APPLYING DESIGN JUSTICE FOR EQUITABLE COLLEGE CLASSROOMS

An Instructional Decision Workbook

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I. AN INVITATION

Welcome to our workbook! We are excited and humbled that you are here to explore design justice for equitable college classrooms. We hope this is an enriching experience for you and that you adapt this workbook to meet your needs. We also hope you will engage with the interactive portions (all of them or simply the ones that speak to you) and that these interactions will help support and challenge you to expand your thinking.

Our aim is to explore how we can translate, or practically draw on, scholarly work on design justice to inform teaching and learning to build a just educational environment in higher education. Having awareness of and proficiency with the design justice framework and principles is especially useful in our current educational landscape, one where the instructional decisions we make today are compounded by the pace of technological change and may have reverberating impacts. At the time of writing this workbook it feels as if the ground is moving under our feet; this is in large part due to the proliferation of AI technologies and it feels like a scramble to keep up. Yet we must. In higher education we are faced with making design decisions that impact large groups of learners, instructors, and staff under constrained conditions, such as little time and limited information. How can we reasonably do this in an equity-minded and sustainable way? The goal is not to know everything before making decisions, rather, the goal is to develop a mindset to make informed, ethical decisions despite moving ground. Engaging with the design justice framework and guiding principles is an exercise in developing our own equity-mindedness, an ongoing and never-ending process. By asking pointed questions such as who benefits, who is harmed, and who is involved in the design process[1], we are better able to view our educational decisions and processes in a more critical light. Having a more informed sense of our work and its impact on learners, we can imagine ways to involve and center those traditionally marginalized and historically minoritized in higher education. Design justice provides a lens that can guide us in building the educational worlds that we all deserve.

[1] This set of questions were adapted from the Design Justice Zine Issue 1: Principles for Design Justice

II. AN EQUITABLE AND JUST HIGHER EDUCATION

Let's take a moment to warm up and ground ourselves. Please take a few moments to consider the following question and record your thoughts in any way that is useful to you.

What does an equitable and just higher education look like?

Now that you've taken a moment to consider what an equitable and just higher education means to you, let's explore our own context a bit more using the design justice framework. Think about the state of higher education in the United States (or your own context) right now and consider the following three questions.

Who is included in the design of the state of higher education?

Who benefits from the state of higher education?

Who is harmed by the state of higher education?

We welcome all reflections on these three questions and value the varied perspectives we all bring to this conversation. As the literature indicates, the state of higher education is serving some people and not others. At the time we are developing this workbook, equity gaps persist in completion rates for bachelor's degrees when comparing historically minoritized students to historically majority students (American Council on Education, 2024). In addition, D, F, or W rates (i.e., Drop, Fail or Withdraw from courses) are higher for learners from underrepresented populations (Welsh, 2023). Furthermore, gender inequities persist in higher education (Duarte et al., 2023) and institutions of higher education perpetuate academic ableism (Dolmage, 2018).

While the aim of this workbook is not to fix the state of higher education we believe that design justice provides a helpful mental frame to tackle some big questions such as "What does an equitable and just higher education look like?" We hope that by asking questions such as who is included, who benefits, and who is harmed we will be able to imagine possibilities that do not yet exist. This workbook will use this three question framework to explore different contexts in higher education. So, how can design justice inform our work in higher education? First, let's take a step back and explore what design justice is, and even what we mean by design. Let's begin with the latter.

WHAT IS DESIGN?

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, design (verb) means “To plan and make decisions about (something that is being built or created).” Next, think about your job or role in higher education and consider the following question.

In your role, what do you design or what designs do you influence?

We hope that by brainstorming what you design you also come to the conclusion that you are indeed a designer and everyone can contribute to design. Here is an example of a word cloud that originated from the question above when we were conducting a workshop on design justice. As this word cloud displays, there are many ways that our design decisions impact learners. In higher education, our designs keep the system running.

WHAT IS DESIGN JUSTICE?

Now that we are on the same page about design, let's get (re)acquainted with design justice before we connect and apply it to higher education. Pause and consider the following question.

When you hear the term "design justice" what comes to mind?

It is helpful to reflect on what we think about design justice to activate our prior knowledge. Now let's turn to the research.

Design justice is a relatively new theoretical framework coming from the field of design. The Design Justice Network created the framework and set of guiding principles in 2016 that we can use to inform our design decisions for equitable outcomes (Design Justice Network 2021). Another such example of a framework and approach that emerged from the design field to inform teaching and learning in higher education is universal design for learning (UDL), which originated from architecture and product design (Bacon, 2014).

