

Marching to a Different Beat: Reflections from a Community of Practice on Diversity and Equity

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Abstract

The purpose of this reflective essay is to join the dialogue, both past and present, surrounding diversity and equity in higher education by reflecting on the potential for a community of practice to guide both individual and institutional change. Two faculty members and one graduate student share their experiences in a community of practice, including major takeaways from each of them. Recommendations for action are provided as a way for readers to transfer the knowledge to their own contexts. It is acknowledged, however, that the work of diversity and equity is not a single outcome but rather a reflexive journey. We call on all readers to become agents of transformation as they march to a different beat.

Keywords

community of practice; diversity; equity; intersectionality

Introduction

The changing landscape of higher education demands that faculty, both current and future, be lifelong learners (French & O'Leary, 2017). While it is assumed that faculty continue their professional development within their respective disciplines, it is also recommended for them to continue to gain expertise on teaching and learning in higher education. One way to achieve this is by participating in a community of practice. Wenger (1998) describes a community of practice (CoP) as a collection of people with a common interest who gather regularly to improve their understanding and practice. It is not enough to simply gather with like-minded people; there must be action embedded within the CoP. Perhaps the most fascinating characteristic of them is that they tend to emerge around a shared understanding of what is important for the members. Thus, it

is understood that learning is a social endeavor (Merriam et al., 2003).

The purpose of this reflective essay is to share the reflections of two faculty members and one graduate student who participated in a CoP on diversity and equity. This CoP was an outcome of a needs assessment conducted by the Center for Teaching and Learning at our university to determine the areas that faculty wanted to improve in their own practice. From the assessment, one faculty member response, in particular, suggested a program on inclusive pedagogy. This suggestion aligned with the university's strategic plan initiative that focuses on education for life, specifically by developing and expanding experiences that emphasize diversity and build global awareness. Albeit the intention of the faculty suggestion was not explicit, the interpretation of what inclusive pedagogy entailed was adopted from a framework that was reflective of this larger strategic initiative.

In accordance, we begin by considering the literature that informed how and why CoPs function. We then describe the theoretical perspectives that framed and guided our CoP through this particular framework. We move on to a rich description of the context. We follow by considering the reflections from each of the three contributors. We conclude by providing recommendations for action. This CoP answers the call from Freire (1972) to develop a critical consciousness toward the sociopolitical forces that shape teaching and learning in higher education. It is our hope, then, that our experiences of marching to a different beat can be applied to other contexts beyond our own as a mode of transformation. We stand in agreement with Wenger's (1998) assertion that "Education is not merely formative—it is transformative" (p. 263). As such, we see the insights from this reflective essay as transformative.

Relevant Literature

Research on CoPs in their various forms offers both depth and breadth for scholars and practitioners in higher education. Several key concepts, ideas, and processes from this literature informed our own. CoPs are, by nature and design, social and collaborative endeavors of learning (Cox, 2003; Merriam et al., 2003; Ward & Selvester, 2012). CoPs are most often deployed to address certain concepts or challenges, including diversity and equity (Anderson et al., 2014; Petrone, 2004). The collective knowledge co-constructed and contributed within a CoP is exceedingly valuable to its members (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Sirum et al., 2009). Participants in a CoP, however, sometimes express that they gain knowledge but did not find avenues for transference, diminishing the value of membership (Goto et al., 2010; Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). A few factors related to this issue include attendance, time constraints, organizational hierarchies, and disciplinary differences (Kerno, 2008; Nugent et al., 2008). In focusing on the transformative learning aspects of CoPs and in providing a community of support for those involved to interpret and apply new knowledge to their relevant contexts, the advantages of CoPs can be enhanced (Kerno, 2008; Mitchell & Sackney, 2001).

Theoretical Underpinnings

Transformative Learning

Our CoP was framed and guided by the notion of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). Adults

have collected an assortment of experiences throughout their lives that inform how they interact with the world around them. In many cases, adults develop frames of references that limit their perspectives (Mezirow, 1996). Transformative learning, then, occurs when we disrupt these frames of reference in an effort to move adults toward those frames of reference that are “more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). Transformative learning was central to our CoP. Each of us started the CoP with varying degrees of theoretical and practical understanding. Through readings, discussions, and activities that challenged our assumptions about teaching and learning in higher education, we were tasked with becoming critically reflective practitioners (Brookfield, 1995) specifically centering on topics of diversity and equity in our respective pedagogical strategies.

