

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series

Season 3, Episode 1: Why Dead Ideas? A Conversation with Host Catherine Ross and Ian Althouse

Center for Teaching and Learning, Columbia University

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

Welcome back to Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning. I'm Catherine Ross, executive director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Columbia. Today, as we kick off our second year of podcasts, I'm switching roles. I will be the one being interviewed about this Dead Ideas podcast and how it came to be. My interviewer is my CTL colleague, Dr. Ian Althouse, who is a Senior Assistant Director on our Graduate Student Programs and Services team.

Ian Althouse ([00:38](#)):

Thank you, Catherine. I am happy to be here. So Catherine, before I formally introduce you to our listeners, I want to set the stage for today's podcast. Many of us at the CTL have thought that it might be a good time to introduce the new season and remind listeners about our goals in producing this podcast. But most importantly, we thought it might be a good idea to give our listeners a chance to learn a bit more about you, the host, and why you wanted to do this podcast. So with that, I think it's my turn to say, let's get started.

Ian Althouse ([01:10](#)):

Catherine, you and I both joined the center a little over four years ago during which I've had the great pleasure of getting to know you and work with you. But today I thought we might introduce you a bit more to our listeners because your work in the field of educational development in higher ed started long before you came to Columbia. Catherine is the executive director of the Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning. She has spent the last 25 years working in teaching centers at the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Connecticut, Wake Forest University, and since 2017 at Columbia University. She has MA's in Russian and teaching English to speakers of other languages and a PhD in Russian and applied linguistics, as well as adult second language acquisition.

Ian Althouse ([01:49](#)):

She has taught English, Russian and applied linguistics in all of the above mentioned universities as well as at Takai University in Japan. Her work with instructors in teaching and learning spans universities across the US, Saudi Arabia, China and Ukraine. So Catherine, in many ways, this podcast is a product of Diane Pike's paper from 2010. But I was wondering actually, if you might share a little bit about how your background led you to think about these implicit assumptions that are embedded in higher education. I'm really thinking about what led you to start thinking about dead ideas or to start identifying them.

Catherine Ross ([02:27](#)):

So I think it was really my background, my immersion in the world of languages and language teaching. I had studied Spanish and Russian as an undergrad. I lived with a family in Madrid for a while. I think I was very attuned already to the ways in which culture influences behaviors and communication, both written and spoken. And when I had that first experience of moving to Japan and teaching in a Japanese

university, I was fully prepared on how to teach English to speakers of other languages. But when I walked in that classroom the first day, I recognized very quickly that I had violated some profound assumptions that students held about what students do in a classroom and what instructors do in a classroom in Japan. And it was a really quick lesson that I really had to think about my own expectations.

Catherine Ross ([03:42](#)):

Maybe they're not normal in a Japanese classroom, right? So I realized I had to learn a ton more about Japanese culture, about what kinds of classroom techniques they're accustomed to, or they think should be used by instructors. I researched Japanese communication styles. I talked with my students about their college experience and what it meant to them. And I was stunned to learn that there was an expression at that time in Japan, that university is play because they work in study so intensively in high school to get into college that they view university as a time to relax and have friends and really create a network. So that was certainly a stunning revelation for me. So after finishing three years teaching in Japan, I moved to University of Nevada Reno. And I was teaching in an intensive English program, which was for all international students who wanted to attend US universities, but it was at that point, largely Japanese students.

Catherine Ross ([04:53](#)):

And the experiences I had and what I had learned in understanding the context of teaching in Japan really helped me unpack then what happens in American classrooms that these students will need to know about and be prepared to engage with when they become students in a US university. So from there, I was really now examining American cultural assumptions about what university classrooms look like. After finishing my PhD at the University of Texas at Austin, I ended up taking a job at the University of Connecticut, working with international graduate student who were all going to become TA's and be teaching at the university in all different disciplines. And there, the work I had done previously to unpack for Japanese students what it takes to be successful in a US classroom, I was able to then expand on to think about what do these international grad students need to know about student expectations of teaching, but also their departmental expectations of teaching and how do they navigate that cultural terrain.

Catherine Ross ([06:21](#)):

Through the years of working with these international graduate students, I was privileged to observe well over a hundred classes. I was able to talk with the TA's extensively about their experiences, their surprises, their puzzlement, about what was happening in the US classroom. I was able to talk with students and I realized that we also had a lot of work to do with students because students come in with very dead ideas about what happens in college. A lot of these TA's were typically teaching freshman classes. So these are students who are new and they have these preconceived ideas about what happens in a classroom. So there were a lot of miscommunications happening and misinterpretations of things that were happening.

