PUTTING EQUITY INTO PRACTICE:
Equity-Minded Professional Learning

EQUITY-MINDED DIGITAL LEARNING
Strategy Guide Series

everylearner everywhere

Achieving the Dream

PUTTING EQUITY INTO PRACTICE: EQUITY-MINDED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Designers and facilitators of educator professional learning should model exemplary strategies so that faculty will in turn engage equitably with students. This means ensuring that professional learning fosters belonging, centers equity, leverages strengths of participants, and explicitly seeks to cultivate and sustain cultural ways of knowing and being for diverse learners to be inclusive of students and faculty.

By definition, professional learning is the creation of learning experiences that build cultural competence and support faculty through facilitated engagements and communities of practice. Including cultural competency and communities of practice distinguishes professional learning from professional development which is often a one-off event that does not necessarily involve application and evaluation of the topic presented. What designers and facilitators do to support faculty informs their work with students. Through professional learning, faculty can develop their capacity to be change agents both inside and outside of the classroom. Achieving the Dream and Every Learner Everywhere have articulated a set of Good Practice Principles that guide the design and facilitation of high-impact professional learning (Bass, et al., 2019; Eynon & Iuzzini, 2020). This guide expands on those resources and clarifies what it means to create opportunities for professional learning that are explicitly equity-minded.

Being equity-minded also means that faculty assess which practices may not work for students. Equity begins with recognizing and acknowledging that faculty operate in systems and structures that perpetuate racism, sexism, ableism, and other marginalizing and oppressive experiences. Academic institutions are no exception.

> Overcoming our nation's deep roots in racism and inequality will require undoing layers of systems and structures that were built to keep people of color from access to opportunity. But in order to improve educational outcomes for all, we must challenge the status quo and deeply consider what isn't working, why and what can be done.
>
> *College Spark*

As professional learning facilitators, we must explicitly embrace and engender the values of cultural pluralism and an assets-based approach to faculty. Rather than try to "fix" faculty, we should help them build their capacity to address systemic barriers. Understanding our roles in dismantling systems of oppression is essential.

These resources are a good place to start

- *How to Be an Antiracist* (Kendi, 2019)

- *White Fragility* (DiAngelo, 2018)

- *Anti-racism resources for white people* (Flicker & Klein, 2020)

- *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Smith, 2012)

Within your sphere of influence, you have immediate agency to transform your institution and practices as you develop and support faculty. You can help faculty create spaces of belonging, authentic engagement, and social justice by designing and implementing a professional learning strategy that is "culturally relevant, intergenerational, collective, and co-created" (Maloney, et al., 2019).

> "Research in social psychology suggests, in general, that changing behavior can actually lead to attitude change."
>
> *(Creary, 2020)*

Equity-minded professional learning may be counter to the professional learning sequence you are familiar with: knowledge > skills > attitudes > behavior. We believe your professional learning should focus on faculty practices, behaviors, and actions. Do that by offering professional learning focused on building practices and strategies as well as modeling how to value, embrace, and build equitable learning environments.

Fundamental principles of equity-minded professional learning in both online and in-person spaces include:

- Safety
- Trustworthiness
- Choice and agency
- Collaboration
- Empowerment
- Cultural humility and responsiveness

The key is to be thoughtful and intentional in designing professional learning with an equity foundation.

"Equity-Mindedness refers to the perspective used by practitioners who bring attention to patterns of inequity in student data and outcomes. These facilitators take personal and institutional responsibility for the success of their learners and critically reassess their own practices. Being equity minded requires that educators be race-conscious and aware of the social and historical context of exclusionary practices in higher education."

(University of Southern California Center for Urban Education, n.d.)

WHO BENEFITS?

Faculty

Faculty likely experienced culturally damaging and oppressive practices during their own educational journeys. When professional learning is culturally responsive and sustaining, faculty benefit because they can engage as their authentic selves and genuinely share lived experiences. Instruction benefits when facilitators shape professional learning opportunities in equity-minded ways. In turn, students benefit when faculty bring these approaches to the classroom. Offering learning spaces that invite, connect, and value faculty with diverse cultures, languages, and backgrounds, offer them a new pathway to engage with students.

Students

Students benefit from faculty's use of culturally responsive and sustaining approaches. As more students are welcomed, seen, and valued, they become more able to fully engage in learning. When access and opportunity to culturally engaging learning environments or experiences are available to students across racial and ethnic communities, students feel supported and encouraged to critique and question dominant power structures in societies.

