



**An Iranian woman studying in a  
historical black university teaches  
College Algebra in prison!**

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# How does it start:

- I was fascinated by the idea and I wanted to be a part of it: how cool is that, prisoners are offered college education and it's called a second chance; I was curious, how many of them are going to take this chance seriously and what is my role to motivate them to get into the science?
- I had all these thoughts in my head when I attended the faculty meeting; I was the only international instructor! And it freaked me out, because it was just a few months since I had moved to the US, I could not speak English properly, but I passionately wanted to do that and I knew somewhere from the bottom of my heart that I can do it.

On the day of orientation, I had noticed the most distinct difference between them (my students in prison) and students in other classes

- After being introduced to them by my supervisor, I went to each one of them to have a small conversation asking for their names, and a little more information about themselves, what do they want to study, do they like mathematics, and why they have decided to participate in this program.
- Although they answered my questions more determined than any other students in college classrooms, they were more concerned about my perception of them, and they asked me questions like “Why are you here?”, “Do you see us as a bunch of criminals who will never change and who will never have a bright future?”, “Have you ever been afraid of being among of 30 African American males in jail?”



# Prejudgments and self-confidence:

- These questions made me think that they are afraid of prejudices and they need to know their professors believe in them and trust the fact that some if not all of them are going to change their lives using the opportunity they have been given. I have noticed my attitude might change everything and I should prove myself to them first, that I believe in them and I am sure they are going to pass this class and any other classes they have taken perfectly. It was not hard for me to come up with a gesture!
- I am an Iranian women studying math, I have been down this road before that people judge me because of my nationality or they did not believe I would do well in math because I am a woman! So, I easily could see their point; they did not want me to judge them because of their race or because of the place they were born and grew up in or because of the mistake they made in the past for which they are in prison! And I DID NOT. I started to know each one of them individually and it helped to persuade them to go through the exams and classes.

# Challenges in classroom:

- It was beyond my imagination how small problems would make teaching hard and how student support and help would make it just as good as the perfect classroom to teach.
- When we started, we did not even have a proper classroom with a board; there was a big room called the library with huge fans to keep the room's temperature normal, as it gets hot even on the coldest day of winter. Those fans made horrible noise which made it hard for people sitting at the end of the room to hear me! Also with the lack of a normal-size board, it was harder to explain concepts because I had to erase stuff as soon as I wrote them down. Surprisingly enough, no student complains in class, they used to turn off the fans and come and sit closer to the board and ask their supervisor afterwards to provide us a bigger board, and it worked actually after half of the semester.

# Challenges in classroom:

- Another issue that I found so challenging was that the students' age range was from 25-65 approximately; some of them have been away from studying math for more than 20 years and some others were young; some were quick learners; it was hard to arrange a class's pace! If you go fast, those who had been away from math for 20 years would be left behind; and if you go slow, it would get boring to the other group! Normal would be also too slow for fast learners and too fast for slow learners! But again, they were so passionate and they wanted it to work out, so when I asked them to make groups and distribute students in such a way that in each desk there would be mixtures of those two groups, and fast learners could help slow learners to understand better, they accepted. And it worked just as nicely.

# Challenges in classroom:

- Exam anxiety was another important issue, and I believe the most important reason for that was lack of confidence!
- They were not confident enough to see themselves capable of solving all the questions in exams. The other reason might have been they did not want to disappoint their instructors and that would put more pressure on them.

# Challenges in classroom:

- One of my students had a very hard time during the first 3 or 4 exams; he was a good student and he never left a homework undone, but he had test anxiety, so that he used to sweat so much I was afraid something would happen to him. He used to get mad and express he hates math! One time I sat next to him and asked him to do his exam and talk to me whenever he does not feel all right. He did, and he explained he knows the concepts very well and he does not know what is happening during the exam that kept him from answering the questions properly.
- What I figured would help is to distract him from thinking about his not being able to answer the test questions by asking for specific definitions or concepts that would refresh his memory. He liked math at the end, and he said he feels much better now; he added, “I do not hate it anymore but I still do not love it.” He passed both classes he took with me with a B.

# Challenges in classroom:

- They did not have access to the internet and computers very often. Some basic problems were that they could not use “MyMathLab” or tutorial videos. They did not have graphing calculators for college algebra, and they could not reach me whenever they had questions using emails or office hours!



# How could I relate myself to them?

- I am a student under a single-entry F1 visa and it took me more than a year to get it. Having a single-entry visa and studying for my PhD means I cannot travel back to my country to visit my family because it is too risky! I might lose my chance of finishing my PhD!
- So, I totally understand the feeling that you do not appreciate holidays as you cannot celebrate them with your beloved family!
- I felt it strongly when they said they cannot focus on class as they are missing a lot by being in prison (like missing birthdays, weddings, funerals, ...)



# How could I relate myself to them?

- I found it touching when one of the students in his speech on orientation day in his tears expressed how hard it is for them to stay focused and keep trying when prison staff see them always as prisoners and discourage them from what they are doing in school, just as most of them never could understand there could be a woman from Iran who is Moslem but not practicing, who is not a terrorist or terrorist supporter!
- I encouraged them to use the time they have in prison to make something nice, study hard and make themselves and their family proud. I'd like to believe it worked, as out of 30 students in my class 28 of them passed the class successfully with passion.

# Cooperation made it a nice experience!

- At the end, what I think made this experience to be a successful one was we all believed no matter how hard it got, it should work out; we were in the same group and we helped each other out through the challenges; they believed in me and I believed in them, and we made great experiences there.
- Teaching math is not just to instruct students to deal with numbers, it is to build confidence in them to understand the logic behind each problem.

# Thank you notes:

May 31, 2017

Dear Professor Bandpey

Thank you for your patience, hard work, and dedication to teaching me to believe in myself. Before I started this class I not only HATED math, I was also horrible at it and didn't believe that I could do math. However, you've taught to have confidence in myself and with that confidence I began to get better grades. I can now teach my son math in the future. . . Thank you for making me believe in myself. I pray that you are successful in all of your future Engagements.

[Redacted]

**$4 * x - 5 * y; y = 3, x = 4$**   
 **$4 * 4 - 5 * 3 = 1$**

The answer to this problem is 1 and that means you are one cool teacher and we thank you for your time and dedication.

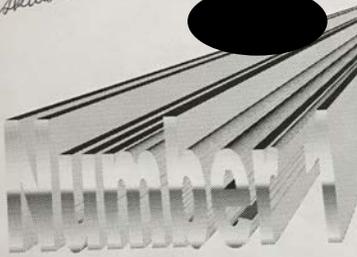
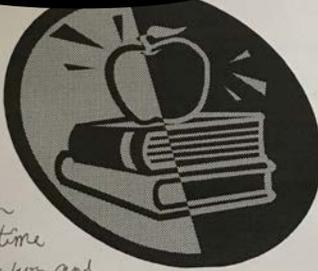
Your mind is more profound than the universe. Thank you for your time & energy

Dr. Z,  
you are a very outstanding Professor and I learned some new math skills all thanks to you!

Thank you for everything

Thank you for taking your time to teach a difficult course to the students

[Redacted]



Thanks for your time and  
attention

May 31, 2017

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Respectfully,