Catherine Ross ([07:11](#)):

So all of that started to solidify my belief that lot of what we do every day in the academy, in teaching and learning that we just think of as normal behaviors are really very culturally bound behaviors. And in 2009, I happened to read Laura Rendon's book, which had just come out at that time, "Sentipensante: Sensing, Thinking, Teaching for Social Justice and Liberation". And that was my aha moment. She really uncovered all of those cultural underpinnings of Western higher education in a way that validated and

strengthened my work and being able to help instructors unpack their beliefs and assumptions that are based on these cultural values.

Ian Althouse ([08:08](#)):

As another... a language instructor who has worked deeply in the field of Spanish language and literature and thought deeply about culture, I think what's really interesting is that you've highlighted how these implicit assumptions occur among students, among our faculty. They can also be embedded into not just all universities, but one specific university and even kind of within that, within a specific department. But I'm wondering now, Diane Pike's paper from 2010 was kind of like the inspiration for this podcast. I'm wondering when was it or what was it about Diane Pike's paper that really resonated with you, especially a metaphor of dead ideas to kind of move away from implicit cultural assumptions into this naming of it as a dead idea.

Catherine Ross ([08:57](#)):

Yeah, that's a really good question. And I think what happened was Diane Pike's paper came out in 2010, right after I had read Sentipensante and I was searching for a way to engage instructors, both grad students and faculty with Laura Rendon's ideas. But it's a complex reading. And when I read Diane Pike's paper, I realized that that metaphor was a very powerful metaphor for promoting reflection also in kind of a fun way in encouraging instructors to uncover their own dead ideas, but also maybe the dead ideas of their colleagues that they hear in the hallways, in their department. The metaphor made engaging with the cultural assumptions much easier and more interesting I think for instructors. So Diane Pike's paper really gave me another set of tools that created that engagement factor so that we could really dig into the ideas that Laura Rendon had exposed and get instructors to apply it to their own teaching.

Ian Althouse ([10:23](#)):

What's really interesting in the way that you're describing this too, is that you're thinking not only about working with graduate students or with faculty, but you're also thinking about how faculty interact with one another. I'm wondering maybe you could tell us a little bit more about what you see as the impetus to do this work from the Center for Teaching and Learning side. What about the location of a Center for Teaching and Learning? Why that center? Why is that center the one that's supposed to be forwarding these conversations about dead ideas?

Catherine Ross ([10:53](#)):

Teaching centers are interesting in the ways in which they sit in the academy. They are very often, not always, but very often located in a provost's office, but because of the work we do with instructors, both grad students and faculty, we're often also sitting in classrooms and sitting in offices of instructors and having these deep conversations with them about their teaching. But we also see sort of the institutional language around teaching and learning and the institutional practices. We get to see what departments are like, what schools are doing around teaching and learning and supporting teaching and learning of their instructors. And so we see all of these aspects together in a way that not a lot of people in the academy do. So I felt like we were uniquely positioned to lead this work, this unpacking work with instructors. We just have this 360 view.

Ian Althouse ([12:08](#)):

I couldn't agree more about the fact that Centers for Teaching and Learning really do have a holistic view of the campus teaching culture, especially because we are sitting in those classrooms often. So we're

also navigating the ways in which students are responding to their instructors. I want to kind of pause for a second and go back to the metaphor, because I think it's really interesting that dead ideas really struck you. Because in past episodes, some guests, even Diane Pike in her original address to the American Sociological Society referred to dead ideas, also as zombie ideas, right? Suggesting that they just won't die. So given that there is this alternative of maybe zombie ideas, why did you choose dead ideas for the title of this podcast?

Catherine Ross ([12:58](#)):

Yeah. It took me a while to sort that out, but ultimately relying on what little bit I've seen, like trailers for zombie movies. I feel like zombies are dead, but they're in our face. Like they're coming through the door, they're coming after us. And dead ideas aren't that, right? They're deeply buried and out of sight and they don't come after us. We have to literally like dig them up and unearth them if we want to confront them. You just don't have to do that with a zombie. They're right there.

