



# An Equity-Minded Approach to Faculty Development in a Community of Practice

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Accepted: 23 December 2020/Published online: 12 February 2021  
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## Abstract

Communities of Practice (CoPs) have been identified as successful models of innovation in higher education institutional change efforts, particularly geared toward faculty. Accordingly, this multi-method qualitative study examined how participation in one equity-minded CoP contributed to participants' understanding and mobilization of equity in their work at a public university in the Northeast United States. Through grounded theory, the authors investigated how participants critiqued current educational inequities, supported one another, shared knowledge and resources, and championed social change, while situated within oppressive academic structures. Although all participants aimed to contribute to equitable practices, findings showcased evidence of accomplice behavior given the nature of academia. However, the CoP provided a unique and supportive space for faculty to critique perceived inequities and systems of power and actively advocate for social justice change in their educational environments.

**Keywords** change model · Community of practice · Equity · Faculty · Grounded theory

In the past several decades, higher education scholars, administrators, and practitioners have been grappling with significant challenges related to equity, diversity, and inclusion (McNair, 2016). Disparities in student enrollment, persistence, and completion continue to exist despite years of programming and policy-making geared toward addressing these inequities (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017). Unlike the turnover that occurs with students, faculty, particularly full-time and non-contingent educators, remain pillars of higher education institutions and

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can play a central role in addressing disparities in student success, developing effective and fair pedagogical practices, and supporting inclusive learning (Esters, 2017; McNair & Veras, 2017). Post-secondary instructors have an opportunity to serve as leaders in creating and enhancing a socially just campus culture and climate (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017). In fact, faculty members' understandings of equity and commitment toward equity work are critical to advancing social justice and inclusive excellence at their institutions, according to a three-year study conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (Esters, 2017). Communities of Practice (CoPs) offer one innovative strategy for uniting faculty with the common purpose of equity-mindedness to share resources and create structures to aid them in developing equitable practices (Nair & Thomas, 2018; Wenger, 1998).

As a guiding concept for this study, equity-mindedness can be defined as a practical approach to naming and changing educational policies, practices, and historical realities that build and deepen disparities (Bensimon, 2018; Bensimon et al., 2016). Equity-mindedness was formative for the current project for several reasons. First, it shifts the focus away from deficit views of students as the cause of the inequities in educational outcomes (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017). Instead, it attributes these disparities to academic practices, structures, and pedagogies that inherently privilege white, cis-gender, straight, and Christian populations (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017; McNair & Veras, 2017). Second, equity-mindedness calls for faculty and practitioners to critically reflect on their understandings of equity and to scrutinize their practices in order to consider what they can do to challenge traditionally oppressive ideologies within academia (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017). These tenets complement the purposes of the CoP model well. Accordingly, this study investigates how

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participation in a semester-long CoP assisted faculty participants in developing their equity-mindedness, including understandings and practice, while learning to subvert and resist oppressive structures within higher education.

## Background

In the United States, completing education levels beyond high school is a key pathway to employment, higher salaries, and social mobility (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development and Office of the Under Secretary, & P. and P. S. S., 2016). Yet, maintaining equitable access and support for degree completion for marginalized populations is not an easy task (Sidman-Taveau & Hoffman, 2019).

Disparities in higher education enrollment, retention, and attainment are documented with regard to race, socio-economic status, citizenship status, and being a first-generation college student, among others (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning et al., 2016). Additionally, in-college experiences of minoritized students are marked by covert and overt discrimination and microaggressions, which impact academic success (Keels et al., 2017). Even with affirmative action policies, inclusion and equity initiatives, and other attempts at systems-level change, there is still clear evidence of significant inequity (McNair, 2016).

To address the enduring disparities among minoritized student populations, changes in traditional faculty development have been an area of recent attention (Bali & Caines, 2018; Calderwood, 2003; Costino, 2018; Prystowsky, 2018; Sidman-Taveau & Hoffman, 2019). According to Bali and Caines (2018), the conventional faculty development model has often focused on developing the scholar's area of research, with the assumption that expertise in their field would be sufficient for teaching. This type of approach has not valued the cultivation of the instructor as a whole person who may have implicit biases that could impede student success (Prystowsky & Heutsche, 2017). This method has also eschewed the unique needs and desires of faculty whose interests may be geared toward social justice aims (Bali & Caines, 2018). Because of the myopic focus on scholarship, traditional faculty development has failed to consider the role that faculty could play as advocates for equity-minded personal and institutional transformation (Bali & Caines, 2018).

