# Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series

## Season 5, Episode 4: Rigor as Liberation with Elwin Wu and Kelsey Reeder

## 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.

[00:00:24] I'm speaking today with Professor Elwin Wu and PhD candidate Kelsey Reeder from the School of Social Work at Columbia. As a quick reminder for our listeners, in this podcast series we're 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."

[00:00:55] Kelsey G. Reeder is a clinical social worker and PhD student in advanced practice at Columbia University School of Social Work. Kelsey has worked in therapeutic foster care, school social work, and community mental health. She received postgraduate training from the Institute for Contemporary Psychotherapy and provides therapy and clinical supervision focused on the expansiveness of queer and trans experience. Kelsey's research explores how social work is taught and carried out in ways that positions social workers as sites of social control within their own communities as well as how this impacts the personhoods of the clinician and client interrupts collective liberation by enforcing unit directional healing and stems from settler, colonialism, and white supremacy.

[00:01:46] Elwin has the title of Professor at the Columbia University School of Social Work. He does research, teaching, service, and activism in the service of social justice. Elwin predominantly targets structural and systemic racism, hetero-centrism and homophobia, oppression and discrimination, stigma, ableism, and other isms. He looks forward to when the field evolves, such that his ideas will be considered dead ideas.

[00:02:18] Welcome to our Dead Ideas podcast, Kelsey and Elwin. It's such a delight to have you here, and I'm super excited for our conversation today.

[00:02:27] **Kelsey Reeder:** Thank you.

[00:02:28] **Elwin Wu:** Thank you.

[00:02:29] **Catherine Ross:** So a quick prelude to just set the stage a little for our listeners. As many of you may know, we're digging into the topic of rigor for this whole fall semester, and I'm trying to get different perspectives on the ways in which the notion of academic rigor is defined and enacted in disciplines across higher education. You know, I just feel like rather than assuming that we all know what rigor is or that we all agree what rigor is that we should be trying to talk more about this construct. Um, so I have been inviting faculty and students from across various disciplines and schools to try and understand more deeply the role that rigor plays or doesn't play for instructors in their thinking about teaching. So I'm really excited today to have my two guests who represent both students/instructor and instructor side of this equation.

[00:03:27] I have a couple of questions for you both to start off with. I'd love to hear, for example, how you would explain either to someone from outside higher ed, or maybe even a new graduate student in social work, what rigor means in a course in your discipline, what rigor isn't, in your view why is it so important to some, you know, instructors in the academy or the academy at large in your opinion.

[00:04:00] Just dive in wherever you want, .

[00:04:04] **Elwin Wu:** Thanks. These are really important profound questions in my opinion to really interrogate. And so as I thought about this, and I thought oh yes you know we have a rigorous curriculum or our classes uphold the highest standard of rigor. What comes to my mind, and I suspect a lot of minds when it comes to like Ivy League research intensive institutions, what comes along with rigor are sort of two parts.

[00:04:29] One is this notion of high standards, and two is sort of the dictionary notion of it. This is, we're unyielding. We're uncompromising, we have a harsh adherence and enforcement of those high standards. And so, you know, in social work, we really like to think about, well, what does it take to become good practitioners of social change and social justice?

[00:04:52] And so when we think about rigor and maybe think critically about rigor, what comes to mind is thinking about what are those standards. What does it mean to be unyielding and uncompromising and harsh? And so when I think about what standards, maybe traditional academia or this traditional notion of rigor really is promoting, is really creating disciples for it in a discipline, um what comes to my mind are things like capitalism. Can we bring

professionally successful? Can we achieve economic success? Can our students achieve economic success? Uh, can we see legitimacy? Can we be compensated for that legitimacy compensated in currency? Then, there's this sort of unyielding, uncompromising hard work, and that also suggests to me maybe standards might be informed by say puritanical work ethic.

[00:05:43] And so for me, all of those things really sort of promote caution, and we want to sort of unpack those. And to really unpack those, uh, and do it in, in a very important way, especially as agents of social change and social justice, I would put forth that what constitutes really, uh, high level social work practice or any professional work towards social changes, social justice is also twofold. One is constantly checking ourselves for our value and position. What are we perpetrating or perpetuating in terms of forms of domination and can we undo those? And second, continuously seeking to hold ourselves oneself more accountable to all those things that we are doing.

