

# THE TYRANNY OF DEAD IDEAS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING: Midwest Sociological Society Presidential Address 2010

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Clinging to dead ideas about teaching and learning limits our practice as professors. The resulting tyranny means we fail to educate our students as effectively as we might. This address challenges faculty to reconsider their understanding and habits in three areas: the preparedness of students, the impact of grading policies on learning motivation, and the role of technology in teaching. The good news is that learned behaviors, sociologically informed reflection, and the application of the research in the scholarship of teaching and learning can liberate us and improve the experiences of teachers and learners alike.

## INTRODUCTION

People like us spend our lives in the world of ideas and wonderfully so. They are the currency of academic life. But not all ideas are created equal and the ones I will talk about today have two peculiar characteristics. First of all, they are dead. And more important, they are tyranny. To these claims, one colleague immediately quipped, “So they’re kind of like zombies?” Now, not to worry—this address is not “Academic Meets Night of the Living Dead.” What I am here to do is to make a serious argument about teaching and learning: some of the ideas to which many of us cling are dead and they are oppressive. My goal today is to convince you to let them go.

I have three ideas in mind: first, the claim that the students are not as prepared as they used to be; second, the notion that grading motivates learning; and third, the belief that technology is, depending on your point of view, either the salvation or the ruin of higher education. For each idea, there is a specific argument about the tyranny that results. These arguments constitute the first section of the analysis and are the core of my exploratory work today. In the second section, I identify critical social forces and new ideas that will need to be embraced in the future; finally, in the third section, we wrap up with some good news. On occasions such as these, one should always end on a positive note. Make no mistake, however. My purpose is to challenge. There are claims with which you will almost certainly disagree. *But* I hope you find the ideas worth debating.

This concept of dead ideas is taken from Matt Miller’s book, *The Tyranny of Dead Ideas: Letting Go of the Old Ways of Thinking to Unleash New Prosperity* (2009). Last spring I listened to a public radio broadcast of Mr. Miller speaking at the

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Commonwealth Club of California.<sup>1</sup> Miller, who is a columnist for *The Washington Post* and a former Clinton administration adviser, was enthusiastically saying things such as: Taxes are too high, right? Nonsense. We should be able to expect our kids to do better financially than we have. Not likely. Schools should be run locally, not nationally. Not a good idea. In fact, hanging on to these and other dead ideas is going to prevent us from having a true economic recovery.

Ideas are dead because they are no longer correct, if they ever were. They are tyranny because we cling to them despite the evidence. Thus, we fail to act as we should. Seemingly logical actions, in fact, are counterproductive. Political leaders, media pundits, and business executives all become trapped (think C. Wright Mills [1959]) by these “tacit assumptions and ingrained instincts broadly shared” (Miller 2009:2). Critical social forces provide the context within which these ideas linger. They must be understood if we are to identify the destined ideas of the future that will lead us in the right direction. Historically, the tyranny of dead ideas has only been overcome when extraordinary events, like the 1970s oil crisis, jarred us into action (Miller 2009:9). Such is the main thrust of Miller’s argument. And although some of the analyses are more robust than other, the book succeeds at the main goal—getting us to question the things we take for granted. (Think Peter Berger [1963].)

Somewhere in the middle of the broadcast, it occurred to me that there must be dead ideas about things *besides* the economy. Midwest Sociological Society (MSS) members who attended Joel Best’s 2009 plenary at the annual meetings learned about public school education and how the crises around its miserable failure apparently can last for centuries. Recalling Joel’s talk and inspired by Miller’s argument, I wondered: what are the dead ideas in higher education? I even considered that *I personally* might be clinging to some dead ideas. No surprise, I spent 10 seconds on that thought. I landed on the following: what are the dead ideas that we cling to about our understanding of teaching and learning as professors of sociology?

