

Walk the Talk: Supporting the Equity Journey of Online Higher Education Institutions

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Author Note

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Abstract

This ongoing qualitative research project examines the process by which faculty and staff at an online university moved from discussions of equity to the implementation of equity practices in the learning environment. 55 faculty and staff members participated. As these are preliminary results, faculty and staff will complete two additional surveys after they complete their voluntary 21-day equity challenge and book discussion sessions. After participating in the virtual interactive game, students showed an increased understanding of structural inequality, the intersectionality between race and poverty, and the systemic issues facing them. Additionally, preliminary results suggest that faculty and staff feel better equipped to support diverse students. These preliminary results are discussed in terms of potential implications for institutions working with fluctuating faculty and staff while working towards institutional equity and inclusion goals.

Keywords: diversity, equity, inclusion, gaming, higher education, professional development

Walk the Talk: Guiding the Equity Journey of Online Higher Education Institutions

Action is an essential part of equity work, but it can be challenging because it forces us to confront and examine some of our socialization and personal biases. Mintz (2021) states that pursuing equity can look like the pressure institutions feel to live up to their purported ideals of merit, diversity, inclusivity, and opportunity. However, what causes the pendulum to swing towards equity in higher education? McNair et al. (2020) suggest that a paradigm shift in language and behavior is needed and that institutions must use an equity lens or framework to guide their work. Hence, faculty and staff having a deep understanding of the systemic issues that impact student success and retention in higher education are essential to the learning environment and the institution. The opportunities to improve equity in higher education remain at the forefront of conversations and should remain the focus of an institution's continuous improvement efforts. These glaring equity gaps have impacted underrepresented and underserved students the greatest (Prystowsky, 2018). Specifically, the non-traditional adult learners who make up 50% of students in higher education are the ones faced with the most significant challenges. (Cahalan et al., 2021). Finally, there is significance in meeting the needs of these students, which can support the sustainability of colleges and universities.

Introduction

Hammond (2015) reasons that intention is the starting point with self-examination of one's cultural identity in the next stage. Notably, the University of ABC leadership team has focused on intentionally supporting students who have been systemically marginalized. Consequently, the researchers assert that it would be a best practice to propose the next step to be supporting faculty through understanding their personal stories and the impact their lived experiences have on their instructional practices. This multi-pronged approach is meaningful as it will help institutions learn ways to support faculty as they move from an equity talk to an equity walk. The researchers seek to provide a professional development protocol to:

- enhance institutional and faculty equity-centered pedagogy
- positively impact student retention and success.
- model for institutions, equity initiatives that engage faculty stakeholders.

Dr. Teresa Leary Handy, a former Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at a private P-12 school, knows first-hand the challenges of shifting a 175-year-old institution forward on equity issues. Dr. Tamecca Fitzpatrick has diverse experiences helping individuals and

organizations ensure their actions are evidence of their commitment to the students, families, and communities that they serve. Together, this team wanted to explore a specific interactive gaming experience followed by the book with an action framework with an optional equity challenge to help provide faculty and staff the ignitor needed to build their capacity and fuel their equity work in talk and action.

Literature Review

Andragogy is the learning theory that is designed to address the particular needs of the adult learner (Cercone, 2008 & Thompson et al., 2004). As the researchers selected the tools/strategies for this project, they wanted each to be rooted in best practices for working with adult learners. In other words, the tools would respect the participants' prior experiences while including what they need to know, it had to be self-directed as well as problem-oriented with immediate opportunities to use the new learning (Cercone, 2008).

According to McNair et al. (2020), the ten obstacles that block an institution's journey to racial equity are:

- Claiming not to see race.
- Not being able/willing to notice racialized consequences.
- Skirting around race.
- Resisting calls to disaggregate data by race and ethnicity.
- Substituting race talk with poverty talk.
- The pervasiveness of white privilege and institutionalized racism.
- Evasive reactions to racist incidents.
- The incapacity to see institutional racism in familiar routines.
- The myth of universalism and seeing racial inequities as a reflection of academic deficiency.
- Seeing racial inequities as a reflection of academic deficiency.

