# Using Collaborative Inquiry to Transform Teaching, Learning, and Inquiry About Leadership: The Transformational Learning of Our Educational Leadership Faculty Team as We Developed Assessments for an Equity-Centered Pedagogy

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This article describes the transformational learning of our educational leadership faculty team as we developed assessments for an equity-centered pedagogy. This piece is taken from a larger study of new leaders' action research projects. The Equity Plan is designed to disrupt inequitable schooling practices by engaging students of educational leadership in identifying a challenging equity concern at their site, collecting relevant data, enacting a collaborative inquiry cycle, and creating recommendations to address the concern. In designing, refining and examining the pedagogy, we as faculty members interrogated our own practices as we moved from instructors of students to facilitators of equity-focused leadership actions by school leaders.

## Introduction

Unabated pressure to improve achievement of the lowest-performing students amid chronic failed reforms has forced school leaders to both learn new information and to continually examine existing assumptions about leadership, learning and change. Educational leadership faculty face challenges similar to the aspiring school leaders. We are often criticized for poor outcomes: producing leaders who are not effective change agents in the nation's lowest performing schools (Levine, 2005). As scholar-practitioners who support new urban school leaders, we agree the challenges are overwhelming. Powerful leadership on the part of these courageous indi-

viduals is imperative. We embrace the challenge to support school leaders and share in this article a transformative journey through our own cycle of inquiry. This paper describes processes used by one faculty team to design and implement equity-centered common assessments for emerging school leaders.

First, we present a theoretical basis for our transformative, equity-centered work. We present the context for our collaboration within a department whose members define themselves as bold, socially responsible leaders (5 Mindscapes or department program goals). Second, we report on our own processes as a collaborative inquiry team undergoing its own transformation along with our students to enact these values. Our collaborative efforts to design and refine the Equity Plan transformed us from instructors of coursework to facilitators of bold, socially responsible leadership. Finally, we assert that faculty must continuously engage in transformative learning to facilitate the development of bold, socially responsible leaders who can change the world of schooling.

## Transforming Our Pedagogy

A transformational pedagogy (Baxter Magolda, 1998; Brown, 2004; Cranton, 2002; Mezirow, 1997) addresses both what leaders know and how they know it, or informational and transformational learning. Kegan (2000) and Drago-Severson (2004) suggest that learning involves increased knowledge and skills, which are important in learners' capacities to change attitudes and competencies. Transformational learning theory provides a framework to develop adults' capacities to integrate the complexities of leadership (Collay & Cooper, 2008). As we strive to facilitate more transformative learning in our students who are emerging school leaders, we are compelled to examine "how we know" within our own practice. We describe our journey as faculty colleagues who designed and implemented an equity-centered pedagogy for emerging school leaders. We present a parallel journey as bold, socially responsible leaders striving to change our practice in response to persistent, unresolved problems of schooling. Our faculty inquiry led to the creation of a centerpiece assignment for our preliminary credential program. The Equity Plan assignment itself is a collaborative inquiry.

In a related paper, Winkelman, Collay & Storms (2009) addressed the integration of inquiry, action research, and practitioner research as critical elements of leadership for school improvement (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 2007; Anderson & Jones, 2000; Burnaford, Fisher & Hobson, 1996; Langer & Colton, 1994; Wiggan, 2007). Inquiry-centered research is ongoing, starting with the identification of a problem and following a standard protocol. Collaborative inquiry includes refinement of a focal question, continued gathering of data, and analysis of information. Actions needed are defined through analysis of data (Calhoun, 1994; Sagor, 1997; Sagor, 2005, Szabo, 1996). We noted a preponderance of collaborative inquiry by

and for teachers, with less attention on school leaders. Effective administrators must continue to practice collaborative inquiry at their school sites if they are to succeed in addressing the most difficult problems of school reform.

As a faculty study team, we engaged in our own collaborative inquiry for the purpose of establishing common signature assignments for the core courses. Reflecting the work of Cranton (1996) on collaborative group learning, we sought to construct and refine our thinking about teaching and learning for social justice:

> In many diverse subject areas, collaborative group learning is appropriate for the nature of the knowledge we want to acquire. Whenever we are interested in how people relate to each other and develop social realities, it is communicative knowledge we are seeking. This is the domain of the social sciences, including psychology, sociology, and politics. It is the territory of administrative studies, such as leadership, organizational behavior, and management. (Cranton, 1996, p. 28)

Through regular communication, we easily came to agreement about an initial reflection assignment on bold, socially responsible leadership (BSRL) and the final portfolio assignment. The challenge was developing a mid-year assignment that would facilitate application of BSRL standards at their sites. The Equity Plan assignment has evolved into the centerpiece of a transformational pedagogy in a leadership preparation program. The plan supports new leaders to develop understandings and skills to lead for equity.

