Humanizing My Teaching

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One of the practices that I’ve been implementing is working toward building a community of learners in my classroom. This comes from the idea of humanizing mathematics. A key idea to do this is to let them know I am a human being (like them). I recognize this is not an easy task, especially because the culture of higher mathematics expects us, as professors, to be perfect. Saying this, it is “prohibited” to be make mistakes or to have compassion for our students. The book Asked and Answered: Dialogues on Advocating for Students of Color in Mathematics reflects on how this perfection is harmful for the experience of students of color.

While humanizing my classroom is not an easy task, this has been one of my goals as a junior faculty since I started in Fall 2019. Why? While I was a PhD student, I learned from the practice of some of my professors that one can be human and mathematician at the same time. For my surprise, they were the professors who challenged me the most and from whom I learned most. So, when I started my pre-tenure position at my current university, I tried to implement these practices. This was difficult. One may think that been a Latina means that you have all the answers to work with communities of color, but I felt lost when working with a diverse population of students. I had experience teaching students in Puerto Rico and in Montana. My classrooms were not very diverse. But now, my classroom looked very different. This was a challenge. I was not sure how to advocate for my students of color. I tried several approaches to show my support including writing in my syllabus that I would have open office hours and inviting them to talk to me in a brief interview in my office within the first two weeks of classes. I thought these would help them see me as a human being and start to establish a community of learners in my classroom, but it was not working, students did not attend to my office hours or to the interview. I was not sure where to set a line between been human and been a professor. I was not connecting with my students, they did not ask for help and I did not know how to approach them to offer my help. When I tried to offer them some help, it was already too late.

I heard about the webinar “Advocating for students of color: There is more you can do” and I registered. I met Dr. Harris at a SACNAS conference, and I thought it could be somehow useful to attend to the webinar. These webinar sessions were useful and practical, I thought of it as a supporting group to be successful on how to advocate for my students of color. I was able to reflect on new ideas and on how to improve my attempts. If you are reading this, thinking “there are no webinars to attend this semester” you can probably find a support group while reading this book and meet to have some uncomfortable and productive discussions.

While I’ve been trying to build a community of learners for the last two years, I feel this Spring semester had better outcomes than before. The webinar helped me reflect on two ideas that I find key: “being human” and “compassionate.” How could I be more human for my students? I did this by valuing my students and supporting them.
To value students, I needed to know my students. Inviting students to visit my office and talk to me in a brief interview during the first two weeks of classes was not working. I was probably not welcoming enough in my invitation, or students were too busy to have an interview with their professor during the first week of classes. So, I needed a better approach. These are the steps I took for getting to know my students.

1) The first step was to send them a welcoming e-mail to our class one-two weeks before classes started. Highlighting that it was “our” class. This e-mail was short, and it included a video with a brief academic/non-academic introduction about myself (e.g., my name is..., I would like you to call me..., my preferred pronouns are..., I’m from..., I like to..., my favorite food is...). At the end of the video, I encouraged them to book a meeting with me to have an informal conversation just to get to know them and for them to get to know me. I avoid the word “interview” as it may be intimidating. I emphasized that these were brief conversations of 15 minutes. In the email I sent them information about the online booking webpage to see my availability and instruction about how to book a meeting. To my surprise, 90% of my students responded to my request.

2) The second step is to prepare for the meeting. I got a notebook and wrote a sketch of information I thought might be helpful to have (e.g., hobbies, favorite sports, favorite place, job). While this is not a script, it was there in case the conversation needed some icebreakers. Before the meeting, I will write their name with their major and year of study. It is important to mention that I do not take notes during the conversation, because I just want to listen to them. Taking notes will probably make them feel evaluated and keeping us in an artificial situation instead of just a conversation to get to know each other.

3) The third step is to have the meeting. I started the conversations by asking them “how are you? how was your break? did you do something fun?” I then explained the expectations of the conversation “This is an informal conversation for you to get to know me and for me to get to know you. You can ask me questions about me or the class, and I will answer them or not [say this in a friendly way]. I will also ask you questions out of curiosity and you don’t have to answer these questions. There is no script for the conversation, this is just a safe and respectful space for us to get to know each other.” I was surprised by the outcomes of these conversations. I learned about my student’s struggles, hobbies, jobs, children, time for studying, etc.

4) The fourth step is to open your notebook and write some notes after the meeting is over. I write details about their name pronunciation, their hobbies, their child’s name, or anything that I think might be useful to make them feel valued during the semester.

5) The fifth step is to use your notes. I use my notes to let them know I value them, and I know who they are. I see them as persons, and they know this. During class I follow up with them with questions “did you went biking this weekend? Did you watch the baseball game last night? How is [name of their child] doing?” While these may seem insignificant, they are making a change to build a sense of community in my classroom and helps them learn mathematics. The dynamic of the classroom is different.