So, how does one combat these obstacles? In the text, McNair et al. (2020) provides equity-minded responses, but how does one develop an equity mind? Exactly what is an equity mind? How can institutions, faculty, and staff properly execute equity initiatives if they don't understand equity, the toll it takes on faculty of color, and what that looks like in practice at all levels throughout the institution (Ballard et al., 2020)? Fundamentally, the book is excellent and there are research-supported strategies to move institutions forward on their equity journey, but

how can faculty and staff explain equity in their practice with students and connect it to their institutional work?

Bensimon, et al. (2016) defines equity-mindedness as a way of approaching educational reform that foregrounds the policies and practices contributing to disparities in educational achievement and abstains from blaming students for those accumulated disparities. According to Bensimon et al., (2016) the five principles that institutional leaders can use to guide their work are:

1. Clarity in language, goals, and measures.
2. “Equity-mindedness” should be the guiding paradigm for language and action.
3. Equitable practice and policies are designed to accommodate differences in the contexts of students’ learning-not treat all students the same.
4. Enacting equity requires a continual process of learning, disaggregating data, and questioning assumptions about relevance and effectiveness.
5. Equity must be enacted as a pervasive institution and system-wide principle.

These five principles, which the researchers, who have experience as diversity practitioners, find to be ideal to help institutions move on their equity journey. However, the researchers wondered how faculty and staff conceptualize these equity obstacles and principles. When working with students, faculty and staff draw on their rich cultural histories. How are institutions preparing faculty and staff to work with 21st-century students? How are faculty and staff trained to handle the complexities of culture, diversity, and systemic oppression that are impossible to ignore as work is done to dismantle structural inequalities that perpetuate systemic racism in higher education (Alexander, et al., 2015, Ash et al., 2020, Castellanos et al., 2008, and Kozleski et al., 2020)?

How do faculty and staff unpack these complex issues to become more culturally responsive or equity-minded? What does it mean to become more culturally responsive? Kwak (2020) asserts that culturally responsive teaching views the cultural knowledge of students as an asset that is needed in higher education by faculty who are adept and comfortable at using that information to scaffold the students learning. Whereas, Casetllanos et al., (2008) contend that for student affairs professionals, training that addresses interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cultural dynamics while also focusing on personal awareness and knowledge would maximize skill development (field studies or a practicum). Furthermore, how do faculty and staff engage in this

deeply personal work that requires them to be not only aware but comfortable connecting with the cultural background of the students they engage within the learning environment. If faculty and staff have not increased their cultural awareness and engaged in not only a critical reflection but also a personal reflection they will not realize their experiences reflect their cultural values and norms and in many cases those cultures and norms are varied from those of the students they serve (Kozleski et al., 2020). We know that how faculty and staff think about ability, intelligence, and academic talent has important implications for students' motivation and performance (Murphy & Destin, 2016). Accordingly, having a growth mindset, one that identifies challenges, knows which strategies to use with students, flexible, curious, open, and receptive to change is a necessary 21-century skill our faculty and staff will need as they work with the 21-century student (Khan & Forshaw, 2017).

Purpose

The purpose of the study is to examine the process by which faculty and staff move from the discussion of equity to the implementation of equity practices in the learning environment. Students need higher education institutions (hei's) to see all their identifiers in the classroom and during their interactions. HEIs that can understand marginalized students' racialized experiences, resiliency, and persistence will demonstrate the cultural competency, cultural humility, and culturally responsive teaching practices these students need. Furthermore, developing a faculty and staff with this skill set supports the 21st-century skills our global students will need to be global leaders (Khan & Forshaw, 2017). For faculty and staff to see the complete student, they must examine their personal stories, biases, and practices while assessing the impact each could have on the institution's equity work. Leaders in higher education are hiring consultants, reading books, and conducting professional development to meet their initial goals. However, it remains to be seen if this is the most effective way to help faculty become more culturally responsive and equity-centered. In fact, after experiencing several lecture-style trainings and book studies, the researchers were curious if a combination of learning experiences could ignite the action needed to move equity forward. They sought to explore, what is the ignitor for movement from talk to action? What is an effective way to help faculty and staff become more culturally responsive and equity-centered in both talk and action?

