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Praxis and True Dialogue: A Freirean Approach to Equity-Minded Data Work

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Abstract: Assessment professionals are often at the helm of leading discussions around data-use and data-driven decisions for higher education stakeholders. However, the problem is that assessment practitioners must be cognizant of how to engage stakeholders with equity-minded and socially just informed assessment practices. The purpose of this article is to provide a literature review of approaches to equity-minded data use and positing that assessment professionals should engage in Freirean critical pedagogy approaches to data use practices. The article opens with a discussion of the intersection of diversity, equity, and inclusion work with assessment practitioners. Next, an introduction to the Freirean concept of engaging in *praxis* and how assessment leaders may unknowingly participate in what Freire calls *banking education* where educators act as a conduit to merely deposit information into students. The article concludes with recommendations for how assessment leaders can engage stakeholders in Freire's concept of *true dialogue*.

Keywords: *equity, assessment professionals, professional development, higher education, data-use, praxis, critical perspectives*

Introduction

Higher education assessment practitioners in colleges and universities are often charged with leading discussions on data gathered from various sources, ranging from assessment instruments for learning outcomes, student surveys for program satisfaction, or career outcomes to institutional data for enrollment and retention trends. Institutional researchers and assessment professionals are tasked with analyzing and presenting data to a number of stakeholders on a frequent basis. However, the problem is that assessment work should not just be box-checking or number-crunching, reducing people down to data; assessment leaders must be cognizant of how to engage stakeholders with equity-minded and socially just informed assessment practices. The purpose of this article is to provide commentary and add to the growing body of literature around equity-minded and socially just informed assessment practices by positing that assessment professionals should engage in Freirean critical pedagogy approaches to equity-minded data use.

Freire (2018) posits that each individual desires to be fully human, and equity-minded assessment work “embraces shared humanity, centers people holistically in all their complexities, and is rooted in our human desire to learn more and do better” (Malone & Breslin, 2023, p. 115). To some, assessment discussions are an obligatory and mandatory practice that must be done to satisfy accreditation requirements. However, researchers (Malone & Breslin, 2023) note that assessment practitioners must

be committed to having thoughtful, reflective conversations about data that will lead to critical action. The discussion will begin with an overview of the methodology followed by background of the problem with the intersection of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work with assessment work. Next, the Freirean pedagogical model will be introduced and the concepts of *praxis* and *banking education* will be connected with how leaders discuss assessment and data with stakeholders. Lastly, recommendations are provided on how assessment leaders can engage stakeholders in Freire's concept of *true dialogue*.

Background of the Problem

More than ever, we live in a data-driven world, and the vast amount of data collected across the higher education field will not be slowing down anytime soon. While assessment practitioners collect and interpret data regularly, the stakeholders they present information to may need to be more experienced in these practices. Faculty and staff may need to learn the specifics of assessment processes and data use, and they may need to gain experience with DEI work. Researchers note that individuals involved in assessment practices need to be adept at guiding conversations and discussions with a critical lens on why specific data is collected, how it is used, and what it means for decision-making (Dowd & Elmore, 2019; Gansemer-Topf et al., 2019).

DEI has been a buzzword in the field of education for several years but recently has come under increased scrutiny and debate. The Supreme Court's ruling in June 2023 that higher education institutions can no longer consider race in admissions, as well as individual state efforts to eliminate post-secondary DEI programs and offices (as seen across the country), have many higher education professionals concerned for the future of socially just work on college campuses. Like assessment practitioners, DEI professionals' work varies in scope across institutions. However, DEI offices often provide invaluable training to college faculty and staff on inclusive environments (Lu, 2023).

The consensus by most researchers (Bensimon et al., 2012; Henning et al., 2022; Malone & Breslin, 2023; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017; 2020; Tharp, 2019) is that equity work in assessment must start with individuals acknowledging their own biases, blind spots, perspectives, and worldviews. In a recent study (Ziskin & Cross Young, 2023) where faculty were asked about their perceptions and experiences around equity-minded work with data, a participant noted that professional development around DEI should be required before discussing how data can be used in equity work. However, as higher education institutions across the United States are struggling with fewer resources than in prior decades (Flannery, 2022), and as DEI offices and programming are being shut down, the responsibility to foster and engage in equity-minded practices will fall on every higher education leader and practitioner, including (and especially) individuals involved in assessment work.

Methodology

The literature on socially just and equity-minded data practices and the Freirean framework chosen for this study were based off of two criteria: 1) the extant literature needed to be recent (within the last five to ten years); 2) the studies needed to be relevant to higher education assessment work and equity-minded practices. The literature from approximately 10 studies were analyzed for the two previously mentioned criteria, and were examined for concepts of why socially just assessment

practices matter in higher education, and how assessment practitioners can better engage stakeholders in equity-minded data conversations.

