Building a Community of Equity-Focused CS Educators

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Positionality

- Positionality is **how we are situated** in our social worlds in relation to a topic. It affects how we are seen, what power we have, what knowledge we have, what actions we can and must take.

- I am a tenured Professor with many kinds of power and influence. I am also a queer, trans person of color, a woman, and I have experienced poverty and brief periods of homelessness. My mother was a teacher, my daughter is a teacher, I am a teacher. I am motivated by my desire for collective **liberation**.
With your neighbor. How would you describe your positionality in relation to becoming new faculty? Who are you, relative to academia and the world?
What is equity???

- I know some of you know this. You’ve definitely heard the word.
- But let’s define it briefly for those of you who aren’t quite sure, and to start from some shared understanding.

Everyone has what they need to thrive.
Equity in teaching

- Imagine a future in which all students, faculty, and staff have everything they need to enable students to learn and grow.

- Students need safety, time, health, wellness, love, care, community, freedom, encouragement, hope, mentorship, and guidance.

- Faculty and staff need these things too, to be able to offer these things to students.
With a different neighbor. Did you have all of these things as a student? What was missing? What was that like?
What does it mean to be equity-focused?

• Recognizing that students:
  • Don’t always have the **resources** they need to learn
  • Have lives **outside of class**, including work and caregiving responsibilities
  • **Cannot be reduced** to categories based on how you perceive their appearance or behavior
  • Can only be understood by having **genuine, mutually desired, trusting relationships** with them
  • Likely have been shaped by **school systems** and **incentives** that were different from yours.
But also...

• That students have **immense assets** in their lived experiences and prior learning that often aren’t validated, affirmed, or valued in CS education

• That students can surprise us when they are given **power and freedom** to bring their full selves to learning

• That students often have **thought more deeply** about our teaching than we have, because they have to live with all the ways it doesn’t work for them, often powerless to change it.
Faculty offer care within boundaries

• There are many things we can do to address these inequities in student’s lives.

• But there are also **limits:**
  • To our own positionality and lived experiences
  • On our time, skills, and training to enact change
  • In our colleague’s and leaders’ support of equity
  • In students’ desire to see change
  • In the consequences we might face for pursuing change, especially if we are on the margins
What else is hard about focusing on equity?
Raise your hand.
What we can do

• Teach more equitable classes
• Design more equitable assessments
• Create more equitable curriculum
• Foster more equitable academic cultures
• Design more equitable policies and budgets
• Resist and respond to inequitable external forces (e.g., racist, sexist, anti-trans legislation)
How we can do it

• I’m going to argue that we can offer much more than we think.

• And I’m going to try to explain how we can do this.

• The general thesis, learning from decades of advocates much more talented and experienced than me is that this is only possible through **community**. We cannot act alone.

• And by doing it through community, we can also get many things we need to thrive as well.
Nine steps to equity-centered change

1. Commit
2. Capacitate
3. Conspire
4. Examine
5. Envision
6. Execute
7. Reflect
8. Recover
9. Repeat

I guess the acronym is CCCEEERRR?
1. Commit
You must commit to equity

• This is more than just saying the words

• Sometimes it is **identity work**: you’ll need to examine who you are, how you’re positioned, why you want to do this work

  • **Don’t** do it because you want fame or recognition
  
  • **Don’t** do it because you want to save people

  • **Do** it because it’s the right thing to do

  • **Do** it because being equity-focused is what being a great educator means
Example

I was not always committed to equity. This is because I was not committed to my own wellbeing: as a closeted trans person, I was unable to practice-genuine equity-focused teaching, because I did not care for myself.

It took accepting and loving myself before I could care for students in a way that centered them instead of my own fears, anxieties, and depression.
With a neighbor.
Have you committed to equity? If not, what’s holding you back? If yes, how did you get there?
WARNING

I do not recommend trying to do change work without commitment to equity. It can often do more harm than good.
2. Capacitate
Change is not possible without capacity

• We can dream all the futures we want, but without the **time** and **skills** to make change, little will change.