> The Equity Plan assignment is designed to provide new leaders with a skill set for conducting inquiry about inequitable educational practices within their own schools and districts. The process of following a question through data gathering, resource identification, and action planning moves participants from nave community members to agents of reform. As a centerpiece of the required core sequence of courses, this quarter-long inquiry is structured to provoke and support informational and transformational learning. Inquiry or action research is a keystone for classroom-based reform (Smith-Maddox, 1999), and we propose that instructional leaders use similar approaches. (Winkelman et. al., 2009)

Our efforts to create such an assignment forced our faculty team to engage in collaborative inquiry. We needed to define our purpose, gather information about each other's assignments, and analyze student work. We didn't predict the extent to which we would be compelled to share and examine our practice.

## Retrospective—Retelling the Story

We presented the Equity Plan assignment at the CAPEA state conference in March, 2008, where we were encouraged to take the work to the national conference, National Council of Professors of Educational Administration. We presented at the NCPEA conference in August, 2008. Colleagues were most interested in how the faculty team came to agreement on the assignment. Through our analysis of this curriculum development, we uncovered our own collaborative inquiry process (Collay, Winkelman,

Garcia, & Guilkey-Amado, 2009). The team of four who developed the assignment met as a focus group to discuss how we developed the Equity Plan assignment. The focus group format was chosen for several reasons. The focus group is a model of collaborative inquiry (Smith-Maddox, 1999); the dialogue illustrates how we work together; and the method is a fit with the purpose of the study. Creswell recommends the use of focus groups when "interactions among the interviewees will likely yield the best information" (1998, p. 124). We report on our collaboration in response to skepticism about faculty collaboration. Our focus group questions align with the cycle of inquiry:

- How did we choose this assignment?
- Why do you think we were able to come to consensus about our work?
- What aspects of the Equity Plan are most important?
- What evidence do you see that students are moving toward bold, socially responsible leadership?
- What are our next steps?

The focus group reflections portray faculty perceptions about the purpose of the assignment, how the faculty team worked together and what aspects of requiring the Equity Plan challenged us as facilitators of leadership development. In the first section, we review the questions and representative responses from each member of the group. In the second section, we analyze the group discussion using the qualities of collaborative inquiry as a lens (Smith-Maddox, 1999).

## Faculty Focus Group Responses and Interpretation

*How did we choose this assignment?* Each of us brought related assignments to the table as we worked to create and refine the Equity Plan. One of us described an assignment used in the joint doctoral program. "It was highly theoretical, very abstract." As we adapted the work for emerging leaders, this colleague was "very pleased that we've used the bold, socially responsible leadership (BSRL) standards and the practical part of the data collection." A second member "used a parallel assignment in a curriculum course that focused on using data to differentiate instruction and establish professional development activities." A third member emphasized the focus on multiple sources of student data: "I got really excited about the student focus because administrators sometimes move away from [using multiple sources of student data] when they become administrators." As a fourth member recalled, "it brought together a lot of pieces of the Instructional Leadership course through the focus on data, collaboration, and recommendations." While we easily reached agreement about fit with the program standards and reflection of the course goals, we did not initially agree about when emerging leaders should collect the data, how much, and from how many sources. We also wrestled with how to frame and assess the recommendations section of the Equity Plan.

*Why do you think we were able to come to consensus about our work?* As one faculty member stated, "the Plan is a match with BSRL (Bold, socially responsible leadership), we already had a clear sense of equity in all our work, not just in this program." We are committed to our department program standards and willing to examine our work with students in order to meet the standards. The newest faculty member described the faculty culture, stating "You unpacked what you do, you set that culture for me coming onto the team." Another illuminated our collaborative process: "We've shared a lot about how we've made it work and our struggles with it, and we've all had struggles. It is the hardest assignment for the students, it's the hardest to teach." This member also recognized the importance of academic freedom: "We've left room for us to do it somewhat differently. The assignment is the same, we had directions (for students), but we said, 'If you want to do it this way, that's fine.'" This last point makes it clear that we agreed different instructional approaches were not only acceptable, but would inform and expand our repertoire of powerful practices. One reflection captured the atypical nature of our experience: "The departmental culture is very important for this consensus to roll out as it does. I've worked at other institutions and I've never seen this kind of collaboration in higher education. You expect just the opposite." Another member attributed our ability to collaborate to the fact that all the team members had similar consulting and coaching experiences in high poverty, low socio-economic settings. We made a commitment to each other to put this work in motion, even though each of us had different emphases or focus areas within the assignment. We gave each other permission to approach the work in our own ways, were flexible in offering to modify our expectations, and trusted each other to carry out the work. As one member observed, "And there was that trust factor . . . all those factors are clear and help me reach consensus."

