Unconscious Bias in Teaching and Learning

Professor Debby Cotton
and Dr Jennie Winter

Educational Development, PedRIO
In this session, we hope to

• Explore the meaning of unconscious bias and how it functions
• Consider how it might impact on teaching and learning as well as interactions with staff and students
• Discuss some possible scenarios and the ways in which bias can be mitigated
Imagine you walk into a company for an interview. You ask the receptionist for directions, and then wait to be called in to the office of the managing director. While you are waiting, you check the news headlines on your smartphone. A judge has just made a ruling about a financial impropriety case. You note the details in case it comes up later.
What is unconscious bias?
What is unconscious bias?

Unconscious bias refers to a bias that we are unaware of, and which happens outside of our control. It is a bias that happens automatically and is triggered by our brain making quick judgments and assessments of people and situations, influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences.

(ECU: 2013 Unconscious bias in higher education)
Who are Professors?
Who are Professors?
Who are students?

“I don’t see gender or ethnicity, I just treat all students the same.”

(Gender and Ethnicity attainment gap research at Plymouth University.)
A quick poll

You will see a series of photos. Decide where you think these people studied. Your options are:

A: Oxbridge
B: Russell Group
C: Post 92
D: What? He/she went to University?

Don’t think!

Just go with your first impression!
Where do you think he/she studied?

A. Oxbridge
B. Russell Group
C. Post 92
D. What? He/she went to University?
Where do you think he/she studied?

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D. What?

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What kinds of things might influence your answers to these questions?
Do we treat all of our students the same?
Should we?
If you don’t believe that this happens, take a quick look at ‘I too am Oxford’ on Tumblr ...
"I don't see COLOR." … Does that mean you don't see Me?
I, too, am Peckham
I, too, am Oxford
Why does unconscious bias occur?
We treat males and females differently from birth ...
We are constantly bombarded with stereotypes ...
Now we're paying disability benefit to obese under 5s! Outrage after official figures show pre-school children are getting handouts

- Statistics show 50 obese under-16s were given disability benefits
- Of those, ten were aged under five and 20 were five to under 11
- Campaigners condemned situation as ‘disgraceful’ and ‘flabbergasting’

By ROSIE TAYLOR FOR THE DAILY MAIL

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Children under five are receiving disability benefits for medical conditions linked to obesity, reveal disturbing official figures.

The statistics show 50 obese under-16s were given the handouts — at a cost to the taxpayer of around £250,000 per year.

Of these, ten were aged under five, 20 were five to under 11 and 20 were 11 to under 16. Last night campaigners condemned the situation as ‘disgraceful’ and ‘flabbergasting’.

According to the Department for Work and Pensions, 2,280 children under 16 received Disability Living Allowance for metabolic diseases in 2013/14.

The total included 630 under-fives and 50 who were officially recorded as obese, if revealed in response to a freedom of information request.

Metabolic diseases are a range of conditions which involve problems with the way the body breaks down food. The best known is diabetes.

Weight could be a factor in why children listed as having a metabolic disease require the benefit, as many of the conditions are linked to or aggravated by obesity. Some, however, are caused by genetic factors.

Tam Fry, of the National Obesity Forum, said it was ‘shocking’ any young child was classed as obese enough to need disability benefits. What does this say about our health services and five-year-olds?
We use ‘cognitive shortcuts’ ...

- We often use cognitive shortcuts in situations where we need to make quick decisions with limited information (Gilovich et al., 2002).
- One of these shortcuts involves over-generalizing from ‘schemas’, based on our knowledge and experiences (Hayes, 2000).
- These short cuts can be beneficial, but they can also be deceiving.
What are the potential impacts of unconscious bias in HE?
Potential impacts in HE

• Papers with female first author given a lower rating than those with a male first author (Lloyd, 1990, cited in Borsuk, 2009)

• Peer reviewers give female applicants lower scores than male applicants with same level of productivity (Wenneras and Wold, 1997)

• Requests for information on doctoral study ignored by academics at a higher rate if from women & minorities (Milkman et al., 2014)
Potential impacts in HE

• Differences in staff expectations of students’ abilities are picked up by the students and can affect their performance (Rubie-Davies, 2006).

• Big difference in performance on a task if told that ‘men perform better on this’ (Moe, 2009; Good et al., 2008)

• Although not studied in HE, there is evidence that teacher assessment is affected by student characteristics including gender (Wood, 1991)
Gendered Language in Teacher Reviews

This interactive chart lets you explore the words used to describe male and female teachers in about 14 million reviews from RateMyProfessor.com.

You can enter any other word (or two-word phrase) into the box below to see how it is split across gender and discipline; the x-axis gives how many times your term is used per million words of text (normalized against gender and field). You can also limit to just negative or positive reviews (based on the numeric ratings on the site). For some more background, see here.

Not all words have gender splits, but a surprising number do. Even things like pronouns are used quite differently by gender.

Search term(s) (case-insensitive):
use commas to aggregate multiple terms

funny

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/07/upshot/is-the-professor-bossy-or-brilliant-much-depends-on-gender.html?action=click&contentCollection=The%20Upshot%C2%AEion=Footer&module=MoreInSection&pgtype=article&abt=0002&abg=1&_r=1
Unconscious bias scenarios

Work in pairs to consider one of the scenarios provided. What would your advice be to the lecturer?
What can we do about unconscious bias in teaching and learning?
What can we do about unconscious bias?

1. Accept that it exists and that we are all biased in some way

2. Decide what we will do about it individually (explicitly try to counter our own bias)

3. Ensure policies and processes are designed to mitigate the impact of bias wherever possible
What can we do about unconscious bias in teaching and learning?

• Incorporate examples into teaching which question stereotypes and value diversity

• Encourage participation of under-represented groups in teaching sessions

• Explain unconscious bias to students and encourage them to reflect on their own behaviour in class
What can we do about unconscious bias in assessment?

• Formulate clear and objective assessment criteria in advance of marking and use them consistently across all markers

• Utilise anonymous marking whenever possible to avoid being influenced by student names

• Avoid marking when tired or stressed – ‘snap’ decisions are much more likely to be biased
Thank you for participating in this workshop. We would really appreciate some feedback from you, so please take a moment to complete the form.

For further information, or to share other thoughts on unconscious bias, please contact: dcotton@plymouth.ac.uk
References


References

