

Beyond Courage: Teaching with Love and Respect¹

A recent conversation between Gad Saad and Douglas Murray reminded me of moments from my years teaching in the United States — moments I have never forgotten.

What follows are three classroom encounters that shaped my understanding of education, courage, boundaries, and trust.

I. When Food Became a Classroom

Northeastern Illinois University, 1999

In one of my Spanish classes, I had forty-two students. Among them were ten Palestinian students — nine women and one man — and one ultra-Orthodox Jewish student who wore his tzitzit openly. From the very beginning, he felt uncomfortable in the classroom.

Very early on, the group of Palestinian students challenged me openly. When I asked questions, one or two would respond bluntly:

“I won’t answer. You’re Jewish. You’ll give us an A anyway.”

I answered calmly. I told them that in Venezuela, where I grew up, we sometimes received unexpected “gifts” in boxes of laundry soap — silverware, small decorative items — but never a university degree. I explained that I studied five hard years for mine, the full length of a university program in Venezuela, and that I did not give grades as gifts. Not to Jews. Not to Arabs. Not even, I added, to the children of the University President.

The tension continued.

The ultra-Orthodox student left the class during the second week. When I contacted him to ask why, he answered quietly that he could not remain. I told him instinctively:

“You are a Jew — we don’t give up so easily.”

He replied:

“You are the teacher. I am just an Orthodox Jew.”

I was deeply saddened that he felt he had no choice but to leave.

One day, I asked the ten Palestinian students to stay after class. I told them plainly that intimidation would not work — and then I made them an offer.

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The university's Cultural Festival was approaching. I proposed a bet. I would prepare hummus, tahini, and falafel — all homemade. They would prepare the same dishes however they wished. One of them would taste my food. I made it clear that I would not taste theirs, since I eat only kosher.

If they said my food was good, they would change their attitude in class and participate fully. If they said it was terrible, I promised them all an A — and they would not need to attend class anymore.

The day of the festival arrived. By coincidence (or fate), the Hillel table stood right next to the Arab Student Association table.

I placed my dishes on the table and invited the young man to taste them. He hesitated. I looked at him and said honestly and calmly:

“I trust you. You taste, and you decide which you think tastes best.”

He tasted the hummus, the tahini, and the falafel. Then he invited his friends to taste as well. After a moment, he looked at me and said:

“Rifka, these are good.”

The very next class, everything changed. Participation flourished. Respect replaced tension.

On the last day of class, I returned to my office to find a large basket of fruit and a note:

“From your favorite group of students.
We know you only eat kosher, so we brought you fruit.”

I still remember how I felt standing there.

II. When Fear Walked In — and Left as Friendship

Northwestern University

Three years later, while teaching a course titled Spanish 199: Latin American Culture, Language, and History, a student approached me before the first class.

She was wearing a hijab, a headscarf covering the hair, neck, and ears as an expression of modesty. She looked at me nervously and said:

“I know you are an observant Jew, and I am Muslim. I hope we won't have problems.”

I remember feeling genuinely puzzled. I answered honestly:

“I’m teaching Spanish — not religion or politics. Who you are will not change my way or my philosophy of teaching.”

The quarter unfolded beautifully.

She became one of the strongest students in the class — thoughtful, committed, and curious. She came regularly to my office hours, sometimes to clarify material, sometimes simply to practice her Spanish.

Over time, fear dissolved into trust.

Later that year, she traveled to Granada with her family. When she returned, she stopped by my office with a small gift — a mini wallet — and said:

“I was thinking of you during the trip. I helped my parents communicate with the locals using my Spanish.”

She was an extraordinary student and an extraordinary person. Our friendship lasted throughout her time at Northwestern.

III. Accommodation, Boundaries, and an Unexpected Return

Summer Quarter, early 2000s

During a summer quarter, I taught a Spanish course with twelve students: ten women and two men. Group work was a required component of the class.

One of the male students, a religiously observant Muslim, explained that he could not work with women. He told me he had attended only boys’ schools and had never had a woman teacher before university.

I tried to accommodate him. At first, there was another male student in the class. But when that student dropped the course, the situation changed.

I told him that participation in group work was required and that he would need to work with female classmates. He refused — until he proposed a compromise: he would sit with two women, but with his back turned to them.

I accepted. One of the women in the group was deeply upset. I explained the situation and allowed the group to navigate it themselves.

Later in the course, students were required to watch the film *Like Water for Chocolate*. Knowing his religious limits, I warned him that the film contained a few seconds of intimacy.

He refused to watch it. I created alternative material for him, which resulted in a separate section on the exam.

The rest of the quarter passed without incident — and, truthfully, with relief.

When the fall quarter began, I was surprised to see the same student enrolled in my class again. I asked him why, given that there were other male instructors teaching the same course.

He replied:

“You are a great professor. You are a native Spanish speaker from a Latin American country. After I graduate, I’m going to South America for a specific job.”

I did not ask what kind of job.

Closing Reflection

These stories are not about perfection. They are about risk, discomfort, and choice.

Fear may enter the classroom, but education begins where it ends — and teaching is always a choice.