Equity Literacy

Our CoP was framed and guided by the principles of equity literacy (Gorski, 2013). Society has historically pushed individuals and communities to the margins due to social, economic, and physical characteristics. This reality is painfully evident within the halls and walls of higher education institutions (Bhopal, 2017; Harris & Patton, 2019; Marginson, 2016). Equity literacy provides us with the competencies to “recognize, respond to, and redress conditions that deny some students access to the educational opportunities enjoyed by their peers” (Gorski, 2013, p. 19). In other words, equity literacy equips us to transform (i.e., eliminate) barriers that exist for marginalized populations in higher education. Equity literacy played an important role in our CoP in that each reading, discussion, and activity was intentionally aligned with Gorski’s (2013) principles and strategies, anchoring these key concepts as the framework that guided our CoP’s overall learning objectives.

Intersectionality

Our CoP was framed and guided by the concept of intersectionality. Crenshaw (1989) describes intersectionality as the social phenomenon in which a person’s collective identities are layered in such a way that compounds the oppression associated with each singular identity. Intersectionality was developed to explain the lived experiences of Black women, who had to navigate the layered oppressions associated with being both Black and a woman. Intersectionality was first introduced to the CoP through an activity in which contributors were asked to sort a hodgepodge of buttons and beads into categories, which simulated the social construction of identity. While Crenshaw’s conceptualization of intersectionality focused on Black women, the CoP expanded our understanding of this to capture the experiences of all marginalized identities (e.g., class, multilingual, immigrant status, and gender). In many ways, intersectionality was a threshold concept (Meyer et al., 2006) for our CoP that remained present throughout each of our meetings.

Context and Structure

Tennessee Tech University is situated in a micropolitan city of the southeastern United States. It is a doctoral-granting university with high research activity. The total student population is approximately 10,000 across all levels. The total faculty population is roughly 500 across all levels. Tennessee Tech University is a predominantly white institution (PWI), as nearly 85% of students identify as white. In addition, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (2019) indicates

that 46% of the student respondents identify as first-generation students; the student population at Tennessee Tech University is also predominantly from the local region, which is considered economically depressed to distressed at the state level. These factors resonate as salient characteristics for the Tennessee Tech University student population in terms of educational retention, engagement, and success.

Our CoP was part of the programming from the Center for Teaching and Learning at Tennessee Tech University. Participation in the CoP was open to any faculty, staff, or graduate student with an interest in the topic. The composition of the CoP consisted of identities that are historically marginalized within higher education, including race and gender. It met once a month for an hour over the span of two semesters. Each meeting was structured around a key concept and an essential question. The facilitator selected readings and activities that would elicit transformative discussions. Our CoP culminated in The Collective Knowledge Project, a collection of resources on diversity and equity that could be digitally shared with others within and beyond the institution.

Our Reflections

Andrea's Reflection

This past year, I was thrust into the evermore present diversity and equity initiatives fervently embraced by my College. As a member of an underrepresented faculty population on campus, the struggles associated with race, gender, and socioeconomic status influence the way that I understand student challenges related to learning and overall postsecondary success. In this regard, the conversations I was having surrounding these vital topics centered on improving pre-service teacher training through a more nuanced integration of these concepts into the curriculum. Topics that frequented our discussions included closing the achievement gap (Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2008), addressing the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006), and training for non-deficit thinking (Wu, 2016). However, as Lang (2016) suggests, seeking impactful transformation often begins with smaller, incremental changes.

Joining a group of colleagues representing different disciplines in a CoP anchored in these same topics was a personal initiative to examine the way that I interacted with the language related to these concepts. This was a way for me to engage in equity literacy and acquire competencies that allowed for me to “recognize, respond to, and redress conditions” that impact student success (Gorski, 2013, p. 19). Reflecting on this experience, several lessons learned are present in terms of transformation. First, our focus on intersectionality helped me to understand social organizations as an embodiment of this concept. For example, although our personal and disciplinary identities often informed the way we understood issues of diversity and equity, this CoP offered a platform in which these could intersect to form common understandings and decipher differences.

