Equity in the Classroom — Key Factors to Consider

Advocates & Allies for Equity
Indiana University Bloomington

I. Approaching Equality vs. Equity in the Classroom

Equality
Equality implies that the same access to resources for a high-level educational experience should be available to all students.

Equity
Equity recognizes that students come to college with almost two decades of life experiences and generations of structural inequality or privilege in their access to resources. An equitable approach means understanding that more resources and attention are needed by those who have been disadvantaged.
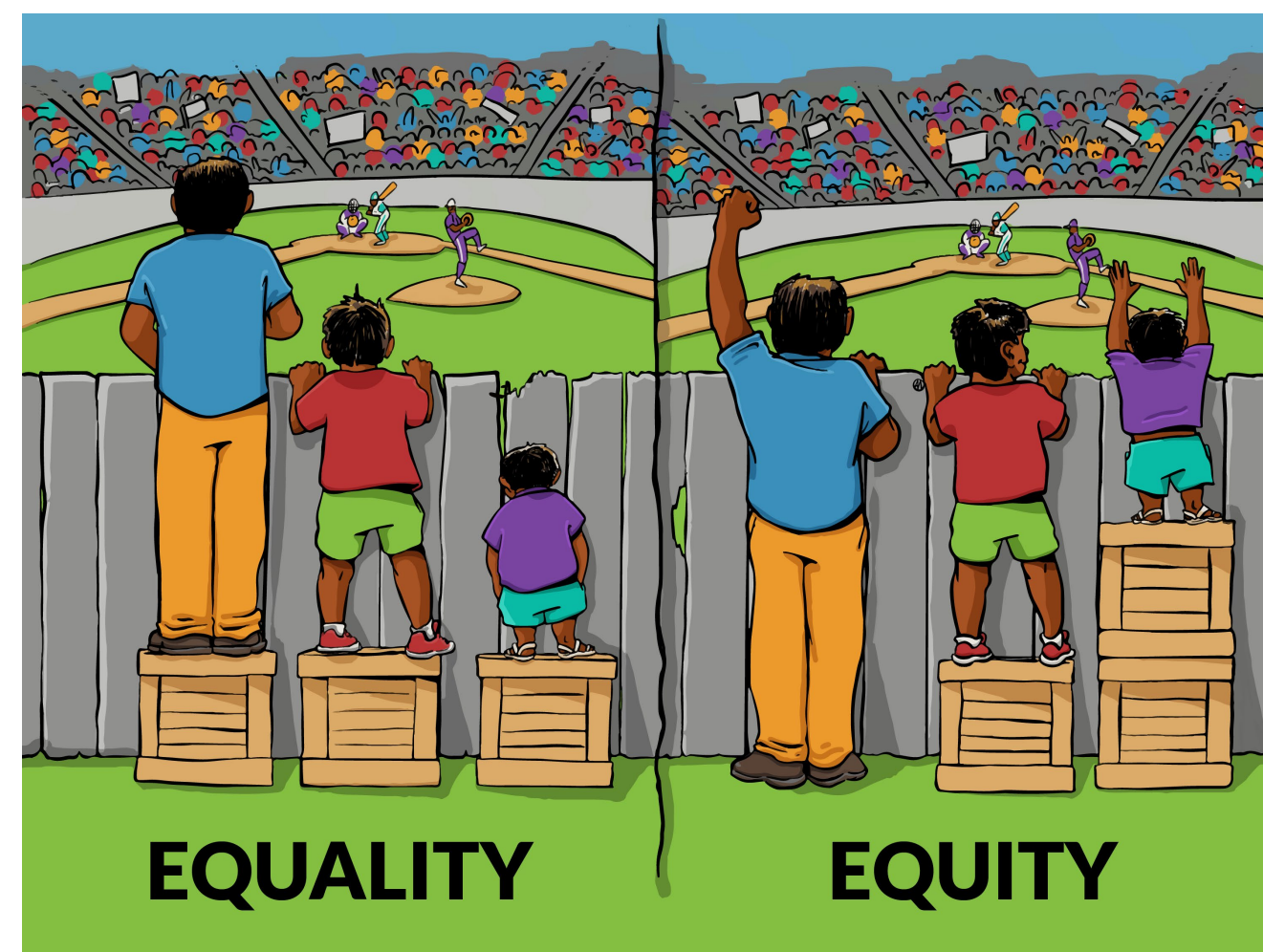

EQUALITY   EQUITY

Image: Interaction Institute for Social Change | Artist: Angus Maguire

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II. Barriers to Equity in the Classroom

1. Power
Power is one of **the typically unspoken, though all-pervasive, dynamics** in the classroom. As instructors, we have power. We earned academic freedom, which gives us agency to design classes from both content and learning-activity perspectives. We design the syllabus. We lead discussions, literally deciding who has a voice and who doesn't. We decide when and how students demonstrate their learning. In their study of feminist teaching, Maher and Tetreault developed four themes to describe the relationships in classrooms among teachers, students, and the course material: mastery, authority, voice, and positionality (1994).

