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A Chance at Birth: An Academic Development Activity To Promote Deep Reflection on Social Inequities

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I describe the structure and implementation of an activity I use in academic development, aimed at introducing higher education faculty to social inequities in a profound way. The activity is structured such that previously naïve practitioners as well as those somewhat engaged in equity pedagogies are provided new ways of thinking about the role classroom practices play in social inclusion. Here I reflect on the activity's genesis, provide suggestions for its use, and present considerations for academic developers interested in using it for their own practice.

INTRODUCTION

Although diversity has played a central role in the history of educational development (1) and leading scholars have begun to encourage academic developers to explicitly serve as forces of liberation (2), our community is arguably still learning how to most effectively advance equitable outcomes through our work.

There are two specific, interrelated barriers complicating these efforts, both foundational to the practice described below: First, the academic development field is still largely ethnically monolithic (3) and there is a growing sense among academic developers (e.g., 4) that we must each consider how historical inequitable structures, including our own potentially unearned privileges, play roles in creating and perpetuating inequity in the classroom. Second, a large percentage of the professoriate were not encouraged to explicitly consider issues of diversity and inclusion during the formative training years for their profession. As a result of this second barrier, discussions about equity are often new for this cadre of practitioners and difficult to navigate.

I spend considerable time traveling throughout North America, working with faculty on the kinds of pedagogical refinements aimed at facilitating the academic success of all students, including students who have historically underperformed. As I engage in this work, I have also become increasingly convinced of the need for deep and sometimes

difficult self-reflection on the part of faculty into their social positioning before further actions (like the introduction of specific inclusive pedagogical practices) can be enacted. This process of self-reflection, as a fundamental component of inclusive pedagogies, is particularly foreign to STEM instruction, almost by design. Philosophers from as far back as the early 1900s forewarned technocrats from giving science carte blanche for solely determining what counts as knowledge (5). The century of scientism that followed gave primacy to a STEM pedagogy that dissociated engaging scientific content knowledge from the humanistic aspects of pedagogical interactions. STEM academics steeped in this tradition are only recently considering the roles their social positioning plays in their pedagogy. I discuss here an educational development activity I have curated over the past few years whose explicit aims are to elucidate the ways in which social privilege affects positioning and to guide participants through a process of reflection that helps them unpack the meaning of that positioning for their classrooms. While I have worked with faculty from diverse disciplines on inclusive practices, the activity typically resonates more deeply with STEM practitioners, who, often in response to institutional pressure, are beginning to more aggressively consider inclusive practices in their classrooms. Below, I describe the origins and implementation of the activity, and considerations for academic developers who may be interested in adapting it for their unique contexts.

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL PRIVILEGE

The standard more well-known version of this activity is commonly referred to as the “Privilege Walk.” This activity is based on the classic essay by McIntosh (6) called “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” In this reflective essay,

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McIntosh ponders a list of what she describes as “unearned privileges” she accrued largely due to her phenotype. In the conventional version of the privilege walk, the leader asks participants to form a horizontal shoulder-to-shoulder line in a physical space where they are able to comfortably walk forward and backward for several steps. The leader then reads from a list of advantages and disadvantages similar to what McIntosh listed, but adapted to contemporary contexts. After each advantage, participants for whom an advantage is true take a step forward. Similarly, participants for whom a disadvantage is true take a step back. If the statement has no relevance to the participant, they remain in place. This activity has been administered and dissected in a variety of contexts (e.g., 7–9)

The activity is meant to underscore how the social structures highlighted by the list can result in some among us being at the “front” of the proverbial line of opportunity, and others left in the back. This is an indisputably powerful message. However, depending on the context, participants, regardless of where they are likely to end up, may feel a sense of shame in sharing private information, especially if that information spotlights them to a very specific point on the socioeconomic spectrum. The spotlighting effect may elicit strong emotions including defensiveness, rage, distress, or sadness. If these emotions are overwhelming, then there is little mental bandwidth left for a purely cognitive discourse on the social implications of the activity. This result in an unfortunate loss of a potential learning moment.

A chance at birth

This version of the activity is titled “Chance at Birth” (CAB) and is deliberately structured to remove the spotlighting component. The phrasing was taken from the book *Savage Inequalities* by Jonathan Kozol (10), in which the author highlights the very unequal educational experiences, most times well into adulthood (11), that students in the United States experience largely due to their literal chance at birth. This title moves the discussion away from potential negative preconceptions participants may have about *privilege* as a term and focuses on the random, diverse life pathways individuals may experience depending on the situations into which they are born.

In this version, participants are given a sheet of paper with 24 statements printed out, each with the phrase “please take one step back” or “please take one step forward” following the statement (Appendix I). The placement of “forward” or “back” depends on whether the statement in general represents an advantage or disadvantage, respectively. For example, one statement reads, “If one or both of your parents has a college degree,” and is then followed by the instruction, “Please take one step forward.” It is explained to participants that the statements represent generalizations, and therefore, many in real life may respond to a “step back” statement with a “step forward.” Similarly, participants from international backgrounds may have had a

different experience based on their cultural dissimilarity with the American-centric themes of the exercise. Noting these exceptions, I explain that for many, the relative advantage or disadvantage assumption holds true. Participants are then instructed to simply *underline* “forward” or “back,” depending on the statement, if the statement applied to their own lives. After the underlining is complete, participants are then asked to stand (if able) and exchange their completed sheets six times, with a new individual on each exchange. This essentially anonymizes the process, and each participant should end up with a sheet completed by someone else in the room (whose name they do not know).

