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# Cultivate a Community in the Classroom: Lead with Values, Vulnerability, and Gratitude

By Rosario Lozada

*Rosario Lozada is an Associate Professor of Legal Skills & Values at the Florida International University College of Law.*

When I face a new class of law students, one objective supersedes all others: creating a learning community.

A learning community is distinct from a group of individual students. Individuals in a group may have common interests or goals—such as the desire to excel in law school, pass the bar on the first attempt, and practice law. But members of a learning community “share a mutual concern for one another’s welfare.”<sup>1</sup> As a result, students in a learning community feel supported in taking academic risks, and they are more likely to be receptive to both the discomforts and delights of learning in each other’s presence. Students who enjoy a sense of psychological safety in the classroom reap the benefits of an enhanced cognitive process and an increased motivation to learn.<sup>2</sup> In short, students in a learning community enjoy—and benefit from—a sense that they belong in the classroom.

In a law school classroom, learning communities are unlikely to sprout spontaneously;<sup>3</sup> a professor’s

purposeful leadership is vital.<sup>4</sup> Early in the semester, a professor can help to sow the seeds for growing a learning community by engaging in four practices: (1) acknowledge the presence of each individual in the classroom by respecting each student’s name; (2) lead a class exercise that safely introduces values and vulnerability—key components of a learning community;<sup>5</sup> (3) show students your authenticity by sharing parts of your life experience, including not only sources of joy and satisfaction, but also setbacks and even “failures”; and (4) express gratitude to your students for entrusting you with four months of their legal education.

## Step 1: Respect Names

Knowing your students’ names, how they wish to be addressed in the classroom, and how to pronounce each one of their names correctly is the first step in creating a learning community.<sup>6</sup> Many professors fear the embarrassment of publicly botching a student’s name. Indeed, among every group of students, a professor will encounter names that are outside her comfort zone. A professor may even consider some of the names to be “non-traditional,” but this judgment arises from the perspective of the professor’s own tradition. If a professor fails to learn a student’s name early in a semester, one day the professor may find herself soliciting a

“Knowing your students’ names . . . is the first step in creating a learning community.”

<sup>1</sup> See MARGERY B. GINSBERG & RAYMOND J. WLODKOWSKI, DIVERSITY AND MOTIVATION: CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING IN COLLEGE 75 (2d ed. 2009); CHARLES H. VOGL, THE ART OF COMMUNITY: SEVEN PRINCIPLES FOR BELONGING 9 (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Conversely, when students lack psychological safety, they may spend more energy “coping rather than learning” in the classroom. See Erin C. Lain, *Racialized Interactions in the Law School Classroom: Pedagogical Approaches to Creating a Safe Learning Environment*, 67 J. LEGAL EDUC. 780, 786–87 (2018). This deficit is particularly damaging to students who are underrepresented in the classroom. See generally Russell A. McClain, *Helping Our Students Reach Their Full Potential: The Insidious Consequences of Ignoring Stereotype Threat*, 17 RUTGERS RACE & L. REV. 1 (2016).

<sup>3</sup> See Gerald Hess, *Heads and Hearts: The Teaching and Learning Environment in Law School*, 52 J. LEGAL EDUC. 75, 75 (2002) (observing that, for many students, the law school environment is “stressful, intensely competitive, and alienating”).

<sup>4</sup> See ABA Report of Nat’l Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being, *The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change* 38 (2017), available at <https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/images/abanews/ThePathToLawyerWellBeingReportFINAL.pdf> (recognizing that professors often “exercise powerful personal influence over students” and that their classroom practices “contribute enormously to the law school experience”).

<sup>5</sup> VOGL, *supra* note 1, at 10, 16.

<sup>6</sup> See GERALD F. HESS ET AL., WHAT THE BEST LAW TEACHERS DO 78 (2013) (“Learning students’ names is the first step in a larger effort to connect with students.”); see also VERNA MYERS, MOVING DIVERSITY FORWARD: HOW TO GO FROM WELL-MEANING TO WELL-DOING 41 (2012).