*What aspects of the Equity Plan are most important?* "This assignment is very challenging!" We noted the parallel between our students' challenges to complete the Equity Plan and our own struggles as instructors facilitating those challenges. One member explained, "They want to know what needs to be done. I intentionally don't give them the directions to the summative assessment (early)." Another member elaborated, "I have them assess their progress as a Think Tank (study group) rather than give them 'the five steps.' After a pause, this member reflected, "I struggle with that philosophically, not giving them the answer. I don't know how realistic it is for students only a few months in, this much ambiguity." A third member added, "I grapple with where to put our attention. That's exactly what they grapple with in their schools." The faculty shared a common dilemma about how to structure applied work so that new leaders would have enough direction to pursue their equity inquiry, yet not offering a cookbook approach.

For each section of the Equity Plan assignment we developed, we questioned how much direction to give and what were the purposes of the directions. For example, we agreed our students should collect data. However,

in requiring students to collect data, we debated about what type of data, how much data, over how many years, and what counted as data. For the Collaboration section, we asked ourselves with whom our students should collaborate, which stakeholders they should engage, and whether we should insist they work with resistant others. In the Recommendations section, we argued about the extent to which new leaders were positioned to take action.

*Asking students to take leadership before they have completed the coursework.* Recognition that both the students and faculty wrestle with this assignment led to a debate about the placement of the Plan . . . why not put it at the end of the third quarter so the students would have completed not only an additional term with us, but many would have taken additional coursework outside the cohort? This particular question exemplifies the discourse that shaped our efforts to come to consensus. One member recalled how the assignment had evolved over time: "We've now reorganized our courses so the Equity Plan is a centerpiece with all of the elements of instructional leadership." Another member noted that the Equity Plan "disrupts student ideas about equity and leadership at a critical time. They can then use their recommendations section to look at organizational theory [in Spring quarter]." Yet another suggested: "It merits some discussion for us to look at the placement of the Signature Assignment. I agree partially with my colleague, I do like it in Winter because you can then make reference to it for the remainder of the year." The query continued: "But then I question the maturity of the students from the leadership perspective. They've only been with us for a few months when they have to tackle something this sophisticated—it's a challenge." One member captured the experience for all of us: "I've learned more about teaching from this assignment than from any other because we must ask, what do you give them to enable them to become leaders but doesn't give them the answer?" We continue to debate the best approaches to preparing new leaders to pursue their inquiry about equity concerns. New leader development is complex and each comes to the work with different perceptions of equity and varying degrees of efficacy as leaders.

*Using collaborative work groups is the norm.* Another aspect of assigning the Equity Plan was the importance of work groups within each cohort. These groups are established by all faculty, some long-term and others by quarter or role-alike. In discussing peer evaluation, one of us noted: "I have them assess their progress as Think Tanks." Another appreciated the small group work in building cross-site understanding: "And that is the power of work groups. In describing their own Equity Plan, they hear about the different settings each is in." We concurred with the statement, "The work groups have really worked." The peer groups that each of us use create a forum for the exchange of ideas and approaches to the work. We strive to mix the membership of each group so that new leaders from more affluent and less affluent districts must work together. Individuals bring a variety of perspectives of race, gender, class and language equity concerns. These

work groups address a key dimension of adult learning theory, the importance of regular, structured critical reflection.

*What evidence do you see that students are moving toward bold, socially responsible leadership?* Our senior colleague described how one graduate of the program "articulated very well issues of cultural competency, conversations about race, ELLs (English Language Learners) . . . to us and to her literacy coach." The new leader's stance reflected her experience in the program and her status as a leader of color. Another member stated, "We can't prepare them for the exact situation they're walking into." At the same time, a third member recognized that, "We can begin to trace the development by using the other Mindscapes (program standards) that become evident in other parts of the plan." A final reflection was about the power of program values: "I had a student . . . who just came to get his credential, jump through the hoop. He said, 'I just came to get the piece of paper and this has been a life changing experience.' "

*What are our next steps?* Two levels of recommendations grew out of our discussion, the first more immediate: "We need more conversation about the Plans themselves." One member asked to "talk about what worked (with instruction), what we would do differently." A second member proposed, "I'm thinking about bringing the high, medium, and lows so were not just looking at the exemplars." The faculty team agreed that there is a predictable continuum in the quality of the Plans in the following ways: how long it took new leaders to clearly articulate an equity concern, new leader efficacy in pursuing data, whether new leaders were able to pull together a collaborative to address the concern, the quality of their recommendations, and the degree to which they pursued those recommendations.

