*Tomodachi ni naro*. *Saigo made gambaro*.

Let’s be friends. Let’s persist until the end.

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Problem: Persistent problem of unprepared, academically and personally, college students at Lincoln University creating retention problems.

Solution: Create an environment where students feel a connection and that they belong in a community of learners.

My first intention of taking advantage of what the Japan Studies Institute (JSI) had to offer was to learn different ways of introducing methods of teaching mathematics to pre-service elementary education majors. While that is still a goal of mine and I will continue to work on such methods and approaches, I have learned more concrete activities of engaging students to feel that responsible to a community, rather than just to themselves.

The 2013 JSI consisted of 16 Fellows from different schools, states, and disciplines. While we are all adults and behaved in a socially acceptable and respectable manner towards one another, I noticed the group dynamic change in a small amount of time. The teachers’ expectation of respect and propriety directly raised our level of community behavior. I observed us becoming more aware of others, more patient with our classmates, and above all, respecting each other outside of the class. This ability to model positive behavior from the 2013 Fellows in such a small amount of time gives me hope of a behavioral change in Lincoln students that will transcend the classroom and help make them become the role models I know they can be.

I have attempted many times, in many different ways, to engage students in more active, cooperative ways. I have tried group activities, pairing students with diverse backgrounds together with some success. However, the time limit of the classes is an obstacle when trying to combine activities with lessons, time for questions, time for further explanation, etc. This has lead to a feeling of constantly feeling rushed, and in mathematics this is not usually a good thing.

Many of our students from Lincoln University, both well-performing and not, come from home situations that are less than desirable, to say the least. Their family life has not been one of inclusion, caring, and nurturing – many of the aspects of childhood needed to grow into a good citizen. When they arrive at Lincoln University, they come to us “broken” in some ways. They have a limited sense of community and almost zero sense of responsibility to others. These students, who can be very intelligent and have great potential, don’t see their value in the Lincoln family. If we can adapt our university and classroom setting to give our students a chance to feel needed, responsible, a part of something greater, I believe our retention of high achieving students will increase and our impact on unprepared students will lead them to achieve higher goals and feel a sense of community that they might not have ever had before.

So the question is, *“How do I create as sense of belonging and responsibility in each of my classes, regardless of subject, and affect (hopefully) each student in a positive manner?”*

After these two weeks, I believe using the Japanese method of classroom expectation/management, even in college, can achieve this goal.

My classroom has always been one of mutual respect and the students pick up on that quickly. I have high expectations of my students and I know they do not intentionally fail my classes. I try to reach each student on an individual basis, but there are always those few that I don’t or can’t reach. My plan begins with instituting the usage of ‘classroom monitors.’ I will have two students per week, which will enable the students who want to repeat the role time to do so closer to the end of the semester. The classroom monitors will have the following responsibilities:

* Arrive to class in enough time to ask the other students what questions they had from the previous lesson and/or homework. They will be responsible for relaying the questions to me, the teacher, when class begins and be able to say who had the question and verbally articulate the problem and question(s).
* Announce to the class when I, the teacher, arrives in the classroom. They will be responsible for initiating the greeting. This will indicate that class has started and that it is time to begin (meaning, put away the cell phones and ipods!).
* They will be responsible for attendance. They will announce to me, the teacher, who is absent from class.

Using this expectation of class students allows a chance for each student to get to know and communicate with their fellow classmates. Often in college, especially one that has a half commuter student population, many students do not get a chance to interact with others outside their small circle. Having class monitors on a rotational basis also allows each student an opportunity to be responsible not only to me, but to others in the class. I feel that the students will also have a chance incorporate leadership skills by being the “voice” of the class.

One of the repeating terms I use when teaching algebra is “*What is your goal*?” When solving algebraic equations, the “goal” is to get x by itself, meaning the solution states x = some number, regardless of how complicated the equation looks. The usage of the term “goal” is useful to the students because it gives them a path to a solution. I will also incorporate the usage of goals – both classroom and individual students – and check on their progress. This is also something that the classroom monitors can report on as well. Setting classroom goals such as, “Achieving 100% attendance for the week” and “Attend a study session for the test” will create not only personal responsibility, but the feeling of being an important component of something greater than themselves. By asking students to set personal goals for the week, such as “Finish English paper in enough time to get it reviewed by a tutor” or “Go to sleep at a reasonable time to get 7-8 hours of sleep” will help them realize that they control, to some extent, the outcomes they experience.

Using these types of classroom methods can be incorporated into any class. Therefore, I will encourage and promote this usage among my colleagues at my university. We are continually talking about a needed culture change. After my experience at JSI, I believe the Japanese method of classroom respect and community will be a positive change agent in my school and result in higher retention and student success.