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A LITTLE MORE EVERY DAY

HOW YOU CAN ELIMINATE BIAS IN YOUR OWN CLASSROOM

By Kathleen Tarr

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Every three years as part of their minimum continuing legal education, California lawyers are required to complete one credit hour on “recognition and elimination of bias in the legal profession and society.” The State Bar of California added that requirement decades ago as a consumer-protection measure. Obviously, clients cannot secure equal access to justice if the evaluation of their claims is based upon irrelevant personal characteristics.

I’ve always found it curious that many colleges and universities do not require their faculty members to complete similar training. Not only do the experiences of bias on college campuses profoundly affect instructors, but also students are subjected to inequitable treatment in evaluations of their work, in mentorship opportunities, and in many other ways.

Most academics acknowledge the existence of bias in every enclave throughout the United States, but we are less likely to see bias in ourselves or how we contribute to the inequities within our environments. Without such recognition, our solutions to bias and discrimination are frequently focused outwardly when we all know that the only real change comes from within. Colleges and universities should require employees to regularly complete a continuing-education course on bias and discrimination, but until that happens, there are steps we as educators can personally take to lessen the effects of personal bias on our students’ (and colleagues’) experiences in academe.

Evaluate the work, not the worker. When it comes to grading (versus other forms of feedback), whether you alter a grade based upon seemingly beneficent considerations or nefarious ones, privileging one student’s work over others’ harms all students. Whether you lower the bar for students you suspect received poor high-school educations or raise it for students you believe had advantaged educations, you are not actually helping students by demanding less, or more, of them. That fact becomes more obvious when you bump a grade a third in either direction because you like — or resent — a student, but it is problematic either way.

In evaluating the worker instead of the work, you open the door to the influence of subconscious emotions about a person’s immutable characteristics. A friend who teaches at the university level in Norway was shocked when I told her I graded my own students’ writing.



In Norway, she said, “universities exchange papers for grading.” Objectivity is compromised by mere humanity. Educators who engage personally with their students are psychologically vulnerable to bias in grading.

For the most part here in the United States, we grade our own students’ work. The challenge, then, is to establish an environment in your classroom in which students (and you) expect objectivity. I tell my students that I am holding them to NCAA, rather than Olympic, standards. While they might begin the season with a pulled hamstring or a hatred of running, or they may hit the track every day of the week and improve their sprinting form tenfold, they still must cross the finish line with a specific qualifying time to advance to nationals (the ‘A’).

Students must be held to rigorous standards in the evaluation of their work before one even considers the impact of personal bias. It is perfectly natural to be more lenient with people you like, admire, or pity. That is why you must neutralize the effects of that tendency with conscious purpose, evaluating the work that is submitted, not the worker.

Acknowledge that bias exists. Essential to any such evaluation is accepting that bias operates everywhere and on a daily basis. Consider a recent experiment in which Nextions, a consulting firm, distributed a legal memo to different law firm partners written by the fictional associate “Thomas Meyer.” Half of the partners received a memo in which Meyer was identified as African-American, while the other half received one in which he was described as Caucasian. The partners were then asked to edit the memo for all factual, technical, and substantive errors. “The exact same memo, averaged a 3.2/5.0 rating under our hypothetical ‘African American’ Thomas Meyer and a 4.1/5.0 rating under hypothetical ‘Caucasian’ Thomas Meyer. The qualitative comments on memos, consistently, were also more positive for the ‘Caucasian’ Thomas Meyer than our ‘African American’ Thomas Meyer,” concludes a study led by Arin N. Reeves

Some of the comments for Caucasian Thomas Meyer included “has potential” and “good analytical skills” while “can’t believe he went to NYU” and “average at best” appeared on African-American Thomas Meyer’s memo. The feedback was simply a result of unconscious confirmation bias shaped by the society in which we all live. As a result, “when expecting to find fewer errors, we find fewer errors. When expecting to find more errors, we find more errors.”

