From: Teaching Toolbox - Center For Faculty Innovation
To: TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU
Subject: Teaching Toolbox: A Conversation on Casual Ableism
Date: Thursday, January 28, 2021 9:30 AM

A Conversation on Casual Ableism

by Daisy L. Breneman and Emily O. Gravett

After the previous Teaching Toolbox on "Online Etiquette," we (Daisy and Emily) engaged in an email conversation about ways that oppression was playing out in discourse around Zoom cameras and the empty "boxes" when cameras were off. We wanted to share with Toolbox readers a lightly edited record of this exchange below. Feedback is so important to the work we both do. As Toolbox authors, as educators, none of us is perfect. We make mistakes, we (hopefully) receive feedback, we grow, we try to do better. We wanted to provide an example of how this works on our team, among respected colleagues, in the hopes of supporting a culture of offering and receiving feedback. This is a different—and longer—Toolbox because we want to emphasize that this work takes time and cannot be quick or efficient; we must engage in sustained, capacious conversation. These tough but rich conversations can even occur in the classroom, if we foster the sorts of environments where students feel comfortable bringing their concerns and critiques to us. We also want to make it clear that we are always open to feedback about the Toolboxes themselves. A few years back, we sent out a survey assessing them. We will do this again, at some point, but in the middle of a pandemic doesn't seem like the best timing. In the meantime, if you ever would like to offer feedback, you can always contact Emily directly (graveteo@jmu.edu) or fill out this anonymous form.

Daisy: It also occurred to me that there is some ableism in the part about cameras, especially when it's suggested that "visual" contact with and among students is somehow more valuable than other ways of being together. Or that a "blank square" on Zoom somehow means a person is less *present*. That is, why is the visual input of seeing a face on a camera somehow equated with engagement or connection? Vision is one way of experiencing the world, but it's not the only way, and it's not really a "better" (or "worse") way of being in the world.

Emily: Your point about ableism is a really good one—and brings up a lot of bigger questions for me, ones that I'd appreciate your help thinking through. It IS hard for me, when I am teaching online, to not be able to see my students. Seeing is part of how I experience the world and how I connect with students. And I've heard that same sentiment from a lot of faculty, here and across the country. Seeing is certainly not the only way to be present or to form relationships. But teaching to 20 blank boxes week after week has proven really demoralizing and disorienting for many folks who do utilize sight.

So the bigger wondering this is all provoking (I hope not defensively!) for me is: how do we/can I balance concerns about ableism (which here, for me, could just as easily be replaced with sexism, racism, classism, etc.) with people's individual (or even collective), real, lived experiences?

For instance, is the idea that I *shouldn't* feel this way about teaching to a bunch of blank Zoom boxes *because* it's ableist? Perhaps the answer is yes. Some of these things do require a shift in thinking, in experiencing, even. Or, perhaps, if I could understand/appreciate the ableism, then I wouldn't have that experience in the first place? Hmm. I'm not sure what would work for me, though…let's find out now! Then that leads me to ask: is the idea that, because not everyone can see (or, again, insert anything else here: not everyone can hear, not everyone is a man, not everyone is rich, etc.), the people who are/can shouldn't mention it or draw upon it as they experience the world? That doesn't seem right. Or is this what it means to be aware of and try to (to use the now much-maligned term) "check" your privilege? That is, I shouldn't be going around assuming everyone else has the dominant-group experience just like I do? Is the problem then more related to public forums like the Toolbox then, where we are in positions to influence or make recommendations? I'm now imagining someone who is deaf and who lip reads. Certainly, for this person, sight is really important—and IS going to be a primary way they connect, even communicate. So is the concern only for those who have all senses equally available to them? That can't be right either. I feel like I keep getting stuck. A colleague who is blind and teaching online definitely wouldn't write the same thing on their syllabus as I would. But does that mean I (or others) shouldn't either? (I guess, to me ableism, and the like, implies a "shouldn't" at some point. Maybe that's not true….) Thanks for reading these ramblings! You really got me thinking!

Daisy: This is why I LOVE having these conversations with you! You always help me reflect and think through everything. An important point is emerging: even people who think about equity and justice *all the time* will get it wrong. Ongoing vigilance and reflection is so important, and we do need spaces for that in our professional and personal lives. Thanks for, always, being so gracious with feedback.
I really think you're onto something with privilege. (And, seriously, how did something we must do, check our privilege, become so laden? I guess the same way "social justice warrior" did. There's clearly some reclaiming to do here). And, bear with me as I puzzle through some of this. All just my thoughts!

Absolutely, every human experiences the world in different ways. But we also have set up the world to advantage some and disadvantage others. We attach hierarchy (and inequitable access to resources) to difference. And that's the thing. The identity status "sighted" (or temporarily able-bodied, in general) carries with it *a lot* of unearned, and unexamined, privilege because of how we set the world up. And there is a lot of cultural imperialism around sightedness. Participating in it is problematic because it *reinforces* ableism (I wonder if "able supremacy" would work here?).