Conceptual Framework: Freirean Pedagogy and Its Use in Assessment Work

At the center of Paolo Freire’s (2018) groundbreaking work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (initially published in 1970), is the concept that the liberation of oppressed groups and individuals must occur through *praxis*, by rejecting *banking education*, and through *true dialogue*. Before addressing how Freirean pedagogy can be used in assessment work and how it was represented in the extant literature presented here, a brief overview of Freire’s (2018) framework and key concepts will provide context to the discussion.

In the Freirean framework, *praxis* is comprised of two components: reflection and action. Reflection involves critical thinking about current conditions but moves beyond mere observation and seeks to understand the causes of conditions by asking “why” and “how.” Critical reflection then moves to action by taking the insights gained and making concrete steps to change the current condition.

The concept of *banking education* is a metaphor used to convey conventional educational systems and pedagogies where the teacher is the holder of knowledge who merely deposits information into the student who is an empty container that passively receives the information without engaging in critical thinking or dialogue. According to Freire (2018), *banking education* reinforces power structures by viewing the teacher as authority and the students as submissive recipients.

The final concept, *true dialogue*, is Freire’s (2018) answer to overcoming *banking education* after engaging in *praxis*. The foundational component of *true dialogue* moves from a depository educational pedagogy to a problem-posing and interactive form. This includes engaging in open conversations that allow for mutual respect, humility, empathy, critical thinking, and a commitment towards liberation. Both the teachers and the students are participants in the learning process and become empowered through the co-creation of knowledge that can lead to breaking down barriers that perpetuate inequities.

The Freirean pedagogy outlined above has implications for use in higher education assessment work, which will be discussed in the next sections. As literature was gathered and examined for this discussion, the concepts of *praxis*, *banking education*, and *true dialogue* were represented throughout (Table 1).

Table 1

Freirean Concepts Represented in the Literature

Concept	Represented in the Literature*
Praxis	9
Banking Education	6
True Dialogue	8

*N=10

Engaging in Praxis

Assessment practitioners need not be DEI experts; however, when working with data, they need to adopt a critical lens to understand the dynamics of power and oppression. These critical lens can only come through critical reflection. If professionals engaged in assessment work do not have a working knowledge of critical perspectives, then they will not be able to engage in what Freire (2018) considers *praxis*, “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (p. 79). The central goal of assessment is to collect and analyze information to gauge where a student, class, program, or institution is that will inform decisions going forward. The central goal of equitable assessment requires a critical lens and practitioners to be aware of how assessment processes may contribute to inequities (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). If there is no true understanding and reflection on the contextual realities that data represent, then aggregated data and a lack of understanding becomes a fragmented reality (Freire, 2018).

For equity-minded data use, Dowd and Elmore (2019) point out that there are “dual competencies” at play: the craft and technical aspects of using disaggregated data and the “critically informed, anti-racist approach to the interpretation” (p. 160) of the data. These two competencies will inform equity-minded data practices only when acting together. If data is disaggregated in critical ways—by race, class, gender orientation, or first-generation—the disaggregation serves little to no purpose in bringing to light any realities. It could potentially do more harm than good if a critically informed conversation cannot be had about why the data is disaggregated and what the data shows. Conversely, thoughtful reflection and considerations of critical perspectives can be applied to aggregated data with knowledgeable and informed assessment leaders and stakeholders involved in the conversation. However, without disaggregation of the data, conversations will only comprise assumptions. Data disaggregation is a powerful, uncomplicated tool for identifying problems and barriers to student learning, success, and institutional goals (Roberts, 2019); it serves as a foundation to begin equity-minded conversations about data.

Banking Education

Conversations with stakeholders about assessment practices and data can quickly become presentations rather than discussions, where the assessment practitioner shows figures and statistics with their interpretation of the data before moving on to the next set of numbers. Practices such as this reflect Freire's (2018) notion of *banking education*. In the context of banking education, the educator is a conduit of knowledge that is bestowed upon (or deposited) into students. Individuals cannot wholly separate themselves from their biases, so those leading assessment work cannot rely on their data analysis as the sole interpretation to be passed on to stakeholders. By not allowing faculty, staff, and others to have agency in exchanging information and ideas, the assessment practitioner engages in oppressive practices that perpetuate a “mechanistic concept of consciousness” (Freire, 2018, p. 79). To move beyond the mere transfer of information or depositing of facts and figures, assessment leaders should engage in *true dialogue*, where the teacher (i.e., the assessment practitioner) and the students (i.e., stakeholders) engaged in reflection and open conversation which moves the hierarchy of “teacher-student” to “student-teacher” (Freire, 2018, p. 80).

