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*When Jay-Z showed up in Calculus at 4:44*

I will discuss my attempts to improve students' first-year experience in mathematics courses. I am a new professor (teaching stream) and face the usual challenges: large classes, a fixed curriculum, service courses that cry out for change, and new students with varying levels of mathematical experience and skill. We are expected to demonstrate the relevance of what we teach to other math courses and to everyday life, yet few students will take higher-level mathematics courses, and the applications on which we focus seldom reflect (directly) anything like real life. What are we to do? One thing that I have tried is to engage students less formally by allowing my personality – thus, more of my life – into the classroom. In our heavy driven social media society, it is important for students to see their instructors as real human beings who have an abiding passion for the subject matter and who really care about students. To this end, instructors should explore opportunities for references that resonate with students and that cast mathematics in a less threatening light. I will discuss the benefits of a more “human” approach with reference to the literature as well as to my teaching evaluations and a recent survey of mine. I will also share some sample phrases and references from class that students apparently like and that can serve them as mnemotechnic rules. Too many students experience first-year calculus as an ordeal [or: as anything but fun], but I want to make it fun!