

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series

Episode 1: The Tyranny of Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning with Diane Pike

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- [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. In Dead Ideas, guests share light bulb moments when they came face-to-face with an assumption that was not serving their students or their pedagogy, and we discuss the changes that they made to their practice. We hope these radically honest conversations will inspire some light bulb moments for those listening at home. I'm Catherine Ross, the Center's Executive Director. Let's get started. Our guest today is Diane Pike, who is joining us remotely from Augsburg University in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where she is a Professor of Sociology, teaching graduates and undergraduates at Augsburg University. Diane, thank you so much for joining us.

- [Diane Pike] Thank you for having me.

- [Catherine Ross] Diane, you were also awarded the Hans O. Mauksch Award for Undergraduate Teaching and Learning from the American Sociological Association's Section on Teaching and Learning, in 2009, and in 2012, you received the ASA's highest award for Distinguished Contributions to Teaching. You are also the author of the essay, "The Tyranny of Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning", which you gave as the presidential address at the Midwest Sociological Society in 2010, and which was published in the Sociological Quarterly in 2011, and it is that very essay that brings us together today. That essay was very influential for me, and I've used it in my own work in educational development, creating workshops at different centers for teaching and learning, so I'm really happy that you are here with us today.

- [Diane Pike] I'm delighted to be here.

- [Catherine Ross] Great, well, in your paper, you talk about how this idea, the tyranny of dead ideas in teaching and learning, came to you as you were listening to public radio, and you heard a discussion of Matt Miller's book, "The Tyranny of Dead Ideas: Letting Go of the Old Ways of Thinking to Unleash New Prosperity" which came out in 2009. Matt Miller is an economist, and yet that sparked something for you. Can you recount a little of that moment for us?

- [Diane Pike] Yes, I was actually in the car, driving to a workshop on faculty development, and I had for the previous weeks been trying to think about what I wanted to talk about in that address to the Midwest Sociological Society, and the interview was fascinating, and of course, when you use words like tyranny and dead ideas, that can be a pretty compelling way to have people think about what you're about to say, and I really did have a sort of a quintessential light bulb moment and said out loud to myself in the car, "There are dead ideas in teaching and learning," and it was pretty clear to me that that was something I could start with and work with as I prepared for that speech.

- [Catherine Ross] Wow, that's amazing. I love those light bulb moments when they happen. So the three dead ideas that you explored in your 2010 essay were, the first one, that students are not as prepared as they used to be, the second one, that grades motivate learning, and the third one was that as educators, technology will be either our demise or our deliverance. Can you pick one of these, whichever one is closest to the top of your mind, and just unpack it for us a little bit?

- [Diane Pike] Yes, all of these ideas, I think, still are things that we're paying attention to in higher education, but probably in the last year or two, I continue to think the most about this notion of technology and its impact on higher education. We have not moved away from the notion, I think, in some circles, and in the Chronicle, and in the media, and in politics, that somehow, technology can be the solution to every problem of higher education. And, of course, technology is a terrific thing. I would not want to go back to teaching with a phone and a typewriter on my desk. That's how long I've been teaching. But as with any technology, and this is one of the things we know as sociologists, with any technology, there are unanticipated consequences, and what concerns me, still, about this is this notion that if we find a technological solution to something it will in fact address the problem, and I think we've learned in the last 10 years that technology is panning out differently than we might've expected. MOOCs are not having the impact that we thought. Entirely online educations have some challenges that weren't anticipated or promised at the beginning. And so while it's here to stay and has much to contribute, I still think that it's not what we need to focus on as the solution to meeting the challenges that higher education faces today.

- [Catherine Ross] That's really fascinating. Let's explore that a little bit more. Could you maybe talk a little bit about what the challenges are that you see in higher education, and, going back to the examples you just gave, maybe how we thought they might address those challenges but they haven't, or what an example of an unintended consequence was?

- [Diane Pike] Well, certainly at a landscape level, for example, if you remember when MOOCs were put forward, and lots of people were investing, and we are gonna have these massive online open courses, and thousands of people will take them, and it will be a replacement for other opportunities that people might have to learn. And in the Chronicle lately, there's been studies mentioned about how MOOCs had their bright, shining moment, and they're still around, and there's still a place for them, but they haven't been the force that transformed higher education and how most people learn. I also think, in terms of online learning and its role in higher education and what it means at a place like Columbia, what it means at a place like Augsburg, that we are still trying to figure out what are the benefits to the students? What are the benefits to the institution? You might recall that we were gonna put things online because it would save money. Well, it doesn't really save money to put things online. And we're trying to figure out who are the students who are best educated through that technology, who are the students who maybe wouldn't thrive with online learning? And when it's in a context of focusing on how technology can be used to make sure that education is primarily about

preparing people for careers and jobs, I think we have a lot of variables floating around that we don't have agreement on in terms of how they work and who they work for.

