

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series

Episode 5: Dead Ideas in Grading with Jenny Davidson

Center for Teaching and Learning, Columbia University

- [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. I'm speaking remotely today with Dr. Jenny Davidson. Dr. Davidson is a professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. Some of her research interests are 18th century British literature and culture, the history of science, prose fiction, cultural and intellectual history, and the history of the novel. She is also the author of four novels. Dr. Davidson has been awarded the Lenfest Distinguished Teaching Award and the Mark Van Doren Teaching Award. Before we get started, just a quick reminder for our listeners. In this podcast series we are exploring dead ideas in 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. Hi, Jenny, welcome to our Dead Ideas podcast.

- [Jenny Davidson] Thanks for having me, Catherine. I'm delighted to be here.

- [Catherine Ross] So I want to just set the stage a little bit for our listeners. Columbia University went all remote, starting on Monday, March 16th. You published an article in the Washington Post on March 20th, "Forget distance learning, just give every college student an automatic A." And your ideas were featured again in an April 13th Chronicle of Higher Education article. "How has grading changed since Coronavirus forced classes online? Often it depends on the professor." So in these articles you argued that grading needed to be changed in response to the pandemic and the ensuing move to remote teaching. And before Columbia decided even to have everyone use pass fail, you told your students they would all get A's. So grading was clearly something important to you to talk about with your students pretty immediately following these changes. So I'm very curious about why that is. What led you to that moment and can you walk us through your thinking on that reaction.

- [Jenny Davidson] The dates that you give of March 16th, March 20th, make it sound like I somehow had a quick, brilliant insight that fed into writing this piece, but really the timeline as many of our listeners will remember, was more protracted and more muddled and all over the place than just giving a couple of dates really suggests. So as to say, very first few days of March, we were all very worried about coronavirus. We thought it was likely to have an impact on how we would be able to conduct things going forward, but there was no official guidance at that point about how Columbia teaching would be affected by that. So every couple of days the situation changed and our frame from inside the university changed and so forth. So I found myself, you remember that classes were suspended just before spring break. We hadn't yet officially switched online. There were a couple of days off to pivot and to readjust our thinking. We then switched just before spring break into an online modality. And

by the week after spring break, it was clear that we would be fully online for the rest of the semester. That was attended with enormous disruptions for undergraduate students in particular. Many of whom had to leave dorms with very little notice and very little certainty about when they would be coming back to for instance, retrieve the possessions that they couldn't fly with in one suitcase and so forth. So it was a chaotic and distressing time for all of us. Everybody had their own distinct twists around that, but I was teaching two seminars. Both of them combined the graduate and undergraduate students. This is a preference that I've developed at Columbia. I like to combine those two groups, partly because it lets me reach both constituencies with more of my teaching. But also because, a two point argument, The graduate students really benefit from the joyfulness and the sense of play that undergraduate students bring to a literature classroom. And the upper level undergraduates are very much the same population we're so lucky teaching at a place like Columbia as the PhD students who were at the coursework stage. So it's a fortuitous combination. It meant that I had these two groups of students, both of whom were mixed graduates and undergraduates. And I cast my mind to the question in this time of incredible uncertainty, a time in which an individual faculty member may not be able to feed thoughts and suggestions into the high level decisions that are being made. What can I personally do to make my students lives easier right now? So I actually I wrote distinct emails to each of those classes. Each one called for a slightly different set of suggestions and adjustments. This was including things like really decreasing the reading in one of the classes. Stripping it down to absolute essentials because it was clear to me that nobody was gonna have the time and concentration. I like the word wherewithal as a sort of general category. Nobody was going to be having the wherewithal to reach the large numbers of pages from Walter Venue arcades project, for instance that I had imagined. And because I'm a private person, but I like leading parts of my life in public. I'm quite active on Facebook in particular, a little bit less so on Twitter. I blogged for a long time on the old Blogger platform. Don't use that much anymore. And what I tend to do these days is when I've got something to say that is beyond something that I would put in a Facebook status update. I posted the letter that I had written to one of the groups of students on Medium. Which I find a nice sort of neutral place. I can put something up and then I can send out the link on Facebook and Twitter. Disseminate it a little bit more generally. So I know that people who don't like social media are probably thinking. Oh my goodness, what an arrogant person that she thinks her thoughts are so useful. But I do consider one of my virtues is that I'm a very quick thinker and I'm also good in an emergency. And I thought everyone is floundering. Everybody has a faculty member at Columbia and at the hundreds of other institutions where I have friends who teach, everybody is floundering. Let me just share this as one model of the way that you might communicate to students. And the key message for that letter. The one thing that I absolutely did have control over, had to do with what they were still going to need to do in order to get credit for the class. I don't know that this would always be the case. It might've been a more complicated choice for me if I had been teaching a lecture course where students hadn't handed in much work. But it's another pedagogical principle that I'm very committed to, that I like to have students including graduate students do shorter more frequent writing rather than the buildup of pressure to a huge large-scale end of term assignment. So I thought I've got one seminar where I've got about 20 students. I've got one seminar where I've got about 12 students. We were just about halfway through the semester when we stopped teaching