• We need capacity for:
  • Doing our jobs within the status quo
  • Planning how to change the status quo
  • Finding others to change the status quo with
  • Managing conflict that arises in community
  • Managing the emotional labor of change work
Making capacity means

• Reserving time on your calendar to do change work

• Making time by deciding that your work *will* be change work (e.g., focusing your service and scholarship on change work)

• Ensuring you have time to rest, be physically and emotionally well

• Cultivating a community of mutual support outside the change work (e.g., partners, friends)
Example

It took me 15 years to learn to rigorously budget my time for my different responsibilities, estimating how much time I will give to each part of my job, and time-boxing my work accordingly.

As part of this, however, now I inflate my estimates by 30%, both to account for wrong estimates, but also to create capacity for change work. Enforcing those boundaries is hard, but essential to maintaining capacity.
With a neighbor. What are your struggles with creating capacity for change (or for anything)?
WARNING.
I do not recommend trying to do change work without capacity. It often leads to burnout and broader discouragement about the possibility of change.
3. Conspire
Doing change work requires community

• You don’t know what everyone needs; communities need a voice in that

• Doing change work alone can be exhausting without someone to share the emotional labor with

• Part of growing capacity is leveraging the combined efforts of many
Finding co-conspirators

• Is there a faculty colleague who is similarly focused on equity, maybe a peer you can learn with or a senior colleague you can learn from?

• Is there a staff colleague who is focused on equity, and brings knowledge of administrative processes, and may have power to implement change?

• Is there a student community focused on equity that could be a source of insight, coalition building, and capacity?
Back in 2014, I had joined AccessComputing as a co-PI and wanted all of our Informatics students to have **basic literacy about accessible computing**, so they would create more accessible software in their careers.

My junior colleague **Joel Ross**, an Assistant Teaching Professor at the time, was excited about this, and well positioned as the course lead for our **client-side development** course.
Do you have a (possible) co-conspirator?
Let’s hear some examples from the group.
WARNING.

I do not recommend doing equity work alone. It is possible, but you have to have a deep well of motivation, resilience, charisma, and a deep knowledge of community needs to make lasting, impactful change.
4. Examine
What is needed?

- Probably **thousands** of things, and probably **different** things from different groups.
- The key is finding something that is:
  - **Needed** by students
  - Focuses on students facing the **deepest inequities**, because if you can address those, your efforts will “lift all boats” — likely to be multi-marginalized students at the intersection of class, race, gender, and ability
  - Is likely **feasible** within the limits of your resources, power, and institution
The way to find it is to talk to students

- Particularly students on the margins of your academic community
- Create safe places for them to gather, without you, to discuss what they need most
- Let them speak to you as a coalition, so you can understand them, and they feel safe in numbers
- Talk to staff to assess feasibility and barriers
- As you do this, build a coalition with students, staff, and leaders, creating a team to manage change
Example

Joel and I plotted; we surveyed students in his class; we talked to our curriculum committee about the idea; we consulted with the broader access computing team; we worked with Teach Access industry partners to verify alignment with industry needs.

This resulted in three new learning objectives for our client-side development class: three sentences identifying specific skills.
With your neighbor. What is a change you’ve tried to make, or you’ve observed others tried to make? Was it informed by the community?
WARNING.
Do not choose a need unilaterally. Students, staff, and external partners are key to validating that the need is actually needed, and their buy-in is key to implementing and sustaining it.
5. Envision
Having an idea ≠ having a plan

• A plan includes:
  • An enumeration of everything necessary to succeed
  • Who will project manage, who will execute
  • Timelines and milestones for implementation
  • A shared definition of success that centers equity
  • A way to track success with equity long term
  • A strategy for sustaining the change
Do not ignore sustainability

• For change to “stick”, you have to be very strategic about how you implement change

• Are there ways to fold change into processes, curriculum, budgets, or culture so that it’s hard to remove, but still possible to change later?

• Will the change survive if you leave?

