

# Allies in the classroom

Zach Murphy

Being a 'real man' in the traditional western sense very often means conforming to a stereotypical architecture of manliness (van der Gaag, 2014, p. 123) and demonstrating qualities such as independence, being intimidating, in control, muscular, tough, strong, respected and hard (Katz, 2006, quoted by van der Gaag, 2014, pp. 59-60). It can be difficult for young men, in particular, to cut across these stereotypes of gender performance. "A man questioning traditional masculinities is somehow less of a man rather than more of one" (van der Gaag, 2014, p. 31). This recipe, written by a male postgraduate student, reflects on some of these issues.

Years ago, as an 18-year-old, I had an amazing opportunity to travel with a cultural education programme for six months. Each week we addressed a different topic. I will never forget the week that we spoke about feminism. I was excited to learn how people in my own age range approached the topic. I had not grown up thinking one gender was better than the other; they were just not the same.

We had a few hours of education related to feminism. It was student-led, and it had

attracted a few of the more passionate women in our group to speak on the topic. The open-minded young man that I was, I waited patiently for some revelation of how I could model healthy respectful and empowering behaviour. I was only to be disappointed and saddened at the way the topic traversed from women's

rights to what felt to my young, untrained ears and mind like man-hating.

I have spent many years since then struggling with the idea that in order for one group to gain equal ground they will either need to lower the status of another group, raise their own or a combination of both. Now I believe that the question is: How can we find ways for gender, and all other aspects of equality, to be a win-win situation?

How do we talk about this?

The challenge I face, and I see others around me facing, is that I don't want to lose my manliness or who I am as a man in order to help people feel better about who they are.

As a young male in academia, I have often found myself in a position of not taking a stance. Not because I didn't want one, but because I truly didn't know how to have



one in a healthy way. This is not the place I wanted to stand, I wanted to be able to talk about racism, feminism, sexuality, and the other topics that relate to gender.

This recipe is my stance on being an ally – an agent for change and equality in the classroom. Since the original draft of this recipe I have been blessed to be surrounded by inspirational friends, partners in bravery, and role models who live their values each and every day.

Seeing positive behaviour modelled around gender, sex, orientation, race and age, has helped me realise caring about people means putting relationships first. People are people. I challenge myself and I challenge others to approach every day with courage, and above all else to be kind.

### Ingredients

- Patience with yourself and others.
- Allies who have experienced the challenge and faced it.
- Compassion and empathy.

### Method

1. Use 'different' instead of 'weird'. The words we use matter. If something is different that is a fact, not a judgement.
2. Stand up for yourself and for what you believe in, without being rude or disrespectful. Ask the hard questions (see *Unravelling rhetoric* for ways of dealing with rhetorical traps).
3. If you dig yourself into a hole, dig yourself out. We have all done this at one point or another: do not simply let the damage stand. Use open conversation, powerful questions and forgiveness.
4. Reflect. If you have a difficult conversation, take some time to write down the points that bothered you or that you didn't totally understand. This may help the next time you are in a similar situation or when you see this person again (see *Challenging bias*).
5. Find a kindred spirit. If you believe that people are people... find someone else who believes it just as strongly. Formidable change comes when like-minded people come together. Just make sure you get some outside perspectives as well and don't slide into groupthink (Janis 1972/1982). Seek a mentor specifically in this area, someone with experience who can help you see what you can't totally grasp.
6. Never hide your light. Do not shy away from the opportunity to lead by example. Practice everyday leadership by showing respect and care beyond your own point of view.