

Missing the Signs: Imperfect Allyship and the Re-examination of Personal Biases

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Let us begin with some recent popular culture. Consider the excellent film *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* released to theaters in late 2018.¹ At a point in the movie, the intrepid heroes Miles Morales and Peter Parker sneak into a lab run by corporate scientists, for plot reasons. During this scene, we discover that the lead scientist, a woman, turns out to be Olivia Octavius, a female version of the famous Spider-Man nemesis, Doctor Octopus/Doc Ock. While watching the film, my friend and I turned to each other and gasped like pre-teen boys; we had not seen it coming. And yet the movie warns us a moment before the reveal that we need to challenge our assumptions, as Parker quips, “I re-examine my personal biases,” after being told that the head scientist, who he thought was a man, was in fact a woman. The writers of the movie left clues throughout the story making it clear that not only would a major antagonist be a woman, but it would also make sense and not be a big deal. However, I think a lot of us long-time Spider-Man fans were genuinely surprised, as we overlooked the tells throughout the film, noticing only after the fact, to our surprise and, perhaps, embarrassment. Peter Parker had to re-examine his personal biases, but so did a lot of moviegoers.

For the sake of the argument I am going to make in this reflection, I will call this story the Doc Ock heuristic, by which I refer to an event that causes me to think about my own biases and find previously overlooked clues to an unexamined but obvious truth. My Doc Ock moment came in the form of a pretty great teacher candidate named Cal. Cal is now a senior in my teacher preparation program, which means I have been teaching, advising, and supervising them for a year now. Cal is funny, smart, sarcastic, loud, and blunt, which are qualities in students and teachers that appeal to me. So I almost immediately took a liking to them. Until embarrassingly recently, I would have used “her” instead of the admittedly grammatically awkward “them.”

To my chagrin, I have learned the hard lesson that I am not as woke as I liked to think I was. Between semesters, after having Cal as a student in two different classes, it dawned on me that perhaps Cal is transgender or non-binary, and I had not even noticed or thought about changing the way I talk with or about them. Now that I understand more about Cal’s identity, I also see the signs over the last year that, in hindsight, make obvious that unexamined (on my part) truth.

My first opportunity to read a sign came upon one of my first interactions with Cal. During the first class period I had with Cal’s cohort I outlined the procedures for teacher candidates pertaining to their field experiences, going into schools, introducing themselves to office staff, that sort of stuff. Cal approached me after class and asked about the name tag provided by the university that all students must wear as identification when they visit a school. Cal’s legal name is uncommon and not something like Callista, where “Cal” would be an obvious shortening, which means that Cal’s name tag did not read “Cal.” They asked me somewhat tentatively about getting a name tag with Cal on it instead of their legal name. I responded, “Yeah, no big deal. Just tell the office what you need and if they give you a hard time, I’ll take care of it.” Easy, because mostly I do not particularly care what the name tag says, as long as it

¹ Yes, really. *Into the Spider-Verse* is much more of a fantastic, award-winning art film than a comic book movie. I am also going to spoil something minor: beware! Of course, if you read this note after reading the essay, then....sorry?

matches the identity of the person wearing it. Cal looked so relieved, like my “yeah, sure” permission was something special and out of the ordinary.

I wish I had thought more about the underlying reasons it was so important for Cal to have their name tag match their identity. In an insightful paper on name choice as an integral part of transgender identity, Arielle VanderSchans explains, “as names are both an expression and construction of identity and identity is partly a social construct it matters what others think” (2016, p. 18). Giving Cal permission to use their chosen name on a name tag had more significance than I had understood in the moment. As the program chair, professor, and advisor, I signified that I approved of Cal’s identity (which I do), but how nice it would have been to fully realize what I was doing at the time!

Another clue: looking back on the past year, I think many of Cal’s fellow candidates knew about Cal’s identity, even if those peers never told me or used any pronouns at all when talking to or about Cal. There are two Cals in the same cohort; the rest of the students call them “Cal T” and “Cal P,” never “boy Cal” and “girl Cal” or some other gendered version. Additionally, relationships and interactions with a teacher mentor earlier in Cal’s field experience seemed strained and weird, but I never caught why, chalking it up to interpersonal oddness that occasionally happens when pairing a student with a teacher. Now, I wonder if some of that discomfort came at least partly from Cal’s non-conforming identity. Finally, Cal occasionally referred to a girlfriend, so my assumption was that Cal is gay. My bias, or my blinder was not considering gender identity in Cal’s case, only sexual orientation.

This is sadly funny, because I teach about racism, ethnocentrism, and sexism in multiple classes at the university. My teaching, my scholarship, and my attention tends to center on marginalized people and their experiences in American institutions, particularly schools. My spouse and I teach our elementary-age children that people have different life-experiences and our responsibility as good neighbors and citizens is to become aware of, befriend, and respect all kinds of people, no matter their race, gender, or identity. And yet, there I was, stuck with the idea that I have only partially been practicing what I preach.

What finally made me understand my own ignorance came from an incident at the end of the semester when I went to observe Cal for a lesson they were teaching at their assigned middle school classroom. Now that Cal is with a teacher mentor who is comfortable with them and allows more opportunities to teach, Cal has blossomed; they interact with their students with the power of wit, charm, and tease, and the students eat it up. Cal is doing great in the classroom, and I told them so, using the titles I save for student teachers in schools: “Ms. T, I very much enjoyed this class. Excellent work, ma’am.” Ma’am. I said, “ma’am,” which is not what I thought was a normal word in my vocabulary. I suppose I use it in place of “sir” when I feel like using an honorific with someone I perceive as a woman. And Cal *cringed*, and I noticed, but it took me a couple of days for it to set in.

