Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series
Season 4, Episode 3: Teaching Development at its Best: A Graduate Student Reflects, with Aleksandra Jacubczak

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.

[00:00:22] I'm speaking today with Aleksandra Jacubczak, a Columbia graduate student in the history department. 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."

[00:00:49] Aleksandra Jacubczak is a fifth-year graduate student in the history department at Columbia University. She has been a Center for Teaching and Learning Lead Teaching Fellow for the history department, and currently is serving as a teaching assessment fellow in the CTL.

[00:01:06] Welcome to our Dead Ideas podcast, Aleksandra, it's such a delight to have you as our guest today.

[00:01:12] Aleksandra Jacubczak: Hi, I'm happy to be here.

[00:01:15] Catherine Ross: Let me set the stage a little bit here. As many of you may know, if you've been listening, I recently interviewed the Chronicle of Higher Ed. Senior Writer, Beth McMurtrie, about her article, The Damaging Myth of the Natural Teacher.

[00:01:29] McMurtrie's article highlights the disjunction between colleges saying that teaching is central to their mission, but they're not really supporting or valuing teaching development. Aleksandra's story is that of her own teaching development journey through Columbia CTL's Teaching Development Program, or the TDP as we fondly refer to it here, which was created by our graduate student programs and services team. The CTL's Teaching Development Program helps Columbia grad students cultivate, document, and reflect on the development of their teaching across the arc of their graduate school career. And our team supports all the grad students who enroll in the TDP as they navigate the path towards completion.

[00:02:24] Reflection is a powerful driver of teaching development and it was Aleksandra's final reflection that brought her to this podcast conversation. She offered such insightful personal reflection that demonstrated how universities can and should support teaching development for grad students in doctoral programs as a way to address the issues that were highlighted in Beth McMurtrie's article.
So with that little bit of background and connective thread, I want to jump into my questions for Aleksandra. So, we'll go ahead with the first question. I was wondering, Aleksandra, if you'd mind giving our listeners a brief overview of the Teaching Development Program - the requirements and your own personal journey, you know, things like what year were you in when you started it? Why did you decide to sign up? What does it involve to go through this program?

Aleksandra Jacubczak: So, the Teaching Development Program, the TDP as we call it, offers two paths; a foundational one and an advanced track. Both of them include extensive training in pedagogy, there are workshops, seminars that revolve around certain topics in teaching, for example, creating a syllabus or course design.

And as you already mentioned, the TDP stresses the importance of reflection, which is mainly self-reflection. But also there is a very important element of feedback, and the participants of the TDP are, for example, observed during their teaching by CTL fellows who are trained for this purposes. They receive feedback on their class dynamics, for example, throughout the semester. Also, they are observing other TDP participants, but I think also what you mentioned, they're also required to self-reflect about their own experiences. And after every workshop or seminar, they have to submit a reflection of what did they learn and how it changed their perspective on teaching.

So, I joined it, the Teaching Development Program, the TDP, I believe the same year that it was officially established. This was my second year in my doctoral studies, but it was the first year that I had to, I had to serve as a teaching assistant in my department. We start teaching in our second year of the program for six semesters, and actually I had never taught before, and it really terrified me. I didn't know how to organize my class, how to make all the students participate, or how to make the discussion going, I started to be worried about the grading as well, how to grade the papers, how to make a rubric, and also how to explain to the students the grades, that they would be convinced that that's what they should get.

And that's why I joined the TDP, because I felt that they can provide me with all the, with all the tips, at least. I wanted to gain some confidence so I can stand confidently in front of the students and know what I am doing, that I am making conscious decisions about my teaching and also about the assessment of the grades and I can be a conscious, cautious instructor, not just make random decisions about what I do in my classroom.

Catherine Ross: Thank you for that. That's great. You started your reflection about the TDP by admitting that you did not have many expectations for the program beyond what you just mentioned, right? That you would get a boost in your confidence around teaching, but could you share what ended up changing for you? It was a little more than confidence.

