



Identity is at the heart of facilitating for equity

BY CANDICE BOCALA AND ROLESIA HOLMAN

Professional learning focused on racial equity in schools should transform educators' beliefs and interrupt inequitable outcomes for students. To ensure that it does, professional learning leaders must not only excel at typical facilitation skills — such as being aware of group dynamics, supporting inquiry, and creating

relationships — but develop a nuanced understanding of their own unique identities and how they influence the work.

We analyzed the reflections of practitioners who have deep experience in supporting educators to understand and address issues of racial equity. According to their own self-identifications, we interviewed

one Asian individual who identifies as transgender, two Black females, one Black male, one Latina female, one Latino male, three white females, and one white male.

Looking at how they facilitate professional learning about racial equity, we focused on how their understanding of identity comes into play in their facilitation, how they

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navigate co-facilitating across lines of racial or ethnic differences, and how they sustain themselves both personally and professionally.

We discovered that experienced facilitators of equity-centered professional learning engage in a sequential process to build and strengthen relationships across difference. Using a framework developed by the San Francisco Coalition of Essential Small Schools, this sequence includes work that they and their group members do introspectively and *alone*, within racial *affinity*, and *across difference*. Through our professional networks, we know that other organizations such as the National Equity Project also take a similar approach.

The process begins with individuals reflecting on their racial identities and life experiences and clarifying beliefs and values. After they have done this internal work, they can proceed to working in racial affinity, where they share experiences as race-alike identity groups and receive support, healing, and mentorship.

These steps prepare educators to come together across difference and have conversations to interrupt individual and collective practices that marginalize students who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC), creating barriers to educational equity and excellence.

To put this sequence into the context of a professional learning example, a group of educators might

begin their racial equity work by having each individual commit to journaling in response to carefully crafted prompts. They might write about characteristics of their personal identities that are salient to them and why or reflect on how their understandings of racial categories formed over time.

They would then join affinity groups with others of a similar racial or ethnic background. Affinity groups have many purposes: They serve as support communities, places to discuss challenges and commit to actions, or spaces to learn more about a group's history or culture. The affinity work serves as powerful preparation for when the educators from different identities come together to discuss issues such as the impact of racism on the school and community.

At each stage, it is essential to adopt working norms that guide how participants interact. To successfully guide others, facilitators should go through this sequence themselves.



INTROSPECTIVE WORK DONE 'ALONE'

Facilitators of equity-centered professional learning that addresses racism in a transformative way must

know how power, privilege, and oppression play out in American schools. It is critical for all professional learning leaders to pay attention to how their backgrounds, including racial, ethnic, and gender identities, influence their belief systems and actions, but this is particularly salient for those leading discussions about race and equity.

Because all our lived experiences, including traumas as well as joys, affect our understanding of the world, it is important to reflect on even the challenging or uncomfortable personal situations and interactions with those from a different racial background.

One practitioner in our study, a Latino male, said: “I think the work that I need to do alone is [identify]: What keeps me up at night? What am I scared to tell other people? Things like my biases, my insecurities, things I need to process by myself first and ruminate over them.”

As another facilitator who identifies as Asian and transgender described, “The work alone for me is understanding where my weaknesses are. And then really [thinking], what does it mean to dive deeper into those weaknesses?”

Facilitators also need to reflect on life events that have been harmful, especially those not yet processed and healed. These unresolved experiences block openness and clear thinking, making it difficult to help transform others. One Black male facilitator described this process of reflective healing: “You can only give what you’ve

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got. If I'm full of anger, hurt and pain, I'm not going to be a good facilitator. I've got to be in a place of healing and restoration, but I can't come to it with anger."

Many facilitators told us that they individually grappled with how they were socialized into white supremacy culture (Okun, 2021), recognizing that the things they were brought up to believe can lead to discrimination and marginalization of BIPOC communities. This was especially true for white-identified facilitators.

One facilitator acknowledged how her socialization affects her actions: "I've been conditioned as a white woman not to be direct, to get what I want through more manipulative means. So there's always a danger of slipping into that as a [facilitator] ... to imply something or just expect somebody to understand what we're saying when we're being vague."