[00:06:30] **Catherine Ross:** Wow. I just, I love that. Kelsey...

[00:06:35] **Kelsey Reeder:** Yeah. No, I mean, I agree with so much of what Ellen has shared. I think that the concept of rigor is complicated in academia. Then I'll speak mostly in the context of our country, but because of how profoundly our thinking and concepts of knowledge in academic institutions in this country are defined by white colonist's projects, limiting indigenous thought, profiting off of black people and other efforts that push forward these agendas, neoliberalism, as Elwin mentioned, capitalism, a focus on production numbers results as opposed to process and practice, which are long and messy and sustained. I also find rigor to be complicated in a practical field like social work in which academic rigor in one's master's or doctoral program can be regarded as how well someone can write a paper or memorize content for an exam as opposed to the concepts someone is able to actively put into practice over a long period of time within relationship. I would also further explore liberating us from rigor. What it means and who defines it in a field that not only centers practice, but in theory care and often the care of people who are incredibly oppressed by systems that are revered as rigorous in their efforts.

[00:07:57] How do we assess rigor of care? This brings for me thoughts of carcerality, rigorous approaches to indigenous erasure through residential schools, and this concept of protecting children, which we see today in our, in our child welfare system. So this is how I would choose to answer this question. I would want to focus less on what rigor is and is not in social work, and more on the fact that the concept of academic rigor may be directly disrupting collective liberation in communities that social work claims to empower.

[00:08:30] **Catherine Ross:** Wow. Thanks for that, Kelsey. I love that summation. I know, just in my own conversations throughout this podcast series, rigor has come up implicitly or explicitly in almost every conversation as a huge barrier to change and to anti-racist efforts, efforts at inclusion. So I'm really excited that you were able to point that out so clearly.

[00:08:58] I know some of the current debates that I've been reading about and hearing about is, you know around rigor, revolve around attention that exists in the academy, not necessarily within us as who we are here today. But attention between caring about students and supporting them versus the standards that Elwin mentioned earlier on in his response. And, you know, maintaining these standards. Many writers have noted that it's not a choice we have to make. We can do both. Right? As social workers and instructors who are charged with preparing new social workers and given how your work is steeped in caring, um, both the caring you offer your students and the caring that your students will then offer to the clients that they will be serving, do you see any tension between caring, relational teaching? You know, the kind we all agree is necessary for deep and transformational learning and the rigor that ensures that, or maybe standards is a better word I don't know, that ensures that students are prepared to meet the need of clients because you know, that's a critical factor for you all. And the question I have is you've mentioned to me in previous conversations this notion of radical caring, and I'm wondering if radical caring is in itself an enactment of a kind of rigor? But a rigor directed at caring as opposed to standards.

[00:10:37] **Kelsey Reeder:** Well, I would first start by saying that, that the tension that you name absolutely lives within this group of people. We are within an institution that holds very, very high expectations for us as students as instructors. I think probably we are always caught in that tension.

[00:10:55] And I would also say that we create often this false binary between instructor and student, between social worker and client, and I think it can be helpful to really consider the parallel process that's formed in the ways that professors hold spaces for their students and how that is then paralleled and how those students go on to be social workers and hold spaces for their clients. And so I would wonder if professors were to think about this parallel process, would they, like what is happening in their classrooms? Would they want it to be paralleled in the fields? And how can we think about that more? How can we really think about the practices in a classroom informing the practices in the fields?

[00:11:37] I also think that when we speak about social work within the academy, we're often referring to this highly institutionalized and professionalized practice that requires licensing and various forms of formality and gatekeeping. But when we think about social work as a historical legacy of community-based fights for liberation, and then we think about classrooms as a parallel or a possible parallel to the field. Then, I think that we're called to have classrooms that are sites of liberation themselves, and I think that this framework inherently makes this question how rigor is being quote unquote "enforced" in such settings. I think care is consensual, it's relational, and it's collaboratively negotiated process between two people or for a variety of people, community. It should be at least. And so I think that the person given care gets to decide whether or not it's care that they're receiving. And hopefully the person giving care is also doing so consensually. Um, and it seems to me that rigor is enforced. The terms of it are not negotiated relationally with students. Students are informed of what's being considered rigorous and expected to adhere to such standards.