After the exchange, the leader invites participants to form a shoulder-to-shoulder horizontal line in a comfortable space. The facilitator reads the statements aloud and invites participants to take steps forward and back according to what is underlined on the completed sheet in their hands. If there is no underline for a particular statement, the participant remains in place. The pattern created from this version would be similar to what would have occurred in the classic privilege walk experience since the data on the sheets represent only the participants in the exercise. However, in this version, participants are “walking in someone else’s shoes,” and hopefully feeling varying levels of empathy. After the walk, participants are asked to spend five to seven minutes reflecting on the experience. No restrictions are placed on how participants choose to report on the nature of that impact. After this period, participants are invited to discuss in groups of three or four whatever they are willing to share pertaining to what they wrote and/or felt. This discussion takes place for an additional ten minutes. At an appropriate stopping point, the facilitator invites participants to share with the room their own thoughts or points that arose in the group discussion. The whole-room conversation is then used to unpack broader themes related to privilege and equity, especially as they pertain to higher education. The whole-room unpacking process is used to encourage/inform faculty to consider ways in which elucidated themes impact their everyday classroom practice.

Academic development and CAB

I have used CAB at more than 50 institutions of higher education and have identified the following strategies that can be useful for academic developers interested in incorporating this process in their practice. Since the physical part of the activity is essentially a one-time inoculation, the main benefits to be reaped from the experience come from the ways in which emergent themes from the follow-up discussions are unpacked. Participants sometimes enter the experience with some preconceived biases pertaining to where the sheets of historically disenfranchised identities might end up in the walk. The anonymizing process means that the resulting pattern neither confirms this bias nor provides clarity on how identity aligns with the accretion of privilege for any particular group. Most patterns I

have observed administering this activity suggest that most individuals are a combination of instances of privilege and lack of it.

The key component therefore is the space that the anonymizing process opens for conversation. If participants are confident that they are not exposing themselves to other participants, they will likely be more willing to have more open conversations on the role that social context plays in the education experience. To this end, there are three key areas a facilitator needs to address. First, if participants primarily stem from dominant culture identities, it is possible that there will be some defensive responses. The “walk” lays out a visually stark reality of how simple things many take for granted can position an individual for greater success or present them with difficult barriers to surmount. For those who had not previously considered the depth of that reality, the representation of it can be jarring. Facilitators should definitely acknowledge the reality and validity of the emotional reactions, while providing a pathway for participants to understand and unpack them. Secondly, academic developers should be ready to provide concrete strategies for willing participants to engage in the change process (e.g., 12). In American higher education, literature on equity often is not intentionally engaged as part of the future faculty training process. Workshops like these are sometimes the first time practitioners are considering these constructs to this level of depth. Without a pathway out of the overwhelming emotion, dominant identity participants can feel defeated and/or confused, and disenfranchised identities can feel that a problem was highlighted without an action plan being enacted to address it. Third, during CAB, participants often learn “new” things about the human experience when they are asked to walk in the shoes of others. If the sheet the participant is holding is very different from the participant’s own life experience it can be a potentially unique experience to undergo the process of walking forward or backward when one’s own steps would have been substantially different. This may also be one of very few ways an individual might come to truly empathize with someone else’s vastly different lived experience. Facilitators should be prepared to address the specific emotions that this may trigger with the expectation that they would have to provide participants further literature and supplemental activities to further address those emotions.

To achieve true inclusion and transform higher education spaces, practitioners need to be prepared to reformat the ways in which they previously considered the social context of learning. The CAB activity offers an entry point into that process, but its effectiveness depends on the ways in which a facilitator prepares for its facilitation and considers its appropriate adaptation for local contexts. For this, the facilitator should be comfortable with the literature on inclusion in some depth and understand the specific local challenges that need addressing in order to support a path to equity. This is by definition an awareness-raising activity, and our large data set of faculty responses (Dewsbury,

unpublished data) suggest that even practitioners tacitly aware of inclusive principles, historically, have not considered the lived experiences of others in this profound way. A facilitator therefore should not only be comfortable with the post-activity conversation but also embed this activity with other clear and context-appropriate next steps for participants to consider. Our process is shared here within the context of broader goals pertaining to equity in STEM and higher education at large, but facilitators should consider what discussions would look like in the institutions where they administer the activity.

Without an intentionally inclusive pedagogy, social inequities writ large may still manifest themselves unfettered in classrooms and on the campuses of universities and colleges worldwide (2)—potentially replicating inequitable structures and continuing to disenfranchise minoritized identities from educational pursuits. Expert facilitation of A Chance at Birth can help practitioners think more deeply of their transformative role in alleviating inequitable structures.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

Appendix I: Chance at birth activity

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