

Strategies to Maximize Learning and Motivation:
Implicit Bias Training as an Example

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The following nine strategies are helpful for thinking about how learning and motivation can enhance the educational experiences for all learners. I use *implicit bias training* to demonstrate how each strategy can maximize learning and motivation.

1. Learning and Motivation Strategy – Attention and Prior Knowledge

To grab and sustain a learner’s attention, instructional strategies should incorporate **intriguing topics** and **tasks**. An instructional task that works well for implicit bias training is presenting a scenario and asking learners to reflect on the scenario. It is called “The Surgeon’s Dilemma”:

A father and his son are involved in a horrific car crash and the man dies at the scene. But when the child arrives at the hospital and is rushed into the operating room, the surgeon walks in and says: “I can’t operate on this boy, he’s my son.” How can this be?

This scenario creates a bit of **incongruity** and **cognitive dissonance** for the learner because the surgeon is the boy’s mother – and most people who participate in this activity come up with all kinds of explanations before realizing that the surgeon is a female.

After reviewing the Surgeon’s Dilemma, I deliberately activate **prior knowledge** by asking learners to think about times when they’ve experienced some version of this scenario. I’ll typically share a personal story to encourage them to think about times when implicit bias may have influenced how they perceived a situation or were perceived by someone else. I might say something along the lines of, “I once received an email from someone named Chris in the IT department who was supporting me in preparing a virtual training session. I went back and forth with Chris for a few days and was shocked when Chris walked into my office and was a female.” I assumed that “Chris from IT” was a man.

2. Learning and Motivation Strategy – *Learning Outcomes/Goals*

In terms of designing instruction with learning and motivation in mind, learning and motivation are enhanced with appropriate **learning goals**. If I'm preparing to teach about implicit bias -- the ultimate goal is helping learners interrupt their own biases in day-to-day interactions. Because bias is an abstract concept, I know the learning outcomes I develop must be **clear** and **measurable** in order to ensure that learners can apply what they learn to the classroom setting. So one learning outcome I always include is "learners will be able to distinguish between implicit and explicit bias." I can measure that simply by asking learners to explain the difference between the two. Other learning outcomes that work well when teaching about implicit bias in this context are "learners will be able to identify and utilize strategies that interrupt and reduce their own and their students' tendency to engage in implicit bias," and "learners will be able to engage and authentically connect with their students."

I present **no more than three to four** clear outcomes because I want to ensure that my learners are focused on this concept of bias as opposed to introducing multiple concepts at once.

3. Learning and Motivation Strategy – *Managing Cognitive Load*

I previously touched on the idea that implicit bias is an abstract concept and because of that, I want my learning outcomes clear. The same can also be said of managing **cognitive load**. The three types of cognitive load are **intrinsic**, **germane**, and **extraneous**. *Intrinsic load* refers to the complexity of new information. Effective instruction *minimizes* intrinsic load. *Germane load* refers to the deep processing of new information by integrating it with previous learning. Effective instruction *maximizes* germane load.

To manage intrinsic load, I want my learning session to be simple and narrowly focused on the concept of implicit bias. Introducing too many concepts – particularly those that are abstract, like implicit bias, stereotype threat, and imposter syndrome – increases cognitive load and may hinder my learners' ability to retain and ultimately, apply the information I'm presenting. Focusing on a singular concept also increases germane load by allowing learners to reflect upon the prior knowledge activated earlier in the learning process and throughout the learning event.

Extraneous load distracts working memory from processing new information. Effective instruction *reduces* extraneous load. Think of extraneous load as a powerpoint slide with lots of fancy animation, color, and lots of text. All of that

animation, color, and text can be distracting to the learner. I do my best to keep slides simple, with no more than a few lines of large text per slide.

4. Learning and Motivation Strategy – *Emotions and Affect*

I always start my learning sessions with what I call *Laying the Foundation*. I explicitly tell learners to “reject perfection and be prepared to make mistakes. We all have room to grow when it comes to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging.” This **alleviates learner anxiety** and allows me to **create rapport** with them – especially around sensitive topics of race, identity, and bias. Another way I create rapport with my learners is by avoiding potentially triggering content at the beginning of my learning sessions. Being mindful of my learners’ emotional states is critical to maximizing their ability to learn, especially as it relates to any feelings of guilt and shame related to the harmful impacts of implicit bias.