Recognizing the limits of traditional faculty development, scholars have documented the increasing demand for equity-mindedness from faculty for the past several decades (McNair & Veras, 2017). With consideration of cost, time, and resources, educators have sought out creative ways to incorporate equity-based strategies into their pedagogical practices that can be feasibly integrated into faculty development initiatives (Bali & Caines, 2018; Sidman-Taveau & Hoffman, 2019). CoPs have served as one approach to support faculty in learning about equity and supporting each other in the challenges of social justice work in the context of higher education (Annala & Mäkinen, 2017; Costino, 2018; Prystowsky, 2018; Sidman-Taveau & Hoffman, 2019). This model has been found to be more successful and sustained compared to other initiatives, as they build relationships, institutional understanding, and resource sharing, while demanding perspective-taking, critical understanding, and reflexivity (Dowd & Liera, 2018; Liera & Dowd, 2018).

## Origins of the Communities of Practice Model

CoPs provide a space where individuals can engage in authentic and critical conversations dedicated to the community's shared purpose (David, 2014; Lave & Wenger, 1998), which, in

this study, was geared toward cultivating equitable and inclusive pedagogies and academic environments. Across disciplines and contexts, they are becoming avenues of social learning, innovation, and positive change, supporting both knowledge acquisition and skill development within groups of people. CoPs are defined as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, n. p.). These communities typically rest on three tenets. First, a *domain* consisting of a shared area of interest needs to exist (Lave & Wenger, 1998). Second, CoPs are defined by the presence of a *community*, meaning that these groups are committed to interacting on a regular basis about a particular topic (Lave & Wenger, 1998). Third, CoPs need to have an established *practice*, which can include the sharing of resources and information, formal and informal conversations, and problem-solving (David, 2014; Lave & Wenger, 1998). The key difference between any community and a CoP is that the members must be practitioners of a domain, not just interested in a domain.

Research has demonstrated that CoPs can impart knowledge and information while simultaneously creating a sense of belonging (Cox, 2004; Wenger, 1998). CoPs allow participants to take ownership of their learning, recognize practitioners as experts in their area, link learning to performance, support both the explicit and implicit learning, and establish norms that are a part of the context (Wenger, 1998). Sometimes CoPs come together as a result of informal circumstances which are not always beneficial to an organization. For example, Wenger (2000) reminds the reader that witch hunts, hate groups, and street gangs can all be considered communities of practice.

CoPs may vary in size, formality, and purpose. These communities may be referred to as professional associations, learning networks, technical groups, etc. However, certain commonalities, beyond domain, community and practice are often seen. CoPs engage in activities to support their practices. CoPs often develop norms around problem-solving, resource sharing, project development, identification of knowledge gaps, and dissemination of information (Wenger, 1998) among the community. Depending upon the context, CoPs may find it helpful to establish leadership and facilitation roles with the group (Wenger, 1998). With rapidly increasing use of technology, CoPs are becoming more international and diverse with potentially large memberships.

## Communities of Practice as Models to Drive Change

CoPs are not just for learning; they are functional ways to problem solve and explore innovative solutions (Cox, 2004; Cox & McDonald, 2017). For example, a large Finnish public university embarking on comprehensive curriculum reform chose to use CoPs to support faculty through the change process (Annala & Mäkinen, 2017). Interviews with 25 scholars revealed:

The curriculum reform as an enterprise was not fully determined by an outside mandate; instead, the practice evolved into the community’s own, more or less active or passive, response to that mandate. It was the community that negotiated the meanings at all levels – including the university, degree programmes and scholar teams – and made decisions in accordance with members’ positions, understandings and interests. The negotiation of meaning included an understanding of the concept of curriculum in general, and it materialized in different contexts. (p. 1954)

Essentially, the study demonstrated that although curriculum change was a highly complex social process, CoPs cultivated faculty buy-in, competency, and problem-solving. Furthermore, CoP

participants reported feeling inspired by other participants and motivated to continue the work of curriculum change when challenges developed (Annala & Mäkinen, 2017).

A similar result was found in a study across eight higher education institutions which had committed to incorporating service-learning. Faculty members ( $N = 221$ ) participated in groups and seminars established to promote learning and shared practices of service-learning across departments. Throughout the 8–10 weeks long seminar, participants discussed shared readings, examined conceptual issues, developed faculty competency, and devised new syllabi and courses to meet the needs of students engaging in service-learning. Upon completion of the seminar, faculty reported increased positive perceptions of service-learning, collaboration, and support for this campus-wide initiative (Furco & Moely, 2012).

Brown and Peck (2018) examined how CoPs supported academic staff implementing a teaching directive involving blended learning and more active student engagement. As often experienced within higher education institutions, the directive was met with hesitancy by the faculty. To counteract this perception and to promote increased knowledge, the institution developed faculty communities centered around blended learning. The participants shared that their involvement in the initiative led to feelings of greater efficacy, sense of community, and opportunities to meet desired outcomes (Brown & Peck, 2018).