[00:12:59] **Catherine Ross:** I love how you're almost channeling bell hooks in that. I think she had a quote, and I won't get it exactly right about, "I would never ask my students to take any risks that I would not take myself."

[00:13:15] **Kelsey Reeder:** Absolutely, bell hooks is all in that, and I'm really glad that you name her work because I plan to talk about her in a little bit, but absolutely this is entirely influenced by Freire and, and bell hooks.

[00:13:28] **Catherine Ross:** Yeah. Especially, all the liberation piece. "The Teaching for Liberation" really brought to my mind everything bell hooks represented, lived for, wrote about, and talked about. So thank you for getting that on the table. Elwin, looks like you want to add something here.

[00:13:49] **Elwin Wu:** It's hard to add to what Kelsey has said. What I will say is, you know, thinking about, you know, bell hooks and what you mentioned the key there then is that the instructor does take risks, right? They not only ask or say that they won't take any risks, or they won't ask students to take any risks they won't take, but that means the instructor should take risks and what are some of those risks? And so, you know, again, thinking back about both my answer and Kelsey's answers around rigor, it really becomes apparent to me that rigor traditionally is really about respectability politics. And if we want to undo, we want to re-envision rigor to be sort of checking against value and position and holding ourselves accountable.

[00:14:31] Then, what we want to do is take that risk and don't adhere to respectability politics, challenge a status quo, challenge forms of domination that might put oneself in peril, professionally, personally. And that is the risk. That is the job of the instructor. And ultimately, I haven't talked about care in any of that, and where I think care comes in is instead of attending to care as a goal or action or something to be given or something to be taken, I like to think of care as something that arises. It's an experience. It could be mutually contracted, but what I took from what Kelsey said is, you know, care is not to be given, not to be taken, but from where I said, I think it could also be advantages to think about care as simply something that arises out of undoing respectability politics, out of the instructor taking chances, and modeling how to take chances, and putting oneself out there because that's the goal of the next generation of, of professional.

[00:15:34] **Catherine Ross:** Yes. Thank you for that and for unpacking that even further about the risk taking and instructors also taking risks. I do want to just follow up. We're going to go off a little bit here, but I think it's an important tangent. You mentioned the risk that instructors take, and I would add particularly instructors of color, instructors who may be out gay, um, possibly trans instructors as well with current systems of evaluation of teaching in this kind of context because when you push against that standard of well, did you call it respectability? Right. The way our teaching evaluation particularly can be conducted can really harm some groups of instructors far more than others. So I didn't know if there was anything for further to say on that other than it is.

[00:16:41] **Elwin Wu:** I think that's very on point in that even Kelsey and I talk about all the various privileges and forms of power that each of us hold, uh, as well as the different vulnerabilities that each of us hold. And of course, Kelsey and I aren't special snowflakes, right? We reflect lots of folks in, in the academy. And indeed, I actually think queer, BIPOC, people are disabled, even things like people who are overweight come subject to a lot more risks, or they suffer the consequences for the same risks as folks who vary from them or who are more sort of, you know, fall under the, the rubric of those who, who have power, those who have the traditional forms and notions and adhere the, and look like the traditional forms and notions of respect.

[00:17:26] **Catherine Ross:** Yeah. Yeah. So I think another fight that we have on our hands is around the ways in which the academy evaluates faculty performance, instructors teaching, right? Because that systematizes bias and systematizes injustice in across the entire university.

