



Episode 005—The Truth About Learning to Ally

Welcome to Adopted into Allyship, a podcast about loving others well and fighting for connection. I'm Jamie K Corbin and this is episode five, The Truth About Learning to Ally.

Hey, friendly reminder—this is intended to be a safe place to learn, but I do talk about hard things here because when you've been adopted into allyship, you don't shy away from conflict or pain. Healing and growth aren't compatible with avoidance or apathy. You can expect both an uncomfortable amount of honesty and vulnerability, as well as an abundance of grace as we work toward becoming better allies together..

In this episode we're going to break down the learning process a little bit. We will explore an educational concept called the zone of proximal development (say that three times fast) and why every ally needs to be aware of it. Also, I'm going to discuss the d-word that every ally will unfortunately face on their journey, and I'll give you some of my favorite ways to handle those dreaded moments.

Listen, in the winter months of 2008, I went through one of the most challenging learning experiences of my life. I, along with the other future teachers in my graduate studies cohort, experienced a hellish first time student teaching adventure—eight weeks in a local middle school.

Our mission? To identify strategies to teach literacy in content areas like science and social studies, write formal lesson plans utilizing those strategies, and then perform as amateur educators doing their best to come across as professionals with authority in front of a bunch of 13 and 14 year olds who had zero intentions of showing a sliver of mercy.

This was not a drill. We were not reading out of a textbook and writing a hypothetical paper. We had real students, in real classrooms, with real expectations to learn..or at least be entertained.

You might remember, middle schools are a special kind of place. Middle school teachers are special kinds of people. And it's right to assume that those eight weeks were a special kind of learning experience. Even though I am grateful for what I learned during that time, the feelings of frustration, discouragement, annoyance, and even embarrassment that occurred along the way still cause me to cringe and roll my eyes. It was brutal.

The process of meaningful learning is often brutal.

Here's why:

When you start learning something new, you do not show up with a blank slate for a brain. You have what us educators call a *schema*: a collection of current understandings about how the world works. You have observed the world your entire life, you have operated within it, you know what to expect. You understand it, and, even when you come up against situations that don't go your way—you have a set of tools to help you get around them. Additionally, if you have a faith background, you might even think that your understanding of the world is **the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God**. You like the world because it's predictable, and quite possibly, comfortable.

The new thing that you are learning? It doesn't fit into your schema. Obviously, right? That's why it's new!

But, in order to get that new thing to fit into your schema of how the world works (and that's what we're doing when we are learning) we have to break the current schema, even just a little bit and then reconstruct it so that everything makes sense to us again.

Breaking the current schema is the worst and there is no learning without that process. This brings us to the d-word, the word that describes a fundamental learning stage that makes me want to swear every time I run into it.

Disequilibrium.

I'm sure we could google a fancy-pants definition of disequilibrium, but I don't think it would connect with the emotional element that you will likely encounter on your allyship journey, so I'm just going to wing it.

Disequilibrium is an experience. It happens at a particular moment, when you realize, with some level of panic, that uh-oh—your typical coping tools that normally get you through any hiccups in your belovedly predictable world aren't helping you fit the new thing into your schema. Darn it!

Disequilibrium invokes a particular set of emotions, which can vary person to person depending on one's default reaction to stress and confusion. (So, if you're in the like 1% of people in the world who have their life together enough to embrace stress and confusion with the spirit of sunshine and a smile on your face, start a faster playback speed because this next bit isn't for you.)

I am *not* the sunshine-y, smiling-through-stress type, so my reactions to disequilibrium border on the dramatic at best and disastrously destructive at worst. If I'm not being careful, I can quickly devolve into the *burn it all down* kind of girl when I am trying to learn something new.

So it's good that I can step out of my tantruming toddler mindset, put on my best teacher superhero cape and have a little pep-talk with myself about the learning

process. Consider this your pep talk, friends! Feel free to come back and listen to it as often as you need to!

As allies, we have a lot of learning to do. It's hard learning because we are starting to realize that there are others around us who do not only experience the world differently than we ever have, but who are often disadvantaged by the social systems put in place that create unjust power structures, favoring certain people groups over others. And, not only do we have **so much** learning to do, we also have equal amounts of **unlearning** to do before the learning can really be of any help to doing our part in creating a better world.

Coming face to face with these realizations is not a pleasant experience.