Institutions
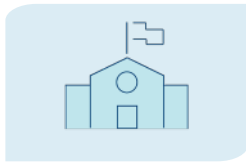
Culturally responsive and sustaining professional learning can begin to dismantle an institution's dominant narratives of white, middle class, "standard" English monolingual/monocultural superiority and move institutions toward systems that value and promote rich and diverse languages, cultures, and histories. Institutions can then support students in deepening their understanding of themselves, their practices, their communities, and their futures which can positively impact institutional key performance indicators such as retention, attrition, and graduation rates. Institutions also benefit when faculty evolve their practices based on their own engagement in equity-minded professional learning.

This guide describes three strategies to intentionally implement equity-minded professional learning, and provides suggestions for using digital learning tools to meet equity-minded professional learning goals.

STRATEGY 1: KNOW YOURSELF AND OTHERS

Effective and equity-minded professional learning facilitators recognize their roles and their positionality. Duarte (2017, p. 135) describes positionality as a mindset that "requires researchers to identify their own degrees of privilege through factors of race, class, educational attainment, income, ability, gender, and citizenship, among others" so they can analyze and act from their social positions. Positionality can help facilitators acknowledge how their own distinct identities influence the results of their work, and in this context, learning opportunities.

When you facilitate professional learning, your role includes the following (Association for Talent Development, n.d.; Development Without Limits, 2020):

- Planning

- Listening

- Questioning

- Problem solving

- Resolving conflict

- Using a participative style

- Accepting others

- Empathizing

- Leading

Connection and Application of Strategy to Adapted Hammond Framework

Awareness: For facilitators to meet the needs of faculty from diverse cultural backgrounds, facilitators must have a learner-centered and culturally relevant approach to pedagogical practices. This requires facilitators to understand what "culture" really means as it relates to faculty, while fully exploring our own cultural beliefs, identities, and biases, and aligning our pedagogy with how the brain functions.

- Know and own your own culture.

- Recognize cultural archetypes of individualism and collectivism.

- Acknowledge the socio-political context around race and language.

AWARENESS:

Knowing and owning
your own culture

Recognizing cultural archetypes of
individualism and collectivism

Acknowledging the socio-political
context around culture and language

LEARNING PARTNERSHIP:

Reimagine the student
and teacher relationship
as a partnership

Take responsibility to reduce
students' emotional stress

Support students in seeing
themselves as capable learners and
co-constructors of knowledge

COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS & LEARNING ENVIRONMENT:

Create an environment that
is intellectually and socially
safe for learning

Make space for student
voice and agency

Build classroom culture and learning
around sociocultural talk and
task structures

INFORMATION PROCESS:

Provide students authentic
opportunities to process content

Connect new content to culturally
relevant examples and metaphors
from students' communities and
everyday lives

You can navigate uncertainty, ambiguity, and possibility only when you truly understand your positionality. As you consider your role in relation to culturally responsive and sustaining professional learning, you must deepen your own self-awareness. While sessions you design and facilitate may involve some level of discomfort, you follow through to work past personal issues and gain more equitable outcomes.

TRY IT: ACTIONS TO ENHANCE SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Education to Raise Awareness

An initial step to create equity-minded professional learning spaces is to deepen your knowledge. Consider learning about institutional trends for Black, Indigenous, Latino, People of Color (BILPOC) faculty and students such as key performance indicators including recruitment, retention, and graduation. This research may provide facilitators with a clear sense of how students are progressing along with their strengths and areas for development. From there, read, listen to podcasts, or watch documentaries centered on topics that impact those groups. Then take some time to reflect and journal for yourself.

PART 1: Remember a moment in a classroom setting when you felt marginalized, excluded, or discounted. "I am the only one like me in the group. I am not understood or not accepted." Reflect on the following questions.

- *How did you know?*

- *How did you feel?*

- *How did you behave?*

PART 2: Remember a moment in a classroom setting when you felt you mattered, were included, and were regarded as important to the group. Reflect on the following questions.

- *How did you know?*

- *How did you feel?*

- *How did you behave?*

PART 3: Reflect on both situations. Reflect on the following questions.

- *What were your patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving?*

- *What influence did these patterns have on your motivation or enthusiasm for learning or facilitating?*

Research Topics to Enhance Self-Knowledge

• Historical legacies

• Generational trauma

• The culture of power in education

• Cultural influences

Take some time to reflect on your practice.

In professional learning, resist the use of practices that oppress and re-traumatize participants with marginalized identities while inadvertently creating spaces that uphold dominant norms and values. While designing and facilitating professional learning, ask yourself:

• Are some people left out?

• Does the motivation or engagement of some faculty seem low or decreasing?

• How might I be responsible for those trends?