Design/Methodology/Approach

This study first engaged Factuality, a timed online interactive gaming experience that simulates structural inequality in America. While participating in Factuality, participants assumed the identities of specific characters encountering a series of fact-based advantages and limitations based on the intersection of their race, class, gender, faith, sexual orientation, age, and ability. Next, participants will read and discuss the book, From Equity Talk to Equity Walk by Tia Brown McNair, Estela Mara Bensimon, and Lindsey Malcom-Piqueux. There are three more sessions of this book discussion left. Participants were provided a reflective opportunity, by participating in a 21-day equity walk, where they have a chance to demonstrate their equity practices in their learning environments. IRB approval (IRB no. 22-0004-UAGC) was received from the University of ABC Institutional Review Board.

The researchers sought to answer:

- a. A What effect does the Factuality the Game have on the understanding full-time faculty have of systemic issues that affect students in the College of Arts and Sciences?
- b. How do University of ABC faculty members demonstrate culturally responsive teaching and how do they practice equity in their learning environments?
- c. How do University of ABC faculty members explain their equity walk?
- d. How do a framework-focused book and equity challenge support their work with students?

The methods utilized are Pre and Post Surveys and small group discussions. The pre-survey will be used to gather baseline information before the interactive game and book study. The post-survey will be used to gather follow-up information. Finally, small group discussions will be used to explain, explore, and understand the faculty members' opinions, behavior, and experiences. The researcher developed a list of semi-structured questions for the book study discussions. The survey and small discussion group questions were tested by a panel of experts to ensure the inter-rater reliability of the questions.

The population of the study is all full-time faculty, Associate faculty, and staff at the University of Arizona Global Campus. The target sample size was 40 participants and the actual sample is 55. The researcher used voluntary response sampling for ease of access. The researchers disseminated e-mail invitations to all faculty and staff. In addition, digital announcements were used through intranet services for three weeks before the event. Interested parties completed an online form to receive additional information. Once their interest was

known they were sent a registration link for the Factuality event and an informed consent link. All participants who completed an informed consent form were sent a pre-survey. At the end of the Factuality event, participants were sent a post-survey. The survey data collection was completed through an online survey resource. The participants who participated in the Factuality event were also invited to the book study sessions (there are three remaining at this time) which are conducted via Zoom. To maintain confidentiality, the researcher created a private meeting, enabled the waiting room to function, and established ground rules for participation (no screenshots and participants cannot record). In addition, the participants will provide consent for cloud recording and transcript, and recordings which will be stored on the Zoom Cloud and deleted upon receipt of the transcript (Santhos, et al, 2021). Transcription was completed by Zoom.com and the data is being and will be analyzed through thematic content analysis and narrative analysis. Participants were reminded of the following they should protect their privacy with their location of the interview, understand that Zoom recordings are not private since Zoom may have access, and the Zoom recordings (audio and video) are considered identifiable data.

The research project aims to support the University of Arizona Global Campus faculty in their work with University of Arizona Global Campus students. Thus, this research project will refer to the faculty as “participants”. There is the potential for some discomfort for the participants as they discuss issues related to race. The researchers respect that they do not know the resources and laws related to mental health treatment in the respective states of the participants. The researchers specified to the participants that they are not providing treatment for those who may experience stress about recalling distressing events. Instead, they contracted a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) who has racial trauma training to recognize when a participant may need a break from the discussion. The researchers had the LCSW engage everyone in five-minute deep breathing calming exercises at the end of each session. The researchers encouraged participants to journal and engage in self-care activities (suggestions were provided). At the beginning of each session, the LCSW introduced herself and announced her background, and her services (to provide stress-reducing strategies, not therapy). She did not solicit participants rather she was available for them to seek stress-reducing strategies during the session in a private breakout room. The breakout room was a voluntary space for the participants to use if they felt the need to take a break from the interactive game or book discussion. The LCSW did not speak during the session. Rather she observed the group. If she believed the

conversation was escalating, she intervened to offer a stress-reducing strategy. Participants were reminded of the presence of the LCSW with notes in the chat. There was an alternative clinician on call if needed. During each session, there is an interactive game and book discussion script read by the researchers and the LCSW.

There are four-hour-long book discussion sessions, and each includes a five-minute stress-reducing activity at the end. The first session covered the Preface and Chapters one and two. Session two will cover Chapters three and four. Session three will cover Chapter five and the final session is a wrap-up session where participants will share their next steps on their equity journey. The researchers have discussion questions for each book session. However, participants actively engaged in open discussions during the Factuality event and the one book discussion that has taken place.