At the broadest levels in higher education, as with the economy, many educational leaders, policymakers, and faculty have claimed the sky is falling. Institutions are failing to thrive; students leave underserved; faculty are being challenged to do more and/or do better in both the teaching and research; only 27 percent of instructors are full time and tenured; some “stakeholders” are calling for the removal of tenure; and for-profit organizations are taking an ever larger share of student market.<sup>2</sup>

But as relevant as these macro factors are, they are not my focus. Rather, as Durkheim (1956) might frame it, these are the social currents of higher education. It is within these currents that we can examine the heart of what we do as a discipline—teaching and learning. Herbert Gans (1989) points out that teaching is how most sociologists earn their living. In his 1989 American Sociological Association (ASA) Presidential Address, he further argued that the effectiveness of those teaching efforts *should be* one of our key research questions. Michael Burawoy argues that students are our first publics. Yet, teaching is not all that we do. Professional sociologists work in research, critical, policy, clinical, and applied settings. Surely zombies lurk there as well.

Of course, some dead ideas do not matter. Whether we cling to them or not is of little consequence. For instance, Miller holds on to the hope that “Rational analysis can lead to constructive change”—an idea he doubts was ever alive if one looks at history. In teaching, some of us might cling to ideas such as, “If I put it on the syllabus, students will read it and understand it.” “Give students more time to work on the paper and they will spend more time on the paper.” Or, “We can finish this committee meeting early if we are just efficient.” But examples such as these are not the ones to which we should be paying the most attention. Miller charges us to identify *strategic* dead ideas, the ones that result in the greatest tyranny.

So allow me to offer specific claims about the three ideas identified earlier. First, focusing on the idea that students used to be better prepared than they are today is tyranny. It may or may not be empirically supported, but it nonetheless leads us to the wrong conclusion—that the students are the problem. Second, thinking that grading motivates learning is deeply flawed. The tyranny of this idea sustains grading practices that are at best distracting and at worst antithetical to our goals. And third, thinking that technology is either the demise or the deliverance of teaching and learning misdirects our efforts. The goals and means are confused; somehow the road is now the destination. We will take each claim in turn.

### THE STUDENTS ARE NOT AS PREPARED AS THEY USED TO BE

This first idea of “how things work” is a little thorny. The problem is not so much that the idea is untrue as it is that the idea is tyranny. Whether students in the past actually were better or worse or no different is not germane in the way we might think. Some students, in fact, *are* underprepared (Haycock, Reed, and Thorton 2006). As early as 1971, Patricia Cross called our attention to the challenges of opening doors and bringing in the new student. A fairly well-understood set of reasons for bringing in these new students have been identified—changes in demography, college missions, economic goals, and institutional value commitments. For many schools the legitimate need and well-intentioned desire to increase or sustain enrollments meant bringing in fewer traditionally prepared students. Such public issues for institutions became private troubles for faculty.

At the same time, and this is important, it is not at all clear that we agree on what student preparedness is, let alone understand if it used to be better or worse. National experts on this issue agree that one of the problems is that there is no single definition of college readiness (Hoover 2008). Professors and high school teachers have quite different views of college readiness, with the former wanting solid fundamental skills and the latter thinking breadth and exposure are more important (Reed and Conklin 2005; Lipka 2007). My argument is that clinging to the idea that students used to be better prepared can limit how we respond to today’s students. With apologies to W. I. Thomas, if things are perceived as real, they can be tyranny in their consequences.

I heard this truism about how good the students used to be from faculty in 1971 as an undergraduate. I got a C– on my first freshman English comp paper. As I recall, most of the students were completely freaked out with their first grades (“I knew I wasn’t

smart enough to go here!”). One can only imagine what Professor Jarrell was thinking about our class. I heard it upon arrival at my first teaching position from senior colleagues bemoaning some lost idyll of a previous era of teaching. Colleagues say it today—too many students arrive who cannot adequately write, read college texts, or think critically. Yet if this perception of student decline in college readiness has been operating for at least the past 40 years, it probably does not make sense to use it as any sort of meaningful benchmark. Flash forward to the year 2020: “Man, if only the students today were as good as they were 10 years ago!”

