

- Welcome to In My Shoes, a podcast about different perspectives on shared experiences across the University of Michigan campus. My name is Rebecca Fantone, the host of this podcast. In this episode, we'll be hearing from our guests, Monica and Priya who worked together in Information Technology Services here at the university. We'll listen to their conversation about code switching, what it means to them and their personal experiences.
- Hi, my name is Monica Hickson, I worked for Information and Technology Services at the University of Michigan. I've been working there for 13 years and enjoy every bit of an adventure at ITS that I have had and will continue to have.
- Hi, my name is Priya Dandamudi. I work as a business system analyst in Information Technology Services in a department called Information Quest. I've been with the University of Michigan for five years now, and I'm enjoying every little bit of it.
- So Priya, you know, we teach a class at Information and Technology Services, as you know, called code switching. And I know that, you know, we always tell people what code switching is, but what does it really mean to you when we talk about code switching?
- Code switching refers to the process of my behavioral changes and mannerism changes and language modifications that I need to do in order to fit with the mainstream folks at work and the society. I'm an immigrant in this country for the past 20 years. And there's so much that I've acquired over the past 20 years as to how to fit in with the mainstream so that I'm not looked at as somebody who is very different. And somebody doesn't look at me with an inquisitive question asking like, how would she react to this? Or how would she behave differently? Does that make sense?
- Yes, no, I understand. I used to be before we talked about code switching and I used to think, oh, I never code switch. I used to always think, well, what is that? Do I really do that? That's my natural personality. But then I notice that I was at ITS one day and I'm like, that's not how you would normally respond if you were around your friends or if you were at home or if you were in the majority of African American women, you wouldn't respond that way. Me being an African-American woman I would probably have responded a little bit different but when I walk into a meeting or a classroom, when it's all, you know, someone that's different than I am normally, I'm like would I have responded that way? And I realized, no. So that is a part of code switching when you have to alter yourself to what you consider the majority. And I never considered myself in certain spots as a minority, but when I get into meetings and classrooms where it's male dominant then I questioned myself and I said, I do do code switching.
- That's very true up, until we started co-teaching this class, I hadn't come across the word code switching at all in any other terms, other than literally code, like in the IT word code. When I first went into the definition on Google to say like, what is code switching? And like, oh my Lord, I have been doing this all my life. Just not realizing that I've been doing this to switch myself to different environments and behave differently in as such a seamless fashion. That it's become second nature to me almost in the past few years.
- And you know, and I also realized that when you code switch, sometimes it's a matter of life and death. And our jobs, we probably don't think of it that way but if we don't code switch in the environment in which we live in, we act a certain way of there's a stereotype, I'm not sure if you've heard about it where if you become emotional or angry as a woman you can be the angry, emotional woman or the angry African-American woman, which is worse. And those stereotypes can really hinder you know, certain situations, especially in meetings. And I don't know if you've ever experienced that in a meeting where you come across as maybe not heard or if you are angry, you may have to tone it down. You know, as people would say, because, and that's a form of code switching as well, because normally you have every right to be upset in that situation but you may feel that for this particular purpose you can't base upon your identity. Or you'll be looked upon differently.
- I can't agree more. That is also situations that I can, I know personally, if you do not code switch, your chances of growth in career, chances of advancement or chances of even being considered to be part of a lead group, maybe double question whether you fit in that role perfectly or not, the more you adapt yourself to be fitting into that particular role in spite of your differences which could potentially be your strength as well. But you'll have to tone that down to a mannerism that fits that particular situation.

- Yeah, I agree. And it seems like when you can correct me if your experience is different, but for marginalized groups, it's definitely something that has to occur in the workplace.

- Right. Like if I were to go into a meeting to even have a regular conversation, it doesn't happen many times in IT. But I would say in my previous jobs like if I wanted to have a conversation, I should know what the latest news is on sports. I should be able to relate to a conversation or add value to that, that initial starting of the meeting with anything that's relevant to the Saturday sports has happened or the weekend events. So if I do not input myself with those jargons, those terminologies, I'm already left out and looked as like somebody who is not interested in the life that's happening here in the city or in this part of the world. So you have to up your game just to be in part of the conversation as part of the conversation.

