## Equity in Distance Learning

I woke up today at 2:00 a.m. and laid in bed. This was not the first time I had awakened in the middle of the night thinking about my students. The switch to distance education has kept many instructors awake, wondering how to create an equitable online learning environment.

Many of us have seen the cartoon image representing the difference between equality and equity. As educators, we take pride in the idea that it is our job to give students what they need (equity), instead of giving all students the same instruction (equality). We work hard to provide the needed "boxes" for students to level the playing field and ensure that all students experience success.
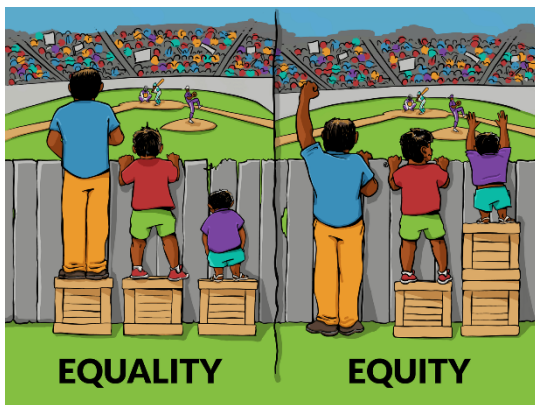
EQUALITY   EQUITY

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When I awoke again at 2:00 a.m. this morning, thinking about my students and the challenge that lies ahead of them in this new environment, I instantly thought of the equality versus equity cartoon. This was my thought process:

Distance learning has changed the stadium in which the baseball game is being held. It changed quickly and offered little time for preparation. Players were notified of the change and taken to the new stadium to get ready for the game. The new stadium had a lot of great additional features, but lacked the supportive infrastructure the previous stadium had. While players warmed up and practiced, they noticed new challenges they had never experienced. The team tried their best to warm up and prepare for the game, knowing it may not be their finest. Ultimately, they were there for the fans, and they were going to do their best.

Fans started arriving, taking in the new venue and adjusting to its new structure. Most fans took their seats and waited patiently for the game to begin. But some fans, like our three little boys, stood in the outfield to watch the game.

Although this stadium was different from the original, they came prepared with the same boxes they had used previously to watch the ball games. However, the fence in the outfield was now substantially higher than before. In the areas where the fence was lower, there was standing water from a poor drainage system. The boys' boxes worked well for a while, but then they began to sink into the soggy ground. Frustrated with how their new experience was going, the boys quickly realized the boxes that had worked previously were not going to work now.

As the game finished, the players were tired, but felt good about their effort. They managed to navigate the new stadium and avoid any major injuries or difficulties. They looked around at the approving crowd in the stands and were proud of what they had accomplished. Meanwhile, defeated by the experience, the three boys went home and lost interest in attending another game at this new stadium.

Making sure distance learning is accessible and equitable for all students is our challenge as instructors. We must be sure to acknowledge those students who needed boxes before, and realize those same boxes may not work in this new distance learning format. As players on the field, it is easy to get caught up in the excitement of the crowd and congratulate ourselves on our successes, not realizing we have lost some important fans.

As my work with students shifted online, I attempted new strategies to ensure all learners were able to grow and experience success. I swapped out the boxes I had typically used for students and created a system to help build customized supports that met the needs of each learner.

Establishing Course Essentials

First, I determined what my Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs) were. I went through my curriculum and standards and determined what was essential for students to know and what was non-essential. We all have "extras" in our classes that we typically like to cover or throw in because we have the time available. Identifying the ELOs of your course allows you to have a better scope and sequence for what you need to cover and what is simply nice to know. This frees up a lot of your planning time and also lets students focus on what's really important.

Ensuring Course Necessities Are in Place

Once I had my course ELOs determined, I focused on ensuring the online necessities for my course were in place. I needed to make sure students had access to the internet,

were comfortable with the digital platform being used, and that I had at least two ways to communicate with them. Simply relying on one method of communication does not work. I used college email addresses and set up a Remind account that allowed me to send text messages and information to students' phones without actually sharing my personal cell phone number. If students felt they were going to have an issue with the internet, I worked with Metropolitan Community College to provide hot spots. If a student wasn't familiar with the digital platform, I found tutorials and paired him or her up with a classmate who could provide remote assistance.

Administering Student Surveys

After my ELOs were in place and my course necessities were met, I administered a survey to my students. In this survey, I asked questions like, "Have you ever taken an online class before? How was your experience with it?" and "How are you and your family doing?" "What challenges do you foresee having with distance learning?" I can't emphasize enough how important it is to know your learners and understand their needs. I also asked students to list the three most important things I should know about them. Allowing students to share their worries, frustrations, and anxieties helps you to plan accordingly and demonstrates your partnership with them during this challenging time.

Providing Grace and Accountability

The last strategy I used with my students was providing grace and accountability. This looked different for each student in the class. Based on the information that was shared on the surveys, I was able to meet the needs of my students and modify or accommodate deadlines, assignments, projects, and discussions in a way that worked for each of them. It is important to keep in mind that just as we are maneuvering our classes online, they are maneuvering their learning online. Accountability is necessary, but so is grace.

It is hard to say how long we will be in an educational environment that flips between face-to-face instruction and distance learning. As we prepare for these shifts, we must also prepare to meet the needs of our learners in ways we hadn't considered before. As educators, we must be prepared to think outside the box.

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