[00:17:49] **Kelsey Reeder:** Yeah. And this is bringing up something that actually Ellen and I spoke a bit about as we were talking about this concept of rigor. I think that this pressure that I felt even in answering some of these questions or even the audacity to answer a question as me or as Elwin. And I think, you know, so much of the research that I'm hoping to do and Ellen is doing is to uproot dead ideas, and I think it feels like there is a pressure when you are going to challenge a dead idea to do so rigorously. When that pressure is present, how much can be lost when you feel like I'm going to uproot a dead idea by adhering to the standards of perhaps that same dead idea and what can be lost in the process. And so even in answering some of these questions, feeling like, well are our responses rigorous? Will we actually support the uprooting of such a dead idea if our responses aren't in themselves rigorous? And who determines that?

[00:18:56] **Catherine Ross:** Very good question. Who does determine that?

[00:19:00] **Kelsey Reeder:** Yeah, so I think that your questions and your points, Catherine, are very apt because we all live within bodies that have been socialized and labeled and marginalized and given power in a variety of different ways. And we constantly have to be thinking about that as we speak and as we define rigor, I think.

[00:19:19] **Catherine Ross:** Absolutely. Yeah. Thank you for allowing me that little digression. Another thing I've noticed in recent readings about this idea of rigor is the sort of polarization of opinions based on recent instructor frustration. And when I say recent, I mean people reacting to last spring semester, which would be the spring 2022 semester when many campuses said, okay we're back. We're going to be teaching back in classrooms and students on campus. There were a number of pieces written and even in editorial I saw in the New York Times about instructor frustration that students came back to campus. Um, many of them did not want to come to class. And were actively trying to find ways to not actually physically go to class and or were showing up in class and simply not engaging or, you know, participating as a learner in that community. And some instructor's reactions were to say, well we need to go back to deadlines and we need to have strict policies because clearly students have forgotten how to learn and we have to get them back on the rails. That's a, you know, very broad summary. But then a couple people said, you know, maybe there's a third path where you can care and support your students, um, and support their learning with more engaged pedagogies that will mediate any need for these strict policies and one size fits all sort of policies.

[00:21:06] So now you both work with grads students. So I don't know how accurate a description this is of what's happened recently with graduate students. Have you seen these kinds of needs arising related to returning to class with a pandemic that isn't even over. Basically, we're still experiencing it. So I'm wondering how you've walked this path between the compassion and caring and ensuring the skill development and competency development for the work that your students are going to do.

[00:21:43] **Kelsey Reeder:** Well, I'll first say that as, as a current student, I've certainly felt it myself. And I can't, you know, going back to sort of false binaries between instructors and students, I cannot begin to imagine that instructors are not feeling the same way. I don't want to show up. I, you know, like there are so many, there are so many things going on right now, and I can't help but think how little control we have over any of it. We have so little control in so many different facets of life right now, politically, internationally, environmentally, from a public health perspective. And I think that because of that, we are in this moment that is calling us in very, very extreme ways to start practicing values that social work has pushed forward for a long time.

[00:22:35] Whether we've done it well or not, that's a whole other question, but I think that it, we are called towards collectivism, towards mutual aid. And so when I think of professors leaning into this idea of enforcing standard, hard deadlines, mandatory attendance. I hear this deep desire for control in a world in which we currently have very, very little, and so I have a lot of empathy for that too.

[00:23:00] I also think about instructors, and the numerous amounts of expectations that are on instructors, and then the parallel of all of those expectations that are on students. So I think that we're called as instructors to attune to what will actually give us comfort so that we can cultivate spaces that will allow our students to attune, attune to their own needs, and they can cultivate spaces that will allow their clients to do the same.

[00:23:28] I do believe that so many of the concepts we grapple with in academia can bring comfort even when they make us uncomfortable. And so I think that, you know, sometimes that means bending standards in attunement with our needs, and I think prioritizing our bodies over potentially a predefined rigor. For me, the act of consenting to engage in learning in a class, in an assignment, in a country that constantly prioritizes carcerality over autonomy is the most profound practice we can center in our classrooms.

[00:24:07] **Catherine Ross:** I love that, the act of consenting to engage. That's the first time I've heard that, and I think it's a very powerful move that an instructor can make with students. Right. Oh wow, that's, that's amazing. And I really like that you see this challenging sort of time as an opening. It's an opening to further the goals of your discipline and the things that are at the heart of social work to improve people's lives, not just outside the classroom, but inside the classroom.