Aleksandra Jacubczak: Yes. So, I came because of fear. I was afraid how it would look like, I was not experienced at all. And I came, I came with some beliefs about teaching; that it's more or less technicality and I should just get confidence, and then it's going to be relatively fine, and I'm going to survive. That's how also others, my peers, that's how they saw it - just to survive these six semesters.
I enjoyed the workshops organized by the CTL so much that I attended more than required at the foundational track. I learned not only the content, many strategies, and how to lead a discussion, how to engage students, how to create a rubric, etc. But also I drew so much inspiration from the CTL’s fabulous staff who delivered workshops. They were so accessible and so welcoming. I never felt so comfortable in a classroom as during these workshops at the CTL. So after taking a bunch of workshops and seminars the first year, I came to a revelation that I can shape my own teaching by learning more about, and not to succumb to some limiting structures, such as the type of the course I'm teaching, because I was not actually teaching the courses of my own expertise. These were courses created by my professors, my main instructors, and I was just a teaching assistant, but I understood, thanks to the TDP, that I can also have some role in this, and I can also become a successful instructor.

I showed up as a, as a shy person, not confident and also convinced that I shouldn't be an instructor, but then I understood that I can learn it. And regardless of one's skills or charisma, lack of it, or other personality traits that are needed for this profession, also type of a course; if we're teaching what we supposed to teach, what we like to teach or what we're experts in, we can still do a great job. And we can enjoy it. And the students can learn a lot from, from us.

And I understood that as we learn how to do proper research, we can also learn how to teach properly. There are certain strategies, methods that can be applied - that's what I learned at the CTL. And I saw how the staff working in this field are really doing these things that they're teaching us. And I enjoyed so much being there. And also another revelation was that my teaching doesn't have to be so separate from my research, and I don't have to treat them so separately, and actually they can complement each other and make me one, full, wholesome academic scholar.

And now after three years and after completing the advanced track, I see this teaching as an extension of my research. And as I try to inform my research, I also want to invest in improving my teaching. Still, while we have resources to support our research - there's the peer review, we have a lot of colleagues giving us feedback on our work - there is much less that we can get help for improving our teaching. And this is still something that I feel we're missing, although the CTL is really doing a great job at Columbia to help us fill this void with supporting us in learning about teaching and improving what we're doing.

Catherine Ross: Thank you for that. You started out by saying you viewed yourself as a scholar, primarily, and by the time you went through this teaching development, you realized that teaching and research are connected and they're not fighting against each other, and in fact, can feed each other. And I thought that was very powerful because that's a very common experience, I think in the academy. Graduate school really is about training scholars, and so I think it's powerful that you had that sort of "Aha!" moment that teaching could feed into your research and not compete against it. And that you could be a very intentional teacher in the same way that you're a very intentional scholar. That's one of the things I loved in your reflection.

I also really liked this quote from your reflection, and I'll read the quote. "First of all, my greatest revelation was that assessment is much more than giving grades. It actually can and should shape the entire process." That is a huge revelation, in one little sentence
there. Can you share the kinds of changes that you made as a result of this epiphany, and how did that change also your teaching? When you looked specifically at assessment.

[00:11:04] **Aleksandra Jacubczak:** Definitely. So, as I mentioned, when I entered the TDP, I was actually worried about grading students. How to be confident about that, how to feel that I'm grading them fairly. And I was too focused on grading, but deep inside, I actually wanted them to learn for the sake of learning, and not for the grade. So, I already felt that there was some problem with the system, that there are grades, but they should learn for the sake of learning. Especially at a place as Columbia that has such a great institution, that students can just come for the sake of knowledge, and not just for the checklist of grades, to get a diploma.

[00:11:47] And actually, again, CTL’s workshops really helped me to think how this can really be about the process, and not about the final product that would be graded and students would be just judged by them, the final product. So, I learned that assessment is much more than that, and it's actually about looking closely at student's learning, providing feedback to students at various stages of the learning process, and not at its very end. And I took a seminar about course design. I learned how to implement low stakes assessments that can help me establish, and also the students, where students struggle throughout the course, and also to give them more control over their learning process.

[00:12:33] Through, for example, non-graded assessments such as peer review, annotated bibliography, some drafts, etc., the students can receive information or their performance where there are strong or weak spots. At the end of the course, they're not so surprised about their grades, but also I, as an instructor, I also feel more in control of what's going on with them and I'm also not surprised by the final outcome. So I noticed that the gain is on both sides; the students have more control over it and I as an instructor.

