A New War and West in the Classroom

By Doni Elliott

A decade after completing my doctoral work, I decided to serve as an observer of students by learning something entirely foreign to my talents, education, and experience. I decided to learn to weave.

A loom, bought years before on a whim, had, until then, been nothing more than a substantial piece of living-room sculpture. But, once I registered for weaving class, I looked at the loom with a mixture of anticipation and fear. Although my fingers ached to produce interesting and elegant tapestries, I worried that my attempts would more likely result in a tangled web.

I chose something daunting on purpose. I wanted to challenge the psychological state of students to pursue new opportunities. My ethos class projected onto them my desire to learn and do well. I took up their own desire to learn and do well, as well as their concern that the material might prove too difficult.

While taking the weaving class, I shared the experience with my students. “That sounds so hard,” they would say when I told them about a gnarled fiber. I felt embarrassed when I realized how rarely professors provide such empathy and respect to students as they embark on the humility experience of learning something new.

That was just the beginning of the in-depth conversations I had with students about weaving. While I learned about my students' day-to-day progress, I also shared some of the work that went into learning how to weave. I encouraged students to share their successes and failures, and we discussed the challenges and benefits of the weaving process. I learned that weaving can be a therapeutic activity that promotes mindfulness and focuses the mind.

My weaving class also taught me that I was the only person who could definitively know when I had learned something. Sometimes my experiences were frustrating or discouraging, but I persevered, and I eventually learned how to weave. I applied this approach to my teaching, encouraging students to have patience and perseverance in the learning process.

My colleagues have shown me that many students are afraid of making mistakes. When students realize that mistakes are a natural part of the learning process, they are more likely to take risks and try new things. I believe that students who embrace a growth mindset are more likely to succeed and enjoy the learning experience.

Since that life-changing semester in which I learned to weave, I've worked with my students to make each class a tapestry that stimulates and supports learning. I tell students that they are responsible for their own learning. I encourage them to challenge themselves and learn independently, fostering an environment of collaboration and innovation.

In my new role as an observer in the classroom, I strive to make learning as enjoyable and engaging as possible. As I continue to learn and develop as a teacher, I am committed to continuously improving my skills and abilities so that I can provide the best possible education for my students.