The pre-survey included a total of 19 questions. Five questions collected participant anonymous identifiers, and demographic information which included job position, gender, ability status, and race. Throughout this paper, comments will be shared using anonymous identifiers. There were six Likert scale questions. These questions were scored using a 5-point Likert scale was a five-point Please note that in the pre-survey there was a scaling issue with four questions. The instructions were correct, but the Likert scale was inadvertently reversed. According to Smyth and Olson (2019), errors do occur and mismatches can undermine data quality in both mail and telephone modes, although they may be less detrimental when respondents can see both the question stem and the response options in self-administered modes, which was the case in this study.

Finally, there were eight long answer questions. The open-ended questions included:

- What is your understanding of structural inequality?
- Please provide examples of your understanding of structural inequality.
- List systemic issues that confront University of Arizona Global Campus students.
- What is your understanding of the intersectionality of race and poverty?
- In what ways do you demonstrate support for diverse students in your classroom or care?
- Share examples of your classroom practices or student interactions that demonstrate an understanding of structural inequality.

- What is something you don't understand or that bothers/irritates you as you engage with students from diverse backgrounds? OR What, if any, concerns or questions do you have as you engage with diverse students. Please feel free to be candid.

The variety in survey questions allowed participants to share their personal views more deeply. Dego, made note that “time-on-task was more than 10 minutes (approx. 35+ min). Retention will very much depend on the time your respondents take/need to participate. I recommend taking a second strong look at the length of time it will take for volunteer faculty to complete the stages.” The researchers will use that recommendation when proposing a scale-up model.

One of the questions the researchers asked participants was to “share something you don't understand or that bothers/irritates you as you engage with students from diverse backgrounds – or what if any concerns or questions you have as you engage with diverse students. Please feel free to be candid.” The researchers found the participants to be not only candid but also vulnerable. We received over fifty responses that demonstrated future professional development opportunities for faculty and staff who have some issues appreciating the many facets of diversity, understanding their own biases, and the impact of structural racism. Here are some of their responses:

- Sometimes it seems that students simply accept their circumstances and don't make enough effort to think out of the box to overcome them.
- I want to know the challenges that diverse students face. I recognize that there are many challenges that I have not had to face, and I don't want my ignorance of those challenges to prevent me from helping my students overcome them.
- I can't say bothered, but I will say frustrating. It frustrates me when students withhold information. On the path to building trust, I hope that I am not missing an opportunity to help simply because I did not know or lacked information.
- Students who are provocative by making statements such as Adolf Hitler is to be respected as a leader and admired and respected. Students who fear retaliation for engaging in topics related to inequality, institutionalized racism, sexism, and ageism.
- I feel that students from diverse backgrounds may feel that I won't be able to relate to their situation/experience. Though I am a first-generation college graduate and came from situational poverty.

- Things that bother me is some ethnicity feels that they are entitled to things and have them handed to them. That bothers me that they do not feel they need to work hard like everyone else. If you do not give them what is asked, they start sending out mixed signals on how they are being treated.
- It is difficult for me to know how to handle Ebonics in student writing. It's not the collegiate way to write, but I feel as though I am punishing them for their culture/language. Unsure how to navigate that.

Preliminary Findings:

There have been nearly fifty thousand participants in the facilitated dialogue, virtual, and interactive experience that simulates structural inequality in America (*Factuality*, n.d.). In the unique gaming experience, participants assume the identities of characters and through the 90-minute experience, they encounter a series of fact-based advantages and limitations based on the intersection of their race, class, gender, faith, sexual orientation, age, and ability (*Factuality*, n.d.). The experience at the University of Arizona Global Campus was not personalized but the developer did connect relevant data points related to higher education. The overall feedback from the participants who engaged in the *Factuality* event is indicated in Figure 1. The 55 participants generally described the activity as overwhelmingly positive. However, there were notably a few participants who had a different experience. Nancy (white female) and Autumn (white female) both reported feeling sad after the interactive experience ended. Ann (a white Hispanic female) felt overwhelmed and Sophia (a Black female) felt stressed and needed to visit the breakout room with the LCSW. She was the only participant who visited the breakout room during the *Factuality* event. As the game progressed it became increasingly clear that Black women were marginalized and significantly impacted by structural and systemic racism.