Thinking about how design justice might inform higher education is in the early stages and hugely important work. The Design Justice Network articulates, "Design mediates so much of our realities and has tremendous impact on our lives. Yet people who are most adversely affected by design decisions tend to have least influence on them"; therefore the mandate of the organization is to "challenge the ways that design and designers can harm those who are marginalized by systems of power" (Design Justice Network, 2021). We believe there is an urgency to challenge the ways that designs and designers may be harming learners who are historically marginalized in higher education. Next, we invite you to consider your own experience.

Can you identify one way you have witnessed or experienced the design of higher education harming marginalized populations (whether intentional or not)?

We imagine you were able to come up with one or two instances where design choices had a negative impact on marginalized learner populations. Here are a few examples that may be in addition to what you have already come up with.

Online Proctoring Technologies: When conducting high stakes assessments online, instructors may opt to use proctoring technologies to ensure academic integrity. Although not intentional, this decision has a direct negative impact on learners with darker skin tones due to a biased algorithm. Therefore, learners with darker skin may set off alerts that they are cheating when indeed they are not. Additionally, the experience of surveillance under an already high stakes situation is anxiety inducing. Those who experience higher levels of anxiety may be cognitively compromised as they attempt to complete exams under these circumstances. And as you can imagine, those who are both dark skinned and experience anxiety, experience compounding negative impacts by this design choice (Feathers, 2021).

Covid Online Synchronous Learning: When Covid abruptly shut down colleges across the world, the predominant response was to pivot classes to online synchronous learning. This made sense at the time since there was little to no time for a proper redesign of courses. However, in practice there was a discrepancy between learners who had quiet space, privacy, access to computer technology, and broadband internet, and those who did not (Soria et al., 2020). This left learners who come from lower economic backgrounds at a significant disadvantage.

So, we know that design decisions are being made that do not center those who are traditionally marginalized, and therefore further disadvantage learners who are already underserved. And that it wasn't necessarily intended that we have these outcomes. How can we prevent or address such harmful moves? While there may not always be simple solutions, we can look to design justice as a guiding framework to help us make better sense of the decisions in front of us, and to examine the consequences in a critical light. For example, instead of using proctoring technologies, instructors may opt for open-book exams, or lower stakes assessments more often without using proctoring technology. For the online synchronous learning pivot, instructors could allow for learners to keep cameras off to accommodate less than ideal backgrounds and lower bandwidth internet connections, or they may consider recording live sessions for review at a later time. **Let's continue to think about design justice and higher education.**

III. DESIGN JUSTICE AND HIGHER EDUCATION

We now better understand the origins of the design justice framework, we've brainstormed what we are responsible for designing in our own higher educational context, and we explored some cases in which design decisions had negative impacts on historically minoritized learners. Let's now move into thinking about how we can draw on design justice in higher education as we make our instructional decisions.

DESIGN MATTERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Amy Collier and her colleagues from Middlebury College are early adopters of exploring and incorporating design justice in higher education. They influenced our own design justice journey. In an Educause Review article, Collier states, "Design matters in higher education… design shapes students' ability to access, participate in, and contribute to meaningful, transformative learning" (2020). Ultimately, what we design shapes the higher education experience for our learners. Design matters in higher education, and, in a small way, how we design impacts the state of higher education and its ability to serve all learners. Therefore, we can be intentional about who we are centering in our designs. Consider the following question.

In your context, how can something you design shape the higher education experience for learners?

DESIGN JUSTICE IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT: INTENTION, AWARENESS, PRACTICE

Intention

Design justice asks us to center those traditionally marginalized and historically minoritized (Costanza-Chock, 2020). The book *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need* by Sasha Costanza-Chock asks, "Who is traditionally excluded and historically minoritized? How can we center them in our designs?" (2020). Reading and discussing this book was one of the first steps we took to start exploring design justice and it is questions like these that have helped us apply design justice to our work in higher education.

The guiding principles of design justice encourage us to prioritize the experience of the users of a design over the intention of the designers (Costanza-Chock, 2020). For example, Dr. Joy Boulamwini, founder of the Algorithmic Justice League (AJL), shared in her TED talk experiences of not being recognized by facial recognition technology as an undergraduate student at Georgia Tech and then halfway around the world in Hong Kong for an entrepreneurship competition (Boulamwini, 2016). While the intention of the designers may not have been for the technology to not recognize Boulamwini's face, that is what happened, and the burden of this design mishap fell on her. Therefore, it's imperative to prioritize the experience of the users. AJL's mission is "Technology should serve all of us. Not just the privileged few" (Algorithmic Justice League, 2024). We believe the same is true for higher education. We must consider how technology or any design is going to be experienced by the users, our learners.