Higher education institutions are in constant flux with changing student populations, expanding technological and research goals, and increasing demands for equity-mindedness. Faculty and staff must continue to broaden their knowledge and move from individual silos and into interconnected and cross-disciplinary networks if desired outcomes are to be reached (Buckley & Du Toit, 2010). As evidenced by the examples shared here, CoPs can effectively facilitate institutional change amidst challenging environments (Cox, 2004; Cox & McDonald, 2017).

CoPs for social justice and equity have been found to be successful in diverse higher educational contexts (Sidman-Taveau & Hoffman, 2019). For example, a self-chosen group of teacher educators in a graduate school, came together over 3 years to examine how to encourage social justice within their preservice teacher population (Ness et al., 2010). Through shared readings, coursework exemplars, and artifacts of their teaching, they discovered that social justice definitions varied greatly amongst group members. This awareness led to collaborative efforts to construct a common definition, reassess curricula and assignments, and discuss strategies to better facilitate class discourse around social justice in education. Faculty participants reported multiple positive outcomes, aligned with equity-mindedness (Bensimon et al., 2016), that resulted from their involvement in the CoP including transformational shifts in understanding of social justice, intentionality of explicit language, a broader shared knowledge base, and most significantly, the ability to transfer expectations of social justice to their students through syllabi, coursework and pedagogy. Furthermore, when challenges arose, the CoP provided a safe space for problem-solving and innovation (Ness et al., 2010).

Equity-minded transformation was the goal of a faculty learning community examined by Costino (2018). Faculty engaged in professional development focused upon evidence-based teaching practices and curriculum development along with critical reflection of how practices continued power and oppressive cycles for students and faculty. After two years of implementing CoPs across the institution, faculty reported being much more aware of how microaggressions and implicit bias may impact their interactions with students, increasingly inclusive of different perspectives within class discussions, more intentionality in addressing social justice through class discussion, and generally recognizing transformational change

across the institution. Additionally, they continued to see increases in numbers of faculty seeking out and participating in CoPs focused on equity and social justice (Costino, 2018).

Research has indicated that participation in CoPs has successfully facilitated institutional changes in areas such as curriculum, instructional platforms, and service-learning (Calderwood, 2003; Costino, 2018; Prystowsky, 2018; Sidman-Taveau & Hoffman, 2019). Given the role CoPs can have in creating a platform for social justice, this study aimed to explore faculty participants' engagement in an equity-focused CoP. We specifically focused on how their participation influenced their attitudes and beliefs about equity issues, as well as their professional growth through applied changes in their practices. It was not our intention to define the parameters of equity and social justice in this group but instead, to explore the ways in which participants made sense of these concepts and mobilized them within the context of their role as instructors in at a public university in the Northeast United States.

## Sensitizing Frameworks and Research Questions

We utilized the CoP model as our conceptual framework as it provided a bounded unit where we could explore how participants engaged in knowledge and information sharing through discussions and transformative problem-solving (Cox & McDonald, 2017; Wenger, 1998). We also drew upon this framework because previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of CoPs in engaging faculty as a central stakeholder group (Cox & McDonald, 2017; Thompson et al., 2015; Vescio et al., 2008). The CoP was organized to provide opportunities for participants to engage with and support each other and acquire much-needed information as they work toward equity in academia. This also meant that equity-mindedness – a focus on naming and changing structures that contribute to disparities (Bensimon, 2018; Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017) – was a sensitizing concept in our work. Consistent with grounded theory analyses, such as ours, sensitizing concepts serve as “points of departure from which to study the data” (Charmaz, 2003, p. 259). This means that rather than “forcing” it as an analytical category on the data, the idea of equity-mindedness oriented our interpretations (Bowen, 2006), as we listened to whether and how participants named and responded to academic structures.

Our study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How do participants in an equity-minded Community of Practice understand and engage with equity in their work at a public university in the Northeast United States?
- 2) In what ways does participation in an equity-minded Community of Practice assist participants' engagement with and mobilization of equity in their work at a public university in the Northeast United States?

## Methods

This multi-method qualitative study employed grounded theory to explore participants' experiences as they engaged in the semester-long group process (Strauss & Corbin, 2014). In particular, we analyzed the recorded conversations of four CoP meetings

and the open-ended responses participants shared in a survey. We explored how CoP participants deepened their conceptions of equity and addressed inequities and systems of power in their pedagogical practices. We also examined how participants actively advocated for change in their roles as faculty, in educational departments, in larger academic structures, and in society during participation in the CoP.

## Data Collection and Context

Participants named the group the Teaching with Equity Community of Practice or TWE CoP. Based on the CoP model, each CoP meeting centered on a topic related to equity in higher education. Topics were chosen by participants' common interests and included mental health, free speech, equality vs. equity, teacher advocacy, and student-centered learning. In addition, the CoP was facilitated by different members each session, which provided an opportunity for all individuals to lead, share advice, and provide resources at some point during the semester.