5. Learning and Motivation Strategy – *Self-Efficacy*

I remind my learners that the goal of any learning session is not perfection and that they should expect to make mistakes along the journey of increased DEI awareness. This enhances self-efficacy because I’m alleviating learner anxiety and any expectations of having to “get it right” right away. **Self-efficacy** is an **individual’s belief in their capacity** to act in the ways necessary to reach specific goals. If they believe that they have to get it right from the start – and I know that the path to a deeper understanding of implicit bias, privilege, etc. is littered with potholes and detours – then I’m setting them up for frustration and failure.

Interrupting implicit bias requires constant work to reduce its harmful impacts, and one way to do this is by reminding learners to “Slow it Down.” I have a slide in my presentation that shows a turtle at the beginning of a long windy road, and at the end of the road is a large sign that says “Conclusion.” It is a reminder that one powerful way to interrupt implicit bias is by slowing down our perceptions of other people, and acknowledging that our gut isn’t always right. The visual of the turtle is a powerful reminder of how quick reactions can often be wrong – and instead of quickly jumping to conclusions, learners can instead use that time to think about counter-stereotypes – a female student excelling in math, for example. Reminding learners to avoid jumping to conclusions about other people also promotes self-efficacy because it is not a complex task, nor does it require expertise related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging.

6. Learning and Motivation Strategy – *Enhancing Metacognition*

In terms of **metacognition**, or “**thinking about thinking**,” the entire concept of interrupting implicit bias is rooted in the idea that I am quite literally asking my learners to think about how they think about the ideas that they hold about other people, and what might be influencing those ideas. When I ask learners to “slow down” their perceptions of other people as opposed to jumping to conclusions or making assumptions, that process requires metacognition in that I’m challenging learners to **engage in critical self-reflection** about what’s leading to those snap judgments. Interrupting and reducing implicit bias is rooted in metacognition and the idea that we must spend a good deal of time thinking about our own thinking in order to manage bias. Because implicit biases operate on an unconscious level, interrupting those biases requires us to **actively think about** how we perceive others.

7. Learning and Motivation Strategy – *Transfer of Learning*

To maximize **transfer**, I want to ensure I implement strategies that **promote transfer of learning to different contexts**. If my learners are faculty members, I want to ensure that they are implementing DEI concepts in their courses. This can include post-training check-ins and follow up in the form of Dean's office hours, focus groups, or surveys. This is also great for me as an instructional designer because it gives me feedback in terms of if my learning is actually impacting how they understand implicit bias and if they are utilizing strategies that interrupt both their own biases and through that, the biases of the students in their courses who will be entrusted with the practice of law within the context of the societal challenges and opportunities we face. One way to determine if transfer is taking place is by asking law school faculty what specific bias-interrupting strategies they’ve adopted as part of their regular teaching practices and how those strategies manifest in their classrooms.

8. Learning and Motivation Strategy – *Mastery vs. Performance Goal Orientation*

Individuals who have a **mastery goal orientation** focus on learning to perform better in the real world – for example, teachers learning about bias in order to become a more inclusive and better educator. Individuals who have a **performance goal orientation** focus on demonstrating competence relative to others – for example, getting high marks on performance evaluations or looking smart or competent in front of others. The construct of **goal orientation** is relevant when designing instruction related to recognizing and interrupting implicit bias. **Clearly communicating the value of a task to learners is a powerful way to promote mastery goal**

orientation, and from my experiences, instructors see great value in learning ways to engage and authentically connect with their students. We can avoid instructors engaging in DEI work as a performative task or compliance obligation (i.e. performance orientation) by communicating to them the value in interrupting their biases, how this can improve their craft as educators, and how it can enhance their relationships with their students.

9. Learning and Motivation Strategy – Assessment and Evaluation using the Kirkpatrick Model

In terms of assessing and evaluating the impacts of DEI training, I start with the end in mind. The **Kirkpatrick Model**, or four levels of training evaluation, works well here. At **Level 1, or Reaction**, I can assess participant reaction via a post-training survey. What worked well? How did they feel about the training session? At **Level 2, or Learning**, I can also utilize a post-training survey in order to determine what participants learned. Can they define implicit bias? Can they explain the difference between implicit and explicit bias?

At **Level 3, or Behavior**, have participants' actions and behaviors changed as a result of the training? Are they implementing bias-interrupting strategies in their classrooms?

Finally, at **Level 4**, which measures **Results and Impact**, I am looking for organizational-level results. What is the impact of implicit bias training on the law school community? Are we seeing cultural shifts because of our implicit bias training? A climate survey at the end of the academic year might shed light on whether or not the learning sessions have contributed to creating a law school climate where all members of the community are actively and intentionally engaging in practices that interrupt both their own biases.

Resources

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