So, when we casually and presumptively and without recognition of other ways of being talk about seeing as if it's THE way to experience the world, that's ableist. When we assume (and ANNOUNCE!) one way of experiencing is "better" than others, we reinforce the hierarchy and oppression. (I'm just tired of people saying having cameras on is "better"—when in reality, it is "better" for some, an inconvenience for others, impossible and therefore discriminatory for many others). We have to recognize how our individual experience happens within the context of power and privilege.

Absolutely, I can relate to and honor your experience of needing to "see" students to feel engaged with them. That is your lived experience. But we have designed the physical and social spaces in a way that inherently and automatically benefits one way of being, the way of the dominant group. And we have to be careful not to reinforce able-bodied privilege by insisting that “seeing” is better; we don’t “mean” to, but we know the difference between intent and impact. In an interesting way, your being deprived of the way you prefer to access the world highlights the importance of universal design. People should have access to multiple ways of learning and being that are meaningful for them. Sighted folks are used to having the world accommodate our sightedness; we usually don’t have to think about our identity as sighted because it’s the unmarked, “default” category. And on the tiny occasions, like this, when we have to examine our sightedness, it’s uncomfortable and confusing and we’d prefer not to because it’s hard. Which is why we need to, and are, doing it.

And, yes, disability brings such richness because of the contradictions. So, yes, what provides access to some provides a barrier to others (such as how the bumps at the edge of a sidewalk that help blind folks navigate the world are barriers to some folks with diverse mobility). That’s why access always has to be a conversation, and fluid, and contextual. And access isn’t enough. As Mia Mingus writes, “Access for the sake of access is not necessarily liberatory, but access for the sake of connection, justice, community, love and liberation is.”

Beyond access, though, there are the questions around oppression. Marginalized groups are used to having their experiences erased, ignored, distorted, exploited, invalidated. Our continual insistence on “seeing,” on setting up spaces that privilege sight, our equating “I can’t see you” with “you aren’t there,” our unthinking/uncritical use of “blind” to indicate ignorance when blind folks know the world in beautiful ways , etc., etc.—THAT reinforces the hierarchy, the power, the (lack of) privilege, the oppression. By assuming/declaring “seeing” is better, yeah, we’re participating in ableism.

For example, I recently edited out all the “see”’s in my Disability and Justice syllabus—“see” Canvas, etc. Now, some disability scholars would argue this is unnecessary. But I just got tired of using a needlessly exclusionary term when often another word got at the point well enough or even better (“refer to,” “note,” etc.). I don’t know that I would make the recommendation to everyone, but to me it just seemed like my syllabus was more inclusive, and potentially less harmful, without unnecessary references to sight.

When we talk about our lived experiences, we can do it thoughtfully—recognizing our own experiences in relation to the experiences of others—and learn to unlearn our implicit biases, and the ways we reinforce oppression without even knowing it. I suspect we may even need some overcorrection for a while. I’d rather spend a few minutes editing out “see” than risk making a blind student feel unwelcome AND risk reinforcing sighted students’ unearned (and unexamined) privilege.

It’s like with Whiteness: we just gotta examine it, challenge it, reflect on it, study it, find ways to dismantle white supremacy. Ask the questions we need to ask. The privilege we experience because of our racial identity is what we need to shatter; we don’t need to shatter who we are. (And, because critical race theory and disability studies are so linked, I’m drawing some parallels; I also need to acknowledge the differences, and not conflate racism and ableism, which are intersecting, but also different forms of oppression).

So, we absolutely can admit, talk about, etc. our sighted experience (and the needs that arise because of it). But ideally we do so while acknowledging our able-bodied privilege, and ableism. Why *is* the world designed so that we never have to think our identity as sighted? *What if* the world could be set up differently so that folks who experience the world through any means have equitable access, human rights, and power?

In a way, it's a good thought experiment because it's a reminder that sighted people have a lot of access needs: the sighted need lights, which are expensive; imagine how much money we would save if we didn't have to accommodate sighted peoples' insistence of lights? Sighted people want/need signs and books and ingredient labels with printed text on them. Some sighted folks insist on driving; how much better off we'd be if we didn't do *that*?

ALL physical and social spaces are designed with needs in mind—too often, though, it's only or primarily the needs of the dominant group. And members of dominant groups are just so darn used to it, it's hard to imagine otherwise.

Back to the issue of cameras: one of my colleagues and I discussed, during the first week, creating an anonymous poll and then some sort of class discussion to talk about Zoom cameras and justice, and use it as a way to talk about access gaps, inequities, and such. Should generate some good conversations!

Anyway, very grateful for this conversation, and for you!

Emily: Okay, this is good, REALLY good. There is so much here. Thank you for taking the time. I am going to mull your email over the thoughts you've shared; I want to let them sink in and settle and swirl. Would you mind if I returned to them after some time?

About the authors: Daisy L. Breneman has a joint appointment with University Advising and Justice Studies and is the co-coordinator of the Disability Studies Minor. She is also a CFI faculty associate in the teaching area. She can be reached at brenemdl@jmu.edu. Emily O. Gravett is an assistant director in the Center for Faculty Innovation and an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy & Religion. She can be reached at graveteo@jmu.edu.

*****

For more information about the CFI's Teaching Toolboxes, please visit:
https://www.jmu.edu/cfi/teaching/other/teaching-toolbox.shtml