

**Working title: Equitable Education Systems Online: Exploring the Online Student Experience  
through a Culture of Inquiry**

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**Abstract**

**1. Objectives or purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to interpret the AERA theme of *Cultivating Equitable Education Systems for the 21st Century* through the lens of online teaching and learning experiences within the United States. Beginning with the posed question of ‘In my context, what kinds of teaching and learning processes foster equity, disrupt systemic inequality, and deepen learning?’, the culture of inquiry borne from this symposium presentation unpacked and uncovered the challenges that exist in each of our individual contexts and practice to foster equity around us. A culture of inquiry can be defined as “a safe, supportive space wherein practitioner-researchers are enabled to share their vulnerabilities, to make explicit their values, and to hold themselves accountable for living according to those values” (Vaughan & DeLong, 2019). To build cultures of inquiry, I believe it is necessary to integrate vulnerability as a cornerstone of the dialogue shared between members of the group. As our group began their work together in November, 2021, I shared some of my initial thoughts around our guiding question in the writing below:

This question is one that I think about often because the context of my teaching and interactions with my graduate students occurs primarily online and often asynchronously. Thinking of myself as a learner, the times in which my own thinking has shifted, and recognition of systemic inequalities has occurred has been through meaningful dialogue with others and the sharing of experiences that bring forth emotional responses. While I try to educate myself in many ways about the historical inequities that exist in my own country, it is truly the conversations I have with those who find themselves at the center of a myriad of inequities that foster my own understanding and deep learning. For example, conversations with Black mothers within my community quickly highlight how the systemic inequalities that exist in our country are discussed differently at each of our dinner tables.

The challenge exists for me, as an educator, in mirroring these learning experiences in an online space. How can I create conditions where my own students can safely share their experiences so those around them can connect to them and learn? I believe deeply in “connection first, content second” in my teaching, and the diversity of my own student population and experiences should provide a great starting place for these conversations, but I frequently get stuck in the limitations of the medium.

As an action researcher, I felt compelled to jump in and begin to introduce some new ideas into my teaching to get closer to my intended objective and “solve” the problem. But in the group discussion with our AERA culture of inquiry that followed my initial writing, I reflected on the importance of stepping back to create space for my students instead of diving in.

In the linked video, I discuss my reflections after reading the work of my peers (14:25-16:50).



<https://youtu.be/Di0743Jhn-Q 291121>

In the transcript below, I discuss how my eagerness to “fix” the issue of inequitable practices will likely lead to a creation of more inequitable practices as it assumes that I am aware of all the inequities that exist in my practice, in the learning space, and in the lives of my students. This is a dangerous tendency as a researcher and one that I often warn my own students about!

By the end of the transcript, I discuss how I believe it would be more valuable to begin my next semester by asking questions and providing space and time for my students to discuss their own ideas about inequitable practices in their learning (and possibly teaching).

*One of the things that I saw come up in a couple of pieces our writing was this idea about, and I decided to write my own first and then read other people's, so after I read everybody else's I thought 'Oh, well it seems to be that there could be a potential thing here about creating space or safe space for these conversations or for just discussion or just being.' Then I went back and I kind of looked at what I had written and was like, you know it's funny because I think that I did you know in my own writing I feel like I did something that I am always warning my teacher*

*researchers against. I went in and said 'Oh I already know what the problem is. I already know what this is and here I kind of jumped right into it, like maybe these are some things I could do to fix it.' Then I read Parbati's and got to the end where she has this challenge about who are the disadvantaged groups and I thought 'well geez, I feel like I already pre-emptively answered that question without even asking the question.' So I think it really was helpful for me to read everybody else's writing and maybe what I would like to do is to start asking some questions for my students and creating some space for them to tell me what is pressing for them, what they feel, what they see, what, if they had the magic wand, what they what they would like the experience to be like and then how they think I could be a service in that. So, it was a really good exercise for me who really likes to get to the end and find and find the solution and tie it with a bow. It was a really good exercise for me, and I think it's definitely put me back into that frame of mind of slowing down a little bit and asking questions and creating space. So, I feel like, personally, that's what I'm going to enter into the next term thinking about is how to do that. Thanks everybody for your contributions.*

Thus, I began to craft some guiding questions that I could begin asking to my online graduate students in an effort to understand their experiences as an online learner and how they would define and recognize equitable teaching practices in an online medium. I began with the following draft guiding questions to guide my line of questioning and literature search. As these ideas unfolded within our culture of inquiry, the inquiry for this paper began to take shape.

