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The pandemic has called into question a host of generally accepted teaching practices (opinion)

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After more than a year of teaching during a massive disruption for higher education, many people are asking what lies ahead for teaching and learning in a post-pandemic world. Predictions abound about how HyFlex classrooms, and educational technologies like Zoom and LMS platforms, will continue to shape teaching as we and our students return to campus.

While technology has indeed allowed us to continue teaching as our campuses were vacated, it should not constitute the focus of our assessment of what needs to change in the teaching realm. This forced experiment in hybrid and online education has opened a wide window into the fundamental ways institutions and instructors think about teaching and learning: how rigor is defined, what role community plays in student learning, whether or not giving grades is always the best way to respond to student work and a host of other previously “normal” teaching behaviors that for many instructors have never been open for questioning.

Indeed, the teaching behaviors that we see in the hybrid, online and/or HyFlex realms are only the visible tip of an iceberg of culturally bound beliefs, values and assumptions that are closely held in the academy. And it is the entire iceberg, especially the part that is not visible, that deserves examination in our conversations about the future of teaching, particularly if we care about inclusion and equity in our classrooms and institutions.

The metaphor of dead ideas can be useful in unpacking these implicitly held assumptions and values. In 2010, Diane Pike, then president of the American

Sociological Association, gave a keynote address titled “The Tyranny of Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning [1].” In her address, she asked the audience to reflect on beliefs that underlie our understanding of teaching and learning, beliefs that are common both across disciplines and within disciplines. Pike identified three dead ideas in her speech and a subsequent paper: 1) students aren’t as prepared as they used to be, 2) grading motivates learning and 3) technology will either save us or doom us (think MOOCs in 2012).

These three are but a few examples of how beliefs based on deeply held implicit assumptions, which are embedded within our teaching legacies, lead to the longevity of what we would deem dead ideas. Generations of instructors learn from each other the traditions of teaching (some explicit and many implicit) within their departments and schools. Those traditions, often expressed as “how we have always taught,” encompass every aspect of what happens both inside and outside the physical or virtual classroom: writing syllabi, curating reading lists, crafting lectures, leading discussions, assigning projects and papers, designing tests, grading, and giving students feedback. These activities are the visible expressions of the assumptions and values, and sometimes dead ideas, that underlie them.

Other scholars have tackled this dilemma. In *Sentipensante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy: Educating for Wholeness, Social Justice and Liberation* [2], Laura I. Rendón presents seven entrenched “agreements” operating implicitly in the academic culture:

1. The agreement to privilege intellectual/rational knowing ... as opposed to deep wisdom, wonder, sense of the sacred, intuition and emotions.
2. The agreement of separation ... domains of knowledge and disciplines, faculty work (in teaching largely) with little to no collaboration ... even within the same department.
3. The agreement of competition ... pits students against each other in a competitive environment with a scarcity model for grades and credentials.
4. The agreement of perfection ... little room for error, unknowing, or imperfection in the classroom, for either students or instructors.
5. The agreement of monoculturalism ... the exclusive validation of Western structures of knowledge ... monocultural paradigms of knowledge production and comprehension.
6. The agreement to privilege outer work over inner work.
7. The agreement to avoid self-examination ... How is it that we can spend so much time exhausting ourselves with multiple projects yet not make

time for self-reflexivity?

Of particular interest to us is Rendón's separation agreement, No. 2 above, which includes several important subagreements that relate directly to teaching. The underlying tenets of the agreement of separation are:

- Teaching and learning are linear, and information flows primarily from teacher to student;
- Faculty should keep a distance between themselves and their students;
- Faculty are the sole experts in the classroom;
- Teaching is separated from learning;
- Any kind of faculty outreach to students, such as validation, caring or encouragement, is more often than not considered a form of coddling students who are presumed to be adults and should be strong enough to survive a collegiate environment on their own;
- The student studies the subject matter from a distance; and
- The student learns to understand and solve problems employing the perspective of only one discipline.

In the Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning's new [podcast](#) ^[3], *Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning*, we have engaged with both instructors and students to unpack many of these common teaching assumptions and the dead ideas underlying them. Conversing with longtime change agents like [Diane Pike](#) ^[4], [Michelle Miller](#) ^[5] and [Carl Wieman](#) ^[6] kicked off conversations about the lack of equity in learning environments, how the research on what makes learning happen is widely ignored and what Zoom should have revealed to us about the utility of only lecturing in face-to-face meetings, in person or especially in remote classes.