To be sure, these colleagues are earnest in their desire to serve students. This concern about readiness is not a lament from faculty who do not care. But devotion to students is tricky. “One of the hardest things teachers have to learn is that the sincerity of their intentions does not guarantee the purity of their practice,” writes educational scholar Stephen Brookfield (1995:1). The face validity consequence of “the students are not as prepared as they used to be” or even “not as prepared as they could be” is that there is something wrong that was not wrong before; or, something is wrong that does not have to be wrong. One logical extension of this view is to expect less of students. (Of course, rarely do students rise to meet a low bar.) Faculty express frustration that they are not able to teach at the level they would hope or in the way they used to teach given the deficits of students today. The problem with this refrain is that it looks to change the students rather than our teaching.

What does that tyranny look like? First, there is a persistent call for raising the admissions standards. If we are more selective in admissions, then the problems of under preparation will be alleviated. Second, by defining the issue as the lack of readiness of students, the solution is to offer more study skills courses, supplemental instruction, developmental courses, federal support programs, courses for majors versus nonmajors, and skill building in freshman seminar programs. We do many constructive things. *What we fail to do is examine deeply enough what we teach and how we teach it.*

What if we acted as if the students have never been as prepared as we wanted nor will they ever be as prepared as we wish? Perhaps, for example, we would do more assessment of relevant skills at the beginning of a course. We would explicitly teach new students how to read a disciplinary text. We would ask for smaller pieces of work earlier in the term rather than discovering the significant problems at midterm. Every faculty member would gather appropriate formative student feedback in every course every term and use it during the course to make adjustments. There is no one right way. There are ways that do not work. Figuring out more effective strategies and more effective strategies for the students in front of us is a better way.

## GRADING MOTIVATES LEARNING

The central argument here is that by acting as if grading motivates learning, we put both student and faculty energies in the wrong places. Does grading *represent* learning? Maybe . . . but mostly, grading motivates getting grades. Many current grading practices are tyranny because they constrain our approach to understanding student learning—by

which I mean transforming information and experience into knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Cobb 2009). Too much of the way grading is done today is a flawed model, a dead idea.

For the sake of this conversation, let us distinguish between grading and evaluation. *Evaluation* is the process of making a judgment about the quality of work using either an explicit set of criteria or an implicit one. Some faculty use rubrics, some share them with students, some do not. Some assignments list criteria of evaluation; some do not. *Grading* is the step of assigning a summative symbol that represents overall performance. Typically that grading is based on some type of point system.

Complex point matrices end up training students to focus on the wrong things. (Think Merton—unintended dysfunctional consequences.) Students sit and calculate what things are worth, which assignments really matter, and adjust their behavior to maximize their situation—all perfectly logical responses. That behavior is what the structure produces. Quantifying assignments, docking points for lateness, and intricate point systems of 400 points or 1,000 points that are spread across varying categories distract students from what should be motivating their learning.

At this point, I realize I am dangerously close to annoying more than a few colleagues by criticizing grading point systems. Please hear me out for at least a few more minutes. To go back to Brookfield, mine is not a criticism of good intentions; it is a question of the effects of our practices. It is too easy to look at our grading policies from our own views as instructors and to presume we know the views of the students. (Think *verstehen*.) It is also too easy to fail to take into account the actual impact of these practices—how *do* they affect student behavior? Do we know? I think we actually do not understand very well the impact of our grading practices. But because we “know how this works,” we continue as a profession to grade pretty much the way we always have (See Pollio and Beck 2001.)

Like student preparedness, grading is complicated. And lest you think she who is without sin has cast a stone, I will tell you a secret. For a very long time, I acted as if the learning happened *while I was grading*. Papers had extensive margin comments, and helpful feedback on exams was offered. Long hours of giving feedback were a sign of my dedication. Usually, there was an interesting conversation and thinking going on while I was reading papers; but it was, literally, all in *my* head. One day it dawned on me that whatever this particular student was going to learn or not learn executing this particular assignment, Elvis was out of the building. Whether it took me 15 minutes or 35 minutes to write all those comments, *that* learning was already done. Taking longer to write more comments did not necessarily mean more learning.