• What can I do to reverse those trends?

• How am I being intentional about creating an inclusive professional learning environment?

Exclusion may result from existing systems of oppression and marginalization. Self-reflection will help you continually recognize your role and positionality as a facilitator. Developing your own self-reflection practices can also help you become aware of and stay mindful about your own biases.

Cause to Wonder: Pause and Reflect

Which of the previous reflection questions piqued your interest? Take a few minutes to journal about your thoughts on those questions now.

TOOL: RACE Framework

Facilitators may not feel comfortable or prepared to talk about race. However, as we discuss culturally responsive and sustaining professional learning, facilitators must recognize that race is an indispensable part of the conversation and should be acknowledged with faculty. *(Creary, 2020)*

Creary's (2020) RACE framework helps facilitators to prepare faculty to lead conversations about race in learning environments.

R: Reduce anxiety by talking about race anyway.

A: Accept that anything related to race will be visible or invisible.

C: Call on internal and external allies for help.

E: Expect that you will need to provide some answers, practical tools, and skills-based frameworks.

Defining Allies and Co-Conspirators

Allies are individuals or groups who actively support and advocate for a particular marginalized community or cause. They may use their privilege and resources to help amplify the voices and experiences of those who are often excluded or discriminated against.

Co-conspirators, on the other hand, are allies who take it a step further by actively working to dismantle systems of oppression and privilege. They recognize that the struggle for justice and equality requires more than just individual acts of kindness and solidarity, but rather a collective effort to challenge and transform the status quo.

STRATEGY 2: CENTER LEARNERS

Centering learners is a strategy in which faculty are agents and partners in their learning. This strategy of co-constructing professional learning is very different from simply setting objectives and moving through content (Eynon et al., 2022).
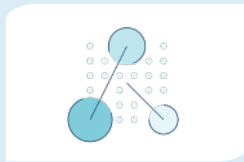
Connection and Application of Strategy to Adapted Hammond Framework

Learning Partnerships: For learners from diverse cultural backgrounds to have successful educational experiences and outcomes, there must be partnerships with facilitators. To create these relationships, build trust with learners, develop inclusive learning environments, and provide opportunities for learners to take ownership of their learning.

During professional learning sessions, model the process of centering students so course content is meaningful, related to lived experiences, and fosters a sense of validation and agency.

- Reimagine the learner-facilitator relationship as a partnership.

- Affirm participants strengths while creating educational experiences that authentically engage students in the learning process.

- Support participants in seeing themselves as professional learners and co-constructors of knowledge.

AWARENESS:

Knowing and owning
your own culture

Recognizing cultural archetypes of individualism and collectivism

Acknowledging the socio-political context around culture and language

LEARNING PARTNERSHIP:

Reimagine the student
and teacher relationship
as a partnership

Take responsibility to reduce students' emotional stress

Support students in seeing themselves as capable learners and co-constructors of knowledge

COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS & LEARNING ENVIRONMENT:

Create an environment that is intellectually and socially safe for learning

Make space for student
voice and agency

Build classroom culture and learning around sociocultural talk and task structures

INFORMATION PROCESS:

Provide students authentic opportunities to process content

Connect new content to culturally relevant examples and metaphors from students' communities and everyday lives

Actions to Center Learners

Facilitators must be conscious of how certain instructors or participants are centered based on their racialized or dominant identity markers. This means being aware of who is valued, heard, and validated in the space, and who may be excluded or silenced due to dominant norms and ideologies.

Traditionally, professional learning has often centered on the experiences and perspectives of dominant groups. This has led to certain voices and experiences being privileged over others and has created a power dynamic that reinforces systems of oppression and exclusion.

Facilitators must intentionally challenge and disrupt these norms by actively seeking out and valuing the voices and experiences of historically marginalized groups. This requires creating spaces where people from all backgrounds feel safe and comfortable sharing their perspectives and experiences and actively working to amplify the voices of those who are underrepresented or marginalized.

Spend time getting to know your participants. Engage with participants to find out what they want and need to know.

- Administer polls, assessments, and surveys to find out what participants want and need in terms of content and process.

- Consider a flipped approach. If participants can complete readings or reflections in advance, ask them to.

- Use your time together to discuss, reflect, connect, and practice (race talk, centering race, holding people accountable for assets-based conversations).

Offer ways for participants to share facets of themselves, their histories, and communities as part of ongoing professional learning dialogue and projects.

- Invite cultural assets, knowledge, experiences, perspectives and ways of being.

