraduate and a teaching assistant at the same time in the classroom. So yeah, it was, it was a funny experience, but a good one.

[00:23:26] **Caitlin DeClercq:** What this is making me also think about are just some of the assumptions that I find it really easy to make. One of the questions that I've been surprised to get over the last couple of years, but that of course makes a lot of sense is something as seemingly simple as, what is a lesson plan and how do my, how do I make one?

[00:23:42] That's something that I do all the time for my job, but it's also something that I've heard come up in these conversations about what are some of the essential skills that we might make space for in something like an orientation. So we need to hold on to some of those skill sets. And I guess the other thing that I'm thinking about too is I've been struck by our conversations also that are talking about, I guess the new norm of teaching is being teaching in times of stress and challenge. And how do we also recognize that that is going to be part of the landscape. It's looked different in different contexts over the last couple of years, but it does seem like that's something that we're increasingly needing to pay more attention to.

[00:24:21] **Catherine Ross:** I would definitely concur with that. And as someone who taught in Japan for three years at a university there, I definitely can relate to the feelings that you described, Anirbaan, of not knowing what the norms were and only knowing that on the very first day of class I completely violated them, I could tell by the students' reactions, and despite having all this training on the best way to teach English, conversational English, right? And so that is a really critical piece of the work that we do in trying to help everyone sort of understand what the expectations are.

[00:25:02] **Sara Jane Samuel:** I love that idea for a lot of reasons. And I think one is that I think I, I, as a student, I do my best learning in the classroom when I trust the instructor. And if I know my instructor is also like a human, in addition to being my teacher, I think it really makes for just really, I'm a big nerd, like really fruitful learning...really effective and fun.

[00:25:22] **Catherine Ross:** Right.

[00:25:22] **Sara Jane Samuel:** Classroom vibe.

[00:25:23] **Catherine Ross:** Right.

[00:25:24] **Sara Jane Samuel:** I'm all here for that.

[00:25:24] **Catherine Ross:** Those relationships are so important. Yes. Alright, last question. I've been dying to ask this question, but we'll do it very quickly. If you could change one thing about the relationship between doctoral education and teaching, what ideas would you have? I think, Sara, you were going to kick that one off.

[00:25:46] **Sara Jane Samuel:** Sure. I think, A lot of my doctoral peers see teaching as an assignment, or as a way for the university to exploit their labor. And I'm not, I don't want to comment on that any which way. I think, I think there's a kernel of truth to all sides of the arguments.

[00:26:01] But I think one thing I would love to change is to make it so that my peers understand that the classroom and teaching can be a vehicle for justice. So, if you are feeling neglected by your committee or your advisors, like, you can be a better teacher, a more attentive, student-centered teacher in your classroom.

[00:26:20] If you feel like scholars of color or other people of other marginalized identities are not being represented on your syllabi, then highlight

their scholarship, um, and assign it to your students. I know that's something that I've thought very intentionally about in these tense times and this, and in this political climate.

[00:26:39] But I think it makes teaching both a more joyful activity for me and feels less like an assignment as it does like a fruitful development and critical part of my academic trajectory.

[00:26:54] **Catherine Ross:** All right, Anirbaan, I think you're up.

[00:26:57] **Anirbaan Banerjee:** Sure, yeah. So, I would start with messaging and I would emphasize the interrelatedness of teaching and research as intellectual activities. In some ways, teaching is a more tangible moment of intellectual engagement than sometimes with your research. You don't even necessarily know everyone who's reading your work, but you can see that and you can learn from that space in a much more tangible way.

[00:27:20] So that I would do at the level of messaging, but I would also say that messaging needs to be accompanied with structural changes. And by that, I mean that I would love to see a little more intertwining of systems of reward and recognition for research and teaching, so that we can actually bridge the gap and not just keep it at the level of messaging. So, start with messaging, but end with structural change.

[00:27:46] **Catherine Ross:** I can't tell you how much I love that you just said that. Alright, Anwesha?

[00:27:52] **Anwesha Sengupta:** In practical terms, I feel that one of the biggest stresses for graduate student instructors is when, on one hand, they are submitting their final papers for the courses that they are supposed to do, and also grading millions of assignments. And it just splits them in a way that makes one more important than the other. And it, usually it becomes the courses because otherwise they're penalized for it. So, one thing that I think can go a long way to kind of, uh, rectify the situation is during the teaching semesters to allow a student to take lesser course load so that it is actually humanly possible to do justice to the two roles as opposed to just, uh, tick on a checkbox. So that's one thing I would, uh, think about more.

[00:28:43] **Catherine Ross:** That's a great idea. And yeah, exactly.

[00:28:49] **Sara Jane Samuel:** I could absolutely get on board with that. I get a little bummed out every May and like a little before the winter holidays, cause

I'm in this like grading hole studying for my own exams, writing my own dissertation. It would bring a lot more joy to, I think, doctoral instructors lives to be able to spread out the teaching and the writing a little bit.

[00:29:08] **Catherine Ross:** Or is that just to somehow prepare you for life as a faculty member? I don't know. Well, thank you. I really can't thank you enough for your conversation today. You have highlighted just some really insightful areas for people to think about and it's, it's just been really fantastic to be able to meet you and talk with you. So thank you all for your participation in our 8th season of Dead Ideas.

[00:29:46] **Caitlin DeClercq:** Thank you

[00:29:47] **Anirbaan Banerjee:** Thank you

[00:29:48] **Anwesh Sengupta and Sara Jane Samuel:** Thank you

[00:29:52] **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. Our theme music is *In the Lab* by Immersive Music.