Further, reflecting on this experience, it is evident that communicative practices surrounding such abstract concepts as diversity and equity improved. Often the activities, readings, and thought experiments we engaged in were beneficial exercises in knowledge transfer, leading to critically informed discussions passing the limits of our one-hour sessions. It was evident, in our context, that despite being part of an underrepresented group, the challenges associated with first-

generation students required an adjustment and adoption of practices particular to this group that sometimes overlapped with the experiences of other marginalized groups, and other times, necessitated a unique approach. Finally, I recognize that CoPs have an important multiplier effect. Effective practices from across disciplines were exchanged in this CoP which led to more confidence in adapting and adopting these in our curricular contexts to better inform our teaching and improve student learning (Akenson et al., 2019).

Betsie's Reflection

I joined this CoP because of my broad interest in issues related to diversity and equity, and I focused on applying what I learned to the design of my Introduction to Sociology course. Because the course fulfills a general education requirement, it tends to attract a diverse range of students with widely varying social identities and academic backgrounds. As a sociologist, I was already accustomed to thinking about how overlapping forms of privilege and oppression contribute to inequality in student outcomes (Crenshaw, 1989), so I was predisposed to think about inclusivity in the classroom as a project to ensure that disadvantaged students are not excluded from opportunities to learn, grow, and succeed.

Through my participation in the CoP, however, my thinking on this issue was transformed by the realization that a truly inclusive classroom requires *both* advantaged *and* disadvantaged students to remain fully engaged in meaningful learning experiences. Despite having worked to ensure that disadvantaged students were included in classroom activity, I had neglected to consider the implications of allowing advantaged students to disengage. For example, I had chosen not to count attendance as part of students' final grades because I reasoned that high-achieving students should not be burdened with showing up to class if it is not necessary for their own individual achievement. This thinking had likely resulted in part from my own past experience as an advantaged student. The privileges associated with my identity as a white, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual woman with American citizenship had allowed me to complete an undergraduate education without ever seriously caring about the academic success of my classmates. I had often taken advantage of lenient attendance policies myself, without considering what impact it might have on others.

Based on the work of our CoP though, I began to think of my class as a community of learners working toward a collective goal. This means that high-achieving students should be concerned not only with their own individual achievement but with contributing to the success of others as well. Based on this transformation in my thinking, I incorporated new practices that focus on including high-achieving students in learning as a communal process. For example, high-achieving students who quickly complete low-stakes assignments during class are now required to use what time is left to assist other students who need help. I also recruited several high-achieving students to work as tutors in the university library so that their individual successes can be transformed into a collective resource available to all students.

Jacob's Reflection

As a white man, my positionality is one of privilege. It is a social reality that cuts across most identities, institutions, and issues. As such, it is imperative for me to recognize such privilege in a

way that pushes against structures that maintain social stratification. This responsibility for social justice is particularly true in higher education (Bhopal, 2017). The question, then, becomes how can I enact my positionality in this way? I viewed the CoP on diversity and equity as a way to transform my understanding of teaching and learning in a context often defined by inequities.

The purpose of our CoP was to discuss concepts and issues related to creating equitable classrooms and institutions by exploring intersectionality in the context of higher education (Barnett & Felten, 2016). This approach to teaching and learning is critical but optimistic, challenging but inspiring, theoretical but practical. It meant asking tough questions that challenge the status quo. In designing this CoP, I intentionally focused on the competencies outlined in Gorski's (2013) equity literacy framework. It was not enough for us to simply recognize issues of inequity in higher education; the design was meant to empower each participant to enact change within their spheres of influence.