- Invite learners' languages (for example, Navajo, African-American Language, Spanish, "standard" English), literacies (for example, hip-hop music, poetry, social media, street art), or ways of being (for example, spiritual beliefs, ways of relating to adults and elders) into the content and dialogue (Ferlazzo, 2017).

To create authentic and inclusive spaces, actively seek out diverse perspectives and experiences while also recognizing and respecting the boundaries of individuals that hold marginalized identities. This means creating opportunities for learners to share their experiences and perspectives in ways that feel safe and empowering for them while also creating a space that values and respects the lived experiences of people from all backgrounds.

Acknowledge professional learners' strengths. Engage with professional learner in ways that are equally valued and validated in the classroom.

- Envision professional learner and yourself at a round table where everyone brings strengths and wisdom.

- State that your role is to facilitate the learning process.

- Acknowledge and name learner's specific strengths. For example, "I know you are already an expert in a, b, and c."

**Invite learners to share and highlight session success.**

- Facilitate a reflection process. First, identify what the group did well together. For example, "We engaged in a challenging discussion," "I appreciate that we held space and participated in ways that were thoughtful, meaningful, and purposeful."

STRATEGY 3: FOSTER BELONGING FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNERS

Professional learners are motivated to learn when they feel respected and part of a community. Use your positionality as a facilitator to ensure equitable learning opportunities. Intentional planning and intentional facilitation will ensure all students feel they belong.

Effective facilitators foster a sense of belonging by creating equity-centered environments and implementing inclusive instructional strategies. Create an environment where learners can openly admit they do not have all of the answers and are learning how to talk about challenging issues. With vulnerability modeled by the facilitator, learners can learn to be vulnerable and share their own experiences (Simkin, 2021).

Instructional strategies that facilitate cross-cultural collaboration in in-person and online learning for faculty include "group work, self-introductions and cultural awareness activities, computer-supported collaborative learning activities, the inclusion of global examples, and internationalized curriculum" (Kumi-Yeboah, 2018). For example, in order to encourage cross-cultural collaboration, facilitators may ask questions about who is represented in content, images, storytelling, data, and examples. Who are the experts in the field? Are BILPOC voices centered?
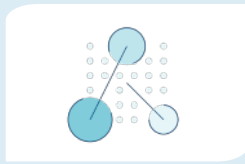
Connection and Application of Strategy to Adapted Hammond Framework

Information Processing: Faculty must understand how to focus on connections with culturally based funds of knowledge that relate to the discipline-based content so they can engage in deeper, more complex learning. This requires faculty to consider information processing strategies common to oral cultures including metaphors, storytelling, and relevant discipline-based examples.

- Provide learners authentic opportunities to process content.

- Connect new content to culturally-relevant examples and metaphors from learners' communities and everyday lives.

Community Building: Culturally responsive faculty work to create supportive, welcoming environments in their courses. They create classrooms that feel socially and emotionally inclusive so students feel confident to take the risks required to expand their knowledge and critical thinking.

- Create an environment that is intellectually and socially inclusive.

- Make space for students' voices and agencies.

- Build classroom culture and learning around sociocultural talk and task structures.

Actions to Build Community in Professional Learning Spaces

Establish community norms or guidelines using a democratic, participatory process. Pose a few foundational, culturally informed agreements, and ask faculty to offer others. Then, ask for their agreement to uphold them.

Sample culturally informed agreements include (Taylor, 2021):

- Affirm multiple perspectives.

- Acknowledge intent while addressing impact.

- Interrupt attempts to derail.

- Practice unapologetic inquiry.

- Embrace difference.

- Accept that some things are outside your control.

- Speak your truth.

- Take risks outside of your comfort zone.

Guidance on Acknowledging Intent while Addressing Impact

In some professional learning contexts, focusing on intent is a way of absolving a person from responsibility for the impact of their actions. This can be particularly harmful when related to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion where the impact of a person's actions on marginalized individuals and communities can be significant.

Here are some strategies for combating the overemphasis on intent in professional learning:

- Center impact.

- Emphasize accountability.

- Encourage reflection.

- Foster a culture of humility.

- Prioritize learning and growth.

Facilitate interactive community-building activities. Intentionally create spaces for faculty to connect and share. Incorporate ice breakers, small group discussions, and mindful breaks to engage faculty. During virtual sessions, model using available tools such as polling, chat boxes, and breakout rooms. If the group is more tech-savvy, consider using shared documents for collaborative note taking or shared activities and interactive whiteboards for group brainstorming, charting, or gallery walks (Gilbertson, et al., 2020).

Invite participants to rename themselves. Inviting learners to rename themselves can create an inclusive and respectful environment. Ask participants to share the correct phonetic pronunciations of their names and preferred pronouns.

