

# 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?

# Example

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

# Example

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](https://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.**