*What are some of the inequitable experiences that may occur in an online graduate program?*

*What online teaching practices do graduate students report as deepening their learning?*

*What can online professors do to create an equitable learning environment that fosters deep learning?*

*How can learning relationships be strengthened online?*

## **2. Perspectives or theoretical framework**

Garrison and colleagues (2000) proposed a theoretical model that introduced three presences – social presence, cognitive presence, teaching presence – as primary elements for successful online education. The three presences are dependent on each other for a successful experience online. For example, cognitive presence occurs when teaching and social presence are well developed, and the development of social presence is dependent on how well the teaching presence has been established.

For my own line of inquiry, I believe social presence may be a necessary component of the course experience for students to feel that they are a valued member of the course community. Social presence is defined as “the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally, as ‘real’ people (i.e. their full personality), through the medium of communication being used” (Garrison et al, 2000, p. 94). It is interesting to note that the research seems to discuss social presence as the “glue” between teaching presence and cognitive presence. If the goal of creating a strong sense of social presence includes creating a community in which students feel comfortable to be their “real” selves, then it is necessary to figure out what instructional strategies or pedagogical tools support creating that type of community.

In practice, it would seem that educators need to have sound equitable teaching practices (teaching presence) to create a community of inquiry in which students felt comfortable and safe being vulnerable and expressing their opinion (social presence). As a result, a higher level of cognitive engagement and critical thinking can occur in the online medium (cognitive presence). If teaching practices are the foundational aspect to developing cognitive engagement in online learning, a closer examination of the research in this area is necessary.

There is a plethora of research that identifies and isolates aspects of online teaching that support student success in online learning in higher education. Although much of this research uses traditional measures of student success (achievement), it is helpful to see if there may be teaching strategies that support achievement as well as the construction of a community of inquiry that supports a strong social presence and may deepen the online student experience. Bailey and Card (2009) built from the seminal work of Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) seven principles of effective practice in undergraduate teaching in their phenomenological study of award-winning eLearning faculty. Their work proposes eight effective teaching practices for online educators: fostering relationships, engagement, timeliness, communication, organization, technology, flexibility, and high expectations. As I seek to deepen my knowledge on equitable practices in online learning, I am drawn to their discussion on how eLearning faculty are fostering relationships in their practice. The authors identify instructors’ empathy for students, passion for teaching, and willingness to help students succeed as key factors for fostering relationships (Bailey & Card, 2009). While these are helpful pedagogical objectives, there is significantly more to understand about *how* educators can demonstrate empathy, passion, and willingness to help to their online students.

More recently, Sun and Chen (2016) reviewed 47 published studies to determine that effective online instruction is dependent upon 1) well-designed course content, motivated interaction between the instructor and learners, well-prepared and fully-supported instructors; 2) creation of a sense of online learning community; and 3) rapid advancement of technology. They found that numerous studies supported a strong correlation between social interaction and sense of community in achieving success in online learning. However, upon completion of their review, they determined that “although many studies emphasized the importance of creating such a learning community, they lacked effective and detailed means, approaches, and technologies that could be used to achieve that objective (p. 171).”