For longer term planning, a third member recalled a suggestion that we align the work from another course (Supervision and Staff Development) with the Equity Plan: "There's a component in the Equity Plan that calls for analyzing professional development plans (at their sites). For me, there's a natural anchor." Another suggestion was using the recommendations beyond the Winter term by asking new leaders to carry one or more forward and by having students revisit them in Spring as part of their Portfolio. We discussed the "hand off" to the Research Year that leads to the master's degree and different ways students could take their initial work to greater depth. There are opportunities in our department meetings, for instance, to collaborate vertically and make recommendations for greater coherence between Year One and Year Two. This speculation caused us to wonder aloud about working with another team of colleagues and whether we would be successful collaborating with new personalities.

## Becoming Facilitators of Bold, Socially Responsible Leadership

Within our own collaborative inquiry we identified tension in ourselves and our students around our expectations that students take leadership ac-

tions rather than merely completing an assignment. Through the collaborative inquiry lens provided by Smith-Maddox (1999) we observed ourselves engaging in debates about the placement of the Plan itself and whether we can expect students to behave like leaders within that cycle. Smith-Maddox notes: "Together, [inquirants] try to identify problems and solve them." Our problem was to come to consensus about common, signature assignments. This larger task required regular, focused work sessions and a high level of trust for us to move out of our comfort zones. "Often, this [problem-solving] takes place in the context of dialogues where participants question one another, interrogate their assumptions, and synthesize the different perspectives represented" (p. 289). Over three years, we met at least quarterly and engaged in dialogue about our purposes, values, and beliefs in relation to supporting the development of school leaders. We definitely questioned one another, interrogated assumptions, and synthesized our different perspectives. We know from past experiences in multiple institutions and from our disagreements within this team that collaboration is challenging.

Our discourse about how to facilitate Equity Plan development illuminates why it's essential to collectively examine and transform our practice as facilitators of adult learning alongside of our "students" who, like us, are professionals seeking to address challenging problems of educational inequity. We must critically reflect on our assumptions about how we learn, and therefore, how we frame learning for our colleagues. Brown (2006) describes an "andragogical framework" for leadership development, drawing from research on adult learning theory, transformative learning theory, and critical social theory. She asserts,

> Within the context of preparation programs, the educational tasks of critical reflection involve helping future leaders become aware of oppressive structures and practices, developing tactical awareness of how they might change these, and building the confidence and ability to work for collective change. (p. 706)

Throughout the development of the Equity Plan, our students and we strive to address the presence of oppressive structures and practices and become strategic in our reform efforts. As our students challenge the assumptions about learning and access at their schools, we as faculty must examine conventional practices that no longer serve our profession. For instance, some faculty argue that "academic freedom" precludes the development of common assignments. The collective development of this common assignment provoked an academic debate about teaching and learning for equity that improved our practice.

## Our Struggle was Facilitating New Leaders through Their Struggle

Coming to terms with the characteristics of the Equity Plan and its implementation became a catalyst for our own struggle to re-conceptualize the work of facilitating the development of bold, socially responsible leaders.

As university-based faculty, we are socialized by custom and beliefs about knowledge production to provide answers to students. Talking with each other about this tension was a risk. One of us acknowledged "I struggle with that philosophically, not giving them the answer."

Another recalled her sense of the group's work to build trust: "By saying, 'this piece seems to be working, this piece I'm not so sure about, I'd like to see more of this.'" A third member followed with the statement, "We shared a lot about how we made it work and our struggles with it [the Equity Plan]." We recognized the department culture supports such collaboration in these words, "I've never seen this type of collaboration in higher ed . . . part of it was mentioned, the word, trust."

Our ability to take risks opened the door to the harder questions about why the work of facilitating the assignment is hard. One of us recalled, "Once we did it, we saw our students were struggling with what we wanted them to struggle with . . . disrupting inequity." Another appreciated her approach to getting the data together: "My students were struggling with the sequence of how I was approaching the Equity Plan. You gave me an idea when you said, 'Well, I start them off early, in the second session,' and that made a lot of sense to me." Our senior colleague also weighed in regarding the scope of the assignment being limited to one quarter, "Because they're struggling, they can explore it for another quarter." We agree with another member's reflection that "I've learned more about teaching from this assignment than from any other because we must ask, 'what do you give them to enable them to become leaders but doesn't give them the answer?'" Our work is ongoing. We continue to refine the curriculum and evaluation framework, are considering requiring students to use literature more systematically to inform their writing and their recommendations, and will link the Plan to "non-cohort" courses that provide additional material. We will set expectations that students test drive one or more of their recommendations during the Spring quarter and be more systematic about linking the Equity Plans to the second, research cohort year.