[00:13:07] And I have to, I have to say that from my experience, the students really appreciated these additional assessment methods such as peer review, ungraded assessments that led to a graded one. For example, as I mentioned, I assigned annotated bibliography, just submitting a thesis statement and a draft of a final paper when only the final paper itself would be graded. But the students throughout the course received guidance about their progress towards the paper, what they were doing well, what was maybe weaker in their performance.

[00:13:44] But also what was important, they learned how to read the feedback, how to engage with the feedback and what to get from it. But also I, as an instructor, had to learn how to give them useful feedback. And what is useful feedback? What is constructive feedback? What is timely feedback? When to give them this feedback, and in what manner.

[00:14:05] And I, I felt just that both of the sides, me and my students, we started to feel more as partners to this process. That we're both learning how to speak to each other, how I should give them feedback and how they should read this feedback, how they should build from that and how can I help them build that? So it was really a rewarding process and I felt really appreciated, seen by my students.
Catherine Ross: That's great, a win win. Many times, when you do learn these sorts of skills and techniques that you've mentioned, for teaching, it does become that partnership, right? That it does allow students to feel more focused on the learning because they're working with you, sort of side by side, right. To learn from you and, and your feedback. So that's, that's very powerful.

And you're building trust, right? The students now will trust you. And hopefully when you do have to grade them, there's not going to be a huge shock at the end because you've been talking to them all the way through. Right?

Aleksandra Jacubczak: Yes. As I mentioned, I feel that everybody has more control over the process. Both the students and the instructor have more control over how is it going, and then at the end, it's not a big surprise, how did it go? Because we were watching it closely, both of us, me and the student and how it was going. And I think the students also are more aware of their strengths and weaknesses all over the way. And they're also more prepared to self-assess and self-reflect on how they were doing throughout the course.

Catherine Ross: Right. Reflection is just as powerful for them as it was for you, as you were developing your teaching, right? They can develop their learning.

So, I'm going to move ahead to another quote that you wrote, about community in the teaching environment. The quote you wrote was, "while as scholars, we share our work regularly and consider ourselves part of a larger intellectual community, I learned that as instructors, we do not have to be isolated and can participate in larger communities where we share experiences and learn from one another."

This is also another profound dead idea in higher education, right? That teaching is something you do by yourself, and you don't talk about it. And so I found that comment to be particularly interesting. How did the realization about building that community shape your teaching and support you in finishing and completing sort of the TDP program, as well as improving your teaching?

Aleksandra Jacubczak: Well, so I noticed that many of my peers are facing similar difficulties when they're thrown out into the classroom. And we have similar struggles, but what is different between us is what we do with the struggle. Do we just want to survive the six semesters of teaching? Or we really want to do something about it, do we want to improve our teaching? Do we consider our teaching an important part of our, our doctoral training and then also our, of our academic persona?

And I found people in the CTL, other people who are taking the TDP, more similar to me than, for example, in my department or in general people who I knew before. Here at the CTL, I found many students like me who were committed to learning more about teaching and learning, who are passionate about that. And they felt that it's worth the time. Because I often met with people who felt that they didn't feel that it's worth to invest time in their teaching, they just want to finish it and they want to focus on writing their dissertation. That's what, that's the common attitude in academia from my experience. But, at the CTL, I found people who are really passionate about teaching, and also they came from the similar
struggles as me. How to make it a meaningful part of our, of our presence at the university and as being scholars and kinetic personas.

[00:18:46] And I came to, as I mentioned, to many workshops organized by the CTL, and though it's not a community organized by the CTL and there are people from various departments, I noticed that the same group of people are coming. And after a while, I knew all the CTL staff and all the participants, everybody was familiar to me. And also the character of the CTL workshops and seminars is all about collaboration. So every workshop made us feel a community. We really shared ideas. We shared our struggles, solutions for our problems, and it sounded that despite the fact that we're in various disciplines, we had similar struggles. And I really felt that I'm being understood and my struggles with my teaching were actually universal. And it's not about the discipline, it's something more common about, about teaching.

[00:19:48] And I feel that these interdisciplinary centers, such as the Center for Teaching and Learning at Columbia, are really amazing places to bring people together, to see that these universal struggles that we can solve together. And collaboration is one of the ways how to do that. We can really learn from each other a lot.

[00:20:12] Catherine Ross: That's great. That's great to hear. So, Aleksandra, in your reflection, you also talked about the fact that the teaching evaluations that the departments typically use at the end of the semester, that students fill out, that those evaluations were not really helping you learn about the effectiveness of your new teaching methods, all the different things that you were trying out. So what did you do to get that kind of feedback on your teaching methods as you tried out all these new things?

