

Can Zoom Be a Tool for Teaching Anti-Racism?



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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.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/responsibility/can-zoom-be-tool-teaching-anti-racism>

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About the series

Covid-19

The consequences of Covid-19 for public health, the global economy and the future of work cannot be overestimated. No one knows where exactly we will go from here, but INSEAD's thought leaders — both faculty and their close collaborators in the practitioner and entrepreneurship communities — possess informed perspectives that will help us not just weather the crisis, but hopefully emerge from it stronger than ever.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

In the wake of the tragic death of George Floyd in the United States and protests in over 60 countries, global attention to DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) has experienced a long-overdue resurgence. As the need for more inclusive forms of leadership and culture becomes apparent, we focus here on the informed perspectives of INSEAD experts focusing on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and their intersections. These thought leaders -- both faculty and their close collaborators with rich experience in practice -- inform understanding of how to develop DEI and address identified DEI development needs.

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