“We don't need no education
Wе don't need no thought control
No dark sarcasm in the classroom
Teachers, lеave them kids alone
Hey! Teacher! Leave us kids alone!

All in all, you're just another brick in the wall
- Pink Floyd, 1979

Back in my the early years of my primary education, I remember hearing that old song already decades out of date but with a quality that was timeless. Although back then it appealed to the rebellious nature of a young man on the most basal level, seemingly in stark contrast to the core nature of our academic calling, as I have grown as an individual and an academic, I began to understand just how prolific it was. This seemingly rebellious song that could very easily be seen as an anthem of truancy and the young vagrant condemning academia on the surface level, has ended up not just inspiring me to stay in school and continue towards a career in academia but also bolster the core pillars of my teaching style.

For anyone that has truly experienced academia It is well understood that true institutions of higher learning are not designed for their prodigy to blend into the work force, but instead to stand out as a great mosaic. Howard University in particular takes great pride in the Bison that have gone on to be the great leaders of this country from Vice Presidents, Supreme Court Justices, and community leaders in every part of this nation and distant lands[1]. It is this drive to provide an incubator for those to reach their full, unique potential that makes the Mecca such a wonderous place, but this all starts with the professor, lecturer, or even the TA.

At every capacity I believe that all educators, regardless of position, must fight the notion of rigidity that might seem tempting be it for self-serving hubris or simple ease of logistics. How this manifests itself in my classroom is through a trifecta of simple understandings.

1. Science is a living story that we are all part of and as an educator you are playing a key role in weaving the greatest tapestry of mankind.
2. Students are our greatest resource and the future of not only this institution but society, but they are also an individual.
3. Your responsibility goes well beyond the classroom which should be a safe space students look forward to coming to, but not be defined by a room number and timeslot.

Something that I believe is all too often forgotten within STEM classroom is that science is more than just a few datapoints and laws, but is the story of humanity itself. As such for the great saga to continue, the next generation of scientists, doctors, or all others who come through the walls of Just Hall, need to be understand the magnitude of what they are learning and given in the core driving force of our human nature which is our desire to be part of something bigger. From what I have seen both as a scholar and being on the other side of the podium, is that sometimes science is taught in a vacuum. Students are told what they should be doing and why things happen as they do, but not how we got to where we are. A problem I have seen arising from this teaching methodology is that when this happens even some of the best students can conform and do well on a test but fail to see the bigger picture and never truly be excited about what they are learning so that after the test the information vanishes.

To combat this phenomenon, I always like to start my lectures off with a short video, a method that has found success in literary classes [2]. These videos allow for the students to connect with the lesson plan better than jumping right into the lecture and with topics ranging from historical players and the human side of science to current events or even “cutesy” cartoons all of which I have seen help create a more emotional connection to the greatest story ever told. In addition to these starting videos, I heavily utilize the principles of call back where I relate the immediate topic to what we have done before and even go as far as bringing up other classes that I know they have taken or will have to take. The biggest area in which I bring students into the story is to foster talking and teach class as a discussion, something which studies have shown improves learning [4,5]

Along the same vein as engaging students to be part of the scientific story, it must be remembered that they are the ones that will be the torch bearers and continue it. As no good story is purely consistent the biggest challenge will always be fostering the natural diversity that can be found within the classroom, since although every single Bison can be considered the best and the brightest, they are by no means the same. Each student has a different story and perspective to tell, and Howard itself has one of the most diverse student populations in respect to cultures which was a defining principal guiding our very founding over a century and a half ago. These differences subsequently must be cherished and nurtured. To help do this in a class-room I try to shift focus away from grades having them serve more of a reinforcement role than being the actual keystone of education. Additionally, questions on all examinations are purposely varied in structure and students are aware they are welcome to challenge me.

The last part of my teaching philosophy is that one cannot be confined by the classroom. My students start to see the importance of what they learn outside of the classroom making connections and having most of the big picture knowledge being learned from life itself. Additionally, I believe in talking with the students on how to survive this exciting new chapter of their life and am always available to discuss what we learned in class or beyond with office hours being anytime (within reason) helping the students. This helps foster a caring and productive environment for learning and growth and studies have shown positive outcomes for students [3].

Sources:

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