live. And I looked at what we'd read. And I thought about the conversations we'd been having. I thought to a lesser degree, yes, I've seen written work from all of these students a couple of times now. And I thought I would give students full credit for this course, given this true emergency situation that we're in. I would be comfortable giving them full credit for this course just where we are now. I might never see you again, because your situation is so difficult that you cannot even muster the wherewithal to be present for a synchronous Zoom discussion, or you're present but you can't have done the readings. The different individual situations really varied widely. And some students were relatively able to continue and found work and comfort, but it was very different from the situation after 9/11, where it was my second year of teaching at Columbia. And I remember that year, we all kind of... The classroom was an immersive space where the literature that we were reading from the 18th century was a sort of safe and joyful place that we could be in as an escape from the world. The sheer chaos and disruption that people were experiencing in March and April. People stuck in the wrong place or quarantining or away from their possessions and so of forth, that made it a really different situation. So that was the key message. I warmly support you and I hope that you know that you can call on me for any kind of personal advice or rumination. And I also said, because I knew it would be weeks before there would be official policy about grading for the semester. And I'm gonna give everybody an A on the basis of the work that they've done already. So upshot, I put that piece up on Medium. I got a lot of positive feedback. And a couple days later, I got an email from an editor at the Washington Post asking me if I would write an Oped along those lines for a national audience. Not just of college teachers or teachers at all stages, but parents of students, of students who were desperate for some clarity about what the semester would bring going forward.

- [Catherine Ross] That is really fascinating. It does kind of make me wonder about how you think about grading, let's say in your general teaching experiences, pandemic aside. Was there ever a time when you struggled with grading or thought that we maybe we need to rethink grading in higher education, that sort of helped you take this approach when the pandemic did hit.

- [Jenny Davidson] I have been resistant for a long time to the conventional practices of grading that we rely on in a setting like Columbia. And I can say that most of my primary and secondary education was at a quite progressive private independent school in Philadelphia at Germantown Friends School. And the grading starts there for students, I think in year seven. I'm always shocked when I hear about the report cards with grades for very young students, which just seems wild. You really see the weakness of that approach right now when students are dinged for not being able to sign on for the Zoom session or the system won't accept an assignment one minute late, all of that sort of thing. It's just causing needless stress, the real issues around how to do online delivery for elementary school students are not easily solved, but the additional problems and stress that are caused by this kind of grading practice just seems to me perverse. Couldn't we just say that kids in K through six don't get any grades this year in public school. Anyway, so when I was in high school, I actually when I was in 10th or 11th grade was very serious about the idea that I only wanted to go to a college that didn't have fraternities or sororities and didn't have letter grades. So I was talked out of that by a

