

Ally or Accomplice? The Language of Activism

A new use of the word accomplice pushed this educator to rethink her activist approaches inside and outside the classroom.

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Recently, I attended a Diversity Committee meeting at my daughter's school. For context, the majority of committee members, including me, are white. This committee actively works to educate our community on issues of racial injustice through events for students and parents. One event is an Ally Week during which students consider the hard work of allyship with marginalized communities. As the clerk of the committee, I strive to make ally work—not “savior work”—a core component of our mission and programming.

So when someone mentioned the word *accomplice* in the context of social justice work, I was taken aback. I joked and said, “It sounds like we would be committing a crime!” But I wanted to know more about how some social justice advocates are using this term. I also wanted to know how I might rethink how those in power can stand *with* and not *for* marginalized populations.

Thinking about the word accomplice, I remembered my Latin roots from high school—*com* means “with” or “together.” So while one may hear accomplice and think about crime, the original meaning of the word conveys a sense of cooperation—and not in a criminal sense. In a social justice context, accomplice speaks to a sense of community or “folding together,” from the Latin *complicare*.

Here's something else I learned: For social justice advocates who use the term accomplice, they often see the site of focus as the main difference between the work of an ally and that of an accomplice. An ally will mostly engage in activism by standing with an individual or group in a marginalized community. An accomplice will focus more on dismantling the structures that oppress that individual or group—and such work will be directed by the stakeholders in the marginalized group. Simply, ally work focuses on individuals, and accomplice work focuses on the structures of decision-making agency.

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Of course, these two brands of work blend into each other and are hard to untangle. But for the sake of understanding, we can look at an example: An ally will “volunteer at a local racial justice-focused organization,” while an accomplice will “join an organization with an explicit aim of naming and disrupting racial injustice,” according to the useful guide “Opportunities for White People in the Fight for Racial Justice.” The former is working with *individuals* toward those individuals’ access to representation, dignity or some kind of protection. The latter is working on dismantling a *structure*, thereby striving for those same protections, but through a different kind of work.

While some writing about these terms implies a hierarchy, with accomplice work as the “best” type of social justice work, I would argue that both ally and accomplice work are crucial. Working on the individual level will push us toward the safety and dignity of marginalized populations in the present moment (ally), and working at the structural level will take a long view to destroy oppressive social structures and create a more equitable world (accomplice).

I don’t see the committee at my daughter’s school changing the name of Ally Week to Accomplice Week in the near future, but I can see the term accomplice as an entry point for those of us having conversations about how to enact social justice from positions of privilege. Continuing to critically investigate our positions in social justice activism allows us to be more thoughtful teachers and practitioners as we all work toward a more just world.