UD COE Inclusive Teaching Workshop Series:

Implicit Bias: Transcript

Inclusive Teaching Series: Implicit Bias

Welcome to the third module of the Inclusive Teaching Series. In this module we will explore the concept of implicit bias.

This series was developed by a Faculty Learning Community within the College of Engineering at the University of Delaware. The contributors include Professor Jenni Buckley of mechanical engineering, Professor Josh Enszer of chemical engineering, Professor Sheldon Hewlett of materials science and engineering, Professor Julie Maresca of civil and environmental engineering, Professor Sarah I. Rooney of biomedical engineering, and Professor Ismat Shah of materials science and engineering and physics. The Faculty Learning Community was funded by the University of Delaware Center for Teaching and Assessment of Learning.

Example from the literature: discussion forum support

We motivate this module with just one example from the literature. In a recent study of a set of online courses, students in discussion forums were randomly assigned a name that stereotypically implied a specific ethnicity and gender. The forums were then monitored to analyze the rates at which instructors replied to forum postings. They found on average across all courses studied that instructors were 94% more likely to respond to posts written by a student perceived to be white and male. The likelihood of responding to white male students was even higher in the STEM courses in the study.

Evidence: Our personal bias is what allows us to interact with the world

The results from the aforementioned example are a reflection of what we call implicit bias, sometimes also referred to as unconscious bias. In short, implicit biases are the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our thought processes unconsciously. They are activated involuntarily, without our awareness or control. We tend to relate to our own “in-group” or engrained cultural norms.

This is not to say that our implicit biases are inherently a bad trait: they are sets of shortcuts that we use to make decisions quickly. By some estimates, our brains are subject to millions of pieces of information per second – think about all the sights, sounds, smells, and other sensations that you’re experiencing right now – but we can only consciously process around 40 inputs per second. The rest of this information is filtered out or otherwise unconsciously processed, and implicit bias is part of that unconscious processing. We wouldn’t be here today without our ancestors’ implicit biases – the ability to quickly discern danger and respond accordingly has lead to our species’ survival. But these days, we use our mental shortcuts less to avoid natural predators and more in our interactions with one another. And there is evidence

to support that our present-day implicit bias impacts who we select to work with, how quickly we respond to email, who we respond to in message boards – ultimately, how likely our students are to succeed.

Tips for Working Around Implicit Bias

Depicted here are just a few ways instructors can limit their personal implicit bias when interacting with students. More can be found on the handout that accompanies this module. One way to circumvent our implicit bias is to build connections with our students that override our mental shortcuts. Get to know your students as individuals, by learning their names and perhaps some small piece of information about them. For example, on the first day of class, have students fill out a notecard with their name, perhaps a hobby or favorite music.

Provide opportunities for all students to have the opportunity to think about and respond to your questions in class. Rather than cold calling an individual, consider implementing the "think-pair-share" strategy shown in the diagram at the bottom left here. Pose your class question as usual, but give everyone a moment or two to quietly reflect on how they may respond, then another moment or two to discuss their thoughts with a nearby classmate. Finally, after everyone has had an opportunity to engage with your question, call on a student randomly if possible, to avoid picking a student for a reason associated with any bias. You could shuffle the aforementioned notecards, use a random number generator, or implement some other process to make sure you are calling randomly, rather than making a decision based on student identity or even their location in the room.

Another main area where implicit bias tends to be invoked is in grading. Attitudes like "I know good work when I see it" often invite an unnecessary level of subjectivity to be included in evaluations of student work. To avoid bias, generate a list of clear assessment criteria upfront, and format this list into a rubric. When possible, consider ways to render student assignments anonymous. A learning management system such as Canvas includes tools like SpeedGrader, which can present electronic submissions in an anonymized way. You could also have student put their names on the unused backs of pages of homework and exam submissions, or randomly assign an identification number so that you do not unconsciously associate a student's name with the work you are evaluating.

Tips for Working Around Students' Implicit Bias

Because our students are people too, they have their own implicit bias. Here are just a few ways instructors can limit students' own implicit bias from impacting themselves or others in the class. More ideas and references are included on the handout that accompanies this module.

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Some findings from the literature suggest that the way we frame our course policies on our syllabuses can impact our students' performance in the course. Find ways to state your policies in terms of the benefits they provide to students, rather than the punishment students would receive for not complying with your policy.

If your course involves a teamwork component, and especially if this teamwork component contributes significantly to the final course grade, it is best to avoid allowing students to form their own groups. Because our implicit biases cause us to relate and gravitate toward our own "in-groups," self-formed teams often lead to homogeneity within the team and isolation of some individuals in the class.

Also make sure to provide opportunity for peer evaluation, and devote some time to explaining to your students the importance of this process. Identify a peer evaluation tool that asks students to assess their peers clearly and objectively, as opposed to vaguely or subjectively. Avoid ideas like having students split points or percentage effort amongst their teammates, because this again can lead to results affected by implicit bias.

There are some free or inexpensive online tools, such as CATME, that can help form teams in a semi-intelligent way, and probe students with objective questions about their teammates' performance.

Take-Away

In short, implicit bias is a natural part of how our brains work, and simply being aware of this can lead to more inclusive teaching. We can plan ahead in both the way we design and deliver our courses to avoid our own implicit bias, and the bias of our students that would otherwise lead to mental shortcuts.

References

These references provide further information.