Facilitators of color also mentioned the need to examine the messages they have internalized about themselves and other racial or ethnic groups. For example, one facilitator, a Latina female, said she is aware that her own identity influences how people see her, so she needs to examine the assumptions she makes about others: "I'm always hyper-aware of the way that people respond to me, especially across difference. ... I have to also interrogate my own responses. And I have to think about [it] when I am working with peers across difference."

Another, a Latino male, described the need to push back against bias, which he referred to as "anti-Blackness" that results from elevating white dominant culture. "I know in me there's servitude to white people because my mom cleaned her whole life, because my dad did gardening his whole life," he said.

"Because I've done that with them, I understand the struggle to survive. I felt this way until I became a teacher and realized that I really have to check my biases when I'm working with other people."



WORK IN AFFINITY SPACES

Affinity groups are spaces where individuals with the same racial or ethnic identity come together to share their experiences in a place where they create norms, feel safe to share deeply personal stories, ask questions, and not subject others from a different racial group to repeated microaggressions or behaviors exhibiting white supremacy culture and further marginalization.

For those who identify as BIPOC, affinity spaces provide a place to heal from racialized trauma, a way to create social capital and solidarity with others, and a space for them to share and receive guidance about how to navigate oppression (Pour-Khorshid, 2018; Tauriac et al., 2013). As one Latina female practitioner said, "You need a space to [talk] with colleagues who understand you, who are coming from that common denominator ... whether it's language, being children of immigrants, or first-generation living in this country, experiencing the United States together. ... You need to be in that community to make sense of it."

Another facilitator, a Black female, pointed out that the healing and community building that happens in affinity spaces must connect to some form of learning or action: "[There is] a Black affinity group in a particular school I'm thinking of where the teachers are so stressed, and all they do is de-stress. That's all well and good to celebrate and be together, but I think there has to be some learning, some movement ... because the kids need us to show up in the spaces that they're struggling with enhanced tools to help them."

For those who identify as white, an affinity space can be a place to process membership in a dominant white

identity and culture as well as a chance to see role models of anti-racist work from the white identity standpoint (Pour-Khorshid, 2018; Tauriac et al., 2013). One white female facilitator said that "in white affinity, I am using my white colleagues as mirrors to help me grow and to struggle with ideas, concepts, fears, judgments that I don't want to burden my BIPOC colleagues with."

Another white male facilitator said, "We need a space, no matter how we identify in affinity, where we can talk about the things that we would otherwise be afraid to talk about because it would be harmful or embarrassing."



WORK ACROSS DIFFERENCE

When engaging with others from different identity groups, facilitators of equity-centered professional learning emphasized the importance of building authentic relationships as well as the need to plan professional learning with explicit attention to power dynamics.

Building relationships

Building authentic relationships across racial or ethnic differences is a key lever in equity work. To embrace diversity and dismantle systems of oppression, we must relearn how to connect with one another's humanity.

When building relationships, the experienced practitioners emphasized two qualities: humility and vulnerability. Humility is taking an inquiry stance while being open to learning and hearing another person's perspective. As one white

female facilitator explained: “[Working across difference] is not about looking ‘different’ from the front of the room, it’s about valuing multiple perspectives in your work and finding ways to embrace them when they show up.”

The skill of listening is especially important to creating these relationships. One Black female facilitator described practicing listening skills through stories: “Everybody has an experience, and everybody wants to actually share that experience in order to be seen, heard, and valued — everybody.”

A white female facilitator pointed out that it was necessary to balance listening with speaking out: “For white people, when we are in an ‘across difference’ space, we should be listening, but also we can’t be silent. ... Know when it’s your listening time and know when it’s your time to express and be heard.”

Another facilitator, a Black female, connected the idea of vulnerability with being what she called “ego distant.” Taking the ego out of the relationship allows everyone to have “courageous conversations about how you show up in your racial identity, where you are on your own journey for liberation, and how you need, or want, to continue your growth and development.”

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one’s ego can help the group find a common purpose: “All of us come into this work from a similar place of putting aside our ego, looking at it as much bigger than just this organization ... wanting to build a bigger movement.”