[00:20:46] Aleksandra Jacubczak: So CTL offers mid-course review and also peer observation. And again, I reached out to them to get these additional forms of feedback evaluation. And for the midcourse review, CTL trained, I think a Fellow, came to sit in my class, talk to my students and tell me what, what does he/she think about my class. This would be in response to my questions, so I would share with him/her my concerns, or what was my intervention before and how does that dynamic work. And also the peer observation. Also, they create their own survey for the students, they meet with my students throughout the course, and they talk to them about specific issues that were interesting for me. So these are very great options to get to feedback about your teaching because these actually respond to your own needs, unlike the evaluations created by the university or the department. They're very general.

[00:21:52] And also, so last year I was serving as a teaching fellow from my department, and I actually believe that these need some reform. So, last year my department involved the students and the teaching assistants in changing these evaluations, that they would actually answer our needs - what do we need to know about our own teaching, especially that these evaluations are afterwards used for our job portfolio. And now they're supposed to be more useful for us and they're supposed to reflect, more or less, what are our strengths or weaknesses in our teaching. Because that should be their purpose, that they should serve us to evaluate on our, our own teaching and what we're doing wrong, not only for, for the department. At that moment it was only for the sake of the institution, but actually they should serve us.
And I also believe that we should use more, more personal evaluations for our own students. I didn't want to burden my students too much with evaluations, but I think that evaluations and feedback for students is so crucial that everybody should think about something more personalized for each course, for each group of students. And besides that, I just saw how my students changed throughout the year, how they reached out to me, how they were really appreciating my interventions, how we became partners in this process. It was really rewarding. And I felt that this was a successful intervention than I did, and I didn't need much of a confirmation besides that. Just, it was a pleasure to see how my students grow, and that it really worked well.

Catherine Ross: But as you said, it's important to be able to get feedback from the students, right? Just to make sure that it's working for them and that they feel like this is really something that's helping them learn, which is your focus. And so I think that speaks to the power that instructors have to get that kind of feedback from their students, whether you have other people come in, as you did. But you can also do it through anonymous surveys, right? Asking students, like, what helped you learn? What's helping you learn? What isn't helping you learn that we should stop doing? What should we continue doing that's helping you learn, right? Those are simple questions where you can get that feedback and I think it's also part of the conversation that you're always having with your students, because then they see that not only do you give them feedback, you need feedback from them, right?

And so it deepens the partnership, and the outcome of having your department revisit the form so that it will better serve your professional needs, I think is wonderful. That's a great outcome! So, congratulations to all of you for working on that with your department.

I know that you said earlier that it was fear that drove you to signing up for the TDP. But now that you've done this, what do you think will inspire you as you go forward around changing higher education teaching? What motivates you to do this work?

Aleksandra Jacubczak: They are the people I met at the CTL - those passionate people who love teaching, who see it as a crucial part of their academic training and their future job at the, at the university. And also, as I mentioned, what my students gave. It was really a rewarding experience; it was an investment worth of time.

Actually, when I entered the program, I felt that I'm more of a scholar and I actually like being on my own, doing my research and from time to time sharing my work to get some feedback. And then I became a person who loves to be with people, with students, and see how other people grow. And that I can learn from them as well. And actually teaching showed me that we can learn from each other so much. And this is, this is about knowledge, and growing, and learning - similarly to research, but even more. Like when I entered the program, I thought that more research is about sharing ideas, feedback, collaboration, and here I saw that actually teaching is more about that. It's about community giving and receiving a lot from students. It's really rewarding. And this is my inspiration, motivation to move forward.

Catherine Ross: That's great. Thank you. That makes for a wonderful conclusion to our conversation. Thank you so much, Aleksandra, for taking the time to talk with us and
sharing your work and your deep thinking to help move higher education teaching to a better place. And also for being part of our spring 2022 podcast season. We really appreciate.

[00:27:02] **Aleksandra Jacubczak:** Thank you for having me.

[00:27:07] **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 in Teaching and Learning is a product of Columbia University's Center for Teaching and Learning, and is produced by Stephanie Ogden, Laura Nicholas and Jon Hanford. Our theme music is *In the Lab*, by Immersive Music.