Allyship is hard work to engage in, and there are many things that can be discouraging, but our experiences with disequilibrium do not have to be. We can make better choices than swearing and burning it all down.

Here are four strategies to take the edge off disequilibrium as you move through your allyship journey and learn to fit new pieces of information about how the world works into your current schema:

1. Remind yourself *why* you want to become a better ally, remind yourself that you can do hard things and that growth is happening in these challenging moments. It will be easier to keep pushing through if you can connect to the reason why this was important to you in the first place. Sometimes, you need to just keep swimming!
2. Ask a friend for help. Friends don't let friends ally alone! Find someone else who is working on their allyship journey and have a conversation about whatever it is that you are learning about. Quick disclaimer here: please do not approach your friends of color and tell them that Jamie K. Corbin told you to talk with them so that learning to be an ally would be easier for you. Nope, nope, nope! That's not their job! Let me not dance around this—if you are White and learning about how to be a better ally for people of color, find yourself another white friend to process with first. If you're a dude, and you're learning about how patriarchy and toxic masculinity has devalued women, find another dude to talk to, etc. I have so much to say about this one, it really is going to have to be its own episode, but for now, please just take my word for it.
3. Find more resources. Maybe you're having a hard time understanding an important concept that comes connected to BIG emotions, let's say the topics of white privilege or white fragility for example. Chances are you might need to keep being curious, asking questions, and researching before it can truly click. We are so fortunate that in 2022 resources are readily available. Lack of information is not on the list of reasons why allyship work is challenging.

4. Break your learning into smaller pieces. I know some of you are like me. You like a challenge, and you sometimes get over ambitious when it comes to learning. I love it, go get 'em! But, it's one thing to do that with something like learning a language or developing a website, and an entirely different thing to do with something like allyship. Allyship is a people thing. As in, it impacts real people who live real lives with real feelings and real needs. If you take on too much, you will burn out and that will be just as bad or worse than staying neglectfully ignorant.

Allyship is love in action. Here's a hard truth: as allies, we have to stay engaged in our own productive struggles. We have to keep learning, even though we will encounter disequilibrium with every step forward we take in our allyship journeys.

So, how do we do it? Well, at the top of the podcast, I threw out some really technical teacher words. Four of them, actually, and they are the magic fairy dust of learning, especially when paired with one of the four strategies we just covered.

Zone of Proximal Development.

Again, I'm sure Google could give us a great definition here, and you are of course welcome to look it up on your own, but I'm just going to break it down real quick. The zone of proximal development is the range of tolerance you have for learning something new. They vary from person to person and topic for topic. Our family likes jigsaw puzzles, so let me use that as an example.

The five of us here at Casa Corbin range between the ages of three and thirty-six, and have a varying amount of patience, ability to hold still, and anxiety over unfinished projects. If completing a jigsaw puzzle represented learning a new thing, the number of puzzle pieces would be a great metaphor for the zone of proximal development for each of us. As a family right now, our zone of proximal development, or, ZPD, when it comes to puzzling is between 300 and 500 pieces.

That is to say, we cannot tolerate much below that (boredom sets in and we lose interest way too fast) or above that (cue all the tears and big feelings of inadequacy). Either way, if we aren't providing a puzzle experience in the right zone of proximal development, it's game over.

Do you see how this concept is important for all allies to understand? If you don't work within your ZPD you will fail to grow—you will either make inadequate progress or you will give up. Failing to grow as an ally means failing to show up for your people—you know, your friends, family, neighbors, community members, and siblings in God's Holy Family who want to know that you have their backs in this busted up world.

We all have somebody who needs us to pick up the mantle of allyship and be there for them. That's why we're here, we want to be better allies, right?

So, we have to find that ZPD, the space between too easy and so frustrating that you essentially burn it all down by giving up and walking away from your efforts to grow as an ally. And, beyond that, we have to constantly be reflective practitioners, asking ourselves if our endurance and grit has grown over time, and deciding when our limits can be expanded.

This is not an easy task, friends. But it's an impossible one if you don't know that you should be considering it.

How do we know what our personal ZPD is? I think a smart starting point would be to spend time thinking about where your endpoints might be. Where might you lose interest or fail to progress in this work? Where might you get so frustrated that you give up? I'll give you some reflection questions to guide that exploration, but first, you'll need to pick a mode of reflection.