Recommendations: Engaging in True Dialogue

How can assessment professionals engage faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders in *true dialogue*, though? The following recommendations were gleaned from the extant literature presented here and stresses the importance of using critical conversations between assessment leaders and stakeholders to create more equitable and socially just outcomes in colleges and universities.

One recommendation would be to allow faculty and staff the time to process data ahead of group conversations or meetings, especially if large amounts of data need to be discussed. For institutions with the resources to have individuals whose entire scope of work is dedicated to assessment, discussions about data should be happening regularly for continuous and ongoing improvement. However, whether this is the case or not, when programs undergo the accreditation self-study process, the amount of data and evidence that must be analyzed, interpreted, and written about at length is vast. Cautionary advice is to avoid data dump, which will not create space for true dialogue with thoughtful reflection and action. Having a centralized system to share disaggregated data in meaningful and concise ways that stakeholders can reference beforehand will allow for more meaningful independent reflection, but also having an iterative system of regular data review can prevent the dilemma of data overwhelm (Ziskin & Cross Young, 2023), both of which will maximize efforts toward true dialogue.

Another suggestion would be for assessment practitioners to utilize initiatives like The Equity Scorecard to foster collaborative inquiry with faculty, staff, and stakeholders when reviewing data. The Equity Scorecard was developed at the University of Southern California Center for Urban Education (CUE) and implemented at universities around the United States (Dowd & Elmore, 2019; Bensimon et al., 2012). The goal of The Equity Scorecard is not to merely apply a template or checklist of conversation starters but to have an entire team collaborate and converse together (true dialogue) as “teams jointly struggle to create meaning of the racial inequities revealed by ‘routine’ data” (Bensimon et al., 2012, p. 10). Results from Loyola Marymount University that implemented The Equity Scorecard led to positive changes such as increased representation of minoritized students in the honors program from 1.9 to 2.4 percent for African American students and 6.7 to 8.3 percent for Latino and Latina students over a three year period (Bensimon et al., 2012). Referring back to the idea that assessment practitioners first need to have a knowledge base of critical perspectives before guiding conversations with others on equity-minded data use is especially important when engaging in true dialogue. Dowd and Elmore (2019) recommend that leaders who have developed their “racial literacy” will likely see more success with their efforts (p. 167).

A final and essential recommendation is for assessment practitioners to remember that just like the practice of assessment, engaging in critical reflection, true dialogue, and taking action is an ongoing development with continuous improvement in mind. Individuals new to the realm of equity-minded and critical perspectives will take time to reflect on their own biases and roles in perpetuating inequities (Bensimon et al., 2012). Equity-minded data work can begin with simple critical questions from assessment leaders on who is represented in the data, how does the institution support (or not support) the identities of students and why (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2019). With equity-minded assessment leaders at the helm, true dialogue can happen with stakeholders—administrators, faculty,

staff, and students—to create radical transformation in the inequities that undergird our higher education practices because “without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education” (Freire, 2018, p. 93).

Conclusion

The current climate of dismantling DEI efforts and rejecting race-conscious admissions is unfortunate timing for the field of assessment, as scholars have just begun in recent years to explore what equity-minded and socially just assessment practices entail. As Montenegro and Jankowski (2020) note, “the end goal of socially just assessment is to advance social justice” (p. 8). Even with the growing body of literature, some have still pointed to the under-researched area of equity and assessment (Robinson et al., 2021). Assessment practices in higher education are rooted in the inequitable systems they were created in. It will take dynamic, ethical assessment leaders and practitioners committed to socially just and equity-minded work to further higher education's central mission of developing humans to their fullest potential to promote a democratic, global citizenry. “It is time that we, as a field and a community, committed to supporting all humans in reaching their full potential, address the ways assessment serves to reify and reproduce structural inequity, white supremacy, and colonized thought” (Malone & Breslin, 2023, p. 114).

Freire’s (2018) *praxis* and *true dialogue* can serve as a framework for assessment practitioners to guide equity-minded data work. One role of an assessment practitioner is to turn data and numbers into meaningful dialogue because “education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world” (p. 81). Above all, Freire's pedagogy is centered on love “because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is a commitment to others” (p. 89). With love at the center (Malone & Breslin, 2023), our commitment to equity-minded assessment and data work will be grounded in the practice of critical reflection, dialogue, and radical action.

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