Making Culturally-Responsive Sense of Assessment Data: Inquiry About Equity

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When it comes to data about inequity, especially racial inequity, people often find reasons to minimize decades of evidence that systemic inequity affects students. Assessment requires data, but a data-driven approach to conversations about oppression don't necessarily lead to a change in perspective or a change in practice. The quality of assessment design in terms of sample size and metrics is not necessarily the most important measure of its utility for faculty. In the case of culturally responsive assessment, emphasis on the limitations of quantitative measures might actually work against progress. Cultural changes require explicit and ongoing discussion about the tendency for faculty, staff, and administrator resistance to taking action on equity.

The work of building and sustaining a healthy culture of inquiry, especially one that considers evidence of inequity and acts on it, must be culturally responsive and relational. There is a preponderance of data proving systemic inequity that affects and is reified by higher education. Yet, at least at my institution, we experience ongoing aversion to trainings that call for self-reflection around bias in the classroom, particularly among white faculty when addressing issues of race. Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) offer a motivating argument about the essential role culturally responsive assessment practices play in challenging inequities. I'd like to elaborate on some of the issues of campus culture that might get in the way of such useful and necessary assessment practices using H. Richard Milner's (2012) opportunity gaps framework and Robin DiAngelo's (2018) book *White Fragility: Why It's so Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*.

I recently attended a training focused on equity and data-informed improvements to instruction. The people there were colleagues from several institutions who had expressed a distinct interest and were going to review equity data and responses in order to champion evidence-based improvements to instruction at their community colleges. In other words, they were a group of particularly dedicated and informed people with an expressed commitment.

The group excitedly followed along during the first day of our training when we reviewed information about the efficacy of the proposed improvements that we could all bring to our colleges. However, when the presentation shifted to a review of national data about inequity, the room exploded with anxiety. Suddenly, several white people

had seemingly random objections, others had comments they believed were crucial about all the aspects of inequity outside of their control, or comments about how "other faculty" on their campuses would never tolerate reflecting on campus-wide or course-specific data on inequity. The presenter repeatedly had to intervene to redirect the conversation, which took almost twenty minutes. She deftly earned everyone's attention by reassuring us that the improvements we were learning about were a strategy we could all use, starting now, that would improve equity. She reminded us of the challenging but extremely important truth that there are some things as instructors and even administrators that are absolutely within our control when it comes to improving equity.

The facilitator was seasoned by having presented this same information repeatedly, and got her message through because she specifically designed the presentation to address white fragility. White fragility is an obstacle to equitable educational practices, and it is an effect of privilege. In most conversations about improving education, it might appear as minimizing of systemic oppression, especially racism. It might also appear as a diversion. It might also appear as some variation of a "kids these days" argument about how underprepared our students are when they arrive (and how that isn't our fault). This attitude about students' problems is an example of what H. Richard Milner (2012) refers to as deficit thinking, or perpetuating the incorrect assumption that students are to blame for inequitable education systems. Another barrier unique to equity conversations is a faculty response about how many external pressures students face that are completely out of our control. When addressing a group of well-meaning progressive white faculty with evidence that we are responsible for some inequities in our own classrooms, it is unfortunately likely that presenters will encounter white fragility.

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If faculty involved in designing assessment are struggling with white fragility, we may avoid cultural responsiveness even when presented with a preponderance of data. This avoidance can get in the way of faculty making sense of data, preventing us from integrating it into our thinking or classroom practices. Montenegro and Jankowski remind us that:

> It is unrealistic and counterproductive for assessment professionals to think they are approaching their work from an impartial stance or to assume that the students being assessed also operate from an impartial stance. Failing to recognize how culture and our own experiences affect the assessment process can limit the impact of assessment (Montenegro and Jankowski, 2017, p. 14).

Milner (2012) also argues that "Social contexts of schools and communities can reinforce the status quo or in fact disrupt or interrupt it. Context-neutral mindsets do not allow educators to recognize deep-rooted and ingrained realities embedded in a particular place" (p. 709). In other words, context neutral mindsets in assessment are not possible, and the desire to pursue perfect, "objective" context-neutral assessment ignores the very problems we are trying to solve.

It is unjust that so many white faculty in positions of social and institutional privilege require so much training to deal with our white fragility. However, acknowledging and addressing white privilege is a way to accomplish more socially just and culturally responsive assessment.

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In her response to Montenegro and Jankowski's paper, Ereka Williams (2017) reminds us that "[w]e cannot afford to ignore those legacies in defining or (where appropriate) redefining who we are currently and who we hope to become for the common good" (p. 3). Although addressing inequity is a challenging and imperfect process, ignoring it is not an option. DiAngelo (2018) supports this imperative by clarifying the result of ignoring the problem: "To avoid talking about racism can only hold our misinformation in place and prevent us from developing the necessary skills and perspectives to challenge the status quo" (p. 4). In the case of assessment, this means barriers to student success, retention, graduation, and, most of all, learning.

To clarify, DiAngelo (2018) is not specifically addressing what assessment professionals or educators might call the "sense-making," part of the assessment cycle, when people respond to data and integrate it into their own thinking. But, like Montenegro and Jankowski, she proposes a useful way to think about cultural context and sensemaking in our work as educators: "We make sense of perceptions and experiences through our particular cultural lens. This lens is neither universal nor objective" (p. 9). For white faculty, staff, and administrators working in outcomes assessment, making sense of student success data and other data about inequity and developing awareness of our own cultural "lenses" might need to happen before we can design responsive assessments.

To develop this self-awareness, white outcomes assessment professionals and educators should participate in ongoing training in understanding and supporting equity and how it relates to inquiries about culturally-responsive outcomes, classrooms, and professional development. This training and search for greater understanding "is on-going and life-long, and includes sustained engagement, humility, and education" (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 9). Some of this work can only happen through collaboration with the people on campus who have great experience and expertise in social justice and analyzing systems of power, privilege, and inequity. What most colleges do well is offer a variety of trainings about cultural responsiveness and social justice, addressing inequities, learning about systemic oppression, being an ally, and other related topics. Some, like my place of employment, require all faculty, staff, and administrators to participate in training.
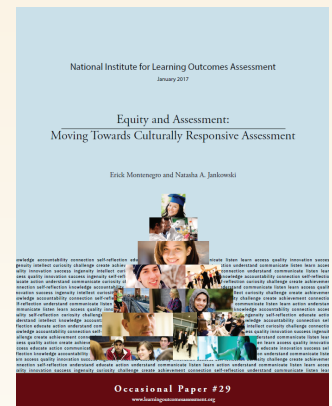
Unfortunately, many of us struggle to support the kind of humility and desire to receive feedback and ask uncomfortable questions that both social justice work and meaningful assessment require. For white faculty especially, who are accustomed to the feeling of always being the holders of knowledge, truly effective conversations about cultural responsiveness are uncomfortable and require humility. DiAngelo (2018) refers to this crucial state of mind as sustaining "the discomfort of not knowing" (p. 14). Instead of knowing, as assessment professionals and educators, we must open-heartedly ask ourselves how we can do better, and then listen and make sense of data from a place of humility and "not knowing." Connecting ongoing social justice trainings with a culture of inquiry about equity offers a way forward in this work.

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