college advisor that thought that I would prefer being a big fish in a big pond to a big fish in a small pond. The schools that I was looking at were Reed and Hampshire, the places like this. And so I was an undergraduate at Harvard, but I feel very lucky that my upbringing was very much more oriented towards the intrinsic goods of education. The joy of learning. I know I sound sort of naive when I say that, but I feel really, really lucky I always have had a powerful joy doing this kind of work that we do when we're reading and writing and thinking and doing analytic work. And so I was pretty impervious to grades and I was a student who happily took lots of grad seminars in English that I easily got As in, and meanwhile I was getting Cs in my core courses 'cause the lectures were so boring and I couldn't stand sitting there just supposed to sort of have passive intake. So I guess I would say that I'm more detached from those values than many of my colleagues are. And I've been teaching at Columbia for close on 20 years now. And I realized pretty much right away that, this is my opinion obviously others wouldn't agree, that in humanities classes in particular at a college like Columbia, there's virtually no need or value for grades other than for external administrative functions, like for law school admissions you need to have letter grades or for med school, for professional school admissions they're necessary. So grades are a proxy always, rather than being some kind of a deeper, more complex evaluation. And especially in humanities courses, we're not testing for mastery of material or looking to see if students have developed a key set of skills. It's an ongoing work in progress to understand literature well and to be able to clearly articulate things about it. Work in progress for faculty as well as for students. The letter grades are given in a relatively narrow band. I don't think that's grade inflation that we only give mostly As and A minuses. I think that speaks to how intrinsically motivated the students are to read these books with us and to write about them. So grading, who cares? I think those grades are silly. And I know how anxious students are, many students to get good grades. And I consider it part of my responsibility when I'm teaching a class, whether it's a seminar or a lecture to help everybody calm down a little bit on that front. I often say to students in this time, not just this year but in general, the world that we have been living in. The proportion of students who are experiencing serious mental health issues is really much higher than it ever was 30 years ago let's say. We're living in a different world in all sorts of respects. So I say upfront at the beginning of the semester, I know that... Especially in a lecture class this is true. I know that some of you are gonna run into situations that essentially make it impossible for you to complete the work in this class, to hand in the written work, to have good enough attendance. You may well be battling circumstances that make those things out of reach. Now, if you've hardly handed in any work, I may feel that it's appropriate to give you a C plus instead of the A that you have pretty certainly would have gotten if you could have. But me awarding that mark on the basis of what you were able to do that semester, it's not a judgment on you or on your character or anything like that. In fact, I often make sure when students are in that situation, that they know that I would write a letter to accompany their transcripts, that would explain that there were circumstances that really affected their ability to complete the work. So I'm resistant to grading for classes. I wish I didn't have to do it. And now have to stay thinking about how I might not do it going forward. I'll tell you a little bit about that later. But also for a long time now I've said that I liked giving short assignments that I think it's more valuable for students to write often and about texts that we haven't discussed yet. I like students to write before they come to the class where we're gonna talk about

something. That takes a lot of pressure off the idea that it has to be perfect or so forthright. It shows them that we write in order to think and understand. Not primarily in order to have a carefully flawless final product. Those short assignments, we'll discuss the topic they hand them in at the end of class. I stopped probably 15 years ago, giving letter grades on those. I use a tool that is still an evaluative tool, but that detaches from those sort of triggering letters or numbers, just saying, check, check plus, check minus. Which is just to say check plus, absolutely continue in the thing you're doing. Check, it's totally sufficient, but there might be more depth or richness or exploration that you might be able to go a little bit deeper. And check minus says, there are things about your writing or your approach to the text that aren't currently working. And I would like you to come and see me and we'll have a conversation about those. Where we sit down with your assignment between us and I show you why a sentence isn't ringing quite right and how it might be configured differently. Or we read back through a passage that the piece was doing a close reading of and think. what are the salient details in the passage that you didn't register? And that without those details you're not going to have a sufficient understanding as you lay it out. So the more that I can do that work in a face-to-face conversation, it's fine. If it's virtual, it doesn't have to be in a real physical room. The more I can transfer it to that work, the better. I don't have the sense that most students benefit that much from written feedback on assignments. And whenever I can turn it into a real conversation and focus. I resist the students who like to say, oh, I only got a check and not a check plus. Can I rewrite this? They know, but if you come to my office, I'll show you some places where you could have gone a little deeper and you'll put those lessons to work on the next thing that you write for this class.

- [Catherine Ross] Well, certainly the research that I'm aware of on writing and how students improve their writing would support what you're saying, particularly about written feedback on papers. And particularly once those papers are graded, in which case students very rarely take that feedback to heart in any kind of way. But offering it as a stepping stone to the next assignment is generally what the research supports. There's just so much you've said to unpack here. So would you say that grade inflation is a dead idea in higher education?

- [Jenny Davidson] Yes, I think that... My clear cut answer is yes. My nuanced answer is of course it's a bit more complicated. But I think if we looked at Ivy league schools 50 years ago versus today, the student population and the circumstances that most students are living in and working in and thinking in are just extraordinarily different. So we think of George W. Bush as the exemplar of the sort of gentleman C school of what students at Yale let's say were like in a given era. Obviously they're always were many intellectually wonderful driven students who weren't getting gentleman Cs. But we just don't have students like that in any significant numbers in the Ivy League now. Yes, the college admissions scandal might make you wonder a little bit, but it really is a tiny proportion of the total haul. I remember a detail that I really loved that I learned in a year. What was that committee? I believe it was part of the NCAA recertification. And I believe I was on the subcommittee that had to do with gender and equity and diversity. So I learned on that committee that at that point, if you looked at the GPA and test scores of Columbia's women's soccer team, they're substantially higher than the median scores for Columbia students as a whole. Especially in the women's sports. It really

tends to be that those student athletes who come in are extremely bright and driven and very, very hardworking and absolutely have the same kinds of academic intellectual gifts and capabilities. So in this world that we're in where college admissions have become so preposterously competitive. We know that really the top third of the applicant pool at Columbia would all be wonderful students here. It's really not a meaningful distinction. There might be students who would thrive elsewhere more than they would here if they're not so independent, or if they're really unprepared for college and so forth. But many more students than we can actually admit would thrive academically at Columbia. So the students have made it past those hurdles, they're really different than the student population was 50 years ago. If I'm teaching an upper level English class, that's mostly people who are either declared English majors or people who like English literature enough to use up an elective on it at a school that has unusually extensive core requirements. It's not grade inflation, it's that they're all doing A range work. They're all really excellent students who were very committed to participating fully in this learning environment.