Create or offer a set of gestures. Inviting learners to communicate their feelings or responses through non-verbal gestures such as placing their hand on their heart to indicate depth of feeling, a hand signal to indicate "I agree," etc.

Set discussion parameters. Tell participants in professional learning when they are expected to contribute to a discussion or when it is optional. Set a speaking order and say people's names to invite them to contribute to the discussion. Allow space to pass, and provide opportunities for all learners to speak if they choose.

The Components and Basic Guidelines of Calling a Circle

Personal Preparation

Start Point
Check-Out
Setting Center
Guardian
Agreements
Center
Three Practices
Check-In
Three Principles
Intention
Invitation
Hosting

Approach to Support Community

The Circle Way (Baldwin & Linnea, n.d.) provides a powerful approach to talk about challenging topics or areas of conflict and offers a useful framework for engaging groups. This model centers equity and justice and unequivocally affirms the essential practice of turning to each other to uphold racial, ethnic, gender, ability, economic, and environmental justice.

STRATEGY 4: INTERRUPT HARMFUL BEHAVIORS

Facilitators must reinforce a safer community by interrupting harmful behaviors. When learners don't feel safe, learning cannot occur because complex information is blocked from higher cognitive functioning and memory. Slowed learning can lead to frustration, aggression, or withdrawal.

Actions to Interrupt Harmful Behaviors

Be aware of obstacles toward racial equity and address them directly.
As you create professional learning spaces, acknowledge the detours, myths, or misconceptions, and name and debunk them upfront.

Resource: Avoiding Racial Equity Detours by Paul Gorski

You can address these obstacles in a number of ways, including:

DUB Method: It can be easy to make snap judgements about colleagues or students. Often, we form opinions based on our lived experiences, perspectives, and personal biases. The DUB method is an invitation to slow our thinking and make better-informed decisions about what we believe and how we respond to others.

- **Describe:** Be objective. Leverage your senses, and describe what you notice, without judgment.

- **Understand:** Seek to understand what's going on. Research, and get curious.

- **Bridge:** After getting clarity about the behaviors and actions you observed, make a decision about how to react.

Interrupter phrases: Create inclusive spaces by using inclusive language, norms, materials, and images. Encourage growth and sharing of ideas, but take a stand against hurtful language or statements.

CONSIDER SAYING OR ASKING…	CONSIDER DOING…
I'm going to stop you there. Hold on. I need to process what you just said. What were you hoping to communicate with that comment? Please consider the impact of what you just said.	Ground students in community agreements or discussion norms. Revisit debunked myths that were previously discussed. Encourage peers to solve problems collaboratively. Slow the conversation, and discuss what was said.

Resource: PAIRS: Effective Dialogue Skills by Kathy Obear

McNair et al. (2020) provides examples of potential obstacles and racial equity-minded responses. The following table includes the obstacles with potential responses.

Obstacle	Response
Claiming not to see race	Acknowledge that race exists and impacts individuals and communities in profound ways.
Being unable or unwilling to notice racialized consequences	Recognize that actions and policies have unintended consequences that disproportionately impact marginalized individuals and communities.
Skirting around issues of race	Create opportunities for meaningful dialogue around issues of race and create safe spaces for sharing perspectives and experiences.

Resisting calls to disaggregate data by race and ethnicity	Disaggregate data by race and ethnicity to understand the unique experiences and challenges faced by different groups.
Substituting race talk with poverty talk	Recognize the unique experiences and challenges of those who have been historically marginalized due to their race or ethnicity (in addition to poverty).
The pervasiveness of white privilege and institutionalized racism	Work actively to challenge systems of oppression. Challenge white privilege and institutionalized racism actively.
Evasive reactions to racist incidents	Acknowledge harm caused by racist incidents, and take steps to repair that harm. This may involve difficult conversations and committing to ongoing learning and growth.
Unable to see institutional racism in familiar routines	Educate yourself on the ways institutional racism operates. Institutional racism can be difficult to recognize, particularly when it is embedded within familiar routines and structures.
Myth of universalism	Recognize that different groups may have different needs and experiences.
Viewing racial inequities as a reflection of academic deficiency	Acknowledge that racial inequities are not a reflection of academic deficiency but a reflection of broader systems of inequality and oppression.

To begin weaving the strategies presented here into practice, start by reflecting on your own assumptions and biases and challenge yourself to listen to and learn from your professional learners.

Ultimately, the success of these strategies hinges on a willingness to take action and commit to continuous improvement. By taking small steps in service of learners, we will gradually build on existing skills and become more effective facilitators, educators, and leaders.

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