Preparing for, executing, and debriefing facilitation across difference

The experienced equity practitioners all emphasized the importance of balancing power dynamics when co-facilitating with another person of a different racial or ethnic background. Because these discussions often bring up or reproduce racial power dynamics, co-facilitating transformative spaces for

equity requires intentional planning, implementation, responsive facilitation, and regular debriefing.

First, co-facilitators told us how they created plans and thought carefully about the roles each person would play and why. These decisions were based on an understanding of their own and participants’ identities. This involves considering “how each facilitator’s race intersects with their facilitation moves, including what they say, who they call on, and what they give attention to” (Ngounou & Gutiérrez, 2019).

For example, one white female facilitator explained that it required dialogue across difference to create an agenda that would work for people who identify as white as well as BIPOC: “Sometimes there’s tension when we have a different idea about what should happen, and usually the root of these come down to who we’re leaning toward [in] the work: white or BIPOC participants.”

She went on to explain that, when they discuss “who we need to lean toward in a certain section and why, we both have a deeper understanding of our goals and how to reach them.”

Additionally, co-facilitators should discuss the roles each individual will play during the session itself, considering power dynamics. A Black female facilitator described a time when racial and gender stereotypes



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were reinforced and not intentionally interrupted. “I was observing a white and Black co-facilitator, and the Black woman was literally getting the coffee and filling the glasses with water, and the white person was facilitating, and they called that co-facilitating.

“When we debriefed at the end, I questioned that set-up, and they had some lame excuse ... like [the Black facilitator] couldn’t stay the whole time. ... If that was the case, then I think that should have been said upfront because — particularly when you’re working across racial difference — when you see the person who comes from a marginalized racial group and they are moving the PowerPoint to the next slide or filling glasses of water, that speaks to a power dynamic that should never be allowed to exist in the name of [equitable] co-facilitation.”

Another facilitator who identifies as Black told us how she talks with white co-facilitators about whose role it will be to interrupt harmful discourse from participants: “We’ve talked explicitly about if somebody says something that is ridiculous or racist — OK, who’s the right person to respond? ... To my [white] colleagues’ credit, they take a lot of responsibility for being sure that they can model what it looks like to interrupt unproductive, racist, or otherwise insensitive or infuriating discourse.”

Finally, co-facilitators who plan equity-centered professional learning commit to debriefing after the event has ended. This begins with checking what each person is feeling or processing. Then co-facilitators might discuss how the agenda went, why they used certain facilitation moves, participants’ reactions, and implications for learning and future work.

As one practitioner said, “[We ask,] What did you do? Did we achieve our intention? Here’s what I was working on. How do you think I did?” She advised that co-facilitators “be open and willing to talk about that and to keep a racial equity lens present in that debrief.”

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TRANSFORMING SELF TO TRANSFORM OTHERS

Professional learning that aims to address racial injustice will remain transactional, rather than transformational, unless facilitators’ intentions and planning are holistic and scaffolded through the sequence described above: beginning with introspective and individual work, reflecting with others in affinity, and then building relationships and taking action across difference.

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The learning and reflection sequence that the facilitators in our study described can support anyone in growing toward a more anti-racist stance. One of many benefits of this approach is that it engages facilitators in modeling how to be aware of one’s own identity and work across difference.

As one white male facilitator said, “Besides having a good curriculum or a good experience, we believe that modeling is important because the modeling of that discourse, the modeling of that relationship [across difference], the modeling of that healing is essential because it is counter to what our system has fostered us to be doing day-to-day.”

Facilitating others to engage directly with issues of racism is challenging and

rewarding. By engaging in this learning *alone*, in *affinity*, and *across difference*, professional learning leaders can help educators make progress toward transforming learning spaces into places where students and adults can thrive, close opportunity gaps, and regain humanity and liberation for all.

As a Black female facilitator explained, “Our elders used to say, ‘Well, you can’t wring your hands and roll up your sleeves at the same time.’ So our work is about trying to help people keep their sleeves rolled up and stay moving.”

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