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student’s participation by either pointing to or fixing her gaze on the student. These actions may unintentionally send the message that the student is invisible or not entirely welcome in the classroom.<sup>7</sup>

On that first day, welcome your students to your class and enlist their expertise. Consider: “As I take attendance, I ask that you let me know how you prefer to be addressed, and that you correct me if I mispronounce your name.”<sup>8</sup> As you take role, scribble phonetic spellings of each student’s name and place accents on syllables for future reference.<sup>9</sup> If your knowledge of phonetics is limited, as is mine, jot down a word that rhymes with a student’s name.<sup>10</sup>

I often tell students that my name has been ill-treated over the years: “My first name is Rosario and I still remember how I felt when an elementary school teacher called me “Roh—zuh—REE—oh” in front of a classroom of peers.<sup>11</sup> In Spanish, this pronunciation makes my name sound like a river,” I tell them. I go on: “Also, because my first name ends in an ‘o,’ which suggests a masculine gender, telemarketers who call my home will inquire: ‘Could I please speak to Mr. Lozada?’”

There is a collateral beauty to sharing accounts of a mispronounced and misgendered name: these personal anecdotes connect the professor to her students, while sending the clear message that professor is determined to learn and properly pronounce their names.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> This message is particularly detrimental to students of color. See MYERS, *supra* note 6, at 52–53 (discussing the “conspicuous invisibility” that many minorities endure when they are noticed but not recognized).

<sup>8</sup> Some law schools invite incoming first-year students to audio-record the correct pronunciation of their names into the student directory before orientation.

<sup>9</sup> Without fail, at least one notation is undecipherable, even though it’s my own. I follow up with the student as soon as practicable, knowing that, as the days pass, I’ll become increasingly reluctant to approach the student.

<sup>10</sup> Professor Shailini Jandial George of Suffolk Law School introduces herself with this guidance: “My name is Shailini. It rhymes with colony.”

<sup>11</sup> My mother named me Rosario in honor of a Marian prayer in the Catholic Church—in English, the Rosary. The correct pronunciation of both my name and the prayer is Rose-Are-E-Oh, with an accent on the second syllable.

<sup>12</sup> A good professor has “a capacity for connectedness,” which allows the professor to “weave a complex web of connections” among the professor, the

## Step 2: Lead an Exercise in Values and Vulnerability

Next, lead your class in an exercise that creates connections by eliciting values and encouraging vulnerability. After taking attendance and briefly introducing myself, I offer this opening prompt to the students: “Please repeat your name and then share something—anything—that you are proud of.” This seemingly innocuous request induces looks of panic, and understandably so. On the first day of class, many students are self-conscious, nervous, and fear saying the “wrong” thing or letting their guard down. Articulating something they are proud of requires self-reflection, the courage to be vulnerable, and some measure of trust in their new classmates and professor.

As students volunteer sources of personal pride, the classroom space begins to honor personal experiences.<sup>13</sup> And many values come to the surface:

- *I am the first person in my family to graduate from college, and now I’m here in law school.*
- *I am training for my first marathon—the Boston Marathon.*
- *I’m a role model to my four younger siblings.*
- *I decided to leave the small town where I grew up to come to law school here in Miami.*
- *I’ve managed to work through my OCD.*
- *My heritage—I’m proud of my Jewish and Cuban heritage.*
- *I took the LSAT three times and now I’m here, so I’m just proud to be in law school today.*
- *I participate in mission trips with my church every summer.*
- *I have a sister with special needs, and I coach her basketball team.*
- *I’ve written a couple of songs.*

subject she teaches, and her students, who in turn will “learn to weave a world for themselves.” PARKER J. PALMER, THE COURAGE TO TEACH: EXPLORING THE INNER LANDSCAPE OF A TEACHER’S LIFE 11 (20th ed. 2017).

<sup>13</sup> See Hess, *supra* note 3, at 84 (observing that an effective learning environment makes room for students’ personal experiences).