Design justice also acknowledges that designs often have unequal distribution of benefits and burdens (Costanza-Chock, 2020). We should pay attention to these discrepancies in order to be more intentional in our designs; if we're not, we are likely going to perpetuate existing inequities. We can ask ourselves how our intersectional identities impact who benefits and who is harmed in higher education, which increases our awareness of unequal distributions of benefits and burdens.

Awareness

Design justice draws on black feminist thought: Kimberle Crenshaw's work on intersectionality (1989) and Patricia Hill Collins' matrix of domination (1990). The matrix of domination is the idea that we have intersecting social identities (race, gender, ability, class, and more) which differentiate how we might experience our worlds and that our identities may be privileged or oppressed as we interact within dominant structures and systems. Ultimately these ideas can help us understand the distribution of benefits and burdens as this kind of literacy enables us to more accurately evaluate the impact of our designs on our learners, especially those who have been traditionally excluded and historically minoritized in higher education.

Practice

Design justice encourages designs to be community-led, where designers co-design with communities directly impacted by the design (Costanza-Chock, 2020). This emphasis on the participatory processes derives from the field of disability studies (Werner 1998) and is important because we're limited in our understanding of others' experiences and perspectives, we need to partner with them in order to design for equitable outcomes. Design justice encourages us to ask: Who is a part of the design process? Who should be part of the process? (Costanza-Chock, 2020). And, importantly, how can we collaborate in a non-exploitative manner? Especially with learners

and those who have been historically marginalized in higher education. Design processes are typically expert-led; instead, can we develop structures to make them community-led? We acknowledge that often this is easier to say than to do. This doesn't necessarily mean that the process must be egalitarian. There can be different roles for different participants. But in our practice, we can be mindful about power dynamics, transparent with participants, and create inclusive spaces for involvement. Consider the following question.

In your context, can you imagine how you may partner with learners (or others in the community) in a design process?

DISRUPTION HAPPENS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

At the time of writing this workbook we emerged not long ago from a global pandemic and the memory of quickly shifting all classes to remote instruction is fresh in our minds. Since the initial switch to remote learning we have experienced multiple instances of disruption at our institution, such as quickly switching classes to remote instruction for short periods of time due to public health concerns and environmental reasons, some due to climate change. We also experienced, as institutions across the world have, the introduction of generative artificial intelligence technologies. We believe design justice is one way to handle disruptions like these by providing a framework to help inform our choices to be equity-minded.

IV. APPLYING DESIGN JUSTICE

We're going to share two examples to help you consider and work through applying design justice to the higher education context: syllabus policies on generative artificial intelligence technologies and classroom community guidelines. Please decide which example you would like to start with.

SYLLABUS POLICIES ON GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) TECHNOLOGIES

Tracie Addy and colleagues consider who benefits and who is excluded when learners are permitted or prohibited from using generative AI (Addy et. al. 2023). They argue AI has the potential to facilitate transformative learning for students specifically, but not limited to, multi-language learners, students from marginalized linguistic communities, students with disabilities, and low-income learners. In addition, when tools are accessible to learners they can help address barriers that prevent students from fully engaging in their learning. Therefore, generative AI can expand on approaches learners can take to support their learning but there are potential limitations when it comes to equity that we need to be aware of. Some AI technologies require you to pay to access them and these tools are not free from bias, often their outputs are reflective of the data used to train the tools. If the data used to train the tools is biased, that could go unnoticed and cause harm, especially if they go undetected by those who design the tools (Addy et. al. 2023).

Instructors are not the ones designing these tools (or at least the majority are not, maybe some are!) but these tools do impact teaching and learning. And we do design lessons or assignments where learners could use these tools (or we specifically prohibit their use - which is another design decision).

So we should next specifically consider how to center those traditionally excluded and who can be a part of the design process. For example, do we have an AI policy on our syllabus? That might be one way to start including student perspectives and those traditionally excluded.

Additionally, how are we teaching learners to engage with these tools? Are we talking about them? Are we prohibiting them in our classes? Are we considering possibilities to use these tools in appropriate and transformative ways? Learners can benefit from learning how to critically engage with the tools.

Design justice can help frame our thinking around a disruptive yet potentially transformative technological innovation. Let's work through a few potential AI policy scenarios that could be found on a syllabus document and consider who benefits, who is harmed, and who participated in the construction of the policy.

