Can Zoom Be a Tool for Teaching Anti-racism?

Leverage today’s technology to help correct systemic problems.

In late May, George Floyd, an unarmed Black man in Minneapolis, Minnesota, fell victim to an act of police brutality. Weeks of international protesting followed. The upsurge in consciousness triggered by the Black Lives Matter movement has highlighted a need for a greater focus on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) across all organisations, including business schools.

Only a few days before Floyd was killed, professors from the world’s top business schools gathered for the second instalment in a planned annual series of conferences on integrating DEI into business school curricula. The series’ overarching, multi-year mission is to co-develop best practices for any and all business schools looking to bring DEI-related topics into sharper focus.

This year’s conference showcased interactive exercises aimed at doing just this. Aligned with the format of the inaugural conference, attendees presented exercises they had developed and used in class, with the attending educators participating as if they were students. Importantly, the focus this year was on exercises inherently well-suited or easily adaptable to virtual platforms such as Zoom, as befits the Covid-19 “new normal.”

For example, Adina Sterling of Stanford Graduate School of Business demonstrated one way of leveraging Zoom to maximise inclusion. Though it is a little-used feature, the platform allows you to “rename” yourself, i.e. customise how your name appears in the participant frame. (Try it at your next meeting.) During the conference, Sterling suggested that the professors provide the phonetic spelling of their name and their preferred pronoun. This automatically takes away some of the “otherness” of having a name or identity that is unfamiliar to the majority.

Looking within

Effective interventions around diversity operate on three interconnected levels. They provoke personal introspection and meditation on our experiences. They cause us to re-examine our interactions with others, both in and out of the workplace. And ideally, they give us a sense of how inequality operates within institutions and structures, and how to effect change on a macro scale.

Caryn Block of Teachers College, Columbia University modelled a reflective exercise using the personal level as an entry point. After a group discussion on the persistence of bias in the workplace, Block pairs up participants for what she calls a “diversity dynamics” discussion about what it means to be in the demographic minority as opposed to the majority. Even members of socially empowered groups (e.g. white men in many Western contexts) have experiences where they feel
they not fit the norm because of attributes over
which they have no control (e.g. working as an
expat). Discussants reflect upon their experiences,
focusing on the extra cognitive and emotional
energy that is required to work effectively in
situations where they are in the minority.

The final stage of the exercise involves participants
sharing their reflections with the larger group.
Block’s goal is to explore the intersections of
individual and systemic factors of dealing with
diversity.

**Person to person**

To explore the interpersonal dimensions of
diversity, Kara Blackburn of MIT Sloan screens a
**22-second clip** (created by Claire Kamp Dush
of Ohio State University) in which a lawyer named
Lyndsey recounts how the president of her firm,
upon learning she was pregnant with her second
child, called her into his office to ask if she “knew
how pregnancy happened” and “who was going to
take care of all those babies”.

In a written exercise, participants examine the
incident from Lyndsey’s perspective, imagining
what they would say in response. They also put
themselves into the shoes of a hypothetical partner
in the firm who happens to overhear the president’s
comments to explore the opportunities and
challenges of allyship. In small groups, participants
share their prospective replies with one another,
which provides a rich learning exchange.

Of course, there is no one right way to respond –
context matters greatly. Therefore, the goal is to
engage in perspective-taking and to give
participants an opportunity to consider how they
might respond to biased comments at work, either
as a target or an ally.

**Institutional bias**

If the advancement of DEI required everyone to
become a passionate advocate for the cause,
prospects for real change would be grim.
Fortunately, much can be done even without full-
scale conversion. A change of institutional policies
can be far more impactful than a change of heart.
To this end, Sterling has designed an exercise that
targets the former while skirting resistance to the
latter.

Sterling begins by prompting a discussion around
the concept of “merit”. “Why is it that organisations
don’t always live up to their meritocratic values?”
she asks. Sterling includes a useful working
definition of merit – not a dictionary definition, but
one that works for the purposes of her discussion: to
level rewards (jobs, pay, promotions and recognition)
in ways that reflect actual performance.

She asks participants to rank order five
organisational practices from most to least
meritocratic: bonuses, promotions, recruitment,
performance feedback and salary compensation. As
they do so, they think about why some practices are
more susceptible to creeping bias than others.

**Remote challenges and advantages**

Creating the psychologically safe space that enables
honest conversations about DEI is difficult on its
own, and entails extra work in a remote learning
environment. For example, facilitators need to
redouble efforts to establish trust and reassure
participants that their privacy will be protected
within appropriate limits.

However, there are also upsides to running these
exercises in the digital space. In the real world, the
process of breaking into small groups and
reconvening can be cumbersome and logistically
difficult (necessitating a large enough room or
several small ones, etc.). With Zoom’s “breakout
room” feature, it can be accomplished in a few
clicks.

Adam Galinsky of Columbia Business School
pointed out during the conference that Zoom makes
it much easier to host guest speakers, thus widening
the range of perspectives to be included in the
discussion.

**Looking ahead**

Outside of the exercises, one very positive
development discussed at this year’s conference
was the growing number of leading business
schools with DEI vice-deans or associate deans: Ray
Reagans and Fiona Murray at MIT Sloan, Sharoni
Little at USC Marshall and Gita Johar at Columbia
Business School, just to name a few. INSEAD’s Dean
Ilian Mihov has committed to creating an Office for
Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, which will be led by
a dean.

In recent years, we have been heartened to see DEI
being gradually institutionalised within business
academia. At the same time, intensifying social
struggles against racism demand that we speed up
the pace of our evolution. Giving Black and Brown
students more of a voice and representation in our
classrooms is an area of particular importance. The
appointment of DEI vice- and associate deans is a
hopeful sign of change to come for faculty, students
and executive leadership.

Zoe Kinias is an Associate Professor of Organisational
Behaviour at INSEAD and the Academic Director of
INSEAD’s Gender Initiative.

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Erin Kelly is the Sloan Distinguished Professor of Work and Organization Studies at MIT Sloan.

Modupe Akinola is an Associate Professor of Management at Columbia Business School.

Michael I. Norton is the Harold M. Brierley Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School.

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