- [Catherine Ross] Let's maybe take it down to the personal level, like, where were you in your pedagogy when you had this light bulb moment? What kinds of challenges were you facing in your classes, and how did this breakthrough of a way to think about these hidden assumptions that we have help you in your own teaching?

- [Diane Pike] Well, I think the flattering thing would be to say that I was mid-career when I had this idea, and because I'm at a smaller institution, I'm very lucky. I get to teach everything from introductory level courses to the capstone in the major, to courses in our graduate program, so I have quite a range of students, and I have quite a range of courses, and which I find a terrific opportunity within that. But at any stage of the career, it's important to stay effective, and I've been so fortunate in my career in that I got involved in faculty development very early on, when I first arrived out of graduate school, and so paying attention to teaching, explicitly, was something that I had the good fortune to be involved in right from the get-go. Every professional needs to figure out how they're going to stay effective over the course of their career, and that is, of course, true in teaching. So I found this framework, or this way of thinking, or this reminder, something that was energizing and gave me a new vocabulary for thinking about the work I wanted to do as a faculty developer. I was Director of our Center for Teaching and Learning for seven years, and then also as a sociologist. So it stuck, and it continues to inform the way I think about what I do, and how I can do it to the best of my ability.

- [Catherine Ross] Great, can you think of any specific moment in a class that you were teaching when you had that sort of, "Oh, wait, maybe this is another dead idea." Absolutely. The example that comes to mind for me was, maybe eight or 10 years ago, and I was grading papers. Sociology is a fairly writing-intensive discipline, and we have the luxury with smaller classes of being able to have essay exams and papers, and not have to do multiple choice because I have 500 people in my intro section. Fortunately, that's not my situation, although I think there are things that can be done in those situations as well. And I was grading papers, and I had talked to a colleague who was grading papers, and he said, "You know, I've been spending 45 minutes on each paper. It's taking me days to get through this." And as I was reading the papers, and writing margin comments, and trying to direct them, and I have learned from my English colleagues that you never have a substantial writing project for which there's not an opportunity for a revision, but I know I also have a lot of colleagues who will spend 30, 40, longer, on a paper that's not going to be revised. And the aha moment for me there was I realized that while I was reading the papers and making comments, I was having a conversation in my head with the ideas in the paper, and with the student. It felt like the more I wrote, and the more time I spent on the paper, the more the student was learning. And it occurred to me that the student wasn't learning anything while I was reading the paper, the student wasn't even in the equation, and so this lovely conversation in terms of response to the ideas was happening in my head and wasn't happening with the student, and whatever they had learned from that assignment had already happened, and so whether I spent 20 minutes on a paper or

40 minutes on a paper wasn't necessarily gonna change the learning that the student had done in producing the paper. And so that changed the way I approached the feedback on all of the papers in all of my courses. And one of the things I did, again, because I have the good fortune of not huge classes, is in the courses where it was possible. I now meet for 20 minutes with every student to talk about the paper, rather than my writing for 20 or 30 minutes to give them comments on the paper, and that's been a very productive change, I think, because then the student and I are having a conversation about the paper, and I came to realize that the learning was not happening while I was grading.

- [Catherine Ross] And that's related to the second dead idea you had in your original essay, that grades motivate learning. I think there is some research in rhetoric and teaching writing that shows that once students have a grade on a paper, they don't use the comments and all those wonderful thoughts that the faculty are giving them as a tool for learning, because in their minds, the paper's done, as you said, the learning's already happened, and now it's just about what grade did I get.

- [Diane Pike] Right, but I used to feel like, "Oh, aren't I a great teacher? Look at all this feedback I'm giving, and isn't this interesting, and I'm so happy to be having this conversation." And it was all in my mind.

- [Catherine Ross] And have you seen a change in your students' writing as a result of your new approach?

- [Diane Pike] I think particularly in upper division courses where there's more substantial writing assignments that have multiple versions, that the students have better understood what it was that we were looking for in the assignment. And I've gotten better in the conversations with the students in getting them to sort of, tell me what you think I just asked you to do with the paper, or tell me what's the hardest part of the paper. And so students have told me that the 20-minute conversations help them make progress more than margin notes. Now, some of that depends on what kind of feedback in writing faculty give. Some faculty edit papers. I think most faculty don't really do that so much anymore, but because we're able to have a dialogue, because I'm able to emphasize what they really need to pay the most attention to in a way that I can't always do in writing, the response from the students has been quite positive. And, of course, we can say more in 20 minutes than I can write in 20 minutes. So I have stuck with that plan, and the students have been very receptive.