The TWE CoP was a group of 12 fixed term and tenure-track faculty members who teach in higher education. While participants' disciplinary foci were not systematically collected, academic fields mentioned during the sessions included teacher education, social work, higher education administration, math, computer science, nursing, communications and journalism, psychology, and women's gender and sexuality studies. All participants identified as non-Hispanic white, 83% identified as female while 17% identified as male, 67% were between the ages of 40–49 and 33% between 30 and 39, and 83% responded that the US was their country of origin.

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained to audio record and transcribe conversations from monthly one-hour meetings starting in February 2019 to May 2019, as well as to collect survey data. Participation was voluntary and participants signed informed consent forms. Four recorded CoP sessions were transcribed and included in the analyses. Six participants attended the first session, three participants attended the second, six participants attended the third, and eight participants attended the fourth and final session.

After the second, third, and fourth CoP session, participants were sent an anonymous post-meeting survey link. They were asked in an open-ended format to respond to the following question prompts about attitudes, interactions, and changes in equity-minded understandings and behavior in their work:

- 1) How has your understanding of equity changed or developed?
- 2) How have your experiences in the CoP meeting influenced your thinking about your work (if at all)?
- 3) How (if at all) have you applied your experiences in the CoP in your work since our last meeting?

Even though not all participants attended each CoP session, the survey was sent to the entire list of participants each time. We informed participants to only respond to the surveys which corresponded with the sessions they attended, however, given the anonymous nature of the survey, we were not able to verify who responded each time. Six people responded to the first survey; three – to the second; five – to the third one.



## Data Analysis

We utilized grounded theory as our method. Strauss and Corbin (2014) maintain that grounded theory enables the collection and analysis of data in phases as researchers continuously refine themes. Each researcher coded the data independently before coming together to discuss themes. Through constant comparative analysis, each researcher first engaged in open coding, which included the examination, comparison, and categorization of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 2014). We then initiated the process of axial coding, which consisted of connecting the created codes between categories and refining our interpretations (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 2014). Finally, we utilized selective coding, which Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe as “The process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development” (p. 116).

Throughout the semester, we continued to return to our themes and codes while collecting additional data via post-surveys. We conducted a separate analysis of the post-survey responses through open coding, followed by a constant comparison approach with the transcribed sessions. This iterative process assisted the team in developing a theoretical understanding of how participation in the CoP may have influenced participants’ equity-mindedness and engagement in social justice advocacy in their work. To enhance confirmability and credibility of the findings, the research team came together to compare their findings, codes, and themes, and also to perform member-checks to ensure accurate interpretations of the data (Creswell, 2014).

## Trustworthiness

In order to increase the trustworthiness of our data and interpretations, three researchers were involved in the analysis and engaged multiple ways of seeing the data to mitigate bias and illuminate blind spots. Two of the researchers involved in data analysis were members of the TWE CoP. We acknowledge that the interpretation of the data is situated within the context of our identities, experiences, perspectives, and biases as individuals and as a research team.

While there is no way to completely remove our subjectivities, we sought to increase the trustworthiness of the findings by engaging in reflexive practices throughout coding and analysis. For example, our analyses used rich descriptions and direct blinded quotations so that each researcher had the ability to draw their own interpretations prior to our team discussions. Additionally, to increase interpretive validity, we engaged in continuous dialogue to ensure interpretations of the data were consistent across the group (Maxwell, 2005). We also offered feedback as we developed drafts of the findings, regularly participated in discussions regarding emerging themes, and provided data-based evidence to support interpretations.

## Positionality Statement

Each author drew upon distinct identities to inform their understandings and interpretations of this research. We consistently grappled with how certain identities and roles were privileged within oppressive systems, while others were constrained by the very systems that provided us with advantage. Within this study, salient identities of sex, gender, race, nationality, and social class were imperative to examining our educator



roles in higher education and the subsequent behaviors, attitudes, and practices we observed. This examination was particularly important as we were involved as both participants and researchers in this study. Throughout the process, we regularly debriefed and individually analyzed all findings before sharing our interpretations with each other. This process allowed us to be reflexive researchers while also accounting for our personal advocacy and pedagogical journeys within the CoP.

## Findings

The findings from this study highlighted the ways in which CoP participants contended with issues of social justice, power, privilege, and oppression, all within the context of a self-described hegemonic academic environment. While our study initially centered on participants' teaching responsibilities, the discussions broadened to include all aspects of academia. Specifically, we found that participants used the CoP to critically name and reflect on institutional, systemic, and societal inequities, while simultaneously acknowledging their participation in these systems. A framework of equity-mindedness would suggest that disparities are understood and addressed at the structural level, rather than being seen as individual or cultural deficiencies of those experiencing inequities (Bensimon, 2018).

