7STEPS WITH PLYMOUTH UNIVERSITY

7 Steps to: Mitigating Unconscious Bias in Teaching and Learning

Overview

We often use cognitive shortcuts in situations where we need to make quick decisions with limited information (Gilovich *et al*., 2002). One shortcut involves over-generalizing from 'schemas': mental representations about things, people, places and events, based on our knowledge and experiences (Hayes, 2000). For instance, a teacher might draw on schematic information about types of educational institutions and their curricula to make (helpful) judgements about new students' likely exposure to core topics in a subject. However, the same schemas could inadvertently lead the teacher to make inaccurate assumptions about students' abilities. Thus, while generalizations we make are valuable, they can be deceiving.

There is increasing evidence that we **all** form stereotypical associations and make inaccurate judgements about people (positive or negative), **without explicitly being aware that we are doing so** (Greenwald and Krieger, 2006). This is referred to as unconscious bias. In our everyday lives, such associations assist us in making rapid decisions, but in a professional context they can be a systematic cause of error (Reason, 1990).

It is possible to be biased against groups we ourselves 'belong' to, especially if similar biases are prevalent in our society. For instance, Greenwald and Krieger (2006), found a percentage of African Americans to be implicitly biased to favour European Americans over African Americans. Stereotypes can also affect us and our students through 'stereotype threats' - causing victims of stereotypes to behave in a manner which confirms the stereotype (Hayes, 2000). Moreover, it has been demonstrated that differences in staff expectations of students' abilities are picked up by the students and can affect their performance (Rubie-Davies, 2006). These differences may be, in part, due to unconscious biases and could account for some of the gaps noted in attainment levels between different student groups in HE (Cotton *et al.,* 2013b).

Unconscious biases cannot easily be removed from our thinking, but our behaviour need not be based upon them. Recognising their existence and impact, allows us to consciously take them into account and override them.

1. Recognise that everyone uses unconscious bias

We all identify with particular social groups and people similar to us (Hayes, 2000). While this sense of belonging is important to our growth and self-esteem, it can lead to a 'them' and 'us' mentality. We tend to magnify differences between ourselves and 'out-groups', and exaggerate similarities between ourselves and 'in-group' members (Tajfel, 2010). If we believe that we have no unconscious biases, it probably means that we are simply not yet aware of them. Think about your own behaviour, especially in an unfamiliar setting: Do you find yourself interacting more easily with individuals belonging to a certain group? When asked to nominate students for a committee, do certain students come to mind immediately? Why might this be? Remember that it is perfectly natural to have preferences. However, it is unreasonable to disadvantage a group of people because of our biases and hence it is important to minimise their impact.

2. Identify your biases

We tend to think our assumptions about groups of individuals are justified, based on valid statistical information, when in reality they are grossly exaggerated (Quillian, 2008). Additionally, unconscious biases may run counter to our consciously-held viewpoints. One way of starting to understand our unconscious biases is to take the Implicit Association Test (IAT) **(https://implicit.harvard.edu)** (Nosek *et al.,* 2010). The test asks you to categorise items very quickly, without drawing on conscious views. The IAT includes tests for biases on, amongst others, race, religion, sexuality, age, weight, disability and skin-tone. You may find the results of the tests uncomfortable but bear in mind that we are all frequently exposed to stereotypes through our environment and the media, which can influence our behaviour without us being aware of it.

3. Avoid snap decisions and consider assessment criteria carefully

Time pressure means that we may try to mark papers or shortlist candidates rapidly, but a 'gut feeling' maximises unconscious biases. Evidence suggests that even where individuals possess identical skills, members of certain groups are discriminated against. For instance, ethnic minorities and women are more likely to be ignored by academics when requesting information on doctoral study (Milkman et al., 2014). Differences favouring men over women have been observed in the length and content of letters of recommendation written for job applicants, and in the selection of written work for publications or presentations (Trix and Psenka, 2003; Easterly and Ricard, 2011). One way of mitigating impacts is to use anonymous marking wherever possible (as required by the University's Anonymous Assessment Policy, 2014), and to require coursework to be typewritten rather than handwritten. Assessment criteria which are clear, objective, and available to students in advance should be circulated to all markers. Wherever possible, take a moment to question your first impressions and justify your decision to yourself.

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4. Incorporate examples which question stereotypes and value diversity

In developing your modules and teaching sessions, choose examples that are counter-stereotypical. For example, there are widely-held beliefs about particular groups being associated with certain traits which both staff and students may have internalized: Black athletes; Asian violinists: men rather than women in leadership positions. Continuously using examples which contradict these beliefs helps to minimise biases (Dasgupta and Asgari, 2004). Where appropriate, encourage students to use critical thinking to evaluate the validity of stereotypical beliefs exhibited in text books or other resources. Throughout your programme, try to develop teaching materials that illustrate diversity, and set up learning environments (including physical spaces) to engage all your students and not just those of a certain gender, age, nationality or ability.

5. Encourage participation of under-represented groups in class

There is evidence that certain groups (for instance white men) are more likely to dominate whole class discussions and group-work and to be selected to lead feedback (Cotton *et al.,* 2013a). Reflect on the distribution of students who are selected to be representatives or who participate most in class. Are they more often from a certain ethnic group or gender? Why do you think this is so? It may help to explain unconscious bias to your students and encourage them to reflect on their own behaviour in class. Simply reminding your students that you have high expectations from all of them can go a long way in encouraging participation from different groups. Organise students into intercultural groups, such that students work with others from different backgrounds. Use cooperative rather than competitive structured tasks to encourage interaction towards a common goal.

6. Adopt an affirming approach

In view of the fact that overcoming unconscious bias is a continuous, reflective process, it may be helpful to adopt an approach of affirmation to motivate **all** students. 'Micro-affirmations' are acts, small and sometimes unconscious, which reflect a person's intention to help another succeed (Rowe, 2008). They can be realised through providing new opportunities, showing concern, listening to and including students, especially when they are facing a challenging time. Adopting an approach which emphasizes 'fair, specific, timely, consistent and clear feedback' can go a long way in mitigating our unconscious biases (Rowe, 2008:4). Personal tutors have a key role to play in offering support to students and encouraging them to discuss any concerns.

7. Create an atmosphere of openness in discussing biases and best practices to minimise them

It is important that academics do not feel guilty about having unconscious biases, which are an inevitable consequence of the use of shortcuts in human decision making. Instead, try to use your increased self-knowledge to promote an atmosphere of inclusion in teaching and learning, and more widely within your department. Share with colleagues your understandings of unconscious bias, and encourage them to be vigilant in mitigating their impact on behaviour at an individual, departmental and institutional level. Everyone has a responsibility for ensuring that all students feel included. If you observe actions or decisions which you believe to be biased, challenge the person – in a sensitive manner – to consider whether unconscious bias may have affected their behaviour. Finally, bear in mind that students will have unconscious biases too, towards each other and the staff. It might help to talk to your students about unconscious biases, and think about ways to manage biases. Consistently taking steps to mitigate stereotypical views and biases can contribute to a change in culture across the whole university.

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