Breaking the silent borders: Unconscious biases exposed
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In 1954 Dr. Kenneth Clark asked black children questions that required them to choose between a black and a white doll.

- “Show me the doll that is the ‘nice’ doll,”
- “Show me the doll that looks 'bad',”

In nearly every instance the black child pointed to the black doll as bad and the white doll as nice.

In 2005 filmmaker Kiri Davis repeated Dr. Clark's experiment in Harlem as part of her short film, “A Girl Like Me.” Davis asked 21 children which was the nice doll. 71% told her that the white doll was the nice one.

Why was Dr. Neil De Grass Tyson American astrophysicist and director of the Hayden Planetarium exposed to teachers who suggested he pursue an athletic career rather than one in science?

Why is the leadership landscape so stacked against women?

Why?

 Preferential hiring of more people from one group or enacting legislation in the absence of a genuine commitment to inclusiveness is insufficient misses the mark and doesn’t solve the root problem.

Teachers must move beyond explaining the “what” of diversity to the “how” of inclusiveness. They must assist students to expose their unconscious biases. Biases that make good people do bad things.

    Learned as part of one’s normal socialization process and rooted in stereotypes and prejudices, unconscious biases are simplistic images or distorted truths about individuals or groups of people based on judgments of habits, traits, abilities or expectations. Robert Louis Stevenson’s best describes unconscious biases when he laments the sad case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. “Jekyll is not pure good, and Hyde is not pure evil, for just as parts of unacceptable Hyde dwell within acceptable Jekyll, so over Hyde hovers a halo of Jekyll, horrified at this worser half’s iniquity” (1987, p.12).
Understanding the role of unconscious biases in decision making blows apart the traditional paradigm that assumed discriminatory behaviour is a conscious decision and begin to explain why human rights legislation is often ineffective in the hands of decision makers with unconscious biases.

Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg believes the goal of moral education is to stimulate a person’s natural moral development and engage his moral reasoning. More importantly, Kohlberg’s recognized the need for reflection in achieving moral development. Reflection is the only sustainable way to make students less vulnerable to allowing self-serving cognitive distortions to influence their decisions. Research is clear that teaching moral development and diversity from a surface perspective of observable demographic physiological differences such as race, ethnicity, gender, age and physical capabilities is insufficient.

Surfacing one’s deep-seated beliefs and social order of what is right and just is the most effective way to make sustainable change and rectify past wrongs.

As instructors we are obligated to provide instruction that is useful. The best gift we can give our students it to assist them in uncovering their unconscious biases.

Below are trips to assist in uncovering your student’s unconscious biases. They work for small or large classes.

1. Present an optical illusion. It’s an innocent way to begin the tough discussion on unconscious biases.
A Native American profile?
Or an Eskimo entering a cave?
http://kids.niehs.nih.gov/games/illusions/illusion_09.htm

2. Ask students to write down what they saw. Yes, write it down. This starts the reflection process. Allocate five minutes.

3. Divide the class into groups. Ask each group to appoint a note taker. Ask the group to discuss what each group member wrote on his or her paper. Allocate 10 minutes. The note taker takes notes of the discussions and behaviors of the group members.

4. Bring the class to order and move to the next step.

5. In their groups, ask the note taker to read his or her notes back to the group. Ask the group to discuss the note takers’ notes. Allocate ten minutes to this activity.

6. Take charge of the class.

7. As facilitator, open the floor for discussion. Ask for individuals to describe what transpired in their group. Allocate ten minutes.

8. Selecting points from the open discussion, introduce the concept of unconscious biases.
9. Present your lecture on unconscious biases and its influence on achieving diversity and inclusiveness.

Points to remember:

1. Exposing one's biases is a humbling experience.

2. It’s not about blame. It’s about becoming a better person.

3. Encourage the use of an e-journal. Writing assists in unearthing personally biases that are contrary to what one espouses.

4. Be honest. Don’t explain away your unconscious biases. Bring them out in the open, reflect on them. Understand them. Surfacing them minimizes their influence on your decisions.