- As my role as an instructional designer I cannot mispronounce a word. I cannot have something go out, grammatically incorrect because then it becomes not a mistake, but it could be a part of, oh, well of course, because she's a woman or she's African American or she's fill in the blank, whatever that might look like. It can't just be a simple mistake that I made. It always seems to go to the social identity that I hold which has you were talking about, I am an African-American woman, but what you don't see, I have a master's degree. I have an undergrad in journalism. There's things that you don't see beneath the lines. So you have to switch to kind of make up for that, if that makes sense? Or at least that's how I feel now. Other people may say, well, no, you don't have to do that. Just be yourself. But I can't bring my authentic self all the time. Sometimes I do have to code switch so that people can understand that I'm not what you're just seeing as an identity on the surface.

- The one sentence that you just said that, whether somebody looks at you differently or not, you are constantly second guessing yourself. That is a huge stress that you can live with because you are constantly proving yourself to be competent. It's one thing to know that you can and one thing to constantly prove that you can which debilitates your functionality and your performance you can use that and energy towards actually functionally being better at your work. Other than thinking, what is that person going to think if I made this mistake? What is that person going to think if I did not communicate it the way that they understood?

- It's hard, especially when people don't know you. Like, I work on a lot of different projects. So therefore some team members have never seen me. The people that know me, I don't feel I have to switch as much, I guess. But when you go into a new project as the instructional designer, and they're looking at you, some people may have the stereotype that, oh my goodness, she's not going to know how to manage this change. Or she's not going to understand how to document this. Or she clearly doesn't know how to use a website or build a website or edit a website. And I do bring all those skills, but you have to come in a little differently when people don't know you because you have to kind of set the stage as I will. Like, no, I do know what I'm talking about and sometimes you take that on because my identities are visible, and as yours are. Some people don't have visible identities all the time. But when you're talking about race or you're talking about age, or you're talking about certain things like gender, those are visible. And then it seems like it makes the code switching more validated if that makes sense? But I feel like I have to prove something because I hold my identities on the outside, I guess as opposed to something like religion can may not always be seen, unless you're wearing a cross or something that's something that will show. But no, it's difficult. I mean, it's very difficult and you have to know when to do it, turn it on and off. Now ask, I'll ask you another question. Do you find that you have to kind of preset your code switch or you just do it on the, on the fly of the moment? Like, okay, this is a code switching moment. Or do you have to practice that? Does it come natural to you now?

- As I said, up until we started this class, I didn't even realize that I've been doing this, but as I've started this, like it's almost a couple of years now since we've been

- Yes.

- taking these classes. So I'm noticing myself, I'm being more observant about when I switch and when I don't and when do I feel emotionally stable? And am I causing a little bit of anxiety for myself when I have to switch? And I am noticing that there is a level of anxiety that is always there at a very low level, when you are proving yourself to be somebody that the other person can accept.

- And nobody teaches you the rules. That's the thing about it. And I think that's one of the reasons why, in my personal opinion, why code switching comes into play. No one teaches you the rules. I don't think I code switch all the time. I'm actually, I don't think I code switch for the most part but I noticed when I do and it's not something that I think about but when I feel tension or tightness in my chest or I'm shaking, or something's not quite right, then I realize, oh, I'm not bringing that authentic self that I mentioned earlier. I'm not able to do that in this situation because I'm maybe in a male dominant space or maybe I'm in a space where I'm looked upon because I'm younger or maybe older than the rest of the population. And then that's when I realize, okay, you're making a switch because you're not feeling comfortable in your own skin at this moment. And code switching can be dangerous in that way because you go home at the end of the night, if you have that meeting or that conference or whatever you're doing that day and you're tense. And you wonder where that tension has come from because you've had to break outside of what you would normally do in the norms just to suit what the majority wants you to be, or wants to see from you. And that can be very frustrating.

- In our next episode we'll continue to hear from Monica and Priya. We'll learn more about their personal experiences. How code switching is a means of survival in white spaces and how code switching also looks different for people with visible and invisible identities. Thank you for listening to, In My Shoes, a podcast about different perspectives on shared experiences across the University of Michigan campus. In My Shoes was produced with the support from the University of Michigan Center for Academic Innovation. This episode was edited by Ellie Daftor Find us on Spotify, Apple Podcasts or SoundCloud. For updates on the most recent episodes, follow us on Twitter @inmyshoes.