Dead Ideas
That Limit Teaching and Learning

DEAD IDEAS that limit teaching and learning—that was the topic of Professor Diane Pike's plenary session at the recent Teaching Professor Conference. There's a tyranny associated with dead ideas. They limit and constrain our thinking, and can lead us in the wrong direction. An idea may pass on without us noticing, and discovering it is dead can be provocative. Consider, for example, these three ideas that Pike proposed.

It is permissible to allow convenience to trump quality.

"Too often [in higher education] convenience is the driver." Her example: online learning. Pike challenged us to "carefully examine the reasons for moving to courses where a student can, at the last minute, show up face-to-face or do the online version of that session." Is that a decision students should be making? Does being in class or online change what and how students learn? She pointed out that the convenience rationale is frequently used to characterize online learning as nothing more than a different delivery mode. It's the same course, just delivered in a different way. "Well, maybe it is the same course but that doesn't mean it's the same learning experience." Here's the example she used to make the point: You can spend 24 hours getting to your destination in a Greyhound bus or you can fly three hours in business class. The destination may be the same, but how you get there makes a big difference. Her conclusion: "If we fail to question the limits of convenience and too easily presume comparable quality, we won't be serving the students as we claim."

Subject matter expertise is more important than teaching skill.

"The tyranny of failing to privilege teaching expertise at least at the same level as content expertise for all categories of faculty is still more widespread than it should be." Successfully running a business does not qualify someone to teach any more than having a new PhD with lots of research experience prepares one to face students in a classroom. "What is the balance between knowing a discipline and having a lot of personal expertise?" Pike asked.

The dominance of subject matter expertise has a long standing tradition in higher education. Pike did acknowledge that some progress has been made in redressing the imbalance, but her examples showed that subject expertise prevails in some disturbing iterations. She held up a May 5 New York Times headline that read, "Last Refuge from Scandal? Professorships". The article pointed out that David Petraeus, Eliot Spitzer, former New Jersey governor James McGreevey, and clothing designer John Galliano (fired from Christian Dior for an outrageous anti-Semitic rant) had all assumed positions in higher education and were teaching. Celebrity cases? Yes. Extreme examples? Yes. But what criteria are we using to determine who's qualified to teach college students? And are all those criteria equally important?

Learning outcomes are the most important thing.

"Learning outcomes are not more important than learning 'inputs' such as the texts selected for a course, the resources available, the questions posed, and the qualities of both student and teacher. Nor are they more important than learning experiences, including pedagogical variety, discussion, peer review, and teachable moments." Pike noted and endorsed the push toward more and better evidence of student learning. However, "If the push for outcomes around career readiness and providing statistics on who is employed, where, and by what major becomes the defining characteristic for what major to study—that would be tyranny."

She concluded her talk with this summary: "We need technology, content expertise, and outcomes but they aren't the only things that matter. We need to seize the opportunity to use these 'disruptions' to improve all manner of teaching and learning without abandoning the journey—the most effective learning experiences, not the most convenient. To do so, we must continue to critically examine our ideas, gather empirical evidence, accept some changes, and resist others."

Note: Professor Pike gave a similar address to the Midwest Sociological Society in 2010. That speech, which explores three other dead ideas in teaching and learning, was published in The Sociological Quarterly, 52 (1). And those ideas are just as interesting and provocative as these.

Maryellen Weimer; Dead Ideas That Limit Teaching and Learning; Faculty Focus;; June 26, 2013 [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-

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A Dozen Strategies for Improving Online Student Retention

ONLINE STUDENT retention is one of the most critical components for the success of any college or university. The key to a successful online retention program is the realization that student retention is everybody's job.

The main objective of a well-established online retention program is to maintain a student's enrollment and to keep him highly satisfied with the level of education he is acquiring in an online environment. This is not an easy task since there are many reasons why a student might need or want to withdraw or leave the program of study.

Below are a dozen strategies for improving online student retention for administrators and faculty:

1. Make a good first impression. The first day of class should be both welcoming and informative. The instructor should create a welcome letter with a few details about herself and the course and have students introduce themselves as well. After students post their introductions in the discussion board, the instructor should respond to each and every student. These first-day activities help set the tone for the course as a community of learners.

2. Never underestimate the importance of instructor presence. Providing students with immediate feedback and being highly visible in the classroom and online threaded discussion boards will improve the online experience for learners.

3. When grading student assignments, it's best to provide constructive recommendations for improvement that are highly motivating and encouraging. It's easy for attempts at humor to fall flat or words to be misinterpreted in the written word, so be sure reread your comments before hitting submit.

4. Answer all questions posed by students in the faculty forum section within 24-48 hours, and communicate this feedback window to students so they know what to expect. A student could be encountering a discouraging issue or a personal emergency that could lead him or her to withdraw from the program, so a timely response is critical.

5. Make students feel they are a part of the program by letting them know how important their contribution is to the class. One of the most important factors impacting retention is whether students feel they belong to part of a larger community, which can affect whether they continue on a course of study or drop out (DeVries and Wheeler, 1996; as cited by Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap, 2003).

6. Let students know they were missed when they return from being absent. This gives awareness to the student of how important they are to the class, that their classroom contribution was greatly missed, and that you're aware of their absence.

7. Practice proven adult learning principles and strategies in the classroom. For example, students should perceive that the goals of their learning experience are directly related to their own personal goals. Also, their learning experience should be organized around what they see as relevant to the "real world." The student is provided with self-directed and independent learning activities. The faculty should ensure that the learning environment is characterized by mutual trust and respect, freedom of expression, and acceptance of differences.

8. Introduce collaborative learning techniques in the classroom. The famous Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978), who contributed to the later formation of constructivism, theorized that students learn more effectively in a collaborative environment where they can share their ideas and experiences.

9. Engage students by hosting live webinars. In addition to the classroom experience, introduce a variety of career skill topics that will provide students with learning tips and other strategies that will help them in the future.

10. Establish an early alert system. Identify and assist underperforming students who are at risk. Recommend to the students to seek assistance with the appropriate support staff.

11. Help students establish specific goals for attending the program and each course. At the very beginning of the course, in the announcement section, the instructor should establish the course expectations. This ensures the students know early on what is required of them for a successful completion of the course. If the student does not meet their weekly goals, the faculty should contact the student and remind them of the course goals and help to get the student back on track.

12. If you're an administrator, be sure to involve faculty in student retention matters. Because faculty have the most interaction with students, they serve as a tremendous resource for helping improve online student retention and success.

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