One of the pre-survey questions asked the participants about their understanding and ability to explain structural inequality in America. In the pre-survey responses (n=51) 58% of the respondents indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed that they understood and could explain structural inequality in America. In the post-survey questions (n=32) 90% of the participants strongly agreed or agreed that they understood and could explain structural inequality in America. Please note that no other data has been collected at this point. Participants will report on their voluntary equity challenge and a final survey after the final book discussion. The

following are reports of new learning from the participants who participated in the 90-minute Factuality experience:

- Redlining maps was eye-opening. (multiple responses)
- The cost of structural inequality was new learning for me. I knew it was big, but I did not know it was \$16 billion big.
- I need to learn more about how to support students and faculty in the area of DEI. I plan on participating in as many sessions as this to broaden my foundation and strengthen my role in this process.
- I learned a lot. It was an eye-opening experience. I feel so grateful for all that I have and have a better understanding of the sacrifices others have to make for reasons beyond their direct control.
- How disparate pain medications are distributed between white and black women for the same procedure depending on the color of the prescribing doctor.
- Affirming how we cannot truly understand anyone else's experiences and need to honor their journeys and perspectives.
- I'm having very mixed feelings about being part of a society that is so obviously built on the practice of oppressing certain groups, whether it's based on race, country of origin, or faith. It is so baked in.
- New learning = now quantifying by time how long it takes women and minority women to earn what white men earn in a year. I felt that like a punch in the gut. The training also exposed a blind spot I did not know I had about disability impact, particularly when and how it intersects with race and poverty.
- When one's personal life or experiences is impacted, one takes notice. Taking part in this exercise helped me to develop empathy for the structural inequities that take place every day in the lives of others.
- I knew surface info but did not know the level of disparity in housing, healthcare, and pay scale covered in the factuality game session 1.
- I did not previously have much knowledge of the opioid crisis and had not made the comparison with the treatment of crack in the 80s. It is clear that there is a difference in the way these two types of drug abuse have been treated that aligns with race.

- Environmental justice specifics regarding green space.

The participants want to know:

- How to translate this into university policies and classroom practices that support our students?
- What needs to change in our own systems?
- Support faculty in the same manner as we support students.
- It would be nice to have examples/best practices of how this knowledge would be best be implemented in the classroom.
- How does this look/sound from the student's perspective when they experience support?
- What is the most impactful way a single individual can make a dent in structural inequality for our students?
- We've had recent policy changes in addition to our new culture of care initiative. Are we doing anything to address hiring practices to ensure we are growing a thoughtful student support team that aligns with our new policies and changing culture?
- My only question is how to make a positive impact in the brief time we have students in the course since they already have many demands pulling them in different directions.

The researchers are optimistic that the planned book discussion will support faculty and staff as they work to answer many of these questions. The chosen book has strategies and action steps for HEIs to take on their equity journey. In addition, as the participants complete their voluntary equity challenge, they will find opportunities to not only extend their learning but to also put some of their words into action. In our final session, faculty and staff will develop and share their action steps for their equity journey to support students in their care.

Originality/value:

The Walk the Talk study uses a multi-pronged approach to provide evidence for the types of effective strategies needed to build capacity for faculty and staff at the University of Arizona Global Campus. These strategies will be used to propose a best practice professional development protocol that best supports faculty and staff in their equity work with students while increasing their understanding of not only their role and their connection to their belief system but also the impact of their values on the learning environment and students' experience. As this

study is ongoing, the findings in this paper are preliminary. However, the preliminary findings have high implications for higher education institutions seeking effective and efficient professional development models to support their equity initiatives with a dynamic staff.

The expected outcomes of the study are:

1. Faculty will demonstrate an understanding of the systemic issues that impact their students.
2. Faculty will through self-reflection explain the ways their personal experiences impact their learning environment.
3. Faculty will describe ways they will specifically practice equity in their learning environments.

Conclusion

The equity work at the institutional level needs to be dynamic and representative of the best practices of equity work. The preliminary research presented in this paper indicates that using the virtual, interactive gaming activity does increase the knowledge of systemic issues that confront students that can support an institution's equity work. The researchers anticipate that upon completion of the book discussion and the voluntary equity challenge they will learn more from the study participants to help guide their work and develop a professional development protocol that will address the deficits and needs identified by the study participants.

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Figure 1



Word Cloud of Factuality Participants