Ian Althouse ([13:42](#)):

I appreciate that distinction. I hadn't really thought about the fact that the zombies would be coming after us in a way that the dead ideas just happened to be present and kind of latent. So Catherine, now that we've thought about why dead ideas and not zombie ideas, maybe you could explain to me a little bit more about why you chose to deeply examine dead ideas in the format of a podcast. Why not something like a talk or a journal article more aligned with Diane Pike's paper. These are communications that are more typical of higher education. So why a podcast?

Catherine Ross ([14:18](#)):

Well, at this point in my career, this is a real passion project and the vice provost was encouraging us to consider a CTL podcast. And I thought the theme of dead ideas is a natural broad umbrella to talk about a whole lot of ideas under. So a podcast made sense to me in that way, because in a paper you're much more constrained with the number of topics you could dive into. And it's also, not everyone reads papers, right? Not everyone listens to podcasts, but a lot of people do. So why not try a different venue to really explore and go deep into this idea of dead ideas. Also, a podcast format allows me to bring other voices in to speak to this topic in a way that's difficult and maybe even not possible in a journal, single journal article.

Catherine Ross ([15:29](#)):

So when you bring those other voices in, people get to hear the guests talking about their own discoveries, their own ideas that they want to unpack, and you hear that excitement and their passion for this work. And to me, that's inspiring when you hear people talking about their projects and their understandings and the things that have challenged them in the academy. I think that is moving in a way that a paper is not. So, I just think back to my conversations with some of the change agents that I've been able to speak with. People like Carl Wieman or Diane Pike herself and Jesse Stommel and instructors at Columbia and students at Columbia. The excitement in their voices and the intense passion for changing higher ed, I just think it's remarkable and you just don't get that out of a paper.

Catherine Ross ([16:40](#)):

And I think a podcast expands our reach in a novel way. So, academic paper is abundant and there's often just not enough time to read them all, but sometimes people have a little more space to listen to a podcast because it's something you can do while you're commuting or doing something else, taking a

walk. So I felt like it was worth trying to see if we could engage with instructors, not just at Columbia but also around the country, around the world with these dead ideas. So I think it offers people from other institutions, other kinds of educational systems, a window into the US educational system. And it almost creates like an open education platform to talk about higher ed writ large, and teaching and learning in higher ed writ large. And there's no fee, so anyone can access it and listen to it.

Ian Althouse ([17:52](#)):

For me it's that last point of yours, Catherine, that really resonates, I guess. I think it's inspiring for us to think about podcasts, not just as a tool for entertainment, but also as something valuable for the educational realm. I think your point about changing up the format, trying to reach people in a different way is also really important. It's also probably something we can bring to our own educational practices, our own pedagogical practices, right? Thinking about maybe we don't always have to assign the journal article, but maybe that same researcher has done a podcast, might be another kind of interesting way to reach our students.

Ian Althouse ([18:31](#)):

So with all that said though, the excavation work that you talk about, right? Digging up these dead ideas, has been going on for a long time. It takes a lot of energy and making a podcast also takes a lot of energy, especially since we are accustomed to generally writing academic papers. So I guess I'm really curious as to what do we do once we've dug up these dead ideas, right? We've put all this work into it. So what happens? What do we do differently once we unearth these dead ideas and what would change in our teaching practices?

Catherine Ross ([19:11](#)):

I think last year was a really good example of what we could change in our teaching practices. Every episode was focused on a teaching practice and invited instructors to reflect on what they're doing currently and unpack why they might want to consider changing it. So we had, for example, Jesse Stommel talking about ungrading, which is a very thought provoking concept. And we had people talking about assessment and how you can totally rethink the function of assessment in your course, right? It's not just about ranking students, but it can be used as a tool that promotes learning and helps students see if they're learning the concepts and skills that they need to be developing.

Catherine Ross ([20:04](#)):

So all of those episodes from last year focused on various kinds of common teaching behaviors, writing your syllabus, grading your students, even ideas about like online teaching, given the amount of online teaching that was happening last year. So I think we've done a good job of really diving into helping individual instructors reflect on their practices, the so-called normal practices of higher ed teaching. And I think this fall might be a good time to turn a little bit and maybe focus more on a bigger picture way of changing teaching in the academy and thinking about systems that are related to teaching and learning, not just individual instructor behaviors.

Ian Althouse ([21:05](#)):

Well, that's really interesting. I see what you were saying about these common classroom practices. And so I guess... And how they are much more individual. So I guess my question then would be why shift away from individual practices that our listeners could enact to these larger systems and what kind of systems are we talking about?