Eventually, I got the idea. Oh no! I called Cal “Ms.” and “ma’am,” and I am not sure that Cal *is* a “Ms.” and a “ma’am,” and *I never thought to find out first, because I never ask first!* After I realized my mistake, I started reading about gender identity and engaged in the classic practice of going to Google to get advice on how to ask students about their own gender identity in an appropriate manner.² I found some guides from several universities across the country and decided to share a document from another institution with my students for their own edification.³ On the first day of class of the new semester, I met with my group of student teachers and shared

² Not an endorsement of Google as a company or a suggestion to exclusively use their search engine. Bing, Yahoo, even DuckDuckGo are all viable options for searching on the internet.

³ Citing the source to the students, of course.

the document. Cal seemed genuinely pleased, until they got to the final page, when they pulled out a pen and started marking.

When class ended, I approached Cal and asked the question that I could not bring myself to send in an email: “Hey, Cal, remember last semester when I visited you and called you ‘Ms.’ and ‘ma’am?’ I think I screwed up, and I am very sorry. What title and pronouns should I use?” Cal cocked their head a bit, flipped back some hair, and nonchalantly replied, “They. I prefer ‘they.’ But call me ‘Ms. T,’ anything else just confuses my students.”⁴ I apologized again and told them I would use the correct pronouns, but it seemed Cal had bigger fish to fry. “Actually, we need to talk about the handout—you usually give really thoughtful, good stuff, but this one kinda sucks.” Cal then informed me that at the end, the seemingly helpful chart that gave a list of “alternative pronouns” with handy conjugations (e.g. *ze/zir/zirs*) included multiple pronouns that are largely considered insulting or mocking of non-binary, non-conforming people. I felt stung, again by my own ignorance. I expressed thanks and apologies and told Cal I would correct the error and share with the rest of the class in our next meeting. Cal’s response: “No problem. Look, remember when you said I could change my name tag? I knew then you were an ally.” There it is. My relatively thoughtless act of kindness, in that I did not even consider the underlying reasons for a name change on an ID badge, but it mattered to Cal.

Being a nice and generally considerate person is great, but not enough. I realize that I need to be more thoughtful and active in my allyship. I cannot wait for students to identify themselves, to assume “he” and “she” are the norm for each individual until somebody demonstrates otherwise. So, I am making some changes. For example I added a few unassuming questions on my student profile sheet I ask every new student to fill out, and now I know what pronoun my students prefer I use and what title I should employ when visiting in a field placement. Simple, not a lot of effort on my part, even confidential as the form goes directly from the student to me, no big deal. And yet, it took me five years and mis-identifying one of my own students to think of changing my own practice as pertaining to gender identity.⁵

But this essay is not meant to be another “blunder narrative”—where I explain my mistake, how I solved the problem, then congratulate myself on my newfound enlightenment and ask readers to do the same.⁶ Instead of offering shallow, three-step solutions, my intention is to demonstrate my own oversight as an example for others. I would like for you, dear reader, to draw your own conclusions for your own teaching and interactions with your own students. If you see a warning applicable for your own life, great. If you read this and think about how much more aware and less hypocritical you are, fantastic and good for you. Ultimately, what matters is

⁴ This answer about using the title “Ms.” because any other moniker is confusing to students is loaded and very much worthy of further discussion and analysis.

⁵ I had received the advice that I include more suggestions on how to intentionally create an inclusive classroom space, which I admit to feeling awkward about because I am not an expert. But there are a growing number of educational professionals who have excellent ideas, so let me share a place to start: Allie George (pseudonym) wrote for a Guardian blog on education and had an excellent piece in 2014 about supporting transgender students (<https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog/2014/oct/29/transgender-supporting-students-school-lgbt>). George also ran a twitter account called Rainbow Teaching which, while no longer active, contains a treasure trove of information, links, and contacts with teachers and administrators who take the work of inclusion seriously (<https://twitter.com/rainbowteaching?lang=en>). Finally, Monmouth University made a simple two-page flyer with basic advice and links to other sources (<https://www.monmouth.edu/gender-studies/documents/transgender-inclusion.pdf/>).

⁶ The phrase “blunder narrative” is a derivation of John Paul Tassoni’s and William H. Thelin’s “Blundering the Hero Narrative” (2000). An excellent explanation of the inherent issue of the blunder narrative comes from Darren Crovitz’s “Bias and the Teachable Moment: Revisiting a Teacher Narrative” (2006).

that we treat our students with respect and care, then correct mistakes when we discover our errors. I would like to reiterate something stated by Jenni Bader two years ago in *Kansas English* in a reflection she wrote about a non-binary student in her class:

The lesson for me is not in learning how to qualify or label students' gender identities or sexual orientations but in learning not to label or make assumptions. Rather, each of our students should be able to expect non-judgmental, unconditional care and support as students and as individuals (2017, p. 12).

The point is that I do not need to worry about how to label Cal, just how to treat them with respect, which in this case means I need to change the way I speak to and about them.

Finally, back to Spider-Man. For me, the Doc Ock heuristic serves as a reminder that I need to be more actively cognizant of my students, but when I am not, that I own the mistake and then do better. I am an ally, just an imperfect one. I have been more attuned to race, ethnicity, and sexuality for a while now, but my own radar was not picking up on gender identity. Allow my story to serve as a warning. As sensitive as you are to the needs of your students and the realities they live in, you can still miss something in the future. Maybe the signs will be clear in retrospect, perhaps not. Regardless, re-examine your personal biases, and I will re-examine mine.

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