

Power and Privilege Pitfalls

We are all implicated in these structures of oppression. It is important to avoid a charitable approach to our work. Try to incorporate a social justice perspective to your work with learners and in your own lives. Although challenging, it is important to establish equal relationships with people within structures of oppression – (racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism...). No one likes to think of themselves as oppressive but if we're not constantly self-interrogating we are perpetuating and replicating these systems, systems that have been extremely damaging, even life threatening – for people.

This exercise is not meant to suggest there is only one way of seeing the world, or to try to indoctrinate you or intimidate you into one way of thinking or to blame or shame you for not thinking critically about some of these statements before. It is meant to highlight some of the traps we fall into when we're trying to practice anti-oppression. What we're doing is taking some very common statements, questioning them and challenging them – and encouraging you to go deeper in your anti-oppression practice, and self-interrogate a bit more.

1. **“I want to help my student. She’s had such a hard life.”**
 - Avoid paternalistic attitudes towards your student.
 - Avoid romanticizing your learners’ social/economic conditions
 - Be careful about using your student’s personal story to prove your point in a privileged context (without their knowledge)
 - Be aware of confidentiality and acknowledge when you are appropriating their knowledge and life experience.

2. **“I’m oppressed too”**
 - Avoid comparing oppressions
 - We have a freedom *from* racism, heterosexism, etc. and *from* the intense presence of the state in our lives, but not a freedom *to* become or do anything we want. (Wilmot, 2005)

3. **“Sexuality is something people should keep to themselves.”**

4. **“Racism isn’t a problem anymore”**
 - Be sure not to gloss over history
 - Multiculturalism makes racism more disguised and subtle (people of colour communities are not homogenous, race relations vs. racism)
 - Identify the difference between everyday and structural racism and how they reinforce each other. Also, racism is about assumptions – not just neo-nazi racial slurs.

5. **“I don’t see colour. We’re all just people.”**
 - This statement is about equality of humanity, but it does not address the inequality of social/economic conditions.

*** Some ideas taken from Sheila Wilmot (2005) “Taking Responsibility, Taking Direction” (Arbeiter Ring Publishing: Winnipeg)*

Developed by the staff of Parkdale Project Read (2006)

6. **“Why do we need a separate Black History Month? Let’s call it Heritage month and include everyone.”**
 - Equity vs. equality perspective
 - Treating everyone equally does not address the unequal positions held by different equity groups in society.
7. **“I’m not a feminist, I’m a humanist.”**
8. **“Muslim women are so oppressed; they aren’t allowed to drive, work and must obey their husbands.”**
 - Avoid ‘us and them’ thinking.
 - Learn about different religions, customs and traditions. Don’t make assumptions based on mainstream media portrayals.
9. **“I’m really trying to learn and understand people’s disabilities.”**
 - Focus on ability not disability.
 - Identify that difference is not the source of ablism (deaf, blind, learning disabilities) – economic, political and social power is.

Can you think of any others?

11.

12.

13.

14.

15.

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