2. Privilege
Privilege is **an unearned advantage** that benefits an individual or group based on race, class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities. Privilege often feels invisible to the privileged—and sometimes to those lacking privilege—because it is part of our cultural norms, operating whether or not we notice and acknowledge those power inequities. We may be unaware of how we have access to power or are excluded from it due to privilege. Privilege differentials boost the privileged student's access and performance and diminish the unprivileged student's. Unexplored power dynamics lead to unchallenged privilege in the classroom.

3. Hidden curricula
Hidden curricula are unwritten but **powerful norms that usually go unrecognized and unremarked** by the institution and most of its community members, and yet, as Snyder points out, this hidden curriculum "**determines, to a significant degree, what becomes the basis for all participants' sense of worth and self-esteem** (1971, p. xii)." Snyder notes that this hidden curriculum consists of the informal rules and sanctions, the values, the assumed expectations, the tacit understandings, and the accepted academic and social behaviors that faculty, staff, and administrators work under and that shape each campus. These "hidden" expectations and rules, often initially written by those in power, protect the empowered, recreating systems of privilege and often marginalizing already underserved students.

4. Social Threat Identity
In perceived "identity threat" environments, **students will underperform because they are paying cognitive price** as they stress about possibly doing something to reinforce negative stereotypes about their group. This identity threat situation can happen to anyone, but it impacts some students more than others because they encounter daily negative messages about themselves. This can trigger anxiety and often silence a student who may be worried about asking a question in class for fear of reinforcing that negative stereotype. As Ross (2017) demonstrates in many examples in her book, students new to campus may not feel they should attend office hours, expect a clear syllabus or comments on papers, or advocate for themselves if they feel they have previously received poor treatment from a professor or student service office.

IV. Summary

Key Factors for Equity in the Classroom

Factors to be Cautious

- Power
- Privilege
- Hidden Curricula
- Social Threat Identity

Equity in Classroom

Factors to Do More

- Belonging
- UDL
- Strength-based
- Safe/Brave Space
- Transparency
- Microaffirmation

III. Achieving Equity In the Classroom

1. Belonging
Creating a sense of belonging for your students demands a mindfulness of what your students may be perceiving and how their life experiences may inform their sense of belonging in the institution and in your class. Students use all sorts of cues (verbal, nonverbal, and environmental) to figure out whether they fit into campus or not. A belonging context requires appropriate policies, practices, procedures, and relationships to produce places of non-prejudice (Student Experience Research Network, 2018).

How to foster belonging in the classroom (Gray et al., 2018)
- designing a course with interpersonal opportunity structures that facilitates social ties between students and between students and instructors.
- creating instructional opportunity structures to provide avenues for students to make meaning from perspectives that they hold in high regard.

2. Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
UDL's intentional commitment to student choice in developing intrinsic interest and expressing learning establishes student agency in the learning process. The design relies on three types of choices: engagement, representation, and expression:

Engagement	Identify ways to connect students' interests with your content, find ways to challenge them appropriately, and support motivation for learning.
Representation	Present content and information in various ways to accommodate diverse learners' acquisition of information and knowledge.
Expression	Offer learners options for how to demonstrate their learning

3. Strengths-based approaches
Measuring students' strengths and centering them in teaching and learning procedurally lessens power differential. It gives students a voice in how they master and demonstrate mastery of course outcomes. Increasing student voice diminishes negative effects of privilege and hidden curriculum as students co-create a class's structure, resources, and activities. Stereotype threat will still have to be managed; however, the process communicates a commitment to growth mindset.

4. Safe/Brave space
Safe spaces are community agreements established in order to think deeply, challenge assumptions, and engage in the intellectual rigor of higher education. Some critiques of safe spaces in educational environments argue they promote an illusion of safety for marginalized students or provide an expectation that there will be no discomfort or difficulty experienced (Arao & Clemens, 2013). Along these cautionary lines, Diana Ali notes, "oppressed students are unlikely to experience truly risk-free spaces, even within the confines of resource centers, on friendly campuses, or in the most inclusive classrooms" (Ali, 2017, p. 7). Because of these drawbacks to safe spaces, instructors may choose to establish a **brave space** instead by creating discussion practices that allow students to engage in hard topics while adhering to a standard of respect and behavior. Hallmarks of brave spaces include controversy with civility, owning intentions and impacts, challenge by choice, respect, and no attacks.