[00:24:47] **Kelsey Reeder:** No, we are clients ourselves.

[00:24:50] **Elwin Wu:** I think there's something really deep and profound around consent to engage. And, you know, my reaction to what Kelsey's saying is, you know, to, to uphold that is, you know, what kind of process or what kind of wave perspective can we, can we as instructors engage in a way to foster not providing an environment for consent to engage, but fostering a collective process where consent to engage arises. And so for me, one aspect of this engagement is simply replacing the word engagement with, with the notion of inclusion. And if you think about really what's at play here is really inclusion or exclusion. I think that will really prompt or I hope that would prompt folks to not think about what's going to, you know, cause students to engage, right? Or how can I like get their consent to engage? But how can consent to engage sort of manifest itself so that everyone is consenting with each other in a collective way. And I think it's to refocus or to remember that what we're talking about isn't, not necessarily so much engagement, but it's inclusion and it's making sure that folks come to the classroom and are included in the discussion, are included in the collective learning, obviously included in the consent process as well. But really I think if we think about inclusion, it also helps us, again, unpack all the respectability politics around there. And so ultimately, I think if you build this environment, if you build this classroom culture, uh, of consent to engage of inclusion, I actually think caring will emerge.

[00:26:31] **Catherine Ross:** So as sort of co-construction of the classroom dynamic and what's happening, and it's equally learners and instructor involved in this, dialoguing around what happens in our space and how do we make sure everyone is heard and seen in the ways they want to be.

[00:26:56] **Elwin Wu:** And certainly also thinking about all the ways that we unintentionally and sometimes intentionally exclude folks. And there's no universal we're going to include everyone. And so it really is that check to say, okay where are we leaving folks out, who is not comfortable, who's not able to be at the table?

[00:27:15] **Catherine Ross:** Great. Thank you Elwin. So my final real, you know, question about rigor for you, leading up to the last question I always ask, is about our peers and our colleagues and whether or not we should, can, or need to talk to our colleagues more around how we are encouraging students to be able to engage in their best learning without reverting to these legacy practices of rigor. Do you, you know, if you have colleagues who like curve their grades, for example, should we be engaging in these conversations with our colleagues? What would we say?

[00:28:07] **Kelsey Reeder:** Yeah. Actually, I really appreciate this question because I think about this practice of curving grades a lot. I think it's a, it's an ongoing conversation at the School of Social Work. I think that ideally we would live in a world in which classrooms were run through, as we were, were talking about earlier, Paoli Freire and bell hooks ideas where generative student dialogue, and student liberation, professor liberation were the standards that we held ourselves accountable to, but we don't unfortunately.

[00:28:40] And we have classrooms that Freire would refer to as following a banking model of education in which professors provide a bunch of information to their students, and then students are expected to give that information back through papers, assignments, and exams. And because high grades, open doors to accessing educational and professional opportunities, especially for students without access through financial or social needs, we've created a system in which learning is completely defined by grades. It's an institutional problem that we can't fix by encouraging individual teachers to stop grading on a curve. It's a system wide issue. And that sort of practice will only hurt already marginalized students. So to be honest, within this somewhat toxic system that we've created, I think grading curves can actually allow for students to spend more time caring about the content than stressing about the grade. And I do think it's deeply sad that we've created a system in which giving a grade to a student that indicates that they have areas in which to grow is a grade that can set them back in the long term though we are working within that system. And so I think we have to consider that.

[00:29:57] **Elwin Wu:** Well, it's such a powerful example and you know, everything you said about, you know, the problem with the curve really arises from Kelsey's point, and that is because of the dependence on a letter grade and a letter grade that's a sign.