I have three major takeaways from our CoP that capture the essence of the transformation I experienced. First, I learned to create and maintain learning ecologies where all are able to flourish. This meant considering my own assumptions about teaching and learning, especially when working with marginalized communities. I soon uncovered that I still needed to squash some traces of deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010). Second, I learned to engage in difficult conversations around equity. We shared a lot about our perspectives and positionalities during the CoP that described how we make meaning of the world. We did not always agree, but it was a brave space for us to engage. Third, I learned to consider an important question: Who benefits? I now ask that when decisions are being made in higher education. I want to know whether or not a group with power benefits from a policy or practice at the expense of a group on the margins.

Discussion

Our reflections demonstrate a snapshot of this journey toward critical consciousness for us as scholars and practitioners, which is in line with Mezirow's (1991) idea of transformative learning. The CoP was centered around the goal of revealing and critiquing conditions that make higher education benefit some and harm others, an endeavor that aligns with Gorski's (2013) idea of equity literacy. Each contributor to the CoP, including the authors of this reflective essay, brought with them both privileged and marginalized identities that influence how they navigate higher education as a space for transformation. This is consistent with how we adopted Crenshaw's (1989) idea of intersectionality as a threshold concept. These three reflections, then, are representative of transformative learning in this CoP that led to shifts in perspectives, enhanced understandings, and critical insights that speak to the competencies associated with equity literacy.

Kozol (1991) argues that "to ask an individual to break down doors that we have chained and bolted in advance of his arrival is unfair" (p. 76). Ultimately, we see a CoP on diversity and equity as an institutional mechanism for collective action by ensuring that doors are opened and barriers are removed. Every human, regardless of a dimension of diversity, has certain rights to which they are entitled. This is especially true in the higher education context. It is understood, however, that the work of diversity and equity is not a single outcome but rather a reflexive journey that requires us to eliminate inequities that are seemingly endless among policies and practices in higher education (Bhopal, 2017).

In the spirit of praxis (Freire, 1972), we offer a few recommendations for action based on our experiences as contributors to the CoP and as authors of this reflective essay. These suggestions are based on the collective experiences of the contributors of this reflective essay from both their involvement in the CoP and the implications this engagement had in their activities as faculty members and facilitators of other faculty learning experiences. First, we must all continue to be lifelong learners. No one person has all of the answers related to diversity and equity. As such, each of us must continue to learn about not only the sociopolitical forces that shape our institutions but also the lived experiences of those placed on the margins. This recommendation is based on our understanding of equity literacy and the work that it takes to continually build, adapt, and comprehend the competencies needed in this field.

Second, we must all leverage the power of collective action to move institutions toward equity. We too often become complicit with the silos that exist within higher education. We recommend finding other people throughout your institution that hold similar visions to combat this isolation and help “create, expand, and exchange knowledge to develop individual capabilities” (Kerno, 2008, p. 72). Again, this insight is inspired by one of the frameworks that drove the creation of this CoP—transformative learning—wherein we recognize that sharing our perspectives, learning strategies, and experiences with another strengthens how we each engage with diversity and equity.

Third, we must all deploy evidence-based pedagogical strategies that shape learning environments in which the rights of every student are honored. There are many online resources that guide faculty members through this shift in practice. The University of Michigan, for example, offers a checklist that faculty can use and share, which, in turn, can enhance that multiplier effect. These are the type of resources and supports that we utilized as part of our CoP and, through this type of sharing, we added another layer of learning that helped us to internalize the purpose and mission of diversity and equity throughout higher education.

Conclusion

Education has long been situated as a pathway to empowerment and agency (Freire, 1972). This is especially true for higher education. It has not, however, been free from unintended consequences, unexamined inequities, and unchallenged deficit views (Gorski, 2008). In order for higher education institutions to truly serve their students and communities, we as agents of transformation must affirm the cultural wealth that students bring to the table (Yosso, 2005). Diversity and equity in higher education cannot blossom without this transformation (Barnett & Felten, 2016). The purpose of this reflective essay was to share the reflections from contributors to a CoP on diversity and equity, a model that has potential for exchanging knowledges and experiences across educational spaces and between educators (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Kerno, 2008; Wenger, 1998). It is our hope that readers will transfer ideas shared within this reflective essay to their own contexts in meaningful and mindful ways as they also march to a different beat.

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