Catherine Ross ([21:26](#)):

My fear is that if we only focus on the individual instructor changes, we're not addressing the broader culture of the academy and that broader culture could be inhibiting for individual faculty who want to make changes to their teaching. So the ways in which we evaluate teaching for example is a system, right? And it's a system based on some really dead ideas about how teaching should be evaluated, who should be doing the evaluation, how the information is collected about an instructors teaching, how it's weighted. I mean, just some really dead ideas there that have to change because otherwise the things we're encouraging instructors to do, they can't do without fearing punishment from the system, right? Systems of grading, systems of assessment. The ways in which in some disciplines high stakes testing seems to be the only way that you're allowed to sort of assess whether students are learning what they need to learn or not. Systems of credentialing and what I would call gatekeeping in the academy. I think to really support individual faculty in changing their teaching, we have to also change the systems around them.

Ian Althouse ([23:03](#)):

I think that's a really profound moment for us that to kind of reflect on that even if we want to encourage individual change that the systems that we exist in, right? These cultures, the implicit assumptions of the cultures of teaching in higher ed may actually be working against the changes that the institution itself wants the instructors to pursue. So as we shift gears then for this fall, and we're starting to think about these systems and exploring those. I guess my question is for you, what is it that keeps you inspired and motivates you to do this work? I mean, these are big topics to unpack and to dig into.

Catherine Ross ([23:45](#)):

They are. And I've been chipping away at this for a very long time, but I do have this kind of stubborn streak in me, and I really do want to change higher education. I want to move the needle. So I think I have a lot of intrinsic motivation. I'm also really inspired by the work of my colleagues in the Columbia CTL, but also in CTL's broadly. Colleagues that I've worked with for decades who are also trying to make these changes happen. And I feel like I get such energy from them as well. So there's a lot of motivation for me just in the day to day work and with the people that I work with. I think extrinsically, I get to talk with some really amazing guests. They bring in ideas that I've never thought of. They've uncovered dead ideas, where I didn't even see them.

Catherine Ross ([24:49](#)):

And that is super exciting and motivating for me. And it's such a privilege to be able to have these conversations with all of these different kinds of guests. I think what I'm really looking forward to this fall is conversations with people who are really pushing change at systems levels. So I get to talk with Kevin Gannon, the author of "Radical Hope" about his take on some of the issues he sees with the evaluation of faculty, for example. And also to ask him a question about, , how do you write a book on radical hope and know that instructors who decide they want to teach in the ways you're advocating for are going to be okay when they meet those evaluation systems. That's extraordinarily exciting to me. I'm going to get to talk with Laura Rendon who wrote Sentipensante, who has been a deep source of inspiration for me. So that's thrilling.

Catherine Ross ([25:58](#)):

And I've already had a conversation with two instructors from Teachers College, Aaron Pallas and Anna Newman who wrote a book called *Convergent Teaching* and it's a very provoking book about the place of undergraduate education in higher education, as well as the public discourse around the value of higher education. And what does higher education need to change to make teaching better. Ultimately, I will get a chance to talk with Josh Kim from Dartmouth and Eddie Maloney from Georgetown about some very radical ideas they have for changing up the systems in higher ed in their book called *Learning Innovation and the Future of Higher Education*. So how could I not be motivated to keep doing this work when all of these people are willing to come and talk and share their brilliant ideas with us. It's extraordinary.

Ian Althouse ([27:08](#)):

Wow. I mean, Catherine, earlier on in our conversation, you brought up why the podcast and why the podcast format. And one of the things you said was how bringing in the voices of other individuals, other thinkers helps us to hear the inspiration, the motivation, and kind of their excitement, enthusiasm for the work that they're doing. And hearing you talk about these interviews actually really is inspiring to me, but also we can hear all of the excitement and enthusiasm in your voice right now. So, I couldn't be more on board with that rationale for a podcast. It sounds like you have an exciting lineup of scholars coming up for this fall. And I really can't wait to hear what ideas that they point out and how they start to unpack these legacy systems within higher ed. I think at this point though, this brings us to the end of our interview. So thank you so much, Catherine, for bringing us through the birth of this podcast and giving us a sneak peek at where we're going next. Your enthusiasm has been very contagious.

Catherine Ross ([28:05](#)):

Well, thank you Ian for taking the time to talk with me and for motivating me to do this podcast and for helping to move higher education teaching to a better place. I really appreciate your help in kicking off this season of *Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning*.

Ian Althouse ([28:28](#)):

Thank you for having me.

Catherine Ross ([28:32](#)):

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