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“Like a Family”: Fostering a Sense of Belonging in a Minority Majority University Classroom

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Abstract

This teaching note, co-authored by nine university students and their peer mentor and professor at the end of a year-long course, argues that the growing socio-cultural gap between students and faculty requires pedagogies that foster a sense of student belonging by faculty becoming “more receptive than authoritative.” All of these students are from immigrant families, and most felt very anxious upon arriving at Portland State University, fearing that they did not belong. Co-creating a space of mutual vulnerability enabled students to feel both cared for and confident.

Keywords: belonging, student-focused teaching, pedagogy of listening, Third Space

Though situated in perhaps the whitest city in the United States, Portland State University (PSU) is undergoing the same sort of demographic transformation reshaping so much of higher education in the United States, particularly for R2, urban universities: its undergraduates are increasingly made up of students who are of color, from immigrant or low-income families, or are first-generation. The great majority of their faculty are not. There is a growing gap between the experiences and lifestyles of undergraduate students and the people who teach them.

This socio-cultural chasm between students and teachers poses severe risks for student success. Gándara and Contreras (2009) find that even “high-achieving Latino [college] students tend to have less confidence in themselves as students and see themselves as less capable than their white or Asian peers” (p. 247). Balcacer’s (2018) study of Latinx undergraduates at PSU found the same attitudes, stating that “All participants related white culture to college culture and privilege” (p. 258). They believed that they lacked the sort of cultural capital that university required, feeling both lonely and out of place. What can universities such as PSU do to disrupt this deeply embedded pattern of students of color being and feeling marginalized?

In this collaboration between members of a year-long Freshman Inquiry course, Immigration, Migration, and Belonging (IMB), nine students from immigrant families and their white peer mentor and professor explore how we created an interactive classroom in which students felt a strong sense of belonging.

The first-year students who came to IMB in the fall of 2019 shared deep anxieties about being at university. Jennifer Marquez Marquez “was so nervous that I wanted to leave” the first day of class. Tony Vo, who had emigrated with his family from Vietnam, “always worried about people judging me for how I speak, because I usually have a difficult time expressing my thoughts clearly when in front of a large audience.” Estefani Reyes Moreno, the daughter of immigrants from Mexico, was “really anxious,” as she “had heard from other college students that professors were very strict and the student’s only job was to do the work that was asked of them.” Other students veiled their anxieties. Raya Alkharroubi, a Muslim Palestinian, had learned that “[p]eople don’t like...something they are not used to.” So “it’s always easier for me to leave a mask up than go ahead and be myself.” Arina Borodkina was one of the few students whose parents had attended college, but since they had done so in Russia, “they weren’t able to give me straightforward advice about how credits worked, how to join clubs and organization or what required classes I was even supposed to take.” She “thought that I was supposed to know these things already, and felt embarrassed asking for help.”

A wide range of scholarship argues that disrupting this deeply embedded sense of alienation requires pedagogies that embody the cultures and values from whence students come. Bartolome (1994) urges teachers to “utilize students’ existing knowledge bases” (p. 182), invoking Hawaiian students’ capacity to “talk story” (p. 184). Yosso (2006) urges a sensitivity to the “cultural wealth” that students commonly bring to the classroom, skills that facilitate “community well being” and resilience (p. 79). If education is understood and practiced more broadly, as “*educacion*,” of “caring, coping, and providing” (p. 79), it will encompass students’ families and communities, their social and emotional lives as well as more esoteric knowledge.

In sum, classrooms should honor and incorporate the very socio-cultural particularities that [professors] have often ignored and marginalized. Gutiérrez’s (2008) cosmopolitan Third Space foregrounds “the ideals and practices of a shared humanity, a profound obligation to others, boundary crossing, and intercultural exchange in which difference is celebrated without being romanticized” (p. 149). This sort of framework requires ceding much control of the class—to student narratives, for example. Campano (2007) writes of how he learned to cultivate a “pedagogy of listening” in the face of his fifth-graders’ compelling lives, a receptiveness that gave them permission “to inscribe their own individual stories into the collective text of the class” (p. 18). As unfamiliar and unsettling as it may be to faculty, part of their work is to vacate discursive space that student values and narratives can then reshape.

Peer Mentor Laiha Organna and Professor David Peterson del Mar in fact found that their students brought abundant skills and knowledge to the class. Organna learned that “a classroom can and

should be a space where everyone teaches, everyone learns, and everyone belongs,” that much of her work consisted not only in “making space for students to feel comfortable and supported,” but also in “turning the stage over to the students, allowing them to speak their truth.” This process bred not just “a new sense of confidence,” but also to students “finding others with stories like their own, creating long-lasting friendships and support systems.” She and Peterson del Mar joined this process by “openly sharing vulnerable stories about our paths to college, our failures, and our fears,” for “we wanted the students to see themselves in us, in our successes, in our failures, and in our humanity.” Peterson del Mar, with a quarter century of teaching and publications, learned that

I had perhaps the most to unlearn. I had thrived, after all, in the same hyper-individualistic system that most of my students found so alien and alienating. My teaching shifted from authoritative expert to become more of a facilitator. We spent more time with guest speakers and story exchanges than with lectures, and outside of class I spent at least several hours a week reading and responding to personal reflections or listening and supporting in one-to-one meetings. The instructors’ attempts to be more receptive than authoritative fostered student confidence.

“This class proved to me how professors and students are able to build close, valuable connections, with effort coming from both ways,” remarks Han Tran, recalling that it had been “nerve-racking to be around a campus with hardly anyone I recognized” after the “familiarity of...my high school community.” “By being vulnerable, both my mentor and instructor created a safe place,” remarks Daira Maldonado Ortega. What “helped me build relationships with my classmates was that both David and Laiha were vulnerable with the class,” adds Reyes Moreno. Kenyn Davila Samayoa cites Peterson’s del Mar’s “one-on-one meetings with us” for “building a connection with our professor.” Vo remarks that “getting to know and befriend a professor/teacher makes me want to try harder and be more active in the class.”

But it was the mutual vulnerability students offered each other that most affected them. Marquez Marquez, the student who had wanted to run out of class the first day, found that “meeting new people and talking about myself was hard,” but over time, from sharing stories, the class eventually “felt welcoming and comfortable.” “Getting out of my comfort zone, being friendly and vulnerable” was instrumental in “creating a comfortable place for myself and others,” remarks Maldonado Ortega. The class became “a safe place to share some of our struggles,” adds Davila Samayoa. “I have never felt like I belonged more than in this class,” concurs Brianna Tuy. Learning each other’s stories “was a beautiful experience” that taught us “that you are not alone on this journey.” Alkharroubi, the student who felt it was necessary to put on a mask outside of her family, found that our work together created “a place I belonged to.” In fact, “the class kind of felt like a family.”

Given the opportunity to shape the nature of their learning spaces, the very students who so often experience college as an alien place are able to transform classrooms into familial places of belonging and support, for “*educacion*” as well as education.

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Author's Note: David Peterson del Mar is a professor at Portland State University. At the time of writing this Teaching Note, Raya Alkharroubi, Arina Borodkina, Kenyn Davila Samayoa, Daira Maldonado Ortega, Jennifer Marquez Marquez, Laiha Organna, Estefani Reyes Moreno, Han Tran, Brianna Tuy, and Tony Vo were students at Portland State University.

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