Students want to be heard, and they appreciate you taking the time to listen to their stories. Be aware that some students will not talk much, they will use the conversation to talk about the
class. We just spend about 5 minutes talking about the class and that is fine! It is also good to establish some connections through the class.

I have noticed that the experiences of my students of color tended to be different from my white students. I can use two examples with pseudonyms to reflect these differences: (1) Elena, an immigrant from Mexico, came to the US with her mom. Her mom remarried and she doesn’t have anyone else besides her mom in the US. At the age of 18 she started to work, moved from her mom’s house and started to study. She needed to take a break from the university because she didn’t make it to tuition. While taking my class, Elena worked 40 hours a week and didn’t have any emotional or financial support to finish her degree, (2) Claire, a white student from the Midwest, lives with their parents, her parents have some college studies, and they pay for her degree. While Claire doesn’t work, she has a hobby of making earrings, and she sells them to buy her own stuff. These are examples of some of the information I can learn from my students while I have informal conversations with them. It is a place to know students as individuals who have their own struggles. It helps me understand their experiences and value their efforts in my class.

I thought that writing in my syllabus that I would have an open office hours policy would support students. While this was showing my time flexibility to meet with them, I noticed that my students of color never used these open office hours and they needed other ways to support them. So I started to do check-in e-mails that I call a “meeting request”. These e-mails were simple and to the point “Dear [name of the student], Do you have some time to meet with me by [date]? Please book a meeting with me at your earliest convenience. [copy of link to book a meeting] Thank you for your time.” I would write this if I noticed any change in participation during class or any assessment. In addition, I started a new late policy, where I would accept one late homework with an explanatory email request before the homework was due. The rationale behind only one late homework is that I don’t want to establish a pattern where students will always turn-in late homework. The rationale behind sending an email request, is because I want students to use this when is really needed. I have found this beneficial.

Check-in e-mails and late homework policies have been a great support for students, especially for my students of color. I’ll tell you the story of Diana (pseudonym), a Hispanic student: I noticed that Diana was distracted in class, and her last weekly homework was missing. I sent her one of these meeting requests e-mails as soon as I noticed. She booked a meeting. The meeting started in the following way: “Hi Diana, thank you for meeting with me, how are you today?, how is your week going?” Diana, started to cry, she explained that she was overwhelmed (i.e., not sleeping, working extra shifts at her job, trying to get homework done, do household chores). She also told me that her family expected her to help making dinner and clean the house. We talked for almost an hour, and I mostly listen to her. When she stopped talking, I acknowledged her hard work and advised her to find ways to communicate with both her bosses and her family. I also told her we could meet any time she needed support with the class and encouraged her to find peer-support. I told her “I want to support you, how can I help?” She said that it would be helpful to use the late homework policy for the missed
assignment, that she will send me an e-mail with the request according to the late policy. I agreed to receive the e-mail, because it was after the due date, and we agreed on a new deadline. I supported Diana by listening to her feelings and well-being. I centered the conversation around her. I made her part of the decision making for the class. We are all part of this community of learners. When starting my new job, I tried to establish a community by being early in my classroom and receiving my students. I tried to establish a connection with my students, but this was not enough. I needed to know my students.

Another way to support my students of color at the department level is by facilitating them with information about other mathematicians of color as well as information about summer research experiences for undergraduates. I "painted" my door, my office, and graduate student's office with many diverse posters. Students do appreciate this support and comment about the posters. I also sent my students of color opportunities of research experiences and information about graduate school and the Math Alliance.

The webinar “Advocating for students of color: There is more you can do” supported me to take some steps to support students at the departmental level. While I feel very supported in my department, as a woman of color (and junior faculty) there is always some fear about presenting new ideas. I sent the chair of my department an e-mail with a meeting request to talk about the Math Alliance. I explained that this was an organization to support underrepresented or underserved students and that we should be recruiting at their Fields of Dreams Conference. The conversation uncovered underrepresentation problems in our department. We talked about the need to make data more accessible and to provide students with more tools to succeed. While I wanted to have these conversations and my chair was very supportive, these conversations were outside of my comfort zone. I was afraid that such an important idea could be rejected. However, I was so happy to see our department, for the first time, recruiting at the Field of Dreams conference.

At the institutional level, I've been also advocating for changing policies of the teacher preparation programs to explicitly state ways to address potential racism in student teaching experiences. This shows our institutional support for students of color. My 5% was to reach out to the policy maker for a teacher preparation program to ask about policies of racism in student teaching placement schools outside of our institution. Our university has a system to report these incidents, however, my concern was on what could happen while they are student teaching (a requirement to complete their degree). At the moment I asked, there was a policy about what to do if there was a hostile environment in their student teaching experience. A hostile environment may also include racism, but this is not specified. As a result of the question I asked, policy makers for teacher preparation programs at my institution are meeting to discuss (1) how student teachers can report acts of discrimination? (2) how will the program handle incidence reporting? (3) how will students be made aware of these protocols? A simple question, the right question, is having an impact and even extending across the university in other teacher preparation programs.