- *I rescue dogs.*
- *I own a citrus farm.*
- *I am proud that I'm a mom and a role model to two kids.*

As each student participates, I maintain eye contact with the speaker, nod encouragingly, and ignore the clock. I rush no one. Each person's source of pride and light lingers in the air for a few moments. In addition to showing respect to the speaker, these quasi-musical "rests" allow other students a moment to reflect and to settle into their own reactions and emotions in response to a classmate's contribution.<sup>14</sup> Some may feel empathy; others experience awe. In the silences, connections are forged.<sup>15</sup>

(I purposefully do not, however, invite students to share where they completed their undergraduate education. Students—and often professors, too—may entertain sweeping assumptions based on a student's undergraduate institution. For example, if a law student attended an ivy league school, *she must be privileged or wealthy*. Or if she attended a top 20 school, *she must be smarter than everyone who attended a school in the next tier*. And if she is a minority student who attended an elite school, *she probably got in because she is a member of a minority group*. Regardless of whether others are making these judgments, the minority student sharing the information often silently fears that her intelligence is being judged or categorized; this fear affects the student's ability to fulfill her academic potential,<sup>16</sup> while undermining the objective of creating connections in the classroom.)

Through this opening exercise, students discover they share many values with their peers. This discovery is key to forming the fledgling learning community.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* (recognizing that silence is a medium of teaching that makes space for reflection and leads to deep learning).

<sup>15</sup> These "rests" also give the professor an opportunity to take notes on the students' experiences and values. The professor's notes are fertile soil to enrich future class discussions or conferences with individual students. See HESS ET AL., *supra* note 6, at 79 (observing that teachers who know about their students' backgrounds or experiences can draw on this information effectively to motivate them throughout the semester).

<sup>16</sup> See generally McClain, *supra* note 2.

### Step 3: Share Setbacks and Sources of Joy

Next, after students have been vulnerable and identified values, a professor can foster additional connections in the community by being vulnerable and authentic herself.<sup>17</sup> Vulnerability, which involves "exposure, uncertainty, and emotional risk," is a catalyst for "connection and joy."<sup>18</sup> A professor becomes more "human" to her students when she shares personal or professional sources of joy and satisfaction. Similarly, by revealing a setback or short-term "failure,"—whether experienced in legal practice, in the academy, or in another setting—the professor expresses aspects of her core identity. By openly sharing setbacks and "failures" as steps in a professional path, the professor also signals to the new learning community that such experiences are familiar precursors to growth and learning, rather than defeat or shame. Sharing at this level, which is uncommon in the law school classroom,<sup>19</sup> strengthens the ability of the students in the class to form a learning community.

One semester, for example, I shared that I was proud that I'd hiked Montaña Machu Picchu with teenage kids in my homeland, Peru. I beamed as I described the breathtaking views on the path to the summit, which towers over 10,000 feet above sea level.

As for setbacks and challenges, personal examples abound. I don't hesitate to give the students

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., HESS ET AL., *supra* note 6, at 187 (students value a professor's willingness to make herself vulnerable); PALMER, *supra* note 12, at 236 ("openness and vulnerability" are virtues that "rarely receive their due in professional settings"); Heidi K. Brown, *The Emotionally Intelligent Law Professor: A Lesson from the Breakfast Club*, 36 U. ARK. LITTLE ROCK L. REV. 273, 297(2014) (teachers who show a "vulnerable, human side,"—rather than the personage of the "aloof expert"—create bonds of trust and respect with their students); Larry Krieger, *Being the Happiest, Most Effective Lawyer You Can Be: New Research*, in STEWART L. LEVINE, *THE BEST LAWYER YOU CAN BE: A GUIDE TO PHYSICAL, MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, AND SPIRITUAL WELLNESS* 3, 7–8 (2018) ("authenticity is the primary foundation of [a person's] life experience").

<sup>18</sup> BRENE BROWN, *RIISING STRONG: HOW THE ABILITY TO RESET TRANSFORMS THE WAY WE LIVE, LOVE, PARENT, AND LEAD* 275 (2017).

<sup>19</sup> See Melissa J. Marlow, *Does Kingsfield Live?: Teaching with Authenticity in Today's Law Schools*, 65 J. LEGAL EDUC. 229, 229 (2015) (observing that "the sharing of ourselves in law school classrooms [remains] a rare occurrence").