So I made some changes. Lots of effort goes into feedback on papers but *only* on papers that are going to be revised. Thus all major papers in my courses have at least two versions. When the final papers come in, the purpose is to grade them with summary feedback. The scholarship of teaching and learning research suggests that the additional 15 to 20 minutes spent writing comments would have been better spent talking with the student and then having the student revise—more time on task and direction with a purpose. (See Chambliss and Takacs, forthcoming, and Nagin 2006.)

Second, I stopped “docking points” or lowering the grade for late work. If I accept a paper late, it is evaluated for the learning it demonstrates. To put a “C” grade on a “B” paper just does not make sense to me anymore. It is not valid. More importantly, I do not think the policy motivates students to try to learn more. To dock points for lateness means that students learn that missing deadlines results in negative sanctions. OK—that works. But if that particular lesson is not the learning goal, then teaching students to meet deadlines needs to be solved in a different way.

We need to be driven by more than how easy it is to calculate the grade or how much work grading requires. The fact that our current systems “seem to be working” is not the best we can do. Most of us have not systematically studied grading practices. Few of us have conducted our own scholarship of teaching and learning research or attended professional workshops on effective strategies for evaluation. Most of us, including me when I began teaching, thought up something that made sense. (In January 2010, the ASA *teachingsoc* listserv carried a long series of postings on grading. I think that conversation supports my claim.) Most of us followed a model that we liked as students (avoided the ones we hated as students), and settled into a system. And all of this professional behavior is embedded in a larger social current where faculty bemoan issues of grade inflation. We worry about how much students are learning; we are criticized by outsiders for graduating students who cannot think at the level *they* expect; and we wrestle with resistance to assessment, accreditation, and calls for national testing. Yet, through all of this, we keep handing out diplomas and sustaining a national GPA that increases .1 every decade. Grades do not come from Mars. They come from us. Interesting and relevant assignments, timely feedback, connection between student and teacher, connection among students, meaningful use of time—these things motivate learning. Thinking more explicitly about grading and evaluation, finding out what students experience by asking them, and reconsidering what grading *does* motivate, we can unleash new practices that just might work better for all of us.

## TECHNOLOGY: DEMISE OR DELIVERANCE?

At a press conference on January 15, 2010, the governor of the great state of Minnesota said the following:

You’re going to have the equivalent of iTunes in higher education, where instead of buying a song for 99 cents, you’re going to be able to click on Econ 101 for probably \$199 or \$399, . . . Unleashing technology . . . will massively decentralize the delivery of higher education in our country. The idea that we’re going to be here 20 years from now talking about how many more buildings can we put up is going to come into conflict with this new frontier. (*StarTribune* January 23, 2010)<sup>3</sup>

Technology is destined to be neither the ruin nor the salvation of higher education. But thinking that it directs how we approach it. Early on in the technology movement of the 1990s, it seemed that technology was the goal. Deans claimed, “We need to offer online courses.” Enrollment managers said, “We need to increase access.” Some faculty said, “I’d like to teach an online course.” Some students said, “I want to take an online

course.” What did not seem to get asked was: “Why is this a good idea?” Rather, the why question was often presumed to be obvious. There was no clearly articulated position other than: students say they want it. It provides access. The Board of Trustees thinks we should go in this direction. It appeared that the chase for online education was driven by the quite legitimate need to get more students and not by the goal of more effective learning. So, we pretty much went right to *how* to do it. We did the same thing with integrating technology into traditional classrooms.

The first standard of assessment about online learning was the “no worse than face to face” claim. This conclusion should have terrified us. It also quickly became apparent that there were unanticipated problems. (Who was doing the actual work at the other end of the computer?) Furthermore, it turns out that *good* online courses do not save anyone time or money—so much for salvation. Currently in the Minnesota State University system, for example, online courses cost more than face-to-face courses and an extra fee is charged to a student taking an online course. This situation was not what was expected. On many campuses today there is far more support for teaching online courses or integrating technology into traditional courses than there is for other skill development such as lecturing, designing assignments, or better assessment of student learning in face-to-face courses. Learning about teaching is usually optional.

