

17. Equity

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TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY-COMMERCE

Definition and Background

Equity responds to the impact of systemic outcomes that go beyond an individual's identity; in other words, for design thinkers, equity means "fair and just access to and representation in scientific and technical communication for all stakeholders" (Haas & Eble, 2018, p. 11). To enact equity, spaces and products must be designed to meet the specific needs of an individual or community, recognizing that each individual or community has different resources. Equity differs from equality, wherein issues are addressed by giving all the same resources; equity requires critically addressing the specific needs of populations. The lack of equity in the world historically impacts marginalized populations such as people with disabilities, Black and Latinx people, women, and transgender individuals. For instance, many auditoriums do not have access to the stage from the audience for those who are not able-bodied and/or able to use stairs or climb onto the stage. The practice of adding ramps, lifts, or other modes of access to the stage much after its initial creation reflects the inequity of the original design.

Equity in design begins by looking at existing systems that "unfairly privilege some over others" and asking "questions about what can be done to level the playing field" (Loew, 2018). Design thinking serves not just as a tool for designing products but also a "powerful problem-solving methodology across fields and sectors" (equityXdesign, 2016). Design remains critical to working towards equity in all spaces. Equity-centered design thinking practices emphasize "dismantling systemic oppression and creating solutions to achieve equity for all," a process that requires designers to unpack histories and "unveil power structures [toward opening] a space for relearning" through empathy and humility (Creative Reaction Lab, 2018).

In 2016, the Stanford d.school reimaged their design thinking framework to promote equity by adding two new design nodes: Notice and Reflect. In the Notice phase, designers engage in critical self-reflection; the Reflect phase occurs throughout the design process, promoting transparency through an "Equity Pause," or "a time to share our learning and see what we can do better next time in the service of equity and inclusion" (Clifford, n.d.).

Design Application

Equitable design practices are an ongoing process that can and will evolve based on ever-changing spaces, places, and interfaces. To better pursue equity in design,

designers must collaborate with the consumer, user, or community the design will primarily impact. In other words, designers should enact a “design with, not for” approach. This collaboration must occur throughout the process and not simply during the initial thought process, a practice also referred to as “participatory design” (Loew, 2018). For example, Jennifer Bay (2022) offers one teaching case that can operate as an application for a “design with, not for” approach. Specifically, Bay describes a technical and professional communication (TPC) service course redesign at a midwestern research predominantly white institution (PWI) required by upper-level students. Rather than taking on a project-based approach, Bay pivoted to service-learning, asking “students to research and apply approaches to fostering DEI [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion] in the local community” (p. 216). Partnering with the president of their local city council, Bay and students in her class collaborated to investigate community perceptions on DEI and offer data-based solutions toward making “the city a more inclusive and welcoming place for Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) [and] learning how businesses, the city, and other groups might unintentionally make it difficult for BIPOC to feel welcome” (p. 217). This case offers one example for how designers can include the community in thinking toward equitable design across spaces, places, and interfaces rather than making those design decisions without the input of those directly affected. Equity in design requires design thinkers to consider the desirability, feasibility, and viability at the forefront of their framework. Equitable design practices should also consider the keywords *design ethics*, *inclusion*, and *social justice* among applicable concepts.

■ Pedagogical Integration

Designers must recognize their own perspectives and privileges in order to undertake a project equitably. Educators must work to promote community-building and equity in the design of pedagogical spaces so that students can build trust and confidence in collaboration while reflecting on how their positionality, privilege, and power function in specific spaces (Sano-Franchini et al., 2022; Walton et al., 2019). An example of such an approach comes from Jennifer Sano-Franchini et al. (2022), who utilize “Slack, an online collaboration platform, as a pedagogical tool for enacting social justice in the teaching of technical and professional communication (TPC) online” (p. 1). Further, instructors and students alike can take up Sano-Franchini et al.’s (2022) WARM framework to assess “instructional technology in terms of intersectional social justice, community, access, and equity” (p. 9). This framework asks practitioners to consider the impact of a tool on Workflow, Accountability (to conditions of material inequality), Representation, and Multiple modes of expression (Sano-Franchini et al., 2022).

Additionally, resources such as the Harvard Implicit Association test and Creative Reaction Lab’s Equity-Centered Community Design Field Guide serve as solid starting points for engaging equity. Within pedagogical settings, equitable

design practices may be enacted through learning activities whereby student designers encounter and grapple with equity issues through design projects. For example, students may be assigned to investigate the asymmetries in gender and pay, race and workplace relations, or culture and innovation as a starting point to understanding how traditions and systemic oppression affect individual and collective advancement in social and professional lives. Students may conduct research or perform design experiments where they devise research questions, data collection, and analysis methods that could yield insights regarding the state of (in)equity in their surrounding community or personal conditions.

■ References and Recommended Readings

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