• In what infrastructure will the change reside, and how sustainable is that infrastructure?
Example

The plan we made involved changing:

1. Our course inventory approved by the faculty and university,

2. An ebook that Joel had written for the course

3. Two assignments that Joel had implemented

4. A course guide to onboard new core and guest faculty who taught the course
With your neighbors. How do you feel about your project planning and management skills?
WARNING.
Validate your plan, and expect to change it. Nothing ruins change more than having a bad plan, no plan, or inflexible plan.
6. Execute
There will be surprises

• Plans that need to change
• New people join your change community
• Faculty, staff, and student resistance
• Conflict amongst your team
• Delays
• Emergent constraints and insights
• Changing external conditions
• Burnout, despair
This is where capacity is crucial

- Many equity-focused change projects in academia fail in this stage because people lose momentum.
- If no one has capacity to manage the project to completion, or execute on it, it probably won’t happen.
- Be mindful of how to protect your capacity so that you can keep momentum going.
Example
Joel piloted changes with students; they mostly loved it, and they consistently practiced accessibility verification in later capstones without prompting. This success caused Joel to skip the sustainability parts of the plan.

I regularly returned to him to discuss the course guide, and connected him with new guest faculty, creating motivation for him to finish the course guide updates.
With a neighbor. Have you seen change projects execute to completion? Or lose momentum? What was the root cause?
WARNING.

Do not skip evaluation. Just because you’ve implemented something doesn’t mean that it worked! This is often where people forget to focus on the margins.
7. Reflect
When your evaluations show success, pause!

• Take a moment to celebrate with your community what you’ve done

• **Thank** everyone who made it happen, especially students and staff

• **Validate** yourself for living your values and making a small bit of change in the world

• Find ways of **broadcasting** the success, not to brag, but to reinforce that change is possible and desired, creating desire and capacity for other change
And what if a project fails?

• Take the time to understand why.
• These are key moments to learn, to regroup, and to identify next steps.
• The goal in these reflections are more than just about addressing a need better next time — they’re also about restoring hope and sustaining community, both of which are key resources for future change.
Example

Joel and I decided to celebrate by having our school fund his trip to SIGCSE to share his work. It was a break from teaching, some much needed travel, and a great opportunity for affirmation from a broader community.

I celebrated by moving a Trello card from one list to another and then did a little dance, but I’m weird, and find great satisfaction in that!
With your neighbors. Do you celebrate successes? Of yours, of others? Why, why not?
8. Recover
A need for recovery is inevitable

• Make the time change nothing.
• Go on a vacation
• Get cozy in the comfort of the status quo
• Remember that you deserve to recover
• Remember that recovery is necessary in order to help others with further change
• Wait until you feel stirred into action again, and feel like you once again have capacity for action
Example

As our undergraduate program chair, I didn’t really have an opportunity to pause change. I was managing dozens of changes at once, and having one win didn’t mean there weren’t a dozen other projects in crises.

Then I burned out, and it took a 15 month sabbatical to recover.
With your neighbors.
Do you need rest right now? How much? What would it look like if you started next week?
WARNING.
Do not skip rest! It can be tempting, especially after a win, to try again immediately. Even if you have capacity, others might not.
9. Repeat
Change is never done

- Most of academia and the world is not particularly concerned with equity.
- That means the work is never done: even if we were to create highly equitable systems, the world will creep in, breaking things
- Being equity-focused is a lifelong identity and commitment, not a side project
- But practicing change can make bigger things possible
After some rest, I decided I wanted to focus on teaching accessibility at a greater scale. It took a few years, but I’m proud to announce that we have a community-sourced online book now that can help all CS faculty learn how to teach accessible computing in their courses:

bookish.press/tac

We hope you’ll read it and think about how to weave its ideas into your classes.
If all of this sounds intimidating...

- Remember that you can start small, and build:
  - Make **your own course** more equitable with your TAs and students
  - Make a **multi-section course** more equitable by collaborating with other faculty
  - Make a **curriculum** more equitable
  - Make a **policy** more equitable
  - Make a **department culture** more equity-focused
  - Make a **community** more equity-focused
Questions, comments?
Let’s discuss.