It also was the case early on that, by necessity, most of what was presumed to be understood was grounded in a great deal of anecdotal experience and trial and error. I would be buying us all a round at the bar if I had a quarter for every time someone said “Online teaching is great because the shy student in the class will post on line!” It was a well-intentioned thought, but it drove me nuts to hear that as a justification for moving to online courses. It seemed a small benefit for such a big change.

To be sure, technology did create access—online or hybrid courses are institutionalized—especially in for-profit institutions. A great deal was learned fairly quickly and much of the quality and operation of online and hybrid courses has improved. But we still have a relatively limited empirical picture of what is actually going on both in online education and technology-integrated courses. And there are still not enough people (including the governor of Minnesota) asking *why* we should do this.

Today, it remains too easy to either reject technology in teaching and learning or to do it simply because it can be done. Rejecting technology makes no sense. There is a great opportunity. Ironically, perhaps the greatest opportunity for technology in teaching and learning is in face-to-face teaching, not online courses. Everything from integrating film clips and databases to course Web sites to YouTube clips to smart boards can be useful done well. Value is added; pedagogies expand learning. But technology for the sake of technology makes no sense either—(“I *have* to use PowerPoint because the students expect it.”) Back in the day, we used to pay Augsburg faculty through development grants to put their text lectures on PowerPoint. We don’t do that anymore—we know better.<sup>4</sup>

To more clearly see technology as a *means* is to allow the effectiveness of the learning to more directly drive our work.

## CRITICAL SOCIAL FORCES AND DESTINED IDEAS

Fully analyzing these other two main features of Miller's model requires more time than we have today. However, I am able to offer some thoughts and leave their deeper analysis for another time.

Miller identifies critical social forces affecting the economy that cover a range of trends from demography to continued extreme inequality. The future of higher education is subject to social forces as well. I suggest four possibilities. First, the outcome of the current recession goes without saying. Second, there will be changes in the business model of many colleges and universities. The situation of high tuition and high financial aid in many private colleges is not sustainable; public schools will look more like privates as tuition and aid increase in those places. The revenue challenge is to bring in more students. The expense challenge is that roughly two-thirds of expenses are in fixed costs so there is little flexibility. It will not work to grow revenue by raising tuition because the sticker shock and debt load will scare too many people away. Some analysts claim that this situation means looking at sacred cows to cut costs (which is code for getting rid of something we are currently doing—like the philosophy or sociology department) and that we need to form alliances and partnerships with other organizations.<sup>5</sup> A lot of change lies ahead in this realm. Third, increasing societal pressure for education to produce “job-ready” graduates will not abate (Fischer and Glenn 2009; Blumenstyk 2010). What that job readiness looks like is by no means clear but the discussion surrounds us and we should be part of it. Lastly, the dependence on adjunct faculty will remain high or even increase because of economic pressures. This shift will continue to challenge the core conceptualization of traditional higher education.

The final part of Miller's analytical framework is “destined ideas.” Ten years from now “we'll wonder why it didn't seem obvious that this was the way history was headed” (2009:156). Although they seem paradoxical today, these ideas are the solutions to the problems. For instance, in the future, only government can save business.

Clearly, journalists and public radio stars have confidence in predicting the future. I am more Weberian and Kuhnian (2007) in my views of history. When we look back it only *seems* obvious that this was the way it was going to go. That is not to say, however, that we throw up our hands and wait to see what happens. So, let me pose three thoughts about the future.

First, by 2020 we will have revised the view that everyone can and should go to a four-year college. We will have come to better value technical and trade-based education and the role of a liberating education will be understood in a new context. Second, the importance of teaching versus research will be rebalanced so that effective teaching is as well understood and rewarded as good research. With any luck, this change will mean that new faculty entering the academy can have balanced lives and manageable careers. (See Austin 2003.) And third, the longer term value of the for-profit higher education business will become clear. We will begin to know how well the business of for-profit education actually serves society and we can adjust accordingly. Some of this forecasting is obviously wishful thinking but perhaps not all of it.