- [Catherine Ross] Yes, and I'm echoing Benjamin Bloom a bit here who wrote extensively about education in sort of the 50s era. And he also pointed out that teaching is an intentional activity. And if we consider ourselves to be good teachers and we are striving always to become more effective, why wouldn't we expect all of our students to learn, or at least most of them to learn to a very high degree. And especially when you're dealing with students who as you pointed out are preselected for their capacity to learn and they're not just sort of a general population sample. So why would we not expect that everyone would get an A if we're really working at our teaching?

- [Jenny Davidson] So in a sense even if you are teaching something like intro to organic chemistry, like the entry level classes in the sciences, if teaching really was the best that it could be and student commitment and resources are there, which again we're very lucky at Columbia. Students do have high level of commitment and often a level of privilege that gives them the resources to be that committed. We kind of think that everybody should be able to learn it all, right? Perhaps not in quite the same way, but to my mind that would be a sensible way of thinking about it.

- [Catherine Ross] Exactly, I couldn't agree with you more. And I think the example that you gave of how you use those smaller assignments was very compelling. I also used that kind of check, check plus, check minus in my teaching. And found that when I asked students sometimes to get together and compare their responses. Not their check, check plus, check minus but their actual responses and come up with what they thought was the best response. They had great capacity for immediately seeing why they got the plus or why they got the minus. And we're very open because it wasn't around a grade. It was around the feedback they were getting and they could easily identify where their peers' answer to some question might have elements that theirs didn't.

- [Jenny Davidson] I think that's exactly right. So in my teaching, I would never show an example of something that was really wrong. I might sometimes share some sentences that

we would then work on together that were from student work. Thinking this is a really good start, but there's a process that you can exert on this passage that would turn it into something really, really excellent. But most often what I do, it's something like what you've just described. Is to share paragraphs of student writing that are aspirational. That really are unexpected and rich and amazing. And I agree with you. I think that that's the clearest way, for instance, to explain to students who find themselves getting B pluses and A minuses on papers in their classes, and can't quite understand why. That it's not a failure or a flaw in what they're doing, it's a question of ambition or reach or real... It's the same way that you can look at two skateboarders. I'm thinking of the skate park in Riverside Park that I run by every day. You can look at two skateboarders and you can say, you can be impressed with the first one. This is a highly competent skateboarder who has mastered the essentials of doing things that kind of make a person turn and look. And then you can look at the other skateboarder who is doing things that you never even thought of, that are truly above and beyond what any kind of baseline would have been for that particular art form. So yes, so making sure that all students see what the best of their peer writing looks like, it's the only way for them to get a sort of feel or to be able to open their minds to the amazing possibilities that there are.

- [Catherine Ross] But again, I think disconnecting it from a grade is what allows for those conversations, right. Because they're not already feeling shut down or I didn't get the grade I wanted so whatever. So I think, and it goes back to Diane Pike's, who is the originator of this Tyranny of Dead Ideas article. One of her three dead ideas that she talked about was that grades motivate learning as being not true. That grades motivate getting grades. And oftentimes grades even push students away from real learning because they won't take risks, they don't want to talk about failure as a learning opportunity. So I think every example you've given very much supports that idea.

- [Jenny Davidson] I like to write assignments that are essentially in some sense ungradable. so that if they're creative assignments or they are assignments that are constructed a little bit more like a problem set that leads you by questions through a set of thinking processes. It's the process of the writing and the learning that happens during the writing. The way is that it helps us clarify our thinking that are absolutely the end of these assignments, rather than something that's only intermediary with the grade being the end point.

- [Catherine Ross] Well, we really appreciate you being here today. So thank you for sharing all of these experiences and ideas with us.

- [Jenny Davidson] Thank you, Catherine. It's been a delight to talk to somebody who I know cares about teaching just as much as I do. And I'm really excited about what you'll be able to do with this podcast going forward.

- [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 Center for Teaching and Learning. And is

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