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“Learning demands the freedom to make mistakes.”

insight into the voice of my inner critic. (I also tell them how I respond to her unwelcome and frequent contributions.) When discussing body language and posture in the context of an appellate oral argument, I confide that scoliosis runs in my family, and that I’ve worked hard at strengthening my postural muscles. Finally, when I’m working on a writing project, I’ll frequently tell of my tussles with imposter syndrome.<sup>20</sup>

The sharing of a challenge or a setback often frees the professor, while empowering the students. At the beginning of each semester, for instance, I let the students know I will make mistakes:

At some point in the semester, you will notice an error in my reasoning or my analysis or in the conclusion I’ve drawn. And one of you—maybe more than one—will tell me, ‘I don’t think that’s right, Professor. When I read that case, I understood the court’s holding to be [insert correct holding or analysis].’

In that moment, I tell them, I celebrate. Why? The learning community has internalized the message that no one has a monopoly on knowledge or understanding.<sup>21</sup> Learning demands the freedom to make mistakes.

#### Step 4: Express Gratitude

Finally, express gratitude to your students for trusting you to guide and facilitate their learning for an entire semester of their legal education, which is nearly four months of their lives. Gratitude is an emotional strength: “a sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life itself.”<sup>22</sup> By expressing gratitude, the professor communicates to her students her awareness of the gift of

<sup>20</sup> Even as I work on this Article, the syndrome lurks nearby. Please go away. Elizabeth Cox’s TED-Ed lesson, which many of my students have found eye-opening, offers an excellent introduction to this phenomenon. Elizabeth Cox, *What Is Imposter Syndrome and How Can You Combat It* (Aug. 28, 2018) available at [https://www.ted.com/talks/elizabeth\\_cox\\_what\\_is\\_imposter\\_syndrome\\_and\\_how\\_can\\_you\\_combat\\_it?language=e](https://www.ted.com/talks/elizabeth_cox_what_is_imposter_syndrome_and_how_can_you_combat_it?language=e).

<sup>21</sup> See Lain, *supra* note 2, at 795 (Legal education is “based on an intense hierarchy that places the professor as the holder of knowledge.”).

<sup>22</sup> MARTIN E.P. SELIGMAN, AUTHENTIC HAPPINESS: USING THE NEW POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY TO REALIZE YOUR POTENTIAL FOR LASTING FULFILLMENT 154–55 (2002).

serving as their teacher. It also engenders hope in students; after all, if the professor—who has been teaching for some time—remains grateful, maybe some positive experiences await.<sup>23</sup>

#### Conclusion

The first class comes to an end. By honoring individual names, making space for values, being authentic, and expressing gratitude, you’ve planted hardy seeds for a learning community to grow. Throughout the semester, you will engage in additional practices to strengthen and nourish it.<sup>24</sup> But for now, reflect on the work you and your students have begun; it’s an auspicious start. Will a learning community flourish and thrive in the four months that follow? Time will tell. I, for one, am optimistic.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The professor, too, will draw benefits from practicing gratitude. See Nathalie Martin, *Gratitude*, in NATHALIE MARTIN, LAWYERING FROM THE INSIDE OUT: LEARNING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH MINDFULNESS AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE 260, 260–61 (2018) (discussing the physical and mental health benefits of a gratitude practice).

<sup>24</sup> For example, a community is strengthened through inclusive practices, such as elevating diverse voices in the classroom through amplification. See, e.g., Tiffany D. Atkins, *Amplifying Diverse Voices: Strategies for Promoting Inclusion in the Law School Classroom*, 31 SECOND DRAFT: BULLETIN OF LEGAL WRITING INST. 10 (Fall 2018). Charles Vogl offers a robust text (with worksheets) on understanding and building communities. See VOGL, *supra* note 1.

<sup>25</sup> My optimism stems, in part, from the positive feelings that I experience when I connect to students. Tracy Chapman says it best: “I got a feeling that I belong. I got a feeling I could be someone. Be someone.” TRACY CHAPMAN, *Fast Car*, on TRACY CHAPMAN (Elektra 1988).