In this study, we saw a dialectical interplay of engagement with both structural critiques *and* with what might be read as individual deficiencies, suggesting that the CoP was a place of negotiating such tensions while constructing equity praxis. Such dialectics have been noted as characteristics of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Notably, in response to our second research question, the present study suggests that the collective working out the parameters of equity in different academic contexts was important to extending understanding and mobilizing actions. The CoP assisted participants' engagement with equity through providing a supportive space for 1) critical inquiry and reflection through which the *domain* of equity was more clearly defined; 2) advice- and resource-sharing, which shaped *practices*; and 3) transformative relationship-building, which grew the *community* aspect.

### Engaging in Critical Inquiry: Naming and Reflecting on (in)Equities

In defining equity-mindedness Bensimon et al., (2016) note that practitioners' critical inquiry is central and continue "Through a process of discovery that makes inequities visible, practitioners gain motivation to make changes in their own practices and in their institutions" (n. p.). Linking to equity as the shared domain aspect of the CoP, we found that participants engaged in continued deep levels of (self-) reflection and inquiry during the meetings, which shaped an understanding of equity and sparked equity-minded change discussions. Participants often asked questions out loud as one way to voice their reflexive processes. For example, one participant reflected on how they could model critical thinking for students, asking the following:

In terms of, as people and practitioners addressing our own, or reflecting on our own tendencies and biases and so on...where do we stand and also how do we model for students how they can take active stances in situations that may take tolerance too far?

Another participant queried, "I often times try to view things on this campus like, what barriers do I have the capacity to remove?" In a similar manner, a third participant pondered:

I'm thinking in a classroom discussion context, what's appropriate for me to say? Where do I draw the line? When do I think that it's being damaging or possibly suppressing to certain student voices by me telling them that's inappropriate? Am I suppressing those voices, even though it's considered hate speech?

These quotes reflected how participants continuously wrestled with ways they might feasibly jettison oppressive ideologies within academia in order to shift toward a more equity-minded instructor role. At the same time participants sought ways to effectively name and transform the presence of such ideologies in their practice and institutional experiences. By asking questions and sharing examples, they made visible their struggles within structures, as well as asked others for know-how based on their experiences.

While the exposure of inequitable structures is key to equity-mindedness, so is the individual and institutional accountability to transforming them (Bensimon et al., 2016). Our analysis suggests that participants attempted to define equity and its scope – namely, they focused on ideological influences (patriarchy, classism, and racism) on specific academic processes and structures (grades and graduation, recognition and promotion, the day-to-day organization of learning activities). Furthermore, CoP members worked to place and see themselves as actors within inequitable systems, but action – be it individual or systemic – was much more elusive within the duration of the CoPs. Participants recognized their agency, but also felt constrained by their existence within interlocking systems of power and oppression.

Throughout the CoP, participants openly and emphatically criticized the notion of society as merit-based and egalitarian, and instead, proposed that power structures such as systemic racism, classism, and sexism shaped and infiltrated the culture of higher education. Female participants were more vocal about the impact of ideological forces on their academic experiences as both students and faculty. One person shared:

Earlier when I was still in grad school, I had our first kid and it was constant: You cannot be a parent and a serious scholar and a teacher, you cannot be all of these things. There have been direct comments from students about my capability and commitment to their education if I brought up even the topic of having children, or family commitments.

Within the context of this conversation, the faculty recognized the hypocritical way that male faculty may benefit by disclosing their family roles because it made them more personable, while women were judged more harshly because it showcased them as less professional. As part of equity-mindedness it is important to name such realities, as they become part of the “hidden curriculum,” not made present in official policy documents or promotion guidelines.

Relatedly, CoP members also reflected on the fact that some mechanisms of inequity hide in plain sight and are taken for granted, while others remain obscure – a dialectic reinforcing inequity. Turning to grades as an embodiment of meritocracy, another participant, who was an adjunct faculty member, shared:

[Higher education] has lots of systemic barriers that are part of the way it operates, right? If we take the group learning or active learning approaches, we still give individual grades. We don't have the capability as instructors to change that, and so one of the reasons that it can be problematic is that I had a student yesterday in class who was like, “I'm really glad there's lots of collaborative learning in this class but we don't do any group projects.” I'm like, well I didn't actually design it that way, somebody else did.