POLICY SCENARIO 1

No policy on Artificial Intelligence technologies listed on the syllabus and this topic is not discussed with learners in the class. Based on the information above, consider the following three questions.

1. Who benefits?

2. Who is harmed?

3. Who participated in the construction of the AI policy or the instructional approach to AI?

POLICY SCENARIO 2

This policy was adopted from University of Delaware Center for Teaching & Assessment of Learning (Guidry et al., 2024)

Artificial Intelligence technologies are completely prohibited. The following statement is listed on the syllabus. The instructor mentions this policy at the beginning of the semester as they are reviewing the syllabus with their class.

> *Students are not allowed to use advanced automated tools (artificial intelligence or machine learning tools such as ChatGPT or Dall-E 2) on assignments in this course. Each student is expected to complete each assignment without substantive assistance from others, including automated tools.*

Based on the policy above, consider the following three questions.

1. Who benefits?

2. Who is harmed?

3. Who participated in the construction of the AI policy or the instructional approach to AI?

POLICY SCENARIO 3

This policy was adopted from Temple University Center for the Advancement of Teaching (2024)

Artificial Intelligence technologies are permitted under certain conditions. The instructor discusses this policy as each assignment comes up in the course.

> *The use of generative AI tools (e.g. ChatGPT, Dall-e, etc.) is permitted in this course for the following activities:*
>
> - *Brainstorming and refining your ideas;*
> - *Fine tuning your research questions;*
> - *Finding information on your topic;*
> - *Drafting an outline to organize your thoughts; and*
> - *Checking grammar and style.*
>
> *The use of generative AI tools is not permitted in this course for the following activities:*
>
> - *Impersonating you in classroom contexts, such as by using the tool to compose discussion board prompts assigned to you or content that you put into a Zoom chat.*
> - *Completing group work that your group has assigned to you, unless it is mutually agreed upon that you may utilize the tool.*
> - *Writing a draft of a writing assignment.*
> - *Writing entire sentences, paragraphs or papers to complete class assignments.*
>
> *You are responsible for the information you submit based on an AI query (for instance, that it does not violate intellectual property laws, or contain misinformation or unethical content).*
>
> *Your use of AI tools must be properly documented and cited in order to stay within university policies on academic honesty.*

Based on the policy above, consider the following three questions.

1. Who benefits?

2. Who is harmed?

3. Who participated in the construction of the AI policy or the instructional approach to AI?

POLICY SCENARIO 3

This policy was adopted from Temple University Center for the Advancement of Teaching (2024)

AI is allowed to be used in any assignment. AI is only discussed if learners ask questions about AI use for a particular assignment.

> *You are welcome/expected to use generative AI tools (e.g. ChatGPT, Dall-e, etc.) in this class as doing so aligns with the course learning goal [insert the course learning goal use of AI aligns with]. You are responsible for the information you submit based on an AI query (for instance, that it does not violate intellectual property laws, or contain misinformation or unethical content). Your use of AI tools must be properly documented and cited in order to stay within university policies on academic honesty.*

Based on the policy above, consider the following three questions.

1. Who benefits?

2. Who is harmed?

3. Who participated in the construction of the AI policy or the instructional approach to AI?

Consider which policy scenario most aligns with how you might approach AI in your class. Whichever type of policy you might use, consider the following two questions.

How do we center those traditionally excluded as we design syllabus policies on generative AI technologies?

Who should be a part of the design process and how?

Below is a list of ways you might bring learners into the process of engaging with, designing, or developing AI policies. This list is not exhaustive. We hope it will help spark your own ideas of how to do this in your classroom space.

- Provide an AI policy and ask learners to discuss with a partner and provide anonymous feedback. Adjust the policy based on the feedback or clarify with learners why the policy is the way that it is.
- Focus on the types of assignments in your course and discuss AI use in light of your specific assignments (e.g., what is ok, what is not ok).
- With your class, use AI text generating tools to generate an AI syllabus policy. Have learners collaborate on a google doc to critique it and make edits and suggestions.
- Ask learners to work in groups to develop AI syllabus policies. Each group shares their ideas with the whole class and the whole class develops an AI policy together.

CLASSROOM COMMUNITY GUIDELINES

Think about a specific classroom experience you've had as a learner or in an instructor role. It can be a good experience, a bad experience, or simply the last experience you can recall. Once you have one classroom experience in mind, consider the following three questions.

Who influenced that classroom environment?