By now, you are probably asking, where is the good news? First, I do think that sociology gives us an advantage in understanding all of this institutional and organizational change. It is what we do. We are trained to question the “things we think we know” better than most. We just need to turn that skill more intently on our teaching. Second, the work done in the scholarship of teaching and learning is making it easier to be scholarly teachers. Read more scholarship of teaching and learning. There are over 300 journals in this field. Apply and experiment with that knowledge. Sociology as a discipline (MSS and North Central Sociological Association [NCSA] included) can proudly claim leadership in the scholarship of teaching and learning. We need to take seriously learning paradigm guru John Tagg’s (2009) assertion that “Being a disciplinary expert does not make you an expert teacher.”

Finally, as a profession dedicated to reducing inequality, we have the skills to not simply accept what unfolds but to shape it. We must pay as much attention individually and institutionally to identifying quality teaching as we do to identifying quality scholarship and research. As Carla Howery often said, “For people who claim to be able to measure urban decay, alienation, and marital satisfaction, surely we can figure out what constitutes good teaching.” And because we are sociologists, we have tools particularly suited to these challenges. As Durkheim (1956:114) put it, “Pedagogy depends on sociology more closely than any other science.”

## CONCLUSIONS

If it does not matter how prepared students used to be, then perhaps there can be greater focus on how prepared they are now. Recognize that a large part of education is reeducation. Instead of getting frustrated because students cannot call up a definition of ethnocentrism when they walk into an upper division course, take the time to explain how ethnocentrism is going to be relevant; help them reinforce their learning.

Loosening our grip on the idea that grading motivates learning does not mean we stop grading—although a few schools have actually done so. If interesting assignments are more motivating than efficient-to-grade assignments, change what you ask students to do. Assessment done right (a tool to benefit students) is critical. How do we know what is working? Faculty have to do better than say “because I gave it an A.” The students have to do better than say “because it got an A.” Students should be able to tell themselves why the work was of excellent quality.

If we could get rid of technology, would we? No. But when we let go of the idea that technology makes or break our teaching, our curricula, or higher education as a whole then we can more easily see technology for its real value—improving pedagogy.

Part of my measure of success for today is that you recognize things that you already do right and do well. Teaching is our profession. It is skilled work *beyond* our disciplinary expertise, often characterized by long hours, dedication, and genuine success with students. But it is disingenuous to conclude that where we are today is the best we can do.

My theme statement for last year’s MSS meetings quoted public intellectual James Burke. “We are what we know and when what we know changes we change” (1985). It is

a fundamentally sociological statement, and if what we know is tyranny, then we need to be liberated. We can triumph over many of the zombies out there if we do not underestimate our collective capacity to socially construct teaching and learning. As Charles Lemert (2008) simply and profoundly puts it in the final chapter of his volume *Social Things*, “In the end, life is always life together” (217). This professional teaching life together is what we know and is thus who we are. I am glad that we are together and trust that we are eager for the liberating ideas ahead.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The link for the Minnesota Public Radio Broadcast of Mr. Miller’s talk is <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2009/08/17/midday2/-2009-08-17> (accessed September 1, 2009).

<sup>2</sup>A number of recent studies have been highlighted, particularly in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. See, for example, Cruz 2010. According to one national survey, adjunct faculty make up 47 percent of university and college faculty at the aggregate level (American Federation of Teachers of Higher Education Division 2010). Some estimates place the number of students in for-profit colleges at 1.2 million. Ninety-four percent of these students borrow federal money to attend and the default rate on loans is becoming a significant issue (Wilson 2010).

<sup>3</sup>Tim Pawlenty is a 2012 Republican Presidential hopeful. He repeated this call in June 2010 on *The Daily Show*.

<sup>4</sup>The past several years have seen much discussion about the use of PowerPoint. Listservs continue to include these conversations. Some of the best work on PowerPoint is by Edward Tufte.

<sup>5</sup>Thanks to Augsburg President Paul Pribbenow for his analysis and direction on this topic. See also the work of Jones and Wellman (2009).

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