While this participant recognized that group and active learning approaches may be more equitable teaching methods, they also noted their lack of agency in changing the academic grading system, which they found to be problematic. Essentially, they saw themselves as trapped in a larger academic structure that privileged majoritarian evaluative methods. Thus, while there was an element of agency in conversations and reflections, participants' lack of actions to change the system could be read as antithetical to equity-oriented teaching. Still, the above quote particularly can be read as an example of CoP members' attempts to define the dimensions of equity and see themselves as agents in relation to those. For example, teaching practice – e.g., using team-based approaches – is one such dimensions that is part of day-to-day learning, over which individual instructors have some control. This dimension, however, is in an interlocking relationship with larger academic structures – such as the grading system and overall curriculum design – which are not within the scope of agency of an adjunct instructor (another dimension of academic (in)equity).

Acknowledging the complexities and nuances of trying to understand, define, and act upon equity, we were interested in learning how participants critical inquiries may have contributed to changes they saw in their equity-mindedness. Accordingly, we explored these changes in each post-survey, as we asked how participants' understanding of equity had developed. In general, we found that participants expressed a deeper and more critical understanding of equity as a result of participation in the CoP. One respondent stated:

I think [my understanding of equity] has broadened and deepened in the sense that I am closer to understanding ways in which the structure of education and culture might be sexist, racist, ableist, ageist and so on. It feels like a glacier moving so little and so slowly despite the feeling of much effort. But I still find the idea of equity to be a theoretical one as far as the classroom is concerned, or maybe more largely as far as culture is concerned. So beyond legislation, how do you promote equity, what would it look like? I don't know.

Another participant explained:

I left the last meeting really pondering over my role in reinforcing inequitable patterns and structures by "meeting students where they are" or staying silent in some professional spaces. I think the tension between remaking these institutions and maintaining their traditional patterns through continued forms of participation is a thing I struggle with constantly in all of my work. And I think it comes back to reform or revolution. I have opted for reform through my own participation in the system.

A third respondent discussed their change in thinking after talking about mental health issues in the CoP as a component of equity. They reflected, "Talking through the issues that face students with mental health needs is really pushing my thinking about how course requirements and attendance may be inequitable for some students."

These quotes exemplified how participants were able to question the perspectives they held prior to participation in the CoP in order to critique inequitable aspects of academia. The CoP also provided a space for members to collectively wrestle with possible complicity, while sharing advice and resources to address equity in their practice, which was a second major theme that emerged from the data.

## Sharing Advice and Resources

Relating to the CoP dimension of practice (Wenger, 1998), participants often discussed how difficult it was to challenge the unequal power dynamics of the instructor-student interactions, where the educator is traditionally in a position of superiority and infallibility. By critiquing this unfair practice, the conversations morphed into sharing what CoP members saw as more equitable strategies that allow classroom citizens – students and faculty – to hold each other accountable. For instance, one participant noted:

If somebody is called out, including the instructor, here is what we do. I think what's important in this situation is not simply to say don't talk that way or don't do these things, it's not okay to do that here. But to recognize that we all probably will say or do something at a certain point in time that might not be in alignment with commitments we have made to each other or as a class, and that we have a course of action in that situation. That is not only to sit and feel further excluded, but, you can say, here is how this statement affected me or here is how this behavior affected me and I don't think it aligns with what we've discussed as a class, and so how do we move together as a community.

A second participant noted the development of ground rules for *everyone*, not just the students, stating:

I think your point about how you try to orchestrate the learning environment is an important one, and a difficult one to do. What I find happens a lot in my class, with my students, is that I set up discussion-based classes, I try to set up ground rules of respecting everybody's opinions and perspectives.

Another shared strategy for transfiguring the student-teacher power dynamic as an expression of inequity was through an intentional re-humanization of the instructor as a sentient teacher-advocate. Within this approach, participants drew from their lived experiences and used counter-stories to challenge normative and outdated notions of pedagogy as effective tools for student success. For example, one participant offered:

For me it's really important to disclose that I'm an open lesbian and that I'm married and that my wife just went through the immigration process, and all of those issues I think, yes, it's vulnerable, but I think it's important so that they know they can disclose to me things that might be personal. It's challenging.

Conversational turns like the one above both serve as advice-giving and as disclosure within the CoP, modelling a reflective pedagogical practice of acknowledging the nuanced ways in which personal experiences are related to systems of oppression and privilege that shape one's role in the classroom. As discussed further below, such disclosure also enabled meaningful equity-minded relationship building within the CoP.

In addition to sharing equity-minded strategies, participants also described practical tools they gained as a result of the CoP discussions. For example, in their post-survey response, one participant reported:

Due to our conversations in the CoP, I have recently sought out more equity-minded pedagogical resources and paid closer attention to articles in the Chronicle of Higher Education to garner direction as to what my role should be and to learn what others are doing, which might work for me as well.