5. Transparency in Teaching and Learning
A main goal of TILT is addressing the hidden curriculum. The TILT framework is learner-centered and explicitly connects learning goals and growth by requiring instructors to transparently write assignments, assessments, and even instructions for learning activities. TILT-designed assignments follow a structure that moves from a description of the overarching **purpose** of the assessment, assignment, or activity explicitly stating the **knowledge and skills** to be used and developed to complete a task, to the **task instructions**, and finally to **success criteria** (rubrics and exemplars).

6. Microaffirmations:
Micro-affirmations contrast with the negative impact of micro-aggressions through small efforts to indicate you have respect and value the recipient as a person. They promote student well-being. Rolon-Dow (2019) describes four types of micro-affirmations:
- Microrecognition
- Microvalidation
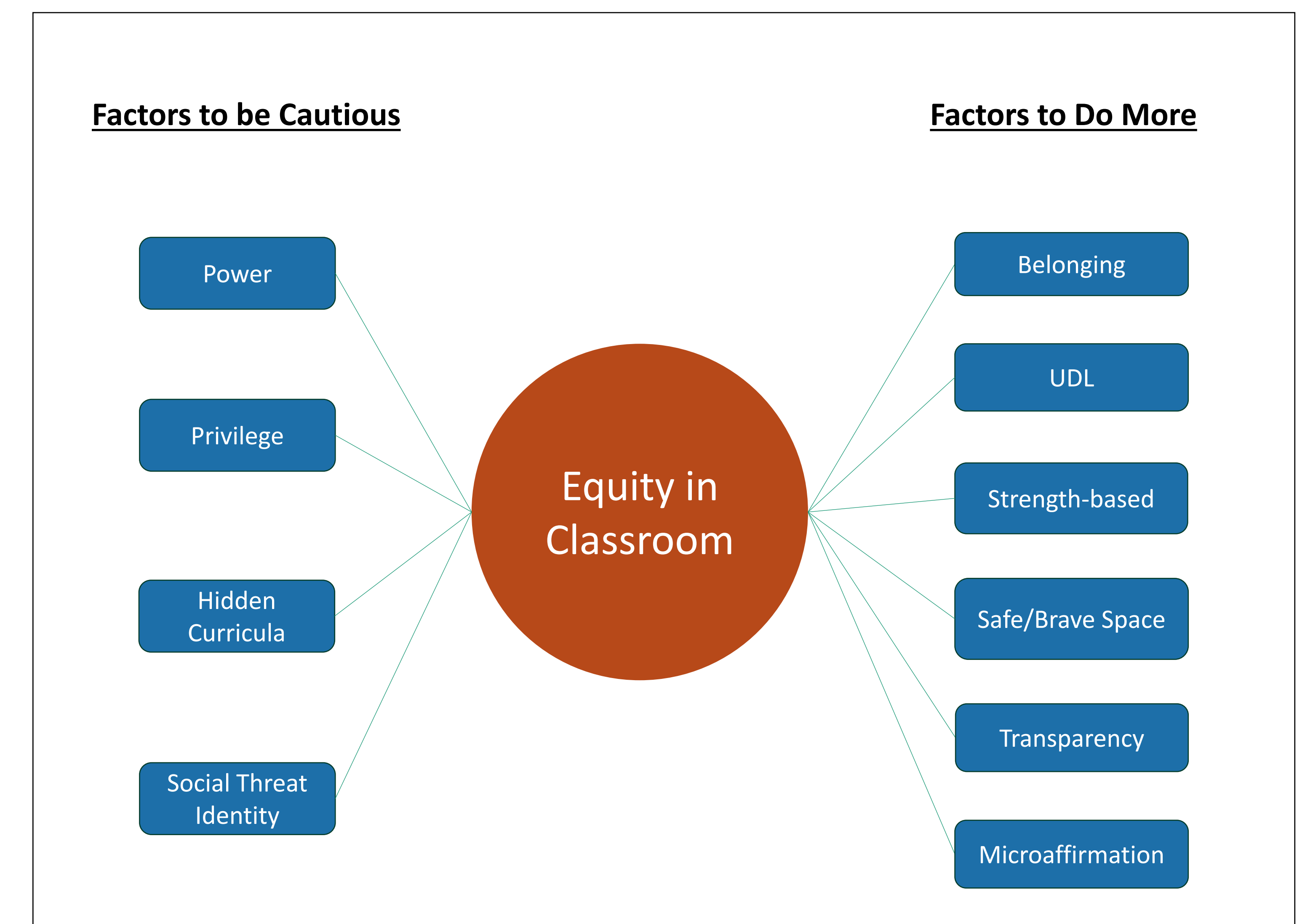- Microprotection
- Microtransformation

Do you want learn more about these topics from fellow colleagues? Join our workshop on *Equity in the Classroom*!

Equity in the Classroom
- Advocates & Allies for Equity
- 4:00pm
- 10/4 (Today!)
- IMU– Maple Room (Tree Suites)