Who benefitted from that classroom environment?

Who was harmed by that classroom environment?

SCENARIO FOR ANALYSIS

It's the first day of class. After struggling with finding parking, a student scrambles to find their classroom. It's a building they've never been in before. 5 minutes late, they finally arrive at the assigned classroom. They enter the room and shyly nod at the instructor and silently mouth "I'm sorry."

As they look around the room, they try to find where to sit. There are no empty tables; they will need to sit next to someone. They scan the room for a friendly face but they don't recognize anyone. Awkwardly they wiggle their way in between two sitting students to an empty seat in the middle. Besides a brief nod from the instructor, nobody acknowledged their presence and the instructor has already jumped into explaining the syllabus.

They notice that everyone has a handout and they look around for a copy. There are none. They open their mobile phone to see if they can access the syllabus on Canvas. After accessing the digital file, they notice that the class will consist of academic discussions for which they will be graded 30% of their final grade.

The last time they had a discussion-based class, they always felt put on the spot to speak from the perspective of their minoritized identity. They also felt unsafe due to microaggressions that emerged from the unstructured discussions in what felt like a competitive environment. The participation grade is based on how much you engage with the discussion, after all. Further, they often had a hard time contributing because they felt anxious about speaking up in front of the class and they do not often land on similar conclusions as what seems like the majority of their classmates do.

They can already feel the butterflies erupt in their stomach as the instructor seems to have moved on to asking everyone to introduce themselves to the group. Maybe this is a class to drop.

Based on the scenario above, consider the following three questions.

Who is benefiting from the classroom environment?

Who is being harmed?

Who participated in the construction of the classroom environment that resulted in the classroom experience described above?

One way to consider this scenario is that the student is being harmed by the structure of the classroom environment. They do not feel welcome, they are experiencing anxiety which interferes with learning, and they are drawing on previous experiences of discrimination that may have traumatized them and interrupted cognitive processes. When not intentionally shaped, the classroom environment will play out by default and reflect dominant cultural norms of the wider institution and society as a whole.

But we can't guess what the classroom experience is like for others. We may only really understand how things are for ourselves or people we are closest to. So, how can we move forward with intent when we are not always privy to the experiences of others?

One approach is to apply design justice principles to develop classroom community guidelines. These guidelines may be called rules, expectations, or sometimes even class participation. These rules are sometimes disseminated on the first day of class through a syllabus or posted on the learning management system, but often they are not addressed at all. Let's apply a design justice lens to think through how best to approach classroom community guidelines.

How do we center those traditionally excluded as we design classroom community guidelines?

Who should be a part of the design process and how?

These guiding questions encourage us to make the process of developing classroom community guidelines more participatory and more inclusive. Is it possible to involve learners in developing or co-constructing the guidelines rather than disseminating what they are on the first day of class? Will this be time well spent? The key is to remember to ask these questions from the perspective of those traditionally excluded. Structure a process that encourages everyone to share their voices and ideas; for example, if a class only uses whole group classroom discussion some learners may not be comfortable sharing their voice. Can you promote multiple ways for learners to engage with sharing ideas for the classroom community guidelines, such as reflecting on their own, sharing ideas in pairs or small groups, or working collaboratively on a shared google doc?

Below is a list of ways to design classroom community guidelines that center learners who are traditionally excluded. This list is not exhaustive. We hope it will help spark your own ideas of how to do this in your classroom space.

- Provide a list of classroom community guidelines in a syllabus and ask learners to discuss with a partner and provide anonymous feedback. Adjust the classroom community guidelines based on the feedback.
- With your class, ask AI to generate a list of classroom community guidelines. Have learners collaborate on a google doc to make edits and suggestions to the AI generated list.
- Ask learners to work in groups to develop classroom community guidelines. Each group shares their ideas with the whole class and the whole class develops classroom community guidelines together.

What other ideas do you have?

V. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Applying design justice for equitable college classrooms is an endeavor without a clear finish line. Every academic term and academic year gives us a new opportunity to recommit to this work. We find it provides us with a sense of purpose as we approach new educational contexts or new disruptions to higher education and helps to ground us from feeling overwhelmed as we are making countless design decisions. We hope you find it is the same for you.

In the first iteration of this workbook, we explored two contexts, syllabus policies on generative AI technologies and classroom community guidelines, for which we can use a design justice lens for equitable designs. What other designs that you influence might you be able to apply a design justice lens? Some possibilities might be rubrics and other aspects of course or curricular design. Depending on your role, you may be designing spaces or institutional policies.

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