Another mentioned:

I have thought a lot this semester about mental health and what equity means in relation to classroom expectations and students' mental health needs. This has made me reconsider assignment due dates, attendance and participation expectations, and specifically, how visibly honest I am with students about flexibility.

A third individual stated, “next semester, I plan to go over the syllabus with my students in more depth, and I liked the suggestions that someone offered last time of getting to know the students more by offering walks with faculty around campus.”

While the strategies, advice, and adjustments mentioned by respondents may seem modest, they suggest that engagement in the CoP enabled participants to share creative, tailored, and promising equity-minded ideas for their specific context. Furthermore, the act of sharing, which requires some vulnerability, contributed to the co-creation of a supportive environment where change can be envisioned.

### **A Safe and Like-Minded Community**

Relating to the community tenet of the CoP model, the current study noted that regular engagement with each other around defining and practicing equity shaped meaningful relationship building. Participants expressed that the CoP served as a consistent and low-risk space to build relationships around issues about which each member was passionate and eager to learn. For instance, one survey respondent noted, “For me, the single biggest takeaway from the last session was a larger feeling of community.” Similarly, a second respondent reported:

I would say that the CoP is a catalyst for me... the CoP introduces me to people and potentially allows the formation of friendships.... The CoP might form the star that other conversations and relationships orbit. For me, I have been able to start having longer conversations with some of the participants and its invaluable. Whether those conversations are informal CoP meetings or just informal conversations between two people.

Finally, a third participant highlighted the three tenets of the CoP model – domain, practice, and community – as critical in their equity growth, stating:

I thought the community aspect was valuable in that we all had a common interest and passion for teaching with equity. It was also very clear that the group cared about our students and aimed to be inclusive and welcoming, while also being humble about being learners. The CoP provided a safe environment to be vulnerable and take risks in learning about sometimes challenging and precarious topics.

As highlighted in these quotes, participants recognized the perils of equity-minded work, as it often meant challenging traditional ideologies and practices within the academy. However, because the CoP was designed to be a bounded and connected group aiming to explore equity, participants expressed feelings of fellowship, inclusivity, and empowerment in their responses. This is reminiscent of existing research that discusses faculty learning communities as boundary space where perspective-sharing and difference contribute to richness of understanding and connection (Liera & Dowd, 2018).

Our analysis of the meeting discussions and the survey responses indicated that the three CoP tenets – domain, practice, and community – were not only present and developed over time, but they assisted participants in deepening their conceptions of equity, while compelling them towards more

intensive and action-oriented attitudes and practices towards equity. The group structure also served as a space where participants provided guidance, support and knowledge, which altered engagement with equity. These findings are explored further in the discussion below.

## Discussion

Throughout the semester, participants in the Teaching with Equity CoP collectively grappled with conforming to institutional and academic norms, which they generally viewed as oppressive and unfair to minoritized identities. This dilemma led most participants to criticize academia, which compelled them to critique their own privileged positionality within this system. Despite participants' good intentions, findings demonstrated that faculty sometimes engaged in behaviors that implicated them in cycles of privilege and oppression. These cycles included a perpetuation of majoritarian education standards of language (e.g., Smit, 2012), teaching (e.g., Castagno, 2019; Hooks, 1994), and evaluation (e.g., Trip et al., 2018).

We found that involvement in the CoP created an opportunity for participants to talk through their complacent and/or problematic practices and to identify ways that they could address their biases and privileges, alter their thinking, and enact equity. These findings echo results from Sidman-Taveau and Hoffman's (2019) study, where they found that faculty who were not engaged in campus-wide equity-focused CoPs were less likely to know if or how their practices were equitable compared with those who were involved. They reported that this lack of involvement led to more biased thinking and less accountability towards equity-minded teaching. Taken together, the current study and Sidman-Taveau and Hoffman's (2019) research indicate that the structure of the CoP may have been helpful in providing a protected space for critical self-reflection, mitigation of bias, and the envisioning of more equitable pedagogies.

Prystowsky (2018) found that learning through active social participation in a CoP focused on institutional racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression assisted faculty in developing awareness, changing practices, and supporting greater understanding over time. Prystowsky (2018) also found that establishing a CoP could be used as an added layer of accountability for participants promoting fidelity towards equitable practices. This finding was also a theme that surfaced as a benefit of our CoP model, as people opened up about mistakes they have made, as well as strategies they have used.

During our study we observed how difficult it was for participants to simultaneously reconcile their commitments to equity with their participation in a system of academia that contributed to both privilege and oppression. The CoP served as a location where participants could find solidarity in this quandary, while trying to navigate the problematic nature of working in academia. Within this context, participants sometimes shared stories, and experiences that outwardly appeared to align with traditional hegemonic academic norms. Similarly, Solorzano and Delgado Bernal's (2001) study of Latina/o/x students' social justice advocacy within the K-12 education system found that despite people's social justice motives, it was still possible to exhibit accomplice behaviors that supported oppressive regimes at times. Along the same lines, Johnson et al., (2018) found that faculty of color used a virtual CoP to resist, reject, and redefine what it would mean to be an equitable faculty member in higher education, while at the same time still participating in self-perceived inequitable practices in order to gain tenure.