## Implementing the Equity Plan: What Worked?

Several factors contributed to our ability to develop a common assignment:

1. Coming to the department with shared values—Our senior colleague described the foundation created by the recruitment of people dedicated to the equity stance valued by the department.
2. Having explicit program standards that are the foundation for all course and program design—Having codified standards that reflect what matters in the work is essential to our success as a team. As leadership consultants who are often called to support "vision statement" development, we are painfully aware of how many school staffs don't have common agreements about what matters.
3. Facilitation of our teamwork in response to external pressures—while our

> department colleagues put us on the path to program coherence, the external pressures of accreditation pushed us to the next level of cooperation. We might have arrived here in any case, but having a deadline was a factor in moving the work to the next level.

Becoming a "community of practice"—The faculty team engaged in the tenets of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) throughout the development of common assessments. They include: Problem solving, requests for information, seeking experience, reusing assets, coordination and synergy, discussing developments, documentation projects, visits, and mapping knowledge and identifying gaps. These activities characterized our work as a team and describe the kinds of collaboration we structure in our curriculum for developing leaders and require as an outcome of the Equity Plan.

## Why Faculty Must Transform Our Practice

Faculty in educational leadership programs can and must transform our own practices. Educational Administration programs are criticized for not responding to the needs of contemporary school leaders (Levine, 2005). We as a faculty benefited from our transformative learning processes, critiquing our own assumptions and practices and using the problem of creating common assessments as an opportunity to examine our beliefs about our roles as facilitators of leadership development. We confronted our unexamined assumptions about what it means to facilitate the learning of leaders, especially regarding notions of expertise.

As we recalled the instructional challenges that accompanied facilitating Equity Plan development, we were constantly challenged to rethink our beliefs about faculty expertise. Two examples from our discourse were one, "not giving the answers" and subsequent perceived ambiguity on our part by the students; and two, grappling with important role of the study groups in providing a collaborative structure for critical reflection. One of us described the power of the ambiguity when she asked: "What do you give them (students) that enables them to become leaders, but doesn't give them the answer? How do you give them the support?" She characterized students' responses by adding, "They always want me to show them the Equity Plans from last year. I always say, 'No, I'm not going to give you a template.' "

Our own practice and lessons from research address the role of collaboration and ongoing critical reflection as an element of transformative learning. Building regular, well-structured small group time into our weekly classes, however, challenged each of us to revisit our beliefs about expertise and adult learning. One colleague noted: "I have them assess their progress as a Think Tank. But what's very important is the ambiguity." While we all use small group process, we constantly question ourselves. He continued: "I struggle with that philosophically. Here's steps one, two, three, four, five . . . if you follow them, you have your framework." He cap-

tured the dilemma by adding the counterpoint. "By the same token, that's not the reality. They're just going to have to figure it out themselves. I don't know how realistic this much ambiguity is for students just starting out." Ironically, this exchange about of how our students experience ambiguity reflected our own challenges with relinquishing direct instruction.

## Conclusion

"I've worked at other institutions and I've never seen this kind of collaboration in higher ed. You expect just the opposite." Even as we agreed the work was worthy of our time and effort, faculty collaboration was much harder than we imagined. What started as a curriculum coherence exercise evolved into a complex discourse about what we believed about learning to lead for equity. Our collegiality was not contrived (Hargreaves, 1994), but based on a shared commitment to school reform. We took risks through collaboration, allowing us to examine our assumptions about what faculty members of educational administration do. We came to understand that, if we didn't engage in the messiness of honest inquiry ourselves, we couldn't expect our students to do so.

Our case study offers one response to Levine's (2005) critique that educational administration programs do not address the needs of contemporary school leaders. Through the collaborative inquiry process, we ensure that our purpose is explicit and reflects the needs of today's school communities. We use curricular approaches that build leadership capacity and knowledge for different settings. We strive to integrate theory and practice, although our program values do not treat them as separate. Our collaborative inquiry about our own practice reflects the very processes we require of our new leaders and strengthens leadership within our departments, schools and profession.

Through collaborative inquiry, we refined our research and teaching practices. We will continue our inquiry by conducting longer-term studies of and with our former students. We will conduct follow up interviews, school-based ethnographies, and surveys to find out to what degree leaders continue to use collaborative inquiry to lead for equity. Our faculty team will use these new sources of data to continue our cycle of inquiry on preparing bold, socially responsible leaders.

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