Nextions’s recommendations as a result of the experiment include distributing their study for discussion, conducting a similar experiment in-house, training employees on subconscious bias, and making the subjective more objective.



Students experience constant evaluation of their work. Given that, it is imperative that colleges take these recommendations to heart. Until then, however, you can take the initiative.

Self-assess. Trying to assess your own biases can be daunting. Luckily, the nonprofit Project Implicit, created in 1998 by three scientists interested in implicit cognition, offers an easily accessible start. It has created a variety of tests online by which you can explore your thoughts and feelings on race and gender or on mental-health issues, for example.

Don't presume you are fair to those groups that share your identity. I am not homosexual, for instance, and yet I've discovered that one of my particular biases privileges LGBT persons.

Note that while I recommend self-assessment of your biases, I am not advising complete and public transparency. While it may feel empowering to reveal your bias in public, be aware that some people still believe any admission of bias is an admission of guilty behavior. To be so transparent is an individual choice, and not a decision you should take lightly.

Actively listen. So often we engage in conversation with our main intention being to persuade someone that our view is correct. "Everything's an argument," asserts the rhetorician Andrea Lunsford, and frequently, we approach conversations with "winning" as our paramount concern. Bias certainly operates more readily when we react quickly without thorough consideration. Active listening can break that pattern.

To truly understand what someone is conveying, you must tune out, or at least reconcile, what you are hearing with the information you are providing on your own. For example, as a brown-skinned woman, whenever I say "diversity," listeners often automatically presume I am talking about race. Sometimes they think I am also talking about gender. Rarely do they think I am talking about professions. But in a room full of Ph.D.s, diversity may be a nod to my J.D. The word can include class or disability. Frankly, when I say diversity I am usually aware of myriad categories.

If you're not listening actively, it's all too easy to project your own biases onto a speaker and reduce that person to a stereotype. When I was in college, a TA commenting on my analysis of tort law and hate speech said, "You sound like one of those black nationalist types." Maybe you would never say something so egregious. Just keep in mind that you may hear plenty that is not actually being said (or written), and your biases influence the final voice.

Don't expect a finish line. Just as strength gains deplete once you stop lifting weights, you will lose advances against your own bias if you cease self-assessment and stop taking countermeasures. I keep a diversity and bias assessment — for my own personal use — that



tracks assignments and course grades by perceived student demographics, including gender, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, and sexual orientation. That means I can easily identify any patterns that might develop because they are charted in such a way that they stand out (data graphs are essential). But just the very fact that I am tracking this information maintains my own sensitivity to issues of bias in my classroom.

Because the question is not whether there is bias in your classroom. The question is, “What are you doing to eliminate it?” Hopefully the answer is, “A little more every day.”

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Reflection Questions:

Please read this article and reflect on the following questions.

1. Have you experienced any of the author's examples about how bias may impact teaching (when you were a student, and as an instructor)? If so, describe those.
2. What do you think of the author's proposal that all faculty should receive implicit bias training?
3. The author asserts that "bias operates everywhere and on a daily basis," which means that all of us are likely to harbor implicit biases (also referred to as unconscious). However, many people resist the idea that they can be biased against or for other people/groups due to stereotypes. This is especially challenging when those stereotypes are not part of an individual's value system. Do you believe that you have implicit biases? Why or why not? How, if at all, have you tried to assess your biases, especially as related to your teaching? How can you become more aware?
4. If you have not taken an Implicit Association Test (IAT), but you would like to, please visit these sites which provide instructions for how to assign the IAT to students. Follow those instructions yourself to help you engage in self inquiry. Please note that the IAT provides an opportunity for us to think about implicit bias and its potential effects. It is not meant to diagnose nor draw definitive conclusions about individuals.

<https://secure.understandingprejudice.org/teach/assign/iatrace.htm>

<https://secure.understandingprejudice.org/teach/assign/iatgend.htm>

5. What can you do "A Little More Every Day" to manage ways that implicit bias may affect your teaching attitudes and behaviors?

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