Acknowledging this dialectic of transformation and stability, we also recognize that the mere decision to participate in an equity-minded CoP for faculty in our study was a step toward social justice advocacy. Furthermore, Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) suggested

that as individuals deepened their equity-oriented motivations, they more actively engaged in social justice advocacy. Similarly, we found that participants moved towards a deeper mobilization of equity when they not only critiqued their implicit role as perpetrators of oppressive academic practices, but employed strategies to defy it.

## The Change Process

The cyclical nature of participants' struggles to enact equity while operating within an overly oppressive academic structure illustrated that social justice change for participants was a fluid and complex process. Research on human change has been described in the literature similarly. For example, Prochaska and DiClemente's (1982) Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change describes change as a dynamic process that is multifaceted and often tortuous (i.e., non-linear). Within their model, the progression moves from thinking, pausing, moving forward, going backward, entering several stages of change, and sometimes starting at the beginning. Likewise, change among the CoP participants took time and was not always linear in progression. At times, participants expressed being sentient teacher advocates in one instance and later expressed believing they were powerless to change the system. We found that the CoP model worked well to counter the difficulties of equity-minded change, providing a reservoir of safety and camaraderie within the perceived hegemonic academic environment. Namely, the CoP structure helped to enhance participants' conceptions of equity and build knowledge and skills related to equity work, while situated in a larger system of inequity. These findings suggest that the CoP could serve as an effective change model for faculty social justice efforts in academia.

## Limitations

There were several limitations of note in this study. Given the vulnerable nature of our research, we chose not to collect information regarding participants' demographics or roles as instructors. As a result, we could not report on the specific disciplines, social identities, or professional status of the participants beyond their role as an instructor. A second limitation included the length of the study, which was one semester. While we strengthened reliability through use of multiple methods (i.e., session recordings and post-surveys), the brevity of this study limited our ability to track changes in behaviors, interactions, and attitudes over the long term. A third limitation of our study was the low post-survey response rates, which may have led to non-response bias in our findings. However, given that each of the participants had similar backgrounds (i.e., instructors who were interested and passionate about equity-minded work), we suspect that this bias was minimal.

## Conclusion and Implications

For the past several decades, higher education administrators, faculty, and staff have been called to foster equity at their institutions through social justice efforts (McNair, 2016; Ramaley, 2014). This call to action, however, has yet to be fully actualized. Inequity has often been viewed through the lens of deficit-thinking, admonishing students or faculty for



their deficiencies, rather than problematizing the inequities in the system in which these individuals are situated (McNair & Veras, 2017). McNair et al., (2016) called for a new equity-minded paradigm, arguing that institutions and faculty must focus on the role that their actions, behaviors, and priorities play in sustaining inequity. This type of equity-minded thinking includes an incisive understanding of how current policies, practices, and pedagogies may be perpetuating injustices. Shared and open critiques of academia could help to assist institutional transformation because there would be a critical and collective understanding of how equity could be achieved (McNair, 2016). Through our research, we found that participation in an equity-focused CoP could be one step towards creating this paradigmatic shift.

Becoming an equity-minded institution requires complex mind-shifts, increased knowledge and awareness, sharing of effective practices, and opportunities for social justice discourse (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017). The use of CoPs to drive systematic change efforts has been shown to be effective in helping to create this equity-mindedness (Calderwood, 2003; Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017; Sidman-Taveau & Hoffman, 2019). As stated by Buckley and Du Toit (2010):

The value of CoPs in academia should not be underestimated. The days of the “ivory tower” syndrome are over. Survival in a knowledge economy is dependent on knowledge sharing. It is widely recognised that CoPs provide value to organisations and the concept of CoP is influencing theory and practice in many domains. CoPs create the trust and understanding that allow people to share mistakes as well as accomplishments. (p. 501)

Our study suggests that participation in the CoP helped faculty reflect on their understanding and practices of equity, while experiencing a sense of belonging, motivation, and justification to continue to work towards individual and systemic social justice change. For higher education institutions committed to educational equity, it is worth the effort to support the development of faculty CoPs by providing the time, resources, and rewards to make participation feasible.

**Acknowledgements** The authors would like to thank Dr. Karen Pelletreau and Dr. Susan Gardner who organized the Teaching with Equity Community of Practice on which this research focused. We would also like to acknowledge their continuous commitment to equity in higher education.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** We have no conflicts of interests to disclose.

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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