I think best about this kind of thing when I'm writing, but these questions could also be the framework for a conversation with someone who knows you well and loves you enough to be honest in their feedback, even if it's hard to hear.

Okay, let's talk reflection questions.

First: Where might you lose interest or fail to progress in this work? Brace yourselves for this one, friends, because this could get brutal. Sorry, not sorry!

Take a bit to reflect back on, say the last six months to a year.

- Where have you found yourself getting curious about things regarding race and allyship?
- What new resources have you read, listened to, or observed?
- When did you experience proximity to somebody different than yourself?
- What new things have you learned and how have you applied them to your life?
- How have you persevered when your current schema about how the world works has been challenged?

If your answers to these questions are thin, that's a good indication that you have been hanging out below your ZPD and need to put forth a bit more effort into being challenged and learning new things.

Next: Where might you get so frustrated that you give up? I'm embarrassed to admit this but I have very little grit in some situations, and I am only learning about a growth mindset now that I have my own children. I am much more likely to hang out dangerously close to this limit, one angry ugly cry away from calling it quits and yep, burning it down. What can I say? I am a never-ending work in progress.

For this question, you don't have to give yourself a time frame...you just have to be courageously honest with yourself.

- What causes you to feel overwhelmed?

- What causes you to feel frustrated?
- What causes you to feel hopeless?
- What causes you to feel embarrassed?
- What is the number one reason you walk away from things?

I'll share my answers with you, so that you don't end up feeling alone if you get some less-than-flattering data here.

I get overwhelmed when things take longer than I feel they should.

I feel frustrated when I don't understand something right away, when I am confused.

I feel hopeless when I take my eyes off of my own assignment to be a part of the solution and focus on the size of the problem and who is being a part of the problem rather than the solution.

I feel embarrassed when I make mistakes in front of people or when I react impulsively rather than act like a grown-up.

I walk away from things, and people, when I am misunderstood, feel unvalued, and feel hurt but don't want to admit it.

Looking at my list, I can tell that my zone of proximal development caps out with situations where I am going to be confused or make mistakes in public, or tempted to speak or act reactively. I can tell that in order to stay in my ZPD I'm going to need to limit my time on social media where I can get real impulsive real quick. I'm also going to need a few strong people around me that will hold me accountable to maintaining focus on my own work, keep my pride in check, and remind me that the kind of change I am hoping for will take generations to come into fruition. I'm also just going to need to accept the fact that I'm going to be misunderstood, feel unvalued, hurt people, and get hurt in this work. Unfortunately, it's all a part of the allyship journey. I should probably just go ahead and come up with a plan for what to do when those scenarios happen.

I think that when you look at the answers to your questions some obvious patterns will pop up for you. I hope you'll honor your personal learning boundaries and commit to making steady progress in your zone of proximal development. And, when disequilibrium rears its ugly head, I hope you'll dig deep and do what you need to do to keep pushing forward because you have people in your life who are hoping you will do exactly that in order to become a better ally.

Father God,

You are the only one who is all-knowing. Your ways are higher than our ways and your thoughts are higher than our thoughts. Thank you for being patient with us as we figure out how your world is supposed to work.

We have so much to learn, Lord, and we pray that you would help us bring our thoughts about how the world ought to work in line with your plan of shalom and loving others as ourselves.

We boldly ask you to provide us with as many learning opportunities as it takes for us to figure out things that are fundamental to loving others well; and help us approach learning with humble and soft hearts.

We ask that you prevent us from staying too comfortable or safe in our learning, and to keep us from leaving when we are tempted to burn it all down.

Give us grit and give us gusto, God, so that we may do our small part to bring your kingdom nearer, now.

In our brother Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Thank you for joining me for another episode of Adopted into Allyship, produced by Day Three Studios. It's an honor to be your ally as you push yourself to listen, learn, and love in a way that helps you become an equipped, reliable, and action-oriented ally.

If you found this episode helpful or encouraging, I would be most grateful if you would take a minute and rate the podcast, leave a review, and share it with those you know who could benefit from joining us as we work toward loving one another well and fighting for connection. I will be back with more next Thursday, but until then, I would love to connect with you on social media. I usually hangout on Instagram, but you can find me on most platforms at [jamie k corbin](#) and of course, I have more thoughts on the topic of allyship on the website, [jamielcorbin.com](#).