I remember the excitement I felt when I stepped into my own classroom for the first time. I was hired at a large urban high school with a diverse student population. I could not have been happier to call this institution my second home. What I did not anticipate was how many unique experiences I would have over the years. From my first behavioral concern to adapting to teaching online, there are a lot of events that I have been present for that I wish I had been better prepared for when I first started.

This article includes a few thoughts I have compiled through my own experiences that I hope will benefit all new teachers in thinking about how they want to run their class.

Reacting with empathy
It is difficult to predict what students will say or do. A student once shared with me that they were pregnant. In that moment, I had not even thought about the possibility of one of my students experiencing this. All I could think to do in the moment was ask, “How are you feeling?” This resulted in some tears, but after conversation, it ended with a smile. I tried my best to put myself in the shoes of the student and tried to imagine how I would feel. Every new teacher must practice empathy in these unique scenarios, as well as the tougher ones such as if a student is arguing or using inappropriate language toward the teacher.

If I could go back to my first day, I would brainstorm hypothetical situations:
- How will I react if a student verbally attacks me?
- How will I react if a student feels comfortable sharing something regarding their identity (such as an LGBTQ+ identity)?
- How will I react if a student feels comfortable sharing something about their health condition?

Even if we cannot prepare for everything, empathy allows us to remember to always care. Following are a few scenarios that I have encountered, along with my reaction to each.

Scenario 1: A student is frustrated while working on an assignment and, when offered help, shouts, “My dad left me, you’d probably leave me too.”
- Reaction: Without drawing further attention to the student, I walked over and sat next to them to chat. Putting myself in their shoes (and at their level by sitting), I tried to think of a scenario where I felt “abandoned.” I shared with them some moments of loneliness that I had in life and how I persevered with help from others. I reminded them that this assignment is just one small task in a life that will be filled with many bigger things. I gave them the option to take a break and to resume when they felt ready.

Scenario 2: A student becomes upset and directs an expletive toward me.
- Reaction: My immediate response was, “Wow! That’s a new one. That’s OK, let’s talk about it.” At that moment, the student seemed surprised and may have been expecting me to argue back or to resort to instant discipline. Instead, putting myself in their shoes, I said, “Listen, I have been frustrated too. I have been so upset at others that I have wanted to say some rude things, too. While you should always be respectful, it does not invalidate how you feel, so I want to know more.” We then had a discussion as to why the student was highly upset, and then I gave permission for the student to take a break and go to the bathroom. The next day, we started...
fresh, and the student worked calmly and quietly without the need for additional discipline that could lead to additional aggression.

Scenario 3: Mid-lesson, a student blurts out, “Wow! Mister has bad pit stains!”

- Reaction: I immediately responded with “Oh boy, I know! I am cursed to sweat forever. But hey, that’s fine right? Doesn’t stop me from doing what I need to” and wrapped up the portion of the lesson that I was working on. Afterward, I spoke privately to the student who had shouted out. I expressed that even though I have worked on my self-confidence and self-esteem, it is not respectful to just shout that out in regard to anyone. I then proceeded to utilize a hypothetical situation with a fictional peer. In this scenario, I wanted the student to empathize with how the other person might feel. Without request, the student immediately apologized and shared that they had never seen it from that perspective. I then thanked the student, smiled, and had them continue their work. It is important to always be warm and welcoming, even in a scenario where one might resort to discipline.

_**Embrace the random**_

Although some of the sudden moments in the classroom are brief in nature, others can be turned into a miniature experience for all. For example, in the middle of class, a student may choose to ask the teacher if they saw the new superhero movie. Will you pause your lecture for a minute and share your thoughts or will you ignore it? Acknowledging and briefly discussing the question can serve as a brief break, as well as an excellent relationship- and community-building moment.

One of my favorite moments took place when we were discussing ecosystems and I showed a visual that contained a snail. Unexpectedly, a student blurted out, “How do snails reproduce?” I could have shrugged it off and moved on with my lesson, but I had a bit of knowledge connected to this question, and I wanted my students’ curiosity to be acknowledged. I paused the lecture to briefly discuss the basics of snail reproduction. This seemed to increase curiosity as students began asking questions about snails and other organisms in nature. After some time, I was able to return to my lecture, and even though I had less time to get through what I had planned, that discussion could have been meaningful for the student who asked the initial question. This student had a voice, I let their voice be heard and ultimately embraced the random to promote curiosity.

There are also random moments that may take place that do not necessarily connect to the content or the class but to other aspects of life. For example, one day, as students were wrapping up an activity, I smelled something quite aromatic and savory. I immediately scanned the room and noticed a student had pulled out a small container of food from home. My students are allowed to snack, as I never want a student to go hungry. However, I had never experienced a meal of this size being brought out. I walked over to the student and asked her about the food she was eating. I then learned that it was a traditional Brazilian dish that she eats at home. I used this opportunity to connect further and asked about how it is made, its popularity in her culture, and the most important question: “When can I have some?” Of course, I stressed that I asked that last question in jest, but the student did end up sharing the recipe on how to make the dish, which was just as exciting. This experience highlighted to me the importance of acknowledging those small moments that are easy to miss. It allows you and the students to remember the human and cultural aspects of life and reminds them that you do not just care about your subject; you care about them as well.

**Please care about self-care!**

During my first year of teaching, I arrived at school about an hour early and consistently left for home two hours (at a minimum) after the dismissal bell. As tempting as it is, we must limit these moments. There will always be grading to be done, and there will always be lessons to plan. Unfortunately, there is not an unlimited amount of time for you to spend outside the classroom; utilize as much time as you can on yourself. Create routines such as going on a nature walk or playing a new video game. Your brain deserves to rest and relax whenever possible. You can only be at your best when you treat yourself accordingly.

If you must work outside school, it is important to organize your office space at home with a clean desk and proper equipment. Add décor and make it a place that you would want to work. This will motivate you to go home at a reasonable time and to work from your desk if needed. I can speak from experience when I say that a second computer monitor makes a difference!

**Takeaways**

You are a human and so are the students. Celebrate their individuality as well as your own. Be comfortable sharing stories about life; it is the best way to engage. Believe me, the biggest debate in my class was not about “Are viruses alive?” Rather, it was always “Which is better, Chipotle or Moe’s?” Exercise empathy and you will overcome anything. Your students will recognize that, and you will understand them at a deeper level.

Most importantly, you got this! It will feel tough, but you can do it.

Alexander Eden (aeden005@fiu.edu) is a first-year Biology PhD student at Florida International University in Miami, FL. He previously worked as a Biology teacher at Greater Lowell Technical High School in Tyngsborough, MA.

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