- [Catherine Ross] So here we are, it's 2020 now, so 10 years since your article was published, since you gave your talk. I'm wondering how your thinking has evolved around tyranny, dead ideas, and the three that you had in 2010. You've briefly already talked a little bit about how technology continues to be an ongoing challenge in higher education, but I'm wondering what other ways your thinking might have evolved since then.

- [Diane Pike] I think that all three of those ideas, as I mentioned earlier, are things that are present in the challenges of the work that we do, and so technology's influence in education

changes. So now we have to worry about cell phones in classes, and now we have to wonder about what does it do to learning if you allow everybody to have their laptop open in class? So one of the things that's changed is the way in which technology is influencing teaching and learning. So we've moved from PowerPoint slides that people used to read in the dark to using PowerPoint and in a much more effective way, and I think there's been real progress there, yet the students' interest and dependence on technology has also shifted over that time. And so figuring out the policies, how you create a learning environment where everybody can pay attention, where there's a reason to be in the room, I think is a continuing evolution of the way that technology involves teaching and learning, and what we hope to do for students. I think, if I think about dead ideas in 2020, and what's most current as I walk in the classroom, it's trying to understand the way students see the world today. And of course that's the wonderful thing about teaching, that they change over time, and I change over time, and the world changed over time, and we need to be able to adapt to that and provide the best opportunities that we can. One of the things I was thinking about was this idea that I'm still hearing some places, that this generation of students are digital natives, and that they are very sophisticated technologically, and therefore, I'm kind of not, and so there needs to be an adjustment there. And what I would say is tyrannical about that idea, at least in terms of my experience with my students and the campuses that I visit, that to say somebody's a digital native, or very sophisticated about technology, doesn't mean what I think people suggest that it means. And many students are very sophisticated about using social media. They are very interested in making sure that communication is immediate and brief, but none of that technological digital native skillset means that they know how to read, that they know how to write, and that they know how to discern information that's valid from information that's not. So the technical skills are there, but the things that we're all interested in, like deep reading, and effective writing and communication, and being able to tell truth from not truth, those things are not a result of being technologically savvy, and so we need to keep doing what we do to help students gain those skills.

- [Catherine Ross] Wow, that's a really powerful example, I love that one, identifying that one as another dead idea, the digital native myth. Did you have any others floating around that you would like to share?

- [Diane Pike] I think we always have to be careful about the myth that somehow, and this goes back to one of the initial ideas, that somehow there's a deficit in the students today that wasn't there in the students in the past. And of course, we all acknowledge that we have to meet students where they are. I just think it's not very helpful to think that everything was perfect before, and that it was much easier in the past than it is today. Now, that said, I think in some ways, our jobs are harder today because of changes in the rest of the world, the kinds of things we care about as a society, the kinds of social and political issues that are challenging students in college today, those matter, and so being attuned to those and recognizing that just because it's different doesn't mean that if we could go back to having a room full of students that look different than the room full of students we have today, that things would be better. And so for me, at Augsburg, when I came in the 1980s, diversity was whether or not you were an Anderson or a Peterson, and I now teach at an institution where all three of my classes in

sociology this semester are minority majority students, and that richness of experience and what they bring into the classroom is a terrific thing as a teacher. But I try very hard to welcome that, and to say, all right, what do I need to do to up my game? Because that's what I need to do.

- [Catherine Ross] Yes, and I am personally deeply grateful for the framing you provided around that very topic.

- [Diane Pike] Oh, I'm glad to hear that, and I think, you know, maybe in five years, there'll be other new ideas that we need to let go of, and so an idea like Miller's that can be applied in a whole range of areas I think is a real gift, because one of my personal, I have a bookmark and I've taped it over my computer, one of my favorite sayings is from Stephen Brookfield, who is an educational psychologist, and he's at the University of Saint Thomas here actually, but he wrote a book in 1995 called "The Critically Reflective Teacher". He writes that one of the hardest things for faculty to understand is that "the sincerity of our intentions does not guarantee the purity of our practice", and that's been a mantra that's guided all of my work in teaching and learning over the years.

- [Catherine Ross] Yes, that's one of my all-time favorite quotes and I have used it on many occasions because it so aptly captures the effort that faculty make, and many of them really do work very hard, but without some ways of thinking about their teaching and unpacking what's just underneath the surface of their thinking about the teaching, it's very hard for them to get the outcomes that they want. So this has been really powerful.

- [Diane Pike] I'm glad to hear that.

- [Catherine Ross] So thank you, Diane, for all of this, as well as for your original paper, "The Tyranny of Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning" and I really appreciate that you would take the time to speak with us today, especially on a snow day, when everybody else is staying home.

- [Diane Pike] Yeah, I'm delighted. It's rewarding to know that the ideas that I was talking about have been useful to other people. That's why you share. There's no zero sum game in teaching. It's all about everybody contributing, and as the other book says, learning from each other. So I'm very pleased that this has been helpful to you. Thank you so much for the opportunity.

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