After reading the myriad of studies completed in the field, I struggled to gain a clear picture of how equitable teaching *looks* in the online medium. Furthermore, what does an equitable teacher *do* when they teach online? Faculty at University of Wisconsin-Green Bay had similar questions and, in an effort to create a way to aid instructors in their mindfulness of equity-minded and inclusive teaching practices in online courses, they built from work completed by the University of Southern California’s Center for Urban Education (CUE) to create a method for analyzing and aligning course design and instruction with the goals of equity and inclusivity. Their rubric ([https://whitesforracialequity.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Equity-for-Online-Classes\\_GB-Wisconsin.pdf](https://whitesforracialequity.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Equity-for-Online-Classes_GB-Wisconsin.pdf)) identifies six principles; inclusivity, respect for diversity, values diverse life experiences and ways of knowing, advocates high expectations for all students, accessibility, and continuous improvement and self-evaluation and general characteristics of each principle to assist instructors in analyzing their online course curriculum and instruction. To date, the detail included in this rubric gives instructors a meaningful place to begin equity-minded work on their online pedagogy. It is also my hypothesis that creating an online community of learners where students can be an authentic version of themselves may support feelings of equity among students and, as a result, deepen the learning experience.

### **Connecting to my own values**

This inquiry connects to my own living educational theory through my values of connection and care in my practice (Vaughan, 2019). As an educator (and human), I strive to develop meaningful connections with those around me and examinations of my own practice show that I infuse humanizing characteristics like vulnerability into my practice to create pathways for connection. While there are a number of definitions of connection that exist, Brown’s description (2010) of connection as “the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgement; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship” (p. 19)

resonates most with me. I find additional support for my core values through the ideas of caring and engrossment by Nel Noddings (2005). Engrossment is the total and complete focus on the other individual at that moment in time, the act of truly listening, caring and an overwhelming feeling of wanting to help or connect with that individual to move them closer to their expressed goals. Her seminal work in the field of caring as a pedagogy was instrumental in my own development as an educator and theorist. Furthermore, bell hooks (2014) explains that “as a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence” (hooks, 2014, p. 8). In order to do that, “teachers approach students with the will and desire to respond to our unique beings, even if the situation does not allow the full emergence of a relationship based on mutual recognition. Yet the possibility of such recognition is always present” (p. 13). This approach to teaching and creating relationships with students is described by hooks as engaged pedagogy and creates space for multiple voices in a classroom, ensuring that all members of the classroom community are empowered.

### **3. Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry**

My inquiry into online equitable teaching practices will begin with a grounded theory approach in order to understand what the current online experiences for my students may be. I want to guard against any assumptions about what I believe the graduate student experience to be. To gather initial information, I sent out a brief survey to all graduate students enrolled in my online program to provide information about their online learning experiences. My objective was to ask students to explain what they believe equitable teaching practices look like in the online modality and to also identify some course experiences that have supported or negated meaningful learning in their online coursework. Most students receiving the survey are currently classroom teachers and have significant background in education, so I believe their own knowledge base could contribute greatly to the complexity of their answers. The following questions were sent out to graduate students as open-ended response survey questions:

*What online teaching practices have helped to deepen your learning?*

*How can relationships/connections between the instructor and student be strengthened online?*

*What makes you feel comfortable (able to be yourself) in an online course?*

*How can professors demonstrate that they support you in your coursework?*

*How can professors build a sense of community within your courses?*

*What challenges or barriers to learning do you experience in your online courses?*

*How can professors demonstrate respect for diverse knowledge and learning in an online course?*

*What makes you feel valued for the unique knowledge/value you bring to an online course community?*

#### **4. Data sources, evidence, objects, or materials**

The use of videos from our conference planning sessions are key pieces of data (as shared in this paper) to validate the melding of multiple values into a concerted effort to create safe spaces in which to build cultures of inquiry.

Visual data can also play a role in capturing nonverbal communication and an exchange of life-affirming energy that is unable to be recorded when looking at a transcript of a conversation. It is these nonverbal cues that are often so important in building trust and encouraging the members of a culture of inquiry, whether micro or macro, to grow in their thinking and independence (Vaughan & Delong, 2019, p. 83).

#### **5. Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/point of view**

#### **6. Significance**

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