In a subsequent episode, undergraduate students weighed in on their experiences with pass-fail grading and what they learned about their own and their peers' motivation for learning absent letter grades. They also brought to the fore their acute sense of loss when separated from their peer communities and how that impacted their thinking about the conditions necessary for learning.

We also chatted with a Columbia University English professor who, at the moment of the pandemic shutdown, told all her students that they would receive A's ^[7] for the course in order to take the pressure off them as they rushed to move off campus and figure out their lives.

All of these conversations reveal fault lines in the iceberg -- faults that have been exposed by the pandemic conditions and demonstrate how dead ideas can obscure what really matters for students to learn successfully. They point to how much of the research on how people learn is ignored or dismissed, while “the way we have always taught” continues to drive our pedagogical choices and limit equity in our classrooms.

Even if you don't listen to the podcast episodes, you can use the dead ideas metaphor to reflect on your own teaching. Take grading, for example. If you have assigned points and percentages to the various assessments and assignments in your course, ask yourself some questions to unpack what values and assumptions are driving your choices.

- What type of learning does your grading system really value?
- Do you explain not only the how of grading but the why?
- Are your grades a good barometer of student learning as demonstrated by performance across multiple and varied assessments? Or have you privileged one way of demonstrating learning, using high-stakes exam scores as the primary driver of the grade, for example?
- Are your grades grounded in actual criteria that define the skills, knowledge base and dispositions that your students should acquire?
- Do you create space for students to take risks and fail without grades being involved?
- Is participation defined with accessibility and equity in mind? Is it included in grades? Should it be?
- Can your students identify and explain their own learning beyond the grade they have received?

Or perhaps you could think about your syllabus -- a document that we often take for granted as having a set of required information (that students almost never read, according to most instructors!) but that can actually be used as a tool for motivating students and inspiring their learning rather than simply directing it with deadlines and test schedules. An excellent resource to use for this reflection would be *Syllabus: The Remarkable, Unremarkable Document That Changes Everything* [8] by William Germano and Kit Nicholls, who were also featured in the *Dead Ideas* podcast series this past spring, in season two, episode three. You can ask yourself:

- How do you introduce yourself? What should students know about you? What would you like to know about them?
- Does the syllabus make the learning explicit or simply talk about topics and content coverage? Will students have choices about the content or

in how they demonstrate their learning?

- How will you communicate with your students? How will they know what is important to focus on each week or in each part of the course? How do you want them to communicate with you? When can they expect responses to their communications? Will you use your campus LMS for communication, and if so, which features?
- What is the tone of your syllabus? Is it purely administrative, covering reading lists, exam schedules, topics for each class? Or does it invite students to join a community for learning -- using big and intriguing questions, describing how you will all engage with those questions via course readings, texts and materials and how you will engage in class and outside class?
- How will you engage the students with your syllabus? Is it up to students to read it outside class? Will you read it to them (often what they expect)? Or can you use it from the first day to help students get to know you and each other by gathering in small groups to answer questions you give them about the syllabus, and then ask them to come up with their own questions about it?
- Will the syllabus be put away after the first class? Or can you consider using the syllabus throughout the semester or quarter to ask students to chart where you are with the big questions, where they are with their learning and what is coming up next?

These examples show us that if we return to teaching and learning practices that are considered “normal,” we will actually take a step backward -- despite all our technological innovations. Instead, we should seize this moment of disruption to unpack our teaching and learning assumptions and shine a light on these dead ideas so that we go back not to normal but to a better post-COVID era.

Transforming Teaching & Learning ^[9]

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Links

[1] <https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/edblogs.columbia.edu/dist/8/1109/files/2016/07/Dead-Ideas-2.pdf>

[2] <https://styluspub.presswarehouse.com/browse/book/9781579229849/Sentipensante-Sensing-Thinking-Pedagogy>

[3] <https://ctl.columbia.edu/podcast>

[4] <https://www.augsburg.edu/faculty/pike/>

[5] <https://nau.edu/psychological-sciences/michelle-miller/>

[6] <https://ed.stanford.edu/faculty/cwieman>

[7] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/03/20/coronavirus-college-pass-fail/>

[8] <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691192208/syllabus>

[9] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/transforming-teaching-learning>

[10] <https://ctl.columbia.edu/>