

Equity Toolkit: Inclusive Teaching and Learning

ENGAGING IN ONGOING SELF-INQUIRY



COLORADO
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SO YOU CALL YOURSELF AN ALLY

Reflection questions for “So You Call Yourself an Ally”

Questions Developed by Brenda J. Allen, August 2019

In social justice work, an ally refers to someone from one social identity group who stands up or speaks out in support of members of a different group. An ally typically is a member of a dominant social identity group (e.g., a white person or someone who is heterosexual) who acts out of concern for a non-dominant social identity group (e.g., people of color or persons who are LGBTQIA). Being an ally means being willing to act with and for persons and groups who are subject to discrimination and inequities.

1. Do you consider yourself an ally for any social identity group(s)? If so, which one(s)? Why?
2. Which, if any, of the 10 Things All ‘Allies’ Need to Know are you already doing?
3. Which of them would you like to improve?
4. How does being an ally matter to creating culturally relevant classroom communities?

So You Call Yourself an Ally? 10 Things All ‘Allies’ Need to Know

by Jamie Utt based on the writings and theories of Mia McKenzie and other activists

Find the full article at <https://everydayfeminism.com/2013/11/things-allies-need-to-know/>

1. Being an Ally is About Listening

As McKenzie puts it, “Shut up and listen.” As someone striving to be an ally, the most important thing we can do is listen to as many voices of those we’re allying ourselves with as possible.

Now, does this mean that we should assume that just because, say, one Person of Color said it that it’s the absolutely truth that we should parrot? Absolutely not. But listening to a diversity of marginalized voices can help you understand the core of any given issue. And it also can help you understand why the opinion of your one Lesbian friend is not necessarily the best defense of your use of heterosexist language.

2. Stop Thinking of ‘Ally’ as a Noun

Being an ally isn’t a status. The moment that we decide “I’m an ally,” we’re in trouble.

As Mia McKenzie puts it: “‘Currently operating in solidarity with’ is undeniably an action. It describes what a person is doing in the moment. It does not give credit for past acts of solidarity without regard for current behavior. It does not assume future acts of solidarity. It speaks only to the actions of the present.”

3. ‘Ally’ is Not a Self-Proclaimed Identity

Really, being an ally is not an identity at all, but it’s vitally important that we understand that we cannot simply decide we are allies. Being in solidarity is something we can strive for, but in the end, it is the choice of those we are attempting to ally ourselves to as to whether they trust us enough to call us an ally. Additionally, just because one person considers me an ally, that does not mean that every person of that marginalized identity considers me an ally or should! Trust is something earned through concerted action, not given simply because of our actions in a particular arena or context.

4. Allies Don’t Take Breaks

The thing about oppression is that it is constant. Those who are oppressed and marginalized in our society do not get to take breaks and respites. Thus, if you truly want to act in solidarity, you cannot simply retreat into your privilege when you just don’t want to engage. This is one of the hardest things. But People of Color have no choice but to resist racism every single day of their lives. Women have no choice but to weather the shit storm of misogyny every day of their lives. Disabled abled people have no choice but to deal with and respond to ableism every day of their lives. And in the end, part of the privilege of your identity is that you have a choice about whether or not to resist oppression. And falling back into your privilege, especially when you are most needed, is not being in solidarity.

5. Allies Educate Themselves Constantly

Standing in solidarity with a marginalized or oppressed person or people means that we need to know our shit. We need to educate ourselves about the issues facing those with whom we want to be allied and about the history of said oppression. One of the most important types of education is listening (see #1), but there are endless resources (books, blogs, media outlets, speakers, YouTube videos, etc.) to help you learn. What you should not do, though, is expect those with whom you want to ally yourself to teach you. That is not their responsibility. Sure, listen to them when they decide to drop some knowledge or perspective, but do not go to them and expect them to explain their oppression for you.

6. You Can't Be an Ally in Isolation

To a certain degree, it is entirely possible for someone to stand in solidarity with a group of marginalized people even if they have no relationships with said people. At a surface level, you can support the cause and advocate in your community for equal rights or speak out against oppression. But solidarity in total isolation lacks one vital thing: accountability. This is particularly important for people of privilege, but really any person who wants to act in solidarity needs to recognize that allyship cannot exist in isolation. This is not to say that your “one Black friend” legitimizes all of your actions and self-professed “allyship.” In fact, some of the most important accountability comes from relationships that are not friendships. But without a diverse community to engage with and without other activists to hold you accountable, your understanding of “solidarity” can very quickly become paternalism or, worse, outright recreation of oppression.

7. Allies Don't Need to Be in the Spotlight

True solidarity means supporting the work of those you're allying yourself to, not solely creating a platform for your own voice and work. Sure, your privilege may afford you the spotlight sometimes, and there are times when you can use that spotlight to talk to people who share your identity (see #8), but whenever possible, allies turn that spotlight away from themselves and to the voices that are so often marginalized and ignored.

8. Allies Focus on Those Who Share Their Identity

As a person who benefits every single day from White privilege, it is not my place to engage People of Color in a discussion about what is or is not racist. That's not solidarity. However, I have a very specific responsibility in engaging conversations about racism: talking to other White people.

Beyond listening, arguably the most important thing that I can do to act in solidarity is to engage those who share my identity. As a man, I have a specific responsibility to engage men in building a more positive masculinity and standing up to misogyny and sexism. As a White person, I have a responsibility to stand up to racism and work to bring White people into the anti-racist conversation in a way that they can hear and access. As an able-bodied person, I have a responsibility to call out examples of everyday ableism.

9. When Criticized or Called Out, Allies Listen, Apologize, Act Accountably, and Act Differently Going Forward

The single most important thing I've ever been told about being an ally came from a professor of Color who profoundly impacted my life: “If you choose to do social justice work, you are going to screw up – a lot. Be prepared for that. And when you screw up, be prepared to listen to those who you hurt, apologize with honesty and integrity, work hard to be accountable to them, and make sure you act differently going forward.” There are few lessons more important for “allies” to understand than this one. When you screw up and damage trust and hurt and anger those you have allied yourself to, listening is important, but it's not enough. Apologizing earnestly is important, but it's not enough. Working hard to make sure you are accountable to those you've wronged is important, but it's not enough. In addition to all of these, you have a responsibility to learn from the mistakes you've made and to do better going forward.

10. Allies Never Monopolize the Emotional Energy

One of the more common and egregious mistakes supposed “allies” can make is to expect emotional energy from those to whom we ally ourselves. To once again quote McKenzie, “[T]he people who experience racism, misogyny, ableism, queerphobia, transphobia, classism, etc. are exhausted.” The last thing they need is our monopolizing of the emotional energy to only further their exhaustion. Surely allies need emotional support, but it must come from other allies. Don't expect marginalized people to do the emotional work for you or feel sorry for you or forgive you.