[00:30:12] I like thinking hard about the curve, and I like thinking about holding instructors accountable and in some ways the curve also keeps the, I don't know that it holds the instructor accountable, but it controls for or it allows for if you

have an instructor who is highly problematic. All the grade shift or the curve allows you to adjust. The students don't suffer because it's a, a poor or a problematic instructor at the same time. And so there can be a protective aspect of the curve as well, as well as an inclusive aspect. Ultimately, the both the pros and the cons all stem from the dependence on a letter grade, and so another key is you what can we use to either inform the letter grades or what are alternatives to letter grades? I wish I was smart enough. I'm not smart enough to have an answer to that. But ultimately, going back to Kelsey's point, it shouldn't be about can a student really give the instructor what the instructor wants. Right. In an applied profession, it's really can students do what's best for those we serve, whether it's our clients, our communities. And so if there is some way to tie professors to the performance of their students. Ultimately, really can we tie how professors do to the wellbeing of communities ultimately that we're trying to serve? That would be the brass ring in my opinion. However, like I said, I'm not smart enough to figure out exactly how to hold it accountable, but that's my, my utopian dream.

[00:31:43] **Catherine Ross:** Wow, that's really fascinating, and I think, you know, it, being in a professional school really helps because you have some very concrete ways of being able to see, right, what your students can do when they're in the community, and where they're succeeding and maybe where they need more support. So I think that's a real advantage that you have in the kind of work that you're engaged in. Thank you again for a very nuanced take on something.

[00:32:18] So the final question I ask all of my guests is what keeps you inspired and motivates you to keep going and to believe in the possibility of changing higher education teaching in this case, but you know, we could say higher education more broadly.

[00:32:38] **Elwin Wu:** I love this question and, when I answered I answered it last, but at some level I kind of wish you asked it first because all sorts of insights came from my initial answer to that. And my initial answer was actually masochism. So, but to tie ultimately, to you know, really build off what you said earlier, you know, as instructors were supposed to take risks. And we can suffer the consequences. And sometimes those consequences aren't pleasant, but I'm asking us to lean into that. Lean into that unpleasantness. And so in some levels that masochism is really you know what keeps me going. And it really is, means it, it's, there's some success and I take comfort, pleasure in taking risks, which sometimes don't play out in the best way, in the best experiences.

[00:33:26] **Kelsey Reeder:** Yeah, I mean this, this question is, is so challenging for me. Maybe that's because I'm cynical. I'm not sure. I think what motivates me is, is thinkers who are pushing the envelope, but I do think and questioning power, right? Like, and this is what we do, Elwin and I do in every single conversation we have. We have a conversation. Then we pull away, we say, why do you think you said that and I said this and was it because you said that? And what does that, you know, what does that say about our power in this room? And, um, and the fact that you're tenured and the fact that I'm a student and, you know, constantly questioning these things. So I think that, I think that that's, that is a really important process that we go through interpersonally.

[00:34:12] And I think that if you, if you were to put that on a macro level I think that when you think about in order for higher education or the teaching within it to change, I think that there would really have to be an examination on how dependent higher education is as an institution, but also how each of us are dependent and in relationship with forces like white supremacy and capitalism that define rigor within our walls.

[00:34:40] I'm constantly struggling with this. I'm constantly struggling with why I'm here and the ways that I'm here at Columbia because of my own tie or reverence to white supremacy and, and white supremacy values. It's a daily thing that I grapple with. And so I think that this, all of everything that we've talked about today is not, does not just require critical thinking, but a real attunement, like I mentioned before, real attunement to our bodies and our bodies' responses to various regulations and expectations within academic institutions.

[00:35:13] So what I'm talking about is sort of an attunement process that checks in with all of the varying experiences and identities that make us who we are and asks, which part of me are welcome here? Does this institution make parts of me feel unable to breathe and speak and grow? Which ones? Why? What's the legacy there? And where can I build community and alternative learning spaces that will center those? That motivates me. Finding those spaces.

[00:35:46] **Catherine Ross:** Thank you. Thank you so much Kelsey and Elwin for taking this time out to talk with us today and to help push higher ed to a better place. I really appreciate you being part of this fall 2022 season.

[00:36:03] **Kelsey Reeder:** Thank you for this opportunity, Catherine and Elwin.

[00:36:06] **Elwin Wu:** Thank you, all of you.

[00:36:12] **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. That Ideas is produced by Stephanie Ogden, Laura Nicholas, John Hanford, and Michael Brown.

[00:36:37] Our theme music is *In the Lab* by Immersive music.