I am a nerd. Dork. Geek. I love my science. I love the connections I can make, the way it explains our world, how simple and complex it can be. But that's not the most important thing I teach – not by a long shot.

Let me tell you a story about my 4th block chemistry class. During my first semester teaching (which was this fall semester in 2015), I taught a section of sophomores that stretched my very-much-still-developing classroom management skills to the limit on a regular basis. On our alternating block schedule, 4th is both the class after lunch and the last class of the day. Combine this with chemistry, which few of my students see a need for, five or so loud volatile personalities, and a large class with a strong sense of learned helplessness and need for constant attention, and you'd get my 4th block.

As much as this class stressed me out, I learned more from them than any of my other classes, particularly about the impacts of our education system. May and Jacob (these, and all names, are pseudonyms) raged against state testing when I told them they couldn't listen to music during a unit exam. Fate, who was pregnant, and Ian, her boyfriend, threw a fit every time they were separated or treated like they weren't adults. Simon sulked in the back, muttering about the truancy system and how it made *so much sense* to send truant kids to jail so they missed *even more* school.

One day, May was in a particularly precarious mood, throwing out May-like comments to get a reaction out of the rest of the class. Simon, rolling his eyes, told May to sit down and shut the f— up. The shouting match that ensued left all the kids watching gleefully as I struggled to regain control of my classroom. When everyone was finally sitting and calm again, I asked them to reflect on their frustrations.

Fate, being very uninterested in chemistry and very interested in gossiping, wrote nasty things about May, sitting next to her, in inch-high letters in her notebook.

May, of course, read Fate's comments, stood up, and launched into another tirade, threatening to throw punches.

Completely fed up, I put the two girls in separate spaces. The rest of the class was not allowed to leave their seats and worked (mostly) quietly on a (completely useless) worksheet for the remaining 15 minutes of class. As I watched them, I realized I was mostly distressed by how the rest of the class was so delighted in watching their peers threaten to punch each other.

I required an exit ticket from every student that day, with two questions. The first was something about chemistry that no one remembers, including me. The second question was "How can you show kindness in this chemistry classroom?"

Out of my 26 students in that class, 18 of them responded that the best was to show kindness was to "be quiet." Not for the first or last time that semester, I put my face in my hands and tried, unsuccessfully, not to cry.

There are several indicators our brains look for when trying to decide what's important; one of them is repetition. How many times do we tell our students to be quiet, to stop talking, to give us their attention, to bring some focus, to lower the volume, to shut up already? We're teaching our kids that being quiet is the most important skill they can take from our classrooms. We are not teaching them kindness.

So how do I, a first-year teacher, overwhelmed by three different preps in three different classrooms and 170 students, endeavor to teach them kindness? How do I step away from the science content that I love so much and feel so much pressure to get through quickly? Well, just like any other skill, I scaffold it and I break it into pieces.

What my students taught me that day was that they don't know what kindness is. So maybe I start by modelling. I can tell my kids I appreciate their hard work or their sense of humor. I can notice when kids add a new color to their pink-purple-turquoise hair, or when a kid seems sad or withdrawn. I can listen to them.

But just because I model kindness doesn't mean my kids will see it. Often, I think my kids are so wrapped up in their own lives they don't even see themselves, let alone me. Before I teach them kindness, I need to teach them awareness, both of themselves and of others.

Imagine awareness like several spheres nested inside each other. The first innermost sphere is instinctual: self-awareness of basic needs. As children grow, this develops into basic wants as well; toddlers grab at what they want with no concept of how that impacts their playmates. But there is more to self-awareness; there is awareness of how we feel emotionally, how we react to that, how we motivate ourselves to work towards goals. Our self-awareness is constantly deepening and growing. Without this awareness, we can't manage our own feelings and reactions, and we can't practice kindness to ourselves.

The second sphere is awareness of those people in our immediate physical or emotional vicinity. When I say something funny, other people laugh. If I take my brother's toy, he cries. This is also present at a basic level in young children, but it also has to be developed to more depth and sophistication as we grow. If we don't understand how our actions affect others, we will never be able to practice kindness. Some people call this compassion and, if it's also linked back to self-awareness, we call it empathy.

The spheres surrounding these include people who are farther from us, in terms of location, time, or emotional connection. They stretch to our non-human environment, including issues such as caring for our planet. Caring about people we've never met or our planet doesn't really feel like kindness, but I believe they still count.

Often, people run away from awareness because so much of what they see is pain and loss. This can happen to anyone, but I see its impacts most clearly in students who have difficult home lives. We don't need to be constantly, bluntly aware of every single thing in our lives; finding deep constant awareness of everything isn't my goal for students. But I can ask students to find academic awareness. This is the goal of formative assessment; to help students become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. And I can ask students to make observations of how their own emotions impact their behavior, even if this is as basic as, "When I'm having a bad day, I play games on my iPad more than normal."

The next step is helping students figure out what to do with this information. Once students know which sections of material they still need help with, how do they frame questions and find answers? How do I ask my students to create a gap between feeling something and reacting to it?

This is not easy work. I have no idea how I'm actually going to pull it off in practice. In some ways, it feels like the wrong focus; I should be teaching my students how to balance equations and explain how we know the structure of the atom. But what good will that do Fate when she has her daughter and gets frustrated with her boyfriend? How will that help May make friends or get a job? When I stop and ask myself these questions, the importance is clear. In order to be successful in our ever-more-connected world, students need to be aware of their own passions and feelings, their interactions with other people, and their short-term and long-term impacts on the world. Teaching my students to be aware of themselves and their impacts on other people, teaching them to be kind, is the most important thing.